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Interview with Heather Pringle

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(*Heather Pringle is one of those rare people who have a power to mesmerize... with their pen. If you read her latest book "The Mummy Congress", you would tend to agree with us. Mummy Congress is all about mummies, a subject which is so close to the hearts of all forensic pathologists. Naturally we couldn't contain our desire to know more about her. We at the "Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology" approached her for an online interview and she graciously agreed. The interview was conducted for well over a week. Some excerpts.. ..*)

Heather Pringle with Douglas Wolfe in a New Mexico desert in the spring of 2001, discussing fossil dinosaurs.



Qu. 1. What is a mummy?

Most people tend to think of mummies as dead folks wrapped in linen, specifically Egyptian dead folks. But the world's mummy experts take a broader view of things. They define a mummy as any body that has resisted the natural course of decay. So a mummy can be a body frozen in ice, like the Inca children found at the peaks of South America[1]s mountains. Or it can be a body preserved in rum, like Horatio Nelson, the famous British admiral. Or it can be the chemically preserved body of Lenin, installed in a Moscow mausoleum. In other words, mummies include bodies preserved by natural processes and by the hands of skilled morticians. There are many ways of preserving a dead body.

Qu. 2. How did you get so interested in mummies?

I think I've always been interested in mummies. A few weeks after I got married this was in the late 70s my husband and I stopped off in London on our way to Greece for our honeymoon, and I absolutely insisted on a trip to the British Museum to see both the Egyptian mummies and the animal mummies. And it's funny because if you open our photo album from that trip, which was our honeymoon, the first page or so is all photos of animal mummies.

...Of course I'm interested in mummies. So much so that during my honeymoon, I insisted on a trip to the British Museum so I could see Mummies! You may be surprised that the first page of our honeymoon album contains photos of nothing but animal mummies!...

I didn't really consider writing about them, though, until long after that, when I was traveling in Peru to research an archaeology story. I was out in the southern desert region with a team of archaeologists, who were investigating a number of sites inhabited by the ancient Nazca people. One site that we visited looked as if it had been hit by mortar shells. The looters and grave robbers had gotten there before us. And they had opened all the tombs, looking for pots and woven shrouds and such they could sell. In the process, they had thrown everything they didn¹t want onto the surface of the ground. I was just walking through this ancient village, and I began to see human body parts everywhere. A mummified arm here. And a mummified leg there. And someone from the team called to me from up the hill. And I went over and he held something. And it was a mummified head. Just lying on the ground. And I looked at it, and I was just stunned and flooded with emotion. Here I¹d been, trying to find some few clues to the ancient Nazca people. And here I was staring into the face of one of the Nazca, probably a young woman. And I was just blown away by this.

Qu. 3. Why do you think we are so fascinated by mummies?

That's an excellent question, and it's one that I have really struggled with while writing my book. I think that human beings have always been fascinated by mummies, but I think the reason for that fascination, and the nature of that fascination have changed and evolved over time. The ancient Egyptians, for example, were fascinated by mummies because they were the pathway or the portal to eternal youth in paradise. The Egyptians believed that every living human being possessed a body, a life-force and a spiritual force. At death, the bond between these three elements was severed. But if embalmers could successfully preserve the body, then the life-force and spiritual force could reunite, and bring about eternal life. So every ancient Egyptian who could afford to do so, wanted to have his or her body preserved. The Egyptians went to huge lengths to do so, importing costly resins that would preserve a body to the end of time.

Yde Girl winces in a Dutch Museum, revealing a single peglike tooth. Modern forensic examination shows that the ancient teenager, one of Europe's famous bog bodies, was probably stabbed, then asphyxiated by an unknown assailant. Although her mummy appears hideous, she was an amazing beauty. (From Heather Pringle's book *The Mummy Congress*)



In Europe, the fascination for mummies had a very different tone to it. In medieval Europe, mummification took on a new meaning within the Roman Catholic church. Certain Roman Catholic saints whose bodies defied decay were called The Incorruptibles. Roman Catholics believe that during saints' lives, the Holy Ghost works through their bodies to do great good. After death, the body of a saint is still sanctified by this contact with the Holy Ghost, and as such is capable of performing a miracle. The devout believe that there is a special category of saints whose bodies are miraculously preserved by God and they call these the Incorruptibles. To the faithful, these bodies, and there are hundreds encased in reliquaries in Catholic churches across Europe, are signs of God's miraculous powers.

During the renaissance in Europe, the fascination with mummies switched more to commerce. Europeans were obsessed with finding a miracle drug that would spare them from the worst excesses of Renaissance medicine, which was very big on bleeding the very ill, depriving them of life giving blood, or on administering enemas, as many as four and five times a day. To the sickly, anything was better that these treatments, so they enthusiastically embraced a drug known as mummy. It was made by grinding up Egyptian mummies. To obtain sufficient supplies of this commodity, European merchants imported mummies by the boatload.

Today, we are also fascinated with mummies, but in a different way. I think we see them as symbols of immortality. We have learned to love ourselves and love our bodies and we want to live forever. Mummies are the closest that we have come to this prospect.

Qu. 4. Why are movies about mummies so popular?

I think it has a lot to do with the tenuous relationship between science and science fiction and fantasy. If you think about it, many of the standard plots for science fiction are losing some of their luster. Films about cloning, about genetic engineering or about space travel are becoming less popular, because they have really begun to move from fiction to reality. We see ethical debates about cloning on the nightly news. We read newspaper articles about genetic engineering in the paper. We watch wealthy enterpreneurs return from their 20 million dollar rides in space. But at the core of the mummy movies is a still-fantastical scenario: the return of the dead to life. Immortality. Science hasn't even begun to approach immortality. Death is the final frontier.

Qu. 5. Which is the largest collection of mummies in the world?

The world's largest collection of Egyptian mummies is housed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. In addition to its royal Egyptian mummies, the museum has hundreds of other human mummies and a vast collection of animal mummies.

...Unfortunately I have never traveled to India, but I suppose it is because I tend to keep the most fascinating parts of the world for the last. And of course one day I would love to attend an Annual Meeting of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine...

Qu. 6. Which is the oldest mummy in the world? Which is the oldest you have had an opportunity to see?

You know, I can't answer that. But the oldest natural mummy I've ever seen was that of an Ice Age horse found in the 1990s by gold miners in Dawson City, Yukon. The horse was more 10,000 years old and was partially though exquisitely well preserved in the northern permafrost. There are human mummies known from caves in Nevada that date to 9000 years ago. But the oldest human made mummy was the mummy of a child that dated back nearly 7000 years.

Qu. 7. Have you ever traveled to India, or to Indian subcontinent? Would you like to visit, if such an opportunity arose? Have you ever attended the Conference of the Indian Academy of Forensic Medicine (IAFM)? Are you aware that this Conference is to be held in the month of January 2002?

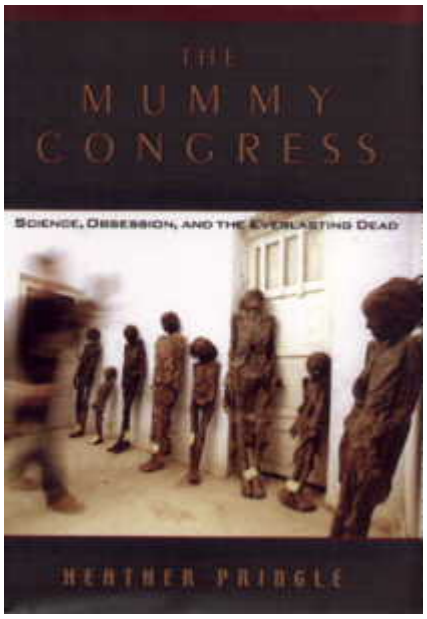
Sadly I have never been to India, although it is one of the places that I have most wanted to visit. I suppose that I am keeping the most fascinating parts of the world for the last, when I am older, wiser, and have the time to travel them in a more leisurely fashion. I have never attended an IAFM meeting but I am sure it would be a great experience.

Qu. 8. You are obviously very interested in science. Was science a childhood fascination?

Quite honestly, no. My main interest as a teenager was in history. I was always very keen on learning about the intimate details of life in the past. I wanted to know how people like Alexander the Great or Henry the VIII had actually lived, and how ordinary people of the time had fared. I wanted to know how they dressed, how they lived, what their daily lives were like. Historians today call this social history, and I was very keen on this.

I eventually enrolled in history at university, but the classes all concerned political movements, wars and parliamentary reform. So I quit and studied English literature. I specialized in Victorian novels. Eventually I got a job in book publishing. I began writing, and quite soon, in the early 1980s, I began writing about archaeology. It was science writing, but science as it intersected with history. And archaeology provided a really intimate look at the lives of people in the ancient past. Over the years, I¹ve hunched over the garbage heaps of 35,000-year-old Neanderthals in southern France and 500-year-old Polynesians in Tonga. It doesn¹t get more intimate than that.

***The Mummy Congress*, the best-seller by Heather Pringle. Click on the book to go to its review.**



Qu. 9. Is "The Mummy Congress" your first book? Which books have you written before? On which subjects?

Ans. I'm a science writer who's been writing about archaeology and anthropology for nearly twenty years now. So it was natural for me to explore these subjects in depth in my books. In all, I've written three books. The first explored the prehistory and natural history of one of Canada's mountain national parks. The second, entitled, *In Search of Ancient North America*, examines nine of the most important archaeological excavations across North America. To research the book, I traveled from the remote bone-strewn caves of the northern Yukon in Canada to the desolate windswept valleys of southern Texas, interviewing archaeologists and profiling both them and their research. My most recent book is *The Mummy Congress*, which explores the broad world of the preserved dead.

Qu. 10. What is your next book about? Does it have anything to do with mummies?

Ans. Unfortunately not. My editor, who I respect enormously, thought it was time to take a break from the ancient dead. My next book will take a look at the murky intersection of archaeology and politics during the Nazi era in Germany. I do hope to return to writing about mummies, however, in my magazine work when I'm finished this book.

Qu. 11. How many countries did you visit to write this book, and which experts did you meet?

Ans. I had the great good fortune to visit 11 countries on 5 continents in my research for The Mummy Congress - everywhere from Egypt's Sahara Desert to the remote Andes in Peru.

...To write my book, I visited 11 countries on 5 continents - everywhere from Egypt's Sahara Desert to the remote Andes in Peru... I would love it, if somebody wanted to make a movie on this book, but at the same time, I would want it to be done in a serious way. In a manner that showed respect for the science of this work, the researchers themselves and the mummies...

Qu. 12. What was your most fascinating experience while writing this book, or while researching for this book?

Ans. Thanks. Really a tough question - there were so very many. But if I had to pick one, I'd chose the time that I spent with pathologist Dr. Arthur Aufderheide who was unwrapping, examining and

dissecting Egyptian mummies. It was an incredibly eerie feeling to watch the unveiling of a person who had been shrouded and entombed for nearly two thousand years. And I was fascinated by some of the ethical issues that such an unveiling and such dissection pose to us today. Do we have the right to disturb the rest of the ancient dead? Is there a moral justification for dissecting bodies that have survived for so long against the odds of nature? Should we be putting the best preserved on display in our museums? I got very interested in these questions while visiting Egypt and I explored them at length in my book.

Red Haired and Long-nosed, Cherchen Man is one of several hundred Caucasian-looking mummies found in northwestern China. A resident of central Asia three thousand years ago, the lanky mummy contradicts theories about when China and the West first came into contact. (From Heather Pringle's book *The Mummy Congress*)



Qu. 13. Could you tell us about your family? Did you inherit the love of writing from your parents?

Ans. I'm afraid that I come from a rather odd family background. My father was a professional hockey player in his youth and his family was very athletic. One of his uncles was an early twentieth-century soccer star in England. I did, however, get my love of writing and words from my mother, who was a quiet introspective women who was famous in our family for the eloquent letters she wrote.

Qu. 14. Are you formally trained in science, or in journalism, or in both?

Ans. I did my first degree in history and my second degree in English literature and I thought of becoming an academic at university. But I took some time out from my studies and began working in a museum in the history department. I so loved the work that I decided to try writing on the subject of the ancient past.

Qu. 15. Is there a plan to make a movie on this book? If someone to approach you for a movie (on this book), what would your answer be? And how would you like to go about it?

Ans. There's no plan yet to make a movie on this book, but of course I'd be delighted if someone proposed doing so on some aspect. But I would want it to be done in a serious way, in a manner that showed respect for the science of this work, the researchers themselves and the mummies.

...A message for your readers? Gosh, it's hard to know what to say to such a distinguished readership! I suppose I would just suggest that the ancient dead really do deserve as much respect as we currently give the recently dead. These people were truly human beings just like us, with families who loved them and with full lives. They ate, drank, argued, made love, struggled and laughed. And for all these reasons, they really do deserve our consideration today...

Qu. 16. What do you consider as your biggest achievement in life?

Finishing each of my books has been a major achievement! I am always incredibly anxious when I start a book: I wonder how on earth I will ever be able to do justice to the topic and conduct all the research that I know will be needed in order to write the best book possible. The task just seems so incredibly daunting, even before I begin to struggle with the writing itself. So I am immensely relieved when I finally dot the last I and cross the last t.

Qu. 17. If God asked you choose your profession again, what would it be?

I would still want to be a writer, but I'd love to be a novelist. I think I'd write novels about archaeologists, mummies and the illicit antiquities trade.

Qu. 18. What do you love most (besides mummies and writing of course)?

Ans. I'd have to say that the next thing on the list (after my husband!) would be traveling. One of the most wonderful parts about being a science journalist is that offers enormous opportunities for travel. In search of stories about the ancient past, I've journeyed from the Polynesian islands of Tonga to the high Arctic of Canada.

Qu. 19. Your favorite movie?

Ans. Wish I could say that it was *The Mummy* or *The Mummy Returns*. But neither seemed to have much to do with mummies. My current favorite movie is *Gladiator*.

Qu. 20. Do you have a message for our readers?

Ans. Gosh, it's hard to know what to say to such a distinguished readership! I suppose I would just suggest that the ancient dead really do deserve as much respect as we currently give the recently dead. These people were truly human beings just like us, with families who loved them and with full lives. They ate, drank, argued, made love, struggled and laughed. And for all these reasons, they really do deserve our consideration today.

Heather Pringle has her own website at www.heatherpringle.com. She can be approached via E-mail at hpringle@telus.net. The review of her book The Mummy Congress *appears in this very issue. Readers wanting to visit this review may want to the linked page (page005).*

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