Recollections of C. Leonard Woolley

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On the grounds that I am one of the living survivors of the early seasons at Ur, (1922-1934) the Editor of Expedition has kindly invited me to open these Proceedings, and a feeling of nostalgia comes over me as I do so, more than fifty years on. My 'Memories of Ur', have been recorded in Iraq XXII, (1960) which contains a delightful photograph of Woolley and his beloved foreman Hamoudi ibn Shaikh Ibrahim together with a picture of the staff in 1926. As I have also written about my experiences at Ur in Mallowan's Memoirs, published by Collins, September 1977, I feel justified in indulging in brevity here.

Among the other survivors of those living ancient monuments of Ur are G. M. FitzGerald 1923-24, aged 97, Sidney Smith who served during the first season, 1922-23, aged 86, A. W. Lawrence 1922-23, aged 77 and A. S. Whitburn 1925-27 and 1930, now an octogenarian, who served as Architect during the time when I was Field Assistant. Of the nineteen who served at Ur there are to the best of my knowledge eight still living in 1977, not a bad witness to gerontology. Many who served at Ur subsequently embarked on distinguished careers. A. W. Lawrence for example became Professor of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge. I conclude that in spite of the violent sandstorms, Ur has been something of a health resort and that the open air life which we enjoyed there, sometimes, for five months on end, has done the participants nothing but good. Woolley himself when he died was but two months short of his eightieth birthday.

I remember Leonard Woolley as of slight build, perhaps about 5'8" in height, wiry and possessed of great stamina. During all the years of his active life as a digger he was, as far as I know, never ill; an indefatigable worker.

There is no doubt that this great leader of all the Ur Expeditions would be highly gratified if he could witness the impact of his work, fifty years on, for the scientific bearing of his finds, artistic, architectural, epigraphic, and the wide repertoire of objects discovered on the site is still being actively developed. We now appreciate the broad scope of Sumerian civilisation and can study the impact of the Early Dynastic Period as far afield as Tepe Yahya in the district of Kerman on the route to India, also at Shahr-i Sokhta in the same district. It is indeed possible that one day sites once involved in the overland trade from Ur will be found in Iran, further east, on the route to the Indus Valley and that we shall witness further evidence of the ramifications of Sumer in the Orient. The essays that follow...
In 1955, the University Museum awarded its highest honor, the Lucy Wharton Drewel Medal, to Sir Leonard Woolley. He is seen here with Froelich Rainey, Director of the Museum, and Percy C. Madeira, Jr., President of its Board of Managers.

Woolley in a Nairn Cadillac and when we found the wadi at Rutbah in full spate, volunteered to carry the baggage across on my shoulders, as the drivers feared that loaded cars might be bogged down. I recall that when later at Ur we were talking about the incident I was, in those days, too shy to admit that I was the one who had performed that service, which however our Architect, Whitburn, had not forgotten.

Woolley’s work at Ur was the climax of a long and distinguished archaeological career and, not excepting Flinders Petrie in Egypt and Palestine and Arthur Evans in Crete, he must have been the world’s most prolific digger. The lesson he left us is that not to publish is a crime, and that we should brand others who have not lived up to these expectations as criminals.

We do well to honour him in these pages and to remember that what Arthur Evans did for the Minoans, Woolley did for the Sumerians.