

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures*

Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures by William Carruthers, editor, Routledge, Abingdon, xii+283 pages, \$125.00, 2015, ISBN 9780415843690

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As William Carruthers makes plain in his editorial introduction, this is a book more about questions than answers. Given that its subject-matter, Egyptology, has been of such immense popular interest for so long, it is hardly surprising to find that its practitioners do not share aims and methods. So, instead of there being just one Egyptology, there are many – past, present and presumably future. This book represents a welter of different voices, perspectives and purposes and Carruthers' primary task is to work towards a space where productive dialogue between all of these different Egyptologies can occur. The book derives from a conference held in 2010 'Disciplinary Measures? Histories of Egyptology in Multi-Disciplinary Context', and despite dropping the question mark and changing Multidisciplinary to Interdisciplinary, the book is about questions and a diversity of ways to seek answers (both multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary).

The editorial introduction by Carruthers clearly lays out the rationale for the book and the ways in which the various contributions sketch out a landscape where different interests and disciplinary perspectives have come and gone into and out of fashion over the past 250 or so years. Carruthers is well aware that the very diversity of Egyptology is both a cause and a product of its success in reaching a very wide professional as well as public interest. He is right to observe that the 'history of Egyptology, if such a history actually exists, is written at cross-purposes: everyone writing about it seems to know what it is, despite not reaching any consensus' (p. 3). Of course the answer seems clear enough, as it is with the history of archaeology, anthropology or any of the other constituent elements of Egyptology – there are histories, not history, both in the past and the present, and if the field is to remain vibrant and relevant, in the future as well.

Making the history of Egyptology problematic might feel a bit like reinventing the wheel, but the contributors

cover some novel ground if within pretty standard frameworks – there are institutional histories, microanalyses of conflict and competition, postcolonial reflections, and some highly entertaining discussions of a few of the more popular aspects of Egyptomania that clearly demonstrated that the 'reception' of Egypt by a diversity of cultures and societies is likely to become an industry in itself, adherents of Cecil B. DeMille, Steve Martin and Ridley Scott please note!

All of this diversity is marshalled into 4 roughly equal parts: The Creation and Isolation of an Academic Discipline; Knowledge in the Making; Colonial Meditations, Postcolonial Responses, and Representing Knowledge. Each of these parts features a very useful summary essay that teases out the common themes and points of divergence that appear in each of the papers.

Again the focus on the postcolonial and the contemporary politics of Egypt as important frames for Egyptology pretty closely mirrors what is happening in other aspects of global archaeology and anthropology – particularly in relation to the widely understood need to decolonise practice. Obviously the complex politics of contemporary Egypt provides a potent context within which to explore history-making and nation-building, especially from within institutions such as Museums, which began life as essentially European institutions that have remained fundamentally divorced from the interests of the Egyptian people. Mohammed Elshahed (and William Carruthers) are quite right – political, social and cultural changes as massive as these mean that it cannot be 'business as usual' for Egyptology.

While this collection does not chart significant new theoretical ground for archaeology or anthropology, it more than adequately brings the study of Egyptology well and truly into contemporary debates about historiography and the socio-politics of archaeology. For this reason it is to be warmly welcomed.

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