

WILLIAM BORLASE by P.A.S. Pool. The Royal Institution of Cornwall, Truro, 1986. x + 314 pp; frontispiece + 12 pl. Price £14.95, hardback.

It needs an effort to remember that William Borlase was born in the last decade of the seventeenth century, for his acute perceptions of Scilly's changing sea-levels, and its characteristic chambered cairns, have endured to this day. Essentially it is only the elegance of his prose that reminds us that his visit took place in 1752. To recall that his stay on Scilly, which led to his letter to the Royal Society and his renowned book, was only two weeks long and that this and his other books were produced in a single decade, emphasises the singular qualities inherent in a man who spent his life in the quiet of Ludgvan Rectory, three miles from Penzance. Here he propounded a clear philosophy of antiquarian endeavour and devised various presentations and innovations, almost all in advance of their age. However, although he made a unique contribution to embryo prehistoric studies, extending the criteria set by John Aubrey in his *Monumenta* and establishing standards of observational accuracy which have excited the approbation of succeeding generations, William Borlase's pioneer work in climatology and geology were of equal distinction. He was still in an age when a broad spectrum of scientific activity could be conveniently subsumed beneath the baldachin of *Natural Philosophy*. How then, one might ask, is it that this unusual and distinguished scholar has never been numbered among the father figures of our discipline? And this despite his repute in Cornwall and the preservation to this day of his papers! There is no easy answer, but, nonetheless, the advance of Cornish archaeology during the past three decades, to a point where its ideas and approaches are setting the pace for much that is coming to pass elsewhere, has made an authoritative biography of William Borlase necessary although perhaps not inevitable.

For many years now, Peter Pool has been immersed in William Borlase's life and work, and we are indebted to him for the stimulating paper that appeared in 1966 (JRIC). Now he has put a biography before us, saying, modestly, that it is mainly for Cornish readers. It is undoubtedly a signal contribution to the history of archaeology (besides other disciplines) and all who pursue this vital dimension will find pleasure in its pages besides profiting from the insights that it imparts.

As a demonstration of simplistic clarity in the ordering of material, the book is unsurpassed and therein is its strength. The complexities inherent in

the consideration of one whose contacts were all by letter are given order while the observations that prompt the discerning reader are balanced, conveying neither too much nor too little. Indeed, as with all well-wrought academic books, he puts it down wanting to know more about its subject. Thus *Background and Youth* delineates the unique world of the Cornish gentry from which our hero emerged, *Preparation* is notable for the marshalling of the many factors that made the man, *Achievement* chronicles the astoundingly concentrated circumstances surrounding the publication of the famous books (*Observations on the Ancient and Present State of the Islands of Scilly* (1756); *The Antiquities of Cornwall* (1754 & 1769); *The Natural History of Cornwall* (1758) and the many papers. *Latter Years* followed by *Last Days and Posterity* complete the quintet. These last provide a rounded view of the established scholar at work and a perspective of his descendants which includes the gifted, but unfortunate, William Copeland Borlase (*Naemia Cornubiae* (1872); *The Dolmens of Ireland* (1897)), his great-great-grandson, frequently confused with his forbear. An appendix lists the Borlase manuscripts which are happily numerous in Cornwall. Also included is the *Parochial Queries* of 1752, a searching questionnaire which, were it updated, could be used even today! All things considered, the book is refreshingly free from the constant and irritating misprints which, despite stringent proof corrections mar so many present-day publications, while the index is easy to use.

In the last year of his life William Borlase wrote a measured retrospection, in a sense a personal stocktaking, an extended letter to William Huddesford of Trinity who became Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in 1766. This detached and percipient observer, who had set in motion the delicate process which led to the Oxford Convocation conferring upon William Borlase the degree of Doctor of Civil Law in 1766, planned the biographies of leading antiquaries of his own times and those previous to them, in which this was to be included. In the event, Huddesford, who also died in 1772, was to produce only the first

volume (*John Leland, Thomas Heame and Anthony à Wood* (1772)) and this remarkable undertaking, which would have given Borlase his rightful place among England's antiquaries, was never continued. When it appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (Dec 1803) and in Nichols' *Literary Anecdotes* (1812) the climate had changed and its impact was lost. Undoubtedly this narrative showed how he wished posterity to remember him and it is the basis of Peter Pool's chapters one to four. Comparison with the assembled material that has been brought to bear, demonstrates Borlase's objectivity, yet it is thought by many that a biographer must bare the man behind the mask. Moreover, in this account, which primarily treats the remarkable antiquarian work, it could be considered that there might have been greater cognizance of the intellectual and literary world of the earlier eighteenth century of which such studies were an important component. Correspondence within a circle, such as with Charles Lyttleton, Jeremiah Miles, Thomas Pennant and the like, was the usage of the times and has been superseded by the sending of offprints. Borlase's correspondents, antiquarian and otherwise, were distinguished and influential and thus some of his ideas may, indirectly, have gained wider currency. Tracing them would be a complicated task, beyond the bounds of the book's intention, but substance could have been given to the names via, perhaps, a biographical appendix or some such device. Recourse to the Dictionary of National Biography is necessary at times and that is not always readily available!

Manipulatory consideration apart, enjoyable consideration of the life, times, and works of William Borlase, is greatly enriched by reading Peter Pool's book. The reader's feelings are moved by the glimpses of pleasant domesticity with his family, its tragedies and problems. The illustrations match the theme and Borlase's own sensitive and skilful portraits of his wife Anne and their son Christopher provide a fitting and sympathetic complement to the text.

Paul Ashbee