

I. Editorials

The following is a response by Dr. Andrew L. Christenson (Consulting Archaeologist, Prescott, Arizona) to the editorial in the May 1995 (5[1]) issue of the BHA concerning the publication of obituaries:

“The issue of obituaries is a sticky one. As the size of the discipline increases we seem to be less interested in honoring those who came before. One would think that with the proliferation of journals the number of obituaries would increase, but the reverse seems to be true. It is up to editors and subscribers to decide whether expensive journal space will be taken up by obituaries. I suspect that the vote would be generally negative because obituaries do not count toward tenure, whereas journal articles do.”

Mr. David Van Reybrouck (University of Leiden, The Netherlands) has responded to the editorial concerning the publication of obituaries in the May 1995 (5[1]) issue of the BHA by writing:

“In his interesting editorial to the May issue of the BHA, Douglas Givens expressed his worry as to the gradual disappearance of obituaries in anthropological periodicals. He regrets this tendency as to him ‘obituaries are an essential source of information for those who have a research or general interest in the history of the development of worldwide archaeology.’ Along with his critique, Givens urged for an alternative form of publishing obituaries such as an extra issue of the *American Anthropologist*. Givens is right in stressing the historical importance of obituaries and in regretting their decreasing popularity, but the alternative he suggests is not very promising as he fails to appreciate the reason for their disappearance.

Givens suggests that obituaries are no longer published because of the ‘increasing pressure by . . . readers as well as the executive boards of their sponsoring academic organizations.’ Whereas this might be the case, this is not the reason but another effect of a more general tendency. If there is financial pressure on scientific periodicals, why then are obituaries the first items to disappear? Why do other items remain untouched? There is much more to disappearing obituaries than financial reasons alone.

This tendency to eliminate obituaries in academic journals is an interesting historical phenomenon in-itself. It is, in my view, representative of a certain form of academic morés which have changed not only in archaeology but in many other sciences. As long as the criterion for scientific validity is primarily based upon the personal expertise of the scholar with his data, obituaries will flourish. In this tradition, the publication of an obituary is a posthumous expression of respect and gratitude to the deceased scholar. As personal acquaintance with the data was the criterion, the older one was, in general, the more erudite and thus the more respectful one became. In archaeology, this tradition changed with the emergence of the New Archaeology and its explicit claim that ‘personal expertise’ was no criterion at all to assess the validity of a theory. The New Archaeology marked a clear break with the testing and law-building that became the new standards for what counted as a valid argument. These procedures were believed to be independent from subjective acquaintance with the archaeological data, and equally valid for all scholars, young and old alike. In this respect, the New Archaeology marked an older generation. Whereas older scholars used to be respected on the base of their accumulated erudition since the 1960s - this was no longer evident. I believe that this change in academic mentality towards the older generation explains the gradual disappearance of obituaries. With the New Archaeology, the obituary itself has died out. This claim gets additional support when we see that obituaries are still published in the most traditional sections of archaeology, such as Classical archaeology, Egyptian archaeology or within the German schools.

What Givens does not take into account is that obituaries are not published because of their historical value but because of their emotional reasons of respect which are very real, even within academia. His alternative suggestion of publishing obituaries in a special issue of the *American Anthropologist* or in a journal devoted to the history of archaeology will prove hard since there is no link with the person’s own publishing preferences. If we really want to keep the practice of publishing obituaries alive, we will need to return to a pre-processual form of archaeology. But are we willing to make such an offer? Otherwise, I am afraid, it is a literary genre which will be irretrievably lost from academic discourse.”