

## **The Life of Margaret Alice Murray: A Woman's Work in Archaeology**

**Sheppard, K.L. 2013**

**Lanham. Lexington Books.**

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### **Review by Charlotte Booth MA**

This hardback is made of good quality paper and looks attractive. Each chapter ends with an extensive note section, and there is a bibliography and an index at the back. There are however only four black and white images in the whole book. Whether this was a publisher or an author decision is not clear but a plate section of images of Murray or even the sites she visited or lived would have enhanced the reading experience.

Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of Murray's life starting with her childhood in India, interspersed with trips back to the England continuing through her career at UCL, her excavations and her personal and academic interests. With a traditional father, Murray was discouraged from pursuing her dream of becoming a nurse. She was forced to compromise providing three months voluntary nursing work rather than paid employment which was deemed unsuitable by her father.

After his death Murray was persuaded by her sister Mary to attend classes at UCL in Egyptology. This is where she met Petrie and was introduced to the discipline of Egyptology. This started her career as an Egyptologist. Although she started learning at UCL in 1894 she only made her first trip to Egypt in 1902 to excavate with Petrie for two seasons.

Throughout her time at UCL she was Petrie's assistant in the department, teaching students in his excavation techniques and methods despite only spending two seasons in the field. Sheppard refers to her role as one of domesticated science where Petrie and Murray acted as a 'couple' in the sense that whilst Petrie was in Egypt Murray held the fort back in London. This role was eventually taken over by Hilda Petrie when she married Flinders.

Murray maintained an important teaching position at UCL until 1935 when she retired. During that time some important Egyptologists passed through her classroom including Guy and Winifred Brunton, although with only two years training with Murray, how much can her teaching have truly influenced their careers?

In later years her students commented that she kept going off on tangents about witchcraft, a passion of hers. This passion developed during the First World War and she believed witchcraft was a religion which spread across Britain and Europe in retaliation against Christianity. She wrote a number of articles and two books on the topic aimed at the general public. They were not received well by the target market or the Folklore Society as they were said to be badly researched and her primary sources were quoted out of context and in a misleading manner. Sheppard asserts that Murray's fascination with witchcraft was partially a means of separating herself from Petrie and his teaching, ideas and methodology.

To further separate herself from Petrie in the 1920s, Murray ran her own excavations in Malta and Minorca accompanied by her hand-picked female excavating team. However, Petrie's influence was still maintained in the speed and detail within which she published the excavation reports.

Choosing a female excavating team was a result of Murray's support of suffrage and women's rights. Although she joined a small, unnamed, suffrage group and attended two important marches she was not an active suffragette and instead supported the cause through her work at UCL, encouraging women in the department, ensuring women were entitled to the same training and were given the same opportunities as men in the department.

Throughout the book Sheppard has placed Murray's life in context giving details about life in colonial India, UCL as an institution, women in educational institutions and on excavation and some background on suffrage in the early twentieth century. This provides an intelligent all-round description of life as a female academic in the late nineteenth century.

I found the book fascinating reading, not only as a female Egyptologist myself, but also as a UCL Egyptology graduate. However, I am uncertain of Sheppard's constant assertion that Murray was a scientist. Maybe this is a case of definition as Murray is no doubt an important historian, Egyptologist and pioneer of female education at UCL but Sheppard does not offer much evidence as to why she is a 'scientist.'

Sheppard describes in detail her contributions to the discipline of Egyptology in the form of her numerous publications which were aimed at the general public rather than scholars. She describes these as 'teaching' not only her students but the public at large. Murray's most important work was that done at the Manchester Museum with the assemblage from the tomb of the two brothers where she was the first woman to unwrap a mummy, and this was done publically. However, although presented by the author as a scientific presentation there are no records of the unwrapping other than the general volume written by Murray. The observers were also able to sign up for a 'souvenir' in the form of a piece of bandage which was perhaps a reflection of the time rather than Murray's scientific failings.

Semantics aside, for someone present at UCL for forty years Murray has made little impact with her students omitting her in their biographies and Petrie only making a cursory nod to her in his. Sheppard's biography certainly fills a gap in the history of UCL, early Egyptologists and early women in academia.

As with many books of this calibre, academic rather than trade books, the price is often out of many people's price range. However, this book is an essential read and therefore worth putting on a wish list.