

THE SYKES COLLECTION: This enchanting treasure, never appraised by a rare-book dealer, could not be duplicated at any price. Who was this collector?

The Making of an

Atlantean Scholar

By Anne Ruby

The third study carried in the A.R.E. Library is kept under lock and key. You must check in with the librarian and state your business before being permitted to enter, and the librarian will keep a watchful eye on you the whole time you're there. Peering inside the collection, you're overwhelmed by the deluge of bookshelves that crowd all four walls and reach to the ceiling. A.R.E. members who donated toward this acquisition have their names calligraphically inscribed in parchment and framed on the wall. The solemn portrait of an English gentleman oversees the tiny space. The room has a presence.

If you could step back in time to the origin of this collection, you would find yourself at a 100-year-old Regency home in Brighton, England. Surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, it stands elegantly on a hillside crowned by St. Michael and All Angels Church. A wooden gate opens into a peaceful garden and a flagstone walkway leads to the front door. Entering the sitting room, you would be drawn to the animated words of the white-haired gentleman in the overstuffed, brosen armchair. Tall, lanky, wearing his signature bow tie, Bill



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Sykes would hold you spellbound, brilliantly leaping from Plato to the Egyptian calendar to the mysteries of the North American Mound Builders. Little wonder that people of every age, persuasion, and nationality were regular visitors and among his worldwide circle of friends.

In the upstairs study, books are everywhere — on shelves, in boxes, in piles spilling down the hallway. Small desk tables, one for each subject Sykes



was currently studying, stand at attention behind a long desk. Sykes's collection includes over 6,000 books, magazines, pamphlets, photos, slides, tapes, personal letters, unpublished manuscripts, and newspaper clippings, including volumes in 15 languages on a dazzling variety of subjects. There are ancient maps; books on classical literature, astronomy, archaeology, geology, religion, mythology, legend, history, and evolution; and the largest private

collection about Atlantis in the world.

The contents of the Brighton study, the legacy of Bill Sykes, came to the A.R.E. Library in 1979. This enchanting treasure, never appraised by a rare-book dealer, could not be duplicated at any price. Who was this collector?

Egerston Sykes, born in London in 1894, acquired the nickname "Bill" along with a taste for unknown civilizations as a boy. Reading Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, he became enthralled as Captain Nemo led the professor to underwater "picturesque ruins which betrayed the hand of man." As a teenager, Bill started collecting books on Atlantis, a fascination that would survive an eventful 30-year career in Europe and the Middle East as a foreign correspondent, intelligence officer, and diplomat. He was also a self-taught anthropologist, archaeologist, and mythologist, an author and a lecturer.

Sykes's career began as a lieutenant in France during World War I, where he was shell shocked and hospitalized. Trained in engineering and languages, he spoke French, German, Polish, and a "smattering of other Germanic and Slav languages," and went on to hold many prestigious positions. He lived in Poland from 1900 to 1942 while serving as correspondent to the *Morning Post*, as well as relief writer for the *Times* and Reuters news service, and editor of the *Warsaw Weekly*. Sykes was an attaché in the British embassy in Teheran and later held posts in Cairo, Naples, and Rome.

Since his profession allowed him to search the world for material on Atlantis, he tried to purchase books in their original languages, preferably author-autographed. His first Atlantean collection was lost during the Nazi siege of Warsaw in 1939. Undaunted, Sykes methodically built another unrivaled library and became acquainted with everyone in the field of Atlantis research from 1912 to 1950, maintaining a worldwide correspondence with scholars and scientists. He took part in dozens of archaeological digs and wrote articles on sites in the Middle East. In 1945, Sykes issued a comprehensive *List of Classical Sources*, tabulating all of the existing manuscripts pertaining to Atlantis. He also published a



A.R.E. Library manager Stephen Jordan is pictured with the Sykes Collection.

revised edition of Ignatius Donnelly's 1882 classic, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, which included the most recent discoveries relevant to Donnelly's work.

(Donnelly [1831-1901], a former Minnesota congressman, known as the father of modern Atlantology, had cited scientific evidence of a trans-Atlantic relationship between the cultures of Europe and Africa to North and South America and embraced the theory that cultural links were derived from a common ground—Atlantis.)

Sykes, the persistent collector, became a passionate believer in the Lost Continent. Steeped in mythology, he concluded that all myths were stories founded on actual events. He pointed out that many historical facts based on writing, a skill often introduced to primitive cultures by missionaries, may have been skewed in translation. Only in cultures where myths were recorded before the arrival of the church did they retain any real value. In addition, conquering invaders had a habit of erasing knowledge of the past. As Sykes wrote in *Esrosyan's Dictionary of Non-Classical Mythology*, a standard reference in most libraries: "In the Americas, several of the pre-Columbian races had evolved a form of writing and had produced whole libraries of picture codices telling of the history of the various tribes. Unfortunately, the Spaniards on their arrival ... destroyed every document which they could find, with the result that nobody has yet succeeded in reading the glyphs of the

Mayas, with the exception of dates, and it is improbable that anyone will manage to do so."

Sykes suspected that stories referring to the earthly Paradise were linked to folk memories of Atlantis and that the culture left traces which are yet to be recognized. He dedicated himself to bridging the gulf among myth, legend, folklore, and anthropological and ar-

chaeological research. He once declared, "While the work of the mythographer is not always as spectacular as that of the archaeologist, it must be remembered that had it not been for the mythical tales of Troy, [Henry] Schliemann would never have dug there and another chapter of history would have been closed."

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Bill (Egerton) and Kay Sykes at their home in Brighton, Sussex, England in the 1970s.

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The story of Schliemann's feat is, indeed, compelling. While most scholars and archaeologists doubted the existence of Homer's lost city of Troy, Schliemann studied *The Iliad* and believed he knew exactly where it was located. Having made three fortunes, he used his wealth to dig for the mythical city in Turkey in 1871. People thought him a crazy millionaire - until he found it.

Sykes had a theory about where to look for Atlantis. He hypothesized that Dolphin Ridge, the backbone of the Atlantic Ridge, may have been the main center of the Atlantean civilization back to 15,000 B.C. He was convinced that all races originated in Atlantis. Inhabitants varied by color according to latitude and the amount of sunlight received. The continent was submerged by a cataclysmic event - lunar capture? Halley's comet? a large asteroid? - leaving survivors on both

sides of the Atlantic, and the Azores and Ascension Island as the sole remaining remnants above water. Peripheral cultures off the Florida and Iberian coasts were linked with, but not geological parts of, Atlantis, he theorized. Sykes concluded that gravity was the only force in nature that could have shifted the waters of the polar seas and drowned an entire continent.

The axis of the earth may have reached a point of instability, suddenly altered its position by a couple of thousand miles, and precipitated disastrous flooding. However, the more probable alternative is the gravitational attraction of a celestial body such as the moon.

Sykes was open minded to the "Cosmic Ice Theory" of Austrian engineer Hans Hoerbiger, who calculated that 600 generations ago the moon was a small planet with an irregular orbit between the tideless Earth and Mars. When the erratic moon traveled too close to Earth, the gravitational power of the moon acting on our planet's equatorial zones drew considerable amounts of water from the North and South polar regions. The moon, 50 times smaller and 80 times lighter than Earth, was drawn into Earth's gravitational sphere and turned into a satellite. The final struggle resulted in world-shattering events as the Atlantic Ocean was deepened by two to three miles.

Like Donnelly, Sykes was particularly interested in specific scientific details testifying to possible trans-Atlantic contacts in the pre-Columbian period. He was fascinated by the similarities among cultures separated by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Stones from a Mayan ruin bore illustrations of the Indian elephant. The calendars of ancient Mexico and Egypt were remarkably similar, as was the practice of building pyramids. The practice of artificial cranial deformation was found all over America and the Mediterranean Sea. Mummification was devel-

oped simultaneously in Chili, Peru, the Canaries, and Egypt. Sykes kept a complete card file index of such provocative facts in hope that a certain pattern would begin to emerge.

Sykes founded the Atlantis Research Center, an international clearinghouse for information on Atlantis, in 1945, and the following year he and his wife, Kay, purchased a small publishing house in Chebea. For the next 31 years, they published a bimonthly research magazine, *Atlantis*, encouraging scholars worldwide to contribute papers. They also established the Hoerbiger Institute to preserve the mathematical theories of cosmic origins postulated in 1913 in Hoerbiger's *Glacial-Kosmogoni* and published three other magazines, *New World Antiquity*, *Pentakulon*, and *Uranus*.

Sykes's editorials connected Hoerbiger's hypotheses to the more than 600 disaster stories told by ancient peoples - tales describing floods around the Atlantic and Mediterranean basins and of the survivors who settled in South America and Egypt. Some scholars claimed that the Great Flood survived by Noah may have occurred about 11,000 B.C. Plato, who wrote about Atlantis in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, dated the third and final destruction at 10,500 B.C. A 1936 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey of the bottom of the Atlantic indicated that the mid-Atlantic Ridge was possibly once above sea level. A Polish astronomer wrote about major comets passing close to the earth in ancient times and the possible gravitational disturbances that may have led to disastrous upheavals on the earth's surface. Sykes noted common threads and wove them together. His commentaries encouraged scholars to compare their specialized research with the work of others in different fields: "There is a vast amount of research to be done, information to be collected and checked, tabulated, and then linked together to make a coherent pattern. This is far beyond the abilities of any one man in a lifetime. No one person could hope to be an expert on every subject covered in this journey to find the origin of civilization."

A member of an impressive list of societies - the Royal Central Asian Society, Royal Anthropological Institute, Royal Geographical Society, Royal In-

stitute for International Affairs, and Royal India Society – Sykes lectured extensively in Europe. The Explorers Club in New York also accepted him and once sent him to Buckingham Palace to present an honorary membership to Prince Philip.

Over time, Bill's inspiring words about solving the origin of civilization had gradually regressed to disgruntled

edge than his own smaller group of academics.

Arriving in Virginia Beach, Sykes befriended Hugh Lynn Cayce, elder son of Edgar Cayce, who was extremely interested in Atlantis and wanted Sykes to return as speaker. Unfortunately, finances did not allow the organization to pay his travel expenses, and Sykes's personal bank account couldn't spare the fare. But fate would solve the problem more than a decade later.

In 1977, the year Sykes folded *Atlantis* magazine, Charlotte Schoen, head librarian at the A.R.E., heard that he wanted to sell his Atlantean collection. Charlotte wrote to him immediately, inquiring about the rumor.

Sykes replied: "My attitude towards my library is that of the Cumaean Oracle who offered her library to a Roman Emperor for a large sum. He refused. The next day she came and said she had burnt one third but the price was still the same. He again refused. The third day she told him she had destroyed two thirds of the library but the price was still the same. This time he bought, but the entire history of Atlantis perished in the process."

Scolding the A.R.E. for not inviting him back sooner "to pick his brains," Sykes said that "papers can only tell you so much." He chided, "You now appreciate why I put a high price on my material. It is worth it. If the library is not sold, my executors have instructions to destroy it. That will not worry me as I take my knowledge with me. Others can spend their lives in acquiring the required data, probably with similar results. Forgive my cynicism, but I have been a diplomat, soldier, businessman, editor, broadcaster, engineer, etc., and have very few illusions left."

Sykes's letter triggered a flurry of activity by A.R.E. A member living in neighboring Hove, who was asked to preview the collection in Brighton, gave it a nod of approval. The A.R.E.

board, however, would not agree to the purchase unless library staff personally made the recommendation after visiting Sykes in England. A delegation led by Charlotte Schoen went to England at their own expense. Others included her husband Birley, Stephen Jordan, and Geraldine McDowell, all on the library staff. On their arrival, just in time for tea, the librarians met a sharp and capable 84-year-old man and his petite 80-year-old wife, married for 60 years and, in Geraldine's words, "two of a dying breed – real English gentlefolk raised in an era when breeding and intelligence were more impor-



Birley Schoen and Bill Sykes in Sykes's study in England in 1978.



tant than money." Pleasant chitchat over gingerbread and buttered buns quickly shifted to the topic on everyone's mind. This proud couple lived on a fixed income – their pension had not increased with inflation – and they needed money. Kay's glaucoma required immediate treatment. Bill had a heart condition and suffered from vertigo. Their silver and various artifacts were to be sold at auction. Their only son Peter had died in World War II. There was no one to care for the

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pleas, for he was disappointed and frustrated at the lack of scholarly interest in Atlantis. Sykes had little luck generating interest even in America, until invited to the A.R.E. in 1965.

When Sykes first entered the lecture circuit, he judged Atlantis seekers to be a bizarre but interesting group. He preferred the scientific approach and was generally impatient of the occult, which he thought "clogs up the question of Atlantis." However, the audience often provoked humorous situations. At one speaking engagement a woman inquired, "Mr. Sykes, do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I'm not sure," he replied.

The woman quietly asked his wife, Kay, "Do you think that your husband was ever a beautiful Atlantean princess in a previous existence?"

Kay looked at Bill and whispered to the woman, "Well, if he was, I'm not surprised it sank."

While he pursued the scientific approach to Atlantis and the A.R.E. chose the metaphysical angle, Sykes reasoned that a bridge between the opposing views had to be built if Atlantis were to be known. It was the A.R.E.'s job to keep the idea alive and scientists would eventually find time to prove it. Sykes felt that the A.R.E. had greater potential for disseminating his knowl-

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priceless collection and continue the research. The library was for sale for \$10,000.

The guests were impressed by their mesmerizing host's discussion of the tremendous possibilities of Atlantean research. Every nation in the world was involved. There were Atlantean traces in legends, linguistic phenomena, archaeology, and racial characteristics. Sykes did most of the talking for several hours and claimed that he could lecture, without notes, twice a day for a week and never repeat himself. No one in the group doubted him.

The order of the downstairs, brimming with antique furniture and paintings, disappeared upstairs where the librarians found material assembled over 60 years of searching the world's bookstores and museums. Several of the books were so rare that only the Library of Congress and British Museum had copies. The Russian author, Zhirov, published a book on Atlantis in 1970 and Sykes owned it in three languages.

Despite its disarray, Stephen Jordan saw the value of the collection and wanted the A.R.E. to have it. They could catalog the books, but would need an archivist or Atlantean scholar to organize the remainder of the material. Charlotte spotted the "card catalog" - the meticulously kept personal research cards that were the key to the collection. She wondered what secret store of wisdom they contained.

Returning to Virginia Beach, the librarians recommended purchase. On January 22, 1979, Hugh Lynn Cayce sent Sykes a contract offering a down payment of \$1,000 and \$200 per month for nearly four years because the A.R.E. lacked the full amount of the purchase. Sykes agreed and made arrangements to ship all the material - except his personal research cards. He wanted to work on the notes until he died, and then they would follow the collection to their new home. The grand opening of the collection at the library was planned for September 1979, with Sykes invited to cut the red ribbon.

Shipping proved a monstrous headache. Publications copyrighted prior to 1950 could enter duty-free, but those published after 1950 with a U.S. copyright and reprinted in a foreign country, and foreign material as well, re-

quired a multitude of paperwork. Packing lists needed to be written by knowledgeable individuals, and boxes of prescribed dimensions had to be prepared, numbered, and waterproofed. Shipment by water was cheapest. U.S. Lines left Felixstowe once each week, on a trip of only six days. Customs brokers in England and Norfolk, Virginia, had to be hired. Insurance was mandatory, an additional expense.

In May 1979, Sykes rode in the van to Felixstowe to bid goodbye to 1,053 pieces of his life, bravely watching the dock workers cart them off. A week later, Charlotte stood horrified before the damp and beaten boxes at the warehouse in Norfolk - 127 books and 33 pamphlets had been damaged en route. The material was repaired, at the expense of Lloyds of London, but Charlotte vowed to personally ensure the safety of future shipments.

The books were installed on newly constructed shelves by a devoted volunteer, and accessioned by a professional librarian from Connecticut on holiday. The enormous task of cataloging was expected to take months. In fact, it would take Charlotte four years.

The opening of the Sykes Collection Room went as planned. Sykes was the highlight, delivering a series of lectures to standing-room-only crowds. Reporters covered the event. A college professor from India dropped by. A Canadian filmmaker taped interviews. The weeklong festivities concluded with an autographing party, Sykes signing copies of his revision of Donnelly's classic.

There were, however, still some 2,000 items remaining in Brighton to be transported. Determined to avoid casualties, Charlotte returned to England with Geraldine, at their own expense, to prepare the shipment. Geraldine returned home lugging heavy boxes of glass slides in her suitcase. All parcels arrived, unharmed, and generous contributions by A.R.E. members to purchase the collection amounted to more than \$3,600.

Over the next few years, Charlotte and her associates would make additional trips to Brighton. The head librarian also evolved into Sykes's American bank manager and agent. She maintained a bank account for him in Virginia Beach, as British citizens couldn't take more than \$300 out of

England when traveling abroad. She welcomed Sykes as a house guest, scheduled his lectures, and solicited American publishers to reprint some of the out-of-print books in the collection.

Beyond finding his work a permanent home, Sykes wanted to stimulate interest in amateur archaeology in America. Excited by the archaeological potential in this country, he was out-



The first boxes from England are opened by (l. to r.) Bob Clapp, Gladys Davis, Gail Cayce Schwartz, and Charlotte Schoen.

raged that many important sites were left untouched by scientists and once ravaged. "You have literally hundreds of square miles of archaeological relics that nobody has taken interest in. Every square inch of England has been dug up by some archaeologist or other." Sykes was certain that the shoreline from Canada to Key West harbored artifacts deposited by prehistoric seafarers. He thought that evidence confirming cultural links would eventually lead to a common origin. Sykes pointed out that at least six American states and many place names are Egyptian in origin: Tennessee or Ta-N-Ese in Egyptian, meaning Land of Isis; Kentucky or Kintuck or Quantuck translates to Land of Anubis (the Egyptian dog god); Missouri or Mesu-Ra signifies Children of the Sun; Kansas and Arkansas or Khansu means the Third Great God of Thebes; and finally, Massachusetts or Mesutchesert indicates Children of the Red One. Sykes claimed that traces of the Egyptians could still be found in these

states and was convinced that there were enough sites to keep archaeologists busy for at least a decade. He was positive that "the vast earthworks of the American Mound Builders provide a vital link in the common heritage of America and the Land of the Pharaohs."

"Leakey could go for a walk on a place where people had been exploring for more than 3,000 years, and he'd

walk 50 steps and pick up a stone a million years old," said Sykes. "It's simple. You've got to know exactly what you're looking for."

To encourage amateur archaeology projects in the United States, Sykes made a final visit in October 1980, but returned home weak and exhausted and later developed bronchitis. In January 1982, he

suffered a heart attack; later that year Hugh Lynn Cayce died. Charlotte worried that interest in Atlantis was dwindling, as A.R.E. was unable to sell back issues of *Atlantis* magazine, and she was troubled by her own health after being diagnosed with breast cancer.

In October 1982, Geraldine McDowell journeyed to England to mail a shipment and was alarmed at how frail the couple looked. They lived solely on the lower floor now, as stairs were too difficult to manage. Bill had just gotten over shingles. Geraldine worked at a makeshift desk made of boards placed over the upstairs bathtub.

Bill Sykes believed in the existence of Atlantis up to the moment of his last breath, at age 88, in 1983. Kay received sympathy cards and calls from all over the world. Julian Amery, a member of Parliament, paid wonderful tribute to his beloved friend: "A great oak tree has fallen and the forest will never be the same again." He eulogized Sykes as a well-traveled man "who died full of years. He was always open to new

ideas and was himself a powerhouse of fresh thought."

In July 1983, Charlotte dispatched librarian John Schuster to England on a delicate assignment to bring Sykes's catalog of 3,000 personal research cards back to Virginia. But Kay insisted that the card file remain in her possession until a ghostwriter finished Bill's book. Kay died within a year, and the manuscript was never completed.

Although enduring the effects of chemotherapy, Charlotte, now 77, was determined to obtain Sykes's catalog. Sykes's nephew and trustee of the estate temporarily foiled her plans by claiming that it was not included in the original sale and was to be the subject of a separate transaction. Charlotte, having kept all of her correspondence with Sykes, shrieked with joy as she found the letter that read, "As to the cards, they will all go to you when I am dead. Don't want to pass them on before, as they are my brain."

The Schoens flew to England to collect their prize. They originally planned to photocopy the cards before transfer, but it proved to be a mammoth task. Wrapped in little packets with elastic bands and stored haphazardly in shoe boxes, the cards were neatly cropped Benson and Hedges king-sized silk-cut low-tar cigarette packages (the brand that Kay smoked). But they were Sykes's brain - an outline of his knowledge in notes scribbled over the years. On most cards, Bill didn't list any book titles, authors, or pages of reference. Many cards had but a single word, name, or phrase. Half were typewritten, but a large percentage of the handwritten cards were illegible. The astronomy cards included documentation of Halley's comet over the years. Artifacts cards inventoried stone circles in Boxford and Goose Cove, Massachusetts, three Roman coins dated 327 A.D. found in the same state, and a serpent mound in Ohio. There were scrawlings about craters and meteors and ancient trade routes, ice ages, Irish voyages, and Hebrew scriptures. Typed on one cardboard rectangle - *South Atlantic geomagnetic anomaly recorded by NASA near Falkland Islands and jotted below - meteor strike?*

At first glance, the cards made absolutely no sense to Charlotte, but she was confident that she'd be able to de-

code them, and she and Birley carried them home in their carry-on luggage.

After endless despairing hours of reading and attempting to decipher them, however, it finally dawned on Charlotte that Sykes's cards were useless to her. There were just too many missing pieces of the puzzle. Gloomy and disappointed, she banished the files to the attic of the library.

Charlotte found solace in a letter dated 1982 in which Bill assured her, "When your investigations into the past come to a dead end, remember that the back issues of *Atlantis* and *New World Antiquity* probably have all the information you need, whether it is the Holy Grail, Bust the Cat Goddess, Lady Godiva, the Egyptians in America, the Bermuda crater, the lost cities of Atlantis, the voyages of Argo and Odysseus, the Amazons, the Carolina Bays, the Irish travelers to America ... while we cannot guarantee to answer all your archaeological and historical questions, we shall be much surprised if we fail to reply to the greater part of them." Charlotte smiled. The Sykes Collection could be a valuable research tool after all.

Charlotte Schoen died a year after Sykes. Today, the Sykes Collection is mentioned on daily A.R.E. tours and, occasionally, curious people stop by to browse. A handful of serious researchers have visited in the past two decades.

Atlantis is referred to in thousands of books from Plato to modern-day authors. Jimmy Buffett's *Where Is Joe Merchant?* and Carl Sagan's *The Demon-Haunted World*. The world of Atlantis seekers has encompassed serious scientists and the corporate world, as well as mystics and misfits. Most archaeologists roll their eyes at the subject of Atlantis, yet the world is still intrigued with the possibility.

Sykes's literary executor in Brighton anticipates publishing a study of Sykes's life. Stephen Jordan, now head librarian, feels that "a discovery out there will focus attention back to the Sykes Collection."

Was Sykes an eccentric intellectual with an impossible fantasy? Are there keys in the books waiting to be recognized? Whatever the future holds, let's hope that Captain Nemo and the professor aren't the only ones to walk among the stone ruins of that famous sunken continent ... if it truly exists. ☞

