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Brian Street Memorial Issue

A Note About the Formative Years

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The importance and influence of the teaching and writing of Brian Street had already been globally recognised by the time of his untimely death in 2017. He was inordinately modest but would have been nonetheless proud to see this *gedenkschrift* from friends and colleagues highlighting the reasons he had become such a presence in both the worlds of anthropology and literacy.

Brian was a huge part of my life from the time we met as undergraduates in 1963. It was a friendship that lasted fifty-four years. Hilary Callan (this Issue, p. 3-10) has brilliantly captured his intellectual progress through the worlds of anthropology, literature, literacy and education. Here I want to reflect briefly on some of the personal influences and experiences that helped shape that progress during its formative years.

His undergraduate English literature studies under the tutelage of Malcolm Parkes of Keble College, gave Brian a lifelong love of classical literature. The works of Chaucer and Langland laid a foundation that never faded.

The catalyst for a change of direction came, as noted by Hilary Callan, on meeting Godfrey Lienhardt in 1966.

I was then studying at the Institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford, at a time when teaching was a social as well as an academic experience. Both Edward Evans-Pritchard, the then Professor and Head of the Department, and fellow anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt were regularly to be found leading stimulating and wide-ranging discussions in the local pub. When Brian joined me at the Institute he was immediately drawn into the circle - and it was soon clear to see that Godfrey had found in him someone whose understanding and love of literature mirrored his own. A friendship began that lasted until Lienhardt died in 1993.

It was an easy decision for both Brian and myself to remain in the Institute and continue studying anthropology. During that year Brian found his true spiritual home. Helped by Lienhardt, he saw a way he could combine his interest in literature with the context that anthropology offered.

His first focus was on the influences governing early Colonial rulers, who had only the most sparse knowledge of the people who came under their control. What they knew, or thought they knew, was based upon their readings of popular literature of the time. The writings of Rider Haggard, Conrad, Buchan and Rice Burroughs all created and reinforced long-lasting public stereotypes about foreign cultures.

> While anthropological ideas have been subject to the rigours of academic scholarship and have radically changed since the 19th century, the literature which first presented such views to a wider public continues to be read and taught in schools today and has thus fossilized many out-dated academic ideas in a vivid, memorable way that provides the 'proof' as well as the framework for many current prejudices. (Street BV, 'Stereotypes in science and literature', JASO, Vol 1, 1969).

Between 1967 and 1970 Brian immersed himself in research for his doctoral thesis (later published as 'The Savage in Literature') while at the same time editing a new anthropological journal, The Journal of the Anthropology Society of Oxford (JASO). He was convinced that the unique hybrid of literature and anthropology was where his future lay – but there was still fieldwork to be included in the equation.

In 1967 he had a first taste of what fieldwork might entail. At the end of that academic year, a group of scientists from Oxford were looking for additional members for an expedition to the Basseri tribe of Western Iran, (the official Oxford University Expedition for that year). Frederik Barth had already published an intriguing account

of the Basseri, (Nomads of South Persia, 1961) and the prospect of several weeks' fieldwork there tempted both Brian and myself to join what was to become, literally, a bumpy ride.

When we eventually arrived in the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran, Brian tasted for the first time the complexity, challenges and excitement of trying to make sense of a community whose language he didn't speak and about whose culture he had limited second-hand information. It was an experience that was to shape the trajectory of his future, for notwithstanding the Nilotic emphasis of Lienhardt's research - and Oxford anthropology in general - it was Iran that drew Brian back for his own fieldwork.

Education among the Iranian nomadic tribal groups was then complex and fraught with political problems. Sedentarisation was formal government policy and education a central plank in that, but many local tribes still maintained seasonal migrations across the mountains, making education something of a challenge. Just as Brian was getting to grips with the situation tensions between the Government and the nearby powerful Bakhtiari tribe erupted, making any research in Western Iran impossible.

When Brian returned to Iran, research opportunities were still limited. The most promising area proved to be in Eastern Iran, in the province of Khurasan and the hinterland around its capital, Mashad. The village of Cheshmeh became his base, but he was able to look at the system across the whole area by linking up with the University of Mashad and by utilising links with the American Peace Corps whose teachers worked extensively in schools across the Province. This ability to combine the micro with the macro in his work was to serve him well in all his future studies and the rest, as they say, is history. His restless search for answers never dimmed, nor did his natural ability to inspire friendship, co-operation and respect wherever he went.

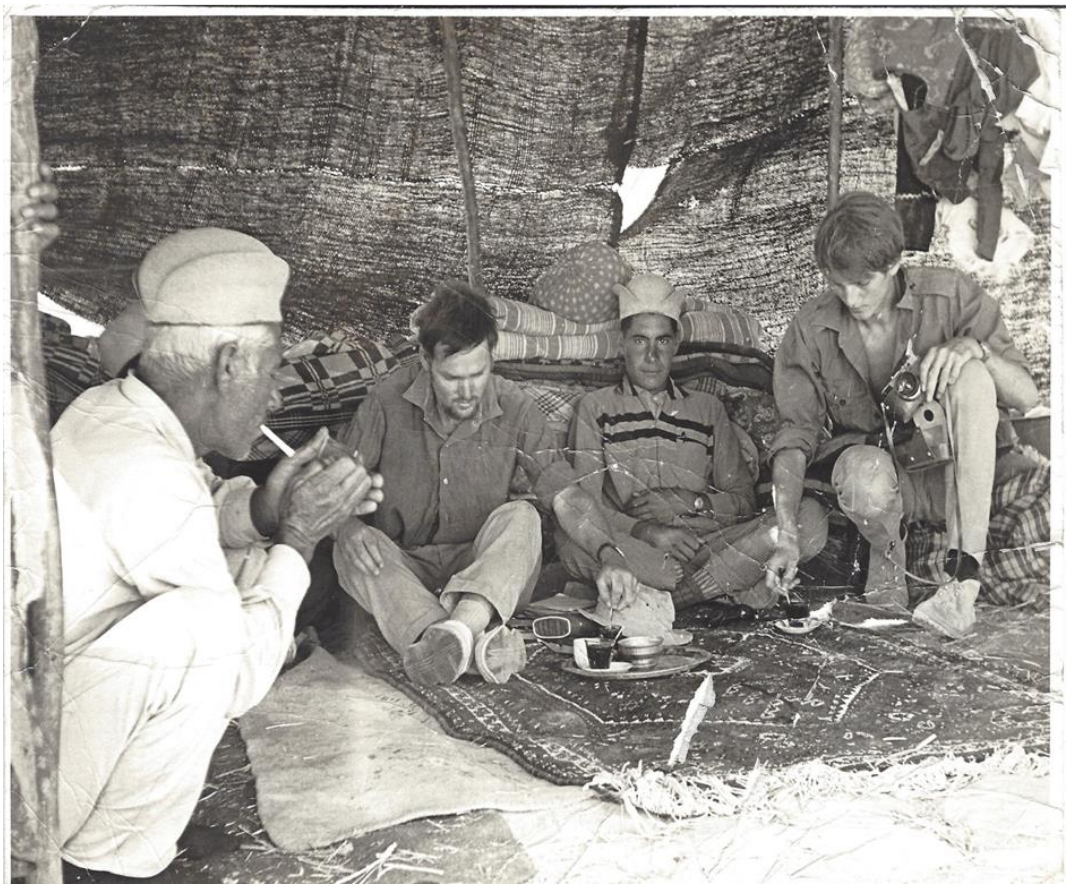

Figure 1: Brian Street and author having tea with the Basseri, Zagros Mountains, 1967.