

Obituary

Professor John Morton Coles MA(Cantab), PhD(Edin),
FDhc(Uppsala), ScD(Cantab), HonFSAScot, FSA, FBA,
FRSA, Hon MRIA, Hon MCifA

25 March 1930 – 14 October 2020

Professor John Coles, who died on 14 October 2020 aged 90, had a long and distinguished career as a prehistorian, experimental archaeologist and wetland archaeologist, and he made substantial contributions to Scottish archaeology, as well as to European and world archaeology more generally. His legacy is huge, and he inspired generations of students and researchers, including the author of this tribute.

Born on 25 March 1930 in Woodstock, Ontario, he graduated from the University of Toronto in 1952 and worked for three years in commerce, ‘working in an office in a small town,

and doing things that were of little interest to me, buying and selling’, as he recounted in his entertaining autobiography, *Yesterday’s Man: An Archaeological Life 1955–1980* (Coles 2019). During the summers of those years he travelled to Europe and in 1955, thanks to friends in Lincolnshire, and having been encouraged by his mother to pursue interests in ancient history and archaeology, he found himself invited to tea with Professor Grahame Clark of the University of Cambridge and was immediately accepted as a student in the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology there.



ILLUS 1 John Coles with Margaret Stewart, 1959, in Perthshire. (Photo courtesy of Professor Bryony Coles)

In 1957, having received his Diploma in Prehistoric Archaeology, he was persuaded by his friend and fellow Cambridge student Alan Macfarlane to go to Scotland. John and Alan were keen tennis players and John excelled at the sport, winning the Scottish Men's singles title at Nairn that year, followed by the Scottish Tennis Cup in 1959. (Local press coverage of the Nairn competition reported that 'the superior court craft saw the young student outplay Wylde in two straight sets'.) He contacted Professor Stuart Piggott, the Abercromby Professor at the University of Edinburgh, in 1957 and was accepted to undertake his doctoral research under Piggott's supervision. Initially planning to research the Picts, he was persuaded by Piggott to focus instead on the Scottish Late Bronze Age, since F T Wainwright's 1956 book, *The Problem of the Picts*, had just been published and, according to Piggott, 'there was little more to be done' on that topic (Coles 2019: 29). 'However, the Late Bronze Age of Scotland was a bit of a vacuum and could prove to be an interesting project. I had never heard of such a period in such a country but I accepted the offer of a place at Edinburgh and resolved to study the Late Bronze Age. I cannot now say it was the most exciting subject I have ever encountered ...' (ibid: 29). He nevertheless excelled in his research, completing and submitting his doctoral thesis in just under two years; indeed, he had to retrieve and resubmit it, to comply with University Regulations regarding a minimum two-year duration of doctoral study (ibid: 37–8). His hilarious account of the tour of Scottish regional and local museums that he undertook with Piggott as part of his research portrays a thankfully bygone age of hair-raising non-curation or over-zealous mis-curation in some places: in one museum, all the labels pertaining to the pots and bronzes laid out for them had been gathered up and placed in a Food Vessel at the end of the table by the curator 'for their convenience', while in another, a bronze axehead was found in the jaws of a stuffed alligator on the floor (ibid: 34–5). 'Other museums were in a process of re-organisation, a word that generally heralded a total shambles' (ibid: 34). In some places, Coles and Piggott resorted

to a decidedly unconventional research method: while some local collections were housed in unlocked cabinets, others were hermetically sealed in cases that had probably not been opened since their installation, and in those instances Piggott would distract the custodian while Coles used his trusted multi-purpose tool, named 'Bimbo', to lever open the case and then, after studying the artefacts and replacing them, to 'screw or hammer down everything necessary to secure the case' (ibid: 34) – an approach not recommended to researchers nowadays!

After completing his PhD Coles remained in Edinburgh, continuing his research with a Carnegie Scholarship and as an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, until he returned to Cambridge in 1960 as an Assistant Lecturer. Thereafter, despite various invitations to take up employment at the University of Edinburgh (including in a professorial capacity), he remained at the University of Cambridge until his retirement in 1986, rising through the ranks of Lecturer and Reader to become Professor of European Prehistory in 1980. While his teaching and research covered a wide array of topics ranging over Palaeolithic and Mesolithic archaeology, the European Bronze Age, the Stone Age of Africa, experimental archaeology, wetland archaeology and – latterly – Scandinavian rock art, he retained an interest in Scottish archaeology and returned to excavate several sites during the 1960s. These included a hut-circle at Dalnagar in (then-named) Perthshire, with Margaret Stewart (Stewart 1962); a cave with what was subsequently found to be the first substantive evidence for Upper Palaeolithic activity in Scotland at Kilmelfort in Argyll, with Marion Campbell (Coles 1983; Saville & Ballin 2009); Neolithic sites at Pitnacree (Coles & Simpson 1965) and Grandtully, Perthshire (Simpson & Coles 1990), with Derek Simpson; and Mesolithic sites at Low Clone, Wigtownshire (Cormack & Coles 1966) and at Morton, Fife (Coles 1971) with Bill Cormack. He also published his highly influential synthetic studies of the metalwork of the entire Bronze Age (and indeed Chalcolithic period, although it was not thus named in those days) in Volumes 93, 97 and 101 of this Society's

Proceedings (Coles 1960, 1964, 1969), along with several articles on individual Scottish finds (such as the Torran hoard: Campbell & Coles 1963) and classes of artefact (eg Scottish swan's neck sunflower pins: Coles 1959).

John Coles is arguably best known for his work in experimental archaeology and in wetland archaeology. He became interested in both early in his career, with his experimentation initially stemming from the desire to understand better the Late Bronze Age metalwork he was studying. Coles used his skill as a trumpet player (along with several mouthpieces) to great effect when he was invited by Joseph Raftery, Keeper of Irish Antiquities, to blow various Late Bronze Age horns in the National Museum of Ireland. His experimental work on the efficacy (or otherwise) of Late Bronze Age sheet-bronze shields vs leather shields when used against leaf-shaped swords is immortalised in an iconic *Time/Life* image showing him engaged in simulated combat with Don Allan, an Assistant in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, in 1961. That photo was subsequently reused on the cover of *Experiment and Design*, the *Festschrift* for Coles following a 1997 conference in his honour, titled *From Somerset to Simris* (Harding 1999). Coles went on to publish *Archaeology by Experiment* in 1973 (which was then translated into seven languages) and *Experimental Archaeology* in 1979, produced after his 1973 volume went out of print (Coles 1973, 1979). This was groundbreaking work and both volumes were (and remain) essential textbooks on the subject. In its obituary for Coles, EXARC – the flourishing international network of experimental archaeologists – paid tribute to him as an inspiration and a giant in the field (Paardekooper 2020).

Coles's involvement in wetland archaeology, the other discipline which he helped to shape, arose from Grahame Clark's exhortation to the young Assistant Lecturer to explore some pre-historic trackways that had been spotted in the peat of the Somerset Levels by Stephen Dewar, an amateur field archaeologist. That was to be the start of a quarter-century-long involvement in the archaeology of the Somerset Levels, as recounted in *Sweet Track to Glastonbury* (Coles

& Coles 1986), and its legacy is immense. With major support from English Heritage, and particularly Geoffrey Wainwright who was then the Inspector for that part of England, the large-scale Somerset Levels Project ran from 1973 to 1989, and included the establishment of the Somerset Levels Museum near Westhay in 1982. (Later renamed the Peat Moors Centre, this was sadly closed by Somerset County Council, due to budget cuts, in 2009. It reopened as the Avalon Marshes Visitor Centre, and although it is mainly devoted to wildlife, archaeology is covered, and includes a recording of John Coles talking about Ray Sweet, after whom the Sweet Track was named.) The Project's results were promptly published in the series of Somerset Levels Papers (15 volumes, 1975–89) and the Project won both the Imperial Chemical Industries Award for the best archaeological project offering a major contribution to knowledge in 1996 and the European Archaeological Heritage Prize in 2006.

Other major wetland archaeology initiatives were to benefit from John's expertise, determination, advice and advocacy. He was responsible for establishing the Fenland Project in the mid 1970s, the North West Wetlands Survey in 1991 and the Humber Wetlands Project, which ran from 1992 to 2000. His publication of 'Irish bogs: the time is now' (Coles 1984), drawing attention to the massive loss of wetland archaeology through commercial peat extraction in Ireland and urging action, was one of the drivers that eventually led to the establishment of the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit (IAWU) in 1990. His support for Irish wetland archaeology continued – he was on the Directorate of the Discovery Programme from 2001 to 2006 – and in 2001 his 'An Evaluation of Current Peatland Survey and Excavation Strategy' (Coles 2001), commissioned by Dúchas, the Heritage Service, made sound recommendations (which, sadly, were not all followed up; the IAWU was closed in 2005, and the subsequent management of wetland archaeology became the subject of a highly critical review by the National Monuments Service in 2013). Throughout his work promoting Irish wetland archaeology, John collaborated with his close friend Barry Raftery.

John and his wife, Professor Bryony Coles, also established WARP – the Wetland Archaeology Research Project – in 1986 as an informal worldwide network of those engaged in wetland archaeology. Its newsletter evolved into the *Journal of Wetland Archaeology* in 2000 and its conferences have both raised the profile and shaped the course of wetland archaeology around the world. It was thanks to John's good-natured yet steely encouragement of the Scottish delegates at the 1998 WARP conference at University College Dublin to 'stop talking about it and just get on with it' that the Scottish Wetland Archaeology Programme (SWAP, 1998–present) was founded, led by John Barber and Anne Crone. The Scottish Wetlands Archaeology Database (SWAD: Scottish Wetlands Archaeological Database (ed. ac.uk), <https://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/~ajn/swad/>, accessed April 2021), supported by the then-named Historic Scotland, was an early output of this project and, thanks to continuing support by Historic Environment Scotland, SWAP continues to flourish, with Crone's excavations at the Iron Age site at Black Loch of Myrton just one of several initiatives that are keeping the profile of Scottish wetland archaeology high.

John's research on rock art in Norway and Sweden, encouraged by his friend Professor Bo Gräslund of the University of Uppsala, occupied the later part of his career, between 1975 and 2005, and resulted in (*inter alia*) *Patterns in a Rocky Land: Rock Carvings in South-West Upland, Sweden* in 2000 (Coles 2000) and *Shadows of a Northern Past: Rock Carvings of Bohuslän and Østfold* (Coles 2005). Both exemplified his thorough and insightful approach to understanding the remains of the past. His colleagues in Sweden have remarked on his uncanny topographic memory and his expertise in 'scientific budgetary economy' in achieving much with a small budget (Price 2020). In his introductory address to the *From Somerset to Simris* conference, Bo Gräslund accurately summed up John's 'can do' approach as 'don't wait, do things now, do it yourself, do it cheap, do it simple, do it thoroughly, do it well' (Gräslund 1999: x).

In addition to undertaking these major fieldwork and research projects John was, of course,

a teacher, and his reflections on his life at the University of Cambridge, recounted in his 2019 autobiography – complete with his tale of being Director of Studies to Prince Charles, and being flown to France with him by the Duke of Edinburgh for an archaeological field trip that was plagued by journalists – are a cracking read.

The present author was one from several generations of students lucky enough to have been taught by this hard-working and inspiring teacher, who imparted his immense scholarship with élan, humour and generosity and who was always keen to give students practical experience of archaeology and the opportunity to participate in projects and conferences. Working on the Somerset Levels, lying on a plank in freezing Easter weather to free a Neolithic trackway from the peat with a plastic spatula, was both character-forming and huge fun. It was a delight to work with John and Bryony who were so dedicated to, and enthusiastic and knowledgeable about, prehistory. Students continue to this day to benefit from their generosity and encouragement through the John and Bryony Coles Bursary, established in 1998 and administered through the Prehistoric Society, which funds student members of the Society to undertake foreign travel to deepen their understanding of prehistoric archaeology through fieldwork, museum study or site visits.

John's many other services to archaeology include his stint as Assistant Editor, then Editor, then President (1978–82) of the Prehistoric Society. His wise and no-nonsense counsel to the Discovery Programme in Ireland and to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, as a Commissioner (1992–2002), helped to shape the course of archaeological fieldwork and of heritage management in these countries. John was also the first archaeologist to advise the Trustees of the Heritage Lottery Fund on the disbursement of funds to archaeological projects when the HLF was established.

He published extensively, from 1958 to 2019, and the impressive list of his scholarly publications to 1998 that appeared in his *Festschrift*

(Harding 1999: 194–8) includes classic textbooks such as *The Archaeology of Early Man* (Coles & Higgs 1969) and *The Bronze Age in Europe* (Coles & Harding 1979). John was also assiduous in communicating archaeology to the public in an accessible and entertaining way (eg through his popular book *Sweet Track to Glastonbury*), and he was highly effective in using mass media to raise archaeology's profile and to generate support for heritage protection.

The esteem with which he was held is marked by his many honours and awards. In addition to those noted above, he received the Grahame Clark Medal from the British Academy (1995) and the gold medals of the Society of Antiquaries of London (2000) and of the Swedish Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities (2009). He was awarded an honorary doctorate by Uppsala University (1997) and an honorary Professorship at the University of Exeter (1993). He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1963), of the British

Academy (1978) and of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (1983), an Honorary Fellow of this Society (2000), an Honorary Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge (1987), an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy (2005) and an Honorary Member of the Chartered Institute of Field Archaeologists (1991).

Added to these formal indications of esteem are the many expressions of respect, gratitude and deep affection that have come from his friends and colleagues around the world upon hearing the sad news of his death. These tributes emphasise how, through his fieldwork, his scholarship, his teaching, his leading by example and his passionate advocacy, John changed the face of archaeology. He lives on in the hearts of many people, and archaeology will long continue to benefit from the achievements of this brilliant, witty and generous man. This Society's condolences are extended to Bryony and to John's children Joanne, Steven, Ali and Chris.

ALISON SHERIDAN



ILLUS 2 John Coles, aged 78 in 2008. (Photo copyright unknown; photo had been provided to Roeland Paardekooper by John Coles)

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