ARCHAEOLOGY
and the
ARCHDEMON
Near a busy intersection in the town of Kisumu stands a stone memorial to the memory of the Archdeacon Walter Edwin Owen. Its inscription reads:

He devoted his life fearlessly to the fight for justice for all and to the care of the sick and needy.

Older residents of Nyanza will remember Owen, the outspoken religious and political figure of the 1920s '30s, and '40s, but few are aware of Owen's significant contribution to the fields of archaeology, geology, and paleontology.

Owen was Anglican Archdeacon of what was then Kavirondo District from 1918 until shortly before his death at Limuru in 1945. Born in Birmingham in 1878, he arrived in Mombasa in 1904 to begin his missionary career. During his early years in Uganda and Tanzania, he revealed a remarkable talent for African languages and an unusual interest in African customs. Owen's African church members were well acquainted with his translations of the Bible and hymns into Dholuo and other African languages, and with what Church Missionary Society secretary H.D. Hooper in an obituary refers to as Owen's "transparent love for his fellow man." C.G. Richards, C.M.S. literature secretary, estimates that during the influenza and bubonic plague epidemics of 1919, Owen inoculated 11,000 people, fetching serum by motorcycle from Kisumu.

By the 1930s Owen was well established in Kenya as the founder of the Kavirondo "Taxpayers' Association and the proponent of many controversial reforms in colonial administration, which he promoted in frequent articles in the East African Standard. In these essays he stressed the need to consult Africans on the issues which concerned them, such as the hut tax and forced labour, and he earned the title of "Archdemon" from irate members of the Congregation of All Saints' Cathedral, Nairobi, after a controversial sermon there in June of 1922.

If the settler community and Owen's missionary colleagues disagreed with his social, economic and political ideas, they were often won over by his commanding physical presence, personal charm, hospitality, indefatigable energy, and by what one friend refers to as "his shattering skill at chess". Owen's scientific contemporaries, while often discounting his opinions, were forced into grudging admiration by the sheer number of Owen's archaeological and paleontological finds and their obvious importance. During the 27 years he was Archdeacon of Kavirondo, Owen discovered more than 70 archaeological and paleontological sites. His discovery of elephant limb bones from Kanjera in southwestern Nyanza was important among the factors prompting L.S.B. Leakey to devote his third Cambridge expedition to an exploration of western Kenya. This expedition resulted in the discovery of several rich Miocene fossil sites, notably the Rusinga Island localities, and of the Kanjera human fossil remains, subject of much dispute. The famous "proconsul africanus" skull was subsequently discovered at one of these sites by Mary Leakey in 1948.

Owen's interest in geology was first aroused by his fascination with rocks encountered on long walks during his boyhood in Northern Ireland. His later commitment to the welfare of his African congregation caused him to visit them personally at their often remote and inaccessible homes, traversing enormous tracts of Nyanza on foot, bicycle, motorcycle, and finally, automobile from his home at Ng'iya, Siaya District. In the course of these visits he frequently encountered archaeological and paleontological sites, and with his customary energy he often returned to them for further examination during his periods of leave.

Specimens recovered during these expeditions were usually sent by Owen to what was then the Coryndon Memorial Museum, Nairobi, or sold to museums abroad, primarily to the British Museum (Natural History) to finance further collecting activities. Specimens acquired from Owen in this way now form the basis of the British Museum's Middle Miocene fossil mammal collection. Sale of specimens has unfortunately resulted in their dispersal from Kenya. Owen, aware as he was of the fossils' pecuniary value, would not have parted with his finds were it not for financial need and his desire to use the funds for yet more fossil hunting. He was an avid collector, with a fascination for fossils and a love of their possession. He enjoyed laying his finds out on a 12-foot trestle table on the verandah of his house at Ng'iya and puzzling over them before breakfast. Thus Owen was bitterly opposed to the progressive legislation of 1936, prompted by Leakey, which made fossil specimens the property of the colonial government. The new law deprived Owen of a source of income and of the joy of ownership of fossils, but he did comply with the letter of the law which he saw as unnecessarily hampering his activities. In a letter to a paleontological colleague, Owen laments, "It rather robs collecting of its zest, if the stuff is demanded after one has gone to all the trouble and expense of finding it".

Owen's enthusiasm for fossils and fossil sites sometimes resulted in their destruction due to the shortcomings in his field.
techniques. Excavation techniques were much less rigorous in the early decades of this century than they are today, and Owen had received no formal training. His excavation activities were somewhat curtailed by the colonial law, but even the pleadings of British Museum staff could not persuade him to refrain from toying with fragile specimens, sometimes with disastrous results. Modern scientists would cringe in horror to read the following words:

"That night, by the light of a hurricane lamp, with a hammer and a screwdriver, I chipped away the limestone and exposed the teeth... It was hopeless to try to preserve any of the head bones for they were shapeless (Owen 1939, part II, p. 122)."

Owen's interest in archaeology increased over that in paleontology during the 1930s, as he became aware of the archaeological richness of Nyanza. He discovered dozens of stone age sites in western Kenya, collected at most of them, and excavated several. He corresponded with many of the key figures of archaeology of the day, including C. van Reit Lowe and B.D. Malan of South Africa, and Henry Balfour and Miles Burkitt of the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford. His most frequent contacts in the field of archaeology were Louis and Mary Leakey, but his particular friend and mentor was E.J. Wayland, then director of the Geological Survey of the Uganda Protectorate. Inevitably, through these associations Owen became immersed in the tides of professional jealousy which swept about these figures.

J. D. Solomon was at that time engaged in his geological work in East Africa which would eventually demonstrate the invalidity of the pluvial chronology, which had been designed chiefly by Leakey and Wayland. The pluvial chronology was the theory, accepted by archaeologists for years, that the age of archaeological sites could be accurately assessed by correctly identifying the "pluvial" or "interpluvial" period to which they belonged. These wet and dry periods were thought to have been contemporaneous throughout sub-Saharan Africa. It is now appreciated that climatic change during the Pleistocene was considerably more complex than this scheme would suggest, and that, as Solomon pointed out, tectonics and volcanic activity account for many of the phenomena thought to illustrate the pluvial hypothesis.

Owen had the greatest respect for his archaeological mentors, and in letters he invariably refers to himself as a "keen amateur." It was his practice to circulate his archaeological manuscripts among his colleagues before attempting publication. Thus his own observations sometimes became lost amid his colleagues' many academic grievances and disputes. One notable example is Owen's report concerning the archaeological site at Ngira, near Karungu, south of Homa Bay in South Nyanza, where human remains had been found. Owen became so perplexed at the conflicting comments of experts Leakey and Wayland over the site's position in the pluvial framework, and by the site's obvious geological complexity, that despite his extensive fieldwork he gave up the idea of publishing a report at all. An extreme example of Owen's failure to assert himself among his archaeological peers concerns his article describing stone age finds in rock shelters near Kisumu (Owen 1941). By allowing van Reit Lowe to alter the manuscript before publication, Owen found himself credited with the authorship of statements concerning the cultural affinities of his finds with which he himself did not agree.

Owen did make a number of serious contributions to the scientific literature, however. He published an account of his collecting activities in the Journal of the Royal African Society (Owen 1939), a short note in the prestigious British anthropological journal, Man, (Owen 1940), describing his discoveries at the site of Kombewa, Seme Location, Kisumu District, and another (Owen 1941) in which he describes finds from several northern Nyanza rock shelters. Owen also co-authored two papers on archaeological topics with the Leakeys. The first (Leakey and Owen 1945) concerns Early and Middle Stone Age sites in Western Kenya, and represents the culmination of many years of prospecting for stone tools by Owen. The second, published posthumously (Leakey, Owen and Leakey 1948), discusses a type of neolithic pottery discovered by Owen at a site a few miles from his home at Ng’iya, Siaya District.

Owen's preoccupation with things archaeological naturally caused some friction between him and his missionary fellows. Owen appears to have been fascinated by the contemplation of past life forms and the activities of our human and prehuman ancestors. Nowhere in his papers is any mental conflict evident between this study and his religious beliefs. But when he attempted to author an introductory archaeological text for African students he encountered difficulty with his missionary superiors. After C. G. Richards of the Church Missionary Bookshop Committee had read Owen's manuscript, he urged him to consider "the effect it will have on African minds" and suggested alterations in the text to bring it into line with the Biblical account of creation, so as not to damage the Church in Kenya. Despite the
urgings of the Leakeys to publish elsewhere, after an irate exchange of letters with the C.M.S. Owen evidently became disillusioned and gave up the project. In a letter to Richards of 1942 he observes sadly, "We are more likely to drive people out of the Church... if we persist in regarding it as so fragile that no breath of modern knowledge can be allowed to ruffle it."

Owen's liberalism is confirmed by Louis Leakey, who in his memoirs (Leakey 1974:138) refers to Owen as "a freethinker, who did not accept all the dogmas of his church." He describes a conversation in 1929 with missionary colleagues in which Owen vigorously defended the idea of the presence of man in East Africa prior to 4004 B.C., the date of creation as computed by Archbishop Usher.

In view of these liberal ideas and Owen's appreciation of the monetary values of fossils, it seems unlikely that the story repeated by Sonia Cole (1975:183f) in her biography of Leakey regarding the missing Moboko Island skull has any basis in fact. According to this recurring rumour, Owen found a "human-like" fossil skull in the Miocene beds at Moboko, and then, either unable to cope with the implications of his find, or unwilling to part with it, either destroyed or reburied it.

Owen makes no mention of this find in his extant correspondence or field notes, but according to Cole, Owen's wife recalled a skull which interested her husband greatly being packed for shipment to the British Museum in 1944 or 1945. A possible explanation for its disappearance, if it existed, is that it was lost in transit to England from East Africa in the closing years of World War II.

In other matters Owen was more conservative. His attitude towards the involvement of women in science is surprising, considering his efforts to improve the social and political status of African women. He achieved a degree of notoriety in the local press for his passionate opposition to the forced marriage of young girls. But in a letter to Wayland of 1936 Owen comments, "... I think that these expeditions are better when womenfolk do not join them. My wife never joins me." Olive Owen, herself a missionary, appears to have played no part in Owen's scholarly activities, other than an occasional visit to his digs and providing hospitality for scientists on their visits to the Owen home in Ng'iya.

In short, Owen was a man of his time and not outside the realm of conflict brought about by social, religious, political, and scholarly change. Many of the economic and political reforms he advocated so zealously are now commonplace in modern Kenya, and his archaeological and paleontological discoveries, though largely unacknowledged, have formed the basis of all subsequent work in the Nyanza Province of Western Kenya. One of the last of a long line of British clergymen-naturalists, Owen contributed much to the study of fossils and artifacts from the African past which so fascinated him.

Acknowledgements
I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Mary D. Leakey who kindly allowed me to examine many of the Archdeacon Owen's papers then in her possession, and to the Church of the Province of Kenya, who have given their permission for Plate I to be reproduced from their archives. Plates 2 through 7 are reproduced from material in the archives of the National Museums of Kenya.

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