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978-0-521-10622-1 - Pitt Rivers: The Life and Archaeological Work of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, DCL, FRS, FSA

Mark Bowden

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

The name Pitt Rivers is now associated with a magnificently eccentric museum in Oxford and, for many people, with the memory of an equally strange museum in the depths of rural Dorset. This is the story of Augustus Pitt Rivers, the founder of both museums. He was a soldier, landowner, archaeologist, anthropologist and government inspector; a splendid Victorian autocrat who determined to carry out scientific research and to that end caused all kinds of excavations and other activities to be undertaken. His burning desire to educate ‘the masses’ was the driving force behind his endeavour, for Pitt Rivers was a political animal; but it was as an archaeologist that he made his greatest impact.

Lt-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers has been recognised as a central figure in the development of archaeology ever since Sir Mortimer Wheeler declared himself a disciple. Hawkes (Hawkes *et al.* 1947), Crawford (1953, 31, 33) and Wheeler (1954, 13, 25–9) were clear about the General’s role in the growth of the discipline, and they were followed by Piggott (1959, 44–50), Fagan (1972, 141), Daniel (1975, 169–74), and Barker (1977, 13); Thompson (1977) gave the General more extensive treatment and Bradley (1983) argued for a different interpretation of his significance. The General has been called ‘the father of scientific archaeology’ (for example Bowden 1984) and yet some ambivalence exists concerning his treatment by modern authors. Rahtz names the General among the top five archaeologists of all time (1985, 52) while Carver (1989, 669) gives an opposing viewpoint, but neither of these writers document their arguments. Meanwhile others see him as little more than an amusing eccentric with a private band and menagerie of exotic animals. However, if for no other reason, the General has had a significant influence on British archaeology as the excavator of over forty sites including such classics as Wor Barrow, South Lodge Camp and Woodcutts, all of which have been sources of reference and reinterpretation for later researchers. An appreciation of the historical context of the General’s work is fundamental to our understanding of these sites (Barrett 1987).

Pitt Rivers cannot be judged by archaeological criteria alone. He was, like most prehistorians of his day, also an anthropologist and an early follower of Darwin. In Stocking’s words he occupies ‘an important secondary place in the evolutionary pantheon’ (1987, 180).

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The intellectual circles in which Pitt Rivers moved were remarkable. They included Darwin himself and his earliest and ablest champion, Thomas Henry Huxley, as well as Herbert Spencer, who interpreted Darwinism for the humanities and created sociocultural evolutionism, the dominant sociological mode of thought of the later nineteenth century. They also included geologists such as Sir Joseph Prestwich and Professor Boyd Dawkins, the leading anatomist Professor George Rolleston, the philologist Friedrich Max Müller and the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor. Archaeology was central to the concerns of the disciplines represented by these men in the later nineteenth century because it was able to address questions, such as the antiquity of the human race, which were seen as fundamental to science. Pitt Rivers worked alongside some of the greatest British archaeologists of his generation: Sir John Evans, Sir John Lubbock, Augustus Franks and Canon William Greenwell.

The outstanding qualities of this group were the intense intellectual excitement generated at the meetings of learned societies which they all attended, not surprising in view of the momentous discoveries so frequently communicated throughout this period, and the wry humour which is apparent in much of the personal correspondence between them. Enthusiasm was strong. The archaeologists, all of whom with the exception of Augustus Franks must be considered amateurs, thought little of dropping their everyday business to visit gravel pits in the Somme valley with Boucher de Perthes, or to travel to the Swiss lake villages, or to Hallstatt, or to Neanderthal, or to any of the major continental museums.

General Pitt Rivers was to take a leading role within this group from the late 1860s until the end of the century. In the first place his organisational skills were much in demand and he served as an officer on the councils and committees of several learned societies. His colleagues' perceptions of his success in this field are surely reflected in his appointment as the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments in 1882. The General's success as a fieldworker and theorist was of much greater significance but was, ironically, less appreciated by his contemporaries.

This lack of appreciation may in part be due to the novel aspects of much of his work. The General's greatest innovations in archaeological technique fall under three heads. Firstly, he excavated a wider range of sites than did his predecessors and contemporaries. He escaped from the prevailing obsession with burial mounds and studied hillforts and settlement sites: 'From the tumuli we derive evidence of things deposited with the dead . . . but the relics found in camps and dwellings are the things that were in everyday use, and, therefore, give us better insight into the social conditions of the people' (Pitt Rivers 1884a, 65). Like the great Worsaae (Daniel 1975, 48) he recognised the potential for retrieving information from the sherds of pottery and fragments of bone which most contemporary antiquaries would have discarded without a second glance: 'The value of relics, viewed as evidence, may . . . be said to be in an inverse ratio to their intrinsic value' (Pitt Rivers 1892, ix). Secondly the General recognised the importance of context. Whereas for most antiquarians it was

enough to know which site an artefact came from, Pitt Rivers insisted that only by making an accurate record of the exact findspot and its relationship to structural features could the history of the site be reconstructed. Thirdly, though the analysis of archaeological finds had a respectable history, Pitt Rivers brought a degree of consistency and completeness to this aspect of archaeology. The best example of this is the measurement of modern animals and their bones for comparison with the animal bones found on excavations that he undertook for much of his Cranborne Chase work. He also undertook experiments, such as knapping flints and digging with bone and antler tools.

For Pitt Rivers all this scientific endeavour had one end. He was a fervent advocate of a gradualist Darwinian doctrine, of the law that nature makes no jumps, and he sought to apply this to human society. Evolution, not revolution, was the way forward. Through his publications and, more especially, through his museums Pitt Rivers sought to indoctrinate the people with this idea.

Before going on to discuss the character of this extraordinary man in detail it is necessary, however briefly, to sketch his family background.

PITTS AND LANE FOXES

In 1789 Marcia Lucy, youngest daughter of George Pitt, first Baron Rivers, married James Lane Fox of Bramham Hall, West Riding. While James Lane Fox came of stolid and traditional Yorkshire stock his bride was a member of a rather more volatile family. The lives of her elder sisters, Penelope and Louisa, are indicative both of the spirit and the tragic ill health of the Pitts.

Penelope had married in 1766 Edward, Viscount Ligonier of Clonmell, but they were divorced by Act of Parliament only five years later, the cause being her adultery with Vittorio Amadeo, Count Alfieri. Lord Ligonier accordingly fought a duel with the Count in Green Park, using a sword borrowed from a cutler in Bond Street. Lady Ligonier subsequently had an affair with a postillion, giving rise to the immortal couplet:

But see the luscious Ligonier
Prefers her post boy to her Peer.

In 1784 she married a man calling himself Captain Smith who, according to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, was a trooper in the Horse Guards (Cokayne 1929, 656–7). A very fine portrait of Lady Ligonier by Gainsborough used to hang in the dining room at Rushmore. Gray recorded that ‘more than one West End dealer has offered the General several thousands for this notable work of art, but all to no purpose’ (Gray Papers). Sadly some of the General’s successors have been less scrupulous and the picture is now in the collection of the Huntington Library and Art Gallery, California.

Louisa was married in 1773 to Peter Beckford, a cynical fox-hunting squire with whom she had nothing in common. She fell in love with his selfish and eccentric cousin William Beckford of Fonthill and died in 1791 of tuberculosis

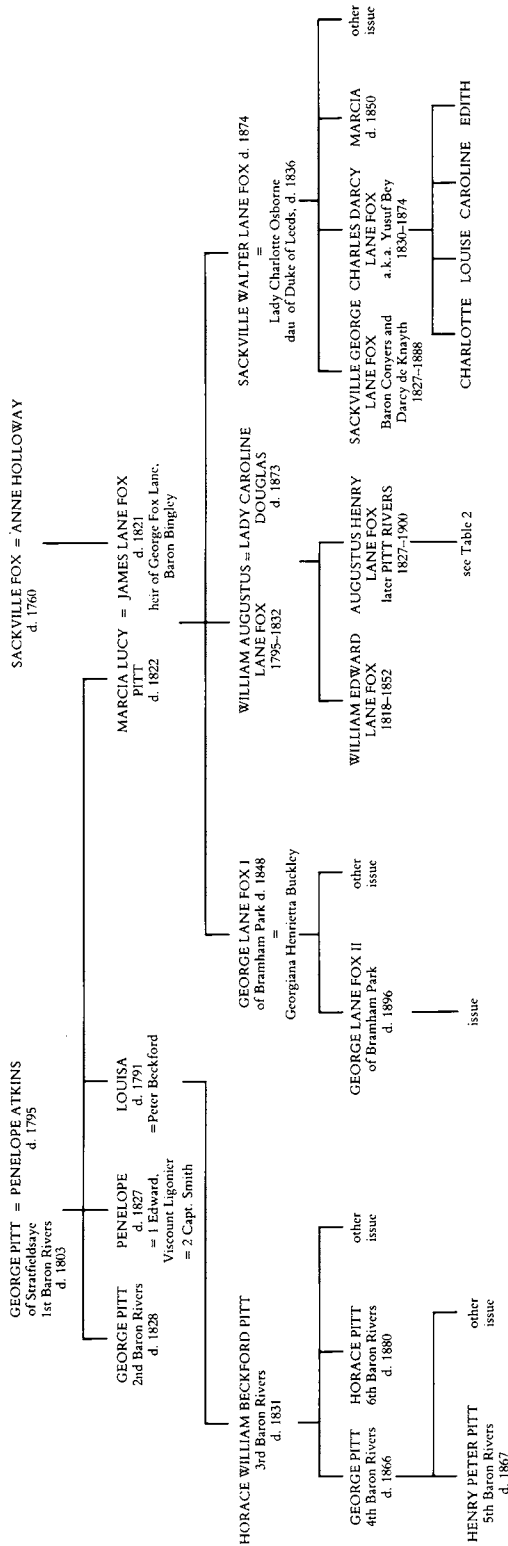


Table 1 The Pitt and Lane Fox families, c. 1750–1870: simplified genealogical table

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and a broken heart (Mannings 1986, 303). Louisa Beckford bequeathed her poor health to her descendants who became the heirs of the first Baron Rivers and took his name. They were an ill-fated family. The three eldest sons of George, fourth Baron Rivers died at the ages of sixteen, seventeen and fourteen respectively. Only the fourth son, Henry Peter, survived his father but died unmarried at the age of eighteen. Lord Stanley saw the Hon. William Pitt and Henry Peter Pitt on his visit to Rushmore in 1858 and he described them as follows: 'I saw the eldest son carried out by a servant & put into a little carriage – he cannot walk at all & is not likely to live; they say the younger one is better than his brother, but I suspect not much' (Mitford 1939, 191). As if the early fatalities of the brothers was not enough their sister Alice was struck by lightning and killed on her honeymoon in 1865 (Hawkins 1982, 10).

The Lane Foxes were, on the whole, healthier and less imaginative than the Pitts. Their lives were dedicated to the traditional country pursuits of the squirearchy and to a reactionary political outlook. James and Marcia had four sons and a daughter. The eldest, George, inherited the Bramham estate, following the family tradition as the sporting squire and taking a great interest in agricultural improvement (Ward 1967, 64–5). However, for all their solid respectability the Lane Foxes were not immune from scandal. George's marriage failed and his wife went to live with Lord Chesterfield. When, in 1830, Lord Chesterfield suddenly married another lady, Mrs Lane Fox became the mistress of the Prince of Orange (*ibid.*, 65).

George Lane Fox's heir, George Lane Fox II of Bramham Park, was cast in the family mould. He was the perfect Regency Buck, being rusticated from Oxford because of his excessive devotion to sport. He was an inveterate race-goer and a member of the Four-in-Hand Club, he frequently drove the Tadcaster stagecoach and Glasgow mail and hunted four or five days a week. After his father's death in 1848, however, he calmed down and devoted the rest of his life to the careful management of the Bramham estate (*ibid.*, 66–71) though he remained an habitual pursuer of the fox. In later life he was regarded as the embodiment of the manly virtues of the country gentleman and sportsman by all levels of society, from the Prince of Wales down to his own tenants. Indeed so popular was George Lane Fox II with his tenantry that 'about the year 1856 the whole body came forward and offered to raise their rents for him' (Speight 1902, 407–8).

George Lane Fox I's second son, William Augustus, was born in 1795. In 1817 he married Lady Caroline Douglas, a sister of George Sholto Douglas, eighteenth Earl of Morton. They had two sons, William Edward, born in 1818 and Augustus Henry.

THE GENERAL

Augustus Henry Lane Fox was born on 14 April 1827 at Hope Hall near Bramham Park. When he was five years old his father, who had been an officer in the Grenadier Guards and subsequently in the 98th Regiment of Foot, died

and his mother took him to live in London. Nothing is known of Augustus Henry's childhood until he entered the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in 1841 except that he read his father's letters from the Peninsula with interest (Constanduros 1953 unpublished) and that he had a toy boomerang. As he later recorded with some pride, 'I . . . acquired some skill in throwing it so as to return to me repeatedly, and also to pass behind me in its return flight' (Pitt Rivers 1883a, 457).

In adult life he was a large man and an imposing figure. His health was always weak however. He suffered from a bronchial condition and diabetes (Pitt Rivers Papers M1-10) which necessitated several visits to Carlsbad and other spas. He also suffered some affliction of his feet (*ibid.* App. 2, 24) though his grandson, Captain George Pitt Rivers, was later at pains to deny a local rumour that the General's feet had been frost-bitten in the Crimea (Constanduros 1953 unpublished). On occasions his physical weakness led to difficult and potentially dangerous situations. While lecturing at Salisbury Museum one evening he slipped on the platform and injured his leg and his hand, which smashed through a glass case. He insisted on continuing with the lecture but fainted and fell again. Having been revived by the Bishop of Salisbury and others he completed the lecture 'being seated whilst doing so' (Pitt Rivers Papers App. 2, 104).

The General was a man of fierce temper, not untinged with violence, of considerable energy and enthusiasm, unsociable with his peers, a domestic tyrant and yet approachable to his labourers; a dominant and aloof father figure in the grand Victorian manner, though possessing a dry sense of humour.

His temper was most evident in his relations with the members of his immediate family. His daughter Agnes recalled many unhappy incidents in her diary, most of them involving her elder sister Alice and herself. On 1 March 1882 the General 'swore like anything at Alice' (Hawkins 1982, 29). These incidents could turn to physical violence. At one time the General had forbidden his second son, St George, to enter the house or estate at Rushmore, but Alice arranged to meet him in the park. Mrs Pitt Rivers, who seems to have arranged a system of domestic espionage, employing servants to report her daughters' movements (*ibid.*, 32), told the General of this rendezvous. The General intercepted Alice crossing the hall on her return. He snatched her riding crop and slashed her across the face with it (Tomkin Papers).

Michael Pitt-Rivers has described his great-grandfather as having a 'powerful personality; cold, impersonal and serious, but never very human. He evidently inspired respect rather than affection; loyalty but not love' (1977, 23). The General dominated the lives of his children and of his archaeological assistants. Alice was driven into an unsuitable marriage with Sir John Lubbock because life under her father's roof was unbearable. The eldest son, Alexander, who never moved far from home, seems to have been totally overawed by his father. St George left home to pursue his own bizarre life in London while William escaped by joining the army.

The General seems to have had only three close friends. In the army there

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2 Statue of Caesar Augustus, copied from an original in the Vatican. Caesar Augustus could have no direct historical connection with the Roman remains in Cranborne Chase, so the General's choice of this statue as a memorial is entirely due to the fact that he was the Emperor's namesake

was Colonel the Hon. Alexander Gordon, a fellow staff officer in the Crimea and godfather to the General's eldest son. Subsequently Professor George Rolleston, the Oxford anatomist, was the General's close companion; and after Rolleston's untimely death in 1881 Pitt Rivers found a kindred spirit in his fellow antiquary and Dorset landowner John Mansell-Pleydell. They regularly visited each other at home and Mansell-Pleydell was the General's most frequent correspondent. They shared a fear of the growing power of the radicals in the Liberal party. In October 1885 Pitt Rivers wrote to Mansell-Pleydell, 'If you go to Scotland on a Geological trip you will come back to find your park cut up into plots of 3 acres with a cow & a pigsty in each' (Pitt Rivers Papers M37b). Except for his relationship with these three men and his early attachment to his wife the General seems to have avoided emotional contacts. Feelings such as 'surprise,' 'delight' and 'satisfaction' were reserved for inanimate objects such as Egyptian boomerangs and medieval windows (Pitt Rivers 1883a, 454–5; 1890, 12). Although the General also maintained a regular correspondence with his old mentor Canon William Greenwell their letters are

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respectful rather than friendly in tone. The same may be said for letters from the General's other professional colleagues such as Sir John Evans and the man who was to become his son-in-law, Sir John Lubbock, later Lord Avebury. The General was a poor correspondent in any case, in the sense that he did not read the letters he received very carefully and often replied tangentially. His most persistent professional correspondent was J. H. Moule, curator of the Dorset County Museum at Dorchester. Amongst other subjects they discussed decorated pottery at length but on several occasions Pitt Rivers failed to answer Moule's remarks and questions (Pitt Rivers Papers L975, 977, 2184, 2186). Similarly Frederick James, who sent a skull to Pitt Rivers in 1898 to be measured in the craniometer, failed to obtain a reply despite making three subsequent applications for the information (*ibid.*, L2218).

One of the most striking characteristics of the General was his compulsion to collect and to order everything he collected, studying the objects in meticulous detail. By the late 1860s he had filled his house with ethnographic objects (Chapman 1985, 29) and thirty years later, though increasingly ill and close to death, he amassed the finest collection of Benin Bronzes in the world. Harold St George Gray, his secretary in the 1890s, described him as 'a voracious and omnivorous collector' (1905, xxxi). Not many people can claim to have created two major museums. The General's ethnographic collections were world-wide in origin but he had an extensive catchment area for objects of antiquarian interest as well. He was well known to dealers as far afield as Vienna, such as S. Egger and Co., who sent him the following charming letter in December 1882:

Dear Sir, After much troubles it succeeded us to acquire a very nice Celtic sword, which we allow us to offer you. The last price of it is £20 and it is of an especially form and size. We request for a very soon answer, as we cannot reserve a price like that for a long time. (Pitt Rivers Papers B412)

The collections were put to use as tools for public education, Pitt Rivers' most cherished goal, but clearly not all the objects he obtained were meant for public display. In November 1888 Mr R. Alexander of the Indian Art Gallery, a firm with which the General had many dealings, wrote to him about objects that can only have been pieces of erotica:

Sir, I beg to take the liberty of writing to ask if you would care to see two very exquisitely carved pieces of ivory of a certain character. I should not thus presume only that I had the pleasure of selling you two stone models which you may recollect. If you care to see them I should be glad of an appointment to show them as, should you call here I might not be able to produce them, as they are quite private, though at times I could, (*ibid.*, B423)

The General took great care to verify information connected with objects in his collections and was very proud of his ability to detect fakes (for example, Fox 1872a, 458), but he was not altogether proof against clever forgeries. Two objects from Farnham now in Salisbury Museum, a samian dish and mould (Acc. Nos. 3M 6B 8 and 3M 7B 3) are certainly not genuine pieces (Mark

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Corney personal communication). The authenticity of the 'Pitt Rivers knife', an Egyptian antiquity, is also in question (James 1988, 86).

Although many of Pitt Rivers' interests and attitudes seem eccentric in the late twentieth century, he was a man of his time. One of the most positive aspects of his character was the incredible energy which allowed him to achieve so much despite almost constant ill health. This can be seen as an example of what Seaman has described as 'typically Victorian tirelessness' (1973, 50). His sense of personal moral responsibility, of duty and of respectability are all characteristic of the age in which he lived. He was extremely receptive to the new ideas of his age, to Samuel Smiles' doctrine of 'self-help' and to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and he combined these ideas in his scheme of public education to support the ideology of the Victorian ruling class, 'designed to induce in the masses a docile acceptance of the tyranny of the capitalist entrepreneur' (*ibid.*, 6).

His racial views too are conventional in the light of Victorian modes of thought. Although they appear wildly extreme to a late-twentieth-century observer they were moderate in comparison with the established views of many of his contemporaries such as Sir Richard Burton, James Hunt and the continental craniometrists. Only in relation to the Irish did Pitt Rivers show a personal bitterness derived from his experiences in the 1860s. The attitude of the English ruling class to the Irish people was vindictive (Woodham-Smith 1953, 108–9) and this was reflected in the writings of many anthropologists (Stocking 1987, 63, 225) but the General abused the Irish not only in his overtly political speeches, accusing them of vicious crimes such as cattle maiming, which was certainly not confined to Ireland in the nineteenth century (see for instance Archer 1985), but also in his archaeological writings. His explanation for the existence of disc barrows is a case in point. He thought that they were unfinished monuments:

The first idea of the mourners, when grief was poignant, may probably have been to erect a large monument to the deceased, and the ditch in such a case would contain a large area. In the course of a few days, however, the grief may have abated, and laziness supervened, in which case the arrested tumulus would assume the form described. The habit of all primitive people, including the modern Irish as a familiar instance, of lashing themselves up into a frenzy on the occasion of a death, and general excitability upon any common occurrence, followed by a speedy relapse, favours this hypothesis. (1898, 145)

The General's religious beliefs have been the subject of much controversy. He was accused of atheism in his lifetime and many people still believe this to have been true (for example, M. Pitt-Rivers 1977, 23). Certainly he was not a regular churchgoer, attending only at major religious festivals or at weddings and funerals, but he was scrupulous in allowing his dependants to worship as they pleased, and family prayers were held every day at Rushmore (Hawkins 1982, 17) at a time when the institution of family prayers was already in decline generally (Seaman 1973, 419–20). Furthermore the Larmer Grounds Sunday opening was certainly not an attack on the church as has sometimes been stated