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Jason Thompson. *Wonderful Things; a History of Egyptology*. Vol 1: From Antiquity to 1881 (Cairo. American University Press, 2015). ISBN: 978 977 416 599 3 pp.359. Hardback £30

Review by Charlotte Booth

The foreword by Jaromir Malek speaks very highly of this volume claiming it is a well-executed attempt at writing a history of Egyptology, something that has not been comprehensively attempted before. The author's introduction, however, reads like a literature review and rather than offering insight into the material was more a dispassionate list of book titles and authors. The book also lacks illustrations. This was justified in the introduction;

“my intention is to allow the text to speak for itself in the textual volumes of *Wonderful Things* and present the visual aspect of Egyptological history in a future volume and in a video series that will display that history in yet another dimension”(p.13)

Unfortunately this approach necessitates purchasing further volumes if or when they are published and greatly affects the pleasure in reading this volume as a standalone work.

On the nature of the book he explains that the history of Egyptology is about people and therefore it “has been essential to provide substantial biographical information for many of the great Egyptologists” (p.12). However, he does not attempt to do this until chapter 5 and the onset of the nineteenth century.

The structure of the book is in itself unusual with the first four chapters written in chronological order from the time of the ancient Egyptians until the Renaissance, and chapters 5 to 14 covering the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The chapters on the nineteenth century were categorised by theme with the same characters appearing throughout. A chronology may have been useful with a list of eminent scholars and their dates to prevent the reader from having to flick back and forth trying to work out their own chronology.

These negative aspects aside this work is incredibly well-researched and provides an overview of the creation of the discipline of Egyptology. The history starts with the ancient Egyptians' interest in their own history and highlights Khaemwaset as 'the first Egyptologist'. This evolves into the Roman obsession with all things Egyptian leading to the transportation and manufacture of obelisks, resulting in there being more standing obelisks in Italy than Egypt.

The ancient decline in the knowledge of written hieroglyphics dictated the direction future Egyptologists took and provided a strong thread for the rest of the book. In the chapters on the medieval hiatus and the Renaissance scholars strove to understand the language and numerous books were published regarding the nature of hieroglyphs including one by Nostradamus. Most people believed each sign held some spiritual concept and it was not until Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815) suggested the key to understanding hieroglyphs was through the study of Coptic that progress could be made. Unfortunately this line of research was not pursued until much later.

The Renaissance also saw an increase in travel to Egypt followed by the publication of books on the history and monuments. This theme was re-visited in chapter 13 and the nineteenth century increase in travel and subsequent travel books. For both the Renaissance and the nineteenth century Thompson provides a whistle-stop tour through a number of the better known publications.

Thompson touches briefly on medieval contributions to Egyptology but this chapter was incredibly short and lacked detail. *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium, Ancient Egypt in Medieval Arabic Writings* by Okash el Daly (2005) still remains the best book on this topic and Thompson references this in the notes. Egyptology was not said to begin properly until the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt with the 151 savants who travelled with the French army in order to record the monuments, culture and nature. Their findings were published as the *Description de l'Égypte*.

The most famous and significant artefact from this expedition was the Rosetta Stone which bore an inscription in hieroglyphs, demotic and ancient Greek and was essential for the decipherment of hieroglyphs. The Rosetta Stone and the decipherment is the focus of chapter 6, and the process of decipherment and the background of all the key players including Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838), Åkerblad (1763-1819), Thomas Young (1773-1829) and Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) are given.

The description of the expedition and decipherment is very thorough but it is a subject that has been written on frequently and little was new. Thompson approaches the work of Champollion objectively and highlights how he failed to reference or acknowledge the work of scholars before him. Young had even received advice from Silvestre de Stacy in 1815 stating: "If I have any advice to give you, it is not to communicate your discoveries to M. Champollion. It could transpire that he would then claim priority" (p.119). Thompson makes it clear that Champollion did not 'decipher hieroglyphs' but rather made the important breakthroughs which other scholars could build on.

Whilst the race for hieroglyphic decipherment was happening in Europe, in Egypt, travelling had become widely available and much safer. After Mohammed Ali gained power many Europeans travelled to Egypt and William Richard Hamilton (1777-1859) started the trend for sailing from Cairo to Aswan quickly with the North wind and sightseeing on the way back. Newly arrived travellers engaged the help of Henry Salt or Bernadino Michele Maria Drovetti, who not only worked in order to acquire monuments for European collectors but also helped visitors obtain permits for travelling and excavation.

Egypt in the 1820s and the work of Robert Hay, John Gardner Wilkinson, Frédéric Cailliaud and Champollion's Franco-Tuscan Expedition which had the intention of following Napoleon's lead and writing a more detailed and accurate version of *Description de l'Égypte* becomes the focus of chapter 8. Following the death of Champollion in 1833 the discipline came to a halt as there was no-one in a position to continue his linguistic work. Many promising Egyptologists failed to progress in their studies, including Edward Hincks (1792-1866) who made leaps and bounds in translating the Book of the Dead but whom finance prevented from pursuing his studies. In the case of Robert Hay, William John Banks, and Henry Salt inactivity prevented their research being published. Gardner Wilkinson on the other hand, lost momentum after his *Manners and Customs* and did not publish anything vastly different and William Lane, though ready to publish, was hit by politics affecting publishers' schedules meaning his work remained unpublished.

From this period of inactivity rose Richard Lepsius who became an important Egyptologist. He started the Prussian expedition to Egypt which also had the intention of adding to the work of Napoleon. The Expedition produced the publication

Denkmäler aus Ägypten un Aethiopien which was published after the death of Lepsius by his student Édouard Naville.

The true legacy of the Prussian Expedition was the foundation of the museum in Berlin and chapter eleven discusses the development of Egyptian museums throughout Europe. This chapter had potential for a fascinating discussion on the theory of museum studies and practices of collection but instead was an inventory of whose private collections went into which museum and how much they paid. A sample of such descriptions runs thus:

“From that vantage point, Champollion was able to encourage the acquisition of Drovetti’s second collection in 1827” (p.213)

Throughout the chapter there are very few, if any, details as to what pieces were included in these collections, and as such, ‘Drovetti’s second collection’ will mean little to the average reader.

This is followed by a chapter on the representations of ancient Egypt in the nineteenth century with numerous descriptions of photographic developments and techniques including the fact that Petrie, ever frugal, decided to build his own camera rather than purchase one. The chapter then touches upon Egyptomania, something that has been extensively written about (and illustrated) elsewhere.

Considering chapter twelve summarised in detail the life and works of Auguste Mariette, the final chapter seemed mistitled as *Mariette’s Monopoly*, as he seems to be mentioned only in passing. Instead the chapter discusses further details of the work of Lepsius and his rivalry with Brugsch. The chapter ends with the death of Mariette and a change in the discipline of Egyptology which will be discussed in volume II.

The content throughout the book is detailed and provides a thorough history of the development of Egyptology but there was little information that is not widely written about elsewhere. The unique thread throughout these chapters was the development of knowledge of the Egyptian language and its importance in the development of Egyptology as a discipline. It is because of this that this volume would provide a good introduction to students of the discipline, and the extensive bibliography offers advice for further reading. As a standalone volume it is affordable and, as long as the

additional book of plates and accompanying videos are equally affordable, it stands as an important introductory guide to the subject.