

KIRK BRYAN — 1888-1950

It was difficult really to know Kirk Bryan; one accepted, without fully appreciating, his truly extraordinary ability. His spirit, his humor, his friendliness, and above all his real interest in all the problems of his colleagues obscured for some the scope of his knowledge and his willingness to apply this knowledge without regard for traditional barriers. Kirk considered himself a scientist and he defined science in the broadest of terms. Though a geologist by profession, his work was never limited by customary definition either within that field or outside it, as his almost incredible bibliography indicates. In addition to his publications in geology for which he is renowned, he is equally well known for contributions to botanical, archaeological, and other fields.

It will probably never be possible to estimate the stimulus value of the long discussions he had with his colleagues. Through such discussions his contribution to science goes far beyond his published work. He loved these opportunities to employ his ceaselessly active mind. None of us who have brought problems to him will forget the way in which he applied his broad conception of science to any problem. Ideas from such discussions have been incorporated in the basic doctrines of archaeology, as well as in other fields.

There is a certain futility in an attempt to pay tribute to Kirk as an archaeologist. What he did, and was doing when he died so suddenly, transcends such an arbitrary limitation. The idea that he might be called an archaeologist would amuse him greatly; "practicing without a license" he would call it. Nevertheless, he has, upon occasion, done work which was archaeological in import, and his humanity has enhanced the value of it. He thought of the people themselves and how they made a living in the changing environments which his investigations brought to light. Many of us will remember his long discussions of Pleistocene geology. They were often in the nature of lectures on complicated geological problems which he could explain so that people in other fields could understand them and contribute their own data.

Although Kirk had probably seen archaeologists during his early life in his native New Mexico, it was not until about 1923 at Pueblo Bonito that he came in contact with them professionally. Here he recognized the value and use of potsherds and other cultural debris in the study of arroyo cutting and sedimentation which he had previously begun, and which he carried on for many years afterward. This famous series of studies demonstrates his ability to collaborate with colleagues in different fields, and to select with acumen and with a sense for practical value, facts and hypotheses contributing to the solution of a problem. As the studies progressed they became of increasing significance to archaeological work because the cycles of sedimentation and erosion were synchronized with cultural events, the whole forming a setting for human prehistory.

This work set the stage for much of Kirk's later research. Concurrently with investigations in which geological problems appeared as a central theme, he included, wherever possible, archaeological ideas and hypotheses. Archaeologists will remember his great interest in artifact typology and distribution together with discussions of what might be called human ecology. At the same time, just for example, he was reading every publication on pollen analysis in America, and publishing critical papers. For fifteen years or more he was deeply concerned with a set of

botanical problems which bore upon soil phenomena, cryoplanation as he called it, and other factors. The results of these studies were carried the full circle, giving rise to more adequate interpretation of the locus of the remains of man.

Bryan was one of the best critics of significant phases of archaeology that we have ever had. When categorical and biased assumptions that man was young in the New World were rife, he was most impatient but, as always, politic. He has said that he even told his early geological students that if they ever found remains of "Early Man" they should cover them up quickly and say nothing, but never to forget about them. Bryan himself, in his study of the Lindenmeier site, which was then almost unprecedented in America, finally destroyed the prejudice which had clogged archaeological thinking for a generation or more. As is well known, his principal interest was Early Man, but he never lost sight of other developments, particularly those involving chronology. His constructive criticism has greatly influenced the development of present opinions regarding Early Man.

Bryan's analysis at Sandia Cave testifies particularly to his brilliant and ever-practical ingenuity. He applied his knowledge of the processes of soil development to the difficult problem of defining a sequence of events in the cave in such a way that they could be correlated with climatic fluctuations of the Pleistocene. Of equal importance is his careful study of the deposits in Ventana Cave just recently published. In addition to the specific results, he takes the reader through the terminological difficulties which have developed in geological circles, so as to supply the archaeologist with a series of definitions and statements of the concepts back of them. This to a large extent aids the archaeologist, and I suspect many others, in understanding what their geological colleagues are saying.

Minnesota Man was a discovery in which Bryan was deeply interested. His outspoken criticism of those who tried to discredit the find by bringing to bear pedantic technicalities, reveals his faith in his fellow man. The ensuing investigation, in collaboration with geologists and others, exhibits Bryan's characteristic thoroughness. His clear, and extremely practical argument has been instrumental in establishing the authenticity and significance of the skeleton and associated artifacts.

These scattered notes are inserted only to provide brief examples of the kind of important work which Bryan did. There exists a wealth of additional and equally significant data which only time will bring to the fore.

The shock occasioned by Kirk's death is still with us. It will be a long time before we can readjust ourselves to it. One finds oneself thinking of him at unpredictable moments and in the midst of conversations with scientists from many fields. "I feel as though I have lost a favorite uncle," is one person's comment, that comes closest to expressing our feeling. The idea applies to formal, professional relationships, as well as to more intimate moments. He was gregarious and his friendship and above all his sense of humor were never failing, even in a debate where he could be a formidable and tenacious antagonist. Archaeology has lost an almost irreplaceable consultant and scientist, but more than this, archaeologists have lost a true friend.

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