
BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology*

Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology, Volume 1: From Antiquity to 1881,
by Jason Thompson, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 352 pages, \$39.95,
2015, ISBN: 9789774165993

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If you are a regular reader of this journal, you know that there are a number of books about the history of archaeology. They examine the histories of processes, time periods, disciplines, field sites, geographic locations, institutions, archaeologists' lives, and more. There are also numerous dictionaries, encyclopedias, and, of course, the *Who Was Who in Egyptology* (now in its 4th edition). So, why is there another history of an archaeological discipline—especially of Egyptology? As Jason Thompson argues in the introduction to *Wonderful Things*, there are so many facets in this particular discipline that there have been few attempts at putting all of them together into a coherent, presentable, historical narrative. *Wonderful Things* is the first in a multiple-volume work—how many volumes, Thompson does not reveal—that details the interesting, dynamic, sometimes-mysterious, sometimes-tinge-inducing story of the development of Egyptology, the study of the history, culture, language, and people of ancient Egypt, from antiquity (Greece and Rome) to 1881 (the death of Auguste Mariette). Thompson says that the purpose of the book is “to explore the consequences of that unflagging interest [in Egypt], examine why the subject of ancient Egypt never grows stale, and show how that inexhaustible mine has been exploited in ways that resulted in the science of Egyptology” (1–2). He fulfills this purpose.

The first volume is organized chronologically, which may be an obvious choice for this kind of project, and each chapter takes the reader a step further along the discipline's timeline. Throughout, Thompson weaves together a number of different threads, such as the institutionalization of the discipline, the founding of museums, the political climate of Egypt, the decipherment of hieroglyphics, and the development of Egyptomania in the west, among others. In order to accomplish this mammoth task, Thompson focuses on the lives and careers of the major, and some minor, players in Egyptology. He follows them through testing ideas about Egypt, from site to site, and from artifact collection to museum stores. The reader learns more about some familiar characters,

such as Herodotus, Napoleon, Amelia Edwards, and Giovanni Belzoni in their adventures in Egypt. But readers also come to know a number of the supporting cast who usually get left out of the most well-known stories, such as Napoleon's savants and how dangerous their missions were, and the scholars who helped Thomas Young and Jean-Francois Champollion, and those who followed them in deciphering more (and more accurately) hieroglyphs. Unlike a number of other authors, Thompson does include women when and where they should be included in this volume, but before 1881, there were few of them who were not wives, assistants, or travel writers.

Thompson does what he sets out to do, and does it well in very readable prose. Personally, I had a hard time putting the book down because I really wanted to see what happened next to this group of artifacts, or that person's manuscript. In fact, many times the answer is “it got lost.” The chapter entitled “Arrested Development” (173–189) divulges a lot of these exasperating stories. One of many is the tale of William John Bankes, who had “a mass of experiences and supporting materials” and many “friends and admirers [who] eagerly awaited the book that was to recount his experiences in Egypt and Nubia” (183). But he simply could not sit down to write it. The illustrations were ready, but for almost 30 years the notes languished at his country estate in England. That is, until he was arrested for “lewd conduct” for the second time in 1841, so he left his home permanently. The materials sat at his home until the late twentieth century. There are many more fascinating, yet maddening, stories of loss, destruction, and desecration in Egypt, but also of success and growth of the field, which are better told by Thompson.

The only criticisms I have of this book have to do with omissions, which are completely understandable in a work of this scope and magnitude. The first is that there is no real discussion of mummies or the study of them in Egyptology. People had been finding, studying, and distributing mummies for various purposes since the time of the ancient Egyptians, yet Thompson only mentions mummies a couple of times in passing. Next is the lack of American characters and places in the narrative. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City makes various appearances, as it should. The formal institutionalization of

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Egyptology did not begin in the US until the late 19th century with James Breasted at the University of Chicago, but there were still a number of Americans travelling to and through Egypt who were significant to the development of the discipline. Charles Edwin Wilbour, recognized as an important collector and benefactor in the US is mentioned a couple of times, but not at length. The discussion of the Henry Abbott collection, which was the foundation for the Brooklyn Museum Egyptian collection, is brief, in that it was sent to the United States. However, the investigation into people and institutions from all over Europe is done very well, especially in a field that tends to focus on the Germans, the British, and the French. Finally, I lament the lack of pictures in the book. To be fair, Thompson prepares the reader for this in his introduction by saying that

he had every intention of heavily illustrating the book, but that the images would overwhelm the text and make for “an unreasonably large tome” (13), which they undoubtedly would. But one does miss images even when he describes them so well.

This book is extremely useful for scholars and the general interested public. Both audiences will learn new things about a field that has excited people for millennia. It has already been useful to me in my own research, pointing out a possible new direction I needed to take in a project I am well into already. I eagerly await the subsequent volumes.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Sheppard, K 2016 Review of *Wonderful Things: A History of Egyptology*. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 26(1): 3, pp. 1–2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bha-574>

Published: 23 February 2016

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