

8 Mar 95  
Faculty  
Meeting

Memorial Minute: Walter Ashlin Fairservis, Jr.

Walter Fairservis died in July, 1994, of cancer.

Walter is believed to have been born in 1921. He was raised in New York - when he wasn't touring as a child actor with his mother - and educated at Chicago, Columbia, and Harvard. As a child he volunteered at the American Museum of Natural History, determined to become an archaeologist. In pursuit of this goal, he dropped out of high school in 1937 and took a job as a cabin boy on a freighter bound for Egypt. Once there, he jumped ship and went to Luxor, where he made a meager living as a tour guide until ill health forced him to return to Cairo, where the American Embassy helped him to link up with an elderly gentleman travelling around the world. Going east, Walter first visited India when their ship docked in Bombay.

Returning home, Walter went to the University of Chicago on an athletic scholarship - he was a runner - and finished his undergraduate work at Columbia. Entering the Army upon graduation, Walter became a Lieutenant in the Intelligence Branch and was trained in Japanese, having already studied German, Italian, French, Latin, Hebrew, Chinese and Mongolian. When he was posted to Japan with General MacArthur's staff, he managed to find a lost specimen of Java Man in the Imperial Household Museum and

sent it back to the American Museum of Natural History. He also liked to tell the story about his experience returning an icon to a certain temple in Japan. Walter was a superb raconteur and as he wove the strands of his quest it took on the quality of a search for the Holy Grail, holding his listeners enthralled.

After the war, Walter returned to Columbia for a Master's degree and then transferred to Harvard for his PhD. His thesis research, supported by the American Museum of Natural History, took place in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and resulted in a major monograph, Excavations in the Quetta Valley, West Pakistan. Walter directed the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum in Seattle from 1962-1968 and then returned to New York to curate the "Hall of Asian Peoples" at the American Museum of Natural History and to teach at Vassar. He and his wife, Jan, who illustrated his archaeological reports and designed costumes for his theatrical productions, set up house in Sharon, Connecticut, where Walter stored and added to his huge library and extensive collection of art objects, including a plaster piece from Taylor Hall which was destined for the junk heap.

While maintaining an interest in Pakistan, particularly in the Harappan Civilization and its writing system, and continuing fieldwork there, Walter never lost his interest in Egypt, and returned in 1968 to direct excavations at the important prehistoric and dynastic site of Heirakonpolis.

In both Pakistan and Egypt, Vassar students were afforded the opportunity to participate in archaeological excavations under Walter's tutelage.

At Vassar, Walter was active in Anthropology and Asian Studies, as well as being an outspoken advocate for general education. His teaching style was dramatic and his lectures were enlivened by tales from the field. The Comparative World Views course, which Walter originated and taught from 1978 to 1990, introduced many Vassar students to outstanding pieces of world literature and to a wide range of Vassar professors. Important ~~aspects~~ to the course were the student discussion groups which met in the dorms. Walter was also an impassioned supporter of the traditional liberal arts, and considered as one of his major contributions to Vassar his continual insistence on the floor of the faculty that we consider the implications of computers before embracing them uncritically.

Walter always ate lunch in a corner of the Retreat, where he amused and encouraged his friends and colleagues. He was passionately interested in a wide range of subjects and there was always something to talk about. He never gave up his interest in the theater and was very proud of the fact that he was the only anthropologist he knew who was a member of Actor's Equity.

Walter's life was a great adventure, and he was in no way ready for it to be over. After he retired, he had one more monograph to complete and then he intended to devote himself full time to the theater, but fate intervened. Walter is survived by his wife, Jan Bell Fairservis, and his 4 daughters: Elf, Jenny and Vassar graduates Teviot and Beth.

Respectfully Submitted,

Lucille Lewis Johnson, Chair, Anthropology

Yin-Lien Chin, Professor of Chinese

Evert Sprinchorn, Professor Emeritus of Drama