

Obituaries: An Extinct Form of the History of Archaeological Science?

by

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The inclusion of obituaries in anthropological journals by their parent organizations is recognition of the importance of the past to the anthropological enterprise. 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. Yet anthropological journals from all quarters are rethinking whether space should be provided in their pages to recount the lives of those who have contributed to the conduct of archaeology. The question to be weighed is this: Which is more important, the publication of scientific information relating to some facet of the archaeological enterprise or a brief account of the contributions of those that have passed on? Journals are coming under increasing pressure by their readers as well as the executive boards of their sponsoring academic organizations to publish obituaries in non-indexed organizational "newsletters" to free journal space for scientific papers. In doing this, journals are relegating the past of archaeological practice to the brief mention of the lives who have given their productive years to the development of the archaeological enterprise. Unless libraries and documentary repositories choose to retain such non-indexed organizational newsletters, it is quite possible that the obituaries of colleagues and a cohesive discussion of their place in archaeology will never again see the light of day.

What can historians of archaeological science do about this disturbing trend? Should we be about the business of reversing this trend? These are questions that beg serious deliberation by the readers of the BHA. In an earlier issue, I surveyed the readership as to their thoughts concerning the establishment of a journal devoted solely to the history of archaeology. Not surprisingly, the responses received indicated that a journal of this nature might be a vehicle for the publication of obituaries in addition to articles on the history of archaeology. The majority of the respondents felt that the future of obituaries in anthropological journals was at best uncertain and the respondents wondered whether an alternative source for the publication of obituaries might be in order. One very good suggestion received from the readership of the BHA concerned the establishment of an extra issue of the *American Anthropologist* devoted totally to the publication of obituaries of deceased colleagues.

The question I wish readership to discuss in the editorial section of future issues of the BHA is this: What role if any should the BHA have in ensuring that obituaries remain an integral part of the history of archaeology? If the anthropological journals in the future will no longer publish obituaries, what vehicle should be created to continue the publication of obituaries other than the very short versions now seen in many anthropological newsletters?

The detailed recounting of the archaeological careers of colleagues is an essential source of information used by historians of and those having a general interest in the history archaeological science. Anthropological journals should still maintain adequate space to treat the archaeological contributions of colleagues. One cannot know where one is going unless one knows where one has been. Your comments concerning the future of the publication of obituaries are welcome.