

BOOK REVIEW

## A Review of *Tessa Verney Wheeler: Women and Archaeology Before World War Two*

By Lydia C. Carr, Oxford University Press, 296 pages, 2012, ISBN 9780199640225

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Lydia Carr improves our understanding of the nature and exact balance of Tessa Wheeler's archaeological partnership with her husband, R. E. M. Wheeler so that Tessa's work might finally be appreciated on its own merits. She also uses Tessa's career as a *'point d'appui* for a greater understanding of the female role in British archaeology prior to the Second World War'.

Tessa's career is described with great competence. The author has delved into the archives to discover details of her subject's childhood and student years at University College, London, and these details, from previously the least known period of her life, are fully absorbed into the narrative of Tessa's life story. At University College, she encountered trailblazers such as Margaret Murray and Hilda Petrie; but Tessa was also influenced by the historian A. F. Pollard and, in particular, by his insistence on the importance of primary sources.

It was at University College that the Wheelers first met. We follow them through their early married life during the First World War, and then through the sequence of their famous excavations: Segontium (1921–22); Brecon Gaer (1924–25); Caerleon (1926–27); Lydney (1928–29); Verulamium (1930–33); and Maiden Castle (1934–37). As is well known from Jacquetta Hawkes' biography of R. E. M. Wheeler, it was during the Maiden Castle years that Tessa Wheeler died – unexpectedly – from a complications that arose during an operation, carried out while her husband was touring the Near East in the company of another woman. Tessa's loyalty and help to her husband were also well-known, but it is only in this biography that the details are supplied that allow Tessa Wheeler to be fully appreciated as a skilled archaeologist in her own right. Previously the story of her death has somewhat overshadowed the story of her life.

At Segontium Tessa had yet to find confidence in her own abilities, but by the time excavations had started at Caerleon, her efforts had become crucial to the Wheelers' success. Indeed, it is clear from this biography that it was Tessa, more than Rik (the name by which Tessa referred to her husband), who accomplished the successful excava-

tion of the amphitheatre. As Rik was in London for much of the time, her presence was essential to the smooth day-to-day running of the site. This was also true of Lydney and Verulamium. According to the author it was at Lydney that the Wheelers finessed their methods of on-site recording. Again, these methods seem to have been implemented as a matter of routine for the most part at Tessa's instigation.

The site records allow the author to disentangle the work of the two Wheelers. They also allow for the reinterpretation of the sites in cases where they were subject to subsequent investigation. These reinterpretations also enter the narrative, so that we also learn of both Tessa's and Rik's occasional mistakes.

As to providing a full understanding of the Wheelers' archaeological partnership: the author makes clear that their qualities were complementary. Tessa was a details person. Her focus was upon the small-scale technical aspects of excavation, whereas Rik preferred to focus upon the big picture. Tessa did not shun publicity – she gave numerous talks to local societies – but it suited her that Rik revelled in the limelight. It allowed her to concentrate on the work on site. Their partnership was also effective diplomatically: where Rik was combative, Tessa could be more compromising. The author makes clear that it was largely due to Tessa's efforts that the first premises for the Institute of Archaeology were found, at St. John's Lodge in Regent's Park. (She also suggests that William Ormsby-Gore, the First Commissioner of Works, may have had a hand in arranging the favourably low rent.)

One surprising aspect of their partnership is that Tessa's work on site occasionally stretched so far as to include consoling her husband's cast-off girlfriends. We do not know what emotional reverberations this may have had, but this is not the fault of the author. Tessa was reticent and self-contained. She left no clues as to her deeper feelings.

Yet, whatever the strains within their relationship, intellectually the 'relationship was always equal' although 'the roles were rarely identical'. Rik was respectful of Tessa's intellect if not her feelings, and was frank in admitting how much he owed to her.

Yet, for all the strength and mutual respect of their partnership, the Wheelers' students tended to be either pro-Rik or pro-Tessa. Rik had his fans among the young women

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students, and Tessa had her fans, especially among the young men. The author argues that for her acolytes she occupied the role of 'den mother'. She makes the interesting comment that at some level Tessa realised: 'the work of the male students and workers she taught and directed was often better in quality and easier to induce if they saw their leader as a traditional woman in an untraditional role'.

There are few criticisms that can be made of this book. It would have been interesting to hear a little more of the Wheelers' minor excavations, dating from their early years in Wales: Margam, Blaenrhondda, Ely Racecourse, Castell Morgraig. Among the Wheelers' students, Ian Richmond, who worked for the Wheelers at Segontium, is overlooked.

And Miss M. V. Taylor is not mentioned, even though, like Tessa, she was one of the very first female members of the Society of Antiquaries.

Although the book usually relates events in a broadly chronological order, the dramatic impact of Tessa's death is lessened by relating the story first in a shortened version. This detracts from the dramatic tension from the full version of events, given nine pages later. (A few other instances of repetition also lessen the dramatic flow of the story.)

However, notwithstanding these criticisms, this is a work of sound scholarship and a fine read for all those interested in history of archaeology of this period: a monument to a great archaeologist.

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