

A Faith in Archaeological Science:  
Reflections on a Life

Don Brothwell

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## **Archaeological Lives**

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For my children, Jane, Shona, Nina, Morag, Judith and Jamie, with love



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# Chapter 1

## Introducing a Life

I suppose one could say that this is a limited record of the life and thought of one member of the human species. It is not written because I regard myself as an important individual, special in some way which demands consideration in history. I don't fit in as a leader of any group, political or religious. I have had no distinguished schooling or university record. No, the only reason for writing this memoir or reflection on life is that I feel driven to do so. And I believe this is because few in academic archaeology give an account of themselves in this ever changing field of research, and especially from the point of view of the impact of the sciences on archaeology. Perhaps it should be noted from the very beginning that, to me, archaeology can't really be separated from the broader field of anthropology, and indeed probably from aspects of psychology. Divisions into mind and body, culture and evolutionary biology, past and present, may be convenient in order to arrange data on our species, but we are all the sum total of all of this. I have lived a life influenced by evolution and the environment, of my need for survival, and of social influences on my behaviour. Added to this the myriad of events into which each of us is placed during life. For me, birth in the 1930s, war, poor schooling, the London scene, marriage and children, interaction with academic colleagues (both bad and good), and of course the stimulation of a life which encouraged questioning and exploration, all set the stage. Looking back, I think I spent too much time in some research aspects and not enough in others, but nevertheless I have always enjoyed a broad base to my work, and thankfully have not been obstructed in the enquiries I wanted to make. Given my time again, I would want to ponder human genetics and demographic aspects more, as well as the potential links between archaeology and chemistry and social psychology. We are a species with limited perception and a tendency to extend into mental abnormality, whether the milder states of depression, hedonism and narcissism or the more destructive forms

of neurosis or psychosis. The past, as well as the present, is not free of this rainbow of mental states, yet archaeology has viewed human society as being in a continuous state of normality, except for group conflicts of course. But even in the case of warfare, the social and mental impact on people has not been discussed in the depth it has deserved. Neither have health aspects in general been discussed. The reason for this is really because although archaeology has a history extending back and linking to geology, it has been generally treated as a history of ancient monuments and of material culture.

Over the years, the sciences have been involved more and more in answering questions posed by finds or excavations of the past, and I have been lucky enough to have been drawn into a range of research of a scientific nature, first on human remains but extending into other aspects of what has become 'archaeological science'. In my old age, I have come to realise that all of archaeology is science, as we are simply brainy primates. Of course we are better at tool making than our relatives, and have more complex societies (although parliament sounds like a troop of baboons at times). The fact that we have songs rather than gibbon tree calls should not put us off the similarities. And if chimpanzee culture is not as elaborate as our own, then again, we should not think them so very different. Darwin, I'm sure, would agree with me on this point, but whether the great and the good of archaeological history would agree with me is another matter!

I am aware that there must be bias in all biographic accounts, even with recourse to diaries, notes and the varieties of reference memorabilia which can accumulate in life. My concern has been not to intrude into the lives of others more than really necessary. In particular, my critical feelings about others who have detrimentally impacted on my life are best passed over with a minimum of comment. Their actions, linked perhaps to poor judgment or some other state of mind, are difficult for anyone else to truly understand. For that reason, the least said the better. Surely, in the end, all lives are a mixture of humdrum, tragicomic and, with a little bit of luck, inspiration. I have certainly felt pleasantly driven at various times, although how productively only history will tell. Nothing as wonderful as the discovery of oxygen or the theory of evolution has come my way, but in the field of archaeological science, I have nibbled away with satisfaction. And that is all most of us can hope for, contributing a sand grain to building a history.

Some topics, such as human conflict and war, have occupied me for my whole adult life, although this has resulted in personal action at only particular points in time. My children have occupied a very considerable amount of time and thought, but actual comment here is relatively brief, as for the most part their lives are beyond my personal life and must be protected and respected as such. Similarly, my wives and other female friends I consider to be beyond this review of my life. It can be accepted that these were intimate relationships of a kind which some would include in a work about themselves, but it seems to me that it can't be done without revealing aspects of relationships which are not my personal property.

Finally, I should say that I have given emphasis in the book title to the fact that my career has been strongly influenced by the sciences and their growing importance within archaeology. In particular, much of my research effort has been directed to bioarchaeological problems, related to humans and certain other species. It has been my luck and privilege to be employed in this field of archaeological science for fifty years. And at the moment of writing this, I find it as stimulating and enjoyable as when I first set out to study ancient remains. It has also been a great pleasure during this time to see a significant expansion in academic posts, teaching and research in archaeological science during this half century. Particularly gratifying personally, is to see old students who are academic survivors, and now in key positions both in universities and museums.

To my knowledge, this is the first memoir written by an archaeological scientist. The discipline of archaeology has spawned a range of autobiographies of various forms, from Mortimer Wheeler, Max Mallowan, Philip Rahtz and Leslie Grinsell to Glyn Daniel, all field archaeologists to a great degree. It would have been very interesting to have had available to me the archaeological lives of my own teachers, Gordon Childe, Frederick Zeuner and Kathleen Kenyon, especially as I suspect that their private lives would have revealed a lot more about them and their private thoughts than we will now ever know. But they didn't write and I suspect that a lot of information is now lost forever. The life of Childe has been well covered by others, and I shall return to him later. Zeuner was of course one of the early archaeological scientists, particularly concerned with chronology and environmental archaeology.

Few know that he was also a specialist on fossil insects, although he never developed entomology as a field within archaeology. In fact so far, the developing impact of archaeological science within the field as a whole, and of the scientists themselves, are stories largely untold. Having passed my allotted three score years and ten, the time has come for some personal reflections on where I have been in this history.

I confess that while writing this, I have failed to find a catchy title to the work, something funny or eye-catching, perhaps supported on the front cover by a piece of ancient pornographic pottery. I am reminded of some of the titles which occasionally appear in literature which one would have loved to have thought of oneself. 'Loose Bodies in Joints' could have been a perfect title for a book on syphilis and prostitution. In fact it referred to a learned study by a Cambridge professor of surgery in 1888, to structures of the knee-joint. Similarly, for me 'The Baboon in Medical Research' conjures up dubious individuals of the kind so well portrayed by the cartoonist Thomas Rowlandson.

All who write about their lives and thoughts are also presented with the problem of how to arrange the incidents in their lives. To some extent this can be achieved by a chronological ordering, but some aspects may demand the bringing together of work of a similar kind, even though relevant experiences are scattered over many

years of life. I have erred on the side of pragmatism, finding that various parts of my life follow on sensibly, but with reflective diversions of a less chronological kind inserted where they seemed most appropriate. In the end, it all adds up to my life as a scientist puzzling and enthusing over things archaeological, but linked intimately with family, and cooking, and nappy changing, and all the simple diversions which in fact make life worth living – but seem to be so briefly mentioned in an autobiography. And perhaps that is where biography fails, for it is simply impossible to record adequately as a part of ones life the enormous and warm pleasure of feeling a little hand trustingly holding ones own, or sitting on a warm beach handing out ice-creams. Similarly, the uplifting intimacy of a girlfriend or wife, the special bonding and closeness which occur but a few times, yet mean more than position and honours can ever do.

Are our thoughts about ourselves and others always correct, and to what extent do distorted views influence our lives? Moreover, when eventually sitting down to write an autobiography, can we hope to give a truthful account of our lives or is it likely to be distorted by failing to appreciate subconscious motives and emotions? Of course, our histories include many concrete facts, and therefore there is a core of hard information not to be disputed, but our interpretations of some details, and what we may see as correct emotional responses in our lives, may be dominated by final conscious interpretations of the truth, which may cover up and even avoid what has been debated at a subconscious level.

This problem of trying to truly know ourselves is well discussed by the psychologist Timothy Wilson in his book *'Strangers to Ourselves'* (269). He points out that we have different levels of mental processes, including what he terms the 'adaptive unconscious', which categorizes and evaluates people. This is summed up well by E.S. Dallas in 1866 (quoted by Wilson) who said 'Outside consciousness there rolls a vast tide of life which is perhaps more important to us than the little isle of our thoughts which lies within our ken.'

So I hope this account will reveal something of the minute place I have in history and particularly in archaeological science. While history in general is concerned about peoples and populations, of behavioural and cultural change, the autobiography is a snapshot of one persons' life as recorded by himself. Bias is inevitable, but I will argue here that a reasonable judgement can be made of a person based on the hard historic facts of work, writings and reactions by others, and to a lesser extent by his own personal interpretations. At the same time, I recognise that others, ex-wives, children, friends and associates may have a fairly good, but different grasp of what makes me tick. The one area of me which is not easy for others to invade and evaluate is concerned with my deeper emotions and feelings, which we tend to hide. Language can hardly do justice to how we feel, but I have tried, as honestly as my conscious mind allows, to expand on my emotions to happenings, even though the language is a very subdued response to how I originally felt.

In a healthy state of mind, why would anyone really want to write their life story? Looking at so many autobiographies today, they seem to be explainable in a number

of ways. To the celebrity, it is a way of improving profits and spreading publicity. To the politician or sportsman, such a life in the public eye is not only financially useful, but explains to a general public, their competence to lead or play well on the world stage. And there may be a genuine interest in encouraging the young to consider 'public service' or sporting potential as a worthwhile career. Famous actors or singers may similarly be driven to outline their lives as an encouragement to younger members of society to persevere with their hopes for success in these media. Inevitably, I suppose, it also reveals something of their egos, their view that they have something worthy of telling, even if history may eventually doubt the value of such accounts. In a somewhat different league are the accounts of academics, which appeal to a different and more contracted audience. Many famous names such as Newton and Darwin had lives which are well discussed, but mainly by others not themselves. And perhaps anything worth saying about them is best assessed by others, who can attempt a sober and balanced evaluation of them, without the biases and distortions of personal egoism. So why am I, a very, very minor scientist, attempting some account of my life as I see it? The fact is that we all have a story to tell and some of us have contributed to the early development of a subject. There is another reason which has driven me to write, and I guess many others too, and that is the need to try and understand their lives and actions, and perhaps even come to terms with events or changing beliefs which may or may not have been as happy or acceptable as one might have wished. There is also the fact that it enables a personal evaluation of myself within archaeology at 70 or 50 or 30 years ago, and which I now find to represent quite different people in some respects.

I have subtitled this account 'Reflections on a Life' because part of living is not action but thinking about, pondering, perhaps even making the wrong decisions. Since boyhood, I have certainly observed and thought plenty: about family, neighbours, politicians, the world scene, and I think that gradually this has improved my ability to discern things more acutely and accurately. But those reading this account may disagree. Also, there is no doubt that I have realised more and more over the decades that my early assumptions that most people are intelligent, perceptive, courageous and truly ethical may not be correct. I realise now that we are all varyingly defective, that academics can be nincompoops, politicians unperceptive, administrators uncompassionate, and the 'man in the street' not fit to make judgements which can have serious repercussions for the future of our planet. The majority of the world population are religious and superstitious and impose grotesque moralities and pain on others, and perhaps I have contributed to these absurdities. All our lives have something to say in this respect, but few ruminate in this way, and set pen to paper.

I am of course very aware that what seems to be the truth to me, may be seen in a very different light by some of my family or colleagues. All one can do is to try and get the facts right, and describe ones emotions and attitudes in appropriate words which don't mislead others. However, speaking what one feels is the truth without hurting others, is extremely difficult to do, and sometimes impossible. My conscience, whatever that is, has prevented any temptation I might have had to be

over-critical or scornful of old colleagues or others who have entered my life. We all have our problems, and if some act jealously or malignantly towards others, they are failing themselves. The extent of the truth given should then be tempered by the extent of the pain and hurt it can potentially give to others and I hope that my accounts are free of any such personal destructiveness to others.

So I have entitled this work 'A Faith in Archaeological Science', because I think that is what I have been concerned with for much of my life. To some extent 'anthropologist' or even 'applied biologist' would equally explain much but not all of my labours, but ultimately my passion has been to see the sciences applied to answering archaeological problems, and also to establish that archaeology is to a large degree applied science. Like many of my colleagues, there have been periods of frustration when grants did not materialise, and it must be a common feeling that with better financial support, far more could have been achieved in research. But we have to live with these limitations, and in so many ways luck has been on my side. A variety of interesting sites and discoveries have come my way, and I have also been stimulated to take up various editing work in the field of archaeological science, plus book projects and research opportunities over the years. It has demanded commitment and time, but it has been a pleasure. So what follows is an account, but also an experiment in how to describe one life in the midst of many, and with the backdrop of the world of excavations, museums and universities, as well as family and friends. In particular, I hope it will show the variety, the challenges, and the fun of working in the ever growing field of archaeological science.