



PARVINE HELEN MERRILLEES (1932 – 2019)

Parvine Helen Merrillees (née Razavi) was born in Isfahan, Iran, on 16 April 1932, and spent her early childhood in Hamadan, of which she had nothing but the happiest memories. Her mother was Florence Isabella Leahy, of Irish descent, and father, Hassan Razavi, a Persian citizen. They had met and married in England. By background and inclination, she considered herself stateless – she scorned nationalism – and was proud of possessing the passports of four different countries, Australia, Iran, Ireland and the United Kingdom. She did her secondary education at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Hove, England, and subsequently attended the Nightingale Training School at St. Thomas' Hospital in London, qualifying as a Registered Nurse in 1954. Though she did not continue with the nursing profession, she felt it compensated for the less than rewarding experience she had had at school and prepared her well for the next step in her career on which she had firmly set her sights, a tertiary qualification. It required several more years of patient but determined effort to gain entry to the University of London.

Having obtained a London County Council Major County Award, for which she was eternally grateful, Parvine, as she was known to her Persian relations, Helen to almost everyone else, and Raz to her nursing colleagues, took her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Degree in 1962 at University College London, where she was taught ancient history by Professor Arnaldo Momigliano and Miss Margaret (Peggy) Drower. To them she felt she owed a great debt for the introduction they gave her to the academic world, both its joys and its pains. Her first appointment after graduation was in the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities (now Middle East) at the British Museum, where she was employed in the only position then available as a technical assistant with the unusual title of 'half a stonemason'. Her duties were to make seal impressions for Dr A.D.H. Bivar, then Lecturer in Iranian Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, who needed them for the British Museum catalogue of Sassanian gemstones. Thus began her lifelong interest in ancient Near Eastern cylinder and stamp seals.



Figure 1: Helen, her uncle Ahmad and her mother, Florence, in 1958.

In 1963 Helen married Robert Stuart Merrillees, an Australian archaeologist and later diplomat. With their return to Australia in 1965, working as a bibliographer in the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra and having two daughters, Antoinette and Dolla, to look after, Helen had little further opportunity to pursue her archaeological interests as a student. With Robert's diplomatic posting to Cambodia in 1967 and more spare time, Helen, drawing on the postgraduate research she had begun in London on Greco-Persian seals, developed a more wide-ranging specialisation in ancient Near Eastern glyptic. This process was consolidated during her Robert's transfer to New York from 1969 to 1972 when she became acquainted



Figure 2: Helen in 1963.

with Professor Edith Porada, the world's leading authority on the subject, and was able to attend some of the latter's lectures and classes. Professor Porada was also the supervisor of Dr Dominique Collon, then a postgraduate student at Columbia University who was living with the Merrillees family in Manhattan. She went on to become an eminent expert on glyptic in her own right, remaining Helen's close friend and collaborator.



Figure 3: Helen with her father, Hassan, and daughters, Antoinette and Dolla, in New York State, 1970.

With this background, Helen progressively undertook, in between overseas assignments, a catalogue of the ancient Near Eastern seals in museum collections in Australia and had the results published in Occasional Paper No. 3 by the Archaeology Research Unit of Deakin University in Melbourne in 1990, under the title *Cylinder and Stamp Seals in Australian Collections*. Inevitably, no sooner was this catalogue finished than it was brought to her attention that an unknown collection existed in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and she was invited by the Director, Dr Timothy Potts, to write up this collection as well. She completed the catalogue of these specimens and submitted the manuscript to Dr Potts, who left before it was published. As his successor declined to honour this commitment and bring out the promised work, it was



Figure 4: With Nicolas and Nicola Coldstream in France. Nicolas was the Yates Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology at University College London, and he and Nicola have been longstanding colleagues and friends of Helen and Robert.

thanks to the enlightenment and generosity of Professor Paul Åström of Sweden that Helen's catalogue eventually saw the light of day in Jonsered in 2001 in *Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology* Vol. CXXIX under the title, *Ancient Near Eastern Glyptic in the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia*.

Four years in Stockholm from 1991 to 1995 gave Helen the opportunity to catalogue the cylinder and stamp seals in the Museum of Mediterranean Antiquities (Medelhavs-

museet) that had not been included in the initial listing published by Hans Henning von der Osten in 1961. In this she was greatly aided by Dr Eva Rystedt, later Professor of Classical Archaeology at Lund University. After arriving in Athens in 1996 she recorded, with the co-operation of Dr Katie Demakopolou, all the Near Eastern seals without provenance in the National Archaeological Museum. Following Robert's enforced retirement from the Australian diplomatic service in 1998, she devoted her later efforts



Figure 5: With Robert at Larnaca Museum in 2013.

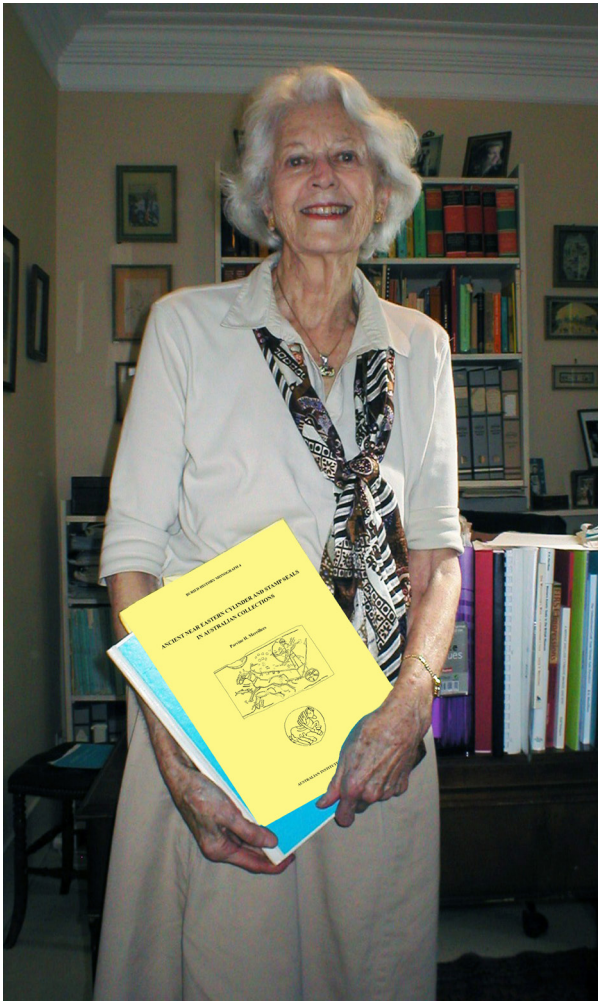


Figure 6: Helen holding her Australian seal catalogues.

to cataloguing the cylinder seals in the Old and New Collections of the Cyprus Museum, Nicosia, a major undertaking for the publishing house of Paul Åström which regrettably she did not live to see finalised. None of these catalogues was ever prepared for publication and all exist as resources for others to consult and use as needed.

In the meantime, however, Helen had embarked on two major publishing ventures which gave her an outlet for

her many talents and great professional and personal satisfaction. The first was the *Catalogue of Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Cylinder Seals VI. Pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid Periods*, published in 2005 by the British Museum Press in London. In it she fulfilled all of her long-held ambitions. She not only drew all the illustrations with a mastery of form, detail and shading, but drew on her deep knowledge of the field and included sections on the history and development of the collection, as well the historical background. For her, antiquities were a means to an historical end, not an end in themselves. Her second substantial project was the total re-edition of her inaugural work on glyptics in Australian collections. This was done at the invitation of Dr Christopher Davey and appeared in a handsome format in 2015 under the title *Ancient Near Eastern Seals in Australian Collections* as *Buried History* Monograph 4 of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, Melbourne.

Helen did not see herself as a scholar or authority but as an enthusiast for exploring and explaining the past. She considered her research a contribution to knowledge, not as a means of advancing her career or reputation, and felt strongly that her efforts should be recognised and appreciated for the selfless historical interests they served. She enjoyed the studying, less so the writing, and was endlessly indebted to Dominique Collon for all the help and advice she received over the years on the drafts of her various seal catalogues. Apart from some articles and sections in other people's works, she did not indulge in other academic pursuits such as lecturing and participating in conferences – she had a horror of public speaking – and always welcomed the chance to see, hear and talk about Persia. She had hoped, in vain, to have her father's typewritten memoirs published, and inspired by his example, egged on by Antoinette and Dolla, and encouraged by Robert, she wrote her own memoirs up to 1963, but not for publication.

Helen, who died in Auxerre, France, on 23 November 2019, would wish to be remembered academically not for her literary output but for her attachment to and search for the truth for its own sake.

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