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Book review:

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linders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology

Margaret S. Drower

Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985,
1995. 500 pages. \$40.00 cloth (ISBN 0-299-14620-0),
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Review by

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Margaret Drower's fascinating biography tells the story of the "father of modern Egyptology," Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853-1942). It is comprehensive, well-documented and illustrated throughout, and in general, an excellent read. M. Drower's painstaking research brings us into close contact, not only with the ingenious work of a pioneer in ancient Near Eastern studies, but with Flinders Petrie the man, an adventurous and eccentric sort.

One of the more pleasurable aspects of this book is the steady supply of interesting anecdotes that acquaint the reader with Petrie's idiosyncracies. For example, we learn that Petrie did not celebrate Christmas, since the Christian Brotherhood to which his family belonged felt it was ungrounded in Scripture. In addition, he was a man obsessed with measurements; one easily pictures him plumb-line in hand, fearlessly lowering himself along tattered twine into uncharted burial shafts in hopes of discovery. Perhaps one of the most intriguing anecdotes is that of Petrie's request that upon his death his head be removed so that future scientists might study his brain. With such information, Drower sheds light on the less academic experiences that accompany Petrie's creative genius.

One cannot help but be impressed with Petrie's incredible breadth and versatility. Even as a child of seven years old, though disinterested



in languages (especially Latin), he absorbed himself in the study of chemicals, minerals, and fossils. He would spend long hours studying and making "deep arithmetical calculations" in order to construct tables of specific gravity, specific heat, atomic weights, and atomic values (p. 17). The son of inventor William Petrie, also a pyramidologist and fundamentalist preacher, Flinders Petrie received little formal training due to constant bouts with illness and the vagaries of his father's ad hoc positions which kept the family on the move. Yet, this never stunted Petrie's intellectual imagination or development. He was eager to learn. Few children of fifteen, for example, acquire a love and talent for Euclidian geometry. As Petrie's memoirs recall:

(I) feasted on a book a day with full delight, skipping all the propositions which were already axiomatic to me, and satisfied if I could visualize the reality of those demonstrations which were not self-evident (p. 19).

Petrie's preference for the natural sciences and mathematics profoundly shaped his later life as an archaeologist and surveyor. Though most readers identify Petrie with Egypt (rightly so, since he dug at some sixty sites and produced over a hundred books on the subject), his interests and influence covered a much greater geographical area. For example, Petrie surveyed Stonehenge from 1870-1880, and periodically from 1890 to 1934 he excavated several sites in Palestine. In fact, it was during his work in Palestine that he invented two principles of archaeology for which he is best remembered, ceramic typology, and stratigraphy.

Like the eye of Horus, Petrie's powers of observation and scrutiny extended beyond the ordinary ken. His talents were not limited to numbers and excavations. For example, Petrie also was adept with music. One time, after hearing an antiphonal chant at the Coptic Church in Giza, Petrie was inspired to send his long-time friend Flaxman Spurell, "the musical notation of a wailing chant he had heard at a funeral and a bugle song played for marching soldiers... (p. 61)" as well as the songs of working children. To demonstrate the enormous influence of Petrie's ideas, Drower tells us that Petrie suggested to the London authorities that "all omnibuses and streets should be numbered, and a map issued for public use..." (p. 428), a suggestion that later was put into practice. Later in his life, we also discover, Petrie enjoyed writing several works of fiction (p. 421). Such is a testament to the man's versatility and penchant for experimentation.

Drower's treatment is evenhanded, and she frequently points out



that his eccentricity was not bereft of problems. For example, Petrie paid little attention to advances in archaeology made by other archaeologists (pp. 215-216). Such self-absorption in his own work, while admirable as conviction, sometimes lead to mistakes and misunderstandings of the evidence. He has been accused of rushing too quickly to conclusions, of inadequate presentation, poorly drawn plates, inaccurate references; not everything he found or bought during a season was illustrated. Not everything illustrated was described (p. 432).

Despite his human failings, of which he certainly was cognizant, Drower's research demonstrates that Petrie was an inventive visionary. As an outspoken advocate for the preservation of monuments, Petrie suggested that the destruction of national treasures could be avoided through international effort. As he wrote:

It is sickening to see the rate at which everything is being destroyed, and the little regard paid to its preservation; if allotments were made all over the hill to the different European Government museums, with free leave to clear and take all they liked, and power to preserve it, something more satisfactory might be done. Anything would be better than leaving things to be destroyed wholesale; better spoil half in preserving the other half, than leave the whole to be smashed (p. 43).

At the same time, "he was condemnatory of those, like Wallis Budge, who boasted that they had smuggled out of the country what they would not have been permitted to take legally" (p. 64), as well as Sir Gaston Maspero and M. Edouard Naville, whose cultural arrogance allowed them to leave the pyramid at el Kula in the form of "barbarously mangled remains" (p. 112); a critical word which today deserves repeating.

In the end, however, it is Petrie the devoted explorer to whom one is drawn in this book, to the man who spent two winters dwelling in a rock tomb at Giza in the name of Egyptology. Few scholars today have the *Sitzfleisch* to carry on comparable work.

I have little to offer by way of criticism regarding this book. Given the tome's exhaustive nature, however, it is somewhat surprising to find only a select bibliography of Petrie's work following the main text. Although Eric Uphill's bibliography of Petrie is available in the 1972 edition of the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, providing an exhaustive bibliography would have made Drower's work definitive. This is a minor matter, however, and does not measure against the numerous positive aspects of this tome. One only can hope that Drower, or others



with equal flair and talent, will attend to penning biographies on other ancient Near Eastern luminaries as well. Some names that come to mind include Sir Alan Gardiner, Thorkild Jacobsen, Samuel Noah Kramer, and Cyrus H. Gordon, to name but a few.

In short, this is a model biography; one that I heartily recommend for scholars, archaeologists, and historians of the ancient Near East. It is to Drower's credit that she has introduced us to so complete a picture of the legend Sir William Flynders Petrie that we are lost in the book and captivated by the man.

