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## *A Son Remembers*

GABRIEL WARREN

My father was an academic, but certainly not only that. He was a keen observer of the human animal and its behavior patterns, sometimes predictable, sometimes erratic. Above all, whether in the form of classroom discussions, lectures, poetry, fiction, or expository prose, he was a *storyteller*, teasing meaning and implication out of the observed world.

I, on the other hand, am none of the above. In jest, I sometimes characterize myself as the black sheep of the family, since my sister Rosanna, like our father, is a professor and like both our parents, a writer. I consider myself a landscape sculptor, but this does not mean that I bounce about on bulldozers; there are scars enough on the land. Rather, the forms and patterns that I find in my travels, especially in ice, give me an armature for my visual, intellectual, and emotional explorations in metal.

But, am I really so different in the way that I joke about, because I work with my hands? I had never really thought about this until a few months ago – it never even occurred to me to ask myself the question. My other family members have always to me been just who they are, and I am just who I am. However, I recently presented a slide talk at Western Kentucky University. Hitherto, I have been scrupulous about leaving my family origins out of my professional life, but at this location – Bowling Green, Kentucky – it seemed to me that it would have been silly to do so. As a result, I gave it some thought, for the first time.

In pondering about how I would stitch this together, a few points of tangency seemed reasonable starting points. One is that like my father, I rely on close observation of the world as the starting point for meaning. This may be somewhat obvious in writing, but it is not at all the rule in the visual arts at a time where the purely cerebral often supplants the referential. Another is that both my father and I address subject material from which we are absent. My father loved the South and wrote about it almost exclusively during a long and productive lifetime, but he felt more freedom of imagination somehow by not living there. In a similar way, my sources are also distant; I feel an internal intimacy with them that only a yearning for the absent can bring. I have been lucky enough to be sent to Antarctica and to the High Arctic on icebreakers, and to kayak near some of Alaska's tidewater glaciers. I have also seen wind-shaped landscapes in the Sahara and still-forming features of many types in New Zealand, among many other sculptural works of nature. These exposures were brief – months at most – and subsequent to them the

imagery and consequent meanings descend to the fertile lower levels of imagination and memory where they can slowly percolate into their appropriate brew.

Another parallel revolves around travel. My parents had a great appetite for different places as a way of continuing to see the world through fresh eyes, and as a result I saw a fair bit of Europe as a child, even though we had a very stable home and school life in New England. Their pattern was never to move for movement's sake, but to settle down in one spot for a summer or longer periods of time, where they would quickly establish a work routine. The attitude was that travel was never a "vacation" – whatever that is – but was always somehow in service to the work, the work that really defined who they were. I inherited this sentiment, and live accordingly.

Two among many examples from my childhood: In 1961, we spent the summer in Brittany. It was magical, of course, for us kids, living in new surroundings, learning words in a new language, exploring things we never could at home. The beaches were still dotted with enormous concrete pillboxes from the war – I'm sure they are gone now – which naturally stimulated a child's imagination, and I learned to ride a "two wheeler" on a stony driveway that extracted its bits of flesh from my six-year-old knees in the process. That was also the summer my mother became besotted with the local oyster fishery, and the result was one of her best books, *The Oysters of Locmariaquer*.

In 1966-67 we spent two summers and the school year between them in the South of France. Both of the summers were spent on an island eight or ten miles off the coast, Isle de Port-Cros. It was a magical setting for all of us, adults and children alike. One incident is illustrative of the points mentioned above: I was ten years old, and on one of my long solitary ramblings deep in the forest, I stumbled upon an object of such power that I have it to this day: a Nazi helmet, with an entrance on one side and the exit on the other marking the passage of a rifle round. As a child will, my first reaction was to show this remarkable find to my parents. My father worked those summers at an outdoor table under a huge, spreading fig tree, focusing mainly on poetry. At the moment I came to him with my find, he had been struggling, stuck in the middle of a poem, seeking its resolution. In the finished version, there is an abrupt shift in the piece's middle from historical reference to a small boy and the extraordinary object he has found. It is called "Natural History" and is in *Incarnations*.

Later on, after I was married, I was fortunate to engage in three trips with my parents and my wife, Ana Flores. The first was in 1981. A friend we had met on Crete some years earlier, Luli Hamlin, had become fascinated with the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, and felt a strong compulsion to witness that kind of landscape. She had found a way to travel to the central Sahara desert in southern Algeria by guided camelback, and had been there several times. For some years she exercised her persuasive powers, and finally my parents capitulated and agreed to accompany her on one of these trips. They were feeling a bit apprehensive, understandable since my father was 76 at the time, my mother a bit younger, and invited Ana and me along both for the company and to assist in any way needed. In the event our physical assistance was not really needed, but the trip was nevertheless extraordinary.

**[insert photos #1 and #2 with the following captions:]**

Figure 1. RPW on camel. This is early in the trip; he is on a "people" saddle before he was

shifted to a cargo version.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 2. ECW on camel. She has just extracted a Kleenex from her purse, needed due to the respiratory distress described below.

This section, the Hoggar, is not comprised of the sand dunes commonly associated with the Sahara, but rugged, naked sandstone and granite hills punctuated by the columnar basalt cores of ancient volcanoes from which the ejecta have eroded. North Africa was the “breadbasket of the Roman empire,” although due to changing climates and precipitation patterns is mostly desert now. In a few refugia in the Hoggar, ancient olive trees and other plants hang on, although they could never seed out under current conditions. Further back in time, Neolithic peoples found shelter in the wind-sculpted overhangs and caves, and left abundant rock paintings and potsherds as testimony.

**[insert photograph #3 here:]**

Figure 3. A small example of the natural sculptures that are all about the Hoggar.

For a sculptor – a developing landscape sculptor although at the time I did not know it in that way – those forms in the geology were breathtaking. The erosional processes differ from those in more temperate areas, and are dominated by ventilation (“sandblasting” by wind) and exfoliation (peeling of outer layers like those of an onion, by diurnal thermal shock). The result is that the whole area of many, many square miles is like an enormous natural sculpture park. I found it very humbling, but inspiring as well.

Physically, the two weeks or so we rode were demanding for my parents, in different ways. (They were demanding for me as well. I am heat intolerant, and so unadvisedly shed layers in a desperate attempt to lower body temperature. The obvious result was eventually sunstroke.) My father found the camels intractable. One rides less on the hump than against its forward surface. To prevent sliding forward, the feet are crossed on the beast’s neck, which is held by the reins a bit higher than he would prefer. If one is inattentive or softhearted, the neck drops, one’s feet lose purchase, and down to the neck you go. After several such episodes, the guides switched my father’s “people saddle” for a cargo model, and he rode the rest of the way strapped in like another piece of freight. It must have been agonizingly uncomfortable.

In my mother’s case, the desiccated air attacked her lungs, damaged from a lifetime of smoking. Halfway through the trip she could no longer stand the incessant breathlessness and hacking cough, and threw away the cigarettes for good, after having tried and failed to quit for decades. Obviously, though, there was no immediate relief, and her misery continued unabated.

As I predicted while we were still in the desert, listening to my parents’ complaints (perhaps that was a useful role for us after all – ears), as soon as we were on the plane out of Algeria headed for Marseilles and with a glass of good French wine in front of them, the discomforts magically evaporated from their memories, replaced by the wonders we had seen. Future conversations with us and others included only these. My mother later got a book out of the trip: *Thirteen Days in the Sahara*.

Two years later my father had some sort of Rhodes Scholar reunion event at Oxford University, and my parents approached Ana and me about again accompanying them to

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<sup>1</sup>Editors’ note: All photographs in this article were taken by Gabriel Warren.

the UK. (We must not have disgraced ourselves too horribly on the previous trip in their eyes.) For years I had been researching and dreaming about the “standing stones,” the megaliths of northern Europe, of which Stonehenge is but the best known example. These had become an important source for my sculpture. I suggested a tour of these megaliths, and my parents enthusiastically agreed. It is to be noted that this was an interest of mine, not theirs, but their minds had such innate curiosity (at 70 and 78) that they wholeheartedly embraced this unfamiliar topic. I shared my library with them, and soon we were planning an itinerary.

**[insert photo #4 with the inscription:]**

Figure 4. RPW and ECW on a ferry across the Minch, which separates the Inner and Outer Hebrides. Note that RPW is holding his hat in the wind, which he did nonstop for three days until Ana took pity and surrendered her beret.

We started near Glasgow, Scotland. In a rented car (Ana’s and my first experience of driving on the left), we traced a huge question mark on the map, moving first northwest to the Outer Hebrides to a series of circles called Callanish, east to another archipelago, the Orkneys, to see the Ring of Brogar, then south along the east coast of Scotland sniffing our rings, lines, tombs, and eventually ending up on Salisbury plain at the great rings of Stonehenge and Avebury.

**[insert photo #5:]**

Figure 5. The standing stones in the largest of the rings of Callanish, #1, on the Isle of Lewis.

We spent long days of it, not only in the car and examining the sites, but reading from the guidebooks and scholarly texts I had brought along. Much of this was out loud since my mother’s macular degeneration had robbed her of the ability to read by that time.

**[insert photos #6:]**

Figure 6. RPW, ECW, and AF examining one of the stones in the Ring of Brodgar, Isle of Mainland, Orkney. Note RPW wearing beret. This stone is huge, but is only 30cm thick. The sedimentary formations of Orkney naturally fracture into such sheets.

Two years later at 81 (and just three years before his death), my father was no longer up to such physical demands; but his appetite for new stimulation was undiminished. We had all realized that the Orkneys deserved far, far more investigation than the two or three days we had spent there in 1983; so we returned and settled down for a month or so. Every day we headed out in the car to some new and fascinating location from many periods of history and prehistory, and at the end we felt we had still just scratched the surface. Sometimes my father remained in the hotel and rested while the three of us went out “exploring” – remaining in one place afforded us this flexibility – but he always demanded a full accounting upon our return. Again, we read and discussed a great deal, and we all felt hugely enriched by the event.

**[insert photo #7:]**

Figure 7. The Old Man of Hoy, a spectacular sea stack over 200 meters tall, penetrating a cloud ceiling. The Orkneys are replete with fascinating works of both nature and mankind.

I have always felt extremely lucky to have had the opportunity of these trips. Some ways are obvious: They afforded me the opportunity of intimacy with my parents in a rare way, since nothing brings people together like shared experience, even family members. I was able to witness some extraordinary terrain in the company of intelligent, curious, erudite, and thoughtful company, which always magnifies one's own impressions. As well, I have innumerable little memories that are personally precious, now that my parents are gone.

My sentiments regarding these trips go well beyond there, however. I did not know it at the time, but I was crystallizing into the kind of sculptor I am today, to whom observation of landscape – and thoughtful interpretation of it – is essential and central. Given my exploratory temperament, for which I am happy to credit my parents, it is likely that I would have eventually found my way to a similar place anyway without the inputs these trips gave me; but I do not doubt that they nudged me further and faster down these rails than I would otherwise have gone.

Another sense, more difficult to express, also lurks about the edges. During this time, 1981-1986, my parents were reaching the end of their productive years, although it is only clear in retrospect. My mother got a book from the first trip, and they both scribbled a bit about the others, but nothing published came of it. At the same time, these same experiences pushed me in new artistic directions and greatly helped me begin to crystallize my personal voice. I do not want to overemphasize something that is to me quite shy and gossamer, but in some funny way, these trips resembled an athletic relay event where something is passed from one competitor to a subsequent teammate. And I can think of no finer honor than to be considered such to the larger-than-life characters who were my parents.

**Gabriel Warren** is the son of Robert Penn Warren and Eleanor Clark Warren. He is a sculptor, and resides in Rhode Island and Nova Scotia. His work is intimately derived from his sources in the natural world, most prominently ice. In 1999 he became the first sculptor from any country to be sent to Antarctica, courtesy of the National Science Foundation, and spent almost two months living on the largest nonnuclear icebreaker in the world, the USCG Polar Sea. He also spent numerous hours observing from her helicopters, and those from the main US base at McMurdo Station, at the bottom of the Ross Sea. In 2001 he embarked on a companion trip north, and spent weeks in the high Arctic on Canada's largest icebreaker, the Louis S. St-Laurent. This also involved numerous "helo" hours. The landscape features observed on these trips and others become the artistic point of departure for larger metaphorical investigations into mankind vs. nature interactions.