



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

September 2020 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

“Egyptologists’ Notebooks: How the Modern World Rediscovered Ancient Egypt (And Partly Lost It Again)”

Dr Chris Naunton

At the beginning of September Chris Naunton (<https://chrisnaunton.com/>) gave a talk to us via Zoom about his new book “Egyptologist’s Notebooks” (<https://chrisnaunton.com/egyptologists-notebooks/> which is coming out at the beginning of October). He described his talk as “not quite, but nearly, a shameless plug” for his book – what he wanted to do during the talk was tell us a little bit about some of the characters he explores in the book and the main themes he wanted to draw out.

He said the idea for the book came from discussion a couple of years ago with Ben Hayes at Thames & Hudson publishers – they had previously published a book called “Explorers’ Sketchbooks”, which published bits of said sketchbooks as part of compiling the history of explorers and exploration. And so Hayes wondered if something similar could be done for Egyptology, given the extensive archives that exist from several early figures in the field. Naunton said that he has had a long term interest in the history of Egyptology, partly arising from the long time he spent working at the Egypt Exploration Society in their archives. There a lot of material in those archives that isn’t well known, but that he felt more people would be interested in seeing and learning from than are currently aware that it exists. He said he also feels that there are stories that should be told about how we got from the position two centuries ago where the Western world knew essentially nothing about Egypt other than what a handful of Classical sources said, to the position we’re in now where we can read the texts and have done significant archaeology in Egypt and therefore have a much fuller picture of the Ancient Egyptian culture.

Naunton’s approach to the project was to use the people and their archives as a way to tell the story of the history of Egyptology. But he didn’t want to make it “the definitive history” – there’s too much to cover in the planned length of book, and anyway there is a recent 3 volume AUC press history of Egyptology by Jason Thompson that does that job in a thorough fashion and so he didn’t want to retread that ground. It was also important to both himself and his publishers that it should be a very visual book – even though Thames & Hudson have published a lot of history and archaeology books they are primarily an art book publisher. And so they decided that they should focus on telling the stories that they could illustrate. The previous book on explorers was organised by person, and so they decided for consistency they should organise this one like that too. Naunton also decided he wanted to split the people into thematic groups as well. The order is almost, but not quite, chronological – there is a lot of overlap in the times that these figures were active, and many of them knew each other. He wanted to feature people who were well known, and that potential book buyers would’ve heard of and would be interested in. But he said he also wanted to include some lesser known people and items from lesser known archives – and in that vein he also wanted to include as much unpublished material as possible.

The story Naunton said he wanted to tell was not quite the “usual story” of Egyptology. That usual story tends to be dominated by the idea of individual scholars being the key players – which is not quite untrue, but it means that the focus ends up disproportionately on the men who led expeditions and whose names end up on books and journal articles. But there are other people who played important parts who get missed out of this “usual story” – like junior team members who did more of the work but less of the writing – and these people are better represented in the unpublished archives. He also said he particularly wanted to pay attention to the women and the Egyptians who played such a big role in the doing of the Egyptology but are overlooked in the “usual story”.

The book (and the meat of Naunton’s talk) starts with Athanasius Kircher, who was active in the 1600s and was also the only character in the book not to visit Egypt. He was born in Germany, but moved around a lot as he was a Catholic and this was the time of the Reformation and thus he was persecuted at various times. He was interested in hieroglyphs and made a contribution to the study of the Egyptian language, hence his inclusion in Naunton’s book. As he never went to Egypt his work was dependent on the monuments that weren’t in Egypt – like the obelisks in the Vatican – either ones he saw in person or from (dubious quality) copies. He was spectacularly unsuccessful in the translation of hieroglyphs – Naunton said that Kircher is essentially famous for being wrong! Kircher worked on the Bembine Table of Isis, which is now in the Museo Egizio, Turin – or rather he studied a drawing of it. It’s a fairly standard looking piece with scenes of gods with short inscriptions. Kircher’s inspiration for trying to decode it was the Hermetica, which are Greek texts which are the purported writing of Hermes Trismegistus aka Thoth and had become important in Kircher’s time. So he thought the hieroglyphic texts must be writing this wisdom literature, and assigned symbolic meanings to the hieroglyphs on this basis. Sadly for Kircher even if he’d not been barking up the wrong tree with how he was interpreting the glyphs he still wouldn’t have been able to make sense of the writing on this object. It’s not actually Egyptian, it’s a Roman Egyptianising piece so it looks right on the surface level but the hieroglyphs are just goobledegook rather than writing anything meaningful. Despite this failure of Kircher’s to get anywhere with truly understanding the Egyptian writing system he was still the first scholar to go to great lengths to gather together Egyptian material with the intent of learning about it and from it. So even though he was wrong Naunton said that he considers this the beginnings of Egyptology, and of raising the awareness of and interest in Egyptian objects and culture in the West.

The next character that Naunton discussed was George Sandys who was also active in the 1600s, but a little before Kircher – Sandys is the earliest character in the book and the first to have gone to Egypt. He travelled around the Mediterranean (including to Egypt) beginning in 1610 and returning home in 1615. In 1621 he published an account of his journey called “A Relation of a Journey”. He doesn’t seem to have travelled further south than Memphis, perhaps he got to Saqqara. His descriptions in the book show just how little was known about Egypt at the time, and how much of it was unfamiliar to the people he was writing for. Naunton gave an example of a quote where Sandys is talking about the pyramids at Giza where Sandys expects people to have heard of them but still feels the need to describe what a pyramid actually was because people might not know that. Sandys also climbed to the top of one of the Giza pyramids (probably Khufu’s) just like every visitor of the time (and of a few centuries after, as Lee Young told us in her talk about Lance Thackeray, see <https://writeups.talesfromthetwolands.org/2020/08/07/the-lighter-side-of-egypt-with-the-art-of-lance-thackeray-lee-young/>). He wrote about how impressive the other pyramids he could see from the top would be, if this one he was standing on wasn’t there – so clearly he was looking towards Saqqara and Dashur. The description of the Sphinx in the book is very much of it’s time and also sounds somewhat ludicrous nowadays – all he could see was the head of the Sphinx poking out from the sand and he referred to it both as “an Aethiopian woman” and “an harlot”!

Naunton said that Sandys’s book is a window into how the sites we now take for granted were unknown and exotic to Sandys and his contemporaries. At the time all the information about Egypt that Sandys would’ve had available to him were texts by

classical authors such as Herodotus or Diodorus Siculus. And those were around 2000 years old so it would be difficult for Sandys or other travellers to reconcile what was in the books with what was visible in their day. For instance Sandys was looking for Memphis, which was very important in those texts, but we now know there wasn't much left by the time that Sandys visited – he did find some ruins in a place that he thought might be Memphis but it was so much less impressive than he was expecting. He possibly also visited Saqqara but that name wouldn't have been familiar to him – it's a modern Arabic name so not in his texts, and anyway maybe no-one applied it to that site at the time or maybe no-one told it to Sandys anyway. Whilst in the place that Chris Naunton thinks was Saqqara Sandys makes some reference to tombs being “violated” which perhaps suggests that tombs were open to be visited and their items being taken out to be sold to collectors. Naunton said it's a shame that there are not more pictures and details in Sandys's book as there must've been so much more still there for him to see than there is now.

Jumping forward to the 18th Century Naunton moved on to talk about Richard Pococke, who was an English clergyman. Again he made a record of a journey to Egypt which he published in a delightfully titled book: “A Description of the East and Some Other Countries. VOLUME the First. OBSERVATIONS on EGYPT”. There are several drawings in the book, and although they're not realistic (and tend to look rather classical in style as opposed to Egyptian) they do give a sense of the geography and the antiquities he saw. He got as far south as Thebes, so his drawings are one of the earliest attempts by a Westerner to capture the Theban landscape – including drawings of the Colossi of Memnon, the Valley of the Kings, the Ramasseum and the sheer number of tombs in the Theban cliffs behind.

Frederick Ludvig Norden was a Danish contemporary of Pococke's who sailed up and then back down the Nile. As he went he recorded the names of the villages, and mapped the landmarks he saw. His drawings still aren't particularly accurate but they are better than Pococke's! Naunton showed us Norden's representation of the Giza plateau which is a step further towards being scientific and included a pretty reasonable attempt to map the inner chambers of the Khufu pyramid. He died not long after he returned home, whilst still in his 30s, but his account of his journey was published posthumously and translated into several languages. It became a standard guide to what one might find on a journey to Egypt.

At the end of the 18th Century everything changes with the expedition of Napoleon and his savants. They arrive in 1798, accompanying the army, with the backing of the French government. The expedition is driven by political and colonial forces – the French are intent on taking Egypt over to exploit themselves whilst preventing the English from being the exploiters. The French army faced opposition from the Mamluk army, who ruled Egypt on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. At first they defeated the Mamluks quite easily. So even though they were subsequently defeated at sea by the British (who destroyed the French fleet) there was a couple of years of the French establishing themselves in Cairo whilst still fighting the Mamluks. However the English formed an alliance with the Ottomans and drove the French out in the end. The French were rather more successful in their non-military aim for the expedition, which was to document the country and its monuments both ancient and modern – and this work was published as the *Description de l'Égypte*. The savants also established an academy, newspaper and library in Cairo and these institutions are still there now.

Naunton said that even once the French army was driven out the savants continued to stay in Egypt and work in their institutional outposts of Western culture. The *Description de l'Égypte* became a landmark text for Egyptology, and the standard of drawings and texts was far higher than in previous works about the country. This is also one of the places where Naunton's theme of “Lost Monuments” comes in – this is a snapshot, a record of what the monuments were like at the tail end of the 18th Century and much has changed since then. Some monuments have been restored, or excavated, others have

had parts removed. By and large the savants themselves didn't excavate (or restore) any of the monuments – they were interested in cataloguing what was there.

Various of the savants published their own records separately from the official publication. Naunton told us that Dominique Vivant Denon was the most prominent of these. He captured a number of monuments in a state that wouldn't last much longer, in fact some have vanished entirely. He depicts Luxor Temple with both of its obelisks still in place, the great statues buried up to their necks in the ground and the houses of modern people nestled into the temple. The temple was cleared of modern buildings in the 1870s under the authority of Maspero and 3 or 4 metres of debris were cleared out between the 19th Century floor level and the ancient floor. This would've contained the archaeological remains of the millennia since the temple was built, and now all these objects and all this information is lost because it was just cleared out like rubbish and disposed of. Naunton also gave us some examples of sites that Denon had visited and recorded that are now completely gone – these included a portico at el Ashmunein which was built during the time of Alexander the Great but no longer exists, a temple at Armant (much of which was removed in the 1860s to make way for a sugar cane processing facility), a temple at Antaeopolis which began to be destroyed by the Nile in the 1820s (as the course of the river changed).

During the early 19th Century Western expeditions to Egypt were fuelled by competition between the colonial powers – in particular Britain and France. From 1815 to 1830 this competition was led by Henry Salt for Britain and Bernadino Drovetti for France (despite being Italian himself). Both were building collections of antiquities which they saw as being for the glory of their country, and they saw each other as rivals and as competition. Against this somewhat grubby “patriotic” backdrop several figures visited Egypt, and Naunton told us a bit about a couple of them. First was William John Bankes who visited Egypt in the early 19th Century and made drawings himself, but also recruited other people to do so on his behalf. And to do some digging as well – this included the well-known figure of Belzoni as his employee. Belzoni brought back the obelisk from Philae that now stands in the grounds of Kingston Lacey (Bankes's house). The trip the obelisk made was not entirely smooth sailing – it was dropped in the river when it first left Philae, but thankfully Belzoni managed to recover it and bring it back to England. It plays an important role in the decipherment of hieroglyphs.

Bankes was also particularly interested in discovering the ancient capital of Meroë (which Robert Morkot told us about in July, see <https://writeups.talesfromthetwolands.org/2020/07/13/pyramids-and-elephants-the-kingdom-of-meroe-robert-morkot/>) – and this too was the subject of competition between the British and the French. Bankes had recruited Belfont to try and find it, but the French had at the same time recruited Caillaud for the same job. Both took advantage of an Egyptian military expedition that was travelling to the south anyway, but it was Caillaud who was successful in discovering the city and who made the claim that it was Meroë. Naunton showed us a picture of the graffiti carved into the lintel of one of the temples by Caillaud's assistant (and Caillaud himself left a bigger and more visible piece of graffiti elsewhere).

Of course one of the most famous travellers to Egypt of this period was the Frenchman Jean François Champollion, who is best known for deciphering hieroglyphs. He visited Egypt with a number of artists to draw and start to translate the texts. Their drawings of hieroglyphs tend to be better as they know more of what they are looking at. Nestor L'Hôte was one of the more notable ones of these artists, and Naunton showed us L'Hôte's drawing of a temple at Elephantine (done from earlier records as even by the early 19th Century it had been stripped of the stone).



The Younger Memnon

The next section of Naunton's talk was entitled "The Digging Begins" (rather more sedately called "Archaeology Begins" in the book!). Of course this section needed to feature Giovanni Battista Belzoni – who Naunton had talked about a little earlier on in the talk in connection with collecting standing monuments for Bankes. One of the monuments he's responsible for taking out of Egypt is the statue of Ramesses II that's now in the British Museum (see photo above) which was referred to then as the "Younger Memnon". Belzoni had an enormous impact on the major Egyptological collections of Europe that are in Turin, Paris, London and Florence – many of the large scale monuments in these museums were brought out of Egypt by Belzoni. Another of the large statues in the British Museum that Belzoni discovered is the head and arm of a colossal statue of Amenhotep III – this is all that Belzoni found, but Naunton said that the body has subsequently been discovered. Or least, quite possibly so – the records are vague on the exact locations, but there is a right size statue that was found in a plausible place. At this point there wasn't really a field of archaeology as such, so records of locations of finds do tend to be vague and there were no standardised numbering or naming schemes. For instance at the time Belzoni was working in the Valley of the Kings several other people were working there too and all of them used different numbering schemes for the known tombs. There wasn't a standardised system until the adoption of John Gardner Wilkinson's numbering system.

The French counterpart of Belzoni was Jean-Jacque Rifaud. He left a record of his adventures and travels, and from his archives we have documentation of several things that haven't survived including ancient Crocodilopolis (later Arsinoë, and even later called Kom Medinet el-Fares). There are several charming drawings in Rifaud's book, and Naunton showed us some of these – however his drawings of standing monuments rather let him down as they aren't very good (and the general standard was getting higher so the lack of accuracy stands out in a way it wouldn't have in earlier times).

Robert Hay was a 19th Century British man, whose archive was the first one that Naunton looked at while preparing this book. Hay undertook two major expeditions to Egypt – he was independently wealthy and recruited some of the best artists in Egypt at this time. He aimed to produce a comprehensive survey of the Egyptian sites but he failed to publish it. The British Library holds his archive, which includes more than 60 folios of drawings (each folio has many drawings, some contain a hundred). Naunton said he really wanted to publish more of Hay's drawings, but the scope of the book meant he was restricted on space and so only a few would fit. But there is a PhD student called Gemma Renshaw who is working on Hay's archive, and will hopefully publish more of it. As with so many of these archives and publications Hay's archives and drawings show us things that aren't there any more.

James Burton was a contemporary of Robert Hays, but Naunton said he was more of a dilettante. He failed in a series of jobs in Britain before deciding to go travelling – he befriended Wilkinson and went travelling with him, and subsequently got some sort of role in the Egyptian government that let him travel. He left behind a huge number of unpublished drawings, including a plan of an “excavation of a monument off the coast of Alexandria”. The monument in question is another one that's been completely lost (and Naunton promised that he's writing more about it on his website soon).

By the mid-19th Century the study of Ancient Egypt was beginning to develop into a science – this is the time when Joseph Hekekyan was working. He was primarily a geologist working for the Egyptian government taking core samples. His observations and documentation is much more scientific than his contemporaries, and his maps and section drawings are ahead of their time. He wasn't just looking at geology, he was also using the archaeology to try and date the sediments. Naunton showed us a drawing that Hekekyan had made of the excavation of a statue (which is now in the entrance of the GEM) that is much more scientific than previous excavation documentation was.

As Naunton had said at the beginning one of his guiding principles when putting together this book was that he didn't want to fall back on the “usual story” – so he didn't just want to write about the usual dig directors but instead he wanted to include travellers and writers, and to include more women. Of course one of the most famous women involved in the development of Egyptology is a part of the “usual story” but she couldn't be left out of this book either – Amelia Edwards. She was a traveller, a travel writer and a self-trained Egyptologist, and responsible for raising awareness of Ancient Egypt among the general public. Naunton did, however, manage to get permission to publish some less well known sketches of hers, so there is new information even here.

Another woman who travelled to Egypt at the same time as Amelia Edwards was Marianne Brocklehurst. She became the honorary secretary of the Egypt Exploration Fund for the North of England after Amelia Edwards founded the EEF. Brocklehurst was also a travel writer, and made several trips to Egypt. She happened to be on site to see the discovery of the Deir el Bahri cache of 21st Dynasty priests mummies. This excavation is not well documented, so Brocklehurst's sketch of what she saw is a rare piece of information about this find. Naunton also told us about her acquisition of a “mummy” (actually including the cartonnage coffin, now in the Macclesfield Museum) – she wrote about how to get round the rules about not taking antiquities out of Egypt at the time she and some associates smuggled it out. Not exactly a shining light of honesty!

Naunton discusses both these women in a Radio 3 documentary that's currently (as of September 2020) available on iplayer called The Victorian Queens of Ancient Egypt (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002c95>).

Of course the dig directors we usually hear about do also have to feature and at this point in his talk Naunton touched on a few of these in brief – including Ernesto Schiaparelli, George Andrew Reisner, Howard Carter and John Pendlebury. For the John Pendlebury section of the book he said he also managed to work in references to Hilda Pendlebury (and other teams members) whose work was also important at Amarna even if John Pendlebury gets all the credit.

The last character in the book is Walter Bryan Emery, who was still working in 1971 – his career began in 1922 and he knew Howard Carter. Emery provides a connection between modern times and the 19th Century, and is the only person in the book that anyone still alive would remember.

Wrapping up his talk Naunton said that one of the key ways he wanted the book to not fall into line with the “usual story” was that he wanted to acknowledge that what we know about Egyptology and how we learnt it goes hand in hand with colonialism and conflict between the English and the French. This has had a lot of unfortunate consequences, and much was done that we can regret. Even beyond the time of Egypt's independence Egyptology was part of the soft power efforts of the Western powers, and it's been a tool of keeping control in Egypt once the control was not overt. Naunton said he sees this as something that should be acknowledged, so that things can be different going forward – like letting Egyptians do their own archaeology (even now the teams who work in Egypt tend to be nationally organised and non-Egyptian). So in the book are examples of permits given by the Egyptian government to these foreigners who were then taking not just physical items away but also the knowledge (into foreign languages the Egyptians didn't necessarily read and published in publications that weren't readily available). A lot of discussion of this sort of issue plays out outside Egyptology, but he feels it should be brought back into the subject as something to be discussed. He put a piece up on his website about this issue (<https://chrisnaunton.com/2020/07/23/decolonising-egyptology-the-dirty-little-secret/>) but he sees it as a subtle undercurrent in the book.

And Naunton finished up his talk by telling us about an Egyptian who he did put in the book – he had wanted to include more Egyptians but was hampered by the fact that not many Egyptians have available archives. But the archive of Hassan Effendi Hosni was recently discovered in a locked room in the Seti I temple at Abydos – it's an archive of paper documents and letters. It's a huge collection and is currently being analysed and published by Abydos Archive (<https://abydosarchive.org/>), and thanks to them Naunton was able to publish some items in his book. He hopes that as this archive is investigated it will bring a different and more Egyptian perspective to the history of Egyptology.

This was a fascinating trip through some well known and lesser known figures of the history of Egyptology, some of whom were previously completely unknown to me. It was also interesting to hear about the ideas behind the book, and the constraints on Naunton's choices of material and characters to include. A little glimpse behind the scenes!