



Mike Coe, Yaxchilan, 2012.

Appreciating Mike: A Tribute to Michael D. Coe¹

STEPHEN HOUSTON

Michael Coe (May 14, 1929–September 25, 2019) was an archaeologist, writer, and teacher who made the ancient world come alive for scholars and the public alike. His passing, after a long and fulfilling career, left his students and friends in sorrow. But they remember and cherish his presence in their lives. Over decades, Mike, as we called him, had been a steadfast supporter, an unceasing font of insight, almost up to the end in his hospital bed—during his final weeks, emails went back and forth, his comments as incisive as always. Above all, he set an example of intellectual courage, driven by a wide-ranging curiosity that took him on paths impossible to reproduce today. The Germans, who created the modern university, have a word for people like Mike: the *Doktorvater*, “the doctor-father.” And so he was for us.

Like a dig, an archaeological life has many levels. In Mike’s case certain themes defined that body of work. Equipped with a gifted “eye” and a feisty disdain for error, he took on accepted wisdoms and exploded them through close to twenty books, some reissued as revised editions, along with hundreds of essays and innumerable talks presented with astonishing fluidity. *The Maya*, now in its ninth edition, drew many of us to New

World archaeology. A particular satisfaction for me was taking a companion journey with that very volume. As an undergraduate, I was studying for a year at the University of Edinburgh. Numbed by axe typologies, Beaker ware, and Mesolithic chert, I happened to read the book while waiting to board a Laker Airways flight from London to New York. (Struggling financially, the airline had devised a chaotic system of standby travel. The misery helped to focus the mind.) How on earth had I overlooked this civilization! Years later, Mike asked me to coauthor the latest edition. On closer reading, the book disclosed its genuine novelty. Buried within was the first edition from 1966, a work of great daring that asserted claims now widely held to be true: that the Maya had cities, that their glyphs lay within decipherment, thanks to Tatiana Proskouriakoff and Yuri Knorosov, and that nameable, interpretable kings, queens, and courts enlivened the Maya world and filled

¹ The introduction is a much reworked version of an obituary that appeared in *The Guardian*, October 5, 2019. Helpful comments came from Charles Golden, Mary Miller, Sarah Newman, Colin Ridler, Andrew Scherer, and Karl Taube.



Mike Coe, New York City, 1971, working on the Grolier Club exhibit, "Ancient Maya Calligraphy" (photo: Paul Hosefos, New York Times).

its cities with tombs. Later editions took that audacious exploration—such ideas were not generally known—and shaped it into a bestselling yet authoritative book. I was fortunate to catch a ride at various stages of its existence.

One of Mike's intellectual fascinations was in first things. Until Mike, of course, many had seen the Olmec civilization of Veracruz and Tabasco, Mexico, as late, clearly posterior to the beginnings of the Maya. Mike trounced that view, ever the advocate of Olmec priority and contemptuous of complacent points of view. If "frenemy" had been current during the 1950s and 1960s, it would have applied to Eric Thompson, someone Mike both respected, as expressed in many comments to me, yet disagreed with on just about everything. Mike's excavations in early villages of coastal Guatemala and nearby Mexico, and then at the sprawling Olmec city of San Lorenzo, Mexico, confirmed an early date. This was a time in American archaeology when the "New World Neolithic" needed exploration. For us, in eastern Mesoamerica, Mike was its Robert Braidwood, a figure from the Old World who looked large and planned field research accordingly; indeed, I was told by an older professor at Yale, Ben Rouse, that this was one reason for hiring Mike. How our mentor went about his work still inspires awe. He had seen the peerless mapping project of Hal Conklin, his colleague at Yale and, among other abilities, an ethnographer of terraced agriculture among the Ifugao of Luzon in the Philippines. From this Mike created, with cartographers and his old friend, Dick Diehl, a rich portrait of the vegetative, hydrological, and agricultural setting of an ancient American city, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan. The beauty of those maps, the almost loving description of local ecology, the superb renderings of Olmec carvings, and the careful excavations that undergirded the whole rank among the best

and most evocative efforts of any archaeologist in the twentieth century.

Mike's interest in "firsts" could also trigger his love of a "scoop." Karl Taube, Dick Diehl, and I, along with Carmen Rodríguez Martínez and Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos, saw this firsthand. Carmen and Ponciano had heard rumors of an object with what appeared to be glyphic signs, but from an Olmec context. This proved to be the first example in early America of linear, sequenced signs—that is, of writing. The trip to see the text was unforgettable. It was my first view of the lush lands along the Coatzacoalcos River, elbow lakes leaping with fish yet hemmed by villages emptied of men who had gone "north" for work. We saw the muck of El Manatí (a perfect *altepetl*, sacred springs with rounded hill in the background), thrilled to the thick, fragrant air, with Mike's non-stop energy to motor us along. Then there was the object itself. Crossing the Coatzacoalcos on a ferry, we entered the village that housed the text, parked near a cinder-block building, and approached warily, for access was anything but certain. Outside



Mike with Monument 34, Group D Ridge, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, 1967 (photo: Estate of Michael Coe).



Mike discussing Olmec pottery with Carmen Rodríguez Martínez, Veracruz, 2006 (photo: Karl Taube).



Mike and Richard Diehl examining the Cascajal Block, the earliest Precolumbian writing, Veracruz, 2006 (photo: Karl Taube).

wallowed a pig of some 300 pounds. Inside, in a diabetic coma, was the owner himself, seated upright in a chair, slit-eyed, looking at nothing. His sons removed the block from a box, peeling off the ragged blankets that kept it snug. An expert photographer intrigued by electronic gadgets, Mike took numerous photos with his digital camera. Our euphoria was palpable, Mike's most of all: a bemused smile, a shared look of amazement, a slow shaking of the head at this prodigy of all finds. But I also recall that we needed to leave quickly. If overlong, our stay carried physical risk.

There were other adventures of an intellectual sort. As one example of many, Mike shattered the perception that Maya imagery and texts on vases had little importance. *The Maya Scribe and His World* (1973) was possibly the most influential book ever written on Maya art and its hieroglyphic texts. It prompted several of us to apply to work with Mike at Yale. My own copy, a graduation present from a family friend, has long broken its spine from heavy use. I have called it a "CRISPR" book that does not so much edit DNA as our very minds.² Prepared with eloquence and sparkle, it opened up a world of gods, dread spirits, dynastic scribes, and courtly ladies, all legible in the hieroglyphs and highlighted in the accompanying imagery. The books of this civilization, the Classic Maya (c. AD 250 to 850), had long rotted away. In a way, Mike found them again, but as enduring calligraphy on painted pottery. He compelled scholars to take these productions seriously, and to depths still not fully realized, a perspective that has dawned on me as I read subtle, recent works on Chinese calligraphy. *The Maya Scribe* further revealed the existence of a fourth Maya book, nicknamed "the Grolier"—the others tucked away in Dresden, Madrid, and Paris—now confirmed to be the earliest surviving volume in the Americas. This was another scoop for Mike, with the added observation that such finds do not come to everyone. They require perception and bold commitment.

The plain fact is that academics seldom harbor courageous views. What I see after 32 years as a professional: cautious, crab-like motions or fingers held up to the wind. Mike, despiser of politics and politicians, or pretention of any kind, was not remotely like this. Until recently, the Grolier itself was derided by some as a forgery. Mike's views were resoundingly vindicated in 2018 by teams looking at the original in Mexico. He had also, with the help of his Russian-speaking wife, Sophie Dobzhansky Coe, endorsed the phonetic decipherments of Knorosov. This was during the Cold War and against the views of Thompson, who could hardly have been less enthusiastic. The two would continue to spar until Thompson's death, to the latter's detriment. It took similar pluck for Mike to do, well into retirement, a

² <http://blog.yalebooks.com/2019/09/18/a-personal-canon-stephen-houston-on-five-influential-texts/>



Mike and Sophie Coe at Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli, Italy, 1990
(photo: Natalie Coe).

lucid book on Angkorian civilization, far from his usual writing, and to seek out assistance from Damian Evans, a superlative Khmer specialist, to bring its latest edition up to date. Mike wanted these works to live, to grow in the retelling after his departure.

Moreover, all showed Mike's love of books. He made sure they met the most exalted standards of design and illustration, resulting in collaborations with artists like Felipe Dávalos, Diane Griffiths Peck, and Barry Brukoff. Above all, he worked with Justin Kerr, whose rollout photographs of Classic Maya vases introduced new sources for scholars. Once hooked on the ancient Maya, I had the pleasure of looking at the elephant folia of George Byron Gordon and J. Alden Mason's reproductions of Maya pottery. The rollouts by the Quaker artist, Mary L. Baker, captured their color to a T...if destroying her eyesight in the process. Yet so ponderous were these volumes that they seldom budged from a special rack at the University of Pennsylvania Museum library. Similarly inspired, with keen appreciation for their quality, Mike produced comparable monographs with Peck and Dávalos. Each image would take weeks, however. With Mike's encouragement, Justin soon began to produce photographic rollouts that dramatically accelerated the dissemination of Maya imagery.

Mike's own tale is best told in his own words, *Final Report: An Archaeologist Excavates his Past* (2006). Born in New York City, he descended from a family of immense wealth, for his great-grandfather, Henry Huttleston Rogers, was a founder of Standard Oil. To the Coes came the pleasures of the Gilded Age. There were seasonal estates: Buffalo Bill's hunting ranch near Cody, Wyoming, and, in Gatsbyesque splendor, Planting Fields, a mansion and arboretum on the North Shore of Long Island, since deeded by the family to the state of New York. Until late in life, Mike served as overseer of Coe Hall, Planting Field's house museum. Acquaintances included Evelyn Waugh—a home movie shows Mike exchanging bowlers with the author—Gloria Vanderbilt, and Gene Tunney, the champion boxer, who, in a playful jab, received a black eye from Mike. After prepping at St. Paul's School, Mike entered Harvard College in 1945. An early infatuation with English literature left its mark on his prose.

Few would contest Mike's way with words, the source of his popularity as a writer. He knew that the ultimate goal was to tell a good story. Respecting data, Mike marshaled them into narratives with hints of drama, the conflicts, past and present, that generate interest among readers. There had to be a point to these accounts, a clear arc through and over them. A meticulous outliner, he nonetheless wrote with astounding speed and clarity. Boredom did not figure into his personal algorithm. Yet the thought that he was a "mere" popularizer, a spin pushed by journalists who spoke to me after his death, both belittles the difficulty of synthesizing scholarship for others and the indelible fact that Mike was a scholar through and through. He was as conversant with Maya glyphs as he was with colonial Nahuatl; the ceramic typologies of Veracruz were as adroitly handled as the frontier history and archaeology of western Massachusetts. The person I knew was exceedingly brilliant. I have little doubt that, in Mike, we saw the brainpower of his great-grandfather but enriched by an aesthetic acuity that few possess.

As *Final Report* tells us, a chance visit to Chichen Itza, Mexico, led Mike to anthropology and guidance from the redoubtable Alfred Tozzer, just retired but still powerful at Harvard. But first there was mandatory national service. Recruited by the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, Mike entered the CIA as a case officer. He was sent to Taiwan and stationed in part on islands just off the coast of the People's Republic. With characteristic energy, he used this opportunity to study Formosan ethnography and to learn Mandarin. Side trips to Cambodia and its ruins enlivened his interest in tropical cities. The romance of these trips stayed with him, and he would describe with distinct pleasure the rumors of king cobra hunting along the forested paths of Angkor. A rapture in later life was to ascend in a balloon for special shots of the ruins.

Returning to Harvard, Mike completed his

dissertation under Gordon Willey. He continued to assist Harvard in supervising its museum and program of Precolumbian studies at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. How, in addition to that service, Mike completed so many books, monographs, and excavations in the 1960s is a source of wonder to me. In later life, his heart was really at Yale University, after a short stint teaching in the Jim Crow south, an experience he escaped with relief. Mike's time at Yale, from 1960 until his retirement in 1994, saw him rise to an endowed professorship. As he would frequently say, "Yale left me alone," a freedom other professors might pine for. Former graduate students spread his teaching far and wide, including many in art history enticed to classes in anthropology. Notably, Mike would speak and correspond with anyone, provided they were truly interested. He relished quirky, picaresque people, adventures to come, Venice, a superb meal, Victorian paintings. The John Atkinson Grimshaw oils that hung on his walls had all the mood and mystery Mike enjoyed. He found fun in lively theories of the past, Vikings among the Maya, trans-Pacific diffusion, and beliefs about ancient America among some Latter-day Saints, whom he regarded highly. (A teetotaler and vociferous anti-smoker, Mike would declare himself an "honorary Mormon.") Fish around the world, had they known, must have dreaded his visits to the sailfish-saturated currents off Guatemala, the shores of Labrador, or his favorite spots in New England. The third floor of his house on St. Ronan Street—a few doors from where my father-in-law was raised—had its own chamber of mysteries. There, Mike would tie flies and plot his return, with a rod (not a pole!), to the waters of his dreams. His family was a particular treasure: his wife Sophie, who predeceased him, and whom he missed greatly, along with his talented children, Nicholas, Andrew, Sarah, Peter, and Natalie, as well as many grandchildren.

The best teachers do not inculcate doctrine. They



Mike with Cape Cod striper (photo: Peter Coe).

open doors to rooms none of us yet know or fully understand. But they also demand insight. At Yale, the student who failed to say new things or to surprise and delight Mike in seminar understood that more was expected in the future. Yet there was always a large heart. My son, then three, found that Mike liked to push toy cars on a table set outside his second home in Heath, Massachusetts. And I learned a memorable lesson from him too. Mike once remarked—the grammar reflects its own impossibility—"I would have punched myself in the mouth had I met myself as a graduate student"! We were all of us young. Forgive, be kind, find empathy, offer warranted praise. Encourage. There was so much to admire in Mike. His joyful curiosity, his vigor in defending the weak or students in need, his loyalty without end, a spontaneous generosity that offered a life-long model for me and many others. He was a person who was so right about so many things. The recollections below, assembled from grateful students and friends, show why this was so.

Traci Ardren

Every graduate student is a bit intimidated at their first meeting with a new adviser. I arrived at Yale on the recommendation of Steve Houston, completely overwhelmed with the idea of being at an Ivy League school, in the office of Dr. Michael Coe, inside the Peabody Museum of Natural History. It was far from my home in south Florida, culturally and physically. Mike never tolerated anyone calling him Dr. Coe more than once, and we got that cleared up right away. Then he asked me about my undergraduate thesis on women in Classic Maya politics. Because my undergraduate adviser, Anthony Andrews, was a Mayanist, and I had attended the Austin Maya Meetings and worked at Caracol, I had the opportunity to discuss my thesis with many scholars. The vast majority of them thought the topic absolutely unimportant—a piece of fluff that would never turn into a career. When Mike asked about the stelae of Naranjo, he astonished me: there was, Mike noted, a whole lot more to the story of royal Maya women than anyone expected. He told me how hard Tatiana Proskouriakoff had worked to get her ideas published (he knew her!), and I heard the first of many tales about the evils of J. E. S. Thompson. I left that meeting with new confidence in my views of the Maya. The great Mike Coe agreed that I was on to something! That was 1988. He remained curious and enthusiastic about every intellectual left turn I took in the intervening 30+ years. In the past two months alone, he sent me a preface for my edited volume on Maya food and a cover endorsement for another volume. Mike never stopped giving—or being able to meet people on level ground, as he did with me in his office that fall. He found a kernel of inspiration in almost anyone's research and took pleasure in amplifying what they had to offer.



(Top left) seated: Mike, Gillett Griffin, George Stuart, and Jeffrey Wilkerson, Usumacinta River, en route to Piedras Negras, Guatemala, c. 1983 (photo: David Stuart); (top right) Mike with cast of San Lorenzo Colossal Head 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (photo: Damian Evans); (bottom left) Mike receiving elephant blessing, Kerala, India; (bottom right) Mike at Paestum, Italy (photo: Natalie Coe).

Tony Aveni

Here's to Mike!

Fall 1969. I was visiting my hometown, New Haven, Connecticut, where I was working on a project with a colleague in Yale's Astronomy Department. Inspired by Stonehenge, I'd developed a passing curiosity about the possibility of astronomically aligned ancient Maya buildings, though I knew all too little about them. One cloudy day, when we couldn't engage Yale's telescopes, I asked a colleague: "Do you know anyone in your anthro department who might know something about the ancient Maya?" "I've heard of this guy Mike Coe," came the reply, "try him." The directory informed me his office was just around the corner from Prospect and Sachem, where the astro department was then located; so I ambled over, knocked on Mike's office door, and he greeted me with open arms. I introduced myself. "So you're an astronomer—wait'll you see this!" he gesticulated, grabbing my arm and pulling me over to a side table, where he had a copy of a pictorial document laid out. "This is a Maya calendar—it's all about the motion of the planet Venus..." And he went on to articulate the astronomical contents of the then-Grolier Codex. Spending that afternoon with Mike, which included leaving with a long list of helpful contacts scrawled out in his own hand, constituted the first step in my permanently shelving my modern astronomical pursuits and giving over the bulk of my scholarly life to the study of astronomy in other cultures.

Fast forward four years. After much advice and consent from Mike, on the evening of a spectacular aurora borealis display I received a call at two in the morning in the very midst of the spectacle I was viewing in upstate New York. It was Mike. He was in Palenque, where he, too, happened to be witnessing the phenomenon—a rare occurrence in tropical latitudes. He spoke in such an excited tone: "Tony! This is amazing! I'm sure the Maya knew about this phenomenon—if only we could find it in the documents!" As far as I know such evidence has yet to be detected, but I've no doubt he was correct—Mike Coe knew a lot about astronomy

Alfred L. Bush

One overarching motivation for Michael's work in Mesoamerica was his belief that the ancient civilizations found there were autochthonous. Having invented themselves, their descendants should find a special pride in their heritage. This belief motivated Michael's many kindnesses to the indigenous members of his working crews on archaeological digs. It also extended to a respect and interest in native peoples everywhere. So he was especially happy to find in the New Mexico Pueblos continuing ceremonial life that could be traced back to its Precolumbian roots. Few things focused Michael's sense of respect and delight in what was indigenous more than the corn dance at Santa Domingo Pueblo on

August 4th each year. And in 1968 a journey west was organized by Michael to share this extraordinary event with his wife and children. I met Michael and his family by prearrangement at the dance, and it was there that I proposed that he curate an exhibition at the Grolier Club in New York City that was to have a far-reaching impact on the study of Maya hieroglyphs and reveal what became the fourth Maya codex, which Michael's scholarship steadfastly upheld as the earliest American book. I was present to watch the family be mesmerized by the Pueblo ceremony. Michael was careful to point out that unlike contemporary native costumes in Mexico which had been imposed by the Spanish, the ceremonial dress of the Pueblos reproduces costumes recorded in Precolumbian kiva murals. But he was content to let the dance and song take its own effect. After several rounds by the pumpkin and turquoise moieties, the Coes and I piled into the family's minibus with the OLMEC Connecticut license plates and drove to Taos. Michael and Sophie wanted to visit the Millicent Rogers Museum, an extraordinary collection of New Mexican arts assembled by the glamorous Standard Oil heiress, who also happened to be Michael's cousin. "Now don't tell anyone who I am," Michael modestly asked as we strode toward the entrance. One foot inside the door and a greeting rang out: "Mike!" It was one of the Ramos brothers, Millicent Rogers' sons, and yet another generation of Michael's cousins. Michael's privileged life and his delight in the survival of indigenous life intersected.

Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos

We invited Mike to give the inaugural lecture in the 2016 Yale Maya Lecture Series. The topic was timely, since the extensive review that he wrote with Mary, Steve, and Karl about the Grolier Codex—now rechristened the Códice Maya de México—had just come out, and he immediately accepted. The room was full on the day of the lecture. I was waiting a few minutes for everyone to sit down before introducing him, when someone accidentally tripped the switch and the lights went out. Mike started talking at once. I whispered, "Let me introduce you!" But Mike was hard of hearing after a decades-old incident with our dear mutual friend Billy Mata. That cost him an ear rupture while braving the warm waters of Lake Amatitlán in search of ancient artifacts, all while using early, flimsy scuba diving equipment. There was no way I could make him stop, especially about one of his favorite topics. Sure enough, he told us how he kept the actual codex in his office upstairs in that very building while preparing his pathbreaking catalog, *The Maya Scribe and His World*, and didn't miss the opportunity to remark how wrong all his detractors had been about the authenticity of the codex. After a while, I'm sure everyone in the audience was astonished at this 87-year-old scholar lecturing passionately, without interruption

but with enviable clarity, while standing in front of the audience for 45 minutes.

At the end, all I could say was "Mike needs no introduction."

Richard A. Diehl

I suspect I measured up to Mike's expectations in every way but one: fly-fishing. Lord knows, I should have been good at what Izaak Walton called *The Contemplative Man's Recreation*, as I had been instructed by the best of the best, the "Dean of American Fly Fishing." In the 1950s Penn State undergraduates had to take two years of Physical Education. In deference to those of us who refused to break a sweat, the offerings included bowling, target shooting, and fly-fishing. I took all three but did not know that my fly-fishing instructor was George Harvey, the High Priest of the Fly Rod, who regularly fished with President Eisenhower.

When Mike learned this, he assumed that I could hold my own with any young fly rodder. His disappointment was visible when I told him I was actually a hot rodder and had gotten a gift C in the course after consistently wrapping my line around the gymnasium balcony railing.

Nevertheless, he still held out some hope in 1968 or 1969 when he invited me to go fishing with him and his son (Andy or Pete, I honestly do not remember) on a beautiful lake near New Haven. He had just assembled a Heathkit Fish Finder, a diabolical device for locating and revealing the depth of fish hiding beneath the surface. Mike was always a gadget person, and he and the children spent many hours assembling all sorts of devices in the days before Best Buy and the Internet.

In any case, we launched the canoe and began to fish. I spent about five minutes flailing around with my rod and endangering everyone within 50 feet. The younger Coe suggested perhaps I could do better with the paddle and thus help the real fishermen. All three of us were delighted to accept my change of task. In future years I went fishing with Mike many times, but he never allowed me near the rods. It worked out well for both of us.

Kevin Johnston

After being accepted in the Yale Anthropology program in 1985, I was invited by Mike for an interview. Would he take me on as his student? I was surprised when, despite my attempts to steer the conversation towards Maya archaeology, iconography, and epigraphy, Mike kept returning to the topic of fly fishing. Having grown up on the Long Island waterfront I knew plenty about saltwater fishing, but fly fishing in freshwater? Nothing. How, then, to engage? Fly fishers, I knew, tie flies, so I queried him about that. He shared a deep appreciation of fly tying, the various fish-attracting qualities, and the mechanics of fine reels. We spoke of our common New

England experiences as youths salt-water fishing from docks and boats. But freshwater fly fishing, he emphasized, was the more noble and demanding sport. Only in the final minutes did Mike raise the topic of my admission and the department's offer. All, it seemed, had been arranged in advance. Why, then, limit our conversation to fly fishing? Mike knew my record so he saw no need to discuss it. What he seemed to want was something more personal and revealing: an opportunity for him to describe a non-academic passion, and for me to divulge whether I was a flexible and personable conversationalist, someone who could engage with him over a period of years, and whose repertoire reached beyond academics. At Yale and thereafter we spoke about many things, including his intricate knowledge of Venetian politics and history and his fascination with the Shakers. The last of a generation of gentlemen archaeologists, Mike was voluble, generous, voraciously curious, and a talented raconteur, attributes on display in his classes and many books. Looking back, I see that our brief interaction characterized Mike as a person and a scholar. Mike believed that personalities can drive fields and that the stories told by and about those personalities can point the curious towards fruitful horizons. What's your story, he seemed to ask, and if we are to work together, can you appreciate mine?

David Joralemon

Mike Coe loved food.

When I was an undergraduate and graduate student at Yale nearly 50 years ago, Mike organized field trips for his students to visit Precolumbian museum exhibitions and art galleries in New York City. In the middle of the day Mike would take us to one of the Chinese restaurants that he'd heard about from King-lui Wu, a good friend, professor at the Yale School of Architecture, and a passionate follower of great Chinese chefs in New York and which restaurants they were cooking in. A regular lunch stop was Szechuan East on 2nd Avenue and East 81st Street on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Szechuan and Hunan restaurants with their spicy country food were the most popular Chinese eateries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, eclipsing the more subtle and urbane Cantonese restaurants. Mike always ordered a wide variety of delicious dishes. Since my knowledge of Chinese food at the time was limited to canned Chun King Chow Mein, this was quite a revelation. The conversation was as varied as the food and covered archaeology, art history, and the leading Precolumbian scholars of the time, with a bit of spicy personal gossip thrown in. These Chinese lunches gave Mike's students a chance to interact with him in a casual setting and him a chance to learn more about us and our interests. I was always impressed by how Mike ordered an ensemble of Chinese dishes that perfectly complemented each other. Dying of curiosity, I once asked him what was the

key to his ordering. He smiled and said it was simple. A great Chinese meal always includes dishes from the major phyla of the animal world—creatures of the sea, land, and air. Shades of Claude Lévi-Strauss. I ended up moving to New York in the middle 1970s and, as luck would have it, I lived in an apartment half a block from Szechuan East. I ate many a meal there over the years and always thought of Mike when I sat down to savor Szechuan shrimp with hot chili sauce, fiery Hunan style lamb, and dry sautéed string beans.

Justin Kerr

When Mike asked me to be coauthor of *The Art of the Maya Scribe* I protested. I did not feel that I had the qualifications to be a coauthor of one of Mike's books. I told Mike that I would be very happy to work with him and supply all the photographs he wanted to use in the book. From time to time Mike would pursue the same question and I declined the honor.

Barbara and I were invited to spend the weekend at Mike's country home in Heath. I loved to go there and sit on the bench under, I believe, a pear tree with Mike and show him the latest batch of rollouts and tell him my thoughts on what some of the scenes meant. Saturday evening Sophie was preparing dinner (which we ate on paper plates, no dishes at Heath). Mike again brought up the idea of my being coauthor of his book. I again protested, but Sophie called from the kitchen, "But Justin what about the scholarship?" I looked over at Mike who had a grin on his face. I was hooked.

Mary Miller

I started preparing these words in Saint Petersburg a few weeks ago, where I imagined Mike and Sophie Coe walking along the Neva, probably tailed by some KGB types, when they first came to meet Yuri Knorosov at the Academy of Sciences over Christmas 1968-69. Mike's work to bring Knorosov's decipherments to an English-speaking audience would turn the Maya world upside-down, usher in the transformative last quarter of the twentieth century in Maya studies, and bring along with the decipherment some colorful characters, including Linda Schele, a cast of disrupters, all. He was the leader of the pack. When meeting with Knorosov, Mike thought back to the charts Tania Proskouriakoff had showed to him in the Harvard Peabody basement a decade earlier, when Mike was a graduate student at Harvard. Without Mike, it would have taken another decade, maybe two, to bring the phonetic and the structural approaches of Maya decipherment together.

The word "disrupter" was not invented until the twenty-first century, but it was made for Mike, whose impact was in both of the very fundamentals of archaeology: when did the Olmec live, he asked, and where? And in the recognition of the systems that provided the key insights into what the Maya of the first millennium

said and believed. Mike had a brain meant for patterns, and so he saw them. He knew that if you looked at enough Maya vases, you could see a system of supernaturals, and a pattern of inscriptions, disrupting the comfortable notions of the meaninglessness of both that had long prevailed.

Most know that Mike had no patience for the things he did not like. I'd like to think that some of Mike's stamina in the past three years came from his contempt for the individual who sits in the Oval Office. And he loved taking aim at the institution he so cared about, Yale University and its many components. Who did not hear him when he shook his head at the "schlock shop" that had replaced the Precolumbian exhibition he had designed for the Peabody Museum when he was curator? He railed against the new School of Management building, but perhaps it was because the Lord Foster spaceship had landed atop his old archaeology lab where his beloved tepalcates, potsherds, had long lived, and where he had meticulously sorted out ceramic sequences in ways so compelling that many followed in his footsteps. (When Will Goetzmann took Mike up to the top of the new building, Mike acknowledged the beauty inside: he would change his mind from time to time, and especially when there were new data, such as the new dating of chocolate preparation and cultivation in Ecuador: he was thrilled to learn from science.) And the Los Angeles County Museum of Art? His outrage at the Jorge Pardo installation there knew no bounds, where he saw only politics and no virtue in the colorful lanterns of the backyard taquería that visually framed LACMA's important collection as if it were tourist art. The curator heard him, and she would set about to modify the installation.

There are things Mike liked: he talked for weeks about the Vietnamese sandwiches that my husband Ed and daughter Alice bought when they took the train and the subway to a new John Adams opera at the Met. He liked vanity plates, especially if they said OLMEC. There are things he approved of, such as paying your taxes, regardless of how you feel about the government. And nothing gave him greater joy than listening to the livestream in fall 2018 from Mexico City, when the scientists commissioned by the National Institute of Anthropology provided incontrovertible technical evidence of the authenticity of the Grolier Codex, something that Mike had been arguing for since 1971.

Mike introduced me to Judge Dee and to Bernie Gunther, among other great sleuths. I had heard him rave about the *Sopranos*: he loved the wordplay, the violence, the performance, the betrayals. And so it was my great pleasure to give him the DVDs of the first season of the *Americans*. They tied together his fascination with espionage, crime, and murder, and perhaps brought him some memories of his days with...shall I just call it The Company?

Over the past few weeks I have returned to many images and stories of Mike. I'll leave you with one. He and Sophie were already at breakfast under the palapa at La Cañada at Palenque one morning in March 1983 when I arrived; strangely, so was Giles Constable, then head of Dumbarton Oaks and a Michael Coe nemesis, just sitting down with some Harvard travelers. As I said hello, the travelers began to gush about the great book they were reading on the Maya. "Oh," said Giles, in a great plummy voice, "you surely refer to Harvard's own Gordon Willey!" "My goodness no," was the answer: "we are reading the amazing Michael Coe!" "And there is the man," I said. Mike heard it all, and he had the last laugh as he signed yet another copy of *The Maya*.

I am honored to have called him my friend.

Megan E. O'Neil

Mike Coe has been one of the most influential figures of my career. During one of the "shopping periods" at Yale, when undergraduates are allowed to attend different classes before registering, I walked into Mike's "Aztecs of Mexico" class and knew my life was transformed, changing my major to archaeology after only two class meetings. In each class, Mike spoke about ancient Mexico with excitement and enthusiasm, bringing obsidian and other materials for us to handle. His passion was like an electric current racing through the classroom. I did not know Mike was already an accomplished and famous archaeologist and author, because even as he spoke dramatically and painted in-depth pictures of the beauty and complexity of the Mexica civilization, he was also approachable, humble, and truly gentle. This combination of his brilliance and fire along with clarity and gentleness characterized Mike's unique personality and voice, which he used to open and enrich the worlds of anthropology, archaeology, and ancient Mexico for students, scholars, and the general public. Mike also was an important leader in Mesoamerican studies, both on an intellectual level, always among the first to speak up, and, on a personal level, for instance, swooping into Austin after Linda Schele's death, in order to keep her graduate students on a continuing path in our coursework. Mike was an incredibly powerful force in our field and also a personal inspiration, mentor, and touchstone for me—and many others. I thought Mike Coe would live forever. I know his legacy will live forever.

Colin Ridler

I first met Mike back in the early 1980s, when I went to visit him and Sophie at their house in New Haven. I had used *The Maya* as an undergraduate reading "Arch and Anth" at Cambridge, and now, as a callow commissioning editor at Thames & Hudson, I wanted to talk to him about updating it—and for advice about who might be the best person to write a new volume in our World of Art series on Mesoamerican art. It was the start of what

proved to be the most rewarding and fulfilling friendship of my publishing career.

Mike and Sophie couldn't have been more welcoming. We ate a delicious lunch prepared by Sophie (it was no surprise that a decade later we were to publish their *True History of Chocolate*, which instantly went into ten foreign languages), and then Mike showed me the art collection he had amassed in the 1950s. I was flabbergasted. As a teenager I had become intrigued by a Victorian painter of moonlit scenes with the curious name of Atkinson Grimshaw. The Ashmolean Museum had one of his works, the Fitzwilliam another, the Tate another couple. Well, at Mike's house I found myself looking at five or six magnificent paintings by this neglected artist. Not only that, in another room was a grand scene by the eighteenth-century painter John Martin. Mike was a collector and art connoisseur of great good taste—so it was no surprise, on that first visit, that he instantly knew who should write our World of Art volume: Mary Miller. No surprise either that his judgment proved sound: her *Art of Mesoamerica* has been through multiple editions and, like Mike's *The Maya*, remains the standard work in its field.

To a publisher, Mike was a dream author—exacting, yes, in his demands for high standards in editing, design, and illustration, but a truly wonderful storyteller, which showed itself particularly in *Breaking the Maya Code*, full of gossipy tales about his forebears in the field and colleagues and rivals he knew. We had terrific fun working together on that book, which arose out of a seminar of his on the subject that I attended at Yale. No wonder it was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize—and remains very firmly in print. Mike must surely be the most life-enhancing, humane, and generous author I have known, as well as an incomparable scholar and scientist to whom all Mesoamericanists owe a huge debt.

Matthew Robb

By the time I got to Yale in 2001, Mike had formally retired from teaching—but of course for Mike retirement meant working on *The Line of Forts* and returning to his early interest in Angkor Wat. Periodically we'd go to lunch at a Chinese place he favored. We spent a lot of time talking about the history of collecting Precolumbian art and the personalities Mike had encountered over the years—lots of references to pirates and what-not. I tried to soak up as much as I could. As part of these conversations we'd often turn to the cast of characters who had put the Olmec on the map. This inevitably led to discussions of Miguel Covarrubias, and Mike's photographed copy of Covarrubias' lost Olmec notebook via George Pepper (now on Mesoweb). It was in this context that Mike shared his own notebook of Olmec drawings, which he told me he'd made in advance of his excavations at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan. I don't think they were ever published—to Mike, the drawings were

a necessary exercise, to train his eye for details, carving techniques, and iconography in the event that he uncovered a new monument (which of course he did). That attention to artistic detail was something that impressed me so much about all of Mike's work. One can see it in his publications, which all have a real emphasis and interest in providing images that offered the same level of richness and insight as his texts, achieving a level of scholarly synthesis few (if any) of us will ever be able to match.

Barbara L. Stark

In 1966, a first-year graduate student, I shot down the stairs of 51 Hillhouse and halted to listen at the door of the undergraduate class Mike was teaching. Billowing copal smoke was drifting out, with Mike at the back wreathed in an aromatic cloud, talking about Maya religion and worldview. I went to Yale because of one of his early papers comparing the Maya to the Khmer. At the end of that year, for the last season of San Lorenzo fieldwork, he invited me to do a survey around San Lorenzo that they had planned but not gotten to. I was an immensely ignorant beginner. He didn't know, but I had only recently figured out he wasn't saying "weird jaguar" in his lectures, but were-jaguar. I turned down the opportunity of a lifetime because I felt totally unprepared. Scholars familiar with his research recognize his almost clairvoyant ability to recognize important things. Did he see something in me that I didn't, or was he just desperate? Curiously, after my doctoral work I went on to head two major survey projects in the Gulf lowlands. Now, too late to tell him, a settlement pattern monograph is coming out about those surveys. His publications could be uncanny. At his retirement symposium, in my presentation I claimed that his 1965 *Handbook of Middle American Indians* chapter on the archaeology of southern Veracruz could not exist. It was not possible for anyone to have written it. By now I was a Gulf specialist and knew the fragmentary and confusing archaeological literature he confronted when he wrote the chapter. I remain unable to explain how he produced a still-relevant synthesis conjured from scraps. Mike had striking insights and inspiration. Not just attending Yale, but also my dissertation research I trace to Mike. Intrigued by the work he and Kent Flannery did on the Pacific coast, I wanted to explore early Gulf settlement. Although I failed to grasp the geomorphological magnitude of the Gulf Papaloapan drainage and the near hopelessness of the endeavor, some pesky Classic-period, red-rimmed, brushed tecomates led me into Classic-period topics that dominated my later career. Mike's legendary gift as a writer cannot, sadly, be replicated by his students. Gifts are gifts. But after one symposium at the SAA meetings, Judy Zeitlin remarked that there was something different about the subset of papers that had been given by his students.

I wondered what she meant, but on reflection saw something. They were simpler, clearer, more direct, not pretentious. I believe Judy was right. We had learned not to play professional games, just discover. Our work was a moonlight of his gift.

David Stuart

Among Mike Coe's many contributions was his unfailing support of students and scholars outside the barriers of conventional academia, especially in Maya studies. I'm lucky to consider myself one of them. I was never Mike's formal student, but he was always a looming presence in my learning and development as an up-and-coming "glyph." I believe I first met him at the very young age of 17, when I nervously presented one of my first papers at the 1980 Princeton University conference on Maya iconography. Mike sat in the front row of the dark auditorium in McCormick Hall, and I can still remember looking down from the podium and seeing the reflection of my bright slides in his round glasses. "That's Michael Coe!" I thought to myself as I nervously stammered through my presentation. To my surprise and happiness Mike later expressed support for some of my ideas, and treated me almost as a colleague.

His clear openness to new ideas and unconventional voices shaped the field of Mesoamerican research in so many ways. He was a strong supporter of two of my more direct mentors, Merle Greene Robertson and Linda Schele, who themselves had unusual beginnings in Maya research. Merle, a teacher at a private high school in California, spent her off time traipsing through the jungles of Mexico and Guatemala, documenting Maya sculpture with beautiful rubbings, and she began to study the intricacies of Maya art as a result. Merle soon took Linda Schele under her wing at Palenque, where together they worked in the early 70s to record its intricate reliefs. It was an era of constant new thinking, and Mike was a happy participant in pushing everyone in new ways. Mike's encouragement, bolstered also by that of his dear friends Gillett Griffin and Betty Benson, led Merle to organize the first Palenque Mesa Redonda conference in 1973, and the rest is history. I was far too young to be a part of that, but my parents George and Gene Stuart were in attendance, and I specifically remember their excited return to the U.S. from Palenque, mentioning the transformational new ideas and someone named Mike Coe being in the center of it all. Without Mike's constant support of Merle and Linda, my own entrance into Maya studies several years later would simply never have happened.

As the decipherment of Maya writing progressed rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, Mike continued to have a front seat. In the early 1980s I proposed that many Maya vases bore the phonetic hieroglyph *kakaw* (cacao) indicating their contents. Around that time my collaborations with Steve Houston and Karl Taube grew and grew,

and together we rapidly realized the painted texts on Maya vases were not much more than elaborate name tags, indicating their owners, contents, and their terms of reference. Other vase texts were scribal signatures, and as an undergrad at Princeton I was invited by Mike to present a talk at Yale on the identification of named Maya artists. I vividly recall feeling some apprehension at sharing some of these insights with Mike, who a decade earlier had proposed that Maya vases were mostly visions of the Maya underworld, with texts possibly recording ritual chants for the dead. That was all laid out in his stunning and transformational work, *The Maya Scribe and his World*. Mike was right in many ways, but the rim texts on the pots turned out to be more mundane: "So-and-so's drinking vessel for cacao." He was ecstatic at the new advances nevertheless, showing no annoyance at being partially off base. Mike loved the decipherment of the chocolate glyph especially, and this helped lead to his broader exploration of the cultural history of chocolate, written with his dear wife Sophie.

Around that same time in the early 1980s I had the wonderful experience of travelling with Mike and Sophie on a rafting expedition down the Usumacinta River, with the goal of visiting the ruins of Piedras Negras. Gillett Griffin and Mary Miller were part of our group of cheerful explorers. We started off from the small river town nowadays known as Frontera Corozal, stopping at Yaxchilan for a day before we made our way farther down river, into more remote jungle (much of it gone today). We encountered numerous rapids below El Chicozapote, and our rubber rafts dipped, spun, and bobbed for an entire day. I have a fond memory of Mike shouting "Tengo nalgas mojadas!" after a particularly dramatic pass through the whitewater. Sophie was unfazed, of course, and she spent long hours in the raft shaded by an umbrella, a wet hardback copy of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* on her lap. The visit to Piedras Negras was far from a touristic adventure. Mike used it to scout out the ruins for a possible archaeological project, envisioning a historical approach to the excavation of Maya ruins, applying the insights of Tatiana Proskouriakoff directly to archaeological research. The idea was novel yet premature in many ways, and the civil unrest of Guatemala made the project unrealistic in those years. Nonetheless Mike's thinking anticipated the methods later applied to Copan and other sites, including Piedras Negras itself, where Steve Houston and Héctor Escobedo developed an important project a decade later.

Mike was working and developing fresh insights up to his last days. His last large project, of course, was the full publication and analysis of the Grolier Codex, which he had brought to light in the early 1970s. Just a few weeks before his passing, Mike wrote me about a sculpture fragment from Piedras Negras that was about

to be auctioned in Paris, showing the head of an elaborate bird, a detail of a costume of a Maya warrior. "It looks like Spearthrower Owl," he wrote me, referring to a ruler of Teotihuacan I had identified in the inscriptions some years ago. When his email arrived it so happens I was writing a paper touching on precisely the same interpretation. Mike was spot-on, as usual, and once more I thought of the irony in the title of his autobiography, *Final Report*. Mike had much to do and to say after that wonderful book appeared, for he was always honing his ideas and scholarship. Mike's insights and contributions were constant and always improving, and none were ever final.

Karl Taube

When Steve Houston, Louise Burkhart, and I began the graduate program in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University in 1980, it was a whole new environment, and perhaps somewhat more so for me coming from northern California. To be honest, it took me a semester to understand the relation of my role as a graduate student to my professors, including Mike.

Looking back at the time, I realize that I was a very junior scholar with nothing to show for myself, but Mike always treated me as someone whose thought had value. It is hard to stress how important it was for our ideas to be contemplated by such a major figure in our field. If it wasn't for that, I do believe that my research would have withered quickly on fallow land.

To provide a few examples of how Mike treated us, in 1983 I attended a presentation by Nicholas Hellmuth concerning the "Principal Young Lord," and during his talk it became clear to me that this was the Classic Maya Maize God. Within the same week I mentioned this to Mike, who previously identified this being as an aspect of the Hero Twins of Popol Vuh fame. I brought this up with him while cataloging the San Lorenzo material. He paused for about 30 seconds and then said "You know, I think that you are right." Without his initial and immediate support I doubt that I would have ever presented my argument at the 1983 Mesa Redonda de Palenque concerning the identification of this being.

As a second example, when we began the graduate program, Steve and I attended a graduate seminar offered by Mike concerning Maya writing and iconography. Steve took with alacrity to understanding the Primary Standard Sequence, a highly ordered glyphic text that Mike argued was perhaps a form of a "Book of the Dead." During the seminar, Steve found that in fact there was little support for this, and Mike took it fully in his stride. Subsequently, in 1984 I realized that some texts of the Primary Standard Sequence concerned the ownership of bowls, and Steve quickly realized that this substituted for the much more common glyphic compound for "vase." We both told Mike together of our findings, and he was thrilled by it.

With these two anecdotes, I would like to stress how Mike was so supportive of junior scholars who approached established research in new ways. Mike and his research were not about fragile ego, but he truly loved the glorious field of ancient Mesoamerica, and to get it right was the most important thing. That, to me, is testimony to academic greatness.

Javier Urcid

Mike's contributions to Mesoamerican studies are as colossal as the Olmec heads (I fondly remember the tailored plates of his van in New Haven, which read "OLMEC"). As to his intellectual generosity, Michael was a giant (I reminiscence of the time I spent in his library after he shared with me the key to his office). And when it comes to scholarly openness, Michael was monumental. I will never forget his solution to our differences concerning the interpretation of the "Danzantes" of Monte Albán. If you read that section in *Mexico's* eighth edition, you will see what I am talking about.

Barbara Voorhies

I had never heard of Mike Coe before entering the graduate program in Anthropology at Yale and at that time was not even certain I would specialize in archaeology. I had had only one class in anthropology as an undergraduate, so I thought I should keep open the options concerning my choice of subdisciplines. Mike was teaching his undergraduate class on the ancient Maya, and I reasoned that I had better sit in on it in the hope of learning something anthropological. When I asked his permission to attend he informed me that the class, held in a small room at 56 Hillhouse Avenue, was already at capacity but that I could bring a chair. So I did. And just like that my future was sealed. Later, Mike took Matsuo Tsukada (a researcher in the Department of Biology) and me to Guatemala to get us started on our respective field projects. For one week we ostensibly bought supplies, but mostly visited exotic tourist destinations. Mike regaled us constantly with stories about archaeologists and, with characteristic, infectious gusto, shared information about that spectacular country and its Maya peoples. The second week we went to the Izabal lake basin where Matsuo scoped out the feasibility of taking lacustrine sediment cores, while Mike made the logistical arrangements so that I could conduct an archaeological survey of that huge basin. The only trouble was that at the time I spoke no Spanish and had no prior experience in archaeology. Despite these minor impediments I survived the summer and returned the following year to continue fieldwork for my dissertation. I owe an enormous debt to Mike for his forbearance and most of all cherish his enthusiasm for all things Maya that remained undiminished until the end of his life.

Gordon Whittaker

As an Australian student in the U.S., I had gotten used to spending Christmas wandering the halls of an empty campus in search of food and company. My first holiday season at Yale proved to be a wonderful exception—Mike invited me to enjoy a sumptuous Christmas feast with Sophie and his children. I was treated to delicacies my Antipodean palette was little accustomed to, and exotic wines that loosened my garrulous tongue. Soon after spinning an Aussie yarn about venomous serpents while confessing my fear and loathing of the creatures, I noticed six-year-old Natalie get up and slip out of the room, presumably on a call from nature. A couple of minutes later, just as I was winding down my horror stories and beginning to devote my attention to newly poured wine, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. Turning around, I found myself gazing into the beady eyes of Snakey, the family pet lovingly coiled around Natalie's neck, whose existence had up to this moment been unknown to me. As I slowly attempted to lower myself back into the seat that I had just leapt from, Mike remarked that if I wanted to be a Mesoamericanist I had better start getting used to snakes. Natalie took this as her cue to drape the uninterested serpent around my quivering neck, where it remained for the rest of the meal. By the time the meal was over, I had learned a valuable lesson and even developed a certain fondness for the lithe but (fortunately) lethargic reptile.

Judith Francis Zeitlin and Robert N. Zeitlin

Among Mike Coe's astounding array of talents and accomplishments, his matchmaking abilities are less well known but of great personal relevance to us. Judy was a second-year advisee of Mike's in September 1969 when Bob first entered the Yale Anthropology graduate program. Mike subtly but persistently encouraged us individually to get to know one another better, allegedly "because of your mutual interests in Mesoamerica." Despite our shared classes, it was not until the first of several great parties that Mike and Sophie hosted at their home that a real friendship and budding romance began. Newly married the following summer, we embarked on a month-long Mexican road trip, visiting major archaeological sites across the country before focusing our search on Oaxaca's isthmian coast. Even though our trek to San Lorenzo to photograph a newly recovered Olmec monument for Mike was marred by a camera failure, he was pleased that his effort to steer us to the southern Isthmus of Tehuantepec for dissertation projects was a success. Nearly 50 years later (and still married), we remember Mike not only as the brilliant scholar that is his abiding legacy, but as an unwavering supporter we were privileged to have as our teacher/mentor. Mike's example of following one's intellectual curiosity, regardless of current academic trends or assumptions, remained a touchstone throughout our own careers.