

CHAPTER
1

Section 1

HISTORYMAKERS Mary Leakey

Digger into the Past

"I never felt interpretation was my job. What I came to do was to dig things up and take them out as well as I could. There is so much we do not know, and the more we do know, the more we realize that early interpretations were completely wrong."—Mary Leakey

Mary Leakey gained fame for two reasons. She was extremely skillful—and she had incredible luck. Brian Fagan, a well-known archaeologist, praised the “fierce determination and passion for detail” she showed when working in the field. She also made spectacular finds, maybe because of what people called “Leakey luck.” The daughter of an artist, Mary Douglas Nicol showed skill at drawing when she was young. She also showed a rebellious nature; in fact, two different schools expelled her. As a teen, she began to combine her ability to draw with her interest in prehistoric people. She joined archaeological digs and sketched the objects that scientists found.

Luck changed Mary’s life in 1933. At a London dinner party, she was introduced to Louis Leakey. A paleoanthropologist—someone who studies humanlike creatures that predate human beings—Leakey, whom she eventually married, asked her to illustrate a book with drawings of fossils he had discovered in Africa. Two years later they traveled to Africa, which, Mary later said, “cast its spell” on her. For the next few decades the Leakeys worked together, trying to understand human origins.

They made an excellent team. Their son Richard Leakey, himself a famous naturalist, summed up their talents. “She was much more organized and structured and much more of a technician. He was much more excitable, a magician.” Louis traveled the world, lecturing on his theories and working to raise money for more digs. Meanwhile Mary, though never formally trained in the field, stayed in Africa to supervise the work.

Mary did more than just lead digs. Over the years, she made several major finds. The first came in 1948. She found the fossil remains of a creature that the Leakeys named Proconsul. This animal is a common ancestor of apes and humans.

Another discovery came in 1959. Louis was ill one day and had to stay in camp. Mary went fossil hunting with her two dogs for company and she found a small piece of bone jutting out of the ground. She raced back to tell Louis that she had

found an early hominid. “I’ve got him!” she said. Working with dental picks and delicate brushes, they unearthed nearly 400 pieces of bone. Carefully piecing together the puzzle, they assembled the skull of a humanlike creature. Then “Leakey luck” struck again. A camera crew reached the camp the day after the discovery. Their film helped spread the news quickly, and the Leakeys became famous. Soon they received more money to continue their work. A few years later, Mary found another hominid creature and named this specimen *Homo habilis*, which means “able man.”

In 1972, Louis died and Mary added public lecturing and fundraising to her work in the field. However, she tried to avoid the heated debates over human origins. Her role, she thought, was simply to find fossils. She once described the attraction of her work: “For me it was the sheer instinctive joy of collecting, or indeed one could say treasure hunting.”

In 1978, Mary made perhaps her greatest find. While some members of her team were playing near their camp, one found fossilized animal prints in the dirt. Under Mary’s leadership, they carefully cleaned a large area. Their efforts revealed a remarkable find: the footprints of two, and perhaps three, hominids who had walked upright. “Now this,” Mary told the team, “is really something to put on the mantelpiece.”

Five years later, Mary Leakey finally retired from the field. She continued with her artwork and writing until her death in 1996. She had lived, as a former colleague said, “an extraordinary life.”

Questions

1. **Comparing and Contrasting** How did Louis and Mary Leakey balance each other with their special talents?
2. **Determining Main Ideas** What major finds did Mary Leakey make?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** What did she like about studying human origins?