

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion, 1822–1922*

By David Gange, Oxford University Press, Classical Presences, 368 pages, 2013, ISBN: 9780199653102

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David Gange's *Dialogues with the Dead* does historians of archaeology a huge favour. In recent years any number of studies concentrating on the intertwined histories of Egyptological and archaeological work have started to appear. Several – although certainly not all – of these volumes are excellent. Yet the one point that ties all this work together is the way in which none of it – bar perhaps *American Egyptologist*, Jeffrey Abt's excellent biography of James Henry Breasted – has effectively managed to address a particular aspect of the cultural background to the emergence of Egyptology. Discussion of nineteenth-century religion is missing from these volumes. This lacuna seems particularly odd when so much of this recent work deals not only with Britain – a context of great religious ferment during the nineteenth century – but also with Flinders Petrie, who initially went to Egypt in support of the biblical pyramid theories of Piazzi Smyth.

In *Dialogues with the Dead*, Gange provides a much-needed corrective to this absence. His volume chronicles the emergence of British Egyptology across the century from 1822 until 1922, and successfully locates the discipline within its broader British cultural contexts: including the religious debates of the age. Gange uses these contexts to assert new interpretations of when the popularity and cultural relevance of Egyptology within Britain waxed and waned. Just as importantly, though, this close contextual work also means that Gange is able to assert the reasons why these changing fortunes occurred, and what this process meant in terms of British culture. Writing a truly cultural history, Gange makes us think again about what British Egyptology was for – and why, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the work that the discipline's practitioners did seemed so dramatically to change. Indeed, perhaps of most interest to many readers, Gange makes Petrie's work in particular appear in a new light.

The volume tackles its subject chronologically, across five chapters and an introduction. These chapters are

often quite lengthy (one of the few criticisms readers might have with the volume) and there are a few typos scattered about, too. However, this length is forgivable, since it also relates to the large amount of new material Gange has to cover within each chapter for the volume to assert the new temporalities of British Egyptology that it so effectively does. Thus, the chapters – following now standard Egyptological periodisations of ancient Egypt – divide their subject up into three 'Kingdoms' (Old, Middle and New) and two 'Intermediate Period[s]'. This division works well to highlight how – and at what speed – the cultural meanings of British Egyptology changed: until the point, in 1922, when the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb inspired a new wave of both British Egypto-mania, and also of popular theorising about ancient Egypt that the discipline's practitioners now did their best to counter.

Gange's point, of course, is that before this period Egyptologists did not do such disciplinary 'boundary work' at all. Instead, they often did exactly the opposite. British Egyptology was – pun intended – a broad church, a discipline that gained its meaning from its interactions with factions and debates in British (protestant) religion: whether relating to the established church, dissenting movements, or even the more esoteric groupings that emerged during this period. Within Egyptological circles today, this situation is often claimed as a moment of innocence. It is acknowledged that practitioners like Petrie set out to Egypt with religiously grounded motives. However, once there, it is claimed that science helped these gauche individuals to reject their earlier beliefs. In this way, the discipline can claim these nineteenth-century practitioners as its scientific and professional progenitors.

Yet Gange demonstrates, once and for all, that this situation was nowhere near as simple as has often been made out. British Egyptology did not professionalise around the turn of the twentieth century as a result of its practitioners seeing the true light of science. Instead, as Gange points out on page 9 of his book's introduction: 'it was precisely because Egyptology was felt to have so powerful a role in accommodating the Bible to the needs of contemporary culture that its technical development

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was pushed forward rapidly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century'. This point is no mere semantic shift. As Gange notes, Britain's (then) Egypt Exploration Fund, for instance, bankrolled late nineteenth-century excavations in Egypt in the context of excavations elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East that claimed to have revealed isolated events of ancient – and sometimes also biblical – history: Schliemann's presumed discovery of Troy at Hissarlik and George Smith's discovery of the so-called Deluge Tablets amongst them.

Egyptologists – and sometimes, up until the 1870s, 'Egyptologers' – were paid to excavate in Egypt by an organisation like the Egypt Exploration Fund for much the same reason. They went to find material evidence of the route of the Biblical Exodus, for instance, and to distribute that evidence to the Fund's sponsors back in Britain: who, in the face of the Higher Criticism, clamoured for evidence that such events had actually happened to prove the biblical critics wrong.

Thus, Petrie's initial work at the very end of the nineteenth century on Egyptian prehistory was – far from the standard accounts that highlight his immediately successful scientific foresight – deeply unpopular. It was only later, throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, that Petrie's new chronologies – coupled with the

rise, and his own mobilisation of, eugenicist discourses about race – slowly took on valence and ancient Egypt started to be discussed on its own terms. It was in the twentieth century that the ancient Egypt with which we are now so familiar started to emerge, not at the moment in 1882 when Petrie was given his University College London professorship; it was also at this later time of specialisation that the Egypt Exploration Fund, perhaps meaningfully, became the rather more impartial-sounding Egypt Exploration Society. *Dialogues with the Dead* is of course deeper than this one point, but this one point perhaps emphasises the overall importance of Gange's volume in helping to rethink what Egyptology has been.

Inevitably, Gange cannot do everything. For example, certain readers might have questions about the meaning of ancient Egypt for both British Jewry and the British Muslim community that the volume does not answer. *Dialogues with the Dead* is very definitely a history of British Egyptology, not the definitive one, and there are certainly other areas that remain ripe for investigation. However, by providing a picture of British Egyptology within – and in dialogue with – British culture, Gange has provided a genuinely new and compellingly-written historical narrative within which to conduct this further research. For that, he deserves our thanks.

How to cite this article: Carruthers, W 2014 A Review of *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion, 1822–1922*. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 24: 12, pp.1–2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bha.2412>

Published: 15 May 2014

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