

Ernest J. H. Mackay and the Penn Museum

BY GREGORY L. POSSEHL

IN 2008, I published an article in *Expedition* on Penn's first professor of Sanskrit, W. Norman Brown (1892–1975), and his engagement with the archaeology of ancient India. Brown was an institution builder and had founded the School of Indic and Iranian Studies. He wanted to establish an American School of

Archaeology in British India, formed along the lines of those in Rome and Athens. Brown also wanted to begin a program of excavation in India, but Indian law did not permit

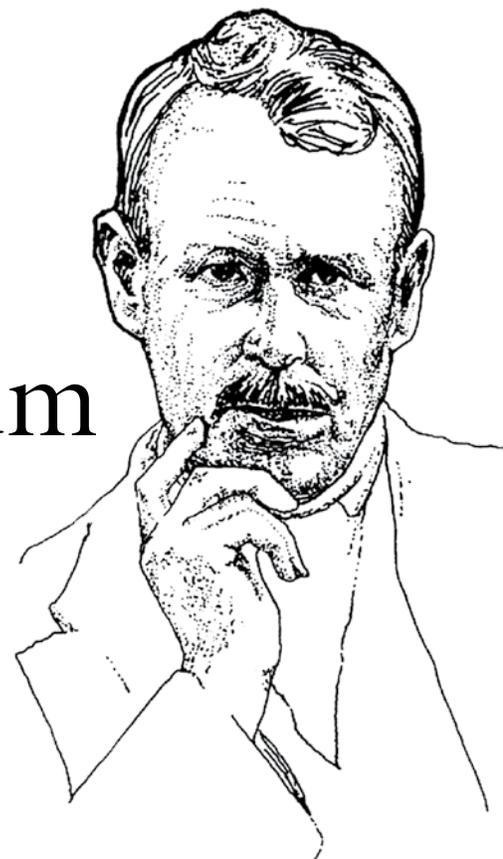
foreign archaeological missions to work there. When the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904 was amended in 1932 to allow “outsiders” to excavate, Brown put in an application, which was eventually approved. Brown selected the Harappan site of Chanhu-daro as the place to work and hired Ernest J. H. Mackay as

the Field Director. This is a well known story for those of us interested in the history of archaeology, especially in the Subcontinent.

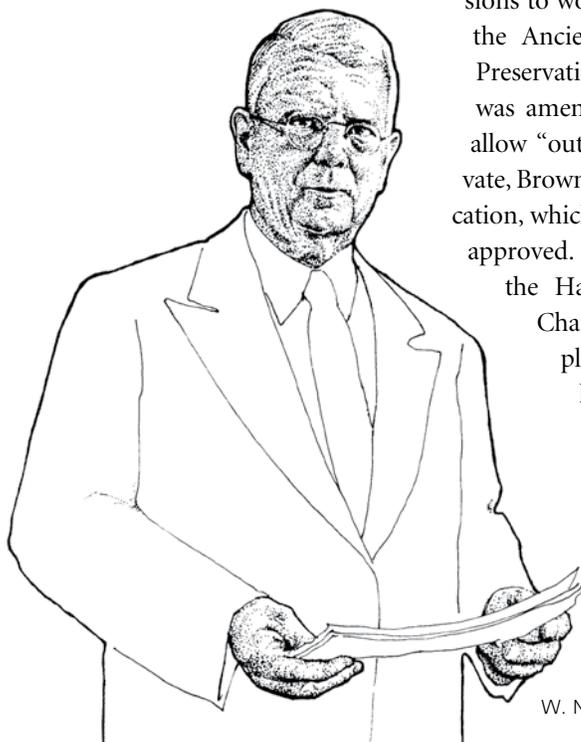
Mackay is best known for his excavations at Mohenjo-daro, the great Harappan city of burnt brick, occupied between ca. 2500 and 1900 BC in the midst of the Indus Valley of Pakistan. In 1936–37, Mackay published two volumes describing his excavations. Brown had visited Mohenjo-daro in 1928 and met Mackay there, so they were known to one another prior to the Chanhu-daro project.

Brown was a close colleague of Horace H. F. Jayne, Director of the Penn Museum during the Great Depression. When I was researching the story of the Chanhu-daro excavations, I came across correspondence between Jayne and Mackay written as early as 1930. Jayne invoked Brown's name and expressed a desire, on the part of the Museum, to conduct archaeological excavations in British India and sought Mackay's advice. In this exchange, Mackay was a warm, informative partner. He noted that the antiquities laws of India would not permit foreign excavation, but suggested that this might change in the near future, as it actually did.

Alessandro Pezzati, the Museum's Archivist, knew that I was interested in Brown, Mackay, and Chanhu-daro. Sometime back he brought my attention to the fact that Mackay had actually been a member of the Museum's staff in 1922. This was not a well-known connection, and it led me to do some further research on the man. What resulted was the



Ernest J. H. Mackay



W. Norman Brown

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Sites mentioned in the text.

story of a well-trained scholar with a mid-career setback, who became a respected and productive archaeologist.

Ernest John Henry Mackay (July 5, 1880–October 2, 1943) was from Bristol, England. He attended Bristol Grammar School and Bristol University (B.A. 1918, M.A. 1922, and D. Litt. 1933). As will be seen, Mackay was abroad for most of his university years, so he must have just managed to squeeze in his higher education. He married Dorothy Mary Simmons who was an anthropologist. They had one son.

Mackay's first calling was Egyptology, and he was trained by the great Sir Flinders Petrie between 1907 and 1912. From 1912 to 1916, most of his time was spent in the photodocumentation of the Theban tombs, on which he published several articles.

During World War I, Mackay was in the Army, rising to the rank of Captain and serving in the Middle East. During this period, he served as a member of the Army Commission for the survey of ancient monuments in Palestine and Syria. Following the war, he was Custodian of Antiquities for the Palestine Government (1919–22). But this position was in jeopardy due to budget problems in Palestine, and he reached out to the Penn Museum. We do not know why or how he came to write to Director George Byron Gordon, but on May 21, 1921, he did.

He told Gordon that his position as Custodian of Antiquities was going to end, and he offered his services as assistant to Museum Curator Clarence Fisher, who was then

working at Beth Shan, a huge 300-foot high tell, 45 miles north of Jericho in the Jordan Valley. Mackay had known Fisher for some time, and he thought they would work well together. By September, the deal was struck. The Museum agreed to hire Mackay as Fisher's assistant at 50 English pounds a month.

The final piece of correspondence between Mackay and Gordon is dated February 22, 1922. It describes, in quite dire terms, Mackay's relationship with Dr. Fisher and a Miss Woodley, who Mackay says "...came at my most unfortunate recommendation as the typist-secretary for whom Dr. Fisher was seeking." It seems that Dr. Fisher had been quite ill at Beth Shan that season and had not been in a position to be an effective, energetic director of the work. Mackay observes that "For the first two months here, during one week of which Dr. Fisher was in bed, I was single-handed to carry on most of the supervision of the digging, all the surveying and planning, all the photographic work and also the recording of the finds, and I constantly worked up to nine or ten o'clock at night." He professes to have reported his progress to Dr. Fisher and Miss Woodley on a regular basis, sometimes twice a day. But these meetings seem to have been unsuccessful. Mackay indicated that Fisher was indifferent, and offered few if any comments, let alone praise.

How different Mackay's rendering of his efforts at Beth Shan is from that of Dr. Fisher. His diary for May 16, 1922 at Beth Shan says: "Informed Mr. Mackay that it was no longer



George Byron Gordon (1870–1927), Curator of General Ethnology and American and Prehistoric Archaeology (1903–1910), and Director of the Penn Museum (1910–1927). UPM Image #174898

necessary for him to remain on the works as he was rendering no useful service. He was merely hindering and not forwarding the work and I do not feel that the Expedition should go on spending this amount of money for no return. I reminded him that he had already been notified that his services were no longer necessary in February and thus the three months notice usual in the Museum would expire at the end of May.”

“Since his arrival here he has supervised the making by Salameh of a few photographs which are not up to standard, also made out cards with half the necessary information omitted. Other than this he simply stands with a cane and a pipe looking at the men working. He has asked for no advice as to the work nor made any report of what he does. If more ample notes have been made he has never handed them into the office.”

Given Mackay’s later accomplishments, especially at Kish, Mohenjo-daro, and Chanhu-daro, Fisher’s remarks are odd, quite out of sync. Mackay was a man of great energy who seems to have loved his work. While he probably made his share of small mistakes, his reports on his excavations do not emerge from sloppy field work, nor are they noted for errors and inaccuracies. The resolution of Fisher’s impressions of Mackay’s work with Mackay’s later record may lie elsewhere. And there is a clue in Mackay’s letter to Gordon.

Mackay felt that Miss Woodley had come between him and Dr. Fisher and that he “...discusses the matter with Miss Woodley in my absence. She advises him and then myself on every point...” The situation was worsened by the fact that Mackay made the mistake of misreading a scale and Miss Woodley told him that this was something “...I should have naturally discovered myself...” There is more, but I simply cannot fail to mention that Mackay told Gordon that “Dr. Fisher

is also stated by Miss Woodley to have formed the impression that I wish to usurp his authority and that I am keeping things secret from him.” This was clearly not a happy threesome. Mackay, at Miss Woodley’s suggestion, offered Gordon his resignation, and Mackay’s time as a member of the Museum’s



Top, Dr. Clarence S. Fisher and a workman make a final clearing of a grave and pick up the beads of a necklace in their original order. Dendera, Egypt, 1916. UPM Image #38942 Bottom, portrait of Clarence Stanley Fisher (1876–1941), ca. 1920s–1930s. Photograph by Phillips, 1507 Walnut Street, Philadelphia. UPM Image #140198

scientific staff came to an abrupt end. It is in some ways interesting that none of this is even mentioned in Mackay's rather voluminous correspondence with Brown over the Chanhu-daro project. Perhaps Mackay just wanted to bury it.

This setback for Mackay did not spell disaster for his career. He went to Mesopotamia as Director of the Field Museum-Oxford University excavations at Jemdet Nasr and Kish from 1922–25, and he published his work. Mackay's time in Mesopotamia corresponded with the discovery of Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization by Sir John Marshall and his colleagues in the Archaeological Survey of India. Mackay found an Indus stamp seal at Kish, as well as other Indus-related material, and he struck up a correspondence with Marshall about it. The British School of Archaeology in Egypt appointed him to excavate tumuli on the Island of Bahrain in 1925.

Marshall needed help with the work at Mohenjo-daro. He wanted to get back to his favorite site, Taxila, and all of his senior colleagues had their routine duties to attend to. Because of the finds of Indus material in Mesopotamia, it would also be handy to have someone on staff who knew that corpus of material. So the Archaeological Survey appointed Mackay a Special Officer between 1926 and 1931, and he became the Field Director of the excavations at Mohenjo-daro. Mackay returned to England following this appointment. He devoted his time to writing the site report on Mohenjo-daro and did the planning with Brown for Chanhu-daro. He and his wife were at the latter site for the 1935–36 field season, after which they returned to England and wrote the report, which appeared in 1942. Mackay died of natural causes shortly after he received a copy of his last site report.

Mackay was a solid journeyman archaeologist. He never held a university post and was not known as a teacher. But he was a very good excavator for his times. He did not understand stratigraphy in a particularly profound way, and he has



General view of the site of Beth Shan (Scythopolis), at the end of the 1928 excavation season.
UPM Image #144005

been criticized for this. But he did understand the spatial relationships of artifacts found in the same context. He was given to publish such groups together, associated with a find spot carefully noted on his architectural plans. In the 1920s and 30s, this was quite unusual, and it gives a very special quality to his reports. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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