

Obituary

Dr L. S. B. Leakey

LOUIS SEYMOUR BAZETT LEAKEY, M.A., PhD, DSc, FGS, FBA, died in London on October 1, 1972, while on his way to America to fulfil lecturing engagements. Perhaps best known as a physical anthropologist, palaeontologist and prehistoric archaeologist of distinction, he was also a man of many talents.

Louis Leakey was born in 1903, the elder son of missionary parents who were working among the Kikuyu at Kabete near Nairobi. From his earliest days his schoolmates were from this tribe so that his command of the Kikuyu language was unrivalled by any other European. Taught at first by his parents and a governess, Leakey was prevented by the Great War from attending an English school until he was over 16. In 1922, he entered St John's College, Cambridge, as a Sizar; some 44 years later he was made an Honorary Fellow of the College in recognition of his worldwide achievements. At Cambridge he studied Modern French, Medieval French and Kikuyu for Part I of the Tripos, an unheard of combination. He went on to take a first and then another in Archaeology and Anthropology. As a result of his academic performance at Cambridge and his experience in Africa he was awarded a research studentship that took him on a number of archaeological expeditions. Later, in 1929, he was made a Research Fellow of St John's and took his doctorate.

While at Cambridge he suffered a rugby injury and was advised to recover in the "fresh air". He took a year's leave and accompanied Cutler, a Canadian palaeontologist, who was just leaving for Tanzania to collect fossils for the British Museum (Natural History). This invaluable period in the field, under expert guidance, gave him both practical experience and a basic knowledge of palaeontology. At first Leakey's principal interest was in the sequence of prehistoric cultures in Kenya. He attempted to correlate cultural changes with climatic changes during the African Pleistocene in terms of pluvials and interpluvials corresponding with European glacial alternations. During this fieldwork several important, if controversial, finds were made, in particular the Kanam jaw and the Kanjera skulls. In each case the

antiquity of the material was doubted, and in one case even the provenance; this pattern of events is well known to human palaeontologists and to others in science whose discoveries disturb the tranquillity of textbook writers.

In the late 1930s Louis Leakey spent over two years in the study of the history and customs of the Kikuyu tribe. The results of this extensive research were written many years ago and they will be published soon as one of his posthumous papers. After the 1939-45 war, in which he served in the African section of the Special Branch CID, Leakey was appointed full-time Curator of the then Coryndon Museum. He added to the Museum a Centre for Prehistory and Palaeontology by attracting research grants from a number of sources, notably the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the National Geographic Foundation. By now the tide of his discoveries was beginning to flood; sites such as Rusinga, Olorgesailie and Olduvai producing important new finds.

The recovery of the 1948 "*Proconsul africanus*" skull was of great significance as it was the earliest ape skull then known. It was examined by Leakey and Le Gros Clark along with a great deal more material recovered from the Kenyan Miocene. The resulting monograph *The Miocene Hominoidea of East Africa* is still a foundation reference for those embarking upon primate palaeontology. The particular importance of the 1948 "*Proconsul africanus*" skull was that at that time it was considered to be the common ancestor of both modern apes and modern man. Subsequent finds made by Leakey, and work by others now make this unlikely. Leakey remained convinced, however, that the common ancestor of man and the modern apes would be found in Africa. The discovery of the Olorgesailie tool site was a major triumph as it remains one of the most significant collections of palaeolithic stone tools ever found.

Soon after the war Leakey was the driving force behind the first Pan-African congress on Prehistory and Quaternary Studies. The first meeting was held in Nairobi in 1947; it has continued at intervals of four years and has proved to be a valuable link

between prehistorians, geologists and anthropologists working in Africa. The name of Leakey will always be associated with Olduvai Gorge not only because of Louis but also because of his wife, Mary, who still works at the site. It was from Olduvai that his major success came, aided as always by his family. In 1959 Mary Leakey found the skull of "*Zinjanthropus*" (*Australopithecus boisei*) in Bed I. The skull is a magnificent example of the larger form of australopithecine; the first of its kind from East Africa and reliably dated at 1.75 m.yr. BP. Numerous other finds came from Olduvai including the remains of the smaller *Homo habilis* and from a higher level an example of *Homo erectus*, the maker of an early handaxe culture at Olduvai. At Fort Ternan excavations in Late Miocene deposits produced the maxilla of "*Kenyapithecus wickeri*"; still one of the earliest known hominid fragments but now usually accepted as *Ramapithecus wickeri*.

In scientific circles Leakey was always a controversial figure in a field renowned for controversy; he was an eager contestant in verbal or written debate and a keen participant at international meetings. He was the author of over twenty books and 120 scientific papers. Recognition came to him from the worldwide scientific community; he was awarded the Swedish Andre medal, the Cuthbert Peek medal of the Royal Geographic Society, the Viking medal of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Pitt-Rivers memorial medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute and, with his wife, Mary, the Prestwich medal of the Geological Society of London (the first time that this medal has been jointly awarded to a husband and wife team).

Only the perceptive of history will allow a true evaluation of Leakey's place in science since many of his opinions have yet to be vindicated or disproved. In the meantime we can only admire his enthusiasm, his initiative, his diligence and his consistent success in the search for fossils and stone tools. A man of greatness and courage who fought hard for the new knowledge that he gave to the world; a man who gave unstintingly of himself to the study of palaeontology, prehistory and the evolution of man.