

Sir Gardner Wilkinson and His Circle, by Jason Thompson. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1992. \$29.95 (cloth).

by

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In the early 19th century there were no “archaeologists” as we use the term today, although antiquarians studied the relics of the past, mainly of the classical world but occasionally also Egypt and other distant, exotic lands, and dilettantes, men of wealth and taste, collected antiquities. Gardner Wilkinson, the subject of this excellent biography, considered himself neither, but rather a gentleman traveler and writer. He became interested in Egypt only by accident. Leaving Oxford in 1819 before completing a degree, he began a Grand Tour, the long-standing tradition of travel on the Continent by which an English gentleman “completed” his education. Wilkinson’s tour included Paris, Strasbourg, Geneva, Turin, and Rome, where he met Sir William Gell, a scholar with whom he struck up an instant friendship. Wilkinson spent half a year with him, learning about Roman antiquities, ancient Egypt and its hieroglyphs (as far as then known), and much else.

Arriving in Egypt in 1821, he immediately began studying the language and copying inscriptions and murals. “These copies are probably his most enduring Egyptological accomplishment for, besides being minor works of art, they are often the best and sometimes the only surviving evidence for objects that have since been damaged or destroyed” (p. 41). Soon, also, he and a friend explored the Eastern Desert (their caravan needed 80 camels), and later he began his visits to virtually every known Egyptian ruin, traveling comfortably in his boat on the Nile with servants and a female companion purchased in the slave market. In spite of such comforts, disease and local hostility were occasional hazards. He stayed in Egypt for twelve years, making immense contributions to knowledge and filling endless notebooks and sketchbooks with accurate, detailed information.

Wilkinson and a few other English explorer-scholars, including the architect Frederick Catherwood, who later turned his attention to Central America, not only added greatly to knowledge of Egypt’s past but were an advance guard of British imperialism, insisting on British rights abroad and developing the skills for successful travel—including wearing the disguise of Turkish clothing, learning the necessary languages, and employing the appropriate retinue of servants.

As Wilkinson’s Egyptian researches continued he became a participant in the international efforts to solve the mystery of the hieroglyphs, hampered for many years by the misconception that they were ideographic rather than phonetic. In the end, however, it was Champollion who solved the mystery. Wilkinson became increasingly impressed by the tomb paintings that recorded so much of ancient Egyptian life. He made exquisite watercolor copies of thousands of them and in 1837 published his most important and enduring work, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, first in three volumes and later in six. It was an important literary innovation, not the personal travel book already so familiar, but a systematic “ethnography” of ancient Egypt, based on extended first-hand study in the field of the surviving evidence. For half a century it was the major source of information on ancient Egypt for a fascinated English public.

In 1839 (at the age of 41) he was knighted, in recognition of his accomplishments, including his *Topography of Thebes and General View of Egypt* (1835) and several shorter works. But the potential of his extensive research was never realized, as he constantly turned to new interests rather than continuing what he had begun. “As a man of leisure and an amateur scholar of his day, it was natural to turn to other topics to pass his time and bring him into contact with other likeminded gentlemen” (p. 168). For example, after publishing his *Manners and Customs*... he turned to a study of the origin of the pointed arch. He also collected seashells and carefully recorded them in three volumes of notes and sketches. Only a small fraction of the archaeological, geographical, or other information in his notebooks was ever published. Nevertheless, Wilkinson and his colleagues “had gone to Egypt, examined the ground, and recorded observations in situ” (p. 200). Scholars of the next generation preferred to work at home in their libraries—a failing that Sir Flinders Petrie would inveigh against at the end of the century when he was laying the foundations of modern Egyptology.

Excavation in Egypt in Wilkinson’s day was more often for profit than knowledge. The English and French consuls in Cairo were deadly rivals in their pursuit of antiquities and one observer wrote that the Nile was “a field for plunder; fortunes were made by digging, not gold, but antiques” and another said “The whole of ancient Thebes is the private property of the English and French consuls” (p. 25). To their credit, Wilkinson and his colleagues dug little, made a point of never harming any monument, and recorded with a thoroughness that left a valuable heritage to future scholars.

After publication in 1850 of *Architecture of the Ancient Egyptians* Wilkinson dropped out of the mainstream of Egyptology, collecting Greek vases, moving to a home in southern Wales, and at the age of 59 marrying a neighbor 25 years his junior, whose companionship he enjoyed for the remaining two decades of his life. He remained active in “retirement,” however, advising the British Museum on purchases, helping defend the nearby town’s medieval gates from destruction, studying Celtic antiquities, learning to play the violin, and taking up woodcarving. He remained a true Victorian gentleman in the variety of his interests and skills.

Although largely forgotten in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Egyptology became the field of professionals rather than amateurs, Wilkinson’s contributions were substantial, coming at a time when knowledge of ancient Egypt was slight and too often based on travellers’ superficial recollections. Fortunately, most his enormous collection of notebooks has survived and is now housed

in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. This biography, besides being informative and enjoyable, will, it is to be hoped, inspire some of today's scholars to examine, analyze, and publish important parts of this record.

Thompson's fine biography of Gardner Wilkinson has a dual value—bringing attention to the largely forgotten life and accomplishments of a pioneer in Egyptian studies and casting a vivid light on the aims and practices of early nineteenth century scholars, as they moved from antiquarianism to archaeology.

"Archaeology and Marxism", by Randall H. McGuire. In *Archaeological Method and Theory*, Volume 5, edited by Michael B. Schiffer, pp. 101-157. Tucson, University of Arizona Press. \$40.00 (Cloth).

by

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Randy McGuire's article in Michael Schiffer's latest compilation is a well-placed contribution to the growing body of literature that challenges the hegemonic discourse on the history of American Archaeology dominated by Willey and Sabloff (1974, 1980, 1993). With this article and his earlier book, McGuire (1992) joins the ranks of the historians of the discipline who recognize that there are rich traditions within archaeology that are ignored or dismissed by this dominant discourse (e.g., Levine 1991, 1993; Patterson 1986; Trigger 1989, 1993). McGuire is an unapologetic marxist (I am following McGuire's lead by de-capitalizing "marxist") and here provides a concise summation of the history of the relationship between marxist thought and the theory and practice of archaeology in the New World.

This chapter is basically a shortened version of the third chapter of McGuire's *A Marxist Archaeology*, which concentrates on the history of marxist thought in archaeology (NB: What appears to be a typo in McGuire's second endnote identifies this article as an updated version of chapter 2 of McGuire 1992. That chapter concerns the development of marxist theory outside of archaeology; chapter 3, on the other hand, resembles this article quite distinctly). By placing a condensed version of his marxist history in Schiffer's volume, McGuire is reaching a larger audience than he could if he relied on sales of his larger book alone, which, unfortunately, is discouragingly expensive (\$85.00 list price, Academic Press). By placing the article in the well-respected Schiffer series with a companion piece by Bruce Trigger (see below), McGuire has taken a step toward legitimizing alternative histories, which are all too often marginalized.

To his credit, McGuire begins his chapter with a discussion of the relationship between marxist thought and archaeological practice in Latin America. The linguistic divide between Latin American and Anglo-American archaeology has served to quarantine some of the more radical marxist theory from the canon of Anglo-American archaeological literature (e.g. Choy 1960, Tabio and Rey 1966). McGuire does the Anglo community a service by discussing the contributions made by Latin American archaeologists. He gives us an indication of why this linguistic rift may have been theoretically accentuated by suggesting that many Latin American archaeologists became alienated from the politically neutral science of the processual archaeology of the 1960's and 1970's. To Latin Americans, McGuire argues, the search for universal laws and generalized changes in history was perceived as an imperialist agenda, which did not articulate with Latin America's concern with its own history. McGuire relates that this growing alienation was in part responsible for the stricter permitting requirements in Mexico in recent years.

In his consideration of marxism within Anglo-American archaeology, McGuire explicitly equates the development of marxist archaeology in Great Britain with V. Gordon Childe. He parallels the development of Childe's materialism and multilineal evolution with similar developments in the United States, notably Leslie White's social evolutionary theory and Julian Steward's cultural ecology. McGuire suggests that the materialism inherent in Steward's thought provided a shield under which the radical anthropologists of the 1950's and early 1960's (e.g., Diamond, Fried, Mintz, Service, Wolf) could develop a materialist research strategy without the constant fear of McCarthy inspired red-baiting. McGuire concludes his discussion of Anglo-American archaeology with a brief analysis of the contributions of alternative archaeologies, including the so-called "post-processual" archaeologies and their relationship to marxism. He is right to point out that the post-processual project, although inspired in part by structural marxist critical theory, was born out of disillusion with the dogmatic approaches championed by some processualists, structuralists and marxists alike. He further suggests that much of current marxist scholarship in the contemporary U.S. is part of a larger tradition of anthropological political economy. He is certainly correct when he suggests that the work of Art Keene, Jim Moore and Bob Paynter reflect this tradition. He is on less certain ground when he attributes the development of feminist archaeology to the same tradition. While the contributions of some feminist scholars like Joan Gero might be attributed to anthropological political economy, the relationship of the ever-growing body of feminist literature to marxist political economic traditions is a matter of some debate. Even Gero's work might be better attributed to the deconstructionist influence of Martin Wobst, who was simultaneously the dissertation advisor of Gero, Moore and Paynter and a colleague of Keene at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. McGuire rightfully admits that one of the goals of the feminist critique is to confront the assumptions of hegemonic theories and traditions including marxism itself.

In the conclusion of his chapter, McGuire explores the tension between feminism and marxism more thoroughly. While he understands that both traditions seek to understand social inequality, he quite unintentionally essentializes feminist archaeology by stating: