

Interview with Rex Morgan

As I said in the Editorial, Rex Morgan is one of the best-known names in the whole Shroud world. Author of various books on the subject, editor of 118 numbers of Shroud News, presenter of numerous historical papers at congresses all over the world, Rex was born in England but has lived in Australia since 1949. He has the added advantage of being quite simply one of the nicest, most accessible people involved in Shroud research. I am very pleased that he answered the following questions for the British Society for the Turin Shroud.

Could you tell us something about how you started Shroud News?

I attended, as an author, the world media session in Turin Cathedral the day before the August 1978 exposition was opened to the public. Along with most other people there this was my first sight of the Turin Shroud as no-one had seen it publicly since 1933. I was deeply impressed with what I saw and on my return to Australia began giving lectures about the Shroud and increasing my own knowledge of it.

I began to build up what is today a very large library resource of books, tapes, movies, CD's, articles, photographs, artefacts and memorabilia of the Shroud. There are thousands of items in my collection.

I received so many questions about the Shroud that I decided to write a small newsletter for a circle of interested people in Australia. The first issue came out in September 1980 and was of four pages.

It soon became sought after in many countries and developed into a more substantial publication of an average of 24 pages. I tried to bring to my mailing list news and information of current activities in the Shroud world. There was no real editorial policy, no mission statement of any significance, no editorial board with individuals forcing their opinions on the publication, no requirement for peer-review (which creates out-of-date, teeth-drawn publication), no deadline to meet other than the approximate bi-monthly production, and no pretensions about being a scholarly or scientific or prestigious publication. I typed it myself, sometimes printed it myself, and paid for it myself.

It is a matter of some personal satisfaction that many of the twentieth century's great Shroud scholars had very complimentary things to say about Shroud News and what it did. For many years it was the most frequent Shroud publication in English.

More than one hundred editions were published and sent round the world - what made you stop?

There were actually 118 and these included the "famous" 50th issue of December 1988 of 68 pages and the 100th of February 1997 of 80 pages. Issue No. 118, the last one I produced, was my Keynote Address at the Dallas Conference of 2001 which summarised much of the position of Shroud studies at that time. I had never intended to stop doing Shroud News. Indeed I never believed I could, such was the driving force which made me do it about every two months for so many years.

But, life catches up with one, and I found that in the past few years I had many other demands on my time and energy, some of them of international importance in other fields. There have been many letters asking me to resurrect Shroud News and I would much like to. The mountain of material I have assembled since the last one would enable me to produce issues for many more years.

How well-known is the Shroud in Australia - is public awareness any different from Europe or the USA?

Back in 1982 I brought to Australia the Brooks Institute of Santa Barbara's photographic exhibition based on the work of the STURP team in 1978. Ernie Brooks and Father Adam Otterbein decided they could no longer take the exhibit around the USA and offered it to me to display in this part of the world. I arranged for major sponsorships for transportation and exhibition spaces with Australian corporations and over a period of two or three years I took the exhibit (of hundreds of images including full-sized positives and negatives of the Shroud) to the capital city of every state in Australia, to Hong Kong, Macau, New Zealand, Canada and several return visits to cities in Australia. Over this period more than a million people saw the exhibition free of charge.

I mention this because until then there was very little knowledge of the Shroud in Australia. I wrote several books on the Shroud and these, together with the exhibit, certainly increased awareness of the Shroud in Australasia and the Pacific region.

There were demands for the exhibition in countries such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka but resources were not available to meet the requests.

As with Europe and the US public awareness was focused when the appalling deception of the flawed 1988 C14 tests proclaimed the Shroud "a fake" to the shrill delight of the paranoid media of the world. As we all know the reversal of this opinion has been almost impossible to achieve ever since despite even the latest work which has determined, as many of us thought back in 1988, that threads of intrusive medieval material were what had, in fact, been dated.

So, as with the rest of the world, there tends to be a non-committal shrugging the shoulders here when the Shroud is mentioned.

Could you tell us something about your projects - photography books of England and China?

I have about a dozen documentary books to my name, having always been interested in travel, local history and the unusual. Photography has always run strong in my veins as my grandfather, father and brother were all professional photographers in their day and my children and grandchildren seem to have inherited the necessary genetic influence to carry on the tradition.

My own photographic work has related to my extensive travel. I have visited about seventy countries in my life, many of them frequently and I have a vast library of images taken over more than fifty years. Amongst other current projects the books of pictures of England and China are in the melting pot as well as books of images of several other countries I know well.

I should also mention that in addition to the four books on the Shroud and the editing of several others on the subject I have in mind two or three more Shroud books!

What is your opinion about the work carried out on the Shroud in 2002 and all the subsequent reactions and criticism?

Like everyone else I was very interested to read and hear and learn more of the work done in 2002. I still find myself unclear about its real significance and consequences. I attended the International Conference in Dallas in 2005 and before I went there I decided it would provide the impetus to start writing Shroud News again. Unfortunately I encountered so much bitterness and aggression, secret meetings and alternative agendas, accusations, plots and counter plots, with both sides dubiously claiming co-operation and compassion ("let's kiss and make up" as one protagonist put

it), as well as many superb and often impassioned presentations that when I came away from Dallas I could not find it in my heart to write up the conference and produce another Shroud News as several had asked me to.

I think the Battle of the Shroudies is hurting a lot of people and this does not advance the cause of the Shroud in the eyes of a puzzled and sceptical public.

The media (which has so much blood on its hands, so much to answer for in the world's tragedies) has long regarded the Shroud Crowd generally as a bunch of religious cranks, a view supported by the emphasis on the deep religious convictions of many Shroudies which does nothing to convey to a dubious public the fact that the Shroud Crowd consists of many extremely competent experts in numerous fields from all kinds of religious and non-religious backgrounds. There is also the unfortunate intrusion from time to time of pious claptrap in some Shroud papers presented as scientific objective hypotheses.

Where do you see Shroud studies going from here?

Despite all the rancour at the moment there is great scope for continuing studies of the Shroud. There are still numerous areas of its historical and scientific aspects and the many associated connections (such as Oviedo, the Catacomb portrait etc) which have a considerable bearing on our knowledge of the Shroud.

I recall writing in Shroud News No. 60 (August 1990), "I idly said at dinner the other night, 'I wonder what the Shroud situation will be when I produce the hundredth Shroud News?' My good wife, for many years a tolerant Shroud listener, said with considerable prescience, I should think, 'Don't worry dear, they'll all still be squabbling' and I expect she'll be proved right".

Indeed she was proved right at the hundredth issue in February 1997 and still is. Nothing has changed among the personalities of the Shroud Crowd. Just as religion has been the basis of many of the world's greatest wars, insurrections, mass exterminations and acts of terrorism, so the Shroud, a religious object, has regrettably stirred up great passions which do no credit to the participants in the Shroud War.

And what the Shroud should be, and could be, is the greatest force for good and love and healing and goodwill if, indeed, we believe in the Christian message of which the Shroud is very likely the most iconic physical reminder of the founder of Christianity and his death.

As I said in my Keynote Address in Dallas in 2001, "If so many thousands of people in the world, regardless of their religion, their age-group, background, training, nationality or any other apparent difference, are united in their quest for the truth about this extraordinary and unique object surely it cannot be some kind of monstrous fraud".

What are your other interests apart from the Shroud?

These days, in the winter of my life, I find myself thinking more and more about the thirty or so books I have in my mind, or already in note books, that I have yet to write. I still travel the world a great deal involved in research of one kind or another and in certain consultation work with some government agencies especially in Asia.

I have a famous historic home in country Australia (which has been visited, incidentally, by several members of the Shroud Crowd over the years) where I can enjoy some of the fruits of my life's labours, especially when my three children and their families of seven grandchildren visit. I also maintain a traditional home on the great Chao Phraya River in the middle of Thailand where I frequently go to write and think. And of course there are all my other interests such as reading, public speaking, collecting (almost everything), photography, antiques, vintage cars, my private museum

and exploration (I did a number of expeditions to the Bay of Bengal, the Roman Catacombs, the Jordanian Desert, Jerusalem Tombs, the Oregon Trail etc etc).

And the famous last words of this interview are probably these: One of the keys to success and satisfaction in this world is hard work. If one can shun the shallow and specious time-wasting pursuits thrust upon us by the material and blatantly commercial world and refuse to engage with the mediocre (that's most of it) and get on with those things which matter to oneself, without harming anyone else, one can probably make a lasting contribution, of one kind or another, to civilisation.