

Obituary

Emeritus Professor Derek Douglas Alexander Simpson

Born Glasgow 18 March 1938, died Hillsborough, Co Down 15 March 2005

Derek Simpson was a product of what those of us fortunate enough to be students at the time regard as the golden years of archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. Born in Glasgow on 18 March 1938, Derek epitomized solid Scottish scholarship. His early education, however, was varied owing to his father's employment with John Menzies, which involved several moves of house. Thus, he was educated first at Perth Academy and then Carlisle and then finally in Edinburgh where he became an undergraduate in 1955 at the age of 17 and where his teachers were Stuart Piggott and Richard Atkinson.

Derek's earliest interest in the past was fired, like that of so many others, by Egypt and all things Egyptological; years later he still used to sign his letters with an *ankh*. It was at Edinburgh that we first met though we spent much of our weekends and vacations away from Edinburgh, leading a gypsy existence digging on hill-forts whose only common denominator was a minimum number of finds and a maximum chance of dying from exposure. But these were sorties over and above the call of the Edinburgh course requirements, aided by the fact that, courtesy of his father, Derek had access to that rare form of transport amongst Scottish students in the 1950s – a motor car. It was the same car that allowed Derek to make the occasional return visit to Glasgow, not to the Hunterian nor to the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery – that was left to Fine Art excursions. Derek had an uncle who was in charge of film distribution for one of the major US studios and thus he could indulge in another area of enduring expertise – the Western and the great Hollywood directors. More formal training undoubtedly laid the ground work for

Derek's own considerable tally of excavations. There were three seasons at Stonehenge – one memorably involving Easter in the snow – and at the Waylands Smithy and West Kennet long barrows, while on North Uist the excavation of the Sollas wheel-house assured Derek a bit-part in a Compton Mackenzie novel, the follow-up to *Whisky Galore* (Mackenzie 1958).

Having begun what was to be a life-long concern with the Neolithic and Bronze Ages in Britain and Ireland, Derek graduated in 1958 and was elected a Fellow of this Society in the following year – when R B K Stevenson, the Keeper of the then National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, was his proposer. Fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries of London, proposed by Stuart Piggott, followed some ten years later. At the time when his first wife, artist and former fellow student Morna MacGregor (now MacCusbic), was Curator at nearby Swindon Museum, Derek's first post was as Assistant Curator at Devizes Museum under Ken Annable. The *Devizes Guide catalogue of the Neolithic and Bronze Age collections* published in 1964 remains a monument to this period and a model of its kind. At the same time Derek was invited by Nikolaus Pevsner to join the team of researchers who were an essential part of the monumental enterprise that was *The Buildings of England*. With typical generosity Pevsner made sure that Derek's name appeared on the title-page of the Wiltshire volume (Pevsner with Simpson 1963).

Publications and excavations north and south of the Border continued throughout the early phase of his career and for the rest of his life. They included in the mid-1960s the discovery of two Beaker houses – a rarity

indeed – at Northton as well as other sites on the Isle of Harris (Simpson 1976; Simpson et al 2003). Northton, the pottery from which was first studied and drawn by another contemporary and friend of Derek's, Isla McInnes, awaits the complete publication it must and, with the help of others, will yet have. South of the Border there was excavation of the West Overton round barrow with Isobel Smith, and, in Scotland, Croft Moraig with Piggott and Pitnacree with John Coles, as well as Kaimes Hill, with its timber-laced rampart where Derek experimented with a primitive form of photogrammetry influenced by Richard Atkinson's adapted fireman's ladder; first reported on in 1971, the full Kaimes report appears in this volume as now, alas, the first of several posthumous publications.

It was also with Coles that Derek edited the first of two *Festschriften* written for Stuart Piggott (Coles & Simpson 1968) in which he contributed a paper on food vessel origins and chronology, a subject he always intended to take further; but this was the product of another major chapter in Derek's life. In 1962 Derek had moved to the Department of Archaeology at Leicester to join Charles Thomas, John Wachter and others where his talents as a teacher were soon recognized. It is true that in his public as well as private life there was always something of a Jekyll and Hyde about Derek Simpson. Thus, while often in informal groups where he did not feel at home he could be taciturn to the point of brusqueness, behind the lectern a totally different persona was revealed, carefully enunciating complex ideas with absolute clarity and, like his own great teacher Richard Atkinson, often without the aid of a single note. In 1971 I too joined the Leicester Department and greatly benefited from Derek's total loyalty and support at a time when the Department was beginning to establish itself as a fully-fledged professional archaeological training ground. And it was to Leicester that Derek enticed Alex Gibson as a PhD student. Derek and Alex soon discovered a natural friendship and Derek found he had gained a research assistant

to complete the study of the Northton ceramic assemblage. The pair of them also had a natural gift for what one nowadays would call 'cultural tourism'. Through an informal arrangement with the Instituut voor Prehistorie of Leiden University, reciprocal visits to and from the Low Countries found Derek walking in the footsteps of Vere Gordon Childe in the Orkneys and posing on innumerable *hunebedden* in Drenthe. There were more serious collaborative projects including in 1975–6 excavating with J G Evans the second long barrow at Giants' Hills, Skendleby, the first of which was dug by C W Phillips in 1936 (Evans & Simpson 1991). The chief joint publication of those years was the writing with a group of others, mostly also graduates of Edinburgh, of the *Introduction to British Prehistory* (Megaw & Simpson 1979), a key feature of which was the line drawings rivalling those of Stuart Piggott himself, drawings executed by Morna MacGregor. Much to Derek's indignation, we were castigated by several of our peers for the largely 'old-fashioned', theory-light approach that was followed – it must be said, much in the style that Derek Simpson himself always preferred. Notwithstanding, the 'idiots' guide', conceived, as Derek himself put it, 'by idiots for idiots', went through no less than six reprints.

It was in those years that his marriage ended. Morna moved back to Scotland with their two children, Lis and Duncan – with whom Derek continued to maintain contact right up to his death. Derek met Nancy, at the time a theatre nurse and enrolled in his Northampton Adult Education class; shortly thereafter they established themselves in Great Glen, a village just south of Leicester. The later 1970s and 1980s were not in fact particularly kind to the University or to Derek nor, truth to tell, was he kind to himself. Certainly, there are many tales of adventures at home and abroad during meetings of the Bronze Age and Neolithic Studies Groups. Most of these were archaeological and several were with Aubrey Burl, one of Leicester's very first graduate students. Nevertheless, it

was with a real feeling of a new start when, in 1984, he ‘received the call’ and took up the Chair of Archaeology at Queen’s, Belfast, an appointment described by one Irish colleague as ‘a breath of fresh air for Irish archaeology’. Despite his apparent occasional stubbornness, Derek was a natural conciliator which may explain why he seems to have been as much at home in the Republic as in the Six Counties, as well as being a regular attendee at national and local committees and conferences; he also occasionally kept up his links with Edinburgh by attending special meetings of this Society. In Ulster there were excavations at Ballygalley and Island McHugh and, with Alex Gibson, re-examination of Lyles Hill, first excavated in the 1930s by Estyn Evans. A glance at successive volumes of the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* between 1988 and 1999 not only bears witness to Derek’s joint editorship in those later years but to excavation of earthworks in Co Tyrone including at Dun Ruadh. There are also notes on a collection of bronzes from Ballymoney, Co Antrim and another examining stone artefacts from the Lower Bann, this last an excursion into ethno-archaeology with shades of the classes we took together at Edinburgh in First Ordinary Anthropology. Last of all, there is a joint study of the use of hazel in prehistoric Ireland entitled – again typically – ‘The Wild Bunch’ (McComb & Simpson 1999). Derek’s many other publications, on topics as diverse as maceheads and battle axes, pitchstone and porcellanite and combs for decorating Beaker pots, reflect his wide-ranging interests and expertise. But it was in this Society’s own *Proceedings* that one finds the final paper to be published in Derek’s lifetime, two years after his retirement from Queen’s in 2001 (Simpson et al 2003); his very first for the Society was the result of our only joint excavation (Megaw & Simpson 1961; Megaw 2004, 21–3).

Latterly Derek had undergone major heart surgery and poor general health had reduced his archaeological activities. However, three final events give some indication of the high standing

in which Derek continued to be held not only by his peers but also by the younger generation of British and Irish archaeologists. In March 2003 Derek was one of three professorial guests of honour, all former students of Stuart Piggott, at the Society’s conference held in Edinburgh and entitled *Scotland in Ancient Europe: the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age of Scotland in their European Context*. This, like the published proceedings that followed, was dedicated to the memory of Piggott, ‘Scholar and Master’ (Shepherd & Barclay 2004). Then in January of this year, much to his surprise and delight, Derek was presented with a *Festschrift* to mark his retirement, another volume which could well also have been dedicated to a scholar and master. It was edited by two of the many who, over the years, have been inspired by Derek’s knowledge and enriched by his friendship (Gibson & Sheridan 2004).

Retirement did not last long. Derek died just two days before what would have been his 67th birthday and was formally fare-welled a few days later in a simple humanist ceremony which was, in the best traditions of those first-release movies we saw together all those years ago, a standing-room only event. Some of Derek’s favourite Gregorian plainchant was played and Alex Gibson gave a eulogy by turns informative, frank, amusing and – above all – affectionate.

On the coast of Sligo atop of Knocknarea, stands the giant pile of Queen Maeve’s Cairn, at 60m in diameter one of the most impressive chamber tombs in the region. It dominates more than 60 passage-graves of Carrowmore lying below, as Piggott described it, ‘on an elevated upland, with its outliers ... crowning a great bluff which towers above the Atlantic’ (Piggott 1954, 193). Climb to the top of Knocknarea and look west and you can see Inishmurray – and then the uninterrupted rolling mass of the ocean. This was one of Derek’s favourite spots and there his remains wait, like those of a latter-day Celtic hero or, rather, like a sheriff saddling up for a celestial posse out of the West ...

NOTE

I am grateful to Alex Gibson, Morna MacCusbic, Alison Sheridan and Nancy Simpson for help in compiling this tribute.

J V S Megaw

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