

OBITUARIES

Richard Leakey—exploring the past to shape a better future

Born: 19 December 1944

Died: 2 January 2022

Tribute by Delta Willis

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“The good men do is often interred with their bones”; adapted from Shakespeare’s play: Julius Caesar.

Richard Leakey was often photographed holding aloft skulls of human ancestors, but during my first visit to Koobi Fora in 1982 he carried a fossilized elephant skull. The heavy discovery sat behind us in his single-engine Cessna. Lumbering down the strip, kept a short 468 yards to discourage visitors, the wheels lifted at the very end, brushing pale grasses. Leakey liked to press his luck, to confront challenges cocksure, and this worked well for the better part of his extraordinary life.

Born in 1944, the second son of Louis and Mary Leakey, he held the same enthusiasm for classrooms as demonstrated by his mother; both Mary and Richard Leakey’s doctorates were bestowed; Richard’s were begrudged. Critics sneered at “the deficiencies of his education.”

Yet his matriculation could not have been more perfectly suited. The most practical tutelage available anywhere was endowed by his parents, who debated with learned visitors, including Philip Tobias from South Africa, who championed the discovery of the Taung child. Ignored in favour of the Piltdown Hoax (planted on British soil) the little *australopithecine* suggested our ancestors began in Africa. The Leakey Family excelled at proving this.

Louis would pull fossils out of his pocket, or from a shelf, dramatically lifting the lid off a tin container marked for tea. Late at night in camps at Olduvai and Rusinga, a lone lantern seemed to emit a new language, words like *Australopithecus africanus* and *Homo habilis*, words that confront students in cold text, with none of the uncovering in situ as happened on Richard’s boyhood digs. He unearthed his first discovery at the age of six.

Following a stint as a safari guide, partnering with Alan and Joan Root, the potential of the Richard Leakey Legacy switched on after an expedition to Lake Natron. Richard took along Kamoya Kimeu, who his parents had trained to find fossils. Kimeu discovered an early lower jaw, and his career began to soar alongside Richard’s.

Leakey managed he said, “through unfair means, I think,” to be appointed administrative director of the Kenya Museum at the age of twenty-three. The previous

British director was asked to resign in favour of Africanization. Kenya-born, Richard stepped in.

In 1967 museum staff numbered twenty-two; during Leakey's tenure this grew to over 600 employees and annex museums dotted the country. What began as a small natural history museum it had no role in archeology or anthropology, but through a series of bills submitted to Kenya parliament, he began to control research, antiquities, and archeological sites. "For example, Olorgesailie was under national parks, but we got it back" he said; "it's all part of the game plan".

Some of Leakey's plans were contrary to his father's. "He wanted to send fossils to England for casting; I suggested we bring in some English technicians and teach our own people how to do it. I persuaded the minister; my father didn't."

Richard's powers of persuasion benefitted Kenyans enormously. "The Hominid Gang" blossomed with training and laboratories, and their leader Kamoya Kimeu went on to find the Turkana Boy, an exceptional skeleton that remains the most complete early human ever discovered. So, *while the good men do is often interred with their bones*, the Leakey Legacy will live on because of the hundreds of Kenyans he inspired.

But it was his war on elephant poaching that brought him greater instant fame than fossils.

According to Iain Douglas-Hamilton, founder of Save the Elephants, "After a census of Kenya's biggest wildlife area revealed the scale of the ongoing elephant slaughter and the involvement of rangers, Richard confronted the relevant minister during a press conference. Not long afterwards, President Moi appointed him to lead the Kenya Wildlife Service." The 1989 appointment suited his leadership style; he had pushed researchers to work as hard as he did, rising at 4:30 a.m. Now he sacked slackers and dared confront the corrupt.

His passion to protect pachyderms was not a surprise to anyone familiar with his personal history. In 1969 he founded the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya, and later on relished watching elephants with researcher Joyce Poole, whose studies of their intelligence would impress anyone. His mission at KWS was to protect these "sentient creatures" he wrote in *Wildlife Wars*.

First he had to pull up KWS by its bootstraps. Few rangers had boots or fuel to patrol the 51 parks and reserves they were meant to protect. Poachers slaughtered on average three elephants a day. Leakey procured boots and fuel, boosted morale, and began to stem poaching with a shoot to kill order on poachers.

"Richard soon saw an opportunity for a characteristically bold statement; "Douglas-Hamilton continued. "When Kenya set fire to a 12-tonne stockpile of ivory in 1989, the symbolism was so powerful that it helped turn the tide against ivory poaching and create a respite across the continent that lasted almost two decades."

Over those two decades, Leakey's focus shifted to climate change, which he warned would do more damage to wildlife than poaching. In 2005 he founded the Turkana Basin Institute with Stony Brook University, New York. His wife Meave and daughter Louise continue to search for fossils, unearthing more ancestors. But the fossil hunter, Richard, known as 'Ostrich' for his long strides could no longer endure this arid terrain or the African sun.

Leakey's health problems began with kidney failure, but the pivotal twist of fate was a near-fatal crash in his Cessna. I stopped flying with him when he received death threats, a wise but terrible sacrifice, because there was nothing as thrilling as seeing Africa from his point of view.

When he first began to fly on his own, he noticed the outcrops surrounding Lake Natron. A chance flight in a chopper gave him a glimpse of East Turkana. On every flight he took across Kenya, he studied the terrain. He flew to numerous sites, to annex museums, northwest to Kitale, west to Rusinga near Lake Victoria, to Mount Elgon, east to Lamu, to the Maasai Mara, with excursions into Ethiopia, and across Tanzania, beyond Olduvai to Dar es Salaam.

Once, when I asked him to show me what he had seen from the air on his pivotal flight over East Turkana, he flew northwest, then just south of the Omo River, dipped his starboard wing toward long sections of earth burned red, eroded, and stratified, saying simply: "It looked like that." There was a lot of "that" below. Finally, he commented on the potential, shouting over his shoulder, "Kamoya! We are going to die in these mountains!"

So when you think about being a tool-user, don't replay the old song about chimps and birds having accomplished this before we did. Consider instead, that Leakey's best tool was his Cessna, tragically

though his 1993 crash resulted in the loss of both legs below the knee. While he learned to walk quickly on artificial legs, circulation problems ensued, as did skin cancer, another kidney, then a liver transplant. He tripled in girth, lost his balance, and his patience. The man who said, “I always take time for students, because I saw so many go so far on my father’s words,” ridiculed a teen for asking about methane after a lecture on climate change. “You conservationists lay off!” he told a board member of the East African Wild Life Society who questioned his acquiescence for a Chinese-built railroad across Nairobi National Park. The railroad was completed, but the tracks are elevated per Leakey’s suggestion.

A planned movie described as a “blockbuster” (before it was never filmed) inspired a pre-emptive quip: “Leakey said moviegoers could expect ...pretty women getting in and out of beds”... so, it won't all be true [to my life].” Brad Pitt was to portray Leakey.

The cascade Leakey described in *The Sixth Extinction* is now upon us, with floods, droughts, wildfires, warming oceans, and the terrible decline of biodiversity he feared. How a single species could devastate life on earth is to be the focus of Ngaren, a museum he was planning, on the edge of the Ngong Hills, and the subject of his final lecture at Nairobi’s Muthaiga Club in October, 2021. He apologized he would not stand, but sat in a wheelchair, he explained, because he had contracted Covid-19. Leakey had described the potential for just such a pandemic during a 2009 lecture. He presciently compared it to influenza and the quest for a vaccine. But his sticking point was how fast a virus could evolve into variants.

He died only months after his Muthaiga Club lecture in 2021, not in the mountains of Turkana—where his dear friend Kamoya Kimeu was buried in July. What they found together goes beyond fascinating fossil discoveries, but the greater gift of camaraderie that is color-blind. Friends have laid a stone on Leakey’s simple grave in tribute, a custom normally reserved for African chiefs.

Delta Willis wrote *The Hominid Gang: Behind the Scenes in the Search for Human Origins, and The Leakey Family: Leaders in the Search for Human Origins (Makers of Modern Science)*.