Historiography and Theory

John Boardman, *A Classical Archaeologist's Life: The Story So Far. An Autobiography*. pp. 261, 79 b/w and col ills. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78969-343-0, paperback £25; ISBN 978-1-78969-344-7, E-book £25.

John Boardman's contribution to Classical Archaeology has been prodigious. The list of publications at the end of this autobiography admits to 44 books (14 of which have been translated, most of them into more than one language), 18 joint books (4 of them translated), about 10 edited books (plus 7 years as editor of *JHS*, editor for 17 BSA Supplements, joint editor for 20 issues of *OJA* and for *LIMC* and *ThesCRA*, and major editorial roles for *CVA* and *Kerameus*), and some 280 articles, with more listed as forthcoming and something published in every year from 1954 to 2016. It is hard to think that this is a record that will ever be surpassed.

This autobiography was written neither to explain how Boardman has come to write so much nor to help the reader to understand the place of his publications within the scholarship. Boardman explains that he began writing the autobiography primarily to share his memories of his childhood and youth with his family. Much of the book remains a book for the family, illustrated with a large number of what are basically snapshots from the family album, and with discussions of the successive houses around Oxford to which the family moved before settling in what we are several times told that Pevsner wrongly identifies as a 'cottage' in Woodstock.

Boardman notes that 'The order of chapters is not strictly logical'. The first quarter of the book is a conventional chronological account of Boardman's life up until his appointment to a permanent position in Oxford. It tells the story of his childhood in the London suburb of North Ilford, his education at Chigwell School and Magdalene College Cambridge, his military service, his time as a student at and then as Assistant Director of the British School at Athens, and his taking up a position at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford as the start of his Oxford career. The second quarter is then taken up very largely with accounts of travels, to the United States and then across the world. The travels are not in chronological order and dates are not always given; most have some broadly academic aim, but we also hear e.g. of a Canary Islands holiday on which Boardman re-read *War and Peace*. A further quarter of the book is an account of books and things academic, divided by type of activity (authorship separate from editing) rather than told simply chronologically, but with a section on 'Friends and Families'. Books to do with gems are left to a final section that, with the substantial section of plates which precedes the section on books, makes up the other quarter of the book. The hour-glass effect (a lot about the distant past, a lot about the recent past, but little in between), which has been found to be a marked feature of oral history, is manifest here.

Neither Boardman's account of his own books nor his accounts of academic colleagues offer any attempt to assess their academic contribution. Indeed, in the course of the book it becomes clear how little interest Boardman has in other scholars, certainly not in how they think. It is the circumstances in which his books were written, and the places in which academic friends have been encountered, that is largely the focus of what is related. Long-time colleagues frequently get hardly a mention (Jim Coulton is referred to just once, 'a valued colleague' marked out by 'his... organising ability which sometimes became extreme' (p. 192), and although Donna Kurtz's name comes up quite frequently, Boardman says very little about her or his work with her). Oxford colleagues outside Classical Archaeology rarely appear at all (Peter Fraser and George Forrest are exceptions, though Simon Hornblower earns an unjustified place on a 1958 trip to Romania, when he was not yet 10).

If Boardman himself offers little reflection on his academic career or the nature of his scholarship, this book nevertheless sheds some light. Having recalled memories of primary school Boardman remarks that 'I have never lost a taste for trivia, an essential element in any career as an archaeologist' (p. 12), and the rest of the book backs this up. Memories of meals figure large in this book, and meals that were late get particular attention. Impatience may not be essential to the archaeologist, but it surely explains something of Boardman's huge academic output. It also explains the polemic edge of some of Boardman's output: 'It has not always been easy to control showing my contempt for what I take to be poor scholarship but I know I have made mistakes, though I cannot recall any of moment!'. Impatience is also on display in the snap judgements, characteristic of Boardman's oral discourse, frequently to be found here; many of them say more about Boardman than about those they concern:

'Bernard Williams... had arrived in the Sixth Form, seemingly with a head start in intellectual matters, probably deriving from his family background apart from his native intelligence' (p. 23).

But what is most revealing is Boardman's account of his education. One gets a strong impression of competitive reading at Chigwell of classical literature (Greek and Latin, but also more widely, including Frazer's *Golden Bough*). Cambridge seems largely to have contributed more of the same – a college Director of Studies interested only in essays having beginnings, middles, and ends, not in their content, and a Head of House keen on having students perform Greek texts, but a library where the uncut pages of the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* offered a challenge. Deciding to specialise in Classical Archaeology came from the attractions of lectures by Charles Seltman (an 'inspiring lecturer, if, on reflection, rather dotty', p. 34) and the chief influence that followed was Robert Cook whose lectures 'instilled a respect for objects and for accurate inspection and description' (p. 33). But there were no supervisions in the final year, and Boardman then, equipped with various scholarships, went off to Athens where education came from friends and colleagues and helping out with excavations in the Agora ('where I learned real archaeology, that is, how to handle things and look at them properly', p. 36).

At the root of Boardman's contribution to Classical Archaeology is that ability to look. Boardman quotes Robert Cook complimenting him on a handbook: 'he said he had learned more from it than he should' (p. 33). A great deal of Boardman's work ('I have no heart for theory... observation and recording... should precede the processes of hypothesis-formation and testing', p. 188) has consisted of one description after another, and its value lies in the selection of objects described. Almost always that selection is revealing (even if some of us frequently think that, precisely as a consequence of the absence of any theoretical engagement, Boardman himself is wrong about what exactly it reveals). Boardman comments of his own knighthood that it 'was surprising, and gratifying... I would like to think it was for being an effective and busy scholar (there are very many cleverer)'. Whatever the grounds for knighthood, that Boardman has been both busy and effective, there can be no doubt.

If Boardman's impatience elsewhere may undermine the value of his observations, on this occasion it has a more obvious impact. There is an enormous amount of repetition (sometimes within the same paragraph), a lot of poorly punctuated text, and only so much trivia that a reader can endure. Boardman the writer needed Boardman the editor.

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