



WILLIAM CULICAN

Picture by courtesy of Jennifer K. Zimmer

WILLIAM CULICAN  
1928-1984

I had my last view of Bill Culican in North Syria just a few weeks before his death, in the seedy and run-down district town of Membij, which it delighted Bill to know was once the proud hellenistic city of Hierapolis. Some of us were returning from an archaeological dig to Australia whilst Bill, with his almost tireless energy, was staying on behind to help tidy up and, with his passion for orderliness, was endeavouring to get under control his mountains of plastic bags filled with pottery-sherds. There, in Membij, as we were being jammed into a taxi for Aleppo, I caught my last glimpse of Bill. He'd come with us as far as town in the dig's conspicuous yellow Chevrolet to do some shopping. All around him unhurriedly sauntered Syrians dressed in their long galabiyas, looking proud and tall with heads swathed in red- or white-checked keffiyehs, whilst in and out of them, resolutely striding forward, we could see Bill, hurrying on. Over one arm he held his walking stick, long scarf trailing around his neck, greying hair in the wind, zestfully enjoying being different, relishing being alive in this exotic – if unromantic – setting, aware as he pushed purposefully forward that he was cutting an eye-catching figure. For they all affectionately knew in the town of 'Mr. Bill', who was unaccountably *digging* up those mountains for broken bits of pottery high up on a steep hill alongside the Euphrates, in the sleet and the wind, whilst they knew sherds lay in their thousands littered all about in the fields, if you really wanted them. Bill was carrying a shopping bag in one hand and in the other he held an Arab phrase-book, but not too obviously, for Bill didn't like to be seen not to know those few things he didn't know. And what he was looking for was something for which his Arab phrase-book was proving, understandably, inadequate: he was striding out in search, of all things, for rat-sack, to lay down at the excavation village to protect his precious bags of pottery so they would remain intact until his return next season, when, as he often mentioned, he very much hoped his wife Dinny might be able to come and share in the experience. And we said to each other as we glimpsed Bill disappearing into the crowded suq that out of the business of trying to convey to a series of uncomprehending Arab shopkeepers the improbable request for rat-poison Bill was going to create one of those hilariously entertaining anecdotes of his: only to him, we knew, with his exuberant taste for the larger-than-life, did such Chestertonian incidents occur. (I learned later that he came back to the excavation village in triumph: he'd succeeded in getting his rat-sack from the puzzled shopkeepers, eventually – by drawing a caricature

of a dead rat, flat on its back, four feet up in the air, whiskers drooping lifelessly. He was so pleased with his winning drawing he showed it round to everyone left at the dig.)

But by now those who knew Bill personally will have conjured up for themselves their own favourite scenes of Bill — whether they see him, net in hand, disappearing across the paddocks excitedly in chase of some rare species of butterfly; whether they imagine coming across in the country a field with an unexpected scatter of large blue plastic laundry-bags — that's Bill at work, eagerly gathering in manure for his much-loved garden; they may recall him pouncing, delightedly exclaiming, as he lights upon some unusual fungus or strange wildflower; or they may have pictured him in Sicily, at Motya, sitting on the beach shaded under a large hat, with that unnervingly accurate eye of his drawing pots as the divers stagger ashore bringing them up from the Phoenician wreck.

My own favourite picture of Bill is drawn from the last month of his life, at El Qitar in Syria, when at the very end of the day we'd gather, pretty tired out after a day's dig, for the evening meal. It was a moment Bill relished. He liked to sit at the head of the long table with his archaeological family about him, noisy, a touch quarrelsome as family mealtimes, as he well knew, often are. He confided to me privately that, as he saw this scene, he had to keep pinching himself to make sure it was really happening, that he was actually taking part in leading such a dig at such a thrilling site. Somebody then came in. He'd received a letter but unfortunately it was written in Russian. None of us could help him to decipher it. Then Bill said in an off-hand way he'd have a go. After reading it through for a minute or two he proceeded to reel off a fluent translation — but then, with a characteristic touch of ironic modesty, he apologized: he couldn't quite work out, he was sorry, the concluding phrase. All day long Bill had been handling broken bits of pottery, hundreds upon hundreds of them, classifying them, sorting out their typology, dressed in a full-length plastic apron, sporting long blue rubber washing-up gauntlets. But his zest was unbounded, his appetite for detail insatiable. He then produced at the meal a piece of pot, with obvious pleasure eloquently describing its unusual texture, the particular nuances of its pinkish buff, its shape so far unrepresented on the site, and he proceeded to conjure out of the air a long list of places where parallels had been found, able to cite the obscure periodicals where they had been published, down to the precise volume and year number.

That memory of Bill's was astonishing: his immense knowledge always remained active and fiendishly accurate. It started with Classics from his Jesuit schooling in Preston, in Lancashire, continued with his first-class degrees in Ancient History and Archaeology at Edinburgh, then his study of Egyptology under Cerny in Oxford and Akkadian under Professor Mullo Weir in Glasgow. By that time, in the late 50's, Bill had already won a series of fellowships and scholarships, enabling him to study for periods as well in Yugoslavia, in

Palestine, in the Lebanon, in Turkey and Persia, and in Sicily — and he never forgot what he'd learnt and seen. By that time, too, Bill had started publishing and that flow of books and articles, to the unashamed jealousy of his colleagues, was to continue unabated. Bill was appointed as lecturer to the Department of Semitic Studies in the University of Melbourne in 1960 when he was just over 30 and from that Department he moved over into John Mulvaney's position, as Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, six years later. In that year (1966), too, Bill was elected a Fellow of the Australian Humanities Research Council, to become a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities when it was established in 1969. He was still only forty.

Whenever I have travelled abroad and mentioned having been for a long period at the University of Melbourne I've invariably encountered scholars who've replied, 'At the University of Melbourne there's a man whose name I'm not sure how to pronounce but he writes splendid articles on . . .' and they would mention Phoenician jewellery or Iranian bronzes, Nubian terracottas, Maltese pottery, Cylinder seals — from Syria, from Cyprus, from Phoenicia, Punic underwater archaeology, material objects from Visigothic Spain, Gibraltar, Sardinia, Etruria, Sicily, even as far as Rajasthan in North India where Bill excavated in the very early 60's. His book *The Medes and the Persians* (1965) has been translated into French, into Portuguese, into Farsi. There is a Dutch as well as a French version of *The Merchant Venturers* (1966) and Bill was under pressure from the publishers to produce a revised edition of it; it had proved so popular. No wonder with his books and over a hundred articles and encyclopaedia entries Bill was invited, of all the scholars in the world, to provide the chapter for the revised *Cambridge Ancient History* on Phoenicians and Phoenician Colonization, which will now appear later in 1984, posthumously.

But Bill's activities were much broader than the confines of the Mediterranean — there were his services to the National Gallery of Victoria, the Victorian Archaeological Survey, his involvement with the Archaeological and Anthropological Society of Victoria, — Bill's prize-winning book with John Taylor on Fossil beach (1972) has set the standard for industrial archaeology in Australia — his round of addresses to the Classical Association of Victoria, and his participation in Australian prehistory, at the Aboriginal Ochre Mine at Mole Creek in Northern Tasmania. In the midst of all this Bill was inspiring students. He could certainly leave far behind the slow-learners; he didn't know how to lower his standards. But he also didn't know how to be dull. And he saw with warm pride — and rightly so — the ever-growing list of theses produced under his supervision and the publications emanating from those researches. Those who could measure up to his exacting standards were always richly rewarded and became tied to him by bonds of deep affection. And there are very many of them. And what they learnt above all from Bill was to see in the material remains of the past not just antiquarian objects but creations of people, expressions of how they perceived the world, how they were trying to

talk about themselves in their world by sign and symbol, by the artefacts they made.

Bill took immense delight in the eventful life of his large and energetic family. The suddenness of his death (on 24 March 1984) can only have added to the shock of their grief. But may his much-loved Dinny and his seven children find solace in the many achievements of the happy and fulfilled life that Bill enjoyed with such evident zest and high spirits. *Lux perpetua luceat ei.*

*G. W. Clarke*