

Once more into the past

Leakey wants to start a new dig in East Africa that he hopes will rewrite man's history



With the enthusiasm and stubbornness that have marked his career, Louis S. B. Leakey says he can prove that true ancestral man existed seven million years ago.

His findings at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and his son Richard's work at Lake Rudolf have pushed the history of early man back to at least four million years. And Harvard's Bryan Patterson has since dated an East African specimen at 5.5 million years (SN: 2/27/71, p. 141).

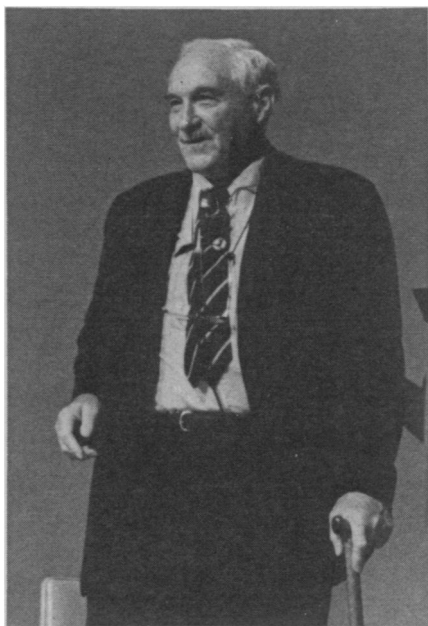
Now Leakey and his youngest son Philip are making plans for an expedition next summer that "we are positive" will bring back the earliest evidence for the origin of man's ancestors. The elder Leakey discovered the seven-million-year-old site, between Nairobi and Lake Rudolf, three years ago and sent Philip in to investigate. Later Leakey *père* went in and brought back what he calls "some very exciting stuff." Already he has 30 good animal specimens (among them a tooth) indicating a well-preserved site that may contain ancestral man.

This is incentive enough for him to organize an expedition. The only reason he has not gone in already is that access to the site, like the Lake Rudolf site, is extremely difficult. The problem is not new to the elder Leakey. He says he would have gone into the Lake Rudolf area in 1931, instead of Olduvai, if he had had the necessary equipment. Now the equipment (airplanes, helicopters and four-wheel-drive vehicles) is available and the only thing holding up the expedition is lack of money to purchase it.

To raise the funds, he has set up the

Leakey Foundation and is presently on a fund-raising lecture tour. Last week, after a two month delay, he spoke in Washington. (He had been hampered earlier by a bad hip, bee stings and a fall from a podium in San Francisco.)

At a well timed juncture in his presentation on the search for man's an-



R. J. Trotter

Louis S. B. Leakey included a prediction of possible doom for the future of an overspecialized society in his talk in Washington last week: "We are using our potential in the wrong direction and if we don't build public opinion to change the direction, to make the world a better place for our children, we will not last another 30 or 40 years."

cestors, Leakey discussed the importance of his family's discoveries and then enthusiastically mentioned his new site. He optimistically hinted that forthcoming discoveries will revolutionize thinking on man's origins.

The optimism, however, is not shared by all anthropologists. Some are skeptical. T. Dale Stewart, a physical anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution, points out that foundations are tight with money these days and says Leakey gets "carried away with his enthusiasm" in trying to pry some of the money loose. The National Geographic Society, for instance, is presently picking up the tab for Richard Leakey's expedition. They would be taking a gamble, says Stewart, to back another expedition on such scant evidence. "It may be that he would produce something," continues Stewart, "but he lets his imagination run away with him. He often rushes in, making wild guesses and then has to come home and say that things didn't pan out as well as expected."

Stewart thinks he knows the site Leakey has in mind. It is in Kenya, near Lake Baringo, about 200 miles south of Lake Rudolf. And "it may be that Leakey will produce something." The whole field of anthropology in this area of study, Stewart stresses, is subjective (based on a few jaws and teeth), and is subject to change with each new discovery. "Leakey has made some of these discoveries in the past and has helped to popularize archaeology," Stewart says. Perhaps Leakey "will settle once and for all the question of whether man was back that far. More power to him." □