THE LEAKEY FOUNDATION

John Fleagle

The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research

Interview conducted by
Bernard Wood
In 2025

Copyright © 2025, The Leakey Foundation

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer. The goal is to preserve substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee.

Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, personal, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Leakey Foundation and John Fleagle.

The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Leakey Foundation. Excerpts up to 1,000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Other requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to media@leakeyfoundation.org.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Fleagle, John. Interview by Bernard Wood, 03/07/2025. The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: John Fleagle. The Leakey Foundation.

Retrieved from: https://www.leakeyfoundation.org/learn/oral-history-bernard-wood

Bernard Wood (00:00):
John, thank you for agreeing to do this. Could you, for the record, tell us where are you employed, where were you last employed, and your full name?

John Fleagle (00:14):
My full name is John Gwynn Fleagle. I am employed at Stony Brook University, where I have been employed since 1975.

Bernard Wood (00:24):
Thank you. So can you tell me, why were you called John, why were you called Gwynn, and where does Fleagle come from?

John Fleagle (00:34):
I don't know where John came from. I presume it's a Christian name?

Bernard Wood (00:38):
Yes, literally, and-

John Fleagle (00:40):
Fleagle is my father's name, or it's my paternal.

Bernard Wood (00:45):
Where does that name ... Is it-

John Fleagle (00:48):
I have no idea.

Bernard Wood (00:49):
I know you come from North Carolina.

John Fleagle (00:51):
Yeah, I have no idea where the Fleagles came from.

Bernard Wood (00:53):
And your mother's family, what was her maiden name?

John Fleagle (00:58):
Gwynn, G-W-Y-N-N. My middle name is from her family.

Bernard Wood (01:03):
Well, you see we've learned something already.

John Fleagle (01:06):
You have?

Bernard Wood (01:06):
So was there an academic tradition in your family?

John Fleagle (01:12):
None whatsoever.

Bernard Wood (01:14):
What did your mother-

John Fleagle (01:14):
No, well, actually that's not true. My father's father was a professor at Davidson College in North Carolina, but my father was not terribly academic. He just sold life insurance.

Bernard Wood (01:28):
And your mother?

John Fleagle (01:30):
She just was a housewife.

Bernard Wood (01:32):
Okay

John Fleagle (01:34):
Yes, she was. Well, there was a large family. There were seven kids, so she was a busy person.

Bernard Wood (01:41):
So you were one of seven?

John Fleagle (01:43):
Yes.

Bernard Wood (01:43):
And where were you in the rank?

John Fleagle (01:45):
Down near the bottom.

Bernard Wood (01:46):
And so how far from the bottom?

John Fleagle (01:48):
I have twin sisters who are two years younger than me.

Bernard Wood (01:52):
Younger than you. And where were you living as a kid?

John Fleagle (01:57):
In Reidsville.

Bernard Wood (01:58):
Reidsville, which is near?

John Fleagle (02:00):
Greensboro.

Bernard Wood (02:01):
Greensboro.

John Fleagle (02:02):
If that helps.

Bernard Wood (02:03):
And that's in North Carolina?

John Fleagle (02:05):
It's in North Carolina. Northern North Carolina, near Virginia.

Bernard Wood (02:07):
And you went to high school there?

John Fleagle (02:10):
Yes, I went to Reidsville Senior High School.

Bernard Wood (02:12):
Were you a good student?

John Fleagle (02:17):
Good enough. I mean, yes. Yes, I was a very good student. One of the best, as a matter of fact.

Bernard Wood (02:23):
One of the best...

John Fleagle (02:24):
I was an honor roll student.

Bernard Wood (02:25):
You were.

John Fleagle (02:26):
I always got high grades.

Bernard Wood (02:27):
So how did you make a decision about where to go to university and what to major in?

John Fleagle (02:35):
Well, that was unusual. I wanted to go to Yale because my father sold life insurance, and every summer there was always a conference, so we would get in the car and drive to somewhere exotic. And one year we drove to somewhere in Massachusetts, and as we drove into Massachusetts, we passed New Haven in southern Connecticut. And I said, "Oh, that's where Yale University is. Let's just stop and look at it." And that was just a total fluke.

And then when it came time to applying for colleges, I just said, "Well, gee, I might want to go to Yale." So there, and I did.

Bernard Wood (03:18):
And so what was the process? I mean, did you have an interview?

John Fleagle (03:23):
Yeah, you have to go to ... The high school has a bunch of people who take care of that kind of stuff. And you say, "Well," you can either have somebody do it for you or you can just put it together, write Yale and ask for the application material, fill it out and put it in the mail.

Bernard Wood (03:42):
And did your high school have a history of other people going to places like Yale and Harvard?

John Fleagle (03:49):
No. Most people went in the general area because there were lots of colleges in North Carolina.

Bernard Wood (03:56):
And so you'd already been to Yale, but this was just a drive through with the family station wagon and-

John Fleagle (04:07):
Exactly. Exactly.

Bernard Wood (04:08):
So you arrived at Yale. You went on the train, or your family took you?

John Fleagle (04:14):
I think I took the train up. Yeah.

Bernard Wood (04:16):
You took the train up. What did you think of Yale and how did you-

John Fleagle (04:22):
Oh, actually it was very nice. Everybody was very friendly and it seemed to be a nice place to be. And then it looked good on your resume.

Bernard Wood (04:31):
Well, let me just go back to you as a boy. Were you interested in natural history?

John Fleagle (04:38):
No.

Bernard Wood (04:38):
No.

John Fleagle (04:40):
Not particularly.

Bernard Wood (04:41):
So you weren't one of these people that spent every spare minute at the American Museum of National History looking at the dinosaurs?

John Fleagle (04:51):
No, no. [inaudible 00:04:52], no.

Bernard Wood (04:51):
So what were you interested in, did you play in a band? Did you do sport?

John Fleagle (04:59):
I got in the band, I played in the marching band and the concert bands because I played the clarinet since third grade or something.

Bernard Wood (05:08):
Well, very good. And what about extracurricular stuff? I mean, was the band the extracurricular-

John Fleagle (05:20):
That was my main extracurricular activity, yes. I didn't play any sports or anything.

Bernard Wood (05:25):
So you were at Yale. When did you get to Yale?

John Fleagle (05:31):
Oh God. Well, I graduated there in 1966 [1971], so I must've gotten there about 1962 [1966.]

Bernard Wood (05:40):
And your major was?

John Fleagle (05:46):
I ended up majoring in, I guess, paleontology.

Bernard Wood (05:50):
And who were your teachers then?

John Fleagle (05:52):
Elwyn Simons.

Bernard Wood (05:53):
Elwyn Simons

John Fleagle (05:54):
And David Pilbeam was in the anthropology department. Elwyn was in the geology department or something. I think I was a paleontology major in the geology department.

Bernard Wood (06:02):
And were you aware of them or were you only aware of them once you had done your career and realized that they were-

John Fleagle (06:10):
No, no. I mean, I remember I was ... Well, that was an interesting story because I was, like most work-study students, I spent my freshman year waiting tables and taking people's dirty dishes back to the kitchen and things like that. That was what you did as a freshman. When it came time for my next year, I went in to the work-study people, and the guy says, "Okay, so what are you interested in?" And I said, "I'm a physics major." He said, "We don't have any jobs for physics majors." I said, "Well, what do you have?" And he says, "Well, let's

see here. Oh, there's this guy somewhere named Simons who does something or other, in the geology department." I said, "That sounds interesting enough." So I was assigned to Elwyn as his work-study student. So in my sophomore year, my job to help pay my tuition and stuff was working in Elwyn's lab.

Bernard Wood (07:16):
What were you doing in the lab?

John Fleagle (07:18):
Oh, I was putting numbers on fossils or I was putting fossils in boxes or helping to organize slides and things like that.

Bernard Wood (07:26):
And so did that interaction with fossils, did you suddenly realize, "This is what I want to do with my life," or is it just a job?

John Fleagle (07:33):
It was, "Hey, this is fairly interesting stuff, and these people are also going out to exotic places every summer." And so I said, "Gee, this is a pretty good deal."

Bernard Wood (07:46):
Okay.

John Fleagle (07:47):
So I liked this.

Bernard Wood (07:49):
And so you did well in your undergraduate degree?

John Fleagle (07:51):
Yes. Not great, not like high school, but I did well enough.

Bernard Wood (07:57):
Well enough. And then what were your plans?

John Fleagle (08:01):
I had no plans.

Bernard Wood (08:03):
You had no plans?

John Fleagle (08:03):
But after I'd been working in Elwyn's Lab for three years and done fieldwork in Egypt and India, I decided, "Maybe I'd like to continue in this."

Bernard Wood (08:11):
How did that play out? You applied to be a PhD student?

John Fleagle (08:17):
Yes.

Bernard Wood (08:18):
At Yale?

John Fleagle (08:20):
No, at Harvard.

Bernard Wood (08:21):
At Harvard. And why at Harvard?

John Fleagle (08:24):
I don't remember why I chose to go to Harvard.

Bernard Wood (08:29):
David [Pilbeam] had moved to Harvard?

John Fleagle (08:33):
No, no. He was still at Yale.

Bernard Wood (08:35):
He was still at Yale.

John Fleagle (08:36):

At that point. I don't think he moved to Harvard. Fuzz Crompton had moved to Harvard. I didn't know him at all. He was pretty exotic. I was interested in both primate behavior and primate evolution. And Irv was there. So he was the person I went to to work for, work with.

Bernard Wood (08:53):
So did Elwyn introduce you to Irv or did you just get on the train?

John Fleagle (08:58):
Yeah, no one introduced me. Because he was up there. He was at Harvard. He was in Massachusetts.

Bernard Wood (09:05):
.So you applied to the graduate program at Harvard.

John Fleagle (09:10):
Right.

Bernard Wood (09:10):
You got in.

John Fleagle (09:11):
I got in.

Bernard Wood (09:12):
How did you support yourself?

John Fleagle (09:14):
I got a fellowship or whatever.

Bernard Wood (09:16):
And you did coursework?

John Fleagle (09:20):
Oh, yes.

Bernard Wood (09:20):
And who were the other students at Harvard at that time?

John Fleagle (09:26):
Well, gee, who were the students? Kenneth Rose was there eventually, the next year. He was a year behind me. Bob Bakker was there. Yeah, Dan Fisher and Christine Janis.

Bernard Wood (09:37):
Okay. So there were people moving backwards and forwards between Yale and Harvard and-

John Fleagle (09:45):
And other universities.

Bernard Wood (09:46):
And other universities. And some were actually affiliated and some were graduate students, and some were moving around. And so when did you decide what you were going to focus on for your PhD?

John Fleagle (10:00):
Well, see, I was interested in both primate behavior and primate evolution.

Bernard Wood (10:03):
Evolution?

John Fleagle (10:05):
So I studied the langurs from Malaysia.

Bernard Wood (10:11):
Okay, so you went to Malaysia?

John Fleagle (10:13):
Oh, yes.

Bernard Wood (10:13):
And is that where Sherry Washburn had been before or not? It wasn't the same place?

John Fleagle (10:20):
I don't think so. I don't remember where.

Bernard Wood (10:25):
And so the paper that I remember about langurs and feeding and that sort of thing, that was your PhD or that was at least part of your PhD.

John Fleagle (10:35):
I think, but I really don't ... That's a long time ago. My thesis was mostly on the anatomy, locomotor behavior and positional behavior of the Malaysian langurs.

Bernard Wood (10:38):
Fortunately, I'm asking the questions, but if you're asking me the other way around, I would give you similar sort of rather vague-

John Fleagle (10:45):
No. The thing is I don't want to say I prided myself, but I considered myself interested in both paleontology and primate behavior.

Bernard Wood (10:56):
Was that unusual?

John Fleagle (10:58):
Relatively, because monkey people just studied living monkeys and fossil people just studied fossils. But I tried to hang onto both of them throughout my graduate career.

Bernard Wood (11:08):
Well, I think you hung onto that throughout your career in many ways. But why was that? I mean, where did that come from?

John Fleagle (11:17):
Well, they are the same thing, believe it or not.

Bernard Wood (11:20):
Yes, I understand that. But why did you have that inside you and a hundred other people didn't?

John Fleagle (11:26):
I have no idea.

Bernard Wood (11:27):
Okay.

John Fleagle (11:28):
Maybe because I didn't have any real interest that I was just taking in or jumping into whatever was interesting at the moment. But no, that's not really the case.

Bernard Wood (11:37):
How long were you looking at monkeys in Malaya? Malaysia, sorry.

John Fleagle (11:46):
For most of my graduate career.

Bernard Wood (11:49):
So you were there for months at a time?

John Fleagle (11:51):
Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Bernard Wood (11:52):
And how, as a North Carolina boy who was in the marching band, how did you take to field work?
John Fleagle (11:58):
It was fine. I liked it. It was exotic. It was nice.

Bernard Wood (12:03):
So you've used the word exotic a couple of times. So it was just it wasn't North Carolina, it was something different?

John Fleagle (12:12):
Yeah.

Bernard Wood (12:12):
And who did you meet there in Malaysia in the field, or was it just you?

John Fleagle (12:20):

No, no. I'm trying to think who did I meet when I was working there. David Chivers was the person I worked with because Russ Mittermeier was in the anthropology department. And if I wanted to work on something on primates, Russ was the local expert. So I'd say, "Gee, I think I'm interested in langurs." And he'd say, "Oh, go talk to David Chivers. He works in Malaysia." And so I wrote David and said, "Sure, I'm taking a group out this summer." So I went out and I met all his graduate students, and then I stayed on and I went back the next year on my own project.

Bernard Wood (13:00):
That's interesting. So you knew David. I mean, your careers were in parallel, but on different continents. Did you know David Chivers well?

John Fleagle (13:17):
I didn't know and as I said, "Gee, I'm interested in langurs." And Russ Mittermeier, who knew everybody about everything said, "Oh, contact David Chivers. He has a project going on in Malaysia."

John Fleagle (13:30):
And I did. When I started, I met all his staff. I flew over one summer and met his students and decided this is where I'm going to do my dissertation.

Bernard Wood (13:38):
So after your PhD, how did you earn a living?

John Fleagle (13:48):
I looked around for jobs and I applied. I guess I must have just ... There was a job obviously at Stony Brook, and I applied for that, but I don't know how I ended up going there.

Bernard Wood (14:00):
But that job was in the anatomy department [inaudible 00:14:02].

John Fleagle (14:02):
Right. I had also been writing on fossil primates, as well as aspects of primate evolution. But I don't know that ... This is a long time ago.

Bernard Wood (14:11):

I know it's a long time ago. \. But you come from North Carolina, Stony Brook is in the middle of a field or in Long Island? I mean, how did you know about Stony Brook?

John Fleagle (14:26):
Well, because there were a lot of exotic ... But Jack Stern was here and had a lot-

Bernard Wood (14:30):
Jack was already there?

John Fleagle (14:31):
Yeah. There was a lot of stuff on primate behavior going on here in the anatomy department, no less. So they had advertised for a job, and I applied for one and I got it.

Bernard Wood (14:42):
But it was the early days of anatomy at Stony Brook.

John Fleagle (14:47):
Oh, yes, the early days. Jack came from Chicago and he was anatomist, but they hired me because I was both a behaviorist and anatomist and a paleontologist. So I fit in.

Bernard Wood (15:00):
And you've been here ever since?

John Fleagle (15:03):
I've been here ever since.

Bernard Wood (15:05):
Have you ever been tempted to leave?

John Fleagle (15:09):
I have occasionally applied for jobs, but never had a serious interest in leaving.

Bernard Wood (15:16):
But there must have been people who would've been very pleased for you to join them?

John Fleagle (15:21):

I don't know. There was no place I was particularly keen to go.

Bernard Wood (15:25):
So you were happy there?

John Fleagle (15:27):
Yeah. Well, very soon though, I mean, I was here with Jack, and Jack ran a very nice department. He ran the anatomy department. So I had a background in anatomy, so I could do that. And Jack had broad interests.

Bernard Wood (15:43):
So tell me about your background in anatomy. Had you done dissections of primates?

John Fleagle (15:48):
Well, no. I took anatomy because many people doing anthropology ended up working in anatomy departments.

Bernard Wood (15:58):
So you took anatomy when you were a graduate student at Harvard?

John Fleagle (16:01):
Yes, yeah.

Bernard Wood (16:02):
And who taught the anatomy?

John Fleagle (16:05):
I mean, my advisor, Farish Jenkins actually taught the anatomy course.

Bernard Wood (16:10):
Yes, I was going to say. It was obviously Farish. And so tell me about Farish. Why did it work?

John Fleagle (16:19):
Farish was a very good advisor, and he helped me along, and he thought I was very good. He helped me when I needed money and things like that. But my advisor throughout graduate school was Irv DeVore.

Bernard Wood (16:35):
But it was-

John Fleagle (16:36):
But Farish ... I had an office in Farish's Lab, across the street from his, across the-

Bernard Wood (16:44):
The hallway.

John Fleagle (16:45):
Yeah, across the hallway from him.

Bernard Wood (16:46):
But my memory of Farish was that he was a member of the American aristocracy.

John Fleagle (16:59):
Yeah.

Bernard Wood (16:59):
If such a thing exists. So how did Carolina Boy get on with Farish?

John Fleagle (17:06):
Oh, fine. Farish liked what I was doing, and he liked to have graduate students, and that worked. And he was Fuzz Crompton's golden boy.

Bernard Wood (17:19):
Yeah, okay.

John Fleagle (17:21):
So when Fuzz moved from Yale to Harvard, I guess Farish was his graduate student, so Farish ended up working for him.

Bernard Wood (17:32):
So at that time, where was the center of gravity in the sorts of things that you were interested in? Was it Chicago?

John Fleagle (17:41):
Oh Berkeley. Berkeley was always the primate behavior place.

Bernard Wood (17:45):
Yes.

John Fleagle (17:45):
Where I really wanted to work for Sherry Washburn. I wanted to be Sherry Washburn's grad student, because he did primate behavior. That was where it was happening on the other side of the continent.

Bernard Wood (17:57):
Did you apply there?

John Fleagle (17:59):
I don't think I did. I may have, but I don't think I did.

Bernard Wood (18:03):
Okay, okay.

John Fleagle (18:04):
Because I was hanging out with Elwyn. I mean, you know how I had this odd other background.

Bernard Wood (18:10):
Right. So you are at Stony Brook. You're in this anatomy department, which my memory of coming there and having lunch in Norman Creel's room and it being absolutely bloody terrifying because there's you and Jack Stern and-

John Fleagle (18:33):
Norman.

Bernard Wood (18:33):
And Bill Jungers and Randy Susman.

John Fleagle (18:36):

And that's all Jack's doing. So Jack was a real anatomist who was trained at the University of Chicago, which was a real hard-core anatomy place. But he was interested in primate and human evolution. So most of the people he hired were anthropologists, not hard-core anatomists. He hired me, and then I think he hired probably Randy Susman first because Randy was also from Chicago. And then he hired Bill Jungers at about the same time.

Bernard Wood (19:11):
Could you describe in a few words Farish Jenkins' mentoring style?

John Fleagle (19:19):
Not really. As long as you're working hard and doing good work, that's all he cared about.

Bernard Wood (19:25):
Well, that's a pretty-

John Fleagle (19:27):
I mean, I was out in Malaysia chasing monkeys. Not exactly what Farish saw as his main expertise. So he has this student who's interested in evolution and paleontology who spent part of his life in Malaysia chasing living monkeys. But Farish says, "As long as you're doing good work, that's fine with me. That's what I'm here for."

Bernard Wood (19:57):
What was the most important advice that you were given at the beginning of your career before you moved to Stony Brook?

John Fleagle (20:03):
I see that question. I have no idea.

Bernard Wood (20:05):
Okay.

John Fleagle (20:05):
I mean, publish a lot.

Bernard Wood (20:10):
Make sure the world knows you're here.

John Fleagle (20:12):
Yeah, exactly.

Bernard Wood (20:15):
How did you learn to write? Because you write very clearly. Did Farish set-

John Fleagle (20:22):
Yeah, I heard that [inaudible 00:20:23] I was really ... All these people kept saying that, but I thought, "Wow, where was I?"

Bernard Wood (20:29):
So was that because Farish put [inaudible 00:20:34]?

John Fleagle (20:34):
Farish was a very tough editor.

Bernard Wood (20:38):
Okay.

John Fleagle (20:40):
He was a hard ... He was good in that. He prided himself in putting words in the right way.

Bernard Wood (20:48):
And you think that was an influence on you, that you've learned?

John Fleagle (20:52):
Probably. I had to write a dissertation and he had to read it.

Bernard Wood (20:56):
You've obviously had a long association with the Leakey Foundation. Was the American Association of Physical Anthropology any influence on you? I mean, with-

John Fleagle (21:09):
Not much. I mean, it was there, yes. I went to their meetings, but it wasn't ... And those were the major meetings. I mean, if you were interested in primate and human evolution,

that's where you had to go every April. You had to go to the AAPA meetings. So that's the real stuff.

Bernard Wood (21:30):
Right, right. So-

John Fleagle (21:33):
And it's where you would meet the major actors in those disciplines.

Bernard Wood (21:39):
Yeah. I mean, in those days that was ... It was there.

John Fleagle (21:42):
That's where you had to go. Exactly.

Bernard Wood (21:43):
That's where you had to go, okay.

John Fleagle (21:46):
Or wanted to go is the case might be.

Bernard Wood (21:48):
Right. I mean, you've done lots of things in research. You've done paleontology. At the beginning of your career, there was a greater emphasis on behavior. Given that pride is one of the deadly sins, but let's allow you to be proud. What are you proudest of in terms of your research career?

John Fleagle (22:12):
But it's very broad that I've maintained interest in primate behavior and primate evolution from the time I was an undergraduate until today.

Bernard Wood (22:27):
Okay, okay.

John Fleagle (22:28):

I didn't feel I could only go to one discipline or work in one. I felt that they were all related to one another, and I've always prided in myself in the fact that I kept a very broad research interests.

Bernard Wood (22:46):
But if all your publications were in a building and it was burning, which one would you be sure to grab?

John Fleagle (22:55):
Oh God. Well, none of them have any monetary value, unfortunately. So that's irrelevant.

Bernard Wood (23:10):
It is.

John Fleagle (23:12):
What paper will I save?

Bernard Wood (23:14):
Yes.

John Fleagle (23:16):
Oh golly, Pete. I have to think about that more than the minute and a half.

Bernard Wood (23:22):
Of the researchers in your cohort and a few years above and a few years below, which of them do you most admire?

John Fleagle (23:42):
I see there's Bernard Wood, Ken Rose and-

[*Note that Bernard and Ken are both in the room...]*

Bernard Wood (23:46):
You're not taking this seriously, John!

John Fleagle (23:48):
No, I'm not. No.

Bernard Wood (23:53):
What about Sherry Washburn? Tell me about-

John Fleagle (23:56):
I wanted to go work with Sherry.

Bernard Wood (23:58):
Yeah.

John Fleagle (23:59):
I mean, that was what I wanted to do, but it was very clear that Sherry was only interested in primate behavior. I wasn't going to work for him. I wasn't going to be one of his grad students. He had a very powerful group of kids. I mean, he really trained a whole lot of people out there in Berkeley. But I was built into this eastern Harvard-Yale system, so I never thought about it.

Bernard Wood (24:27):
So you think there was an eastern way of doing things?

John Fleagle (24:31):
No. No. That's just made up. Because my advisor was Irv DeVore who was in Sherry's field.

Bernard Wood (24:38):
Right. One of the questions, is there a paper written by somebody else that you had wished that you had written?

John Fleagle (24:47):
Gee whiz. I've never thought about that. I mean, I'm sure some time along I thought, "Gee, I wish I'd written that." But I can't think of something right now.

Bernard Wood (24:58):
I mean, there are some papers I read and I think, "Boy, I wish I'd been smart enough to do that."

John Fleagle (25:05):
Well, I think I've always considered my interests a little bit broader than those of most people, but then again, there are papers on individual topics that I just admire regardless of whether I could have done it or not.

Bernard Wood (25:27):
So let me turn to *Evolutionary Anthropology* [the journal] and the textbook [*Primate Adaptation and Evolution*].

John Fleagle (25:34):
Okay.

Bernard Wood (25:35):
Lots of people go through a scientific career and they don't establish a journal and they don't write a textbook. Which came first, *Evolutionary Anthropology* or the textbook?

John Fleagle (25:52):
The textbook came first.

Bernard Wood (25:54):
Okay. And why did you want to write a textbook? Because there wasn't one, or there was one but you didn't think very much of it?

John Fleagle (26:03):
Because my interests were different from those of most people. I didn't want to write a textbook on just behavior because I wasn't that much of a hardcore behaviorist, and I didn't want to write a textbook on anatomy because I wasn't really that much of just an ... I wasn't going to write an anatomy textbook. I had my own interest that I felt could hold a textbook and would be of interest to lots of people.

Bernard Wood (26:29):
So you had a sort of view of the world that was a little broader than most, and you thought that would be useful.

John Fleagle (26:36):
Yep.

Bernard Wood (26:37):
Just before we go more into that, what was the U.S. perception of primatology in the UK and Europe at that time?

John Fleagle (26:46):
I have no idea.

Bernard Wood (26:48):
But had you met John Napier and people like that?

John Fleagle (26:55):
I don't think I ever met Napier. I mean, I admired him because, wow, he was the primate guy, but I don't think I ever met him or had a conversation with him or anything.

Bernard Wood (27:05):
And anybody in Europe?

John Fleagle (27:13):
No. I mean, Russ and I were in the same cohort. We trained together. We were both Irv's students at the same time.

Bernard Wood (27:22):
And there was nobody in mainland Europe who was doing primate behavior that-

John Fleagle (27:28):
Along the lines of what I was, well, I was doing something different, wasn't I?

John Fleagle (27:38):
Yep.

Bernard Wood (27:38):
Okay. But writing a textbook is not like writing a paper. I mean, you had to find a publisher. How did you find a publisher?

John Fleagle (27:48):
I have absolutely no idea. I probably wrote a couple of publishers, and someone said, "That sounds interesting."

Bernard Wood (27:55):
And you write a book proposal and it gets sent to people.

John Fleagle (27:57):
Exactly.

John Fleagle (27:59):
Or more of the point, I was teaching something of that nature.

Bernard Wood (28:05):
So you've been teaching a course-

John Fleagle (28:07):
Once you're teaching a course, it lends itself to a book.

Bernard Wood (28:11):
And your course at Stony Brook was essentially ... The book was in broad brush terms based on the course that you were just-

John Fleagle (28:20):
Yeah.

Bernard Wood (28:20):
Okay, that makes sense. Were you surprised at how successful it was?

John Fleagle (28:28):
No. I was very proud of what I was doing, so I wasn't just saying, "Hey, I'm just doing this crap, and people like it. Where'd that go?" That was not my approach.

Bernard Wood (28:36):STOPPED HERE
What about *Evolutionary Anthropology*? I mean, how did you start a review journal? My dim memory is that review journals, there weren't any until there were sort of *Trends in Evolution* and that sort of thing, and review journals started to be a thing. But how did you come to realize that there was some vacant sort of space where *Evolutionary Anthropology* could be?

John Fleagle (29:18):
The point is from many years before that, or a bunch of my education, I didn't see that primate behavior and primate evolution were that distinctive, even though most people were doing one or the other. But my interests were broad and I was interested in both of them and-

Bernard Wood (29:39):
So *Evolutionary Anthropology* was, in a sense, a review journal expression of the same philosophy that found its expression in the textbook?

John Fleagle (29:50):
Exactly. Yes, which was essentially what I spent my career doing.

Bernard Wood (29:56):
This brings me back to how you work. A lot of people have a successful research career. You decided that you'd start a textbook, and once you start a textbook, it has a life of its own and it needs to be revised and that sort of thing. You start a journal, which is not the same as a textbook because you're not writing the journal, but you have to know enough about the field to identify people who might provide useful review articles. Were you able to do this because you are an insomniac or because you're just extremely well-organized?

John Fleagle (30:41):
I'm not well-organized, that's for sure.

Bernard Wood (30:44):
You're *not* well-organized?

John Fleagle (30:46):
I was [inaudible 00:30:46].

Bernard Wood (30:46):
You *have* to be well-organized.

John Fleagle (30:48):
Trust me, I'm not.

Bernard Wood (30:49):
Okay. So how do you do these things?

John Fleagle (30:52):
I just do. I mean, what can I say? Once you figure out what you want to do, then you figure out how to get it done.

Bernard Wood (31:04):
So is it a question of work ethic?

John Fleagle (31:10):
My main thing is along those lines is that my work ethic is I know what I think is interesting, and I think if I put it out there, other people will as well.

Bernard Wood (31:28):
I think that's a very perceptive summary. But there aren't many people who do that, John.

John Fleagle (31:35):
Yeah, there aren't. But then I've found in the last, I don't know, however many years, it is a value to lots of people if they suddenly find it on their desk.

Bernard Wood (31:47):
Yes.

John Fleagle (31:48):
Even if they don't do it themselves, they think, "Well, gee, this is really good." So yes, I've not been very good at copying the way the world operates. Like I say, when I was younger, I wanted to be one Sherry Washburn's students that was where what was going on in primatology. But it was very clear that my interest in primatology were much broader and different from that.

Bernard Wood (32:15):
it's interesting. When I interviewed Ralph Holloway, he was a student of Sherry Washburn. When he went there, Sherry Washburn said, "What animal do you want to look at the behavior of?" And he said, "No, I'm not interested in animal behavior. I'm interested in the brain." And he said, "Well, hard luck."

John Fleagle (32:34):
I can imagine that's the case. And I'm sure if I actually made an effort to be Sherry's student, I would run into the same problem. “So what do you mean bone? What does that have to do with anything?”

Bernard Wood (32:48):
Is there anything that you would like to talk about that I haven't asked you about?

John Fleagle (32:59):
Not that I know of. Oh my salary. So let's get down to the important stuff, Bernard.

Bernard Wood (33:09):
You spent your whole career at Stony Brook.

John Fleagle (33:12):
Yeah.

Bernard Wood (33:15):
It can't have been that bad because you never moved.

John Fleagle (33:20):
Right.

Bernard Wood (33:21):
And I can't believe that there weren't places who would've been interested in hiring you. So what did you most like about being in the anatomy department at Stony Brook? Did you like teaching anatomy?

John Fleagle (33:36):
Yeah. It's fairly straightforward and ...

Bernard Wood (33:42):
I asked you whether you liked it. In other words, when you spent all morning in the dissection room, would you have rather been doing something else?

John Fleagle (33:51):
I guess it never crossed my mind. The people who were doing the hiring had medical students that needed to learn anatomy.

Bernard Wood (33:58):
And that's what you did.

John Fleagle (33:59):
And that's what most people were doing. That's what my advisor, Farish Jenkins, who was a paleontologist, a hardcore paleontologist, he taught anatomy. And many people in this that I knew had admired taught anatomy because that was a job. They always had to be anatomy in all medical schools.

Bernard Wood (34:18):
And that was John Napier's job.

John Fleagle (34:20):
Yeah, yep.

Bernard Wood (34:21):
He did a course on primates that I took when I was a BSc student. Just like you, he was an anatomy teacher.

John Fleagle (34:31):
Yep.

Bernard Wood (34:31):
Okay. Have you ever been involved in administration?

John Fleagle (34:37):
No.

Bernard Wood (34:38):
How did you avoid it?

John Fleagle (34:42):
I probably wasn't very good at it, or I don't know. I never needed to. People go into administration because they often need the money, and that was what paid, that's where the money was. That's what they paid people to do. Or they had a vision. I mean, well, for example, my boss, Jack Stern, went into administration because he knew how he wanted to teach anatomy.

Bernard Wood (35:14):
He didn't want other people telling him what to do?

John Fleagle (35:17):
And he was interested in evolution and things like that. So people would go into administration because you have a way you wanted a department built, or it may not be the normal way.

John Fleagle (35:34):
Out of all these anthropologists and paleontologists, his view of what could happen in the anatomy department was very wonderful.

Bernard Wood (35:44):
What kept you in Stony Brook, the anatomy department or Stony Brook University or the link with the anthropology department or all of those things?

John Fleagle (35:56):
Oh, everything. I mean, once I came here, my first job was here and I had a bunch of colleagues. My colleagues appreciated what I did. I appreciated what they did. And we got paid reasonably well.

Bernard Wood (36:13):
And it's not a bad place to live.

John Fleagle (36:16):
It's not a bad place to live.

Bernard Wood (36:16):
As long as you like trees.

John Fleagle (36:19):
Yeah. It's near New York, so you can go to major museums and things like that.

Bernard Wood (36:27):
So it was a congenial place to work for because of the colleagues that you had. Are you sure there's nothing else you want to talk about?

John Fleagle (36:40):
No.

Bernard Wood (36:48):
I think we're done.
Were you happy with the conversation?

John Fleagle (36:50):
Oh yeah. I mean, there's a lot of details in there. I think I could live without having had this discussion with you, and I think the world won't be a whole lot better off than it would've been otherwise.

Bernard Wood (37:01):
John, thank you.

John Fleagle (37:02):
You're welcome, Bernard