

From the Sea to the Desert: Preserving History in Many Landscapes S. W. Herbert

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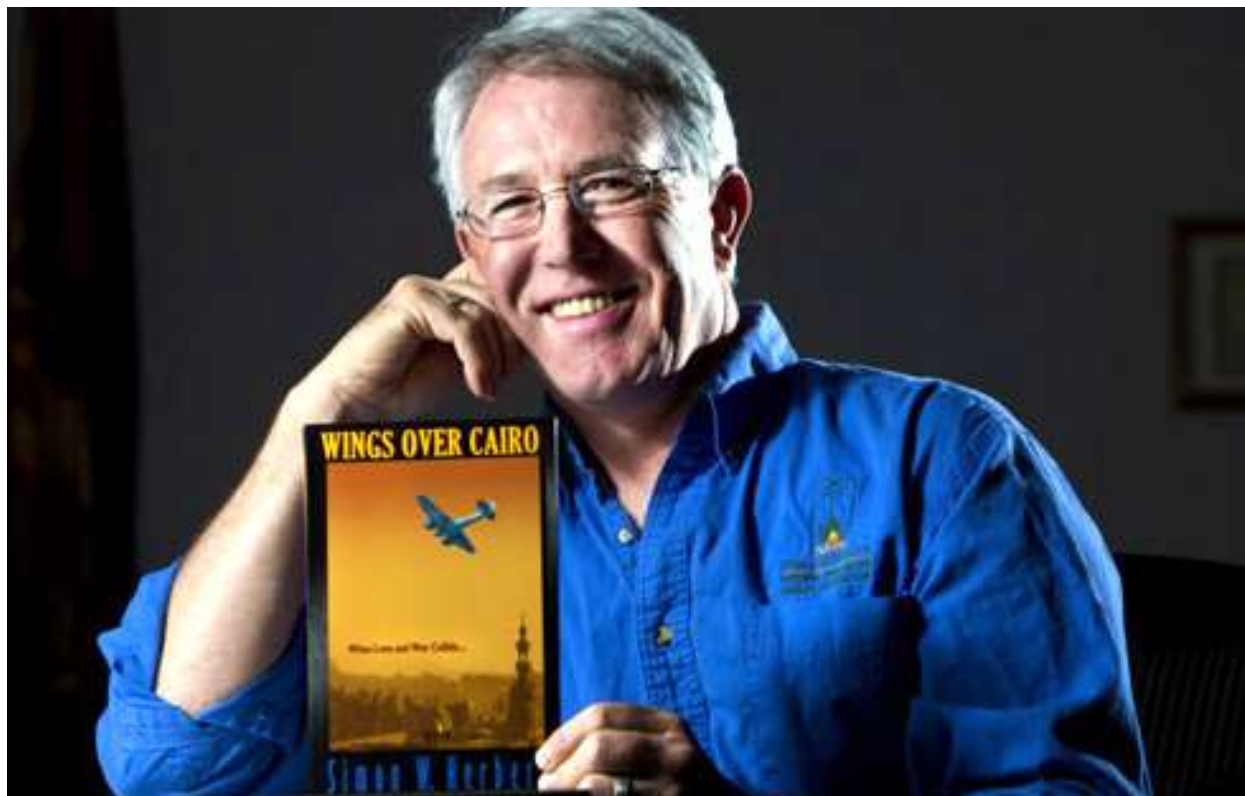


Photo: Simon W. Herbert, author of [Wings Over Cairo](#) (2013)

Born on the [Channel Island of Jersey](#) between England and France, Simon Herbert's journey has taken him far afield from his original homeland. Raised with his older brother, Paul, Simon loved the many aspects of island living. The ocean was a constant presence and he enjoyed the opportunities that proximity to the water presented; boating, boogie boarding and walks on the beach were frequent past times. While in high school he built his own kayak and added surfing the waves to his water sports.

Simon left Jersey to attend [Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication](#) near London, England where he received a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Three-Dimensional Design. His father, a former Royal Air Force navigator and veteran of WW II, exerted a profound influence on Simon in his later years while his mother, a deeply religious woman made sure that as a child, Simon attended church services regularly. Despite his early exposure to Christian teachings, Simon never expected he would someday find himself a student in a theological seminary.

Propelled by an inner restlessness, after graduating from college Simon left England to travel to Canada and then to the United States where he encountered the Creative Community Project which led him to become a member of the Unification Movement. He spent a couple years raising funds to support church projects, but in 1981 he made his way to the [Unification Theological Seminary](#) (UTS). Reflecting on his time at the seminary, Herbert says, "Having arrived at UTS after several years of intense work when there had been little to no personal time, the contemplative environment of Barrytown allowed me an opportunity to savor new ideas, and rediscover old ones in a new light. Being in an area of outstanding natural beauty really enhanced my experience."

"I had many questions about traditional Christian teachings. While growing up, most people I knew just accepted things as they were told; many of the deeper questions I had were more thoroughly addressed at UTS. There were often huge revelations about what many of these Christian teachings meant."

Looking back, Herbert states, "My years at UTS in Barrytown were among the most formative years of my life. Growth is rarely an easy process, and I had much of this to do on many levels. Perhaps my lasting academic lesson from UTS was that religion has been God's relentless tool in His effort to return mankind to our proper relationship with God, our fellow man, and the world we live in. In retrospect, UTS at Barrytown seemed to be a microcosm of this effort."

Having the opportunity to listen to a variety of viewpoints while at the same time being challenged to articulate his own thoughts was excellent training. "My professors at UTS taught me how to think clearly and write succinctly – a skill I was later able to put to good use in my career, particularly when it came to writing in a professional manner."

When Herbert considers his experience at UTS he reflects, “It was far more than just an academic institution; the Barrytown campus was a lively, stimulating, and very special community. I can’t recall a time in my life where I developed more deep and enriching relationships. Even years later, I’m amazed I can sit down with a friend I’ve not seen in years, and pick up the conversation as if there had been no passage of time at all. I find that simply remarkable.”

Ironically, it was not necessarily the religious training and study of theology that most influenced Herbert’s later career path.



Simon Herbert, cowboy dude at Hacienda de la Canoa

“While I was at UTS I had a unique opportunity to switch from being a student to being a staff-person, becoming increasingly involved with building restoration and repair – most notably the 1886 Massena House. I didn’t have a lot of building background, but I had the desire to save and restore buildings. I approached the administration of UTS about creating a plan to make essential repairs to the historic building and it was accepted. We engaged the services of a local architect who helped us draw up plans and contracts. Students did some of the work, but the technologically challenging work was performed by contractors.” The woman who was in later years to become Herbert’s wife was on the team who did work on the Massena House’s roof. “We met on the scaffolding,” laughs Herbert.

When Herbert left UTS to attend graduate school in Philadelphia he did not choose ministry, but followed his inspiration to carve out a career in historic preservation. “I could not have done this without being given the opportunity by the UTS administration to develop a passion for buildings and restoration. One of the things that UTS taught me was that dogged determination is often needed to accomplish a goal, and this lesson has stayed with me to this day.”

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a [Master of Science in Historic Preservation](#), Herbert worked for several architectural firms, gaining valuable experience along the way. He married and had two girls, Hillary and Grace. Hillary died tragically when she was four years old, but Grace, his younger daughter, is now a police officer in Austin, Texas.

In 1994, he began a teaching career at [Belmont College in St. Clairsville, Ohio](#), where he was an associate professor in Building Preservation and Restoration. In 2000 he and his wife parted ways, and he moved to Arkansas where he became the director of an institute teaching historic building trades. Four years later he became reacquainted with the woman on the scaffold at UTS, and moved to [Tucson, Arizona](#). He remarried and took on the challenge of co-parenting his wife’s two sons while working full time, and remodeling their 1958 fixer-upper home.

For the past twelve years, Herbert has been employed for the local county government helping to repair historic buildings. He spends much of his time at the historic [Hacienda de la Canoa](#) (Canoa Ranch) a 4,700 acre remnant of a Spanish land grant located only 50 miles from the border of Mexico. He helps to repair and maintain buildings made of mud adobe, gives tours of the property and oversees a group of volunteers. He enjoys the camaraderie of his co-workers many of whom are of Mexican descent and have fondly given him the nickname of “English cowboy dude.”

“As a boy growing up on a little island in the English Channel, I never imagined I would someday be working on a Western ranch. I had always wanted to visit America when I was young, but never thought in my wildest dreams I would someday be walking around in a cowboy boots and hat in the middle of the Sonoran Desert restoring adobe buildings and mending fences. We didn’t have a TV in our house when I was a kid, so my brother and I would go to the local post office and the lady who lived in the attached house would let us watch “The Lone Ranger”. I think watching that show with cowboys and Indians really raised my curiosity about the American West.”

The accomplishment of which Simon is probably most proud is his book, [Wings Over Cairo](#), which was published in 2013. “I started to write the novel while riding the bus to work here in Tucson, but I actually began the background research for the novel while a student at UTS. I had always been intrigued by the stories my father told me of his experiences as a navigator during WWII. He had served in North Africa and he would share stories of the riveting events and frightening moments he endured. Because these events were so etched in my own mind I wanted to write them down and I began to wonder if I could create a story out of them.”



Simon and his daughter Grace kayaking somewhere in the wilds of Texas

"The novel is a historic fiction with a romantic element, but I used the history of my father's squadron, as well as real historic figures and dates when battles took place; they are all woven together in the story. I had to research a great deal about the North African campaign from all sides - military, geographical and even social. For example, there really is a hotel called the Windsor Hotel in Cairo - it's still there." In the future, Herbert hopes to write a sequel to [Wings over Cairo](#), following the further aeronautical adventures of his main character, Jack McClelland although the setting will shift from Africa to Burma.

In addition to his foray into fiction, Herbert does consulting work including guiding local high school students in restoring a 1915 railroad building, and architectural photography. In October of this year a book on mid-century Tucson architectural designer, [Tom Gist](#), will be released. Herbert was commissioned to take all the contemporary photographs of 16 Tucson homes which include interior and exterior shots. “It was a great experience working with the [Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation](#) and gave me an opportunity to have my work featured in what promises to be a very high quality book.”

"Preservation isn't just about physically restoring buildings although, of course, you see the results, but it isn't just about the buildings. There are real people's lives and history contained within the walls of those buildings; in some way their spirits are embodied in those structures. It definitely gives one a sense of respect for the lives and accomplishments for those who came before."

When asked how he sees the future unfolding, Herbert confesses he is an optimist. "Although our turbulent world is currently a great cause for concern, I am hopeful that eventually we will find the way to a healthier future and experience a calmness after the storm. My theological training from UTS has provided me with a sometimes unconscious force in my life, as if a directional pressure is being exerted on the rudder of my boat. I frequently apply lessons learned at UTS into everyday life situations and have often felt the hand of God guiding me."

To current students of UTS, Herbert advises, "Study hard but don't forget to allow time to develop friendships. Have "time out", and go for a walk or a boat ride." For anyone contemplating enrollment at UTS, he adds, "Becoming a student at UTS can be a life-changing experience. Most importantly, it should meet your goals, but be ready to alter your perspective once there. You just never know what the future holds!"

As to his own future, Simon laughs, "I'm looking forward to a future when I've finished remodeling our kitchen. A year without a functioning kitchen sink isn't much fun. I am hoping to have time to spend with my daughter, do more writing and photography and hopefully downsize into a smaller home near the ocean. I grew up on an island and I miss being by the water. My past is intrinsically linked with the ocean, and no matter how far I've come in life, I will always be connected to where I was born and raised, my family, and those who I have known along the way."

Simon Herbert currently lives in Tucson, AZ with his wife Katherine. When not restoring properties of all kinds, he enjoys kayaking, snorkeling, scuba diving, and creating scale models of WWII aircraft and vehicles.