Remembering Richard Leakey (1944–2022), the Last Victorian Scientist

Kenyan paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey died on January 2nd at age 77, following an extraordinary career devoted to the scientific exploration of human origins. Richard was once my boss. And although we never became friends, I came to know him fairly well.

He died peacefully in his house overlooking Kenya's Great Rift Valley, where he'd made his most notable discoveries, and which occupied his imagination from an early age until his final days. It was fitting that he was buried beside his home, amid the same terrain from which he'd dug up humanity's long-buried early ancestors. As I once heard him say to a group of visitors, "You feel instantly at home when you arrive in Kenya because Kenya was once *everyone's* home!" (Essayists are supposed to shun exclamation marks, but this was simply the way the man spoke.)

To an outsider, Richard's work history may appear to comprise a series of disconnected, sometimes testosterone-driven adventures. By turns, he was a wildlife trapper and animal trader, safari guide, bush pilot, gifted (albeit informally trained) fossil hunter, archaeological excavator, scientific autodidact, museum and civil-service administrator, member of parliament, opposition leader, cabinet minister, conservation activist, Kenyan patriot, fundraiser, public speaker, and prolific writer. The public knew him best as a television and film presenter. But those who knew him privately will also remember him as an enthusiastic team leader and mentor of young talent.

In my case, he helped advance my own project to train young Kenyan researchers to record and document traditional music in the northern part of their country, the Turkana District in particular. When I'd raised funds for this initiative, he brought it under the auspices of the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), of which he was then director.

While he may have seemed like something of an (enormously) overachieving dilettante to some, there was in fact a unity to his life and work. The times being what they are, many will focus on the fact that he was a white man taking a prominent role in a largely black country. But in truth, he likely attracted more scrutiny for being a fervent admirer of Charles Darwin, and a secular atheist, in a religious part of the world. He once published his own edited and illustrated version of *Origin of Species*, which I read when I was working for him, and his contributions to that volume gave me insight into what I believe was his fundamentally edifying professional motivation. I still have it on my shelf.

Richard emphasized that humankind had evolved in the Great Rift Valley, and from there had spread "out of Africa," as the saying goes. He also believed that a previously underestimated factor in human evolution had been our species' relationship to evolving biodiversity and prehistoric climate

fluctuation—"paleoenvironments" as they came to be called.

Hunter gatherers typically have co-existed with abundant wildlife and water—including the so-called *Dorobo* peoples who live in what is now Kenya, as described in Richard's co-authored book, *People of the Lake: Mankind and Its Beginnings*. (The term *Dorobo* is seen as derogatory because, deriving from an expression that translates roughly to "those without cattle," it is interpreted as signalling an impoverished, pre-pastoralist existence. But the term was given to the original inhabitants of Kenya by others, such as the Masai, who came from Sudan a few centuries back.) During my time working in Kenya, ethnographers (and "ethnoarchaeologists") added to the emerging conversation on human origins amidst such habitats through "living experiments," such as documenting indigenous hippo hunts in Lake Turkana, studying the knapping of flints, and analysing the "kill sites" (actually, death sites) of large animals such as elephants. Richard's multifold efforts to preserve much of the Rift Valley's flora, fauna, parks, and archaeological sites emerged from his desire to preserve a critical piece of humanity's living evolutionary puzzle—a book of nature to be read with the help of teamwork and cross-disciplinary co-operation.

Under his direction, the NMK (or simply "the Museum," as it is often known) became a living institutional expression of that belief, bringing the message of science and natural history to scores of thousands of Kenyan schoolchildren and university students who might otherwise have become uncritical creationists. In 2022, it is seen as deeply unfashionable to describe a white man's efforts to teach (mostly) black people in this way. But that is what happened.

Richard understood that the prestige and educational effectiveness of the Museum was dependent on raising funds, a project that itself was connected to his own public stature. Each season, when senior staff and visiting researchers would give weekly public lectures on their projects to the general

public, Richard would start off the year with a lecture on his latest excavations, and his thoughts on biodiversity and evolution. The crowd was full of donors and diplomats, and it was one of the big social events on the calendar. Richard had the stage presence of a world-class thespian, and could hold an audience spellbound. I witnessed his charisma many times. (When my turn came to present, I knew I could not live up to Richard's public speaking standards, and felt at best like a side-act.) Thus did the Museum become a major national scientific centre and a hub for international collaboration.

Richard Leakey was a "white Kenyan," which is to say an imperial frontiersman, born and raised in East Africa into a family that was part of the dominant British colonial establishment. But the Leakey clan had heterodox views. Richard's grandfather was a missionary, which may explain some of his notions concerning the equality of all men and women, regardless of race. And his parents were Cambridge-educated archaeologists with wide interests and social networks. His father, Louis, spurned the jingoistic Social Darwinism that still permeated European anthropology at the time (and much of archaeology before the Second World War). Like Darwin, Louis believed that humankind originated in East Africa, not Asia or Europe. And he sought to prove as much with hard evidence—excavated bones and tools. He spoke fluent Kikuyu and Swahili, and was initiated into the Kikuyu people. His paleontological finds in Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania made him and his paleontologist wife Mary Leakey (who'd discovered the first known Proconsul skull in 1948) world famous in the 1960s.

Louis and Mary Leakey with the jaw of Paranthopus boisei. Undated photo by Des Bartlett from The Leakey Foundation archive.

Richard was educated at the private schools of Nairobi. While

he gained no more than a high-school degree, the value of an overseas British secondary-school diploma in the 1950s was arguably more valuable than a BA from an Ivy League college is today. Richard was required to memorize Shakespeare and understand the fundamentals of mathematics and science. Everyone was surrounded by exotic flora and fauna, and so both amateur and professional naturalists were respected.

The full, detailed history of the family is well-documented in Virginia Morell's 1996 book, *Ancestral Passions: The Leakey Family and the Quest for Humankind's Beginnings*. But the short version of Richard's early life is that he grew up speaking English and Swahili, and developed an independent-minded and rebellious nature. At first, he decided that his parent's work wasn't for him, and started a wild-animal trapping business that brought him into Kenya's bushlands, where he also ran a safari company, marketing himself to interested foreigners. This was something he would continue to do later in life, but with far more scientific rigour and reputable ends.

When Richard first discovered a set of human fossils, he handed them over to his father and other scientists, and then was backgrounded as the "camp boy." This did not sit well with his type-A personality, and soon he had his own excavations underway with his own scientific teams, independent funding, and base operations in the Koobi Fora region of northern Kenya (on the east side of Lake Turkana). Remarkable discovery followed remarkable discovery, and Richard managed to satisfy both the academic world, with multi-authored, peer-reviewed journal articles, and the lay public, through the National Geographic Society. One of his great gifts was his ability to describe his speculations on ancient lifestyles with fine prose. And I remember reading about his work with interest as a teenager, through my family's monthly *National Geographic* subscription.

Meave Leakey with daughter Louise

Richard and his team—often led by his surviving London-born archaeologist wife Meave (*née* Meave Epps), who was just as often the lead scientist—discovered many new fossils, and engaged in controversial debates with other scientists on their meaning and significance. (One notable aspect of this field is that while the evidence is scarce, the disagreements are abundant.) This explains much of Richard's conflict with American paleoanthropologist Donald Johanson, a former team member who'd discovered the famous australopithecine skeleton Lucy in Ethiopia. (Their feud has been described at length elsewhere, and so I won't detail it here.) Although a wonderful scientist in his own right, Johanson wanted to be Richard Leakey.

My favourite anecdote with regard to "Leakey's luck" is the story of the discovery of "Turkana boy," a nearly complete 1.6-million-year-old skeleton that his team found in the Turkana district near the Lake. It was a Sunday, and Richard's fossil hunter Kamoya Kimeu (one of the nicest men to have ever worked for the Museum, I should add) was taking a stroll when he saw a bone, which proved to be part of a skull. He alerted Richard, and the team duly found one of the most intact skeletons from prehistoric times that had ever been discovered, an 11-year-old boy of the Homo Erectus species, which had existed many hundreds of thousands of years before Homo Sapiens left Africa.

I remember Richard giving a public lecture on the skeleton, and pointing out that had the young boy reached manhood he could have been six feet tall—an idea that supported the then-emerging theory among contemporary scholars that the ancient hunter-gatherer's life could be one of abundance, not just unremitting scarcity. Since then, many PhDs have written about the skeleton (which now lies in bomb-proof scientific vaults at the NMK facilities in Nairobi).

Then, of course, there was Richard the conservationist—head of the Kenyan Wildlife Service (KWS), fierce anti-poacher, burner

of surplus ivory, and world-famous (again) for trying to save the elephant herds. In fact, as I knew, he was just as interested in saving the elephants' *environment*. But, like any good conservationist, he knew that, as his own example had proved, good works are easier to effect once you draw in the donors. Indeed, his desire to make his case directly to the public is one of the reasons he co-authored *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind*, with science writer Roger Lewin in 1995.

Eventually, Richard moved on, went into politics and fought for Kenyan democracy. In 1993, a small plane he was piloting crashed under mysterious circumstances (oh, did I mention Richard was also a pilot?), and he lost both feet. Richard had to get around with prosthetics, but that didn't seem to slow him down. Eventually, he gave up on politics, and went back to his Rutgers University-affiliated institute at Lake Turkana to supervise excavations and focus on the ancient past once again. As the end of his life closed in, Richard seems to have come full circle, returning to the local wonders that had first captivated him.

When Richard left the Museum in 1989 to head the KWS, his wife Meave maintained his scientific presence there and supervised excavations in Turkana and other parts of the Rift Valley. I remember visiting the second floor of the main Museum building where they kept so many of the megafauna fossils—skeletons of nightmarish crocodile-like creatures that seemed like something out of science fiction. At around this time, my new supervisor offered me the position of Director of the Department of Ethnography. I was asked to spend half my time writing research proposals aimed at potential donors, managing, at one point, to get funds from the Ford Foundation to develop a strategic plan for the Museum.

Wondering what Richard would have done, I came up with the idea of a Museum-based Centre for Biodiversity, a theme that would incorporate all of Richard's interests and integrate

them with other branches of the Museum without violating his authority and paleoanthropological autonomy. In adapted form, the proposal was taken up by the European Union, and was funded to the tune of hundreds of thousands of Euros. Unfortunately, once the money came in, I wasn't on the new project. Being an expatriate on staff had its drawbacks, and I was quite professionally naïve.

By 1995, after seven years of service, I crossed over to the donors' side, helping the Rockefeller Foundation run a post-doc program for African expatriates seeking to return to the continent to build up its scientific expertise. I then spent much of the rest of my career within the field known as "international development." I would occasionally bump into Richard at a scientific lecture or one of Nairobi's restaurants. He was always cordial, taking the time to say hello. But I knew his mind was somewhere else, as he was always fighting big battles for conservation and democracy.

During Richard's lifetime, science has become much more specialized, bureaucratic, and hierarchical. Unlike Richard, scientists begin their career studying something narrow. In order to facilitate their advancement, they must be cautious until they get tenure. And by that time, risk-avoidance has become baked into their professional soul. This approach has many benefits. But it is not without costs.

The 19th century Victorian idea of science, of which Richard was arguably the last influential living exemplar, was very different. It was filled with self starters, and often was dominated by (yes, white and male) swashbucklers who courted public controversy. Although perfectly modern in every other way, Richard's scientific instincts were a throwback to a time when science was a public adventure, evoked by the kind of characters that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created in books such as *The Lost World*. We all wanted to cheer on a modern Lord Roxton or Professor Challenger in their search for ancient secrets. Richard and his father were cut from that kind of

cloth. And while this kind of behaviour is obviously now held in suspicion within scientific circles, I believe Richard himself was a man of profound thought and decisive action who lived life on a large canvas.

One more memory, if I may: When I joined the Museum, I discovered that Richard was an early bird. If you met him at his office at six in the morning, you'd find him in an especially great mood: friendly, patient, interested, and supportive. I therefore made a habit of setting up my periodic meetings with him at that time. "Mr. Clarfield," he would say, "it is so *good* to know there are other early birds like me!"

When the meeting was over, I would drive home, sleep for a few hours, return to the office, and make sure I put in an eight-hour day.