

Due North speaks to
the archaeologist
Brian Williams

DN: Can you tell us a little about your background?

BW: Well I'm Brian Williams, an archaeologist; at the present time I'm the acting Principal Inspector of the Built Heritage and I have worked here in what's now Environment and Heritage Service since 1972 and prior to that I studied archaeology at Queen's University, Belfast. I graduated in 1972 and thirty years later I graduated again with my Doctorate in 2002. I'm a Belfast man, I was born on the site of where Rev. Dr. Ian Paisley's church now stands, the Martyr's Memorial. It was at that time Ardenlee Nursing Home with a lovely leafy avenue leading up to a nice big house, that's where I was born. The contrast in my personal views with the later occupant of the site is considerable. I've lived most of my life in and around east and south Belfast. I have a family. I'm married to Fionnuala since 1975 and she studied archaeology and folklore in UCD. She now works in the Linen Hall Library for anyone who wants a connection there. We have three children Eoghan who's 25, Cara who's a bit younger and a boy of 14, Fergus. I've ticks beside the two elder names, they are both through University, Eoghan is a journalist in Dublin for the *Sunday Independent* in the Finance Section and my daughter works at the Chester Beatty Library. She studied fine art in Edinburgh and at the *École du Louvre* in Paris which was a pretty nice spot.

DN: In terms of your career – what was it or was there anything in particular that originally interested you in history/archaeology? What precipitated your involvement in that field?

BW: Well I was always interested in history and geography and the arts, literature, poetry, art; you know the way you take an interest in particular things at school. Maths, physics and chemistry were the death of me, I just wasn't so very interested in those and I started to consciously notice when I was about 15; I started to think quite a bit about history and I'd go regularly to the Belfast Central Library. I went to Belfast Royal Academy and in the afternoons on the way home from school I would, at least once a week, call into the Central Library and start, this was not premeditated, I'd just start to get out books on Irish history or autobiographies. I was very keen on that. It wasn't just Irish I was keen on, I remember reading the *Life of Bismarck* and being absolutely fascinated, as a teenager, by somebody like Bismarck. And then I started to wonder 'why am I doing this'? I asked my parents; they used to take us out for runs in the car in the '60s and I said to my parents, 'What is that petrified wood at Nutts Corner airport'? and they would look at me or 'What is that mound on the top of that hill there'? and they didn't have any answers for me. The school I went to, BRA, had a very forward looking geography department and I was privileged to be taught by very good teachers in geography. I'm just trying to think of her name, Winifred Ewing, Tom Shaw was another teacher, he went on to be a school inspector and he wasn't actually a teacher of mine but he had a big influence on me. Anyway we had these school field trips and that got me



Brian Williams with Anne Tannahill, former Managing Director of Blackstaff Press
at the launch of *Strangford Lough*

interested in the whole concept of the landscape and it really, really got me going and I remember our last trip, we were coming home from Ballycastle on a winter's night, in the dark, and everybody was – there was all the schoolboy high jinx – and I kept thinking, with an undercurrent of sadness, 'this is the last trip I'll ever be on, I'll never do a field trip again, I'm eighteen and about to leave school and that's it.' If only I'd known what lay ahead and then as part of that whole thing they took us to an interesting talk one day in Queen's by someone of whom I'd never heard. He was called Professor Estyn Evans and this old man got up, and he started to talk and it all

just clicked into place for me. It was about, well I suppose I could say in hindsight, it was about identity and place and who you are and he seemed to take all the things I was interested in, history, geography, geology, whatever, stories; I've always been interested in stories. He seemed to put it all together in a composite package that made a lot of sense to me. My history department in BRA was also good, there was a great teacher there, Winston Breen, unfortunately he's dead now. He became the headmaster in Banbridge Academy after he left BRA, a fantastic Fermanagh man. Winston wanted me to do history in Trinity and I was planning that but I was overridden

by the lecture by Estyn Evans which just trumped everything and I decided this must be what geography is and I went to Queen's to study what this man was talking about. I arrived in 1968 and sadly he forgot to say at the end of his lecture, or if he did I didn't hear him, 'Oh by the way boys, I'm just retiring.' And so as he left Queen's geography went down the tubes in my opinion. It was sad, it was pathetic it seemed, and they got us to write an essay at the end of first year – What is geography and where is it going? – and I sat down and wrote the essay and appended a little note at the end of it 'and I won't be studying it further in second year.' It was so hopeless. What I found was that archaeology was being taught by an interesting man, Professor Martin Jope. I found archaeology provided something of the measure of what I wanted, but quite frankly I don't think it quite got to what Evans was trying to teach because I think he was a much more holistic man in his whole approach which has hopefully come out in my career. I have found the way that Evans went and I don't mean myself to be a great Evans fan or anything; But I have found that the way my career has gone into things like landscapes and not just individual archaeological sites. Trying to look at things in the broader picture, for instance, in my maritime archaeology I try to go into it in a totality of period and types of evidence and interrelations between humans and sea and I think Evans would have done that.

DN: In a way you have begun to address at least the next question which deals with the earliest interests that you had. Were there particular themes that you felt drawn to or was it this holistic approach that you favoured from the outset?

BW: I think at the start I was interested in pre-history, in the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. I always find the Mesolithic, and I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings like my friend Sinead McCartan, but I find the Mesolithic a bit too dry for me, you know, there isn't really enough evidence to make it really come to life for my own personal interest. Initially I found the Neolithic and the Bronze Age brilliant. I was really interested. I think you could say it started my career but as time went on in fact archaeology would really be defined as the study of the remote past, you know through material remains and probably put in brackets *pre-history*. Archaeology has subsequently grown since all that time ago and it now incorporates a far broader range of subjects, you know themes, but also periods and so now we've reluctantly taken the medieval on into archaeology. I remember that painful time and then the post-medieval and now we've even got things right up into World War II defences and so on. Indeed the police when they undertake their investigations very often they use archaeological techniques and indeed occasionally they even employ some archaeologists.

DN: Is it a paucity of evidence for the Mesolithic that doesn't appeal to you?

BW: Probably, yes I think its this sort of nirvana to go back to the Mesolithic almost when you look at the diets found in the excavations at Mountsandell, you know, those people were eating pretty good food and it's a bit mouth watering, but as regards the archaeological viewpoint there are very few sites that turn up more than a few Bann flakes and microliths and I find that personally, I don't want to criticise, but I find it just a bit too arid for me.

DN: Well then to something a bit more tangible, obviously you will be best known in most recent times for the discovery at Ballycastle and the bell shrine that was found there has created something of a stir at least beyond the natural remit of archaeology.

BW: Yes, it's really an art object. I would say I agree with the *Irish News* editorial which said this was a national treasure. Yes, that's a good find it was great. It was the best object I've found and I was delighted that it turned up and came into my hand. Why my hand of all I don't know, it's just serendipity? I don't do much fieldwork so it's nice to get a wonderful discovery when I do go out.

DN: How significant do you regard that discovery? You have mentioned that you agree that it is a national treasure.

BW: Oh yes, I think so it is a national treasure. I mean, it's a wonderful piece in itself. Since we had all the media attention I've now had it explained to me by Cormac Bourke, who is really a specialist in these matters in the Ulster Museum, he's told me that the Christ figure is actually later than the bell shrine and in fact it's not Irish at all it's from a monastic workshop in Limoges in France and it was cut down and put onto the shrine some time in the mid-thirteenth century which makes it even more interesting. But, there are eight bell shrines in Ireland, there's all sorts of other shrines and crosiers and shrines of the saints' tooth, and this and that, but our shrine, the importance of it is not that it's a first class shrine, in fact I think it's rather rustic, but the fact is it was found in an excavation. No other high class piece of metal work like that ever has been and you can tell so much

more about it because it was found in the course of an excavation.

DN: I was just thinking about the fact that it is tied now to a locality and that can tie into a time frame obviously. Is there a particular era that you have felt drawn to perhaps more than others or is it a case of being led by the evidence?

BW: Well I've always thought that I was interested most in pre-history, but in the course of my job, essentially I'm now a jack of all trades or you could say in another way, in a medical sense I'd be like a GP and when I find something, I, at least have the general knowledge to know who to point it towards. For instance when I found the bell shrine, I'm not the one to write that up, but I knew who the specialist consultant was – go to Cormac Bourke. Funny enough I've really loved maritime archaeology. It's not a period, thematically it just encapsulates everything that I'm interested in which is, I love the sea, I'm mad about boats. I sail a lot, that's my main sport. In fact I pine away in the winter because I don't get sailing. I should try to find substitute activities. So the maritime theme brought together my whole personal interest in landscape and the sea. Probably more than any period it's that theme that I've found most fascinating.

DN: Within maritime archaeology is there anything that you have had that has given you a particular pleasure in?

BW: Oh, yes. The Strangford Lough survey and getting the volume published. I've always been keenly aware of the lack of publications of surveys in the Government in Northern Ireland and to get the Strangford Lough book published was a sweet and delicious moment for me.

DN: We've talked about themes and early influences and so forth. Do you admire the work of any particular historian or archaeologist? I know you've mentioned Estyn Evans but is there someone you would seek to emulate in that regard?

BW: Well, I suppose I mentioned Evans, but then there are a lot of good people around and to pick out one name would therefore leave out others, but I find somebody who has constantly impressed me down the years is Peter Harbison. Peter started off in Dublin producing catalogues of bronzes with superb illustrations, they are all works of absolute detail. Throughout his career he has turned out things like general guides to Ireland and monuments and now he's sort of re-invented himself and he's working on the Early Christian period and, you know, he's been a master of it all. I also must mention the late Pat Collins.

DN: Geographically, is there a part of the Province or country that you would consider to have special appeal or somewhere that is almost like a home from home?

BW: Well the first time that I ever left the city really was to go on field work in the Sperrins in 1968 with a student called Stephen Briggs*. We went off and stayed in a little house in the Sperrins that belonged to a man called Jimmy Brennan. Jimmy was amazing and it was a whole new world to me, rural Ulster, that was the first time I'd had any experience of it. I was in my late teens and riding around on a black bike, around the Sperrins, at night with no lights and only the stars and the moon and hearing about country things for the first time. It nearly blew me away and I've adored that ever since.

Although I'm a city man I really value the whole rural ethos. As to area, I think we're all so lucky to live in the North of Ireland, it's a fantastic place. I've travelled a lot internationally. I remember coming home from East Texas one time; I'd had three weeks in East Texas, and I was called out to a site on a November day on a sort of bleak, grey day to the north Down drumlins, near Ballynahinch. I was going along in the car on this greyest of awful days going, 'Oh, it's so beautiful, it's so beautiful' you know, and we have that. We have our coastline and we have the magnificence of Fermanagh. I suppose people often identify me with Fermanagh. I adore Fermanagh, there is no doubt about it, but at the same time I've worked in Antrim and I find the Glens have a tremendous flavour. I love the drumlins of north Down, Strangford Lough is just wonderful, the Mourne – I like to walk the Trassey track and go up the stream at the Bloody Bridge. It's all fantastic.

DN: Thinking about the general appeal of history/archaeology/folklore in Ulster and in Ireland in general. Can you think of a reason why we are so pre-occupied with the past here or why we have such an in-depth interest in it at times?

BW: I don't necessarily agree with you that we are so different from anywhere else. You turn on the television and there's a whole range of archaeological programmes every night. That's not just limited to Ulster folk, everybody's interested. I think, quite honestly the whole thing is about identity and that works at the individual level. It's not a cliché, you know, 'who am I and why am I here', but that is the truth. That is what everyone asks themselves whether they know it or not and it might be seen

with poignancy when you have maybe an adopted child where you see that very highly developed. We all have it, whether we're adopted or not and I think it works at the group level. So society at large is interested and there's groups within it. You have people trying to create an identity in one way or another by speaking a different language or seeing themselves as separate, you know it's all about trying to carve out a purpose and a reason for why on earth we are on the planet.

DN: **A reaction to globalization?**

BW: I think that's an interesting point too. Certainly, you know within Europe and I would say I would be a Europhile, but I think that Europe of the regions is very strong and has a lot of validity. A Catalan wants to be a Catalan and you get it down to even here your own Federation had a big campaign on townlands in the past and it's all about identity and manageable scale.

DN: **This question can be quite a difficult one to answer but imagine yourself as a time traveller with the option of going to any particular period in history or meeting a character from history. Is there any one person or any particular time that you would like to meet and speak to and if so what would you say to them?**

BW: That's a real hard one because there are so many people. In fact I'd often thought the answer to all these problems is to develop a time machine. Something that really puzzles me is why was Ireland so absolutely economically buoyant until about 700BC and then the whole place went into free fall and it didn't really emerge from that until about the time in the fifth century when Patrick came and brought

Christianity. The whole archaeological record just re-ignites. What happened in that long, more than thousand years, period? To put a name on it I suppose the obvious one for an Ulsterman is, I'd better go back in time and ask Cú Chulainn, 'What on earth did you people do to so decimate this country that there is virtually nothing other than high status sites showing in the archaeological record'? Where were the ordinary folk, what did you do with them?

DN: **Looking then from the past to the future how would you like to see the heritage sector, if you can call it that, develop say over the next ten years locally here?**

BW: I like the way that it's very obvious that the community is interested in heritage. You know you've TV programmes, there are letters to the paper about historic buildings and people rattling on. I think we are doing good work but I'd like to see it more in a partnership with the community and not just Environment and Heritage Service working on its own but continuing to develop partnerships with the University sector and so on to actually get to know more about what we're really seeking to protect.

* For Stephen Briggs on Jimmy Brennan, see *Due North*, Vol. 1 Issue 4, pp. 13-15.