

# Editorial

BRIAN FAGAN\*

☞ The universal interest in the past is perfectly natural. It is the interest in life itself. There was a time when archaeology was voted a dull subject, for only for dry-as-dusts; yet it was not the subject that was dull but its exponents. Those days are over.

O.G.S. Crawford wrote those words in the very first *ANTIQUITY* editorial, 64 years ago. It is a tribute to Crawford's vision that *ANTIQUITY* has not only survived, but flourished for nearly three-quarters of a century. In an era of rudimentary telephones, no computers, and certainly no FAX machines, Crawford envisaged a unique, easy-to-read archaeological journal that encompassed every time period and every area of the world. On the whole, he and his successors in the editorial chair have succeeded. The pages of *ANTIQUITY* have changed gracefully with the times, weathering a World War, alleged archaeological revolutions and the 'hi-teching' of the past. But it is still a journal of limited circulation, appealing mainly to professional scholars and not the wider constituency of people interested in archaeology. *ANTIQUITY* does still have somewhat of an image problem, especially among Americans, who tend to think of it as a somewhat British, tweedy product, a journal born of a long tradition of striding over windy chalk downs in quest of Roman roads and Bronze Age barrows. As an expatriate Englishman, I must admit there is some truth in the image, for the tradition of settlement archaeology was indeed born in the capable hands of Crawford and his contemporaries. But thank goodness *ANTIQUITY* is as British as it is, for her eclectic pages bring a welcome breath of the humanistic and the literary into an archaeology that is becoming more and more specialized, and ever-more jargon-ridden. Although it is sometimes hard to believe, there is, in fact, a strong literary tradition in British archaeology, and this journal is one of the places where it still manifests itself. It is remarkable that a periodi-

cal started basically for British archaeologists should be so widely read and that she has had only three editors in her entire history. All of them, Crawford, Daniel, and now Chippindale, have edited *ANTIQUITY* according to their own, and sometimes idiosyncratic, views of the study of the past, but they have always tried to publish interesting archaeology, and have never deviated from the other fundamental precept of 1927: 'ANTIQUITY will attempt to summarize and criticize the work of those who are recreating the past.' In this they have succeeded brilliantly, and sometimes with *élan*. What other archaeological journal could publish the excesses of Glözel and Rouffignac, claim a journalistic scoop with radiocarbon dating, wander as far afield as Australia and Chile, and publish some of the finest necrologies of respected (and not so respected) archaeologists anywhere? British *ANTIQUITY* may be, but tweedy and exclusive certainly not. She is one of the few journals that selects articles by criteria that go beyond formal peer review – and publishes new discoveries within months rather than years. *ANTIQUITY* has become one of my addictions, if nothing else because of the editorials, which have become an institution in their own right. It is good news to hear that the best of Glyn Daniel's editorials will appear under the title *Writing for Antiquity* in 1992. Colin Ridler of Thames & Hudson tells me the book is 'intended as a bedside book for all lovers of archaeological gossip and intrigue to dip into'. Dare we hope that titillating archaeological gossip will now feature as a Book of the Month selection? . . .

☞ 'It is not the subject that was dull, but its exponents.' There are times, I must confess, when I ponder this statement from another of Crawford's early editorials, especially after attending a selection of poorly prepared and delivered conference papers given by people

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who should know better, or after sampling some of the technical writing published for our delectation. I happened on his words again after coming off two pieces of intensive archaeological reading, which offered a telling contrast. The first was Linda Schele & David Freidel's extraordinary essay on Maya kingship (and much else), *A Forest of Kings*\*. *Forest* came about when an editor at William Morrow brought Schele & Freidel together with writer Joy Parker, the objective being to create a popular account of the history of Maya civilization from archaeology and newly deciphered glyphs. The result is a truly mesmerizing read, bristling with cunning detective-work and intricate argument, yet a compelling read for an outsider. In many ways, this is a very personal, sometimes almost mystical, look at the Maya that combines personal experience with the detachment of the professional scholar. The narrative is dramatic, perhaps sometimes overly so, at times positively rivetting, as it moves from vivid reconstruction of Maya ritual to detailed expositions of individual inscriptions, then on to architectural tours through great cities. The book is the first popular synthesis of archaeology and glyphs, and, as such is bound to raise violent passions among the experts. There were many points where even I, as a non-expert, wanted to argue with the authors, and doubtless our Mayanist colleagues will debate the authors' vision of the Maya at length. Doubtless, too, some archaeologists who should know better will murmur privately about 'wild speculation' and 'insufficient evidence to support such conclusions', the standard criticism of the trade. To accept all that *Forest* says uncritically is not only unfair, but does a disservice to the detailed, and often closely argued, notes in the back. Yes, *A Forest of Kings* will stir vigorous controversy, but it will also heighten public awareness of the remarkable achievements of Maya civilization at a time when its monuments are under siege from the unscrupulous. It is late-20th-century *haute vulgarization* at its best, and does American archaeology a great service, if nothing else because it will engage the public interest – and we do not do that enough.

\* LINDA SCHELE & DAVID FREIDEL. *A Forest of Kings*. New York (NY): William Morrow, 1990; hardback \$29.95.

Time and chance set me looking for some vital stratigraphic information from a Midwestern site during my heady days among the Maya. I waded through a blizzard of edited volumes and conference papers in search of my academic prey. Success at last, in the form of a dreary, edited volume, published by a well-known university press. Like so many of its forgettable relatives, this over-priced volume was patched together from yet another symposium at the annual Society for American Archaeology meetings. No names, no titles, for I hope that the editors (and publisher) will recognize themselves at once. There were 12 papers, only one of them of more than passing interest to anyone but perhaps half-a-dozen local specialists. None of them showed any signs of an authoritative editorial hand. All were written in a turgid, jargon-ridden style, and argued with a stolid logic and theoretical naïveté that made one cringe. I waded through pages of reference-laden clichés, until I began to wonder whether the authors had any notion of the significance of their work – or whether they cared. I felt I was trespassing on a comfortable, obscure world and felt trapped. I located my stratigraphic information (it was incomplete) and fled back to *A Forest of Kings*. All the time, one reads statements by professional archaeologists such as 'the public is fascinated by archaeology and wants to know more about it.' If edited volumes like this one are a typical sample of much archaeological research and writing at the specialist level, and – unfortunately – they are, then we deserve the public ignorance of which we constantly complain – which makes *A Forest of Kings* such a refreshing change. As long as such books are written, there is some hope.

During the past two years, colleague George Michaels and I have been developing a multimedia course on archaeology for 200 freshmen using Macintosh computers. Our students fly over Maya Tikal and Sumerian Ur in a helicopter, survey for archaeological sites in the Valley of Mexico, compete with fellow-rulers in the Nile Valley, and spend a year subsistence farming in the Zambezi Valley. The experiment has been a great, even, dare I say it, a revolutionary pedagogical success, but it has revealed something we sometimes try and forget. Usually through no fault of their own, most students are appallingly bad writers. If this is true of fresh-

man, and indeed senior undergraduates in the same course, we can hardly be surprised that the standard of writing among many professional archaeologists is so bad. Our solution in the freshman course is to make our students write all the time – and we do see some improvement in writing skills at the end. As all of us know, the problem persists at the graduate level, to the point where there has been a major deterioration in writing standards in archaeology. Why are we, and publishers, content to allow a proliferation of unnecessary jargon, of what the late David Clarke aptly called ‘murky exhalations?’ Why do we often use three words instead of one, and take refuge in technical phraseology as if to avoid clear exposition? I am sure that at least some of the theoretical confusion in archaeology results from poorly-fashioned prose. How can we improve writing in archaeology? What can we do to foster the magnificent tradition of fine prose that is very much a part of the study of the past? We can at least begin by insisting that our students learn the craft at an early stage in their training, something that is often a low priority in the current order of things. At the moment, we seem content to wallow in obscurity rather than clear discourse and narrative.

¶ Alas, one master of clear exposition is no longer with us. I suspect that nearly every archaeologist of my generation, and of the present one for that matter, first encountered the Chi-Square test in Albert Spaulding’s elegant and economical writings. His papers on quantitative methods in archaeology from the early 1960s are classics, as apposite today as they were a generation ago. A quiet, unassuming scholar, Spaulding served with distinction not only as an archaeologist, but as Director of the National Science Foundation’s then fledgling Anthropology Program and later, at Santa Barbara, as a College Dean of legendary tact and political acumen. Generations of young archaeologists learned not only statistics and mathematical elegance from Albert, but how to write as well. He was an austere stylist with an unerring eye for sloppy thinking and loose expression. His seminars were famous for their insistence on precise logic and careful application of logic. To hear Albert quietly dissect well-publicized, but flawed, case-studies to devastating effect was to experience con-

structive intellectual demolition at its best. To my knowledge, he never wrote an article for *ANTIQUITY* – to our great loss.

Albert Spaulding died of cancer last year. He was a mainstay of our Department for nearly 25 years. We pride ourselves on being a close-knit community of archaeologists and miss his trenchant criticism and wicked sense of humour – to say nothing of occasional delicious morsels of academic gossip delivered with both quiet gusto and a complex lack of malice. Spaulding’s impact on archaeology was as profound as that of any of the much-published and sometimes ballyhooed heroes of contemporary archaeology, and his legacy to his students incalculable. Let us be grateful that he was among us.

¶ We are all familiar with them, the people who buttonhole you at parties and insist on lecturing you about pyramid power or the Lost Continent of Atlantis. The flood of peculiar delusion never ends. My mail box brings the arcane and bizarre about three times a week. There was the lady last month who claimed to be a direct descendant of the Goddess Ishtar and Giovanni Belzoni. A gentleman from Oregon tells me he has solved the problem of human origins in East Africa. When I referred him, tongue firmly in cheek, to Richard Leakey, he wrote again assuring me his lawyers had instructions to send me a sealed envelope containing details of his theory ‘in the event of his death’. I am still waiting. Desk-top publishing has brought us not only a revamped *ANTIQUITY* but all sorts of strange and mystical works. Last month brought another ephemeral curiosity: Ray Roland’s *Ancient Secrets Revealed*, a ‘scientific version of Biblical history’, which sets out to prove the historical truth of the Scriptures. Roland has designed an ‘Ice Age clock’ and created his own vision of human prehistory. The Garden of Eden was in America, he believes, a continent where gifted people used hot air balloons to build great temples. They voyaged all over the world, founding Atlantis in Britain and (of course) building Stonehenge. Cataclysm ensued 12,500 years ago, Atlantis was overwhelmed and the great diaspora began. Eventually, Hebrews, some of the ‘Exodus Crowd’, built a fleet of huge ocean-going ships and made their dream voyage back to Central America to re-create the ‘Great Empire’. Wonderful stuff, this, complete not

only with Atlantis, but rocket propulsion for moving boulders, and, of course, the Nazca lines in Peru as the inevitable aircraft runways. The author believes all his nonsense of course, but if you want an excursion into the weird misreading of archaeology, why not write to Mr Roland and ask for a free copy (36 Whispering Pines Road, Stafford Springs, Connecticut 06076, USA), if nothing else for the delicious statement about permissions in the Preface: 'because of the controversial nature of my book, some publishers asked that their name not be listed

It was an unexpected pleasure to be able to spend some time last summer deeply immersed in British archaeology for the first time for more than 30 years. Thanks to the National Geographic Society, I was able to spend more than a month at Flag Fen, talking not only to Francis and Maisie Pryor about their Bronze Age discoveries, but also with some of the thousands of people who visit the site each summer. To rub shoulders with casually interested visitors was an education, for it is only occasionally in my rarefied archaeological existence that I have the chance to do so in the field. To the Pryors visitors are not a nuisance, but a welcome part of their work. Quite apart from the revenue they generate for Flag Fen, which is vital, they are, in the final analysis, the consumers of their research. Every member of the research team, however senior, takes his or her turn at conducting the hour-long tours. This not only portions out what is a not inconsiderable work-load, but also gives students in particular a taste of what explaining a technical subject to a lay person entails. Flag Fen, with its water-logged trenches and jigsaw-like timbers, is hardly an easy site to bring alive verbally, but the level of public enthusiasm and of community support in Peterborough makes the effort well worth while. Let us hope that one day a small museum will rise on the site, where the magnificent bronze artefacts from Flag Fen will be on public display.

It was somewhat of a contrast to be told the other day by a distinguished colleague from northern California that the 'public are a bloody nuisance. Why don't people just leave us alone?' Admittedly, he had just suffered through an exacting summer field school, but his viewpoint does reflect the feeling of more

than a few of us, even in this enlightened archaeological age. I responded by quoting Barry Cunliffe's essay of some years ago, which appeared in Glyn Daniel's *Festschrift*. He said that archaeology was virtually unique, in that it was often like an unperformed play. In a real sense, we are a form of intellectual popular entertainment. The people at Flag Fen know this, and I only wish that my worthy colleague would take the time to spend a day there and watch the warm interplay between archaeological performers and the people who ultimately pay for the performance – and the respect for the past generated on both sides.

Flag Fen is a kaleidoscope of cherished memories – the maze of timbers, including waterlogged oak logs up to a foot across, the dark posts of the mysterious alignment projecting above the soft clay in the trench by the Mustdyke, watching Francis Pryor work closely with the local metal detector club on a search for bronze artefacts, and a memorable day spent splitting an ash tree with just a replica of a Bronze Age axe and some oak wedges. Then Francis sent me to see March parish church only 17 miles from Flag Fen, where late 15th-century craftsmen used much the same carpentry techniques to fashion a ceiling that is one of the unsung masterpieces of East Anglia. . . . I only hope I can return one day.

Clearly, the thorny controversies surrounding reburial and repatriation will be with us for many years to become. In some respects, one is reminded of the 19th-century debate over the Antiquity of Humankind. Like the confrontation between the Church and Science, the subject raises violent passions on both sides.

John Mulvaney's timely and forthright article on the Kow Swamp affair in the March *ANTIQUITY* (65: 12–21) focuses not on recent skeletal material of clear historical ancestry, but on very remote fossil remains indeed, remains critical to our understanding of the first settlement of Australia. I don't think any responsibly-minded archaeologist or biologist would deny the need to be sensitive to the reburial issue, especially when known historical figures or issues of direct ancestry are involved. Nor should there be any controversy about the return of sacred artefacts such as medicine bundles or bow stands, provided that they will be treasured and conserved in a manner that befits sacred relics. But the Kow Swamp case, and some of the more

sweeping statements about the return of all skeletal material, or of forbidding all excavation because 'only we [the native people], and we alone understand the nature of our history and creation' raise very different, and disturbing, questions.

Mulvaney is forthright in his opposition to the reburial of the Kow Swamp remains and points out there is no direct link between these fossils of world importance and the modern Aboriginal inhabitants of Victoria. He is equally insistent on the need to be sensitive to Aboriginal concerns and believes, unlike some of the more vociferous of his opponents, that many younger Aborigines feel that fossil material should be preserved for the enlightenment of future, as yet unborn, generations. He told Australian news reporter Julian Cribb that 'to claim total knowledge of the past is to challenge the intellectual freedom of all Australians'. At the other end of the spectrum is Robert Thorpe of the Koori Information Centre in Melbourne. 'We remember the Creation, the time of darkness and how it happened. We know the tracks of the creative spirits – it is part of a whole belief Aboriginal people have about their land and their existence. . . We have a cyclical concept of life. It's what this country is made of. . . .' Uncompromising words, which may, or may not (as Mulvaney and other Australian scholars claim) reflect the views of most Aborigines. This is not, of course, a confrontation which is unique to Australia, for North American archaeologists are now assessing the impact of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, which finally grants Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations a substantial legal interest in their heritage. Under this Act, repatriation will be on a case-by-case basis and is contingent on a finding of what is defined as 'a relationship of shared group identity which can be reasonably traced historically between a present day Indian tribe or Native Hawaiian organization and an identifiable earlier group'. The new Act provides a legal framework, but a great deal will depend on how both individual archaeologists and museums work with native American groups at the local level. The fact of the matter is that in many cases Indian groups will have absolutely unequivocal legal rights to force repatriation of collections. As Keith Kintigh of Arizona State University, Chair of the SAA Task

Force on Reburial and Repatriation, has pointed out, the extent to which they will exercise such rights depends to a great degree on the archaeologist's ability to convince them that remains are being treated respectfully and that the information learned from them is of importance. 'In the long run, attempts to achieve greater understanding will benefit both archaeologists and Indians', he writes in a recent issue of the *SAA Bulletin*.

Therein lies the rub of this entire issue. Undoubtedly, some of the furore over reburial and repatriation is part of a much wider political agenda for native groups in many parts of the world. In this respect, archaeologists are innocent victims of history. But the fact remains that we have been lamentably insensitive to the concerns of native peoples, and to their views of their own history. I make this statement as a result of my own insensitivities in the field, and after many conversations with others in the same situation. It is not that we do not care, but that thinking about such things has never been a major intellectual concern. One has only to look at the literature of archaeology to realize this. During the past 25 years, our writings have proliferated with astonishing, and sometimes mind-numbing, speed. Practically all these many books and articles are concerned with method and theory, or with the results of archaeological research. There is effectively no literature on either the teaching of archaeology, or the archaeologist and the American Indian. What do we archaeologists know about perceptions of history in societies with basically cyclical views of time? How does one explain the importance of archaeology to people who believe 'we have been here since time immemorial. This is what we believe, and these beliefs are the foundation of our society'? We have not faced these issues in the arena of scholarly debate, let alone in the practical domain. Every time the problem has arisen, hastily-assembled committees and task-forces work in an atmosphere of reactive confrontation. This is not the best way to solve long-term problems that are as much a matter of perception as they are of practical management.

Why this astonishing lacuna? The glamour of archaeology, and professional reputations, lie in the important discovery, the major monograph, and the ground-breaking theoretical concept. They most emphatically do not blossom in

the classroom, or in the arcane study of alternative world-views. Yet, our discipline is an alternative world-view in and of itself. Archaeology was born of Western curiosity about the past and about human origins, a curiosity that is totally alien to many of the societies which we study with the spade. It is quite apart from the tales of legend. All societies, including our own, have their own creation myths, their own fables that define the spiritual and the actual world. Whether the myth comes from Genesis or from Australian Aboriginal legend, the intent is the same – a comprehensive, unique definition of the known and unknown world that sets the agenda for the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. And this, invariably, is considered the one and only way of interpreting human origins, of explaining the world. To suggest otherwise is to commit heresy, to undermine the very nature of human existence. And to people who cherish their traditional beliefs in a very personal way, archaeology is potentially very offensive. To consider alternative beliefs is to threaten chaos, to invoke the cosmic abyss and to bring on acute anxiety. In contrast, Western society has developed formal science as a means of visualizing alternatives, alternatives that not only study the past but predict the future. We archaeologists live in a cultural and social environment where intellectual alternatives are considered socially acceptable. We have a vastly diminished anxiety about threats to traditional beliefs, beliefs we often hold as less sacred than was once the case. Our world-view is fashioned not so much by religious belief as by impersonal, ever-changing science. But the workings of this science, of which archaeology is but a small part, are like magic to most of us. (Do you, dear reader, understand every word of the theoretical arguments in the pages of *ANTIQUITY*?) To a great extent, we archaeologists have become so convinced by the power and potential of science that we have forgotten the importance of developing an awareness of alternative world views. It rarely occurs to us that our activities may deeply offend some people.

Kintigh is right when he stresses the importance of respectful behaviour and sensitivity to others' views, but respect and sensitivity are not enough in the long term. We need to foster intellectual debate over the issues, over basic questions. Is it really true, as Mulvaney and others claim, that many younger Aborigines are fascinated by what archaeology tells them about

their past? How is archaeology relevant to contemporary native American society? What theoretical and practical approaches will foster greater understanding on both sides? These are not issues that will vanish within a generation; they are with us to stay. It behoves us to confront them not so much as a special interest group, but as interested, concerned partners in the important enterprises of preserving and respecting traditional culture, while also increasing our scientific understanding of our collective ancestry and of the great biological and cultural diversity of humankind. Part of this process of partnership is overcoming generations of distrust and misunderstanding. Do, for example, the results of our work reach the communities where we laboured? (At present, almost never.) Do we acknowledge the ownership of artefacts and bones *before* we start fieldwork? (Until recently, almost never.) Do we allow native peoples to assess the scientific worth of human remains, allow them the chance to make choices between scientific and other values? (Very rarely until a few years ago.) By and large, we have swept such questions under the rug and now we are reaping the whirlwind. How great a whirlwind overwhelms us in the future depends not only on intellectual debate, sensitivity and careful student training, but on the forging of meaningful, long-term partnerships with the living descendants of those we study.

In an era when Chicago developers buy up and redevelop 19th-century urban cemeteries complete with headstones, and where California Mormon cemeteries are accidentally discovered and the remains promptly reburied, whereas Indian remains often are not, we have to be far more than respectful – we should realize we have an important ethical and moral issue on our hands, one as pressing and fundamental as that surrounding illegal collecting. And it is a potentially explosive topic where our collective ignorance is appalling, and where confrontation is not the solution.

☪ This editorial is being written on a standing-room-only flight from New York to Denver. My neighbour discovered I was an archaeologist two hours ago and has given me a long discourse on pyramid power and biorhythms. This, he told me, was the most important discovery made by archaeologists this century . . . Move over Tutankhamun and Lords of Sipan . . . I will never tell anyone I am an

archaeologist again. Not that I did in this case: my neighbour saw the bright cover of an ANTIQUITY offprint!

### Noticeboard

#### Call for books: Case Studies in Archaeology

US publisher Holt, Rinehart and Winston plans this new archaeological series as a twin to its established student text series, *Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology*. Proposals to its series editor: *Jeffrey Quilter, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Suite 3700, 301 Commerce Street, Fort Worth TX 76102, USA.*

#### Conferences

##### Australian Archaeological Association

Birrigai near Canberra (ACT), 7–9 December 1991  
On the subject: 'Sahul in review: the archaeology of Australia, New Guinea and Island Melanesia at 10–30 kyr BP', with a major symposium on the palaeo-

ecology and human occupation of the major Sahul environments at c. 30,000, c. 18,000, and c. 10,000 BP. Offers of papers and other enquiries to: 1991 AAA Conference, c/o Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, GPO Box 4, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia.

##### VI International Flint Symposium

Madrid (Spain), 1–4 October 1991

Four geological and five archaeological sections, flint mining, flint supply, flint technology, use-wear, burnt flints; field trips before and after. Details: *Angeles Bustillo, Dpto. Geología, Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales CSIC, José Gutierrez Abascal 2, 28006 Madris, Spain.*

A conference on archaeological sciences University of York (England), 2–4 September 1991

Further information: *Dr J. Szymanski, Department of Electronics, University of York, Heslington, York YO1 5DD.*

## THE FAR SIDE in ANTIQUITY



"I see your little, petrified skull ... labeled and resting on a shelf somewhere."

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