REMINISCENCES OF A 'PETRIE PUP'

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Who is, or rather who *was* a 'Petrie Pup', for it is an almost extinct breed. It was a term applied by the hierarchy in the early part of this century to those people selected by Flinders Petrie (Fig. 1) to act as his assistants in the field. By present day standards they were a miscellaneous lot, culled from different professions having aptitudes and skills in no way connected with Egyptology. Indeed academic knowledge was a definite bar to employment with this great pioneer, who preferred people who came to him without preconceived ideas or training.

The main exception to this rule was made in favour of those who had joined Dr Margaret A. Murray's evening classes in elementary hieroglyphs. She was the inspiration of the Department of Egyptology during the long winters when the Petries were in the field. Her sharp eye soon divided the sheep from the goats and many distinguished men started in this way.

When, fresh from school, I took on a temporary job as Mrs Petrie's secretary. Guy Brunton was the Professor's chief assistant, ably seconded by his wife Winifred, a talented artist, whose meticulous drawings of the finds are unparalleled to this day. The year was 1922, which saw the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb, and even I as a dogsbody shared in the excitement and acquired some reflected, but undeserved glory, among my friends. After some five years of dull and repetitive work appealing for funds and writing receipts for the meagre guineas on which the expedition survived, the opportunity came in 1927 to join the team in the field.

It was a time of change for Petrie too for he had decided to leave Egypt and resume work 'over the border' in Palestine, as it then was, where he had excavated for six brief but rewarding weeks in 1890.

Fig. 1. Flinders Petrie (taken by Olga Tufnell about 1930)

Fig. 2. Uahka's Tomb at Qau

In that short time he set up an outline of a stratigraphic approach to the chronology of a site through the pottery found in the section, conveniently revealed for him through the action of the flood waters.

But before he took that step, I was fortunate enough to be included in a small party sent to copy tomb reliefs near Qau, south of Assiut. No one could have had a more idyllic introduction to Egypt. Five of us, Commander and Mrs Risdon, Miss Myrtle Broome, Gerald Lankester Harding and I lived in a palatial tomb, high on the cliffs overlooking the silver ribbon of the Nile. We each had a subsidiary tomb below the great hall which led to the burial place of Prince Uahka (Fig. 2), and two incidents of that time stand out in my memory. One evening we explored his tomb chamber, reached through a sloping shaft cut in the rock. As we slid down, feet foremost, myriads of bats flew up, beating us with their wings in the confined space as they fled up in panic at the intrusion — an unpleasant experience, amply rewarded in the end by the sight of the chamber itself, the ceiling with gold stars on a blue ground, apparently as fresh as the day it was painted.

On another occasion we were walking on the high desert, when a shadow was cast on the land, and we looked up to see that an eclipse was taking place. The villagers below saw it too, and an amazed hush was followed by a fuss and clamour as every drum and basin was beaten and every dog barked in the effort to ward off a total eclipse which, in village lore, would herald the end of the world. Gradually the danger passed and the valley collectively breathed a sigh of relief as people returned to their evening occupations.

All too soon it was time to leave our comfortable tomb, and take the train, after a few days of conventional sightseeing, for the Suez Canal ferry and Palestine.

At that time, a branch of the Orient Express terminated on the east bank of the Canal; we took train there and were deposited in the dark at Gaza station, picking our way across railway lines and into the sleepy town, and towards what was to prove to be a new style of life.

About forty miles south of Gaza we finally reached our goal, one of a string of ancient mounds, which had never been excavated before, along the course of the Wadi Ghuzzeh. There

Fig. 3. Staff at attention, Tell Fara (Left to right: O. H. Myers, J. L. Starkey, O. Tufnell, G. L. Harding)

we joined James Leslie Starkey, our leader for that year, his wife, Madge, and four Egyptian workmen from Quft, a village in Egypt which had cornered the market in the supply of diggers for Petrie, and still considers itself paramount in that respect. Our camp house at Tell Fara was already far advanced on the usual Petrie model, a row of huts within a low courtyard. When we arrived the wadi was in flood, the torrent tearing down blindly until it hit the base of the mound, which deflected it from its natural course to the sea — a grand sight, but a pitiful loss of water in a parched and barren land. At other times, the dry water-course formed a high road for traders on their way to Egypt, then an open market for the sale of camels, grain and citrus fruit.

Fig. 4. Workforce at Fara

Field staff in 1927–28 consisted of O. H. Myers, later to work for Robert Mond at Armant, J. L. Starkey who eventually founded the Wellcome-Marston Research Expedition to the Near East, myself also involved in those campaigns, and Gerald Lankester Harding, who finally became Director of Antiquities in the newly-formed Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Fig. 3). We had been warned that we would not get the Bedu, quite unused to regular employment, to work efficiently and regularly, but how wrong our critics were! Of course there were problems at first but gradually the more hopeful workers built up into a trustworthy force (Fig. 4). With only four

Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.

Fig. 7.

Fig. 8. Mother and child from Qubeibeh

Figs. 5–7: Local workers (taken by Ralph Richmond Brown)

assistants on duty, you can imagine that our tasks were many and varied. One or other of the men took it in turns to whistle on the work at sunrise, less welcome than the midday break to all concerned, and the evening whistle when the whole workforce streamed off to feed around the camp fires. Energies were soon revived, and many an evening was spent in the traditional fantasia of communal song and dance.

At Tell Jemmeh, Tell Fara and for two seasons at Tell Ajjul, Starkey and Harding were the backbone of Petrie's expeditions, though when he was there, the 'Basha' was in overall command, backed by the 'Mudir' and the 'Wakil'. Many others joined the party through the years, too numerous to mention here. Among them, one figure stands out for he seemed so frail and alien to the scene. How Ralph Richmond Brown passed Petrie's unorthodox test for aspiring applicants, I do not know. At lunch at the nearby Express Dairy, the Professor observed their choice of food: a bun and a glass of milk scored high, and a meal of meat and two veg, scored low, and the test was completed by the candidate following his host at speed up eighty steps to the department. If he arrived breathless, he was deemed to have failed the test. In the event, Richmond Brown proved himself tough and resourceful in times of crisis, and he trained himself to be a superb photographer. The portraits of some of our local workers included here are among the most sensitive examples of his skill (Figs. 5–8).

Starkey's forays down the Wadi Ghuzzeh (now Wadi Besor), led him to Tell Ajjul, an inconspicuous mound shrouded in sand close to the estuary. With his phenomenal intuition Starkey realized its importance and soon persuaded the Professor that the site should be excavated. During several seasons, Petrie and his associates found treasure rich enough to compare with the hoards from Troy, Ras Shamra and Enkomi. Discovery of gold has hazards as well as rewards; throughout his career Petrie maintained a policy recompensing all workers — men, boys and girls — with the value of the object according to the price of gold in the latest issue of the *Times* to have reached camp.

It is just fifty years since the Wellcome-Marston Archaeological Research Expedition was founded to excavate a large mound halfway between Jerusalem and Gaza, under the leadership of James Leslie Starkey. I do not intend to talk about our triumphs and the ultimate tragedy at Tell Duweir when Starkey was murdered in 1938 after six successful seasons. When I revisited Lachish in 1972, just a decade ago, the barren slopes were clothed with spruce and fir already well-grown, motor roads encircled the mound and the fellah village we knew on an adjoining spur had disappeared without trace. How much can happen in one lifetime!

Another point should be made concerning changes which have taken place within my knowledge. When we first set up a clinic for our workers and their families they came willingly and so did villagers for miles around. But ask them to go to Gaza or Hebron to the nearest hospital and, in their view, it was tantamount to a death sentence, for the good reason that they did not go on their own until too late and when all local remedies had failed. Weird and wonderful some of them were, and drastic too, but many were based on sound principles and effected cures.

As time went on, some confidence was built up in western methods. Finally we had no difficulty in persuading those who needed expert treatment to trust themselves to western hands. The worst problem was eye disease, which afflicted about 98% of the population through reluctance to keep children clean and free from flies for fear of arousing the envy of the jinns. Patients at our eye clinic came to appreciate the value of cleanliness, and simple treatment was carried on during the summer months, under the auspices of a local girl.

Through the years ditties were composed to commemorate each member of the party, brilliantly set to music by Gerald Harding. The lyrics were often too personal to stand the test of

time, but as a flavour of the somewhat facetious tone, I end with the camp chorus to be sung by all:

Not for the greed of gold,
Nor for the hope of fame,
Not for a lasting heritage,
Nor for a far-flung name.
Rather for making history,
And for some lore of old,
That is our aim and object,
Not for the greed of gold.

Note: Other photographs may be found in Francis James's article, 'Petrie in the Wadi Ghazzeh and at Gaza: Harris Colt's 'Candid Camera', *PEQ*, 111 (1979), 75–77.