

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Hollywood vs. History

In my first semester of graduate school, every student in my program was required to choose a research topic. It had to be related in some way to modern Chinese history, our chosen course of study. I didn't know much about China back then, but I did know this: if I chose a boring topic, my life would be miserable. So I came up with a plan. I would try to think of the most exciting thing in the world, then look for its historical counterpart in China. My little brainstorm lasted less than thirty seconds, for the answer was obvious: Indiana Jones. To a white, twenty-something-year-old male from American suburbia, few things were more exciting in life than the thought of the man with the bullwhip. To watch the films was to experience a rush of boyish adrenaline every time. Somehow, I was determined to carry that adrenaline over into my research. On the assumption that there were no Chinese counterparts to Indiana Jones, I posed the only question that seemed likely to yield an answer: How did the Chinese react to the foreign archaeologists who took antiquities from their lands?

The answer to that question proved far more complex than I ever could have imagined. I was so stunned by what I discovered in China that I decided to read everything I could about Western expeditions in the rest of the world, in order to see how they compared to the situation in China. This book is the result. (A second, more specialized book focusing entirely on China and the Silk Road is in the works.) A funny thing happened along the way, though. The more I learned about Indiana Jones in history, the less I enjoyed Indiana Jones in Hollywood. In fact, the last time I watched the films, in preparation for writing this chapter, I could barely get through all

of them. The boyhood magic had vanished; the adrenaline was gone. Why? Had I watched them one too many times over the years? Had I lost touch with the boyish spark of my youth? Were they never really all that good in the first place? Or had Indiana Jones in history simply proven to be more interesting to me than Indiana Jones in Hollywood?

I suspect it is the last one. In fact, most historians, over the course of their careers, must pay a similar price. The bargain, I think, is more than fair: let us call it the compensations of history. In exchange for the painful loss of the unreflective auras of our youth, the historian discovers a truth far stranger—and, more often than not, more satisfying—than any fiction. What I want to do in this chapter is something that historians rarely do. After spending the past seven chapters systematically replacing the cultural myth with the historical reality, I want to revisit the myth one last time. My goal is to identify where the myth ends and history begins, and put to rest once and for all the nebulous question of the historical accuracy of the Indiana Jones film franchise. At last, it is time to untangle Hollywood from history.

Let us begin with a question that is easy to answer. Where did the inspiration for the Indiana Jones film premise come from? As with most of the issues raised in this chapter, our first and primary source for this question comes in the form of the transcript for a 1978 brainstorming session held in Los Angeles three years before the release of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). In this one-hundred-and-twenty-five page document, we hear George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Larry Kasdan—the co-creator, director, and screenwriter of the first film—discuss in great detail a number of plot elements and character development ideas that would eventually make it into all four films of the franchise. The majority of the talking is done by Lucas, with occasional input from Spielberg and much less from Kasdan. A brief but valuable appendix highlights the additional thoughts and concerns of Kasdan, co-writer Phil Kaufman, and Deborah Fine, who is credited with “research” in the end credits.

In a classic example of cultural recycling, the bulk of the avowed inspiration for the films came from earlier Hollywood

productions. One of the first things Lucas admits is that his idea should be “done like the Republic serials. As a thirties serial. Which is where a lot of the stuff comes from anyway.” By “Republic serial,” Lucas is alluding to Republic Pictures, a film studio most active in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s that specialized in Westerns, B movies, and short serialized mysteries or action stories that played out in consecutive weekly installments, like a comic book. In discussing the character of Indiana Jones, Lucas and Spielberg constantly invoke particular aspects of the on-screen personas of leading Hollywood actors: John Wayne, Clark Gable, Sean Connery, and Clint Eastwood, to name just a few. Not once in one hundred and twenty-five pages of transcribed text does the name of a single real-life archaeologist appear. They also make reference to specific movies or books whose plot, style, or mood they wish to borrow from: *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Land of the Pharaohs*, *Casablanca*, *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *King Kong*, *Three Days of the Condor*, and *Lord of the Rings*, among others. Fictional character templates for certain traits of the hero included James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, and Clark Kent.

But Lucas wanted to push the envelope in a new direction. At one point, Lucas tells Spielberg that “you’ve been describing this to people as a science fiction film, which is good” (Spielberg refutes this; Lucas says “It’s in *Rolling Stone*”). Elsewhere they admit on three separate occasions that they are essentially re-creating “one of those rides at Disneyland,” more specifically “a real, horror ride.” Also mentioned is *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*. Collectively, what we are seeing here is a significant debt to pre-existing Hollywood productions; fantasy, science fiction, and detective novels; and mainstream popular culture. Missing from this list is anything resembling history. Though this will likely come as a surprise to many casual fans—it was certainly news to me—it actually makes perfect sense. Lucas and Spielberg were not making a documentary; they were crafting an entertaining story to sell to the general public. As such, it should come as little surprise to find that the overwhelming majority of their inspiration came from other successful entertainment products of their day, those with a tried and proven track record of appealing to a Western mainstream audience.

Interestingly enough, however, Lucas himself seems to have thought he was incorporating respectable historical input into his story. Throughout the brainstorming session, we are regaled with repeated allusions to “Phil’s research,” a reference to co-writer Phil Kaufman. Lucas describes Kaufman’s research as historical in nature. “There’s a history of it,” he says. “This is, again, where the research comes in. Phil knew more about this than I did, and his notes are very sketchy.” What does all this research concern? Mostly the accumulated lore surrounding the Ark of the Covenant—the religious artifact around which the plot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* revolves—and a supposed Nazi obsession with the occult. Lucas claims to have “more research” on how Adolf Hitler, in “1936 or whatever, was a fanatic for this kind of stuff, occult craziness. We have another book where he was looking for the spear that killed Jesus, which was in a museum in Czechoslovakia. Well, he was a fanatic for finding this sort of occult stuff.”

The books Lucas and Kaufman are referring to are Erich von Däniken’s *Chariot of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past* (1968) and Trevor Ravenscroft’s *The Spear of Destiny: The Occult Power Behind the Spear Which Pierced the Side of Christ* (1973). If the titles alone sound like they come from the minds of slick conspiracy theorists, it is because they do. Von Däniken promoted the idea that most early civilizations were inspired by human contact with more advanced extraterrestrial life forms, an idea taken up in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. With regard to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, we should note von Däniken’s theory of how the Ark served as a form of radio communication between the Jews and their god. Ravenscroft, acting as a posthumous amanuensis for a dead Nazi author—I kid you not—tells a spurious tale of Hitler’s fascination with the occult and the power of various Judeo-Christian artifacts. From the perspective of a professional historian, it would be too polite to characterize the contents of either book as anything more than utter nonsense. And yet both books made their authors rich men, with von Däniken’s *Chariot of the Gods* even climbing the *New York Times* “bestseller list.” Various sequels eventually totaled over seventy million copies in sales, not to mention numerous documentaries and television specials.

As with the other cultural influences on Lucas noted above, it is this penchant for proven commercial success—rather than proven historical veracity—which appears to have exerted the greater appeal for the filmmakers. In a single breath during the brainstorming session, Lucas seamlessly merges the content of these two “history” books: “We’ll just say that Hitler has been trying to find this [the spear], which is history, and he’s also trying to find this Ark.” At any rate, it is unclear to what extent Lucas actually digested the content of von Däniken’s book. At one point in the conversation, Lucas goes so far as to confuse von Däniken the real-life author with von Däniken the fictional villain: “... in the end they convince him to do it because they say this Professor Erich von Däniken, or whatever, this German version of himself is the one who found it.” Spielberg also appears to blur the line between fact and fiction, on one occasion suggesting that a “real slimy German character” would have the name of “Himmler or something like that”—without seeming to realize that Heinrich Himmler, the head of the Ahnenerbe discussed in chapter 7, was a real Nazi leader (not to mention the single most plausible historical villain for Indiana Jones).

In the appended meeting involving Kaufman, Kasdan, and Fine, we learn more about the thin historical basis for the films. After Kaufman reveals his list of “historical” sources for the main plot—*The Spear of Destiny*, the Bible, a television special on the Dead Sea Scrolls, a single entry in the Encyclopedia Britannica (later “corrected” to “Americana”), and a mysterious article on the Ark written by his mononucleosis doctor twenty years earlier—screenwriter Larry Kasdan appears unimpressed. “So basically, it was your doctor, and his article and von Däniken, and the Bible, and nothing else that we know anything about.” Deborah Fine (credited with “research” in the casting list) then chimes in with a more blunt assessment, referring to the film’s basic plot premise as “fairly hokey.” Not only that, but it is based upon speculation that lacks “any serious excavations or attempts by archaeologists to really find it.” Kaufman, now on the defensive, silences his critics with the most revealing phrase of all: “You want it to be fun.”

That we do, indeed. We are not here to pass judgment on the creators of the Indiana Jones film franchise for failing to adhere to the standards of the historian, which none of them trained or claimed to be. We simply want to make it clear that there is little to no respectable historical input for any of the major plotlines in the series. In other words, the Indiana Jones films owe their greatest debt to Egyptomania, not Egyptology. This simply confirms the futility of any attempt to claim that the character of Indiana Jones was based on this or that archaeologist in history, or that any of the plot lines from the four films in the franchise were inspired in any way by actual excavations or expeditions. True to the priorities of someone working in the entertainment business, the topics about which Lucas and Spielberg appear to possess the most historical knowledge—and concern for historical accuracy—relate to the types of props they intend to make use of. As such, both men reveal an impressive familiarity with World War II fighter plane models, the availability of submarines, and what sort of device Indiana Jones could use to jump out of a 1930s airplane. Lucas may not have been overly concerned about the reliability of Kaufman's mononucleosis doctor, but he was certainly "worried they didn't have life rafts then."

The Indiana Jones film franchise is great fun, but it is more closely related to science fiction, Disneyland rides, James Bond, and crackpot conspiracy theories than it is to history. But surely there is some semblance of history somewhere. There are Nazis in two of the four films and Soviet KGB agents in another, and everyone knows those guys existed. In fact, there is a good deal of history that we can take away from all four films—though little of this appears to reflect the deliberate intentions of the filmmakers. Rather, there are a handful of interesting convergences that seem to suggest an unconscious regurgitation of vague but mostly accurate historical knowledge, as refracted through multiple cultural and media prisms.

Let us begin with what the filmmakers got right. Indiana Jones is a successful American archaeologist active in the decades just before World War II. Originally referred to by Lucas as "Indiana Smith," the character was supposed to be "very Americana square," said to be born in the state of Indiana.

(Kasdan: “What does she call him, Indy?” Lucas: “That’s what I was thinking.”) In other words, Indiana Jones is the very embodiment of hometown America. This is in perfect accord with we saw in in chapters 5 and 6. Though relative latecomers to the game of archaeology, the Americans poured their money and leadership into the field in the decades after World War I. In the wake of the war, Europe was devastated, and support for foreign expeditions and museum acquisitions dried up overnight. Into the vacuum stepped the Rockefellers and Carnegies, those great American philanthropists who made their fortunes during the Gilded Age. Whether in China or the Middle East, it was Americans who led the way: men like James Breasted and Langdon Warner. Even when Europeans such as Aurel Stein or Ernst Herzfeld still went out into the field, they often did so under the employ and oversight of American universities and museums. The filmmakers even select a plausible *alma mater* for Dr. Jones: the University of Chicago, which was the home of James Breasted and his Oriental Institute.

Another area where the films are on firm ground is in the choice of a French villain, René Belloq, for *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Though almost certainly an incidental choice—many other candidates of different nationalities were discussed—the selection of a French rival opposite an American archaeologist in the Middle East during the 1920s and 30s is historically felicitous, nonetheless. As we learned in chapters 4 and 6, French scholars were the administrators of choice for nearly every Middle Eastern state desirous of establishing its own antiquities service. And though it is clear to the historian that these French directors were loyal to the governments that employed them—and not to France—this fact was not always clear to the British and American archaeologists who occasionally locked horns with them. Recall how James Breasted, after witnessing the obstruction of Howard Carter at the tomb of King Tut in the mid-1920s under the direction of Pierre Lacau, the director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, immediately suspected an international French conspiracy against Anglo-American interests. It seems that the filmmakers, in choosing to pit an American archaeologist against a Frenchman in the interwar Middle East, inadvertently hit the historical nail on the head.

Unfortunately, nearly everything else about the choice of locale and era for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Last Crusade* does not pass muster. In the commercially savvy estimation of Lucas, the Nazis made for great villains and the Middle East provided a suitably “exotic” backdrop. But neither makes much sense from a historian’s perspective. From an early date, it is clear that Lucas was wedded to Cairo as the principle urban backdrop. “It’s in Cairo,” he says during the brainstorm, “but it doesn’t have to be. I only use that because it’s one of those thirties cities. In the research it will probably be an Israeli city.” We should give Lucas some credit here for his candid acknowledgement of the profound gap between filming and historical priorities. But even “Israel” would have been just as unlikely a site for the story he wanted to tell as Egypt. As we saw in chapter 6, the interwar Middle East was split almost entirely among three political actors: the British, French, and independent states. “Israel” didn’t even exist yet—it was still the British “mandate” of Palestine. For its part, Egypt was independent but still heavily influenced by French and British interests, the former through the Antiquities Service and the latter as advisors to the king. Not only that, but thousands of British troops were stationed there. In other words, the 1930s was a time when the Nazis would not have been able to set one foot inside Egypt or Palestine unless the French and British had wanted them to.

It should also go without saying that even if the Nazis somehow could have organized a dig in Egypt during this time, the Egyptian authorities never would have allowed them the freedom of movement and lack of oversight that they seem to enjoy in the film. Ever since the tussle between Carter and Cairo over King Tut’s tomb in 1923–24, no foreign archaeologist could do anything in Egypt without constant local oversight and stringent restrictions. This observation applies equally to most other Middle Eastern countries at the time. The situation in Turkey was more or less identical to that of Egypt. Syria and Jordan were French and British mandates, respectively, and off-limits to the Germans. Iran was independent but still largely beholden to French and American interests. Iraq, formerly a British mandate but by the time of

the first film a newly independent state, might have made for a plausible backdrop if not for continued British and American influence. In short, the 1930s was simply too late a decade for any German excavations or expeditions to make much headway anywhere in the Middle East. It was difficult enough for the Americans, British, and French. But the Germans, only recently stripped of all their overseas assets after their defeat in World War I, would have searched in vain for a peaceful Middle Eastern foothold. In fact, we know that this is precisely what happened: in chapter 7, we saw the Ahnenerbe expedition to various Middle Eastern countries chased away at every turn.

There are some interesting exceptions. In *The Last Crusade*, for instance, the climactic denouement, in which Jones finds the Holy Grail just outside the modern-day city of Iskenderun (in present-day Turkey), is said to occur within the Republic of Hatay. Someone on the set must have done their research, for this tiny republic, wedged between Turkey and Syria, actually existed, albeit briefly: 1938–39, timed perfectly to overlap with the narrative of the film. Would the Nazis have been able to gain entrance to this country? Probably not, seeing how the chief political influences in the republic were advisors from proudly independent Turkey and French-controlled Syria. Another fascinating—and far more plausible—candidate would have been the Italian colonies of North Africa. The Germans and Italians were on friendly terms, and Libya, just to the west of Egypt, had been an Italian colony since 1912. By 1936, the year of the first film, Italy had also taken over Ethiopia, with its wealth of Abrahamic religions. (Interestingly enough, Lucas briefly floated the idea of an Italian villain opposite Jones, only to shoot down his own idea: “No. Italians are too crazy.”) Of course, shifting the action just a few years ahead to the outbreak of World War II would have given the filmmakers a host of new options: all of Vichy France’s colonies along the north African coast, Italian (and later German) conquests in the Balkans and Greece, and sixty miles of northwestern Egyptian desert briefly captured during the Italian (and later German) invasion of Egypt.

Unfortunately for the history buff, Lucas insisted on gun-toting Nazis in the Near East in the years just prior to

World War II. As we have just seen, this is a set of criteria difficult to fulfill anywhere outside of the Italian colonies of Libya and Ethiopia. He also wanted an artifact drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition, something he and his target audience could identify with. (Here we see the enduring influence of biblical archaeology and Western avatars discussed in chapter 3.) Again, Libya and Ethiopia could conceivably fill this role. But alas, the Nazis cannot. Contrary to the claims put forth in the quack histories of Trevor Ravenscroft and Erich von Däniken, Nazi leaders were not unusually obsessed with either the occult or the spiritually infused baubles of Judeo-Christian material culture. The mysterious rites and jargon of the secret society clubs joined by many Nazi members were scarcely any different from similar fraternal orders found throughout the world, including Britain and the United States.

With respect to Judaism and Christianity, the Nazis were either hostile or ambivalent, but rarely welcoming. Judaism is the religion of the Jews, and we all know how the Nazis felt about the Jews. It would have made little sense for them to covet—much less believe in—the power of the Ark, which represented a covenant between no one other than the Jews and their god. As for the Christians, they viewed Jesus as their savior, and Jesus was also a Jew, one who preached love and equality for all human beings. Not only that, but all the Abrahamic religions originated in the Middle East, far away from the preferred sites of Nazi racial genesis. As we saw in chapter 7, the two poles of Nazi affection for the past are illustrated through the cultural preferences of Hitler and Himmler. Hitler was an unabashed admirer of Greco-Roman antiquity, a bias held by a majority of European elites since Napoleon. (Of course, his Greeks and Romans were Aryans in Mediterranean guise.) He had little interest in the Nordic obsessions of Himmler, whose Ahnenerbe missions attempted to recover the “lost” Scandinavian lore of the least “diluted” of Aryan peoples. Either way, neither agenda had room for Christians or Jews, or their magical relics. If anything, they would have been more likely to destroy the Ark or Holy Grail than to preserve them.

Another recurrent choice of locale in the films is Peru. The iconic opening scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which Jones

retrieves a golden idol and outruns an oversized boulder, is set in 1936 somewhere in the jungles of Peru. The fourth film, *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, returns to Peru and its Amazon hinterlands for a significant portion of the action. In this latter film, Jones is not only said to go to Peru, but more specifically to the former Incan town of Cuzco. Recall from chapter 3 that this was also the launch point for Hiram Bingham and his expeditions to Machu Picchu in 1911–12. The choice of such a well-known site is unlikely to be a coincidence. In the brainstorming session, Lucas told Spielberg and Kasdan that “the film starts in the jungle. South America, someplace. We get one of these great scenes with the pack animals going up the mist-covered hills. Very exotic mist-filled jungles and mountains.” He just as easily could have been describing one of the 250 eerily similar photographs of the hike to Machu Picchu published by Bingham in the April 1913 issue of *National Geographic*.

Superficial convergences notwithstanding, Bingham did his dirty work in Peru a full quarter of a century before Indiana Jones is said to have outrun the boulder in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and a whopping half century before his more extended, CGI-infused visit in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. But even in 1911–12, Bingham was unable to obtain permission from the Peruvian government to remove artifacts in perpetuity. In fact, he was forced to sign a secret clause permitting Peru to later demand from Yale University the return of the skeletons and other objects Bingham had removed from Machu Picchu. In this, Peru was not unique among Latin American countries of that era. Therefore, despite the undeniable visual appeal of an archaeological expedition ascending the mist-enshrouded peaks of Peru—one imagines Lucas to have been influenced by similar scenes in Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972)—such a scene would have been unlikely to unfurl against the temporal backdrop of 1936 (and certainly not that of 1957). Once again, the filmmakers have chosen a historical time frame far too late to accommodate the archaeological free-for-all in which they expect their hero to engage.

Elsewhere, however, the filmmakers appear to have done a bit more homework, at least with regard to historical backdrops. Say what you will about the demeaning portrayals

of half-naked natives in *Temple of Doom* and *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, at least the geopolitics are (mostly) right. In 1935, the year Indiana Jones stumbles into a northern Indian village terrorized by an underground cult, many of the princely states along the Himalayan foothills did maintain the same sort of quasi-autonomy from the British Raj that is depicted in the film. And there was once an underground network of Thuggee cult members who indulged in murder, robbery, and the worship of a destructive god, though they were long gone by the 1930s. Beyond these simple facts of history, though, the rest of *Temple of Doom* is pure fantasy. As for the *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the filmmakers could hardly miss the mark: the only plausible framework for a film set in the 1950s is the Cold War, which naturally invites themes derived from the exploration of space, nuclear weapons, and Soviet spies (though, as mentioned above, the choice of Cuzco and the Amazon jungle as the setting for an archaeological rivalry between two foreign expeditions is still implausible).

One major theme that runs through the film franchise is the willingness of Indiana Jones to lend his knowledge of foreign languages and ancient civilizations to the U.S. government. This relationship is most readily portrayed in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. In the former, Jones is approached by Army intelligence agents, who ask for his help in finding the Ark before the Nazis do. In the latter, it is revealed that Jones worked for the CIA in Berlin during the Cold War and was tapped as a consultant to examine an unidentified alien corpse for the U.S. military in 1947. With the exception of the alien and unlikelihood of scholars taking the place of in-house, trained CIA operatives in the 1950s—after the post-WWII “divorce”—much of this is an accurate reflection of the work archaeologists and other scholars frequently did on behalf of their governments (see chapter 7). The competing and often contradictory priorities of the relationship are summed up perfectly in one of Spielberg’s contributions to the brainstorm: “His assignment is to recover the Ark, but if you see a submarine base, blow it up.”

The films even get the imbalance of knowledge between the two sides correct: in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the Army officers

know virtually nothing of the history of the Ark, and it is up to Jones, who is said to “know more about it than they do,” to educate them. “I’m not a spy,” Lucas says while mimicking Jones’ lines during the brainstorm, “I’m an archaeologist. Why don’t you send one of your guys over there to do that?” Because, the Army men reply, their guys “don’t know an Ark from a bathtub.” Embedded within these lines is the realization that Jones bristles at the idea of being a spy; in other words, someone who prostitutes scientific knowledge for overt political ends. In the film, it is only when Jones later convinces himself of a larger, more noble cause that he accepts the mission. “That thing [the Ark] represents everything we got into archaeology for in the first place,” he tells Marcus Brody, a friend and museum director. Of course, as we saw in chapter 7, Mayan archaeologist Sylvanus Morley likely would have regarded his collaboration with the Office of Naval Intelligence in a similar light. He wasn’t a spy, he would have said, but rather a patriotic scholar on the “right” side of the war, with important archaeological work done on the side.

The question of Jones’ professional morality and ethics is one that Lucas, Spielberg, and Kasdan wrestled with constantly during the creative process. In fact, the feel-good line of dialogue quoted above—“That thing represents everything we got into archaeology for in the first place”—appears only in the final cut of the film. For most of the brainstorming session and early drafts of the script, Indiana Jones was envisioned as a much less savory character. Lucas introduces him to Spielberg and Kasdan as an “outlaw archaeologist” or “bounty hunter of antiquities,” someone who “got involved in going in and getting antiquities” and managed to turn it into “a very lucrative profession.” At another point he’s described as a “grave robber for hire.” But once the filmmakers begin to explore the moral implications of these characterizations, they quickly run into problems. The first issue derives from the realization that they want Jones to be somebody “who really knows his job. He’s really good at what he does.” Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a lucrative profession. But how did Jones get so good at finding antiquities? The only plausible answer: he has an academic background. “He is an archaeologist and an

anthropologist,” Lucas declares. “A Ph.D. He’s a doctor. He’s a college professor.” Later, Lucas again reinforces this point: “We’ve established that he’s a college professor. It doesn’t have to be done in a strong way. It starts out in a museum. They just call him doctor this and doctor that.”

The realization that Indiana Jones can only be a successful archaeologist—albeit an “outlaw” one—if he has a Ph.D. quickly gives rise to a second problem, one alluded to in the line quoted above. That is, he became an expert on antiquities through his association with universities, but to whom does he sell the antiquities once he retrieves them? Again, the only plausible answer: museums. “He gets his money from the museum,” Lucas informs his colleagues. “You understand a little more about him as a professor and all that other bullshit. It also really sets up the fact that he’s a bounty hunter and he works for museums.” Lucas doesn’t yet appear to be troubled by the implications of all the ideas he’s thrown into the mix, referring to them as “all that other bullshit.” But it doesn’t take long before all three filmmakers begin to unpack the tensions involved. In one breath, Lucas, in trying to imagine how his hero might embark upon such a mission, seems to hit upon the legitimizing role of museums almost without realizing it. “We think maybe it’s on the underground market, or in a private collection. We’d like to have it. Actually it belongs to us. We’re the National Museum of Cairo or something.” There it is: only a national museum can serve to justify the removal of artifacts from their original location to another one, as discussed in chapter 1. In other words, Lucas, perhaps unwittingly, has finally discovered the moral discourse of “science,” “preservation,” and “education” as the only legitimate pretexts for an archaeological adventure.

Now we see the ethics of Indiana Jones begin to change. The filmmakers still want him to be the good guy, but they don’t want him to play by the rules. There are certain rules, however, that cannot be broken without turning him into the bad guy. Instead of merely robbing graves for gold, Jones is now said to “swipe it back” in a way that is “sort of legal.” What is “sort of legal”? According to Lucas, “it’s not like he steals things from collectors and then gives them to other collectors. What he does is steal things from private collectors who have

them illegally, and gives them back to the national museums and stuff.” In other words, Lucas now understands that only a museum can claim to represent the interests of science, preservation, and education, in a way that private collectors cannot. But he still wants to think of Jones as someone who “steals” things, most likely in an effort to maintain the specter of adventure and danger. Now, however, he realizes that these two ideas are incompatible: in the world of art and archaeology, Jones simply cannot be the good guy if he “steals” things. In the original brainstorm, Lucas immediately corrects his previous statement. “He’s not a totally corrupt person, where he’ll steal. But if it’s sort of fair game, then he comes in.”

It is obvious by this point that Lucas is desperately trying to preserve some aspect of roguish intrigue without undermining the likeability of his main character. Eventually, however, the contradictions become too evident to ignore. Kasdan is the first to confront the issue, wondering how “an archaeologist who’s spent years studying this” and has “some kind of awe and respect for virgin tombs” can be turned to the dark side. “What’s his stance on this? Does it bother him to go in and...” Before Kasdan can expose the gap in logic, Lucas cuts him off. “Basically he’s very cynical about the whole thing,” Lucas interrupts. “Maybe he thinks that most archaeologists are full of shit, and that somebody’s going to rip this stuff off anyway. Better that he rips it off and gets it to a museum where people can study it, and rip it off right.” What a wonderful phrase: “rip it off right.” It is also an oxymoron. Though Lucas wanted Indiana Jones to be “a very believable character,” he quickly realized that an archaeologist who does not consort with universities and museums is not a believable character. But once Jones is associated with these institutions, the moral discourse of science, preservation, and education that justifies their existence also ties Lucas’ hands in ways he could not have foreseen.

These issues are not resolved in the brainstorm session. Museums and colleges notwithstanding, Lucas still tries to push the limits of how much immoral behavior Jones can absorb without making him into the bad guy. Again, Kasdan is the one who appears most befuddled by Lucas’ repeated attempts to drag Indiana Jones through the mud, only to redeem him

time and time again. "I'm a little confused about Indiana at this point," Kasdan says, after Lucas highlights another random moral awakening in Jones. "I thought he'd do anything for this pendant." Lucas does another about face. "But he still has to have some moral scruples. He has to be a person we can look up to. We're doing a role model for little kids, so we have to be careful. We need someone who's honest, trusting, and true." It was later left to Kasdan, the screenwriter, to work out the final ratio of Indy's morality. In one of the early scripts for *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Kasdan describes Jones' home as "English Tudor, upper middle class home. Quite toney; well beyond the financial reach of an honest college professor." Inside, "the lush tone continues here in Art Deco and shiny marble," with a beautiful woman dressed in silks and sipping champagne lounging on the furniture. When the men from Army intelligence come to interview Jones, his friend Marcus Brody reassures him: "Don't worry, it's not about your business."

All this is removed from the final cut of the film. In their place, most references to Jones' seedier side are delivered in more subtle and comical ways. His lush English Tudor house is now a modest brick abode, well within the reach of an honest college professor, with shiny marble nowhere in evidence. Brody, the director of the imaginary "National Museum" in Washington, D.C., tells Jones that the museum will buy the jewels he's brought back from Peru, "no questions asked." When Jones offers to fill him in on the details of his morally dubious escapades, Brody's response is designed to elicit a knowing chuckle from the viewer: "I'm sure everything you do for the museum conforms to the International Treaty for the Protection of Antiquities." The men from the Army are given similar dialogue when they try to characterize Jones' work. "Ah, how does one say it? Obtainer of rare antiquities." Jones mutters an evasive response: "There's only one way to say it."

Any doubts about Indy's ethical orientation introduced by these humorous scenes, however, are negated by Jones' subsequent confession that the search for the Ark "represents everything we got into archaeology for in the first place." He is also thrilled to learn that the Ark will be given to Brody's museum upon completion of the mission. The edgy morality

of Lucas' early brainstorming sessions is not entirely white-washed, however. A memorable scene in a Cairo tea house serves as the occasion for René Belloq, the French mercenary working on behalf of the Nazis, to tell Jones that the two of them had both "fallen from the pure faith" and were "not so different" from one other. Again, though, the filmmakers quickly undermine the force of these comments by having Jones draw a sharp line in the sand between the two men, by suggesting that only one of them (Belloq) must venture into the "sewer" to find friends of similar moral caliber. (An additional sixty minutes spent punching Nazis completes Indy's redemption.)

The second film, *Temple of Doom*, marks a departure from the first film in its decision to eschew any and all references to Jones' professional ethics, for better or for worse. The only two "artifacts" in the film—a collection of magical stones and an urn with the ashes of Nurhaci, the first Manchu emperor of the Qing Dynasty—are not the sort of objects desired by museums, which themselves disappear from the script. The decision to abandon these legitimizing institutions resulted in a much darker storyline. Children are abused and enslaved, men and women are sacrificed, hearts are ripped out of chests, and the viewer searches in vain for a higher good capable of redeeming such a hellish world. Though still a financially successful romp around the yard, *Temple of Doom* left both critics and audience members aghast, and not in a feel-good sort of way.

Not surprisingly then, the third film, *The Last Crusade*, returned to the formula of the first, but this time freed from the hazy morality of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Just minutes into the movie, both a younger and older version of Indiana Jones give voice to his newly minted trademark line: "That belongs in a museum!" It takes no more than fifteen minutes of reel time before a variant of this line is uttered on three separate occasions. In place of the considerable sum of cash he was paid by the Army for the recovery of the Ark in the first film, here Jones receives nothing more than an "honorarium" for his contributions to Brody's museum. And when a wealthy collector of Holy Grail paraphernalia attempts to induce Jones to embark on a new mission with the promise of personal gain (eternal life), Jones turns him down flat. It is only when

he learns that his father's life is in danger—a higher good if ever there was one—that Indy accepts the assignment. Later, the Austrian villainess Elsa tries to draw moral equivalency between her own unscrupulous actions and those of Jones. “We both wanted the Grail. I would have done anything to get it. You would have done the same.” Not surprisingly, Indy takes the moral high ground. “I’m sorry you think so.”

With Jones’ moral integrity now retroactively established from his earliest days clear into middle age, the fourth film, *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, ventures back into the subtle humor of the first film. Early in the story, when Jones first meets his son Mutt, he learns that Mutt’s mother once told her son that “if anyone can find the skull,” it is his father, “like you’re some type of grave robber or something.” In response, Jones insists on his professional bona fides. “I’m a tenured professor of archaeology,” he says sternly. Later, at an archaeological site in Peru, Mutt reads aloud the sign that greets them: “Grave robbers will be shot.” Though Lucas once envisioned Jones as a “grave robber for hire,” such labels now only serve as the butt for deadpan humor. “Good thing we’re not grave robbers,” Jones replies. Finally, inside an underground tomb complex, Jones happens upon a magnificent dagger sheathed inside the vest of a corpse. As he begins to place the dagger in his own coat pocket, Mutt glares at him in disbelief. “Don’t want to keep borrowing yours all the time,” Indy says in self-defense, fumbling to return the knife. “I was gonna put it back.”

If he puts it back, then Indiana Jones is a practitioner of disinterested science. If he doesn’t, he is a grave robber. Try as he did, Lucas simply could not fudge the line between these two poles of morality. In the world of museums, archaeology, and art, there are rules, and not even Lucas can break them. In the end, the final composite image of Indiana Jones is that of a competent scientist with a colorful past. He gets into tough scrapes and challenging situations, but always does the right thing in the end. As Lucas hoped, kids can still look up to him. What is fascinating is how the filmmakers, without any apparent exposure to the history of museums and archaeological expeditions, managed nonetheless to arrive at the same conclusions reached by the caretakers of Pompeii and the Louvre

more than two centuries earlier: the good guys give artifacts to museums, where they can be studied, preserved, and used to educate the general public. By contrast, the bad guys, driven by greed, vanity, and personal ambition, keep everything in private collections, without regard to the altruistic interests of science, preservation, or education. Though real-life archaeologists and museums may operate within a vast gray area, a major Hollywood action flick meant to provide escapist entertainment for the masses cannot do the same.

If Lucas, Spielberg, and Kasdan could unconsciously weave their cinematic narrative around the noble but largely unspoken discourse of disinterested science, what other sort of subconscious cultural input might have managed to find its way into their Indiana Jones films? As it turns out, quite a lot. Not surprisingly, nearly all of this inadvertent cultural feedback can trace its intellectual lineage back to the foundational discourse of science. Of course, we already know that Jones is presented as a competent practitioner of science. What we have yet to encounter, however, are the strategies deployed by the filmmakers (again, almost certainly unknowingly) to define just what exactly science is. Simply put, the definition of a scientist in the films is not presented through positive explication, by showcasing Jones as a practitioner of the scientific method in cultural isolation. Rather, it is defined through an implicitly judgmental demonstration of contrasting cultural opposites. In other words, the audience comes to understand Indy's degree of scientific competence primarily through reference to the scientific shortcomings of people who are not presented as scientists.

Who are these not-scientists? In both the brainstorming session and the films, they tend to be the dark-skinned natives of exotic lands. Lucas' original idea for Indiana Jones was that he be an "archaeological exorcist," who is "an expert in the occult." Note that he is not a *believer* in the occult, but rather an *expert* in the occult. Lucas himself highlights the distinction. "People will walk through this particular temple and they will die twenty-four hours later," he says. "Nobody knows why. The curse of Mabutu is on that place. Well, he looks at it and sees that there's a fissure in the thing and there's a deadly gas that's coming out of the ground. Because he's an intelligent professor,

he knows his science and he can sort of deduce a hoax.” Who created this hoax? Why, the “natives,” of course. In describing his idea for the iconic first scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Lucas tells Spielberg and Kasdan that “all the natives get restless and start to split. One of the guys goes to him and says, ‘The natives are leaving, they’re not going to go any further.’ It’s the curse of the Buddha, or whatever. He says they can probably get there from here without them.” How does he get there without the help of the cowardly natives? With the aid of a crude map drawn by Jones himself, one that provides “enough information ... where I think I can deduce my way through it.”

Be it the curse of Mabutu or the Buddha, the final version of this scene, filmed largely in accord with the sentiments expressed in the brainstorm session, perfectly illustrates how Indiana Jones comes to be defined for the audience as a man of science. Science is defined not in terms of what it is, but by what it isn’t: superstitious natives who believe in the occult. Time and again, whenever a character in one of the films introduces a fantastic tale of wonder and woe, Jones responds with equal parts skepticism and cynicism. For he is a scientist, and a scientist must regard such tales as little more than “bedtime stories.” This being Hollywood, of course, Jones the scientist is never given the last laugh: in each film, at least one “wondrous curiosity,” to borrow the Egyptomania phrase, turns out to possess real supernatural powers. Even this partial vindication is undermined by the filmmakers’ decision to draw from the Judeo-Christian tradition and extraterrestrial interference for the selection of three of the franchise’s four wondrous curiosity allotments: the Ark, Holy Grail, and crystal skull. In fact, the “Sankara Stones” in *The Temple of Doom* are the only artifacts associated with a non-Western society that are shown to have the “superstitious” powers once relegated to the realm of Professor Jones’ “bedtime stories.” Tellingly, however, the Sankara Stones are also the only wondrous curiosity of the film franchise to be used solely for sinister purposes, with no apparent redemptive qualities. To put it another way (again borrowing the lexicon of Egyptomania), the Western and alien artifacts turn out to be “wondrous curiosities,” while the lone non-Western artifact is portrayed as a “monstrous curiosity.”

The implicit, judgmental contrasts between the confident Western man of science and the passive Oriental beholden to superstition and ignorance continued throughout the creative process, from choice of villain to geographic backdrop. In the brainstorm, ideas for various Asian characters are often predicated upon the imagined inscrutability of their faces and minds. At one point, Lucas says that one trait of a potential Oriental villain would be that “you can never tell what they’re thinking.” In trying to explain the motivations of another character, Lucas makes reference to “the crazy Oriental mind. How do we know how it works. They always wait until the last minute or something.” Spielberg, however, eventually shoots down the idea of an Asian rival for Indiana Jones, though not for admirable reasons. “I think he should be German because there’s something nonviolent about the Oriental villain. Certainly he can ... be good with swords and everything, but there’s something a little more ominous about a real German.” These descriptions of Asians as less “violent” and a “real German” as more “ominous” are scarcely veiled code words for ideas about masculinity, which the Orientals are imagined to lack and the Germans to possess. Again, though the filmmakers had no apparent exposure either to the history of archaeological expeditions or to Western depictions of the non-Western world more generally, they nonetheless manage to replicate elements of the discourse of Oriental stagnation, femininity, and decadence produced during that era.

Nowhere are these hidden biases and stereotypes more evident than in the franchise’s treatment of expendable dark-skinned characters from distant lands. In their earliest discussions, Lucas and Spielberg reveal the guiding assumptions destined to appear in one form or another in the finished films. In trying to imagine what sort of locals might accompany Indiana Jones into the jungle temple to recover the golden idol in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Lucas and Spielberg produced the following exchange:

**Lucas:** We had it where there’s a couple native bearers, whatever, and sort of a couple of Mexican, well, not Mexican... Let’s put it...

**Spielberg:** They're like Mayan.

**Lucas:** They're the third world local sleazos. Whether they're Mexicans or Arabs or whatever.

**Spielberg:** They carry the boxes over their heads. They fall off cliffs.

**Lucas:** The sleazos with the thin moustaches. Those are the peon laborers.

The lives of these "third world local sleazos" are not worth much. They provide labor for the white man, they "fall off cliffs," and they die, but the audience is not supposed to be overly concerned about their fate. A famously unscripted scene that made it into the final cut of the film has Jones facing off against a master Arab swordsmen in Cairo. After the swordsman makes an elaborate display of his martial prowess, Jones simply takes out his revolver and shoots him. Though most viewers laugh at this scene in spite of themselves, the laughter conceals two subliminal messages. The first is that traditional Oriental masculinity is no match for a Western scientist armed with more sophisticated weaponry. The second is that homicide is funny when the character is expendable. If the Arab swordsman mattered to the story in any way at all, this scene would not be funny. It would be repellant.

Only the non-Western characters get cast into such roles. As long as the audience laughs at them, it hardly matters who lives or dies. "They're also with another Arab side kick," Lucas says at one point, "who also got thrown back in the thing. A little comic relief." Elsewhere, in a disturbing preview of the young Asian boy "Short Round" in *Temple of Doom*—whom the filmmakers don't even bother to give a proper name—Lucas proposes a "buffoon character" to be cast as an "Arab kid," who is "just talking endlessly and you never understand what he's saying." Hoping to flesh this role out just a bit, Spielberg adds that "maybe he slows down once in a while to say something stupid. When he talks fast you just don't care." Since no one is supposed to fret over these marginal characters, their actual identities were inconsequential: Mexican, Mayan, Arabs, "whatever." Even a monkey could play the part. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, there is a monkey dressed up like the local inhabitants

of Cairo, one who is just as expendable as they are (he dies from eating a poisoned date intended for Jones). This monkey was the subject of extended discussion in the brainstorm, much of it cringe-worthy even by the standards of the day. "Can it wear a turban?" Spielberg asks. "It should be dressed up." A few moments later, Spielberg makes the association with the marginalized Arab characters even more explicit. "The monkey should be dressed up as a little Arab." Lucas loved the idea. "I like the idea of not only having a turban, but also a little backpack."

Not that there were no major roles for non-Western protagonists. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Last Crusade*, Indy's jovial Arab friend Sallah—referred to as "Sabu" in the brainstorm—pops in and out of the storyline. His appearances, however, are always sudden and unexplained. This was deliberate. According to Spielberg, "Sabu could get out of it and show up later. We don't have to follow his story." Again, Lucas agreed. "We can use him wherever we need him. They can just bump into him, 'Sabu, what are you doing here?'" Yes, says Spielberg, "I like it when a character just reappears." Perhaps so, but this narrative technique is not applied to any of the chief Western protagonists. Even when they simply appear out of nowhere, their presence always makes sense within the storyline. Only the non-Western natives, be they "sleazos," monkeys, or friends, can be used without regard for narrative logic or concern. For everyone else, the story has to make sense, or the show cannot go on.

A similarly cavalier attitude appears to have applied to the choice of location as well. The details of different cities and countries are relevant only insofar as they convey a suitably exotic and dangerous atmosphere. Lucas told Spielberg and Kasdan that he had tried "to move him around the world a little bit to see if we can't get a little Oriental influence into it just for the fun of it." But just what exactly is "Oriental influence," and why is it fun? Well, according to Lucas, in a place like Egypt, "you meet all these interesting characters and every once in a while somebody throws a knife at him, or he beats somebody up, or somebody beats him up, typical Middle Eastern stuff." On another occasion, Lucas predicts that "as soon as he gets there, there are knives coming out of the walls,

these slimy characters are following him, all that stuff happens in those places in the thirties.” Such a state of anarchy would also allow their hero to remove antiquities with impunity. In Egypt, Lucas imagines a scenario in which “the museum does commission somebody to go into the pyramids and you know, whatever they find, sort of get out without the Egyptian government knowing, because they were in the process of turmoil and nobody’s going to know anyway and there’s not going to be any official protest, so just do it.” It should be obvious by now that neither of these conditions applied to Egypt at any point during the 1930s (or for a century prior, for that matter).

But the Far East could work just as well as the Middle East. In a preview of the opening scene of *The Temple of Doom*, Lucas proposed “a tiny piece in Hong Kong where people are constantly trying to knife him in the back and shoot poison darts into his ears.” Hong Kong later becomes Shanghai. “We want to send the guy to Shanghai first just for the environment. Have a little bit of adventure there before he goes to Nepal, before he ends up in Cairo.” For Lucas, all that mattered about China was that it was exotic. “The only reason we’re talking about the Orient is that it’s exotic. He’s going to leave Washington and go to three exotic places. He’ll go to the Orient with the crowded streets and dragon ladies.” In addition to crowded streets and dragon ladies, Spielberg also took care to remind Lucas of Oriental barbarity. “We have to have a beheading,” Spielberg adds. “We have to start this scene with a mass beheading. We don’t have to show it. If you were really bad, it took three minutes to cut your head off.”

Regardless of the details, the most important thing for Lucas and Spielberg was that Indiana Jones spend as little time as possible at home. “Keep him out of the States,” Spielberg warned. “We don’t want to do one shot in this country.” Though this sentiment was later amended to include brief scenes at a New England college and Washington D.C., the message was clear: expeditions were what civilized people did in uncivilized lands. This was the message imparted by the racist cartoon published by the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1937 (see chapter 6), and it is also the message communicated by the over-the-top gross-out banquet in the Indian palace

in *Temple of Doom*: the Maharajah's guests are served writhing baby snake appetizers, eyeball soup, toasted beetles, and monkey brain dessert. The dark-skinned natives with turbans on their heads devour every dish with gusto, as does a British official apparently reconciled to local tastes. Only Jones and his companions decline to follow their lead.

How are we to make sense of all these racially and culturally tinged unpleasanties? Are we now obliged to tar the Indiana Jones film franchise with the damning label of "politically incorrect"? Or is there any way to account for what appears to be a consistent trend of casual racism and ethnic stereotypes? I believe that the historical concept of ethnic and cultural "Western avatars" can go a long ways in explaining—if not always excusing—those aspects of the films that appear most troubling for present-day audiences. As we learned in chapter 3, "Consuming Indiana Jones," ever since the middle of the nineteenth century, popular narratives of exploration, expeditions, and excavations designed for print consumption invariably highlighted white protagonists with whom audiences back home could identify. If they could identify with these protagonists on an ethnic and cultural basis—i.e., skin color, religion, language—then they would prove willing to pay for the privilege of walking vicariously in their shoes. Once this business model proved successful, it formed the basis for endless incarnations of white Anglo-Saxon heroes tramping through exotic lands filled with dark-skinned peoples.

We first encountered this business model with the manufactured *New York Herald* expedition to find the missing missionary David Livingstone in the 1870s. The media catchphrase produced by this publicity stunt, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" is only funny to an audience who recognizes the incongruence of speaking in polite "civilized" terms amid dark-skinned and scantily clad natives. Though Stanley and Livingstone were the first profitable ethnic and cultural avatars of the Western world, they were by no means the last. We saw how anxious Hiram Bingham was in 1911 when he found "Lizarraga 1902" etched into the walls of Machu Picchu, only to be calmed by the discovery that Lizarraga was not white—thus making Bingham the "discoverer" of the "lost

city of the Incas” for his targeted audience back home. And let us not forget Howard Carter’s paradoxical turn of phrase while excavating the tomb of Tutankhamun: “alone, save for my native workmen.” If the goal was to create an adventurous narrative of exploration and discovery by vicarious Western avatars for profitable consumption back home, then the presence of native workmen did not change the fact that the white man was, for all intents and purposes, “alone.”

The job of the Hollywood filmmaker is to entertain. The job of the historian is to educate. These two priorities often conflict with one another, but this need not be the case. The Indiana Jones film franchise is great fun, but it could be even more fun—and age more gracefully—if the facts of history were reflected more prominently in its plot and characters. The growing prominence of formerly marginalized voices in the public sphere has convinced many people of the need to diversify the cast of mostly white protagonists in Hollywood productions. But the lessons of history had already taught us the folly of portraying Western scholars as the undisputed movers and shakers of the archaeological world by the time the Indiana Jones films were said to have taken place. In fact, as early as the 1870s, there were fully trained and competent Ottoman counterparts to the historical Indiana Jones. Arabs, Indians, and Chinese need not only serve as caricatured villains: long before Indy went after the Ark, the Chinese had already sent out their own expeditions to distant lands, in direct competition with Western rivals. The movies need not—and should not—be filled only with white protagonists. There are major legitimate roles for people with different shades of skin color.

An epic story is waiting to be told here, one that would better stand the test of time. But it requires the combined talents of both entertainers and educators. By joining forces, Hollywood could smooth out the warts of the historian (too boring), and historians could smooth out the warts of Hollywood (too lazy). For just as truth is stranger than fiction, Indiana Jones in history is far stranger—and more representative—than the Indiana Jones we have all consumed to date.

And, I dare say, a good deal more fun.