

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Samantha Fryer Ward, Collections Engagement Assistant at the Corinium Museum, to chat about archaeologist Helen O'Neill. So if we could start with an introduction to O'Neill and her work?

SFW: So Helen O'Neill, she was one of the preeminent archaeologists of the 20th century, who worked here in the UK. And she's contributed greatly to our understanding of the history of this part of the Cotswolds where we are. And in 1938, she was actually invited to be an honorary curator here at the Corinium Museum, and she was really a force to be reckoned with. She was quite persistent, she had this driving personality, so everything that happened, she was pushing for, force to be reckoned with really. So she worked at Salmonsbury, which is nearby, and she pushed for the funding there, she pushed for professional support, for the finds to be documented, published and displayed. So she was really quite a character, I think. She had quite a long career, she started in 1931 at Salmonsbury. I'm not sure she had any professional training, but she, probably like many women at that time, got an interest, took it up. She was a member of the Royal Archaeological Institute and the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society from 1932, so a couple of years afterwards, and she was honorary curator here. She married an archaeologist, who she met at the dig at Salmonsbury, Bryan St John O'Neill, and he was actually the Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments. In 1948, she became a fellow of the Society of Antiquities, and she's also got an MBE for service to archaeology, which she got in 1968. And she did lots of digs around here in the Cotswolds, including Bourton-on-the-Water, which is where she grew up. And she excavated various Roman villas, she worked at Gloucester on the city defenses, she's dug at medieval moated manor sites, and she also worked for the Ordnance Survey and the Ancient Monuments Inspector.

AT: Now, you mentioned that she grew up in the area, so can you give us a little bit of background about her earlier life?

SFW: She was born Helen Donovan in 1893, and she grew up in Bourton-on-the-Water, which is where the Salmonsbury Iron Age camp is, and her house was actually Camp House, which was at the west entrance of the camp. So I think that's probably where she got her interest in archaeology. I mean, you could dig in your garden and find something under a rose bush, so she must have known it was this ring feature in her area, it had her house there, and so I think it was probably quite an inspiration to her. So, in 1931, when they started excavating there, she became involved with it. She got onto the committee there, she was the only woman on the committee, but got involved in the dig, and got involved in the background and behind the scenes work there too.

AT: So, I'm just doing a bit of math here, and if she was born in 1893, but she didn't start working on Salmonsbury until 1931, she would have been around 38, and so she didn't get married until she was well into her 40s. So, it's interesting that she started pursuing this, what we would consider later in life for your first go at a new career.

SFW: I mean, the problem is that I don't have any information about what she did prior to then, that the first records we have of her from then, she might have been involved in local digs, we don't really know. There was nothing recorded, there's nothing written that we have that shows what she did up until that

point, but she came from that, Camp House was quite nice, as she came from a fairly well-off background. I'm not quite sure what she was involved in beforehand, but yes, obviously from this point onward, we have it documented, we have information about what she was involved in, but yes, before that we don't really know.

AT: That's actually a larger issue that comes up a lot, is just the relative lack of documentation, so unfortunately that's not surprising. Was there archaeological activity happening at Salmonsbury prior to 1931, or was that the first real exploration?

SFW: Well, there were reports of things being found in Victorian times. They found some currency bars, Iron Age currency bars, which look a bit like swords really, when you find them in the ground, but they've not got any hilt, but they were used as currency, and there was a big hoard found. And they found some more in the later digs, but there's documentation of people finding these bars, and then they were trying to locate where they ended up. I think the local blacksmith took one to try and see what it was made of, they ended up in various museums. So from Victorian times they knew that the camp was there, they found some artifacts, but there had not been a formal dig. It had been more amateur work around that, so there was work going on, and that obviously would have stimulated her interest. She'd have known that things had been found in the area, that it was an Iron Age camp, and yes, so when it started she must have thought, "right, well, let's see what we can find."

AT: And so how did you first come to your attention?

SFW: Well, we're very lucky here at the museum, and spring last year we received the deposition from Salmonsbury digs over the years, which is all their wonderful artifacts and finds. Another local museum couldn't keep the collection anymore, so they asked if we wanted it, it was in our local area. But as well as all the finds, we also got the paper archive, which usually receives all the reports, the diagrams, the maps, and we also received a lot of correspondence. And this was quite incredible because it was her personal correspondence a lot of the time, and a lot of it is between her and Gerald Dunning, who was the director of the digs at Salmonsbury, and the correspondence goes from the 1930s all the way up to the '70s, and you can trace their friendship over this time. The first letters we get are "Dear Dr. Dunning," and by the end we see "my dear Gerald." You can see as well the tone's changed throughout the years, you get more reference to family activities, as well as the information about what they've been doing on various digs, so it's a wonderful resource. I mean her handwriting is very difficult to read. But she doesn't hold anything back, her personality shines through, so from the very first letter right up into the last ones we have, you can really see how this friendship grows between them. It's quite wonderful to read.

AT: And so when we think of archaeologists in this time period, a lot of times in the histories and the media depictions, they tend to leave the women out, and women certainly were in the minority at this time, but they were there.

SFW: Yes, in the paper archive, we've also got photographs, and I think the first thing when I looked at these photographs, obviously you've got all the photographs of the digs, but you've also got the people

there, and there are a number of photographs where it was a group of women who were digging, or a picnic outside the trench, again, and there was probably four or five women and four or five men. And I thought this was quite unusual, and then when I looked into it a bit more, she'd actually invited some women from Bedford College, which in the UK was the first degree-awarding university, the first higher education institution for women, which was founded in 1840. And she invited these women to come along to Salmonsbury to take part in the dig, and she actually, there's a letter we've got where she insists that Dunning must arrive by this date because a crowd from Bedford College are going to turn up and help with the dig. So it's quite wonderful to see these, it's not just a whole load of bearded men in hats, we've got women in skirts. It's a lovely thing to see. She was in contact with some of the other archaeologists at the time. Another really eminent archaeologist, female archaeologist in this area was Elsie Clifford, and she did a lot of excavating around this area, and they met up occasionally. And we have a letter from Helen when she's writing to Dunning about Elsie, and says that she's an amazing woman, but then in her usual sharp and witty style, she writes, "it will be amusing to see what she hopes to prove by that wondrously bilious map of hers, I never saw such a thing, I'm sorry for Nymphsfield," and that's where Clifford was actually excavating a long barrow. So she talks about her as an amazing woman, but then there's a bit of an edge sometimes in her descriptions. She doesn't suffer fools, I mean, not the women, but I found another letter where she talks about going to London to see different archaeologists talk. And she says, "Wheeler was very good, Hinken was very dull, and as for Hawkes, he spoke last, the longest, violently excited and incoherent, the place nearly empty by the time he finished, but very good tea and plenty of grub."

AT: I feel like I would have liked her, there's a quote, I think it was Alice Roosevelt said, "if you don't have anything nice to say, come sit by me."

SFW: Yes. You know exactly how she feels about everything at every point, she doesn't hold anything back, and I like that about her too, she's very honest, so yes, it's good, and witty with it.

AT: Well that also makes it a very good, a very useful historical resource, like when you're looking at what other people might have said about this conference that she was at, and they don't mention that, nobody liked his talk and they left, and that's actually really useful information to have.

SFW: It is, it is, and they had good grub.

AT: That is the most important thing at any conference. And so interestingly, while she did get a later start, once she was at it, she actually worked well under her 80s, which is just so impressive given the nature of archaeology, because my impression is it's quite physical work.

SFW: Well, how much of the actual digging work she did later on, I'm not sure, but she was definitely corresponding. So we've got letters from her talking with the archaeological community trying to find out what's happening about reports that they are writing about the various digs at Salmonsbury. She's always involved, there's always a finger in the pie there. She struggled a bit with her health, but even in her 80s, at the age of 80, in 1973, she actually traveled to India to visit where her father had been a medical officer, and we don't have the letter that she wrote to Dunning, but we've got Dunning's reply to

her, and he mentions, he says, “my, you had a grand time in India, riding about in state on an elephant, I would have loved to see you en route.” And I’ve just got this vision of this 80-year-old woman on an elephant in India. I mean, she obviously, she was completely passionate about everything she did, threw herself into it. And even at that point, was riding elephants through the town in India. So, yeah, she was still very much involved. It was obviously a passion for her, not just an occupation.

AT: And then you’ve also mentioned in pieces that you’ve written about her, that you really love her writing style. And we’ve touched on that a bit with her personal correspondence, but she also wrote like 40 academic articles and things like that. So, could you tell us a bit about how prolific her writing was?

SFW: Yes, she wrote 40 academic articles, and it covered a full range of artifacts and a number of her digs. We’ve got the archaeological reports here at the museum. And a thing I love about her writing so much is she brings it to life, and a lot of the academic archaeological reports are very dry. You get the scientific detail, the fact this was found on layer such in this area in this quadrant, which is of course important, but she then brings it to life. So, you’ll have all that detail. And one of my favorite ones, she was excavating a long barrow in Withington in Gloucestershire here. And she talks about the burnt floor in the antechamber. And then this is to quote her directly, “it was probably the work of a marauding tribe who, in raiding the living inhabitants in the barrow forecourt, broke open the burial chamber, scattering the bones before setting fire to the dwelling.” And she talks about how the tribe had probably removed the skulls, but the remaining fragments had a “hard black waxy feel and the appearance of ebony.” And she said that” this gave us a clue to the roofing in the forecourt. Bones in this condition are the result of a very slow combustion, which could be due to a thatched roof, which would smolder for days once it had fallen and lay on the floor.” Now, she could have written just that “the bones were this consistency, because it would have probably been a thatched roof, which fell and burnt on them.” But instead, we get the whole vision of this marauding tribe coming in, taking the skulls, setting fire. And it just brings that aspect to life. You’re there with her and with the tribe as it’s happening. And it’s not the first time. She also wrote articles for different journals. And she was talking about the occupation of Britain in Roman times. And she actually writes, “let us put ourselves in the shoes of a Roman commander, ordered to advance in the direction of the Cotswolds, to receive their submission and to secure it in permanence. How would he direct his line of march? We may be sure that he would know the ground or be able to obtain guides or both, for the Romans have been established in Gaul for a century and are not likely to have neglected opportunities for spying out the ground.” And later, she moves on, “arrived at the northern escarpment of the Berkshire Downs, a Roman commander 1,900 years ago, saw before him a wide vale as now, but considerably more wooded with a distant ridge of high land beyond. If desiring to reach those hills, he would naturally cross the vale at the least encumbered point in the right direction.” And so you’re there with the Roman commander. She’s put you in their position, looking across, she’s described the scene. And instead of just saying, “well, Romans would have done this and moved this forward in this direction to this place,” you’re there with them. And it’s just incredible. She’s a really wonderful writer. And when you read her reports, it’s always quite exciting because you know you’re going to get that quality in there.

AT: I’m actually very disappointed now because I feel like she would have been an amazing director of historical epics on film and television. And I am deeply miffed that we will never get to see what she

could have done with that. And I know that's just me projecting, but I feel like she would approve.

SFW: Well, I think she might have been, had she born slightly later, been one of the communicators of archaeology on programs we've got here like Digging for Britain, where you have the archaeologists and she would have taken the finds that people would have bought her and she would have told the stories behind them and communicated them wonderfully. And I get the idea that if she'd been born a bit later, she would have been one of the great communicators on television on film. So yes, I can absolutely see that.

AT: Well, it's interesting when we're talking about conjecture and how we communicate history, a lot of the argument for those very dry, just the facts ma'am approaches is that we don't want to be putting our own biases and extrapolating beyond what we have evidence for. But it doesn't seem like she was doing that. It seems like she was making assumptions that had a pretty solid basis in the facts. And I also find that argument hilarious because people are always putting their own biases on their interpretations of history and archaeology. So this idea that presenting it as boringly as possible is going to change that seems a bit silly.

SFW: It does. And I think that the wonderful thing about history and archaeology is the finding of the artifacts, but the communicating them, you need the people and the stories and it's the people that get people interested. So you want to know how they used that, what they did with it. And even if you say, "well, we're not quite sure, but it could have been used for this. Or how about this?" It's getting people interested, getting people excited and understanding the people behind it, because they were just people, like us, they probably had the same desires, wants, needs, but they had a different way of living. And her skill is that she makes you think about the people, she makes you think about what they were experiencing, how they live. And rather than just the things that are found in the ground, which can be very interesting and academic, but to a general audience. They want to know more, they want to make the connections, they want to connect to their own lives. And she's certainly someone who was very skilled at making those connections for people and drawing people in - well, drawing me in, reading her correspondence and her reports, definitely.

AT: You're also touching on something which I understand is part of your job, and that is getting the public, getting students interested in history. Because, I know for me, certainly history class was just over a decade's worth of "memorize these facts and names and dates without getting into the story behind it". And so, as someone who professionally gets people interested in history, I feel like that's kind of an uphill battle for you because of that preconception that that type of learning instills in us from a fairly young age, that history is boring, not because history is boring, but because the way we have been taught history is often boring.

SFW: We're very lucky here at the museum. We run workshops for schools and children usually from the age of 7 upwards, and we have to reference national curriculum, but we can use our artifacts and we can use what we have here and our knowledge to make it interesting too. So we do a workshop about Romans for 7, 8-year-olds, where they get to learn what it would be like to live in Roman Corinium. And they get to try on clothes, they get to make mosaics, they get to see what food they did

and didn't eat, and they're astonished that they didn't have tomatoes or potatoes - no chips, no tomato sauce! And then they get to play games like knuckle bones. And I love these workshops because we have a lot of Roman tesserae. It was the second biggest town in Roman Britain, so we have a lot of artifacts, so we can actually give them bits to hold. So, I've got a glass Roman bead, which you just pop in their hand and you say to them, "this was made by a Roman, this was worn by a Roman, and now 2,000 years later, you're holding this piece of history in your hand. Think about the person who made that, or the person who wore that, and what they would feel to know that 2,000 years later, someone is holding that bead in their hand." And the look on their face, the excitement, and they get interested in archaeology, they talk about, "how did they find it? Where did they find it?" And we say, "well, if you dig in your garden here, you might find something, you might not. A piece of pottery, it could be old." And you could see them, and I think, "oh dear, their poor parents, they're going to go home and start digging up their garden to find things." But it's just making that connection between the people back then, and them today. So they start to see that actually, they weren't very different, they just lived slightly differently. And I love the excitement on their faces, when they do get to actually connect with a real piece of history, they get to hold a piece of history rather than having it in a case, and reading a description. They get to interact with it, and I think that's so important.

AT: And I think we're also getting into putting the A in STEAM, so it's not enough to have science, technology, engineering, and math, but you also need the artistic side, which in this case is the imagination, the creativity, to be able to make it real, for kids and adults.

SFW: Absolutely, we have other workshops for older children, slightly older, where we have replica skeletons, and we get them to pretend they're archaeologists. So they look at the bones and learn about isotope analysis, and they have to, from these skeletons, and the grave goods, work out who they think they were, whether they were male or female, what job they did. And they get to understand a bit more about the people - rather than just seeing a skeleton, they get to build the life up for that person by themselves. And again, I think it's the connection to people, to understanding what the artifacts are, but how people use them, and I guess that's what history is, isn't it? It's how people lived, and who they were. So, yeah, I love my job, I love people getting excited about the things that we find, and thinking about how people used to live.

AT: Artifacts and documents from the Salmonsbury digs are on display at the Corinium Museum. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.