



Moment and Metaphor: Reflections on Ivor Noël Hume’s Address at the 2007 Society for Historical Archaeology Meetings

Alison Bell

Introduction: Grandmentor

When considering the words and work of Ivor Noël Hume, analogies seem indispensable. Metaphors surface in part because they infuse Noël Hume’s own writings so frequently and so colorfully, and in part because his influence in historical archaeology looms so large that simple, declarative sentences appear inadequate to the task of describing it.

Many others must agree, as they too have reached for analogies to characterize Noël Hume’s legacy. He is the “Babe Ruth” of historical archaeology (Scham 2005), its “dean” (Kolb 2003:119), and its “godfather” (Kelso 1992:2). Undergraduates in field schools learn quickly that Noël Hume’s *Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America* is the “artifact bible” (De Cunzo 2005).

Jim Deetz, mentor and hero to many of us, often said that Noël Hume was his mentor and hero. (A genealogical metaphor might make Noël Hume our “grandmentor,” and the term seems apt in several ways.) I remember the excitement that attended Noël Hume’s visit in the summer of 1993, to Flowerdew Hundred, near Hopewell, Virginia, where Jim was leading a field school. As one of the graduate students on hand, I had what seemed a great privilege to help peel back the dusty black tarp so that Jim could show Noël Hume a few of the emerging features. I recall our visitor nodding courteously and suggesting something to the effect that perhaps we dig a bit more. Pleased with that pronouncement, we re-closed the site for the night and returned merrily to camp where one of the fabulous meals on which Jim insisted awaited company and students alike. That evening field crew and undergrads buzzed about how, just some months earlier, Noël Hume had been “knighted”: Queen Elizabeth II having named him an Officer of the British Empire (Kolb 2003:118). It seemed patently appropriate that this “knight” should have drawn late-medieval armor – Tower of London-issued close helmets and breast plates – from the soil of Martin’s Hundred, just downriver from Flowerdew.

It was this sense of his larger-than-life figure – part Sir Lancelot, part Babe Ruth, part Howard Carter – that rendered Noël Hume’s address so moving and so melancholy to many of us in the densely-packed audience at the 2007 Society for Historical Archaeology public session in Williamsburg. How could the work of *this* archaeologist come “to dust”: his exhibits replaced with offices, his museum at Martin’s Hundred filled with dirt? And, admitting a selfish impulse, if such a fate could befall the dean of historical archaeology, what hope might we rank-and-filers hold out for the future of our own efforts?

Martin's Hundred and the Visigoths of Commerce

Though Noël Hume's address left many in the audience feeling like the bottom had at least partially dropped out of the historical archaeological world, there were nevertheless in his discussion several light-hearted moments. First was his recollection that, in the formative years of the discipline, his contribution to "archeology" was the letter "a." A second was this musing: "Some of you may have become acquainted with our work at Carter's Grove and the discovery of Martin's Hundred and Wolstenholme Towne." Making this observation to a roomful of historical archaeologists in Williamsburg is like remarking to a group of enthusiasts in Cooperstown: "Some of you may have become acquainted with an event called 'the World Series.'"

Students – at least the undergraduates who take the *Historical Archaeology* course I offer – are nearly unanimous in their confidence that *Martin's Hundred* is the best book ever written in historical archaeology. Despite my resolve in the course to historically situate and anthropologically contextualize other archaeologists' publications, students remain unmoved. The charms of the 1970's New Archaeology are flatly lost on most, if not all, of them. They usually have more patience for and interest in later post-processual studies, but nothing ignites their enthusiasm like *Martin's Hundred*, with its procession of vividly described "massacre" victims, armor, shipwrecks, a palisaded fort, golden threads, and a transgendered colonist. Reading Noël Hume's narrative of discovery, students share in "the thrill of the chase that excites an archaeological historian, pursuing the proof with all the intensity of a hunter, the adrenalin flowing until the moment of the kill; then an instant of high elation" (Noël Hume 1982:73).

Key target of the hunt in *Martin's Hundred* is, as any reader must recall, the elusive 17th-century gable-lidded coffin. The sincerity with which students adopt a concern for these objects is rather astonishing. I doubt that I'm the first instructor to play devil's advocate on the topic, working up to a rant about significance and pertinence: "Who cares if some people in early seventeenth-century England used gable- rather than flat-lidded coffins?!" As it turns out, the students care, because Noël Hume cared and – through the drama of his writing in *Martin's Hundred* – he won them over entirely.

Few if any of these students visited the museum dedicated to interpreting *Martin's Hundred* and Wolstenholme Town. And now they won't: the museum is, apparently, a casualty (cf. Scham 2005). Its closing is our great loss, and rightfully mourned.

Noël Hume seems prescient in his lament, some thirty five years ago, that despite best efforts in education and preservation, "the Visigoths of commerce despoil the environs of St. Augustine, Williamsburg, Gettysburg, scything the green from virtually every piece of historically fertile American soil upon which they can encroach" (Noël Hume 1973:10). In the case of the museum at Carter's Grove, the Visigoths – popularly characterized as the sackers of Rome and despoilers of all things civilized and excellent – manifest as administrators making budget decisions.

The museum existed, however, on a team of Noël Hume's heavy hitters: with the museum now "out," remaining in the game are the *Martin's Hundred* book and its companion film, *Search for*

a Century. These are the only two avenues through which my students have experienced the Martin's Hundred adventure, and they usually find them so compelling that virtually all else in the Historical Archaeology course pales in comparison. To draw a poor analogy with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Psalm of Life*, "Dust thou art, to dust returnest" might be the museum's fate, but "was not spoken" of the book and documentary. They live.

Archaeology and Jesus

Admittedly, though, and unfortunately, charming undergraduates is often not the same thing as securing funds for archaeological exploration and preservation. Noël Hume's attention to transforming enthusiasm for the past into dollars for research has featured prominently in his writing for decades (e.g., Noël Hume 1974:11). The challenge, he suggests, is "getting anyone sufficiently powerful to substitute money for lip service" about the importance of historical archaeology (Noël Hume 1973:5). Doing so depends first – as Noël Hume frequently says – on assuring historical archaeology's value through the competence, knowledge, and professionalism of its practitioners (e.g., Noël Hume 1974:15), and second on communicating historical archaeology's value to parties with the capacity to back investment in it.

The level of Noël Hume's conviction about the immense, inherent worth of historical archaeology appears in many contexts, perhaps the most remarkable being his 1973 key note address to the Society for Historical Archaeology and Underwater Archaeology. There, he worried that the terms "preservation" and "conservation" had been:

commandeered by the environmentalists who have also gone off with the funding. If challenged, they will have the gall to suggest that potsherd patriotism will be of little use to a population poisoning itself and choking for breath. Can we make a good enough case to prove them wrong? How would the public vote on such a proposition? Ever since it chose Barrabas, it has preferred the ideas it best understands, and I suggest that right now it would take the future over the past, and do it laughingly (Noël Hume 1973:7).

Barrabas, according to New Testament accounts, was an insurrectionary in Roman custody along with Jesus. As per custom, at the Passover festival the local governor allowed the public to choose one prisoner to release from custody. The crowd, given a choice between Barrabas and Jesus, opted to free the former and crucify the latter. In Noël Hume's analogy, Barrabas is to environmentalism as Jesus is to archaeology.

Among our foremost goals in historical archaeology, Noël Hume contends, should be helping funding agencies and the public make the "right" decisions about archaeology. In this quest, education represents "the best hope of gaining popular support for the study and protection of historical sites" and the best hope of making "the tax-paying public and their tax-dispensing representatives believe that the dangers to our cultural environment are just as real, just as dangerous in the long run, as the destruction of the forests, the farmlands, or the rivers" (Noël Hume 1973:10). The order is a tall one, particularly in the current era of climate change and global warming: variables virtually absent from public and even most scientific radars at the time in which Noël Hume made these comments.

Since the early years of historical archaeology much else has changed – particularly the extension of legal protection and associated growth of contract archaeology beginning in the 1970s. Noël Hume seems not to have foreseen these developments, as he was rather pessimistic that contract archaeology would ever amount to much:

It is unlikely that there will be enough of those [contract firms] to employ any but a handful of the people wanting to enter the profession. Save for a few fortunate individuals, historical archaeology is a tool to be used by people in education, in museums, by administrators of historical places, restoration architects ... [.] If this is true, then we must look to a future wherein the needs of historical archaeology will continue to be served more by part-time than full-time professionals (Noël Hume 1973:8).

The discipline, it seems, has changed quite dramatically in recent decades, not only with the growth of CRM but also in the prominence of academic field schools as a vehicle both for education and research. Noël Hume was no less optimistic about the role of field schools in archaeological investigation, but for different reasons:

Unfortunately there are some university teachers who believe that they can couple archaeological education with simultaneous excavation of major sites – thus killing two birds with one shovel. The students suffer because the demands of the dig take precedence over the time needed for training, and the site itself suffers from being torn apart by unskilled hands (Noël Hume 1974:161-2).

For better or worse, university field schools, like contract work, figure prominently in today's historical archaeology.

These points are relevant, I think, to Noël Hume's recent SHA address because they underscore the expansion during the last thirty to forty years in opportunities for supporting work in archaeology. There seem to be more ways now than before to skin the cat of archaeological fund raising. If the Visigoths of commerce remain recalcitrant, the Moss-Bennett Act and *Field Methods in Archaeology* offer possibilities.

Entering and Exiting through a Stage Door

The musical [stage version of *Mary Poppins*] ... is a strange and beautiful thing, containing an astonishing variety of moods It ends with a crowd-pleaser: Mary Poppins departs the Banks family by soaring up and into the rafters, borne aloft by her umbrella On one occasion, when the beloved nanny was making her getaway, a middle-aged man [in the audience] was heard to cry out in anguish, "Mary Poppins, don't leave!" (Flanagan 2005)

Indeed, I intend to conclude this metaphor-riddled essay by drawing an analogy between Ivor Noël Hume and Mary Poppins. (Noël Hume's Barrabas initiative, in my opinion, creates a sense that nearly anything goes.) The comparison between the godfather of historical archaeology and a fictive, semi-magical *au pair* might not be as bizarre as it initially appears: both entered

contexts of disorder, flux, and uncertainty; both through their clear-headedness and firm principles established a new order; and both bade farewell when those whom they had helped were prepared to carry on.

The American archaeology that Noël Hume encountered during the 1950s and 60s – especially historical archaeology – faced acute “crises” of identity and legitimacy that he helped to resolve. We owe even the term “historical archaeology” to him; previously our predecessors had practiced “historic sites archeology” and variants thereof (Noël Hume 1974:5-6). Among Noël Hume’s greatest contributions to the field, however, involve its professionalization. He has often insisted that “there are two essential requirements” for historical archaeologists: “the ability and experience to dig correctly and a *thorough knowledge of the history and objects of the period of the site being dug*” (Noël Hume 1974:15; emphasis in original). The standards are high because the stakes are high in taking apart archaeological sites, making inferences about them, conserving the results, and disseminating the findings both professionally and popularly.

Noël Hume’s address and leave-taking were – as he often said lecturing should be – “really a theatrical performance” (Noël Hume 1974:247). In his remarks he reminded the audience that he had come to archaeology “through a stage door,” and we watched him exit through one as well. If art produces emotive effects on its consumers, then Noël Hume’s address, like his many books, qualify as such – and rightly so, as for him archaeology’s place is not in “the ranks of the sciences” but “with the arts” (Noël Hume 1974:15).

Because he has done and been so much for us in historical archaeology, Noël Hume’s leave-taking in the 2007 address was poignant: “Allow me to say,” he said, “a final, heart-felt ... ‘Thank you and goodbye.’” And then, in the midst of both fervent applause and stunned wordlessness, Noël Hume walked alone down the center aisle – with measured stride, seemingly content – and was gone. I thought of the *Mary Poppins* audience member who shouted out, “Don’t leave!” It was a sentiment that many of us shared that day in Williamsburg.

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