

Lydia C. Carr, 2012 *Tessa Verney Wheeler: Women and Archaeology before World War Two*, Oxford: University Press ISBN 978-0-19-964022-5, pp. 320, 23 in-text illustrations £51.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

Sir Robert Eric Mortimer (Rik) Wheeler has been immortalised in archaeology because of his past media presence and his contribution to the archaeological excavation technique that bears his name, the Wheeler-Kenyon method. By contrast his wife, Tessa Verney, who was also an archaeologist served as field director at Wheeler's excavations, published the results, taught archaeology at University College London (UCL), arranged much of the finance and logistics for these excavations and the beginning of the Institute of Archaeology, including the arrangement of its accommodation at St John's Lodge, Regent Park, has been largely forgotten.

We are indebted to Lydia Carr for a well researched biography of Verney Wheeler, as she calls her to make a distinction from her husband. The book began life as an Oxford University PhD thesis, and traces Verney Wheeler's life from an uncertain birth in Johannesburg 1893 to her premature death as a result of complications from a minor surgery in a London hospital in April 1936. This book is not written 'to put the record straight', but rather to understand Verney Wheeler's life in archaeology, to evaluate her place in the development of archaeological method and to appreciate what it meant to be a woman in English archaeology prior to World War II. It has a useful timeline, Verney Wheeler's bibliography, an index and many interesting images that could have been better produced.

I first became aware of Tessa Wheeler when reading Veronica Seton-William's autobiography. Soon after Nancy Champion de Crespigny and Veronica arrived in England in 1934 'the Wheelers' whisked them away to a conference at York and then to Maiden Castle. Veronica is viewed by Carr as a successor to Verney Wheeler, the third generation of English female archaeologists and along with Molly Cotton and Charles Peers she managed the fieldwork of the 1936 season at Maiden Castle after Verney Wheeler's death. When deciding to make the 1936 season her last, Veronica wrote (quoted by Carr 234):

By 1936 the magic of the great hill had gone: Mrs Wheeler was dead. Rik Wheeler was in many ways a perfectionist with drive and ambition but no patience with the minutiae of the day-to-day running of things. He was a difficult man to work with and one of the reasons I did not do the last season was because of a disagreement....he said to me 'I can see what I wish to achieve but when I fall short of this I tend to lash out at the nearest person'.

Verney Wheeler's role of 'keeping the show on the road' and enduring Wheeler's temper is apparent. Rachael

Maxwell-Hyslop, another student at Maiden Castle, was quoted in her obituary (*Telegraph* 3/8/2011) as saying about Wheeler,

He had a brilliance about finding sites – about where you ought to dig, but he spent an awful lot of time playing around with the good-looking female students.

Wheeler was a serial philanderer and Carr describes how this deeply hurt Tessa. As he aged, his pursuit of women, especially female students, increased. Indeed when Tessa died, Wheeler was travelling incommunicado in the Middle East with his latest girlfriend and only found out about his wife's death when on his return journey he read her obituary in *The Times* at Gare du Nord, Paris. Carr resists the temptation to condemn Wheeler and unlike Jacquetta Hawkes, Wheeler's biographer (*Mortimer Wheeler: Adventurer in Archaeology*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), she does not attempt to offer excuses. Her narrative of Tessa speaks for itself.

Carr does not shed new light on the origins of Wheeler's knowledge of excavation technique, accepting Pitt-Rivers as the antecedent, and she concludes from her analysis of excavation documentation that Verney Wheeler learned basic technical methods at Segontium and Brecon Gaer (103). At the Brecon Gaer excavation (1925) Verney Wheeler also assumed all financial control, taught excavation technique and oversaw the handling of finds and their conservation. Apparently from 1922 her involvement is traceable from the field documents and letters.

In 1927 the Wheelers ended their seven years at the National Museum of Wales and at University College of South Wales in Cardiff and returned to London and the London Museum. Carr describes the beginning of excavation of Caerleon in some detail. Verney Wheeler stayed on in Wales to oversee the excavation, while Wheeler would visit monthly. Her publication of it brought her to the attention of the Society of Antiquaries. The excavation of Caerleon passed to V.E. Nash-Williams, a student of the Wheelers, who continued to seek advice from Verney Wheeler.

Carr's description of the Wheelers is typical of such couples, when students and workers cannot get help or direction from the husband they turn to the wife and if she is approachable and proficient, as Tessa was, she becomes the manager. In these circumstances the respective contribution of the two partners is hard to assess. Carr describes how Grimes, Wheeler's successor at the London Museum, attributed the resurrection of the Museum entirely to Verney Wheeler, while Beatrice de Cardi, Wheeler's secretary after 1936, dismissed her role. Apart from introducing professional practices to the Museum, the Wheelers commenced a regular lecture program that made it an embryonic Institute of Archaeology. While the idea of an Institute of Archaeology may have been largely Wheeler's, it was Tessa who made it happen, raising the funds, finding the accommodation and starting the lecture

program (148). A plaque was dedicated to Tessa Verney Wheeler when the Institute was officially opened in 1937; it now hangs in the staff common room.

Carr draws heavily on Veronica Seton-Williams' description of 'the Wheelers' in her biography (152), which Veronica dedicated to her teachers, Jessie Webb (Melbourne University), Margaret A. Murray and Tessa Verney Wheeler (*The Road to El-Aguzain*, London: Kegan Paul, 1988). Third party observers may refer to people being trained by Wheeler, but it seems that the students themselves remember Tessa as their teacher.

The excavations at Lydney Park, Verulamium and Maiden Castle are discussed by Carr, identifying Verney Wheeler's probable roles, discussing the development of archaeological technique and commenting on the success of the expeditions. There was some controversy when Verulamium was published and Wheeler made a nasty reply to some well-founded concerns. That aside, Carr concludes that the Wheelers' reports were an achievement because of the depth of analysis they still facilitate.

There is a chapter on the importance of the media for the Wheelers as a means of procuring funds for excavation. As in Australia, the media often focussed on 'the Girl excavator' with pictures of Verney Wheeler brandishing a range pole, or whatever. Carr believes that she hated this aspect of archaeology, but realised that it was essential for raising finance for excavation (204).

The chapter on Maiden Castle draws on the field notes to discuss in-trench activity and to illustrate Verney Wheeler's careful monitoring of student record taking. Over one hundred students worked at Maiden Castle in the four seasons and many went on to careers in archaeology or related disciplines.

According to Carr, Verney Wheeler was driven by a need to do a job well. She was apparently pleased to stay in her husband's shadow (108) and as Wheeler was the ultimate narcissist and a 'media talent', she really had no alternative. Even so, in 1929 she was the second woman elected as a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Her obituary in *The Times* (18 April 1936) elicited compliments from Sir Frederic Kenyon and Lord Bledisloe that Wheeler could only dream about and she has an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Verney Wheeler's contribution is discussed by Carr in relation to her legacy and her place as a women in British archaeology. She was committed to careful excavation recording and taught this to a whole generation of students. Kenyon is quoted as saying that Verney Wheeler was the source of what she 'had learned of dig management and field technique, notably the detailed control of stratigraphy and pottery recording' (247). This is an extraordinary statement. At Lydney Park in 1927 Tessa used field notebooks with alternate pages lined and graphed, something adopted by Kenyon and all her students.

Carr's discussion of Verney Wheeler in the context of the progress of women in archaeology is rather superficial.

Gertrude Bell is mentioned in the context of Iraq, but not with respect to her archaeology, she dug with Sir William Ramsay and jointly published with him (*The Thousand and One Churches*, London: Hodder, 1909). Margaret Murray is rightly discussed in detail as she had significant direct contact with Verney Wheeler, but Dorothy Garrod and Gertrude Caton Thompson are only referred to in passing. Winfred Lamb is not mentioned at all, although she was only one year younger than Verney Wheeler.

Carr discusses Lady Petrie and concludes that she was not a role model for Verney Wheeler. She does not mention Lady Woolley or Marie Louise Garstang. Walter Beasley, the founder of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, was very impressed with Mrs Garstang's responsible role at Jericho, and it was Garstang's recording system that was adopted by Joan du Plat Taylor and Veronica Seton-Williams, instead of the Maiden Castle system. Maiden Castle women supervisors who pursued archaeology or ancient studies as married women include Margaret Drower (Hackforth-Jones), Nancy Champion de Crespigny (Movius), Eve Dray (Stewart), Rachael Clay (Maxwell-Hyslop), Molly Cotton, Leslie McNair Scott (Murray-Threipland), and Margaret Collingridge (Wheeler). They all made life-long contributions in widely varying circumstances.

The idea that Verney Wheeler was a transitional figure between Margaret Murray and Veronica Seton-Williams seems over-stated. Veronica remained a maritally single archaeologist, but so did other Maiden Castle supervisors, Joan du Plat Taylor and Ione Gedye for two. Veronica never secured an academic position, but Dorothy Garrod became the Disney Professor of Archaeology in 1939. Kenyon was the post-War female force in British Archaeology.

Garrod's contact with Hallam Movius in 1932 and other Americans at her Mt Carmel excavations and her supervision of Nancy Champion de Crespigny, at Newnham College, influenced pre-historical archaeology in America. Carr contrasts UCL's openness with the rigidity of the Oxbridge colleges such as Newnham, but this is a little unfair to scholars, such as Garrod, who were there.

This reviewer is pleased that this elegantly written book focusses on Verney Wheeler herself and not on her place in the pantheon of female archaeologists. Many of the subjects that Carr deals with are potentially sensitive and she handles them admirably. Even as a graduate of the Institute of Archaeology I was unaware of Tessa Wheeler's role in its establishment and so was not conscious of my debt to her. Some of this may be inferred from Jacquetta Hawkes' biography of Wheeler, but Carr offers much more detail. The stories of Nancy Champion de Crespigny, Veronica Seton-Williams and Margaret Collingridge, Australians who went to study archaeology in London prior to the opening of the Institute in 1937, make sense when considered in the light of the learning environment created by Tessa Verney Wheeler.