

MEMORIAL ADDRESS

BRYAN ALLAN LEFEBVRE CRANSTONE

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BRYAN entered my life in the early 1960s when I was an undergraduate studying anthropology at University College, London. He was then a venerable old man with white hair who descended once a week from the lofty heights of the British Museum to teach us what was then called 'Primitive Technology'. Characteristically leaning Nuer-like on the long pole he used as a pointer, he told us all about digging-sticks, ploughs, traps and weapons. Pre-industrial technology was, of course, his passion, and he loved to share his encyclopaedic knowledge of it. It was typical of him to bring over a member of the Museum technical staff, Les Langton, to demonstrate metal-working to us.

When I joined the Ethnography Department of the British Museum in 1965, I worked directly under Bryan, relieving him of some of his onerous curatorial responsibilities. Till then he had been responsible for the collections from Europe and the whole of Asia, as well as the Pacific area. For the first time since he

Text of an Address delivered at the Memorial Service for Bryan Cranstone held at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford on Saturday 28th April 1990. (Dr Schuyler Jones also spoke at the Memorial Service. His extemporaneous address went unrecorded, however, and we are therefore unable to publish it here.)

joined the Department in 1947, he was able to concentrate on the cultures of Melanesia, which were his main interest.

I remember being greatly in awe of him at first, deferentially addressing him as 'Mr Cranstone', and deferring to him on all decisions about our joint section. When this eventually got on his nerves, he begged me to call him Bryan, and kindly explained that he expected me to take my own decisions and just get on with it. He totally lacked an authoritarian impulse, and treated everyone, no matter what their age, gender, background or position, with equal courtesy and respect. Though a dignified man, he never stood on his dignity. He was always approachable and ready to give information or advice. Beneath his reserved manner there also lurked a wicked sense of humour, and his polite demeanour could occasionally be punctured by an endearingly outspoken personal comment—as when he once blurted out that he thought it was a savage custom to pierce your ears, as I had just done.

When I joined the Museum he had recently returned from his field trip to the Tifalmin valley in New Guinea, and an exhibition of his work there had just opened at the British Museum. Now that it is taken for granted that museum anthropologists should do fieldwork, it is easy to forget that this was not always the case. When Bryan joined the B.M. the old curatorial traditions of armchair ethnography and second-hand expertise were still dominant, and it must have taken a great deal of imagination and courage to persuade the Museum authorities to send him to the quite remote Highlands of New Guinea, and even allow an assistant (John Lee) to accompany him to take photographs and make a film. Bryan's was the first ethnographic fieldwork ever organized by a member of the British Museum.

It is also easy to forget that Bryan's Tifalmin exhibition was innovative too. It was the first in the Department to display artefacts in their geographical and cultural context, using large photographic enlargements—an exhibition method which has become commonplace now. The exhibition included life-size photographs of Tifalmin people in traditional dress, and those familiar with these fashions and with Bryan's sense of humour will appreciate his mischievous glee at planting this exhibition at the far end of a rather staid and respectable gallery of mahogany showcases filled with fine pieces of Oriental art. Bryan appeared conservative, and was indeed conservative in the best sense of the word—of wanting to preserve and continue what was good, tried and tested from the past. But he was also ready to take new directions and encourage and support others who wished to do so, even when their interests diverged from his.

I had not been working under Bryan long before I revised my estimate of his great seniority (even though he kept reminding us of it by complaining, with a sense of outrage, of the bald patch he had discovered only when it was burnt by the New Guinea sun). At Bloomsbury, he scampered up and down the fire-escape stairs to his office in the loft above my desk like a mountain goat, and at Burlington Gardens he always seemed to be charging up stairs two at a time. I think this constant running around was partly due to the fact that he preferred to

deal with people face to face rather than at a distance. He was always so energetic, and usually ruddy from his beloved gardening, and over the years he seemed to get younger, or at least to stay put while his juniors caught up. So we assumed that he'd be certain to have a long and active retirement. He, of all people, also deserved it, after a professional lifetime of sterling efforts at two major museums. So his death and the manner of it seem so unjust and cruelly premature. There was so much he was looking forward to doing too, especially publishing his account of Tifalmin material culture, and editing his film. But I wonder whether he would have ever given writing priority over teaching, supervising students and helping wherever he felt he was needed and could be useful. This, after all, was the pattern of his career.

Bryan was consumed by administrative responsibilities for much of his professional life. To list but a few of the giant tasks he took on at the British Museum: he played a large part in unpacking and installing the ethnography collections when they were returned from evacuation after the war; together with Bill Fagg he organized our department's move to its new exhibition premises at the Museum of Mankind in 1970; and he shouldered much of the gigantic burden of moving our entire reserve collections to Shoreditch—a job which spanned at least five years.

However, in addition to these tasks, which were in a sense imposed on him, he did other more avoidable work by choice—for example, teaching a course in material culture for the members of the Department. This illustrated well his totally egalitarian approach to his colleagues. Everyone was welcomed to his lectures whatever their position in the Museum hierarchy, from warders to curators. This was typical of his desire to make everybody feel involved in the joint enterprise. He was also generous with his time on an individual basis, spending hours helping people struggling to write up their material, or, as in one case, coaching someone in written English after working hours. His generosity was also sometimes of the material kind, and he was known to make loans to colleagues in need.

Although administrative chores sometimes irked him, the unselfish drive to organize things for the common good was apparently stronger than the more egocentric drive to write up his researches. Whenever the opportunities for collaboration and practical achievement were available he invariably grasped them. He perhaps realized that he had unusual management skills, and could deal with people effectively and get things done. So his strong sense of duty and his devotion to his museums caused him to deploy this talent and postpone his writing.

Bryan was an important figure in my professional life and that of many other colleagues. Losing him was a bit like losing a high-quality parent. He helped us to develop, caringly watched our successes and failures, appreciated our strengths and tolerated our weaknesses, accepted us with affection, warts and all. Bryan's virtues were of the quiet, modest and unflamboyant kind, easily overlooked perhaps by those who did not know him well, but greatly appreciated by those of us who worked with him daily over many years. His great and detailed

professional knowledge, his fairness and trustworthiness, were simply there like night and day. They gave us stability and helped motivate us all. So his departure from the B.M. to the Pitt Rivers Museum was our first great loss (though their great gain), and his death was the second, far greater one.

Since we lost him we have all had time to discover what has endured. In my case it is a clear and sustaining image of an outstandingly good human being, a model of honesty, decency and integrity, a standard for how to be in this world, which we should all aim for but which few of us can hope to achieve. Rather than limp on with my clumsy attempts to do Bryan justice (and I know that if he is listening he is getting increasingly embarrassed), I would like to read a passage which I think Bryan, as a Quaker, would approve of. It is from *A Portraiture of Quakerism* by the nineteenth-century Quaker writer, Thomas Clarkson:

If you wish to honour a man who has departed this life, let all his good actions live in your memory. Let them live in your grateful love and esteem. So cherish them in your heart, that they may constantly awaken you to imitation. Thus you will show, by your adoption of his amiable example, that you really respect his memory. This is also that tribute which, if he himself could be asked in the other world how he would have his memory respected in this, he would prefer to any description of his virtues that might be given by the ablest writer....

SHELAGH WEIR