

# JOHN BASIL HENNESSY AO

1925–2013

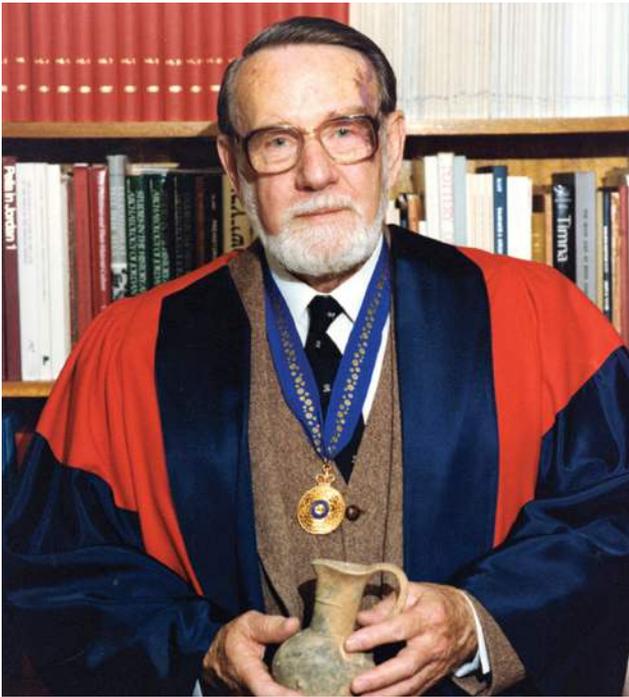


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The death of Emeritus Professor John Basil Hennessy on 27 October 2013 in Goulburn, New South Wales, at the age of 88, robbed Australia of the last of its post-war pioneers in the study of Old World prehistory. Though burdened by physical disabilities in his later years, not the least of which was becoming progressively and officially blind, he remained lucid and buoyant right till the end. By the same token the period after his retirement from the University of Sydney was not as active as he and his associates might have wished, and he left behind a substantial body of archaeological work, especially from the southern Levant, for future generations to inherit and finish. Despite this, he managed to dictate his own memoirs which the family has been steadily editing. Though limited in number, his publications retain a permanent reference value as they comprise reports on the excavations in Cyprus and Jordan for which he was responsible or nobly took on the responsibility, and syntheses embodying old and new data that had not previously been made accessible or meaningful in this way.

Basil's contributions to the archaeology of the ancient Near East were fittingly recognised in a Festschrift edited by Stephen Bourke and Jean-Paul Descoedres, *Trade, Contact, and the Movement of Peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement 3, Sydney, 1995). The papers bore witness to the range and depth of his archaeological interests and professional relationships, and to the respect and affection in which he was held by his peers and pupils. National tributes to his stature came with his appointment as Officer in the Order of Australia in 1990 for service to archaeology and to international relations and the award of a Centenary Medal in 2001. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1982 and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London but resigned from the latter on ANZAC Day, 2002. The University of Sydney conferred on him the title of Emeritus Professor upon his retirement in 1990 and the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) in 1993.

Basil was born on 10 February 1925 in Horsham, north-western Victoria. When he was only ten years old, his father, Thomas Basil Hennessy, who ended his teaching career as headmaster of Natimuk State School in Victoria, died from the after-effects of the mustard-gas poisoning and war wounds he sustained with the Australian Imperial Force on the Western Front. The elder of the two sons of Thomas and his wife, Nell, née Poultney, who was also a teacher, Basil attended a number of schools in Victoria before ending his secondary education at St Patrick's College in Ballarat. Though brought up a Roman Catholic, religion did not play a big part in his life. Sport, however, did, and he excelled at athletics and Australian Rules football. He came to the archaeology of the Near East as did other Australians of his generation and mine, through his reading and collecting activities as a boy.

Before the Second World War there were no university courses in Old World prehistory in Australia and almost no resident scholars specialising in this field. Few museums had antiquities from the ancient Levant, apart from Egypt, and little was on permanent show. The imagination, and ambition, of someone like Basil, who was brought up in rural Victoria, was fired by the books, magazines and other items containing pictures and information about the remains of the past

in the eastern Mediterranean. In his particular case, the introduction came through Arthur Mee's *Book of Everlasting Things*, the monthly serial, *Home University Library*, which he was given to read while staying on his grandfather's property in South Australia, and the cards he gathered from chocolate bars and other food items. While holidaying in South Australia he also started a collection of fossils. These influences predisposed him to the antiquity of the Old World but not yet to any particular region or period.

Before, however, he could take this interest any further, the Second World War intervened. He had to wait until he was 17 in 1942 to enlist in the Royal Australian Navy, where he served from February 1943 to April 1946. His choice of this branch of the armed services, for which no reason has been given, may have been due to his reaction against the army because of his father's wartime injuries. It was not to prove the best of decisions as he found himself prone to seasickness, and having trained in naval communications, was transferred on duty successively to Melbourne, Canberra, Port Moresby, Sydney and Darwin. After being discharged, he was granted War Matriculation Status at the University of Sydney in 1946 and embarked on the study of history and psychology, to which he added ancient Greek the following year.

By happenstance a course on Ancient Art and Archaeology came into existence in 1947 under the direction of Professor A. D. Trendall, subsequently a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Trendall was later joined by James R. Stewart, subsequently Edwin Cuthbert Hall Professor of Middle Eastern Archaeology at the university. Basil was one of their earliest students. In 1948 he took up anthropology, at the suggestion of V. G. Childe, fellow Australian and renowned European prehistorian, and the following year gained a credit in anthropology and high distinction in prehistoric archaeology. He graduated in 1950 with second class honours in anthropology and was awarded the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1951. His abiding memory of his undergraduate days was the maturity and feistiness of his fellow students who, as ex-servicemen and women, expected to make up for lost time and demanded much of their teachers. This put great pressure on their lecturers, not all of whom lasted the distance.

Basil's academic orientation towards the ancient Levant was by then definitively set, under the influence of Stewart's example and guidance. Despite his exposure to Trendall's brilliance, he was clearly not drawn to a career in Classical art and archaeology, preferring something more muscular and out-of-doors than the study of South Italian Greek pottery. He was, after all, a prize-winning sportsman as well. The period between

December 1950 and mid-1952 was spent overseas. An approach by Stewart to a colleague, Winifred Lamb, a British archaeologist specialising in Anatolia, helped secure Basil the first student scholarship at the newly established British School of Archaeology in Ankara. On his way there Basil spent three months in Cyprus, following in Stewart's footsteps, as Stewart's first archaeological excursion in 1935-36 upon graduation from Cambridge University had been to both countries.

While in Cyprus, where Basil familiarised himself with the archaeological scene, as well as doing some of Stewart's own business, he was joined by Trendall, with whom he went travelling for a month in the Levant. In Turkey, like Stewart, Basil did a combination of recording archaeological material, exploration and excavation, before returning to Cyprus where he took part in fieldwork at various sites, including Myrtou *Stephania* and Sphagion, on the latter of which he published a definitive report. Cyprus was not, however, destined to become the main focus of his academic pursuits. In early 1952 he joined Kathleen Kenyon's historic dig at Jericho in Palestine, where he spent four months, and there developed a life-long commitment to the antiquity of the southern Levant. He also became Kenyon's protégé and owed much to her subsequent sponsorship of his research and activities.

Upon returning to Australia Basil became engaged to Ruth Shannon and they were married in 1954 at 'Mount Pleasant', the Stewart family residence outside Bathurst, New South Wales. The same year he joined the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sydney as a lecturer, where, together with Stewart, he taught me in 1957-58. In 1961 Basil decided to leave the university and Australia and commenced a Doctorate in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University under the supervision of Kathleen Kenyon. His thesis on *The Foreign Relations of Palestine During the Early Bronze Age* was successfully defended in 1964 and published in 1967 by Quaritch in London for the Colt Archaeological Institute. In 1964 he was appointed Assistant Director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, since renamed the Kenyon Institute, and then on 1 April 1966 its Director. Just prior to the outbreak of the Israeli-Arab war in mid-1967 Basil evacuated the British School and took his family to Cyprus. Sir Mortimer Wheeler, then Chairman of the British School's Council, was not amused by Basil's actions, and left him in no doubt that he should have stuck it out in Jerusalem, regardless of the fighting and the reasons for his return to England.

Despite all the tension and disruptions, Basil's period in Jerusalem was archaeologically productive, with digs at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, the Amman airport temple, Teleilat Ghassul and lastly at Samaria-Sebaste in 1968. Material from the excavations is to be found

in the Nicholson Museum at the University of Sydney, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne, the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, and the Australian Institute of Archaeology at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Basil resigned from the British School in 1970 and took up what was then called the Edwin Cuthbert Hall Visiting Professorship of Middle Eastern Archaeology at the University of Sydney. This was in fact the endowed Chair which Stewart had occupied until his premature death in 1962 but which had been inexcusably suspended by the University until 1972 when it was finally advertised once more on a permanent, full-time basis.

Basil was a formal and obvious candidate but faced strong competition from an eminent American archaeologist, Helene Kantor, Edwin Cuthbert Hall Visiting Professor in 1970, a measure of the standing of the position internationally. He was, nevertheless, eventually successful. During the 17 years of his tenure, Basil undertook a full teaching load, organised archaeological expeditions to Jordan, beginning in 1979 the long-term excavation of Pella in the north Jordan Valley with Tony McNicoll, and initiated an outreach programme to the Australian community. Though he no longer specialised in the antiquity of Cyprus, he fully accepted the role this field had played in the formation of the Department of Archaeology in the 1950s and did what he could to maintain the connection. In addition to helping sort out Stewart's legacy, he handled Ethel Hunter's generous gift to the University of Sydney and arranged for the distribution of her archaeological papers. In the accompanying photograph Basil is shown holding a Base-ring I jug of the Late Cypriote Bronze Age.

One of Basil's most enduring institutional achievements was the Near Eastern Archaeology Foundation, of which he was the Director until 1991. Originally set up in 1973 as the Australasian Research Foundation for Cypriot and Near Eastern Archaeology Limited at the University of New England, it was, on Basil's initiative, transferred to the University of Sydney in 1985 and began operations the following year. Intended to help Australian students take part in fieldwork overseas and acquaint the public about Australian archaeological pursuits in the eastern Mediterranean, it served a wider purpose that can only be properly understood in the context of Western perceptions of the ancient Near East. Like it or not, the past in Mesopotamia and the Levant has had less of an impact on Australia's culture than Pharaonic Egypt, a constant reminder of which are its obelisks, pyramids and sphinxes. Despite the potent Biblical connections, including the Tower of Babel, no comparable monuments have come down to us from

the ancient Near East to capture the public imagination. It was to overcoming this indifference that Basil devoted his extramural efforts.

Archaeologists like Basil who had made their careers in this region could build on no traditional constituency for interest and support in Australia and so had to work extra hard to make an impact on the public. The Foundation and its sponsorship programme have made a major contribution not only to producing a cadre of professionals equipped to carry out the objectives of the Near Eastern Archaeology Foundation but to enhancing Australian appreciation of the importance of the ancient Near East, the source of the alphabet, Arabic numerals and the three monotheistic Semitic religions, to the development of Western civilisation. It has also helped bring foreign scholars and students to Australia, and draw attention to antiquities from this part of the world housed but often overlooked in Australia's museums. Basil's name will forever be associated with this facility now happily ensconced at the University of Sydney in the Centre for Classical and Near Eastern Studies of Australia.

If there was one quality for which Basil will always be remembered, at least by me, it was his mastery of the spoken word. As lecturer, conversationalist and raconteur, Basil was a born communicator. When he gave his courses at the university, he needed no notes. He not only had complete command and recall of the subject matter but a fluency of delivery that sounded like neither a written article nor an oral reminiscence. All he needed in those days were the slides. When engaged in conversation, with friend or stranger alike, he instantly put them at their ease as his manner was familiar and unthreatening, and it was hard to avoid the impression that you had known him forever. Basil could also tell a good story at the drop of a hat. His multiple and varied experiences had provided him with a fund of anecdotes, none of them malicious, which, when recounted, merely demonstrated the frailty of human behaviour. I shall always remember his description of a bender he went on with a group of naval ratings while stationed Up North during the Second World War. They consumed an alcoholic brew illicitly distilled out of boot polish, fruit juice and other unlikely ingredients, and the following morning nearly all woke up paralysed, unable to move anything except their eyeballs. They were lucky to have survived. Thankfully for us, Basil did.

Basil was no armchair archaeologist but a down-to-earth practitioner of the art. He much preferred the dig house to the ivory tower and was most in his element on site in the field. For him archaeology was not a solitary pursuit but a permanent joint venture with partners, seen and unseen, of all ages, nationalities and

backgrounds. He saw it as his role to share his activities, plans and enjoyment in things past, on equal terms with anyone similarly inclined, and in this respect drew no distinction between his archaeological colleagues and members of the public. As a result he didn't have to make a special effort at reaching out for support beyond the confines of the university campus. It all came to him quite naturally. Unlike many of his contemporaries in the field, Basil had no outsize ego, ulterior motives or proprietorial feelings, and found it hard to accept that others had hidden agendas or unworthy intentions. His experiences may have disillusioned him but they never embittered him. The greatest professional loss to him and the community of Levantine specialists was the untimely death of Tony McNicoll, on whom many hopes had been pinned.

Above all Basil had an inbuilt sense of comradeship that made him a collegial archaeologist, excellent company and a loyal friend. Of all the personal relationships he had, the most constructive was the one he enjoyed with Kathleen Kenyon and the most complicated, the one he had with Stewart, to whom he owed his archaeological formation. It was a measure of the man that he surmounted all the professional challenges which fate put in his way. To Ruth he owed an immeasurable debt for having supported and stood by him throughout his married life and career. His greatest legacy are his students, generations of whom have gone on to carve out for themselves careers in a variety of professions, not only prehistory, and will forever be grateful for the opportunity to have fallen under the spell of his enthusiasm and charm. I am privileged to have been amongst them.

**ROBERT S. MERRILLEES FAHA CHEVALIER DANS L'ORDRE DES  
PALMES ACADÉMIQUES FSA**