

# Conflicts of anthropology

A review of  
**Ancestral Passions: The  
 Leakey Family and the  
 Quest for Humankind's  
 Beginnings**  
 By Virginia Morell  
 Simon and Schuster, New  
 York, 1995

## Jerry Bergman

This book, in my estimation, is one of the most important books ever written about the origins controversy by either a creationist or an evolutionist. This 638-page, extremely well-documented work, gives one an entirely different view of the so-called objective field of human evolution. The scientists covered in this work are not minor-league players, but are those who dominated the field of physical anthropology in the twentieth century. Although primarily the story of the Leakey Family (Louis, Mary, and Richard)—the family that dominated paleoanthropology for over half a century—it is, as the subtitle suggests, more specifically the story of the search for fossil and other evidence of human evolution. The work, therefore, contains much information not only about the Leakey family, but of most of the leading anthropologists and their work.

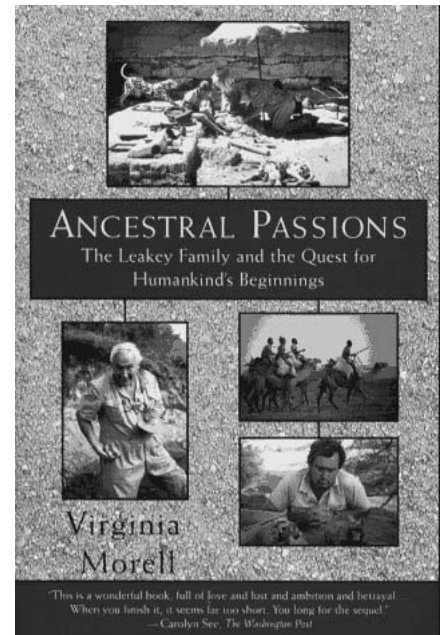
This book is important for several reasons. First, it shows that the anthropological field has been divided into 'camps' dominated by a few persons. Each camp tries to 'prove' its own theory, often dogmatically, by using fossil bones, most of which are badly damaged fragments. Sides are formed in these conflicts, and Morell eloquently demonstrates that the participants are fighting a war no different than those fought between nations—whereas unethical behavior (and almost everything else) is fair game. Only physical aggression is normally ruled out (not always, but normally). It vividly shows

the 'other side' of the leading scientists in each camp—those who dominate the literature in *Nature*, *Science*, and the other leading scientific journals.

Second, the morals of some of these leading scientists also leave much to be desired. The endless, vicious, and sometimes physical confrontations between the Leakeys and others, such as Donald Johanson and Timothy White, are extremely illuminating as to how critically important preconceptions are in understanding the extant fossil evidence. This work eloquently shows that because fossil evidence is less than 10% of the animal, even in the rare situation where a skeleton is fairly complete, it can be interpreted in many ways. (Lucy is the most complete skeleton to date, and almost half is missing—most finds consist of, at best, a few bone fragments.)

Third, Morell also helps us to understand Louis Leakey's conversion from missionary son and aspiring minister to militant opposer of orthodox Christianity. As a young man, Louis was very 'zealous about his Christianity and sometimes stood on corner soap boxes to deliver sermons' (p. 28). As a student at Cambridge he even chastised his fellow students for not 'being proper Christians' (p. 8). His early ambition was to be a missionary, and he once concluded that one could be 'both a missionary and a part-time scientist' (p. 33). As he studied at Cambridge, though, his 'growing knowledge of evolutionary theory' and his 'more liberal views' led him away from the church and into science on a full-time basis. Louis Leakey was even one of the signers of the 'Humanist Manifesto,' along with leading atheists and secularists.

He later became very hostile towards Christianity, an attitude that was passed on to at least one of his sons, Richard. When Richard was asked to be a guest on Walter Cronkite's television program to discuss evolution and creationism, as an 'ardent anti-creationist, Richard agreed to go on' (p. 520). The



ruse to get him on the show turned out to be a trick—Cronkite wanted to pit Leakey and Johanson against each other on the show to debate their radically different opinions about *Australopithecus afarensis* and other putative hominids. On the show, Johanson was less interested in an intellectual exchange to arrive at a better understanding of human evolution than in attacking those with whom he disagreed. In this reviewer's opinion, Richard Leakey came out better in this exchange. Some people felt otherwise because shortly

'after the Cronkite show, the National Geographic Society—the Leakeys' long and trusted supporter—refused Richard's request for funds for Koobi Fora and for new explorations north and west of Lake Turkana' (p. 523).

The antagonism towards creationism by the Leakeys was so great that Mary Leakey 'refused to send any of Kenya's original hominid fossils for display' to the American Museum of Natural History in New York because 'such an exhibit was too risky in a country where creationists were active' (p. 533). She believed that the fossils were in danger in a country where there were many creationists, because she feared fundamentalists would 'come in with a bomb and destroy the whole legacy' of 'irreplaceable fossils'



*Lucy, the significance of which the Leakeys disputed.*

(p. 533). The paleontologist wars may have warped her opinion about humanity, allowing her to develop such an unfounded opinion.

One trait clearly brought out was the unwillingness of these leading scientists to evaluate the data fairly and objectively. Many, such as Tim White, professor at the University of California Berkeley, were anything but reasonable and objective. In the words of Tim White's University of Michigan professor, Milford Wolpoff,

'Tim knows the "right" way ... and that's with a capital 'R' ... I used to think once he got a job and was treated with professional respect, he'd calm down a bit. But I was wrong ... White's self-righteous stance surfaced [in the field] ... leading him to be "unspeakably rude and arrogant to others"' (p. 477).

Morell concludes that 'like Wolpoff, Richard assumed that White would eventually outgrow this behavior. Instead, Richard himself became a target' (p. 477). Another example is when Richard explained his concerns about White's interpretation of a fossil, White

'started shouting at me, calling me

a dictator, said that it was a disgrace that I should be in charge—all this rubbish ... he wanted to have nothing more to do with me, and finally walked out of my office and slammed the door' (p. 478).

Overall, Morell goes into great detail explaining specifically *what* their debates about human evolution were over. Debate, of course, is appropriate in science—but the viciousness that Morell eloquently documents is hardly what we would expect of scientists who are interested in the truth and desire to rationally evaluate their ideas. The extent of the behavior of these individuals was so extreme that it could not be discussed in a family publication (and I will not do so here—you must read the book).

It also is amazing as to how candid the evolutionists in Morell's work were at times, such as Johanson's admission that 'nobody really places a great deal of faith in *any* human [evolution] tree' now (p. 546, emphasis his). Yet many of their arguments are over this tree, which seems to change drastically with each new find, and they are based on evidence so flimsy and fragmentary that a wide variety of interpretations is possible—which is a major reason for the many heated conflicts in which the various participants in paleoanthropology are perpetually involved.

I was aware of many of these conflicts through reading various publications on anthropology, but this work helps to accurately assess both the extent and the degree of conflicts in the field with so little hard data, most of which can be interpreted in many ways. In view of this fact, it is not surprising that there are major disagreements. What is surprising is the immature, unprofessional behavior of the leading participants. I, for one, will now look at the field of physical anthropology in a drastically different way. I am scheduled to teach anthropology at the college soon, and this book will be high on my recommended reading list. Furthermore, I now expect to cover the evidence for human evolution in quite a different way than I have in the past.