Bloody Old Britain: O. G. S. Crawford and the Archaeology of Modern Life (review)

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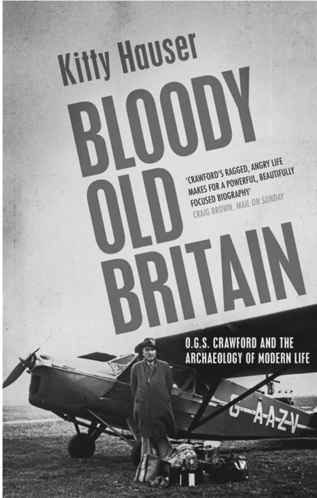
Book Review



Bloody Old Britain: O. G. S. Crawford and the Archaeology of Modern Life
Kitty Hauser
New York: Granta Books, 2008

What concepts of history are fixed in an aerial photograph? Has the taking of pictures of cities and landscapes from an airplane created its own methodology, one that considers natural and built environments as susceptible to visible historical forces? Does the aerial view create its own historical record? The issues of viewing things from above, of considering the history of these things when viewed and photographed from an airplane, of thinking about this process of photographing things from above as historical method, of peeling away layers of modernity to catch a glimpse of what lies underneath—these all implicate the work and writing of O. G. S. Crawford (1886–1957), a pioneer of the use of aerial photographs in archaeological excavations.

Thanks to Kitty Hauser, a postdoctoral scholar at the Power Institute for Art and Visual Culture in Sydney, Australia, Crawford has become more familiar to audiences than ever. Her 2007 book, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape, 1927–1955,* looks to several case studies to understand how a group of English artists, writers, and filmmakers adopted a historicized, neoromantic, and countermodernist view of landscape. It is within this rubric that Hauser considers *Antiquity,* the publication Crawford founded in 1927, as well as his methods for photographing archaeological sites from the air. Both are examples of what Hauser refers to as the "archaeological imagination," the "perceiving of a past which is literally under our feet" that "represents a powerful counter-impulse to this culture of interchangeable surfaces covering over all traces of history" and that calls home "a historical dimension to which the contemporary world seems so indifferent."[1]

In her latest book, *Bloody Old Britain: O. G. S. Crawford and the Archaeology of Modern Life,* Hauser expands her treatment of Crawford's work by adopting a more quasi-biographical approach. Crawford's life becomes a series of vignettes unified by his interest in archaeology. In *Shadow Sites,* Hauser understands Crawford's innovations in aerial photography as

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a counterpoint to familiar narratives about aerial views of cities.[2] But in *Bloody Old Britain,* this ardor is seen as a chapter in the formation of Crawford's most important métier: the creation of aerial archaeology. Hauser reminds us how Crawford himself created a very modest definition for this nascent field. In works like *Wessex from the Air* (1928) and *Air-Photography for Archaeologists* (1929), a manual he wrote as the Ordnance Survey's self-appointed "archaeological officer," Crawford notes how aerial archaeology is simply a method "to indicate what kinds of ancient sites are suitable for air-photography, and what is the best time of year and day."[3] Hauser uses *Bloody Old Britain* to elaborate this point of view as well as to highlight Crawford's technical and interpretative innovations in this field.

Bloody Old Britain is a very good read. Hauser writes with a balance of economy, flourish, and wit, and yet never distracts the reader from the book's focus. But to say that *Bloody Old Britain* is a simply a biography is to miss the point entirely. The book is equal parts intellectual biography, hagiography, and visual essay. For example, Hauser not only considers Crawford's liberal and antireligious background as an essential foundation for his later historical writings, but she also highlights important relationships with figures like Patrick Geddes, Gordon Childe, and H. G. Wells. Hauser also takes advantage of the fact that Oxford's Institute of Archaeology made Crawford's archives available in 2000. As a result, much of the book looks at previously uncatalogued materials, such as diary entries from Crawford's 1932 trip to the Soviet Union, the unpublished manuscript for an antimodernist exegesis called *Bloody Old Britain* (from where Hauser titles her book), as well as voluminous photographs taken during his career. The latter form an important part of Hauser's *Bloody Old Britain.* A reader will no doubt notice how Hauser's deployment of unlabeled photographs that correspond with the text echoes W. G. Sebald's use of photographs in works like *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995) or *Die Ausgewanderten* (1993), which provide "an attempt to relate the formal interaction of narrative and photography to the conceptions of history and memory that are implied in the text."[4]

But unlike Sebald, who used photographs to blur any distinctions between fact and fiction, Hauser uses a photograph's documentary qualities to emphasize Crawford's own life and work. Whereas some photographs are merely evidentiary (i.e., a photo on page 117 of Crawford and Neil Hunter aboard a Russian trawler), others demonstrate Crawford's own aerial archaeology methods. The effect is not unlike that in *Wessex from the Air* or *Air-Photography for Archaeologists:* the photograph is as didactic as it is revelatory. This is the case

even when they are taken out of Crawford's books and placed in Hauser's text.

Hauser is also aware of the problematic nature of some of Crawford's photographs. For example, she reproduces the famous "cat's-eye" views of carpet patterns from Crawford's "Luftbildaufnahmen von Archäologischen Bodendenkmälern in England." Lufthansa published this essay in 1938 in *Luftbild und Vorgeschichte,* the accompanying volume to a conference on aerial photography. There are multiple ironies at work. On the one hand, the irony that the conference occurred months after the *anschluss* and the Munich Agreement is not lost on Hauser, who goes on to describe Crawford's subsequent tour of Nazi projects. Furthermore, *Luftbild und Vorgeschichte* featured many of Crawford's aerial photographs of archaeological sites on the English countryside. Only two years later, in 1940, the Werhmacht's Department of Military Mapping and Surveying *(Abteilung für Kriegskarten und Vermessungswesen)* issued a series of landscape-recognition cards for Luftwaffe pilots. Called the *Miltärgeographische Angaben über England,* these cards featured drawings and pictures of prominent landscape features, intended to aid pilots as they would cross the English Channel en route to inland targets.[5]

Hauser describes how this trip to Germany allowed Crawford to evaluate his own work and to think about the mutual aspirations of aerial archaeology and history. Germany's professionalization of archeologists and historians never failed to impress Crawford. Neither did the level of public engagement with history and archaeology, for here was something that resonated deeply with Crawford's own views: the idea of history as a living, tangible thing. Although Hauser absolves Crawford of any professional associations with Nazi archaeologists, she nevertheless shows how it impacted his own views about archaeology on the British Isles. Hauser writes:

> It doesn't seem to have occurred to Crawford that there might have been a price for state support of prehistoric archaeology in Germany—or if it did, he preferred to keep quiet about it in order to facilitate international co-operation; or simply in order to complain about the relatively low level of official support that by contrast was received by archaeologists in Britain. (217–18)

But Crawford's own views on prehistory are as problematic as they are important. They are problematic in the sense that Crawford seemed to have a rather unpoliticized view of history. Although he seemed all too aware of current events, his own writings on aerial archaeology seem to evacuate any political content. And this is perhaps why he was so enamored

with the idea of aerial archaeology, for this field only worked to reveal things that were unseen. Only when German bombers threatened to destroy Crawford's beloved English landscapes did his work take on a more preservationist bent. As a staff photographer for the National Building Record during the Second World War, Crawford was one of several archaeologists and art historians working tirelessly to document and assess the state of Britain's built environment should it be destroyed.

Yet one of *Bloody Old Britain*'s most rewarding moments is when Hauser explains Crawford's own views on the relationship between history and landscape. She states how Crawford "thought prehistory should be approached not through texts (as many archaeologists preferred), not through fetishized 'finds' (like those collected and admired by antiquarians), but through the spatial logic of *geography*" (15). It is an interesting notion, for before Crawford became famous for his promotion of aerial photography techniques for field archaeology, he would be the very person who famously remarked how "the surface of England . . . is a palimpsest, a document that has been written on and erased over and over again" (64). The very skeleton key needed to unlock this geographic palimpsest would be the aerial photograph.

And although *Bloody Old Britain* is a marvel of archival research, it is nevertheless caught up in many of the ephemera of Crawford's life. Hauser's discussions about Crawford's photographs and unpublished manuscripts are enlightening, yet she misses some opportunities to consider her subject as a historical actor. For example, for all the time Hauser spends analyzing Crawford's books, there is barely any reference to his involvement in the Royal Geographic Society. Nor is there any reference of his active participation in a series of publicized debates in the pages of *The Geographical Journal* about the utility of aerial photography.[6]

Bloody Old Britain goes well beyond portraying O. G. S. Crawford as a complicated subject and shows the geographer-turned-aerial archaeologist as a modern man, a person able to keep defining and redefining himself.[7] There are many who fit this description, but it is impossible not to think about *moderns* without thinking of the idea of a polymath. But in considering Crawford as a polymath, is it possible to understand his various guises and redefinitions of self as a response to historical forces? Although this may ask too much of a reader, it is worth considering that Crawford lived through and documented many of the twentieth century's trials and tribulations, including world wars, political upheavals, and ideological shifts.

How, then, does aerial archaeology fit in this equation? It is, as Marc Bloch would put it, a process, an evaluation of facts from a larger swath of facts, distilled and collected into

a coherent reconstruction of the past. Crawford exemplifies Bloch's idea of the historian as police magistrate "who strives to reconstruct a crime he has not seen" or of "a physicist who, confined to his bed with the grippe, hears the results of his experiments only through the reports of his laboratory technician."[8] The aerial archaeologist is there after the fact and must sift through the "certain residues which he can see with his own eyes."[9]

The term "certain residues" implies stasis. Yet these "certain residues," the very things that Crawford captured in his various flights over the English landscape, are far from static. As Kitty Hauser shows us in *Bloody Old Britain,* for Crawford, these residues were evidence of a living, animated history. Remnants of Iron Age or Roman settlements permanently alter the landscape, and the landscape changes in order to accommodate this change. Crawford writes about this dynamic combination of past and present in *Air-Photography for Archaeologists:*

> There are, of course, on the chalk downs of Wessex, very few areas which have never been ploughed at any time. During late prehistoric times, continuing into the Roman-British period, most of the downs were divided into arable fields. Much of this reverted to pasture during Saxon and mediæval times. During the Napoleonic Wars (and to a much lesser extent during the Great War), some downland was ploughed up again, but allowed to revert immediately afterwards . . . but the orderly field-systems and earthworks of the Celtic period are the only evidence left of a vanished past; and the air-photographs which reveal them are prehistoric documents of first-rate importance. An air-photograph of an open down covered with earthworks is virtually a *manuscript* which may be read by those willing to learn the hieroglyphs.[10]

This quote, though from an earlier moment of Crawford's career, is prescient and compelling.

The Geographical Journal published Crawford's obituary in 1958, shortly after his death. The piece describes the author of *Wessex from the Air* and *Air-Photography for Archaeologists* as an "ardent controversialist."[11] It is a fitting description for Crawford, who not only seemed to defy convention but never strayed far from argument and debate. And, as Kitty Hauser suggests in *Bloody Old Britain,* any account of Crawford's life is more allegory than biography.

Author Biography
Enrique Ramirez graduated in 2007 with a Master of Environmental Design (M.E.D.) degree from Yale School of Architecture. As a PhD student in history and theory of architecture at Princeton University, he continues his research on intersections between architecture, aviation, and scientific and military communities in the early twentieth century. Ramirez's work has appeared in *Critical Planning, Thresholds, The Architect's Journal,* and *Perspecta.*

Endnotes
[1] Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape, 1927–1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.
[2] Le Corbusier and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy are the indisputable modernist avatars of the aerial view and aerial photography. For a historical treatment of Le Corbusier's views on aerial photography and aviation, see Anthony Vidler, "Photourbanism: Planning the City from Above and from Below," in *A Companion to the City,* ed. Gary Watson and Sophie Bridge, 35–45 (London: Blackwell, 2000); Adnan Morshed, "The Cultural Politics of Aerial Vision: Le Corbusier in Brazil (1929)," *Journal of Architecture Education* 55, no. 4 (2002): 201–10; and M. Christine Boyer, "Aviation and the Aerial View: Le Corbusier's Spatial Transformations in the 1930s and 1940s," *Diacritics* 33, no. 3/4 (2003): 93–116.
[3] Crawford, *Air-Photography for Archaeologists* (London: H.M.S.O, 1929), 3.
[4] J. J. Long, "History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten,*" *Modern Language Review* 98, no. 1 (2003): 118.
[5] I would like to thank Jean-Louis Cohen for calling my attention to this fascinating document.
[6] For more on these debates, see G. A. Beazeley, "Air-photography in Archæology," *The Geographical Journal,* 53, no. 5 (May 1919): 330–35; D. G. Hogarth et al., "Surveys in Mesopotamia during the War: A Discussion," *The Geographical Journal* 55, no. 2 (February 1920): 123–27; Crawford, "Air Photographs of the Middle East," *The Geographical Journal* 73, no. 6 (June 1929): 497–509; Crawford, "A Century of Air-Photography," *Antiquity* 28, no. 112 (December 1954): 206–10.
[7] For a discussion on institutional self-reflexivity and modernity, see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).
[8] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (1953; repr., Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1992), 40.
[9] Ibid., 46.
[10] Crawford, *Air-Photography for Archaeologists,* 5.
[11] L. P. Kirwan, "Obituary: O. G. S. Crawford," *The Geographical Journal* 124, no. 1 (March 1958): 144.