

# Where an Ancient Hero's Memory Lives On

By ALAN RIDING

LONDON

**I**n his passion for history, Michael Wood likes to search out those corners of time that survive more as romantic myth than as reliable memory, that float in the past seemingly unconnected to the world as we know it. He usually starts his journeys in the pages of ancient manuscripts, a world he first explored as a history student at Oxford University three decades ago.

But soon the adventurer in him takes over and, using maps as his guide, he sets off for distant lands in quest of lost history.

Naturally, like any researcher, he delights in discovering the unknown, yet his objective is not academic. Rather it is to spread his enthusiasm for history to as many people as possible. And, happily, in television documentaries, Mr. Wood, a tall, good-natured Englishman, has found his ideal medium.

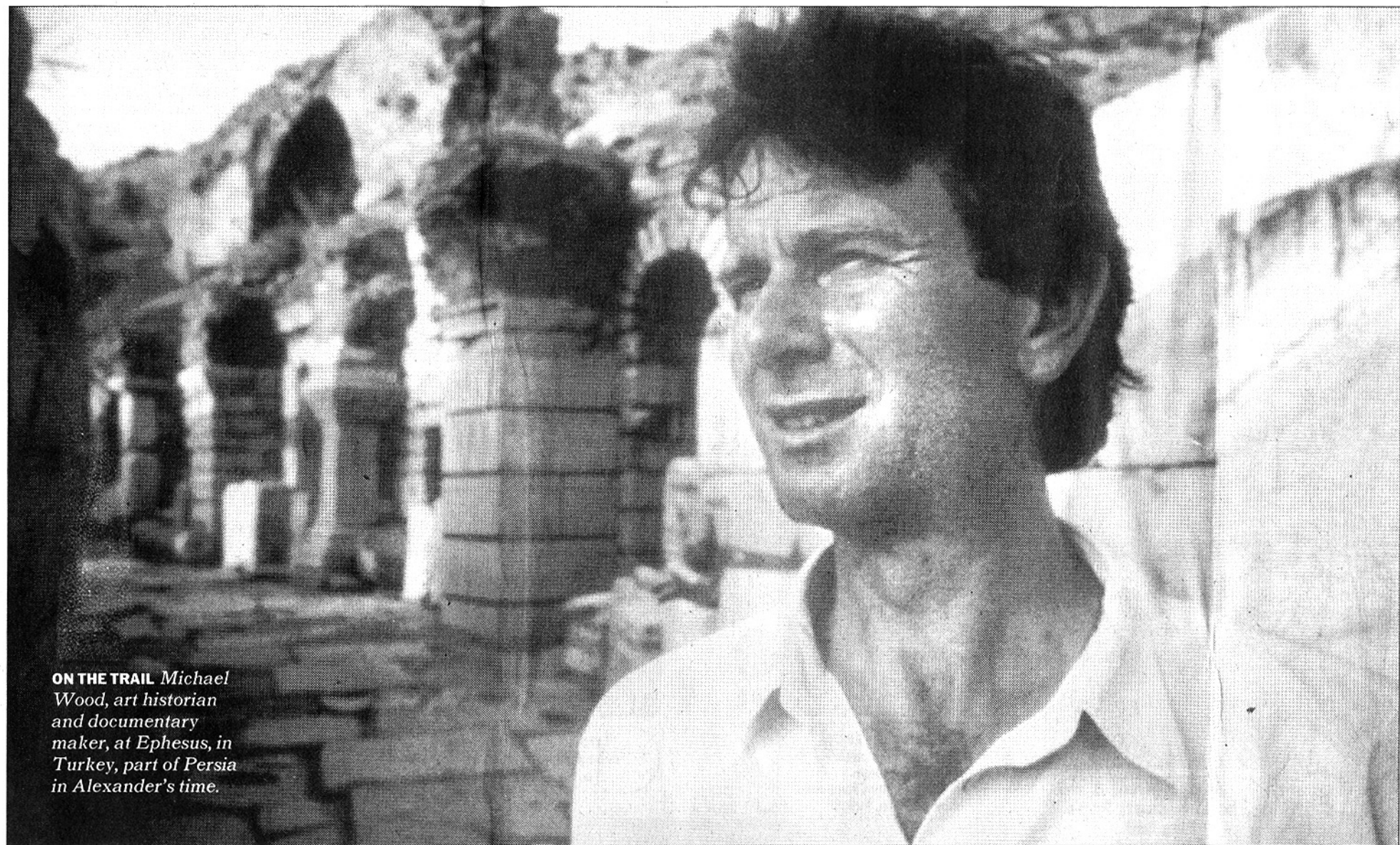
Time and again, most recently with "Legacy" (shown on PBS in 1992), a series about early civilizations, he has demonstrated a knack for making the stories of remote peoples, empires and gods seem topical. For him, quite simply, "popular history" is an achievement, not an epithet.

Mr. Wood's latest documentary, "In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great," is one of his most ambitious to date because of the sheer complexity of retracing Alexander's 10-year, 22,000-mile conquering march from Macedonia, through the Balkans, the Middle East, Persia and Afghanistan to India — and then back to Babylon, where he died in 323 B.C. at the age of 32. Written and presented by Mr. Wood and made for the BBC and Maryland Public Television, the four-hour documentary is to be broadcast in successive two-hour slots tomorrow and Tuesday at 9 P.M. on many PBS stations. Mr. Wood's illustrated book "In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great: A Journey From Greece to Asia" (University of California Press) accompanies the series.

"It's a fantastic story," Mr. Wood, 49, said over tea in the cramped offices of his production company, Maya Vision, in central London. "It is one that has fascinated me since I was a teen-ager. I first proposed the idea more than 10 years ago because I think television is best at telling stories rather than analyzing. Of course, it is always more interesting to deal with the history of ideas than a simple historical narrative. In a way, the most interesting part of Alexander the Great is the interaction of the cultures after his death."

Fortunately for the series, traces of Alexander's life, his military prowess and his cultural reach can still be found today, not only in the Egyptian port of Alexandria and other cities he visited or founded but also in the legends of many peoples whose ancestors were conquered or co-opted by the young emperor. Indeed, thanks to his living legacy in, say, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and India, the familiar Alexander of Greek statuary presented at the start of the series takes on flesh and blood by the end.

To track Alexander's journey, Mr. Wood used the accounts written three centuries after the fact by the Greek Arrian and the Roman Curtius as well as records kept by Callisthenes, Aristotle's nephew, who was Alexander's official historian and who was executed in 327 B.C. when he dared question Alexander's deity. But these accounts, often based on what Mr. Wood called "sensationalist tabloid versions of the era," are at times contradictory, with Arrian inclined to



**ON THE TRAIL** Michael Wood, art historian and documentary maker, at Ephesus, in Turkey, part of Persia in Alexander's time.

David Wallace/PBS

show Alexander in good light and Curtius dwelling more on the violence and brutality that accompanied the journey.

"Our job is not to adjudicate the sources," Mr. Wood said, "although I suppose we do somewhat because we tend to follow the probability of a version.

"When Arrian says nothing after the battle of Tyre and Curtius says that 2,000 prisoners were crucified, you think it was probably true."

Still, there is broad consensus on many aspects of Alexander's journey and even on his character. His belief that he was a man of destiny quickly turned into a conviction that he was himself a god. He originally set out to avenge an earlier defeat of the Macedonians by the Persians, but he soon concluded he should rule "to the ends of the earth." And he had good reason for believing this: the gods signaled him to keep going, while Aristotle had instructed him in the superiority of Greek civilization.

He was a brave and inspiring military chief, leading his exhausted troops as they climbed a new range of mountains, crossed a fresh desert or took on a new enemy. But he also liked a good party. Both Arrian and Curtius recount orgiastic drinking bouts that left Alexander and his commanders barely able to move on the morrow. Alexander himself was bisexual: he married twice and had at least three children, but as was the custom of his age, he also had male lovers. As his journey advanced, however, his drinking, battle wounds, paranoia and intolerance grew to the point of self-destruction.

In the television documentary, Mr. Wood

is effectively Alexander's stand-in, leading his own television crew along the route of the imperial march on ponies, camels, rafts, boats, warships, jeeps, buses, trucks, trains, helicopters, military aircraft and even at one point wading neck-deep in water.

In "Son of God," the first of four one-hour episodes, Alexander is tracked as he heads through Turkey, cuts the Gordian knot, defeats the Persian king Darius at Issus and marches triumphantly through Lebanon and Palestine before founding Alexandria, the first of 30 cities that carried his name. In Siwa, he proclaims himself Pharaoh, or Son of God, and creates the Ptolemaic dynasty that lasted until Cleopatra.

**T**HE second episode, "Lord of Asia," follows Alexander through Persia to the shores of the Caspian Sea. Here, Mr. Wood brings the story alive by reaching the very water hole where Darius was murdered by his own army, by finding Turkoman nomads who still claim Alexander as a folk hero, by tracing storytellers who recite the Persian poet Firdowsi's verses about the conqueror known as Iksander. Mr. Wood even joins a United States Air Force AWACS flight over northern Iraq so that sophisticated mapping screens can illustrate Alexander's final battle against Darius.

"Across the Hindu Kush," the third episode, which carries the story across Afghanistan to the gates of India, was the one section of the reconstructed journey that the program's producers were unable to prepare ahead of filming because of the continuing war in Afghanistan.

**For a documentary on Alexander, a history enthusiast and his crew traveled 20,000 miles. The past, they found, is still present.**

"We had to shoot the Afghan part first because we were very worried about the situation," Mr. Wood recalled. "It was deteriorating very quickly. Kabul fell to the Taliban soon after we went through. We had to improvise as we went along. On the other hand, compared with, say, Iran, it was easy to film there because we were in a country where it was the last of their concerns if a bunch of people came through making a film about their history. In fact, everyone was interested in history and everyone told us stories about Alexander."

The climax of this stage comes when, reliving Alexander's march across the Hindu Kush mountains, Mr. Wood and his crew load their equipment on ponies and set off on foot over the 12,000-foot Khawak Pass. At the top, turning toward the camera, Mr. Wood can barely restrain his admiration of Alexander. "Nothing stopped him, said the historian Arrian, nothing put him off, he just

kept coming on and on, whatever the cold or starvation, he drove on and on, and in the end his enemies were struck with fear at the speed of his advance." Mr. Wood looks at the desolate rocks around him and adds softly, "I'll bet they were."

The final episode, "To the Ends of the Earth," covers the last four years of Alexander's life, from his triumphant march through the Khyber Pass into the North-West Frontier of today's Pakistan and his subsequent discovery that India did not mark the end of the earth to his army's refusal to go on and the slow march home amid numerous battles and near-starvation in the Makran desert. By the time Alexander reached Babylon in April 323 B.C., he was a broken man. And he died on the banks of the Euphrates on June 10 the same year.

Mr. Wood and his colleagues fared better. They traveled 20,000 miles through 17 countries on 7 different trips during 6 months of filming. They were frequently tired and occasionally hungry, but no greater disaster than upset stomachs befell them. Yet, understandably, Mr. Wood felt he could not end his journey without offering an assessment of just how great Alexander really was.

"All the evils unleashed by men of war in our own time teach us that we should reject Alexander's ideals," he said, standing on Mount Olympus in Greece. "But Alexander was a man of his time, not of ours. He believed in the gods and he would accept their verdicts, both for good and ill. If he could answer us here now, I'm sure he would say, like the tragic hero that he is, let the gods be my judges, for in every sign they gave me they told me no lies." □