

“SHERDS” OF TRUTH

by Martha Eddison

At its peak around 750 A.D., the city of Motul de San Jose was a political center and hub of ceramics production about as populous as Williamstown today. Yet the site in northern Guatemala remained largely untouched in the search to solve the mystery of the collapse of Classic Maya civilization. That is, until archaeologist Antonia Foias brought her first team of Williams students there 10 years ago.

Nearly every summer since Foias has worked alongside her students in the jungles of Motul, sifting through the soil in search of clues to help “reconstruct the lifeways, beliefs and cultures of the human past.”

Their work focuses on a central question in the ancient history of Mesoamerica: What caused the century-long collapse of Classic Maya civilization, which embraced 20 or so independent city-states and several million people and stretched from the Yucatan peninsula in the north to the Guatemalan highlands in the south. Leading theories include invasion, economic changes and changes in warfare patterns—and each theory looks to the pottery record for evidence.

“Our initial goal is chronology,” says Foias. “But our driving interest is why human beings behave as they do and how they organize their social, economic and political spheres—the trends and causes in human history.”

The field experience is so powerful that many of Foias’ students are inspired to pursue graduate school in archaeology.



Kevin Kannefick

Melanie Kingsley '05 traveled to Motul with Foias after graduation to help sort and analyze sherds, or pottery fragments, the students had unearthed. “It was a fantastic experience, and she was such an open and willing teacher,” Kingsley says.

Now Kingsley is working on a doctorate in Mesoamerican archaeology at Brandeis University and says she is still “in constant contact” with Foias. “She continues to be my adviser on a whole host of activities.”

For all the Indiana Jones romance attached to actual excavation, the bulk of the work happens off site. Foias estimates the lab analysis—sorting pottery by time period, the clays used, their decorations and their forms—takes “three times as long as the time in the field or more.”

Most of the analysis is done near Motul—in private, rented houses used as labs—in large part because the

“OUR DRIVING INTEREST IS WHY HUMAN BEINGS BEHAVE AS THEY DO.”

Guatemalan government has been hesitant to let go of large collections of artifacts. Small samples of the excavated pottery have been sent to the Smithsonian Institution for analysis. Using chemical sourcing, the Smithsonian has confirmed that the vases, used exclusively by the Maya nobility, were produced at Motul, Foias says. Moreover, they were painted with palace scenes and court rituals that “rarely appear on the public stone monuments we call stelae.”

And Foias received permission once to bring four small boxes of sherds back to Williamstown. Because there are no

dedicated archaeology labs at Williams, she and her students borrowed a lab from physics professor Sarah Bolton, who was on sabbatical, to analyze the pieces.

Students who cannot go into the field have the opportunity to “get their hands dirty” in the classroom by doing computer-simulated excavations and interpreting their findings. For their first assignment, students in Anthropology 103 “formulate a classification of typology of 18th and 19th century tombstones in the Williamstown Westlawn cemetery,” Foias says. “I ask them to tell me if there are changes in the tombstones and what could have caused these major transformations.”

Starting next fall, however, she and students will have a new space for their work—Williams’ first-ever archaeology lab, to be located in the new North Academic Building. The space will include a storage area for the College’s collections, including the Motul artifacts and casts of hominid skulls; a teaching area; specialized equipment for additional materials analysis; and full access to collections on the Internet, which allow students to virtually examine, rotate and compare real artifacts.

The lab also will give students a place to explore and analyze actual artifacts hands on (actually, gloves on). “Even if they can’t come with me on an excavation,” Foias says, “my students can at least touch these artifacts. They love it—it makes everything come alive.” ■



Williams professors and others weigh in on the issues of the day. For a complete listing of media appearances, visit www.williams.edu/admin/news/inthenews/php.

In the Nov. 11 [Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#), Paul Solomon, professor of psychology, discusses the [need for universal screening for Alzheimer’s disease](#) as well as pharmaceutical developments, saying, “It would be a shame to have the medications that can treat the disease and not just the symptoms, but not to have identified the patients and their caregivers and families who can benefit most.”

IN THE NEWS

Reference and Web services librarian [Nick Baker](#), discussing the future of the book in the Oct. 19 [Chronicle of Higher Education](#), says, “A book is a wonderful storage medium when you are dealing with centuries’ time frames. You can open it and still read it, if it’s properly housed. I don’t think we have solved those [issues with the electronic medium](#).”

In an Oct. 2 [Boston Globe](#) profile, lecturer in English [Andrea Barrett](#) says that, as a youngster, “I read constantly novels, without any sense that living people made those things. It was something that seemed to fall to the earth, like rain or starshine.”

Despite optimism spurred by the Federal Reserve’s September interest-rate cut, a “rumble in the background” in the third quarter indicated larger [unresolved issues of risk-taking](#), according to [Jerry Caprio ’72](#), professor of economics, in the Oct. 8 [Chicago Tribune](#).

In an Oct. 7 New Orleans [Times-Picayune](#) article about [college courses on comedy](#), [John Limon](#), the John J. Gibson Professor of English, says of stand-up comedians: “I was fascinated that something was happening in their minds that wasn’t in anybody else’s”

The Boston Symphony Orchestra and [Joanna Kurkowicz](#), the Lyell B. Clay Artist in Residence and Berkshire Symphony Concertmaster, received rave reviews from the [Worcester Telegram & Gazette](#) and [Boston Globe](#) in October for the [American premiere of Shirish Korde’s “Svara-Yantra”](#) concerto for violin, tabla and orchestra, originally commissioned by Kurkowicz.

BACKWASH SQUEEZE AND BUSTER KEATON

by Denise DiFulco

Edward McPherson '99 used to wonder about the stream of "strange and intense" people who frequented his Upper West Side apartment building to attend the Manhattan Bridge Club located inside.

The players harkened back to a time before poker was all the rage, dominating the air waves and the bachelor parties McPherson was attending for his friends. His curiosity led him to take a beginner's bridge class, and pretty soon he was hooked.

His experiences became the seed for his most recent book, *The Backwash Squeeze and Other Improbable Feats: A Newcomer's Journey into the World of Bridge* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

Bridge once had been Americans' card game of choice. There was a time in the 20th century when it was played in more than 40 percent of U.S. households. Hands were broadcast live on the

"IT'S JUST WEIRD THAT BRIDGE USED TO BE SO BIG AND NOW IT'S RELEGATED TO LITTLE OLD LADIES."

radio. *Sports Illustrated* even had a column dedicated to bridge.

"I wondered what it said about us that we went from a game about communication and partnership to one where you're in it for the money and yourself—from something that it takes years to learn to something that you can learn in 30 seconds at a bachelor party," McPherson says.

It wasn't just the game that captured McPherson's imagination—it was the players, who still stand 25 million strong. "The people were all lovely and wonderfully kooky and interesting," says the 31-year-old Dallas native. One woman in particular garnered his interest: an 83-year-old named Tina, whom he convinced to become his bridge partner. Their relationship serves as the backdrop for *The Backwash Squeeze*.

A former assistant editor for the now-defunct *Talk* magazine, McPherson is no stranger to topics that might seem a bit old-fashioned. His first book, *Buster Keaton: Tempest in a Flat Hat* (Newmarket Press, 2005), chronicles the life and times of the comic actor and filmmaker known for movie classics such as *The General*. "Buster Keaton's films feel so modern in a way that other silent film doesn't," says McPherson, who had his first taste of Keaton's work in a film course taught by Williams English professors Jim Shepard and Shawn Rosenheim. "If you show them today, people are still laughing their socks off."

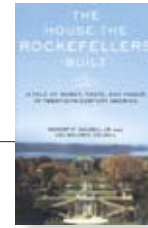
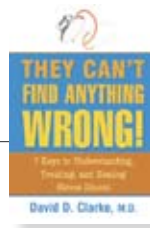
Shepard, who was McPherson's creative writing professor, introduced him to another iconic artist: the novelist John Irving, who hired McPherson as his writing assistant.

Occasionally Irving would ask his young apprentice's opinion, which McPherson—in his self-deprecating manner—describes as "ridiculous and comical." But observing Irving's work ethic left a deep impression: "I learned to see writing as a job. It taught me to see it as something you do every day."

These days McPherson's busy writing and editing for the *New York Observer* as well as for Web sites and national magazines including *I.D.* Though poker is a thing of the past (the onslaught of bachelor parties, including his own, is over), he continues to meet his bridge partner, Tina, at least once a week. "Bridge," he says, "has ruined me for a lot of other card games." ■



Charles Eshelman



MORE FROM THE BOOKSHELF

Consumer Guide to Home Energy Savings, 9th Ed. By Katie Ackerly '04 et al. New Society Publishers, 2007. A comprehensive resource for consumers looking to reduce their energy bills and environmental impact.

Wild Neighbors: A Window on Adirondack Wildlife. Edited by Dick Beamish '56. Adirondack Explorer, 2007. Wildlife stories, drawings and photos from nine years and 75 issues of the nonprofit *Adirondack Explorer*.

Learning and Behavior: A Contemporary Synthesis. By Mark Bouton '75. Sinauer Associates Inc., 2007. A textbook on the history of learning and behavior theory as well as current research in the field.

Glances Back. By Emily K. Bright '04. Pudding House Publications, 2007. A chapbook collection of poetry illustrating our connection to the past and how history affects us.

Rhode Island Curiosities. By Seth Brown '01. Insiders' Guide, 2007. Lighthearted guide to Rhode Island off the beaten path.

Darkstar: The Java Game Server. By Brendan Burns '98. O'Reilly Media, 2007. An introduction to creating networked multiplayer computer games with Darkstar.

Strange Details. By Michael Cadwell '74. MIT Press, 2007. An examination of the major architectural works of Carlo Scarpa, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies van der Rohe and Louis Kahn and the strange idiosyncrasies of their construction.

They Can't Find Anything Wrong!: 7 Keys to Understanding, Treating, and Healing Stress Illness. By David D. Clarke '75. Sentient Publications, 2007. Diagnosing and dealing with stress-related illnesses based on detailed interviews with and treatment of thousands of patients.

The Recall's Broken Promise: How Big Money Still Runs California Politics. By Derek Cressman '90. The Poplar Institute, 2007. Four years after the governor pledged not to accept campaign money, fundraising still plays a role.

The House the Rockefellers Built: A Tale of Money, Taste, and Power in Twentieth-Century America. By Robert F. Dalzell Jr., Fred Rudolph Professor of American Culture, and Lee Baldwin Dalzell, retired librarian and head of research and reference services.

POETRY NOW!

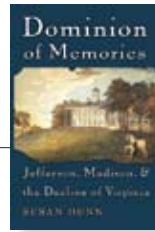


This year the English department launched Poetry Now!, a yearlong series of readings, lectures and discussions about contemporary poetry and poetics. With three events during the fall semester and three to come in the spring, the series aims to highlight new poetry and to encourage its audience to think about writing, studying and teaching poetry in today's world. Each event is followed by a critical discussion and an opportunity to meet the poets.

Featured poets last fall included:

- Ange Mlinko**, author of *Matinees* and *Starred Wire* and a National Poetry Series pick
- Monica de la Torre**, author of *Talk Shows* and *Acuferos* and poetry editor of *The Brooklyn Rail*
- Patrick Phillips**, author of *Chatahoochee*, winner of the 2005 Kate Tufts Discovery award
- Evie Shockley**, English professor at Rutgers University and author of *The Gorgon Goddess* and *a half-red sea*
- Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon**, author of *Black Swan*, winner of the 2001 Cave Canem Poetry Prize

LIFE OF THE MIND



Henry Holt, 2007. The story behind the house that gave shape and meaning to three generations of the iconic Rockefeller family.

TeachingLaw.com, 2nd Version. By Diana (Roberto) Donahoe '86. Aspen Publishers, 2007. A Web-delivered legal research and writing coursebook offering a multimedia, interactive experience to law students.

Understanding German Idealism. By Will Dudley '89, professor of philosophy. Acumen Publishing, 2007. A comprehensive introduction explicating key figures in the school of thought, from Kant through Hegel.

Dominion of Memories: Jefferson, Madison, and the Decline of Virginia. By Susan Dunn, professor of humanities. Perseus Books Group, 2007. The economic, social and political factors leading to Virginia's loss of power and esteem in the early 1800s.

State of the World 2007: Our Urban Future. Preface by Christopher Flavin '77; "Fighting Poverty and Environmental Injustice in Cities" by Molly O'Meara Sheehan '92 et al. W.W. Norton, 2007. Worldwatch's flagship annual report focuses on the problems of environmental sustainability in an increasingly urban civilization.

Taking Things Seriously. By Joshua Glenn '90. Princeton Architectural Press, 2007. Essays about objects with unexpected significance.

The Progresses, Pageants, and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I. Edited by Elizabeth Goldring '92 et al. Oxford University Press, 2007. A collection of literary, historically and artistically minded work sheds light on the culture and society of the monarch for whom the age is named.

Fighting for Love in the Century of Extinction: How Passion and Politics Can Stop Global Warming. By Eban Goodstein '82. University of Vermont Press, 2007. Why political activism must play a role in efforts to halt the effects of global warming.

Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life. By Anthony T. Kronman '68. Yale University Press, 2007. A call to reintroduce exploring the meaning of life into the academic world.

Subverting the Leviathan: Reading Thomas Hobbes as a Radical Democrat. By James R. Martel '86. Columbia University Press, 2007. An interpretation of Hobbes's *Leviathan* as an ironic text subtly seeking to undermine the authority of the sovereign through radical methods of critical reading.

The Oil Crisis of 1973-1974: A Brief History with Documents. By Karen R. Merrill, history professor and dean of the College. Bedford/

St. Martin's, 2007. An overview of this watershed event uses primary sources such as industry and government memos, contemporary news coverage and political cartoons.

Earth's Climate: Past and Future, 2nd Ed. By William F. Ruddiman '64. W.H. Freeman, 2007. A textbook summarizing major climatic changes and their causes throughout Earth's history.

Like You'd Understand, Anyway. By Jim Shepard, J. Leland Miller Professor of American History, Literature, and Eloquence. Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Eleven short stories span a wide spectrum of human experience and emotion.

Spaceman Blues: A Love Song. By Brian Francis Slattery '97. Tor Books, 2007. A science fiction/mystery/superhero novel that follows Manuel Rodrigo de Guzmán González and his lover, Wendell Apogee.

Japanese Military Strategy in the Pacific War: Was Defeat Inevitable? By James B. Wood, Charles R. Keller Professor of American History. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. A challenge to the prevailing notion that Japan's defeat in the Pacific was historically unavoidable.

ON DVD:

Married in America 2. Produced by Dale Riehl '72 et al. Docurama Films, 2007. Sequel to the 2001 documentary examining how nine couples from different cultural and social backgrounds have coped with married life.

