

III. Book Reviews

Jeffrey Abt 2011 *American Egyptologist. The life of James Henry Breasted and the Creation of His Oriental Institute*. University of Chicago Press. ISBN 13: 978-0-226-00110-4.

Reviewed by Tim Murray

This is a massive book: 406 pages of text and over 70 pages of notes and scholarly apparatus. However, given the importance of Breasted and the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, it could hardly be otherwise. Abt has produced a work that is both staggeringly detailed and comprehensive, and offered us a portrait of Breasted that is unlikely to be equalled any time soon.

Breasted was born at the close of the Civil War and lived until 1935. In his seventy years Breasted pretty much did it all – creating a career in Egyptology, founding the Oriental Institute in Chicago and making it to the front cover of *Time Magazine*. It is a good quiz question to work out how many others have achieved that distinction.

Abt explores all phases in Breasted's development in detail. We are told of his favourite books during childhood – Layard's *Nineveh* being among them – his early tertiary education at Northwestern, his time studying pharmacy, and a period as a Congregationalist minister, before he eventually entered Yale University to begin seri-

ous study of languages such as Hebrew, Assyrian, Arabic and Aramaic. From there Breasted went to the University of Berlin to study Egyptology and, via a post-graduation trip to Egypt, to take up a post at the University of Chicago. Abt meticulously explores the importance of Breasted's relationships with his teachers, and the formation of the disciplinary networks that would sustain him throughout his career.

Later chapters chart his extensive fieldwork, the important business of raising donations to support research (among his donors were John D. Rockefeller), the creation of the Oriental Institute as a peak research organization for the study of the ancient Near East, his work on museum projects, and his connection with Howard Carter and Tutankhamun's tomb.

Abt concludes with an important discussion of what made Breasted special. Noting the real respect accorded him by major European scholars and his significant contributions to the study of Ancient Egypt, Abt rightly concludes that Breasted was the exemplary American Egyptologist in the widest sense of the word. Not only was he instrumental in developing the institutional infrastructure of the study of the Ancient Near East in the USA, he embodied its vices and virtues.