

REVIEW

Review of *Wonderful Things a History of Egyptology 2: The Golden Age: 1881–1914*

Wonderful Things a History of Egyptology 2: The Golden Age: 1881–1914, Jason Thompson, The American University in Cairo Press, 2015, h/b 374 pp., ISBN: 9789774166921

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This publication is the second volume of Thompson's survey of the history of Egyptology, the completed series of which is designed to be the first comprehensive English language treatment of the subject as a coherent whole. The volume in question covers a much shorter time frame than the first, which extended over three thousand years from Khaemwaset in the Nineteenth Dynasty to 1881 (Thompson 2015). The period in focus here is from 1881–1914, which indirectly attests to the richness of the (European) archival records and the profundity of extant research covering this era. Many of these works are included within Thompson's thirty page bibliography which, together with the extensive reference notes, are worth the price of the book alone. For neophytes there are also extremely useful excursions into topics ranging across material culture, philology, monuments and historical individuals.

The volume picks up where the last ended, with Mariette's death. Amongst other achievements Mariette (re)founded and became director of the Antiquities Service in Egypt (Reid 2002: 99–103, Thompson 2015: 228–32). This organisation has played a fundamental role in excavation, and in

establishing the laws and regulating foreign excavation in Egypt since its formation and Mariette's successors as head of the Antiquities Service provide the overarching structure of Thompson's second volume. Maspero's tenure forms the basis of Chapter 1, Grébaut Chapters 2 and 3, de Morgan Chapters 4 and 5 and Loret Chapter 6, before Thompson returns to Maspero's second tenure from 1899 to his ultimate resignation in 1914 (Chapters 7–13).

However, as adumbrated in the introduction to the first volume, Thompson's historiographical emphasis is on both the major and minor individuals who 'created Egyptology' (Thompson 2015: 12–13). Therefore, the focus is not on these personalities alone and various threads are skilfully weaved into the narrative. This includes not only the network of private and public institutions that supported and are highly relevant to Egyptological endeavour during this period, but also the extension of the Egyptological timeframe under de Morgan first backwards to prehistory (Chapter 4) and then forwards to Graeco-Roman times (Chapter 5). The latter chapter contains one of the few errors in this book – Hogarth was not with Grenfell and Hunt in their second season, which was their first excavation at Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchus) (Hunt 1927: 115, Hall 1928: 128).

In the second half of the book (Maspero's second tenure) the chronological sequencing is less strictly adhered to and the author begins to disrupt some of the more traditional Egyptological narrative. For example, the rhetoric as to the French control of the Antiquities Service is destabilised, with Thompson pointing out that Cromer and the British were in control of the budgets and it was only when these were increased that the Antiquities Service was reorganised, with Cromer wanting the appointment of English inspectors under Maspero. Thompson also draws the reader's attention to the fact there was no clean break between the artefact collection practices of early and late nineteenth century. He does this through his discussion of the activities of the Cairo Museum saleroom and (European and native) antiquities dealers, pointing out that although private individuals encouraged this trade 'the best customers of all were the museums of western Europe and large-scale collectors' (p. 126). Furthermore, through the example of Insinger (pp. 124–5), he usefully demonstrates how some of the binary classifications (in this case 'dealer') in the standard encyclopaedic reference in the subject *Who Was Who in Egyptology* (Bierbrier 2012) are not necessarily helpful. Other useful digressions include both the Berlin School and its rivals (Chapter 9), and American interest in Egyptology (Chapters 10 and 11). The first eleven pages of Chapter 10 covers the period prior to the volume's 1881 start point and therefore usefully expands the first volume by examining American engagement with Egyptology prior to its institutionalisation in the late nineteenth century. However, several of Breasted's comments towards the close of this chapter – and in the penultimate chapter of this volume – are drawn from secondary sources (his son Charles Breasted's [1943] and Abt's [2012] more recent biographies). This sits in contrast to the rich use of British archival sources such as the Griffith Institute and Egypt Exploration Society throughout the book.

Although the focus of the narrative throughout is on individuals and their

achievements, the book is abutted by discussions of the political situation in Egypt at the start and end of the period (pp. 2–4; pp. 285–291), which helps to ameliorate what could be taken to be a Eurocentric rationale as to the chosen timeframe. This rationale – the subject assumed its defining characteristics during this period remembered as its golden age (p. xiii) – is wrapped by the concluding sentence of the volume. 'Egyptology had come of age' (p. 291). However, it should be remembered that 1881–1914 also spans the period when Egypt was a veiled protectorate of Britain (from 1882–1914), and Egyptians faced considerable obstacles to Egyptological training and career progression (Reid 1985; 2002, Quirke 2010; 2013). In Thompson's defence, Egyptian endeavour (or exclusion) is scattered through the text. This ranges from a discussion of Egyptian Egyptology, including the career of Kamal (pp. 187–192) whose photograph adorns the dustcover, and the exclusion of any Egyptian Egyptologists from the façade of the 'new' Cairo Museum opened in 1902 (p. 128; p. 189), to the role of lesser-known individuals such as Rubi ibn Hamzaoui and Osman Duqmaq in archaeological discoveries (p. 6; p. 142).

However, although Thompson's section on Egyptian Egyptology makes restrictive practices clear, perhaps a few well-placed sentences could have reminded the reader throughout the book as to relevant exclusionary events. For example, although the Congress of Classical Archaeologists being held in Cairo in 1909 did indicate Greco-Roman scholarship in archaeology was firmly established in Egypt (p. 99), as Reid (2002: 167–170) records this 'underlined the salience of Egypt in Western classical discourse' – as only 21 of the 906 registrants were Egyptians, and only one gave a paper. Furthermore, although the French/Anglo tensions and problems in finding a suitable head of the Antiquities Service are mentioned, no remark is made of the exclusion of qualified Egyptian candidates such as Ahmed Najib or Ahmed Kamal, although these two

individuals do appear elsewhere within the volume (e.g. p. 190; p. 192).

Another concern with emphasis lies in the treatment of the extension of the Egyptological timeframe. Both prehistory and the Graeco-Roman period are rich subjects in their own rights, and it is perhaps inexorable that their treatment in a book such as this is cursory. To take one example, the link between Petrie's interpretation of his discoveries at Naqada and his engagement with eugenics is not noted. Surprisingly eugenics is not referred to anywhere in this publication (see for instance Silberman 1999, Sheppard 2010, Challis 2013). This could lead the reader to believe that Egyptology proceeded to develop in an unproblematic way over the period and brings to mind Carruthers's (2015: 2–8) concerns as to cleansed disciplinary histories. I await with interest to see Thompson's treatment in the next volume of German Egyptology leading up to, and immediately after, the Second World War where work such as Raue (2013: 345–376) offers a productive and challenging approach to an ethically difficult period in Egyptology's history.

Moving from aspects of nationalism to gender, it is extremely welcome to see that women do feature in this narrative including Medea Norsa, a papyrologist and collaborator with Vitelli, who, as Thompson (p. 92) points out, does not appear in *Who Was Who in Egyptology* (Bierbrier 2012). Furthermore, Thompson's thoroughly researched treatment extends to other 'minor' characters in Egyptological narrative such as Emma Andrews. In the past, as Sheppard (2016) has reflected, she has suffered from a gendered treatment as Theodore Davies's purported mistress, but left behind extremely valuable diaries covering 1889–1912, currently being digitised (emmabandrews.org).

However, as with any encyclopaedic work there are omissions. Three British examples that spring to mind are Hilda Petrie, Margaret Benson, and May Amherst (Lady William Cecil). Hilda Petrie married Petrie in 1896 and became his formidable organising

force (Drower n.d.). Margaret Benson's name, unlike the other two, does appear in the text in a list of patrons of Newberry (p. 172). However, she is perhaps better noted as currently the earliest widely known example of a woman (of any nationality) to be granted a concession in Egypt in 1895–7 (Peck n.d.), (although further archival research may bring earlier examples to light). May Amherst ran her own excavations from 1901–4 at Qubbet el Hawa and her omission is more curious given Carter's frequent appearances in this book. He arranged her permit and visited her on site, since her work was undertaken when he was inspector of the region (James 1992: 94–97).

However, these are minor criticisms, and Thompson (2015: 12) does discuss the issue of selectivity in the introduction to the first volume of the series. Furthermore, Thompson's meticulous approach, and his aim to produce a coherent (and highly readable) history of Egyptology has to be commended. As such, the book stands as an excellent reference work and the bibliography offers great scope for those who want to expand their knowledge of the subject in other areas. For example, although Thompson (2015: 12) contends that 'the story of Egyptology is the story of the people who created Egyptology', there are other aspects. These include the creation of material Egypt in museums and exhibitions, and the changing nature of reception of the Ancient Egypt by the public and its shifting context. The relevance of the latter, for instance, would be argued by adherents of the Cambridge School of History and Gange (2013), who features in the bibliography, is a good exemplar of this approach taken in one country (Britain) over a similar time period.

I await the third volume, and the volume of illustrations and planned video, with great interest, as I suspect that the compendium will offer a different experience from each viewed as a stand-alone work. Furthermore, the third textual monograph, which is intended to 'comprehend at least a century' (p. xiii) i.e. to at least 2014, will be extremely

noteworthy since this encompasses a period where both the rich archival sources and extant research on which Thompson draws diminish. In extending the history of Egyptology from Khaemwaset into the twenty-first century Thompson will be doing the subject a great service.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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