

Megaw, Basil

by Linde Lunney

Megaw, Basil (1913–2002), archaeologist and folklife scholar, was born in Belfast on 22 June 1913, the third of four sons of Arthur Stanley Megaw, solicitor and writer, and his wife (Helen Isabel) Bertha (née Smith). Arthur Stanley Megaw (1873–1961) was a younger son of Robert Megaw, president of Belfast chamber of commerce in 1885. The Megaws were connected to many prominent families in Ulster: Arthur's mother was Eliza Morrison Megaw (née Pirrie; d. 1915), who was related to William James Pirrie (qv) and to the Barbours of Lisburn, notable in textile manufacture and engineering, descendants of John Barbour (qv). Arthur was educated at Sullivan Upper School, Holywood, Co. Down, and then studied law in QUB, winning the silver medal of the Incorporated Law Society of Ireland. He became a Belfast solicitor, but in middle age gave up the practice of law and had a successful second career as a compiler of around twenty anthologies of verse and prose, short extracts from classic works, intended to be read as relaxation as a bedside book or by the fireside. Some of them went through several editions and in some cases multiple printings; *The bedside book* (1932) was reprinted at least fifteen times. He generally used the pseudonym 'Arthur Stanley'. As well as writing a detective novel, *The Monkhurst case* (1946), he also edited extracts from Shakespeare, John Bunyan, and the letters of Mme de Sévigné, and anthologised extracts for reading out-of-doors and for children, as well as from travel literature. His compilations of patriotic verse were particularly popular; *Patriotic song* was first published in 1901. He contributed articles to literary periodicals and was a lifelong member of the Belfast Literary Society, and its honorary secretary (1927–54). He was awarded an MA *honoris causa* by QUB in 1952. He died 23 September 1961. His papers are in Queen's University Library.

On 9 September 1905, in Waterford, Arthur Stanley Megaw married Helen Isabel Bertha Smith, a granddaughter of John Shaw Smith (qv) of Clonmult, Co. Cork, who was a pioneer photographer. She was related to John Grubb Richardson (qv) and other families in the Religious Society of Friends throughout Ireland, though she herself, like her husband, was a member of the Church of Ireland.

Basil Megaw was educated at Mourne Grange preparatory school and Campbell College, Belfast. He studied subjects in the archaeology and anthropology tripos at Peterhouse, Cambridge, and graduated BA in 1935. Awarded a Leaf fellowship to research in Spain, in 1936 he was appointed secretary and assistant director of the Manx Museum in the Isle of Man. In 1940 he became inspector of ancient monuments and director of the museum, and, alongside developing new display areas, actively added to its collections. He undertook archaeological exploration in the Isle of Man, and also, importantly, collaborated with Estyn Evans (qv) on fieldwork in Northern Ireland, and with other leading scholars in Scotland and

England, notably on the famous Sutton Hoo dig in Suffolk; his experiences enhanced his awareness of the connections around and across the Irish Sea which were significant in Manx archaeology and history. He was equally aware that evidence from Manx sites and folklife and from the Manx language could add greatly to scholarly understanding of the wider history of the Isles, and his careful recording of sites and analysis of finds was further developed in journal articles to elucidate a little-known locus of British archaeology. (Megaw's work helped to disprove the disgruntled European archaeologist's aphorism that if English archaeology in general involved three bricks in a wet field, Manx archaeology offered just the wet field.)

Throughout Megaw's career, he took cognisance of new developments in heritage and ethnology; a study visit on a Carnegie UK travel grant to Scandinavia in 1938 gave him ideas for how museums could change and how folk culture could be represented alongside the more traditional collections. His knowledge of Scandinavian exemplars encouraged Megaw to establish the first open air folk museum in the Isles, at Cregneash village. It opened in 1938 with the acquisition of the first cottage, but the outbreak of the second world war presented setbacks for Megaw's plans. There were also opportunities: suspect foreign nationals interned in Manx camps included prominent German archaeologists, who were allowed to dig important sites, under armed guard. Megaw himself was seconded for the war years as a scientific officer to Bomber Command in the Royal Air Force and to the Ministry of Aircraft Production; from 1942 to 1946 his wife Eleanor Megaw, herself an archaeologist and his frequent collaborator, served as honorary director of the Manx Museum.

After Megaw returned to his post, he initiated the Manx Folklife Survey in 1948, and continued to work within a curatorial practice highlighting the connections between material culture and folklife, developing Cregneash and a new small Nautical Museum at Castletown. With Megaw's enthusiastic support, Caoimhín Ó Danachair (qv) (Kevin Danaher) of the Irish Folklore Commission visited the Isle of Man to record the last native speakers of Manx Gaelic in 1948; later local volunteers from the Manx Folklife Survey, with Megaw's assistance, made further tapes. The recordings form a vital resource for scholars and language activists. Megaw was involved with efforts to preserve the countryside, and was influential in the drafting of legislation to establish statutory controls and to enable a unified Manx Museum and National Trust to be set up in 1951. Megaw's move to become the first full-time director of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh University in 1957 completed the triskele of a life and research focused on the three regions of the Q-Celtic world: Ireland, Man and Scotland.

The School of Scottish Studies had been established in 1951, largely through the efforts of the linguistic scholar Angus MacIntosh, in a pioneering initiative involving several departments within the university, to provide a centre for research into all aspects of Scotland's cultural traditions, and to introduce cross-disciplinary studies and teaching at a time when such an approach was novel. Megaw's interests and

abilities developed the framework and established the ethos of a unique institution, within which artefacts, folk tradition and linguistic material were recorded and studied. As director, Megaw facilitated contacts and friendships which contributed greatly to the advancement of the subject, and was editor (1964–8) of the school's influential journal *Scottish Studies*, disseminating research to an increasingly large international community of scholars. The school under his guidance supported the establishment of a number of organisations, such as the Society for Folk Life Studies. He worked on a trust set up to preserve a highland township at Auchindrain, Argyllshire, and served as trustee of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland and on the council of management of the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie. He was a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, vice-president of the latter body (1974–7), and a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 1966.

In 1969 Megaw retired from the directorship of the School of Scottish Studies, but as senior lecturer worked on his archaeological and ethnological interests; he continued to frequent the stimulating atmosphere of the School of Scottish Studies as a research fellow and honorary fellow of the faculty of arts even after formal retirement in 1980. When they were students in Cambridge, Basil Megaw had met Eleanor Mary Hardy, daughter of Sir William Bate Hardy, a biologist and molecular physicist in Cambridge (reputedly the model for the hero of the *Riddle of the sands* by Erskine Childers (qv)). They married on 6 September 1939, just as the war started; she died in 1977. Megaw lived on until 22 August 2002, when he died after a heart attack in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, England, survived by a son and a daughter. He left £50,000 to the School of Scottish Studies, which used the legacy to establish fellowships in his name.

The scientist Eric Megaw (qv) and the archaeologist Peter Megaw (qv) were his elder brothers.

Arthur Stanley Megaw:

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Basil Megaw:

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