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Archaeologist, Adventurer, and Archetype: A Profile of John Pendlebury

By: Samuel Pfister and Hope Elizabeth Gillespie

Abstract: In his short life, Archaeologist and British Intelligence Officer John D.S. Pendlebury achieved great acclaim as an archaeologist who studied both ancient Greece and Egypt, becoming director of excavations at both Knossos and Amarna. Called a vigorous romantic, Pendlebury would often immerse himself fully in his work, getting to know each of his sites intimately, which ultimately aided him when he joined British Intelligence. John Pendlebury is your classic hero, a personality that became the archetype for what would later become fictionalized archeologists including but not limited to Indiana Jones, Ramses Emerson, and Julius Kane. Though many may not know his name, they certainly know his profile – an intelligent and ruggedly handsome Englishman who is not afraid to get his hands dirty and ultimately gives up his career in order to save the world from evil forces. On the 80th anniversary of his death, this piece analyzes the myth, the man, and the legend of John Pendlebury and shows his influence on fictional depictions of archaeologists even to this day.

Keywords: *John Pendlebury, Amarna, Crete, Indiana Jones, Elizabeth Peters, Ramses Emerson*

In May of 1941, Archaeologist and British Intelligence Officer John D.S. Pendlebury was captured and executed by German invaders on the island of Crete at the age of 36. In his short life, Pendlebury achieved great acclaim as an archaeologist who studied both ancient Greece and Egypt, becoming director of excavations at Knossos, Crete and Amarna, the ancient capital of Pharaoh Akhenaten. Called a vigorous romantic, Pendlebury would often immerse himself fully in his work, getting to know each site he excavated intimately.

He is perhaps more well known today, and not just in archaeological circles. Pendlebury's legacy as a handsome adventurer and interrogative academic has resonated within archaeology as an exemplary

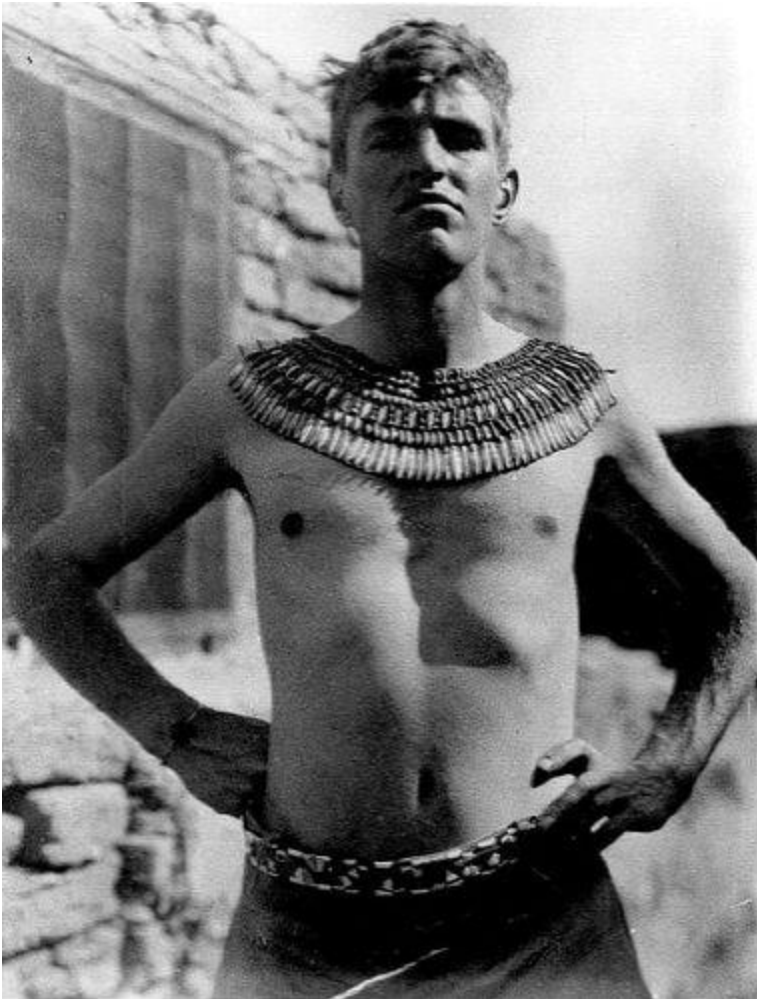


Figure 1. John Pendlebury at Amarna in 1934. Public Domain Image.

inspiration and among a wider audience as an ideal type for the fictional archaeologist. But the legacy of Pendlebury as a “cool character” to look up to is a fairly complex one.

Benevolently kind towards his friends, he was bitterly venomous and exclusionary towards those he did not like. A passionate romantic who married his wife after falling for her while trekking through Grecian hills, he was also a philanderer and harbored inappropriate relationships with at least one of his students.

On the eightieth anniversary of John Pendlebury's death, let us take a look at the complexities of his legacy and how he has come to impact the field of archaeology for nearly a century.

The most famous picture of John Pendlebury shows a young, 29-year-old man framed in shadows that mask the glass eye he wore since childhood. His bare chest is adorned only in a reconstructed

Egyptian necklace that had recently been excavated at his archaeological dig at Amarna, Egypt. He appears fit—well-toned, lean, and in mid-season form from long days excavating at Amarna as well as the friendly hockey games that were common among staff in their free time. Hands on his hips and stern glance fixed on the photographer; John's fitness is on full display.

All of his life John Pendlebury enjoyed an appreciation for sports, athletics, and competition. As a child, he ran circles around the other children playing war in the schoolyard—a premonition of Pendlebury's ultimate fate—and later excelled in a number of organized sports at Winchester. While studying for his classical trips at Pembroke College, Cambridge, Pendlebury earned his full blue (the highest athletics distinction) and competed internationally in the high jump, nearly qualifying for the Olympics.

Although he certainly appreciated intelligence and wit among those he surrounded himself with, John maintained that the measure of a man was his strength, or at least his endurance to apply it well. His biographer, Imogen Grundon, writes, "John was a great believer in the idea that it is no shame to fall, but to lie long."¹ John had overcome the difficult experience of losing an eye at a young age which contributed to the high expectations he set for those around him.

After college, John maintained his fitness with ambitious and physically demanding excursions across Aegean landscapes on both the mainland and Crete. Sometimes trekking for days or weeks at a time and often in the company of others who typically trailed well behind, John would set out on foot to fulfill his fascination with Greece, its peoples, and its places. Of course, these travels brought John to many unexpected places where he encountered new friends, connections, and allies. Especially on Crete, these hikes saw John discover countless of previously unknown archaeological sites and gain a familiarity with the landscape, geography, and topography of the country. His knowledge was unmatched even by most locals which would come to serve John well during his intelligence work in WWII. His topographical knowledge of Crete was almost mythical by the time of his death and he had allies and friends in every nook, cranny, and cove of the island.

Pendlebury also met—in some ways lost - his wife Hilda on these excursions. Having met at the British School of Archaeology in Athens, Hilda was an archaeologist in her own right and accompanied John on all of his excavations in the early years of their marriage. After the birth of their first child, and mostly likely due to the fact that Hilda was thirteen years his senior, she often lagged behind his grueling pace in the field and stayed home in England. It is known that John had at least one affair with a student during this period, though he and Hilda remained married until his untimely death.

John's passion for athleticism and physical fitness was matched only by his ceaseless and hyper-questioning study of the ancient world—his exercise of his body paralleled that of his mind. And while he surpassed so many others intellectually, so too did he tend to surpass those around him physically. This was especially true at his archaeological digs, where competitions like hockey or riding were common activities that staff members took part in to blow off steam. John's opinion of those he worked with was sometimes formed on the pitch. On several occasions during his tenure as director of the Amarna excavations, John's poor relationship with a member of his staff—it was customarily that season's philologist—had something to do in part to his personal dislike of that person for what he considered a softness in character. Additionally, Pendlebury could be caustic in his criticism of others, preferring direct confrontation to passivity.

At the onset of World War II, as global excavations began to shut down, John volunteered for military service, first approaching the Naval Intelligence Department, and eventually being recruited by Military Intelligence. John left England and his family for the last time on June 5th, 1940, heading for Crete, where he would die nearly a year later.

In body and mind, John Pendlebury established a sort of prototype of the ideal modern archaeologist. But in projecting his own high expectations of self onto others, Pendlebury tended to cultivate an atmosphere of antipathy at his digs—those who could keep up and appeal to Pendlebury's notion of manhood were in while those who could not, or refused to, were out. Although he did not start it, Pendlebury refined the “old boys club” archaeology dig—gilding scientific endeavor in hyper-

masculinity. That legacy, although too-slowly shifting, remains prevalent in archaeological field schools and academic excavations today.

In her 2007 biography of Pendlebury, Imogen Grundon writes, “John drew on the heroic notions he found in these stories [Greek and Roman myth and historical fiction] to develop a particular code of his own, combining physical stamina and speed with an acute, academically rigorous and imaginative mind. To John, imagination was just as important as scholarly detail.”ⁱⁱ These aspects of Pendlebury’s personality are clear in many of his theories and reconstructions, but they also play a huge role in the archetypal legacy that he leaves behind. This notion of a romantic adventurer academic, which has been laid out above, is one that pervades the public impression of archaeologists, mostly due to fictional portrayals. If Pendlebury’s story sounds familiar to readers it’s because it is - Pendlebury is the blueprint for the fictional faces of the field.

Looking first at Indiana Jones, the parallels between the famous fictional archaeologist and Pendlebury are fairly clear. Jones is both a professor and adventurer with a wide range of topical knowledge. His famous dueling quotes of “70% of all Archaeology is done in the library,”ⁱⁱⁱ and “If you want to be a good archaeologist you gotta get out of the library,”^{iv} not only speak to the dual nature of the field, but to the minds that Pendlebury managed to marry in his method and practice.

Jones and Pendlebury share the same personality as well - athletic and charming yet somehow gruff man with many friends in many places. As previously mentioned, Pendlebury valued strength and perseverance within himself and among his friends, a trait that Jones exemplifies in all four movies, even into his older age. Romantically, Jones and Pendlebury share a similar pattern of having a revolving door of women from adventure to adventure. However, unlike Jones, Pendlebury was married at a young age, and remained so until the time of his death, and had two young children.^v This, as previously alluded to, did not stop him from having a string of romantic entanglements during his excavations.

Further details of Pendlebury’s life also appear to be lifted and incorporated into the Jones storyline, including his status as a war hero. For both Jones and Pendlebury, their roles as archaeologists helped to prepare them for their service. For Jones, his knowledge of various (and unspecified) languages

and cultures, as well as his global network of friends and overall athleticism, allowed him to be an excellent spy. With Pendlebury, his intimate knowledge of the topography of Crete, as well as his close and personal relationships with its citizens, allowed him to run a covert network of citizens and soldiers in order to aid the Allied powers.^{vi}

Another clear example of a fictional patterning after Pendlebury is Walter “Ramses” Emerson of the Amelia Peabody series, written by novelist and Egyptologist, Barbara Mertz, under the pseudonym Elizabeth Peters. Emerson is an Egyptologist and Philologist, who comes from an upper class, idiosyncratic, English family of Egyptologists. The series sees Ramses grow from a young mischievous boy into a well-educated, yet rugged and humbled man. The parallels here are clear as well- a young boy who excelled from a young age, and found a career steeped in adventure and mythos. In fact, much like Pendlebury was on Crete, both Ramses and his father are legendary among the Egyptians that they excavate with, Rameses being given the nickname “Brother of Curses” and believed to be infallible in nearly everything he attempts to do.^{vii}

Like with Jones, Peters also draws on the war hero legacy with her characterization of Ramses, although with a bit of subversion. Ramses is a pacifist who refuses to fight in the war, the very same war for which Pendlebury volunteered. Ramses reluctantly becomes a spy when he realizes that those close to him could be in danger, and uses his intimate knowledge of Egypt not only to help his country, but ultimately to protect his family.^{viii} Ramses, very much unlike Pendlebury, does not believe in the nobility of the war effort and would much rather be an Egyptologist, husband, and father, which Peters uses as a plot point in many of her later books. In this, Peters also subverts Pendlebury’s image. Though Pendlebury’s wife often accompanied him on excavation as she was also an archaeologist, she rarely joined him after the birth of their children. The Emersons, by severe contrast, are a family of Egyptologists, with both Rameses and his father being the pictures of devotion to their wives, who are also Egyptologists.

Whereas with Jones, the details lifted from Pendlebury’s life may have been occasionally accidental or meant to be drawn from the general profile of the “adventurer” of that period, Peters was a

trained Egyptologist who very likely knew of Pendlebury, both his personality and his legacy. These inclusions and subversions, though also wonderful character and plot work, are a clear sign of her using Pendlebury as a blueprint: Here is what an Egyptologist in this time period acts like, looks like, *is like*.

The characteristics of John Pendlebury that are shown in these men are grandiose and extravagant- this man was a hero, an adventurer, and an archaeologist. This prototype often causes the three to be conflated, because in the case of Pendlebury, they were. While these depictions are, at times, disingenuous, and not indicative of the actual work that archaeologists and Egyptologists do, the truths that they borrow from Pendlebury's life are very real.

Pendlebury's enduring legacy, one of manhood and myth, is a rather complicated piece of archaeological history to unpack. His contributions to the 'old boys club' atmosphere and his characterization in the media have made him a problematic hero for many archaeologists and Egyptologists. He exemplifies the stereotypes of our field that while extremely entertaining, are often misleading and unethical. And yet, his contributions to the theory of interconnection in the ancient Mediterranean and his views about how archaeological knowledge should be treated, are what keep him in the forefront of archaeological discussions.

Pendlebury believed that archaeology was being done for the acquisition of knowledge; knowledge which should be available and understood by the public. He once wrote,

If archaeology is to become a mumbo-jumbo of mysteries then sooner it stops the better. We dig for the enlightenment of the world and while it is obviously a crime to cheapen the importance of antiquity by modern sensationalism it is equally a crime to pretend that it is a secret not to be understood of the people. The 'people' are desperately interested, and interested in the right way. They have been scared on one hand by those who will 'write down' to them, and on the other by those who write in a language peculiar to their little coterie and intentionally above the heads not only of the man in the street but of the average archaeologist also. After all, any one can read an interesting history, and what is archaeology but the providing bones and sinew of history?^{ix}

Even 80 years after his death, the idea that knowledge, specifically archaeological research, should be easily and readily accessible to the public is still heavily debated. The question of what the role of an archaeologist is ranges from protector of material culture - it would be remiss if I did not bring up the "It belongs in a museum!" mantra here - to interpreter and, often, gatekeeper of that knowledge and

material. Accessibility, now more than ever, is at the forefront of not just archaeology, but all academic fields. No one could have predicted the twists and turns of the last 80 years, that Pendlebury still has something so relevant to say is impressive, if not admirable. Though it may be more fun to talk about his macho man personality or his mythicized heroic demise, Pendlebury's true legacy is one that continues to contribute to a conversation we are still having today: How does the study of the material culture of the past become knowable to the people of the present?

Endnotes

- ⁱ Imogen Grundon, *The Rash Adventurer: a Life of John Pendlebury* (London: Libri, 2007), 80.
- ⁱⁱ Grundon 2007, 18.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* (Paramount, 1989).
- ^{iv} *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Paramount, 2008).
- ^v Grundon 2007, 233.
- ^{vi} Grundon 2007, 243-318.
- ^{vii} Elizabeth Peters, *Seeing a Large Cat* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 125.
- ^{viii} Elizabeth Peters, *He Shall Thunder in the Sky* (New York: William Morrow, 2000).
- ^{ix} Grundon 2007, 184-185.

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