

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN SIR LEONARD WOOLLEY BE BETTER
DESCRIBED AS AN IMPERIAL ORIENTALIST THAN A
SCIENTIFIC ARCHAEOLOGIST?



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To What Extent Can Sir Leonard Woolley Be Better Described as an Imperial Orientalist Than A Scientific Archaeologist?

Leonard Woolley remains one of the more complex figures in a discussion of British archaeology as his place on the dividing line between gentlemen–archaeologists of the 19th Century and modern Assyriologists separates him from both the Victorian antiquities collectors, such as Austen Layard and, equally, the “modern” archaeologists of today. Indeed, his prominence in British society and, in particular, the group of British intellectuals who took a leading hand in the running of the Middle East and Iraq, through the mandate system, between the two World Wars, means that Woolley is not only remembered for his archaeology but also for his activities with these figures. More so than almost any other archaeologist of the period, he therefore has become inextricably tied to accusations of Imperialism and Orientalism. The ensuing debate is thus centred on whether his excavations were disinterested, scientific exercises, or whether, through his work, he was an agent of British Imperialism, helping up–hold British rule in Iraq which, due to its proximity to Turkey and its position as a gateway to British interests in the East, was regarded as one of the most important British Mandates, even before it was formally mandated at the San Remo Conference on 25th April 1920. Also, the secondary question, which is important to ask about any intellectual working in the Middle East, is whether he was guilty of being a Western “Orientalist” as defined by Edward Said, in his various books and articles¹. Considering the historiography, his skill as self–promoter turned him into a celebrity in his life–time and resulted in some distorted sycophantic praise by some early writers of Sumerian history, such as Kramer (who comments that Woolley’s discoveries, made with “such care and skill”² were of “epoch–making significance”³). No early writer considered whether Woolley was aiding British Imperialism through his work, not even the Marxist G. Childe (who was considered to be one of the 40 most dangerous communist sympathisers in the country by G. Orwell). Today, unconditional praise of his archaeology is less often heard because although Woolley pioneered many modern archaeological techniques (such as using plaster to make casts of spaces in the earth left by decomposing organic matter), his note–taking was erratic (the 4 volumes of his notes about Ur at the British Museum are neither organised chronologically nor by location) and many of his interpretations (including his “embarrassing mistake” of misinterpreting, as donkey–drawn, a “patently” ox–drawn sledge⁴) and reconstructions have started to be criticised (his reconstructions of the Lyre(s) of Ur in the British Museum and the Philadelphian “Ram Caught in a Thicket” have been

¹Edward Said, *Orientalism*

²S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* pg. 129 (1963)

³S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* pg. 129 (1963)

⁴J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* pg. 165 (1992)

remade⁵). Further weight is added to this argument by Childe who, in 1928, as the Royal Tombs were being “opened” by Woolley⁶, and therefore before Woolley’s self–publicity momentum began, frequently criticises him, in a manner not repeated until the 1980s. For example, he suggests that he based some conclusions on insufficient evidence (“his argument rests on a far too literal interpretation of a ‘theoretical section’ of the mound at Susa”⁷) and therefore adds much weight to the idea that that much praise of Woolley was due to his immense fame, built up in the years following his work at Ur (“Ur of Chaldees” went through 7 impressions in its first two years of publication⁸). Unfortunately, considering the possible underlying ideologies (such as Imperialism) of intellectuals and exploring post–modernist criticisms (such as Orientalism) of their work have never been fashionable in Assyriology (the barely Marxist work of Childe seems to be the only example of it). Although there does not appear to be a print assertion of it, the most commonly held and popular view appears to be that Assyriologists, especially in the UK, have tended to be primarily “pragmatic” in their work, rather than dogmatically or ideologically motivated⁹. There are several explanations of this. Due to the large number of “unknowns” still present in our knowledge of ancient Near Eastern history, most Assyriologists are forced to be what E. H. Carr rather derisively termed “event chroniclers”¹⁰ and spend their time considering what actually happened rather than, for example, the economic forces which caused the events to occur. Also Assyriology has so few publishing authors, that there is ample space within the field for discussion, debate and disagreement on more traditional matters, such as source evaluation and interpretation. This strongly contrasts with, for instance, German history from 1918 to 1945 where the publication of around 365 books ever year tends to encourage the taking of extreme points of view by historians simply in order to differentiate their work from that of others. Finally, by being the most ancient history that is frequently discussed, Assyriology cannot easily be used as “evidence” for modern political ideologies, in the way, for instance, Francis Tombs, uses the “impossible” restoration of the French monarchy from 1814 to 1848 to “prove” that France was inevitably heading for a republic, or the many Soviet historians’ use of the 1917 revolutions in Russia to “prove” the truth of Marxist–Leninism.

To evaluate whether Woolley was an Imperialist Orientalist, it is first necessary to consider whether he acted as an Imperial agent, asking to what extent he was attempting to further British Imperial interests in Iraq; then to consider whether he was increasing “the imperial presuppositions of the West” over the

⁵ Expedition, Ram in a Thicket pg. 51

⁶ G. Childe, *The Most Ancient Near East*, pg. Xiii (1928)

⁷ G. Childe, *The Most Ancient Near East*, pg. 246 (1928)

⁸ R. Silverberg, *Great Adventures in Archaeology*, pg. 219 (1964)

⁹ This term “pragmatic” was first suggested to me by Professor Andrew George in an informal “chat” at a SOAS open day in 2003

¹⁰ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (1964)

East¹¹, which would make him a classic Orientalist, before finally considering how far this can be mitigated by viewing his work as disinterested research. This will show that Woolley, although within the scope of being an Orientalist and a holder of all the prejudices of a man of his times, was mostly acting to further archaeology and not empire, and when he did make imperialist statements, this was generally caused by naïvety rather than malignant intent. A word should be added with regards to sources. Woolley has never been subject to much specific study and there is only one biography about him in existence (Victor (H.V.F.) Winstone's 1990 *Woolley of Ur*). However, because of his association with far more famous British men and women who operated in the Middle East in the early 20th Century, such as Max Mallowan (and thus Agatha Christie), Thomas Lawrence ("of Arabia") and even the Rev. Spooner, he frequently is mentioned in passing but rarely in depth in a large number of sources that are primarily concerned with other people. These have to be treated with caution as the authors are rarely specialists in either Assyriology or archaeology (this is particularly apparent in discussions about influences on Christie's novels that were based on her experiences in Iraq, such as her 1936 *Murder In Mesopotamia*). Also, in the case of biographies of Lawrence, many authors tend give a very one-dimensional image of Woolley, such as Lawrence James' statement that:

"In general, Woolley believed that the best way to handle the local peasantry and the Turkish authorities was by browbeating them and, when this failed...a revolver was banished in their faces to a background of harsh words about gunboats off Beirut."¹²

which rather overlooks the moderation with which Woolley dealt with the robbing of his camp, at Ur, on the 7th-8th November 1922 and his description by authors such as Winstone as knowing:

"the importance of tact, and perhaps more importantly *bakhsbeesh* in oriental archaeology."¹³

There is also much underplaying of the importance of Woolley, in order to benefit the Lawrence biographer's hero or anti-hero (in the case of the Lawrence revisionists). For example, James states that David Hogarth (who, as Keeper of the Ashmolean from 1909 to 1927 was an important early teacher of both men):

"praised the 'zeal and aptitude' of his two protégés [Lawrence and Woolley] and acknowledged Lawrence's unrivalled knowledge of Crusading and Hittite history"¹⁴

¹¹T. Ali in a public discussion entitled *The Legacy of Edward Said*, held at SOAS, 25th November 2003

¹²L. James, *The Golden Warrior—The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, pg. 58 (1990)

¹³T. V. F. Winstone, *Woolley of Ur*, pg. 21 (1990)

¹⁴L. James, *The Golden Warrior—The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia*, pg. 76 (1990)

which is almost shocking in the way which it ignores Woolley. Therefore, these sources can only be of occasional use: most usually when they quote or cite otherwise unavailable sources. The only other major problem with the documents relating to Woolley, is that there are a vast number of pamphlets, note books, magazines and the like written by the prolific Woolley and many of them have never been collected, reprinted or otherwise analysed. Therefore, the choice of primary sources used in research on Woolley can only be a selection as it is impossible to consider them all, comprehensively. For the purposes of this work, almost all of his published books have been considered, as well as any official correspondence held in the National Archives concerning either Woolley or his work¹⁵. Additionally, the journals and papers, including the original field notes, which related to the excavation at Ur were explored, on the grounds that this was the most important and career-defining piece of work of Woolley's life and thus would be the most revealing.

Leonard Woolley's work falls neatly into the definition of Orientalism, as given by E. Said, as his work was concerned with "the source of [Europe's] civilisations and languages" in Mesopotamia¹⁶, and he spent most of his career in the Near East, suggesting that he, a "bright young Westerner", found it an "all-consuming passion"¹⁷. These are the two key parts of the definition of an Orientalist. Indeed, Woolley, in *As I Seem to Remember* appears to give textbook examples of Orientalist thought. The chapter heading "East is East"¹⁸ suggests he regarded the Orient as a homogeneous whole which contrasts dramatically to the West. This is a clear example of viewing the Orient only in relationship to the Occident, another signpost of Orientalism. Indeed, Woolley's continues with comments such as:

"It is very difficult to make an estimate of an Oriental, a man so unlike ourselves that you never are sure how he'll interpret the things that he sees and hears; sometimes his interpretation will be quite unexpected."¹⁹

This demonstrates a condescending, superior attitude towards "Orientals" and also, by calling them "Orientals", and thus grouping the Hashimites (Woolley is here referring to King Feisal) together with the other groups who live "with primitive simplicity"²⁰ "in the East"²¹, he creates a worse example of writing about a people with:

"an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual[s]...with narratable life

¹⁵See bibliography for a comprehensive list.

¹⁶E. Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 1

¹⁷E. Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 5

¹⁸L. Woolley, *As I Seem to Remember*, pg. 54 (1962)

¹⁹L. Woolley, *As I Seem to Remember*, pg. 59 (1962)

²⁰L. Woolley, *As I Seem to Remember*, pg. 59 (1962)

²¹L. Woolley, *As I Seem to Remember*, pg. 78 (1962)

histories”²²

than Lawrence, who Said is here criticising for speaking simply of “the Arabs”. In Woolley’s archaeological work too, the contrast between Occident and Orient is striking, as Woolley capitalised on some of the least Western aspects of the civilisations that he found and exploited their sensational values. Particularly important is the discovery, in the royal graves at Ur, of many bodies of servants and courtesans which Woolley, despite stating that,

“it is impossible to give a decisive answer...[as to] how the victims in the royal graves met their death”²³

immediately states that they,

“walked to their places, took some kind of drug— opium or hashish would serve— and lay down in order; after the drug had worked, whether it produced sleep or death, the last touches were given to their bodies and the pit was filled in.”²⁴

Here there is an obvious reading into the facts of romanticism and sensationalism and an exploitation of what G. Leick calls, “the power of narrative strands in archaeological assessment”²⁵. She maintains, with regards to the passage on the sacrifices, “none of these ‘proofs’ hold up” and concludes:

“Woolley’s inability to... conceive of [other possible explanations]... owes as much to Victorian sensibilities about death as to his lack of ethnographic knowledge”²⁶

Despite going too far, by emotively calling Woolley’s generally enlightened inter-war views, “Victorian”, it is true that this passage suggests that Near Eastern people were generally less civilised than those in the West. Woolley’s emphasis on Abraham further shows this by suggesting that by leaving Ur and its paganism, he is an example of “the rational process of evolution”²⁷. This indicates that “Orientals” left behind in Ur were less evolved or “lower” life. Their development into Babylonians, Persians and Arabs, three countries causing the largest threat to the Western civilisations of Judea, Greece and Britain, is clear, if implicit. This adds weight to the Orientalist accusation, as it is a conservative, chauvinistic view of the relationship between Britain and her Empire, with the Orient being both an “outsider” and an “incorporated but weaker partner for the West”²⁸. Indeed, this view was probably the one closest to Woolley’s heart

²²Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 229

²³L. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*, pg. 59 (1929)

²⁴L. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees* pg. 60 (1929)

²⁵G. Leick, *Mesopotamia* pg. 115 (2001)

²⁶G. Leick, *Mesopotamia* pg. 115 (2001)

²⁷L. Woolley, *Abraham Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins* pg. 18 (1935)

²⁸Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 208

in his excavations at Ur, as it was prevalent throughout the archaeological society in the Middle East. This is supported by B. H. Bourdillon, writing to the Iraqi High Commission, who justified taking one third of the objects found at Ur to Britain permanently, and another third being taken (at Iraq's expense) temporarily by stating that

“Antiquities from Iraq are not sent to England for the benefit of either the British government or the British public but because it is hoped that the exhibition of them in England may stimulate an interest in archaeology in Iraq, and assist in the raising of funds for further excavation”²⁹

This can again be seen as chauvinistic and condescending. Indeed, with the final third being sent to Woolley's other sponsors, Pennsylvania University, Iraq would have been left without any antiquities from Ur for the first few years. By agreeing to this three-way division of objects, in order to appease his sponsors, and by fighting for them to retain many objects (several were divided “on the toss of a rupee”³⁰, suggesting the arguments were gridlocked), Woolley supported this arrangement. As the division was rarely fair, with many dramatic objects from Ur being sent to Britain (such as a “Ram Caught in the Thicket”, the “Royal Standard” and “Royal Board Game”, now occupying important positions in the British Museum), and many lesser but worthy objects made of electrum, rather than gold and lapis-lazuli, being given to Philadelphia and only objects considered to have social importance going to Iraq, Woolley does seem to have been similar to 19th Century antiquities-gatherers and also aiming to further subject the Iraqis by only giving them mundane and domestic objects, rather than extraordinary and national ones.

However, Woolley appears to disagree with an aspect of British Imperial policy: the British aim to give Iraq legitimacy in the first years of independence from the Ottomans by supporting moderate nationalists, such as King Feisal, who viewed the new Iraqi State as a restoration of pre-Islamic states³¹ in the region, over religious and pan-Arab nationalists, such as Imam Shirazi (who led the Great Iraqi Revolution), which would suggest he was not entirely an Imperialist. It is highlighted by G. Bell when she comments about a milking scene found in the Royal Tombs:

“The really agonizing part was after lunch when I had to tell them that I must take the milking scene [i.e. from Woolley and his team so that it would join the collection of artefacts which stayed in Iraq]. I can't do otherwise. It's unique and it depicts the life of

²⁹B. H. Bourdillon writing to the Iraqi High Commission, March 1928, Public Records Office, CO 730/133/3

³⁰T. V. F. Winstone, *Woolley of Ur*, pg. 125 (1990)

³¹i.e. the states which existed before the foundation of the first Islamic nation in c.622 C.E.

the country at a very early date...it broke Woolley's heart, though he expected the decision"³²

This suggests Woolley wanted to remove the frieze, even though its retention supported Britain's aim. Although Bell claimed to be acting as an Iraq minister with the interests of Iraq at heart³³, it seems certain she would not have become Iraqi Director of Antiquities had the British High Commission in Iraq not believed she would support British policies. Indeed, the basic principle of the three-way division of finds and, indeed, the simple idea of removing antiquities from the mandated Iraq was not very congenial to the development of a moderate nationalism, based on the idea of pre-Islamic societies. Nevertheless, H. Winstone's claim, that Woolley was acting,

"like any other archaeologist [as he was] apt to protest when his best finds were taken from him"³⁴

is probably more correct as, agreeing with the general feeling of pragmatism in Assyriology, this seems the most pragmatic answer. It should, however, be considered that, in the longer term, the Ba'hist revolutionaries, who overthrew the monarchy in Iraq, based much of their legitimacy on the idea of a pre-Islamic nation, spending money on reconstructing Babylon and Ur, once they had gained power, in order to give the country a sense of history going back to the Sumerians (whilst King Feisal emphasised his descent from the Prophet Mohammed and, in many respects, used religious authority to gain legitimacy). Therefore, Woolley, by attempting to prevent the idea of a pre-Islamic nation as a base for Iraqi nationalism, may have unintentionally had a better idea for the country than the British authorities. This creates a paradox. On the one hand, Woolley can be seen as an Imperialist, as he strongly supported the removal of a great many artefacts from Iraq to Britain and America, maintaining they would be safer, or even that he had the right of removal (as he had excavated them, through a British Mandate permit), suggesting a chauvinistic view of the superiority of Britain and the USA over Iraq. However, he also refused to support British policy forwarded by G. Bell, of releasing artefacts which, when displayed in Iraq, could create the basis for a pre-Islamic national psyche and thus lay the basis for a moderate secular nationalist movement which the British authorities supported, suggesting he was not an Imperialist as he did not support the Imperial policy. This adds weight to the argument that he was ultimately unconcerned about British policy for Iraq but wanted to pursue his *rôle* as an archaeologist there and, although he would from time to time do his best to help the motherland (most notably with his spying on the Ottomans in the First World War), he only was truly interested in being an archaeologist.

³²T. V. F. Winstone, *Woolley of Ur*, pg. 125 (1990)

³³T. V. F. Winstone, *Woolley of Ur*, pg. 125 (1990)

³⁴T. V. F. Winstone, *Woolley of Ur*, pg. 120 (1990)

The arguments against Woolley being an Imperial Orientalist mostly rely on the fair assumption that he was operating outside the political situation in Iraq or, at the very least; the other factors which influenced his excavations over-rode his political motives for excavating. This is best suggested by the lack of topological information which would have been useful to British efforts in World War One in his joint work with T.E. Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin*³⁵ suggesting an unwillingness to go greatly out of his way in order to collect information useful to the British war effort. Unfortunately, the “other factors” which influenced Woolley more greatly than Imperialism and Orientalism, changed frequently during his life and work, from wanting to raise public awareness of the discipline of Assyriology to an attempt to “prove” the Bible, or parts of it. As Woolley began excavating at Ur in 1923, it was inevitable that parallels would be drawn between his discoveries and those of H. Carter and Lord Carnarvon, as the splendour of Tutankhamen’s tomb had been found the previous season. This is reflected in the time and effort Woolley spent excavating the Royal Tombs at Ur, rather than the rest of the city: his field notes contain only 3 volumes about the city, itself, and 12 about the Royal Tombs, whilst his junior assistant, M. Mallowan, was entrusted with a quarter of the city’s excavation but none of the tombs’.

When it became apparent that despite being rich in gold and lapis-lazuli the tombs could still not match the levels of precious artefacts found in Tutankhamen’s tomb, Woolley noticeably decided to change tactic and concentrated on showing that the Sumerian city-states predated Egyptian civilisation by many hundreds of years. Woolley’s editors seemed to have viewed this idea as the main selling point of his work, as they constructed the blurb for “The Sumerians” around it:

“Woolley...shows quite clearly that when Egyptian civilization had begun, the civilization of the Sumerians had already flourished for at least 2000 years. The idea that Egypt was the earliest civilization has been entirely exploded.”³⁶

This shows that the theme was marketed by Woolley in order to increase knowledge of his work, which seems effective as it was taken up by writers, such as C. W. Ceram, who devotes a chapter to “Sir Leonard Woolley: The Oldest Culture in the World”, in his classic work “Gods, Graves and Scholars”³⁷. Indeed, it is probably still a great attraction for many Assyriologists, whether professional or not. Alongside this effort to popularise his work, by demonstrating its extreme age, was the emphasis on Biblical implications of his discovery which were dramatic for the early 20th Century. However, it is apparent that Woolley did not set out to prove Biblical passages but rather seized on the opportunity so to

³⁵L. Woolley and T. E. Lawrence, *The Wilderness of Zin*, (1915)

³⁶Blurb to L. Woolley, *The Sumerians*, (1965)

³⁷C. W. Ceram, *Gods, Graves and Scholars—The Story of Archaeology* pg. 296 (1965)

do, when it arose. This is shown by the fact that Pits F and Z in which Woolley “discovered” the “flood mud” at Ur which, in turn lead him to conclude the truthfulness of the Noah’s Flood story were dug, not by Woolley but by Mallowan³⁸. This suggests that Woolley did not expect to find anything of major importance in them, certainly not something of such importance as to “prove” the truth of some of the earliest stories in Genesis. Indeed, Woolley appears to have reworked the facts of this discovery to heighten its drama and to take credit for the discovery, rather than sharing it with Mallowan. For instance he later wrote,

“I sent the men back to widen the hole”³⁹

when the mud was reached and the workmen suggested that the pits were therefore dead. However, Mallowan would have been in charge and thus the one who issued commands. Woolley’s story of summoning his wife, who he states was the only person who would dare give the true conclusion,

“My wife came along and looked and was asked the same question [how to explain the mud] and she turned away remarking casually, ‘Well of course, it’s the Flood’. That was the right answer”*T. V. F. Winstone, Woolley of Ur, pg. 155 (1990)*

seems to contradict Mallowan’s immediate academic record in his official site notes:

“The dark grey thickens at the bottom [of Pit F] showing a decrease in the size of the water levels as the strata accumulated”*M. Mallowan, Field Notes for Excavations at Ur, Arched Room—British Museum*

suggesting Woolley was dramatising the story to gain publicity for the work and himself, especially as he immediately sent news of the discovery in a letter to the Times⁴⁰. This offers an innocuous explanation to his work on Abraham, as it links with his aim for promotion of himself and his subject in the public’s eyes, suggesting he was operating more as a celebrity than an Imperialist. One can also explain much of the removal of antiquities as an exercise in preservation. Unlike Layard, who took only what he thought he could sell and was instrumental in some terrible acts of wilful destruction, Woolley seemed keen on making detailed observations before removing objects, and was careful to prevent information being lost, suggesting an almost modern, scientific approach to his work. Had any other archaeologist discovered objects, such as the Standard of Ur or the Lyres of Ur, up until the late 1960s, they would

³⁸M. Mallowan, *Field Notes for Excavations at Ur, Arched Room—British Museum*

³⁹L. Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees*, pg 26 (1929)

⁴⁰*The Times* March 16th 1929, Quoted *Ur Excavations, Volume IV—Early Periods 1935*, Arched Room—British Museum

have almost certainly been lost as few would have used wax and plaster to stabilise extremely fragile objects in the ground. Indeed Y. Rakic's compliment that Woolley possessed a "genius as an excavator"⁴¹ when operating on small objects, shows how important his conservation techniques were, as it is rare for modern archaeologists to compliment earlier ones on technique. The most striking example of modern praise is, however, in Maude de Schauensee's *Two Lyres from Ur*, where Woolley's field notes⁴², photographs⁴³ and books⁴⁴ are treated without criticism as if they were modern archaeological texts. The comment that Woolley, on returning to Pennsylvania in 1955 said that the Lapis-bearded Lyre:

"Did not look the way he remembered it when he excavated it"⁴⁵

almost impertinently made at a ceremony in his honour, further highlights the difference between his methodical excavation and the rather less scientific work of those who attempted to conserve and restore the artefacts which he brought back.

Indeed, M. de Schauensee general conclusion on this lyre, that:

"Our study, therefore... [has] also made clear that Woolley's original identification and careful description of this lyre as a single unique instrument were correct"⁴⁶

shows again Woolley's skill and her praise is, in general, constant and unequivocal:

"It is due to Woolley's extraordinarily careful excavation and meticulous recording that so much information was preserved... The small size of Woolley's staff and the large volume of material made his precise recording even more remarkable."⁴⁷

This shows that Woolley did truly work to the highest level possible in his field at the time and, although that was, of course, below what would be expected today, it is not incorrect to say that he set the standard for archaeology and he was often working beyond what was expected. It might also be possible to view even the exporting so many objects from Iraq as preservation as, with the instability in the region, it was inevitable that many places of archaeological importance would suffer, either through poor restoration or pillaging. For many

⁴¹ *Expedition, Ram in a Thicket*, pg. 54 (1998)

⁴² M. de Schauensee, *Two Lyres from Ur*, e.g. Plate 7 (2002)

⁴³ M. de Schauensee, *Two Lyres from Ur*, e.g. Plate 3 (2002)

⁴⁴ M. de Schauensee, *Two Lyres from Ur*, Fig. 3-4 (2002)

⁴⁵ M. de Schauensee, *Two Lyres from Ur*, pg. 1 (2002)

⁴⁶ M. de Schauensee, *Two Lyres from Ur*, pg. 47 (2002)

⁴⁷ M. de Schauensee, *Two Lyres from Ur*, pg. 9 (2002)

objects, removal from Iraq has guaranteed their safety, whilst being in Iraq resulted in destruction. This can be seen by comparing the lyres from Ur at the British Museum and Pennsylvania, which have recently undergone a reinterpretive restoration, with those in Iraq, which were recently destroyed⁴⁸. Therefore, one can see Woolley as more a saviour of Iraq's history than a pillager of it, because he took many objects to safety. This view was recently echoed by the Arts Fund exhibition entitled "Saved!"⁴⁹, showing objects from similar excavations to Woolley's, which were lifted from Iraq on payment of a donation to the archaeologist to continue excavating.

Therefore, to conclude, one can see that Leonard Woolley fits the scope of being an Orientalist and perhaps even an antiquities collector but cannot truly be described as an "Imperialist". He held a chauvinistic, if affectionate, view of the "Orientals" and lifted many of their most precious objects without real permission from the people of Iraq. However, it was inevitable that anyone working in Iraq at this time would have been similar in their actions or attitudes. Therefore, to call Woolley an Orientalist seems merely tautologous as it seems impossible for any European to become an Assyriologist without being, at some stage, a "bright young Westerner", finding the Near East an "all-consuming passion"⁵⁰. Equally, this form of ancient history is so ancient that when writing about the Sumerians, "an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual[s]...with narratable life histories"⁵¹ will automatically arise because of a simple lack of information about more than a handful of Sumerian individuals. This is the problem of Said; it was effectively impossible to be British and in Iraq and not be an Orientalist. Indeed, this tautology does begin to open up more problems with Said's work. Although Said, to the end, states that he:

"never taught *anything* about the Middle East, being by training and practice a teacher of the mainly European and American humanities, a specialist in comparative literature"⁵²

this denial of the political edge to his work, which includes titles such as *The Question of Palestine, Peace and Its Discontents: Gaza to Jericho 1993-1995*, and *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, seems churlish, at best, cynically misleading at worst. Said was always closely linked to the politics of the Israelis and Palestinians, even being widely considered for a ministerial *rôle* in Yassar Arafat's first cabinet⁵³ and Orientalism can be seen as partly an attempt to remove foreign and Western influences from the intellectual world of the Middle East, in combination with the removal of the:

⁴⁸ *Expedition, Ram in a Thicket*, pg. 54 (1998)

⁴⁹ Hayward Gallery 2003-4

⁵⁰ E. Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 5

⁵¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 229

⁵² E. Said, Preface to the 2003 edition of *Orientalism* Pg. xii (2003), repeated in *The Last Interview* (2004)

⁵³ Discussed in, *The Last Interview* (2004)

“illegal and imperial invasion and occupation of Iraq by Britain and the United States.”⁵⁴

This seems an odd comment in the preface to a book which is mostly concerned with culture and intellectual writing. Indeed, this combination, in both Said’s work and elsewhere, of attacking both Western scholarship and Western politics has recently been considered in books such as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit’s *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* which suggests that some sort of reaction against Orientalism is developing in the West. However, Said’s statement that, throughout his life, he delighted in being “oppositional”⁵⁵ must also be taken into account and perhaps one could regard his work more as a way of attacking and seeking to undermine Western work on the East with the more general aim of keeping the West out of the East. In the end, therefore, although Woolley was an Orientalist, this rather ugly term seems almost meaningless when applied to a figure such as Woolley, who did so much to preserve Iraqi pre-Islamic history. Although he removed many objects from the country unfairly and treated Iraq with what would be today regarded as a less acceptable attitude, the other influences which affected his work were more important. Self-publicity, religion and, in particular, science, were by far the most pre-eminent motives for his work. Indeed, as a final thought, it would not be too much to suggest that these three motives have driven, and will continue to drive generations of Assyriologists and archaeologists to Iraq, in search of both personal fame and new knowledge to further mankind’s understanding of the history of this region.

NB. Any emphasis in quotations is that of the original author.

⁵⁴E. Said, Preface to the 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, Pg. xiii (2003)

⁵⁵E. Said, *The Last Interview* (2004)

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