

## Oliver Davies (1905-1986)

Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* included Pericles' discourse delivered at the first public funeral of those Athenian soldiers who had died in battle. It began with the following words:

Most of those who have stood in this place before me have commended the institution of this closing address . . .

In this particular instance 'the closing address' is in the form of an obituary notice in *Natalia*, which, as its readers know, is primarily concerned with 'matters of interest pertaining to the Province of Natal'. Thus it is fitting that the work of an exceptional academic who had devoted so much of his time and phenomenal intellectual capacity doing pioneer research work on the very earliest period of the story of Natal should be commemorated in this journal. It is therefore relevant to note here, for example, that Oliver Davies was the writer of Part I — 'Archaeology of Natal' — in Volume I of the *Natal Regional Survey* (published for the University of Natal by the Oxford University Press, 1951) entitled *Archaeology and Natural Resources of Natal*.

The writer of this obituary has had access to two written sources for the factual information which it contains. (These have now been added to the records of the Natal Museum, Loop Street, Pietermaritzburg). The first, and shorter one, gives several interesting details about his personal life — particularly his outstanding, precocious intellectual ability as a child. The second, and fuller one, was written by Oliver Davies himself in October, 1984, and gives a detailed account of his academic career. To it is appended a list of his numerous publications (compiled in September, 1984). This runs to ten and a half A4 pages of single-spaced typing! Starting with his first publication entitled 'A New Cretan Inscription', which was published in 1927 in the *Annual of the British School of Archaeology at Athens*, it also includes one with the fascinating title of *Date of the Golden Gate at Istanbul*, which was published in 1944 in the *Journal of Roman studies*.

Oliver Davies was born in Chelsea, London, on 7th May, 1905. His father was Ernest Davies C.B.E., a stockbroker, who was in a position to realise his ambition of being able to retire at the age of 40! He also wrote novels which were published under the pseudonym of Oliver Martin. Oliver's younger brother, Martin, who was a graduate of Cambridge University, subsequently became Director of the National Gallery, that familiar edifice in Trafalgar Square. He was knighted for his services to the state, which included the onerous task, during World War II, of removing the countless art treasures at risk in London to Wales where they were housed through the War. Martin died on 7th March, 1975.

Oliver must have been an exceptional child because he could spell at the age of two and at the age of three he could read out the numbers on the doors of houses when he was taken for outings in his perambulator! Even before he went to school he constructed imaginary timetables and imaginary omnibus routes. In his first year at school — at the age of nine — he was made 'head student' when the majority of the pupils were thirteen years old! His first boarding school was Earlywood where, when he was only twelve, the headmaster informed his mother that 'he can write Greek like a Greek.' He won a £100 scholarship to Rugby in September 1918 at the age of

thirteen. At this age he could read and write Greek, Latin, French and German and 'was considered to have attained the education and knowledge of a nineteen year old'.

He won a scholarship to Exeter College, Oxford, where he read Honours Classics and received a First Class in both parts. The subjects were Greek and Latin language, literature, history and philosophy. He received his B.A. at Oxford in 1927 and M.A. in 1930. In 1927-29 he was Craven Fellow of the University of Oxford. He was based in Athens and he worked on mining sites in Greece and the Balkans. He received a further grant in 1929-30 to enable him to continue this work.

His first academic post was that of lecturer in archaeology and ancient history at Queen's University, Belfast, in 1930, where he became Reader in 1945. During the 1930s (up to 1937) he worked largely on ancient mines in the Balkans and in Spain. He also worked on the relevant literature relating to ancient mines in other parts of Europe, many of which had been re-opened in the 19th century. In the Balkans many old mines were re-opened in the 1930s.

In 1935 he was appointed secretary of a committee of the British Association and worked on Roman mines in Wales while during vacations he visited mining sites in Ireland, Austria and Czechoslovakia. From 1936 he extended his work on Roman remains and sites in the Balkans but published little during this period. Ultimately, because of the deteriorating international situation, he abandoned this study. From 1931 onwards he also worked systematically on excavations in Northern Ireland — principally prehistoric sites but also on a few medieval sites. This work led to his contributing to the *Preliminary survey of Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland* which was published by H.M. Stationery Office in 1940. He was also a member of the Northern Ireland Monuments Council from 1930-1947. From 1940-42 he carried out a survey of the archaeological sites in the border counties of Eire and his reports were deposited in the National Museum in Dublin, and a few of these were published. From 1946-47 he resumed his work on the sites in Northern Ireland and contributed to the publication of the complete surveys of several counties. This project has subsequently been continued by his successors. In 1937 he re-founded the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* and edited it from 1938-42 and 1946-47. The 33rd volume (1970) of the Journal of the Ulster Archaeological Society was dedicated as a *Festschrift* to him and to Professor B.B. Evans.

From 1942 to 1945 he was seconded from Belfast to the British Council in Istanbul and from 1943-45 he was attached to the University there. During this period he visited a few ancient mining sites in Anatolia during the vacations.

In 1948 he took up the Chair of Classics at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, a post he held until 1951 when he resigned to take up an appointment as Reader in Archaeology at the University College of the Gold Coast (which later became the University of Ghana). It was during this stay in Natal that he was able to carry out an archaeological survey of the Province, which, until then, had been explored very little. In fact, writing in 1971, Professor Desmond Clark had described it as 'the Cinderella of African archaeology'. Oliver Davies's archaeological research activities in Natal involved the study of the coastal systems of the Province and the

collection of archaeological remains from within the beach-gravels. He also attempted to follow the river-gravels inland and investigate the tools in them. In addition to this he carried out archaeological investigations in Northern Natal. He subsequently deposited his field-notes and his collection of artefacts in the Natal Museum where they have been sorted and catalogued.

In order to stimulate further interest in the archaeology of Natal he established the Natal Branch of the S.A. Archaeological Society, which provided lectures and local excursions. The Branch subsequently went into recess after he left Natal but he re-founded it on his return to the Province in 1967 and he was its Chairman until 1982.

At the University of Ghana he had virtually no teaching duties and he was therefore able to spend many months of the year in the field. He was made Associate Professor, and, in 1952, he started to attend international conferences on archaeology — something that he continued to do fairly regularly thereafter. These included, for example, the Panafrican Prehistoric Congress and the International Congress of Prehistoric Sciences. In 1958 he was appointed representative of Ghana on the *Union préhistorique internationale* and held this post until 1966 (the year in which he left Ghana), when he was transferred to the *Comité d' Honneur*. In 1963 he was appointed secretary of the Volta Basin Research Committee and he organised the archaeological rescue-work in the area of the Volta Basin to be flooded by the Akosombo Dam. During his sojourn in Ghana he wrote three books dealing with the archaeology of West Africa, and he also published a number of journal articles and congress reports.



Professor Oliver Davies (1905-1986) at work in the Natal Museum.

(Photograph: *Natal Witness*)

After his return to Natal in 1966, following on his retirement from his post in Ghana, he extended the scope of his archaeological research activities to the study of the Pleistocene shorelines of South Africa, while at the same time continuing with a number of research projects in Natal. These included several excavations on iron-age and earlier sites. He also continued mapping geological-archaeological sites in the Province. In 1969 he was given an honorary appointment at the Natal Museum, which he was still holding at the time of his death.

In the 1970s, as a result of his work as a convener of a working party, several reports on the Tertiary and Quaternary Periods of South and South West Africa were prepared by the group, and, ultimately, together with Dr L.E. Kent, he compiled Chapters 7 and 9 of *Handbook 8* of the South African Geological Survey. During the years 1974-76 he held office as President of the South African Archaeological Society. From 1973-75 he was secretary of SASQUA (the South African Society for Quaternary Research), and President from 1977-79. In this capacity he attended the National Council of INQUA (*Internationale Quatärvereinigung*) Mediterranean Shorelines Sub-Commission, while he continued to work on the South African shorelines.

Amongst his final research projects was his work on further excavations on the Shongweni Caves in 1981. As a result of radio-carbon dating he found it necessary to modify his earlier conclusions. In addition to this he was able to define the food plants introduced by the Bantu-speakers in the earliest centuries A.D.

For Oliver Davies life was the opportunity to experience daily a routine of meaningful activity, enthusiastic endeavour and solid achievement. Although he would undoubtedly wince at the use of the word 'monastic' nevertheless 'monastic' epitomises his single-minded dedication to the pursuit of his academic goals. It was typical of the man that he should specifically state in his will that he should have no formal funeral, but the gathering of his bereaved friends held at the Natal Museum on Tuesday, 9th September was eloquent tribute to a man of outstanding brilliance yet one with modest, affectionate charm.

Finally, when one sadly and searchingly reflects (as I'm sure we all do) on the grim manner in which Oliver Davies met his sudden end in August, 1986, one cannot but be reminded of that Latin phrase from the pen of the great Roman orator and writer, Marcus Tullius Cicero: '*Cui bono?*' — 'Who stands to gain?'

JOHN M. SELLERS

