

A Biographer's Dilemma

Writing about the life of Aurel Stein presents a biographer with some quite striking contrasts. While avoiding any attempt at an exhaustive list, I would like to take as my subject three areas of contradiction suggested by a review of his life. Firstly, there is the contemporary demand for a 'warts and all' approach to biography, set against the fact that Stein led a singularly ascetic life. Here is apparently arid ground for anyone seeking inner emotional turmoil, explosive professional revelations and/or a secretive sex life. Secondly, there is the conflict between a modern view of the morality of his work, and the approach to archaeology taken not only by Stein himself but also by fellow academics and archaeologists across the Western world during his lifetime. The third contradiction is perhaps the most interesting of all. This is what one reviewer of my book described as the spectacle of a rather boring man leading a very exciting life.

To return to the first area of contrast, there is little doubt that publicity for my book would have been boosted had I uncovered a scandalous love affair, covert homosexuality, blackmail or some such thing – perhaps all three. However, nothing of the sort came to light in the course of three years' research. Stein's sexuality was much more subtle, and no less fascinating because of that. He had very little experience of females in his upbringing. His mother, in her mid-forties when he was born, seems to have had comparatively little to do with him except in a grandmotherly role, and his sister was twenty-one years his senior, already an adult at the time of his birth. He attended all-male schools and his brother and uncle oversaw his education. Immersed in a family that set great store by unquestioning loyalty and gratitude, he seems to have treated his mother as an object of sentimental nostalgia (she died in 1887 when he was twenty-four, shortly before he left Europe for India). Women were on a pedestal, virtuous and unapproachable, and the only one he came to know well, Helen Allen, wife of his best friend P.S. Allen, was beyond criticism and without fault.

At the time of my book's publication, a radio interviewer singled out my comment that Stein probably preferred the company of men and invited me to develop it with reference to his sexuality. This was something I could not do because it would have been the purest speculation. It is certainly true that Stein spent most of his time in exclusively male company – even when supposedly 'alone' in camp in Kashmir, he was surrounded by male servants – but of course this was not nearly so unusual in British India a century ago as it would be now. I was told by male friends that it was unrealistic to suppose that Stein had no sex life; but my feeling is that all his energies and drive went into his work. One of his friends once wrote to him that he had chosen Central Asia 'for a bride',¹ and Stein described the remark as 'happy and delightfully true'.²

The second major contrast, highlighted by a consideration of Stein's life and work, springs from changing attitudes to the morality of archaeology. The question of whether to judge someone by today's standards or those of his own times is a common one. In my opinion, the case of Stein and his work is a good example of why modern moralizing is of limited use and perhaps actually an impediment to understanding. Stein had an impeccable academic background and an uncompromisingly rigorous attitude to his work. He was quite clear that the value of that work lay in making finds available to experts and thus extending the bounds of knowledge. His view was that, if objects were at risk in their original locations, they must be moved to a place where they were available to scholars. In pursuit of these objectives, he exhibited a ruthlessness that is undoubtedly distasteful to us now. He learnt quickly and well the art of what he called 'eastern diplomacy', and the way in which he used his skill was double-edged. It enabled him to understand a culture – but it also allowed him to exploit it. This is what makes the Dunhuang episode difficult in terms of modern morality. Stein had no qualms about using all sorts of negotiating ploys to persuade the caretaker monk, Wang Yuanlu, to hand over thousands of manuscripts, and told a friend in a letter that he had bought them all for 'a sum which will make our friends at the Br. Mus. [British Museum] chuckle'.³

However, his motivation was shared by almost all contemporary Western specialists with an interest in Central Asia. For example, Stein's fellow explorer and rival Albert von le Coq wrote to him in 1914:

I fear that gradually the Chinese will interfere with the investigations sent out by more advanced nations, & therefore each line of writing & each specimen of carving, moulding, etc. that you will bring away will be a piece rescued – may their number increase a thousandfold!⁴

The third contradiction is the idea of the boring man leading an exciting life. One reviewer of my book described Stein as having 'all the allure of an Edwardian chartered accountant'. What seems boring, perhaps, is his consistently relentless focus on achieving his aims, which were basically the same throughout his long life: to be allowed to work in difficult parts of the world, and to be financially supported for doing so. He spent almost all his time either in the field, or writing up his expeditions, or pestering the relevant authorities to make it possible for him to go on further expeditions. Such thoroughness, determination and devotion to hard work contrast oddly with the romantic associations of the wild and inaccessible places he explored.

But those expeditions would not have happened without the hard work. Stein undertook all the necessary organization practically single-handed, dealing personally

with everything from initial correspondence to the packing of the last dried food tablet. He had a natural talent for, or perhaps I should say an obsession with, organisation. In the thousands of papers he left after his death were lists of correspondents and cook's accounts covering decades of his life, as well as 50 years' worth of letters from friends. The testimonial of an early employer identified his talents: Sir William Rattigan when Vice-Chancellor of the Punjab University, wrote in 1895 that Stein 'displayed great business capacity, marked ability, and considerable tact and judgment in dealing with men and things. When he joined us everything was more or less in a chaotic condition, and he has helped me always in the task of reorganization with a zeal and devotion which I cannot praise too highly'.⁵ It is a challenge to a biographer to create an interesting story out of such single-minded dedication; but it is also fascinating to trace the development of character that led to these achievements. Without going into detail, I would like to identify some aspects of that character as manifested in different areas of his life.

As a child, Stein was exposed to several defining influences. He was brought up in a bourgeois Jewish family where cultural assimilation and intellectual endeavour were highly prized. He had only two adult siblings and spent his spare time alone, immersed in books or in retracing history on foot in his native Budapest. I think he was emotionally rather undeveloped: he had a claustrophobic Lutheran education at the hands of his academic uncle and his brother, the latter transferring all his own frustrated hopes to his young brother-cum-son. As I said earlier, he had no opportunities for insight into the female sex, but inculcated in him was a deep and unquestioning reverence for family that later found expression in the form of a rather maudlin nostalgia. He formed very conservative habits of mind and retreated into the past partly as a way of escaping from things that alarmed him about the contemporary world.

Having been a shy and awkward teenager, he became quite good at forming polite friendships. But he had few close friends, other than three Englishmen whom he met soon after his arrival in India. To these he was as loyal as he was to the memory of his family, and an indefatigable correspondent. He and P.S. Allen wrote weekly to each other over a period of some thirty years. However, he was also fairly demanding, relying on one or another of them to proof-read copy for his books, run endless errands during the equipping of expeditions and generally assuming that they would always be devoted to his cause. He needed total, uncritical loyalty from them. Interestingly, despite his deep affection for them, he only ever spent limited periods in their

company, partly because of his work but also because, in fact, the place where he was happiest was in his camp on Mohand Marg, Kashmir, alone apart from his servants and his dogs.

If Stein was a demanding friend, as an employee he was indefatigable. He never settled into any of the jobs he was obliged to do in India, always pushing for promotion, better terms, longer holidays, periods of special duty and, of course, extended leave in order to go on expeditions. He frequently bemoaned his lack of financial independence because of the difficulty of constantly searching for funds: 'All this writing and pleading', he wrote to P.S. Allen, for example, in 1904, 'makes me feel only more than ever how petty a thing Government machinery is compared with personal independence or the money which secures it'.⁶ His single-mindedness often blinded him to any point of view other than his own. He genuinely could not understand why the Government of India might be reluctant to allow him years away from his post, and was constantly frustrated by their refusal to appoint him as 'special explorer'.

Lastly, I would like to say a word about Stein and his canine friends. One reviewer made me laugh when he remarked that I was clearly fixated with dogs because I had traced Stein's history of dog ownership so minutely. I found the dogs interesting, not least because keeping a succession of fox terriers as companions seemed a very English thing to do, and Englishness was very attractive to Stein. But also I was curious about the fact that he gave all seven of his dogs the same name, Dash. Most dog owners, I think, would see each of their dogs as a unique character and name them accordingly. So I came to feel that the dogs, and their shared name, were significant not only because of their place in Stein's solitary and sometimes lonely life, but also in terms of his powerful dislike of change. They not only represented a permanently loyal family, to replace the one he lost mostly when he was still young, but also provided a devoted and uncritical companionship whether in the East or the West, in an Oxford college or deep in the Chinese desert.

Notes

1. Sir George Grierson to Aurel Stein, 10 July 1928 [Bodleian MS Stein 82].
2. Aurel Stein to Sir George Grierson, 19 August 1928 [Bodleian MS Stein 82].
3. Stein to F.H. Andrews, 15 June 1907 [Bodleian MS Stein 36].
4. Von Le Coq to Aurel Stein, 23 January 1914 [Bodleian MS Stein 11].
5. Testimonial [Bodleian MS Stein 277].
6. Aurel Stein to P.S. Allen, 17 September 1904 [Bodleian MS Stein 1].