

NICOLAS COLDSTREAM (1927–2008)¹

NICOLAS Coldstream was one of that small and distinguished group of archaeologists whose years as students at the British School at Athens led to their writing masterpieces that were immediately acclaimed as standard works. Nicolas's first masterpiece was *Greek Geometric Pottery* (or *GGP* as he, and many others, called it), which came out in 1968, eight years after he had finished a three sessions' stint (1957–60) as Macmillan Student. Others in this select group would include Humfry Payne, the first person to have a Macmillan award (1929) for *Necrocorinthia* (1931), and Vincent Desborough (Macmillan Student 1937–9) for *Protogeometric Pottery* (1952).

Nicolas had a circuitous path to archaeology. Throughout his life he had a deep love for, and knowledge of, classical music, and he was an excellent pianist—indeed, so determined to improve his playing that at the age of 57 he started lessons again, with Ruth Nye of the Yehudi Menuhin School and the Royal College of Music, and for over twenty years had a lesson with her every six to eight weeks. It is hard to say whether he could have been a professional musician rather than a top-notch amateur, both sensitive and precise; but he certainly could have been a brilliant mathematician, doubtless as a professor: many mathematicians, of course, and scientists have also been excellent musicians. In Nicolas's case, the congruence of the inherent formality of music, mathematics, and the Geometric style of table and funerary wares, makes satisfying and comprehensive intellectual and artistic sense of his approaches to life, art, and scholarship and his achievements. How then did Nicolas come to attack the problems, discern the harmonies, explicate the syllogisms, and resolve the discords of Geometric pottery and history in the ninth and eighth centuries BC, that exciting period of Homer, the arrival of a new way of writing an old language, and wide horizons throughout the Mediterranean—especially if you were a Greek, and from Euboea—that all helped to shape what we call classical Greece? For the four decades since *GGP* came out, Nicolas was the doyen of research into those dynamic early times.

John Nicolas Coldstream was born on 30 March 1927 in Lahore, then part of (British) India and now in Pakistan, where his father John Coldstream was a High Court judge. Knighted on retirement in 1938, he then spent a year as Chief Minister to the Maharajah of Kapurthala, a Sikh state near Amritsar. Nicolas's mother, Phyllis Hambly, had worked when young in a fashion house in London: the family's oral tradition has it that John Coldstream spotted her in Piccadilly in 1916, when home on leave from France, followed her, and asked her out; marriage ensued.

After, doubtless, the care of a nanny (and whether she was an ayah, or English or Scottish, is unknown), Nicolas was sent off in 1934 on the long voyage 'home' to England to start his formal education at a preparatory school in Eastbourne. The regime of being sent back to

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Obituaries of Nicolas Coldstream appeared in the London press as follows: *Daily Telegraph*, 4 April 2008 (anon.); *The Guardian*, 4 July 2008 (A. W. Johnston); *The Independent*, 15 April 2008 (G. Cadogan); *The Times*, 9 April 2008 (P. M. Warren).



a)



b)



c)



d)

FIG. 1 a) Nicolas Coldstream lecturing at University College London; b) with his wife, Nicky, in the Eretria apotheke; c) working in the Stratigraphical Museum, Knossos; d) with Hugh Sackett at a party at the Taverna, Knossos.

England, without usually the convenience of aeroplanes, was totally familiar at the time (and indeed continued into the 1950s, if not later). But it was not quite so bleak for him as for some sons of the Empire, since his mother returned every year for summer holidays with him and his two sisters, Anne and Cynthia. At Christmas and Easter, however, they went to cousins and family friends. It is hard to tell what effect such an upbringing had on Nicolas, beyond its clearly making him hardy and self-reliant, and increasing his deep-seated grit, sense of duty, and willingness to take on chores and responsibilities, notably for the British School at Athens, which was such a feature of his later life.

In 1938 Nicolas had his only trip back to India, being let out of school early for a blessed six months to go to Anne's wedding. He flew unaccompanied with KLM, one of the first Raj children to do so, landing after many stops at Karachi, and then had a 36 hours' train journey to Lahore. The governess who had been hired to keep up his lessons during the long break asked him to write the story of the trip, which the Maharajah of Kapurthala thought was so good that he published it at his own private press. Nicolas's first publication is then *My First Flight* (Jagajit Press, Kapurthala, 1938). Sir John died in 1954, and the following year his mother married an old family friend, Colonel George Osborne: they lived principally at Seend in Wiltshire, where he would produce 72 cases of estimable wine from half an acre of vines on a south-facing slope.

St Cyprian's, Eastbourne was not a happy place for Nicolas or for Eric Blair (George Orwell), although Cyril Connolly quite enjoyed it, as he writes (calling it St Wulfric's) in *Enemies of Promise* (1938). But boys were well drilled there: all three won King's Scholarships to Eton, and so were in College. Among other high-flyers in Nicolas's election (he was seventh in the order), who went up the school with him in an education of the Great and the Good that Plato would have relished, were the future Lords Armstrong of Ilminster (later Secretary to the Cabinet, but alas better known for his, but originally Edmund Burke's, axiom on 'being economical with the truth') and Kingsdown (later Governor of the Bank of England), as well as a 16th baronet, Sir Peter Swinnerton Dyer, the mathematician. For Nicolas, Eton was not an especially happy time either, except that his tutor, Francis Cruso, introduced him into the delights of listening to music on records. He also benefited from being in College, where the dame (matron) was the fearsome Miss Iredale-Smith, who took care that her boys were still fed reasonably well during the war: Nicolas saved the orange peel from school for his mother to make marmalade. At the end he duly won a Scholarship to Eton's sister establishment, King's College, Cambridge.

But first there was National Service, as a subaltern in the Buffs and Highland Light Infantry, which took him to Egypt and Palestine in the last days of the British Mandate, a hairy time, if alleviated by the chance to visit sites and museums and learn the geography at first hand, which would help eventually in understanding Greek interactions in the Iron Age East Mediterranean. He had in fact hoped for Greece—which would have been equally hairy.

About to go up to Cambridge and fearful that he had forgotten his Greek and Latin (by now he had forgone mathematics), he was advised by Patrick Wilkinson at King's to take a vacation term the summer before and read himself back into the subject. Cambridge then went swimmingly. He took a double First, had a part in the triennial Greek play, and made, and heard, plenty of music, singing in choirs and learning the organ (which he later played for services in St Paul's Anglican church in Athens) as well as playing the piano.

From Cambridge Nicolas was recruited to teach classics at Shrewsbury (1952–6), apparently satisfying work with willing and bright boys such as Richard Ingrams and Willie Rushton, two of the founding fathers of *Private Eye*, but it was not totally his *métier*, as became clear when he left for a one-year Temporary Assistant Keepership in the Greek and Roman Department of the British Museum in 1956–7, when Denys Haynes succeeded Bernard Ashmole as Keeper; but his great mentor in the department was Reynold Higgins, who became a close friend. He now encountered Geometric pottery and soon knew that what he wanted to do was to study it and make artistic, cultural, and historical sense of it in its various regional styles and combinations of styles. That the work would entail thorough re-ordering of our understanding of the ninth, eighth, and early seventh centuries BC of Greece was a

development arising from the research on the pottery and not the original main aim. Later, Nicolas put his thoughts together on these issues in another *magnum opus*, *Geometric Greece* (1977), or *GG*. Its second edition (*GG2*), published in 2003, reflects how very much more has been learnt in the quarter-century between, thanks to what he and others had been able to build on the foundations of those twin temples of scholarship, the pioneering *GCP* that set the framework of study of the period and *GG* that put it all in context.

In May 1957 Nicolas arrived at the British School at Athens. He had already been admitted in 1950 and 1954 with Student Privileges, as they were then called; now he spent three years collecting the material for what would become *GCP*. In the late 1950s the School was still a small, collegiate group of usually long-term residents, who included John Graham, Richard Hope Simpson, John Ellis Jones, John Lazenby, and Hugh Sackett; George Huxley, the Assistant Director (until 1958, when Philip Sherrard succeeded him) soon became a close friend; and Jane Rabnett was Secretary. Nicolas travelled widely in Greece collecting material, which was not always easy: he arrived at one museum to be told that the Ephor had left that morning for two years in Germany; and I recall a visit that Richard Barnett, he and I made to Thebes in the mid-1960s. Richard Barnett, then the Western Asiatic Keeper at the British Museum, but also once London Secretary of the School, wanted to look at the Mycenaean ivories from the so-called Kadmeion, but also translated for us the Hebrew epitaphs in the Museum yard; I went for the Mycenaean pottery; and Nicolas wanted the Geometric pottery which, the guards said, was unpublished. We looked hard, and two of us made notes. Then we went out to a *kafeneio*. At once Nicolas said, 'Don't speak', as he wrote out his notes and drew the pots from memory. He also went to Turkey, partly in the Geometric cause, with John Ellis Jones and Hugh Sackett, who recalls how much the Turks liked his old-fashioned good manners; and in 1972 he helped publish pottery from Xanthos in *Fouilles de Xanthos*. Later, he made many Geometric trips to Cyprus and Italy, and especially to Ischia to work with Giorgio Buchner and David and Francesca Ridgway.

The Director of the School during Nicolas's time was Sinclair Hood, who was starting his multi-period programme of stratigraphical excavations at Knossos with the aim of (re-) assessing the validity of Arthur Evans's chronological and ceramic systems. Each year from 1957 to 1961 he took a good number of the students to help, maintaining the tradition of 'School excavations', as had happened at Old Smyrna and in Chios. If the work at Knossos may appear to have concentrated on the Minoan levels beside the Royal Road (although Sinclair Hood was equally diligent in recording what the post-Bronze Age strata could tell about Knossos, much of which Nicolas published in a series of articles in the *Annual*), the project always had a diachronic approach, from Neolithic (where Peter Fraser began the excavation, and John Evans took it over) to post-Bronze Age. The chief later site, midway up Gypsades hill, was known at the time as 'The Terracottas' (hence its Knossos code of TC) or 'Τα αγγειοτάκια' (as the foreman Manolis Markoyiannakis would say), where Nicolas directed the excavation for Sinclair Hood, taking over from—yet again—Peter Fraser, who briefly started the work in 1957. In four seasons, Nicolas's assistants included John Hayes and, in 1960, John Ellis Jones and Anthony Snodgrass.

It was a stirring excavation, literally so when the workforce on the other sites (such as Royal Road: North, the Road Trials, and Early Houses) was sent over for a day to help move the dump. From far away you saw swirling clouds of dust. Nicolas's publication of *The Sanctuary of Demeter* came out in 1973. It is still an object lesson in how to identify a cult, for which there

was only one small piece of epigraphic evidence, and its history and possible continuity from, or resurrection of, nearby Minoan cult, by persistent interrogation of the generally scrappy data. Nicolas's persistence, helped by a generous serving of pork bones—a pioneering use of biodata in classical archaeology—and Reynold Higgins's scrupulous study of the figurines, led to a sanctuary of Demeter with cult from the late eighth century BC to the mid-second century AD on the hill immediately south of the Palace of Minos.

After the last season at The Terracottas, Nicolas started his long stint of teaching at the University of London, as a Lecturer at Bedford College for Women. In 1966 he became Reader and nine years later Professor of Aegean Archaeology, until 1983 when he was translated to University College London to hold the Yates Chair of Classical Archaeology, in succession to Peter Corbett, who had said that he would take early retirement if Nicolas took his place. Sir James Lighthill, the Provost, offered him the post over lunch. But those years were not always so easy: there had been the sad and unpleasant closing of Bedford as a place of its own so as to amalgamate it with Royal Holloway College (when Nicolas strongly declined to go there); and he had hoped he might get the Laurence Chair at Cambridge when a successor to Robert Cook was needed in 1976. John Barron, however, who died a few months after Nicolas, was very supportive of his going to UCL, having tried earlier to obtain a personal chair for him at King's College London.

In retrospect, Nicolas did very well by being in London for all his academic career. It brought him a remarkable parade of graduate students, especially from Greece and Cyprus, who were glad to be in the capital as well as to have Nicolas as supervisor. Many colleagues and visitors from abroad came to dine or stay, often as speakers at London's distinguished Mycenaean Seminar—which Nicolas chaired for some twenty years, encouraging his students to attend so as to be completely up to date in Aegean archaeology and philology—or in the case of one *cher collègue*, partly so as to buy his Bordeaux, finding the prices better than in Paris. And not least, London is the heart of British music-making: it meant public concerts galore, and chamber music at home and with the UCL Chamber Music Club.

Nicolas lived at an unusual house: 180 Ebury Street, SW1, where Mozart had stayed as an eight-year-old (as a plaque commemorates) and later Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson lived (for which there is another plaque). In 1970 he married Nicola (Nicky) Carr, a leading scholar of mediaeval architecture and art. It was a blessed union of hearts, minds and warm welcomes: there were many exuberant evenings of trenchant talk, good food and wine, sometimes Nicolas on the piano, robust laughter, *kefi*, and ever bountiful hospitality. Nicolas was rarely without a twinkle in the eye at these happenings, or a deep chuckle at someone's egregious and revealing behaviour. For decades first he, and then he and Nicky, had a famous and lively party after the Annual Meeting of Subscribers of the School in cold February: School hands and their spouses were very welcome.

Life with Nicky led also to many trips abroad, to France and Italy for cathedrals, colleagues, museums, and *dégustation*, and Cyprus, which had as much for mediaevalist Nicky as for archaeologist Nicolas, and the United States, where their first trip began in Cincinnati, and they were soon much in demand. And there was always Greece. He loved the people and the resilient spirit of place of both Greece and Cyprus, but perhaps dearest of all were Crete and Knossos. Decades after studying and publishing the sanctuary of Demeter, and the Iron Age upper deposits in Sinclair Hood's excavations, he was doing the same for Hugh Sackett's excavations above the Minoan Unexplored Mansion, Colin Macdonald's outside the

southwest corner of the Palace, and Eleni Hatzaki's under the Villa Dionysos. In the meantime there had been a far greater undertaking. The massive rescue excavation led by Hector Catling, as Director of the School, in 1978 on the ridge just north of the Venizeleio Hospital of a large and important Iron Age cemetery led to an equally large and important publication: J. N. Coldstream and H. W. Catling (eds), *Knossos North Cemetery: Early Greek Tombs* (1996). For Nicolas and Nicky it had meant years of long visits to Knossos, where Nicolas marshalled the pots and Nicky drew many of them.

If the main task was to co-ordinate, and prod, the contributors—Nicolas himself, a workaholic with a tidy mind that naturally made order, never needed prodding or co-ordination—and produce what is a remarkable work of editing, there was a bonus in it to add to his work on, say, the ramifications of being a Geometric Euboean or the cultural fertilization between Athens and Cyprus, and many other such topics. Nicolas enjoyed this dividend to the full. Since the North Cemetery, and nearby graves excavated since the 1930s by the British School, are so packed with evidence of the life and culture of Iron Age Knossos, and the city's rich foreign contacts, he now found that he had boundless exciting new material to discuss in a magnificent parade of interpretative articles as rich and varied as a Cypriot *meze*. Indeed, several of them are on the relations of Crete and Cyprus and the stylistic impact of each island on the other, as well as on the hints of a Phoenician or Levantine presence at Knossos, and the important connections with Athenian potting and painting. Others review the slow development of Knossos as a polis (with particular reference to Aristotle), others the reuse of broken bits of Minoan larnakes probably for child burials centuries later, and others the Knossian artists' quirky iconography, best seen in the 'hippalektryon' vessel, found in a tomb with larnax fragments and thirty miniature pots, and surely a toy for the child buried there. In his address on being made a Corresponding Member of the Athens Academy in 1996, Nicolas described this weird animal as

a combination of horse and bird, covered with every kind of ornament including fish, snakes, and even a Tree of Life down the front of the creature's neck; there is even a diminutive rider, perched precariously in front of the handle. Although less than two centimetres high, his hair and dress are shown in great detail but his facial expression looks just as bewildered as we might be, by this strange form of transport.

This passage is a distillation of Nicolas's scholarship: it was and is human and humane, often humorous, blessed with a probing eye (the painter William Coldstream was his cousin) and a rich visual memory, imaginative and empathetic in his speculations about what the ancient artists, craftsmen, merchants, and patrons thought and chose, and always ready to wonder about how they reacted to, and adapted, exotic ways or exciting new poems—Nicolas relished the likely impact of the Funeral of Patroklos on the conspicuous-consumption burials of Salamis in Cyprus. And he was in the best way ironic in handling evidence, since he was no determinist, sceptical of, as he saw it, theory-based and often facile deductivism, and constantly aware both of what we do not know about the ancients and of the need to allow for human quirkiness in trying to explain them, coupled with a personal, avuncular pride in their extraordinary achievements and progress in the ninth and eighth centuries BC, which he described with lucid elegance. It is a pleasure to read him chronicling their work and resolving their problems. The reader is never in doubt about what he is trying to say and the variety of potential interpretations until, that is, he zeroes in on one of them, and one is left thinking—gasping—'Yes, why not? That's bright. I'd never thought of that.'

Open-mindedness and encouraging students to look at the evidence for themselves and come to realize that they might have an explanation that could be as viable as any professor's made him a much-loved teacher and supervisor, and students came from across London from the other places of learning for his lectures at Bedford and UCL. He is a paradigm of how pupils reveal a person. They stretch from Arizona to Japan, with a high concentration in Greece and Cyprus, where he was much loved. For Cypriots and Cyprophiles he was, for a time, the only person teaching Cypriot archaeology in the UK and had a graduate seminar after the main bread-and-butter lecture of the week, as he did for the Aegean Bronze Age and Iron Age, which he taught deliberately in one continuous course. The Cypriot course, which also spanned Bronze Age and Iron Age, was so successful that Nicolas and ten pupils even published a collective article on 'A Late Cypriot tomb group from Nicosia' (now in UCL) in *BICS* 38 (1991–3). Nearly all his graduate pupils showed how he had been their Tree of Life (or Tree of Jesse) in his *Festschrift*, C. Morris (ed.), *Klados* (1995), and continued after his retirement to ask him for references or keynote lectures at the conferences they organized, or send him work to critique.

Once based at Bedford, he was soon recruited into the British School's home guard of volunteers on whom much of the UK business depends. The Managing Committee conscripted him in 1967: he stayed on it until 1998, when he was elected Vice-President. In the meantime, he edited the *Annual* for five years from volume 64 (1969), became the appointee of London University on the Committee in 1976/7, a Trustee in 1983/4 (succeeding Bernard Ashmole), and Chairman for four years from 1987/8 (to be succeeded by Richard Tomlinson). He took on these demanding unpaid jobs—especially the *Annual* and the Chairmanship—cheerfully and with determination and, in the same spirit, agreed at short notice to run the XI International Congress of Classical Archaeology at UCL in 1978. It was a big success and even made a profit.

During the Bedford years, he and George Huxley excavated for the British School at the basically Minoan settlement of Kastri on Kythera (where Cyprian Broodbank and Evangelia Kiriati have followed with the School's Kythera Island Project). Like Nicolas's Geometric studies, it was a pioneering project, in several ways, not all of them obvious. In their prompt publication called *Kythera* (1972) Nicolas, who knew the Bronze Age virtually as well as the Iron Age and was to have many Bronze Age pupils, identified for the first time a pottery style in Late Minoan IB that he christened the 'Alternating Style': it is now a standard usage. More important is the project's place in island studies, since the volume is among the first, if not the first, to tackle an Aegean island and try to see the interaction of people and place diachronically, in this case from the Early Bronze Age to Venetian times: again this has become a standard approach, with striking results in the recent work on Kythera. Last but not least, this was the first British School excavation in which the participants did not have to pay for either their board or their lodging (or both), while contributing their hard work. At Knossos in the 1960s, we were still paying (30 drachmes a day), as may have been (I do not remember well) the case also at Lefkandi; but Kythera pioneered the change, and the two excavations at Myrtos were glad to follow. He also went twice in the Kythera years to the excavations at Motya in Sicily, ostensibly to study the Athenian Black Glaze pottery; but since that did not occupy all his time, the director Ben Isserlin asked him to dig what turned out to be a Phoenician temple at the north gate.

Nicolas was elected FSA in 1964 and FBA in 1977, and received the Academy's Kenyon

Medal for Classical Studies in 2003. At UCL he became an Honorary Fellow on retirement. Abroad, he gave many distinguished lectures and, besides his membership of the Athens Academy, was an Honorary Fellow or member of the Athens Archaeological Society, the Rhein-Westphalia Academy, the German Archaeological Institute, and the Archaeological Institute of America.

Retirement in no way abated Nicolas's zest for work, or music, or travels with Nicky. Articles continued to flow, including the publication a century plus later of pottery from the British School's first excavation in Greece, at Kynosarges; and he edited for the School (with Jonas Eiring and Gary Forster) the *Knossos Pottery Handbook: Greek and Roman* (2001), writing the Subminoan to Late Orientalizing chapter, and the Late Archaic and Classical one with Jonas Eiring, both invaluable synoptic accounts.

For the year or so before he died, he had been looking less strong, although his spirit and scholarly inquisitiveness were unabated, and he tackled undaunted a visit to the rather difficult site of Kalapodi in June 2007, after a conference at Volos organized by Alexander Mazarakis Ainian, another old pupil. But his death from a heart attack was unexpected. He and Nicky had been about to go to Athens for a colloquium at the British School to celebrate *GGP2*, with papers on new work in Geometric studies, many of them by his former pupils. It became a memorial event, and the book appeared a few weeks later. He left several unpublished projects, including a *CVA* volume on the British Museum's Geometric collection—where his scholarly career began.

Nicolas was scrupulously courteous and well-mannered and, I believe, was seen in Greece as one of the best examples of what a British archaeologist should be in that country. His life with Nicky was a true marriage of minds as well as hearts, dedication (not least to the British School at Athens) as well as enjoyment of company, music, and the civilized life. The keen eye, sharp memory and concentration on the human angle that they have both shared bear out the importance and relentless demands in scholarship—as in the rest of life—of what another King's man, E. M. Forster, said: 'Only connect.' Nicolas's life and work did just that.

This son of the Raj died on 21 March 2008, a few days short of his 81st birthday. We were friends since 1960.

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