

From Bastard to Knight of the Realm: The Spectacular Success Story of Sir Ernest Wallis Budge



by Geoffrey Clarfield

On November 23, 1934, Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge died at the age of 77. After a short church service, he was buried beside his wife at Nunhead cemetery in London, England. Five days later, a memorial service was held for Budge at St.

Paul's Cathedral. The mourners included the Earl and Countess of Shaftesbury, the Earl and Countess Stanhope, the Dowager Countess of Seafield, General Sir Reginald Wingate, Mrs. Robert Crawshay, the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner, the publisher Sir John Murray, Sir Herbert and Lady Samuelson (the first British and Jewish British High Commissioner for Mandated Palestine), as well as representatives of Britain's top universities and learned societies.

They all knew why they were there. To honor the life of an adventurer, a scholar, a writer, public speaker, antiquities collector, curator (smuggler) and servant of the crown and empire; one of the pioneers in his field who helped to lay the foundations for the Egyptian and Assyrian collections of the British Museum, and who had significantly contributed to the scholarly study of ancient Biblical and Near Eastern civilizations.

Of the one hundred thousand ancient Egyptian artifacts held by the British Museum today, ten thousand of them—that is ten per cent of the collection—were collected by Budge. In the early days of the twentieth century no doubt those ten thousand artifacts comprised the lion's share of the collection, notwithstanding the thousands of cuneiform tablets that Budge managed to send from Iraq and whose antiquities were under the authority of the (corrupt) Ottoman authorities.

That is to say, Budge had acted as a catalyst for the growing field of secular Bible studies (as it was initially conceived in the nineteenth century). By comparing Biblical texts with the newly discovered ancient inscriptions, manuscripts, and artifacts emerging from Egypt, the Levant, and Mesopotamia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, late Victorians and early Edwardians, were afforded a better understanding of their subjective spiritual roots in the ancient world of the Bible and among its neighboring peoples.

But Budge was also motivated by “non-rational” reasons. He was

fascinated by the occult and believed that he had special gifts as a conduit to the world of the spirits. He also believed in the development of a renewed Christianity that would be in harmony with modern science and evolution.

Had Budge only been remembered and commemorated for just three of his thousands of finds—the most complete ancient manuscript of the Egyptian Book of the Dead (with its thought provoking parallels to the ten commandments), the Tel el Amarna letters, and his discovery of the only surviving copy of Aristotle's treatise on the ancient Greek Constitution of Athens—that would have been enough to cement his enduring fame in the study of the ancient world. Today, few people know who he was and even fewer have read his works.

Worse still, Budge is vilified by many of today's professional Egyptologists who, when they recount the history of their discipline, see him as a pre-archaeological tomb robber, smuggler, plunderer, and antiquities dealer, an Indiana Jones with a British accent.

Instead, they idealize Sir Flinders Petrie, who through his introduction of stratigraphical archaeological techniques, and proper record keeping, finally put archaeology, Near Eastern archaeology, and Biblical archaeology on a solid footing. Petrie's admirers do not like to remember that he was also a crude Social Darwinist and believed he belonged to a superior race. He willed that his body be interred in a Jerusalem cemetery and his head, now languishing in the back room of some institute in London, be donated to science. While ostensibly committed to science Petrie thought cranial size was a marker of superior races.

Unlike his friends and mourners, Budge was not born into the upper crust of British society where he ended up. He was born out of wedlock, in rural England and through incredible hard work and some luck, managed to climb his way up the academic, museological, and social ladder of Victorian, Edwardian, and

early twentieth century Britain.

Budge's life story sounds like something out of a Dickens novel, and it is a marvel that some talented British screenwriter has not yet presented it on the silver screen.

The full tale of his remarkable story has been well told by his most recent biographer Matthew Ismail under the playful title of *Wallis Budge, Magic and Mummies in London and Cairo* (2021).¹ This version and an earlier version published ten years ago, perhaps for ideological reasons, has not been widely reviewed and discussed by historians, museologists, biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholars despite its 1,367 footnotes, 443 pages (plus an afterword by Julian Reade), and extensive bibliography.

Ismail has mastered the literature on Budge and he tells his story effortlessly and in a writing style that evokes and mirrors the rhythm of the time that Budge lived in, the late nineteenth century, when long, detailed books, newspaper, and journal articles were the respected currency of the educated classes, a time before the tyranny of pictures.

It is a slow moving but engaging tour de force, an intimate social history of the rise of Egyptology and Assyriology. (Nineteenth century novelist George Eliot would have felt at home reading this fascinating tour de force.) Ismail's book is not only a personal and intellectual history of Budge, but also of the world that he lived in—late Victorian and early Edwardian times, an epoch when Europe and Great Britain were rediscovering the civilizations of the ancient near east and the Bible in order to better understand the roots of their own beliefs and civilization. For anyone interested in these topics, including the cultural history of the British Empire, Ismail's book should one day be a classic. I hope it will get its due recognition.

Budge was born in rural Bodmin, Cornwall on July 27, 1857 to a

young woman by the name of Mary Ann Budge. She was unmarried and poor and thus, according to the prejudice of the times, Budge was at the bottom of the British hierarchy—fatherless, impoverished, and without prospects.

Budge was farmed out to close relatives, retained his family name, and began the difficult ascent of an informal Victorian primary education. He was bright and hard working. His fascination for the east and the ancient world led him to low level employment at the British Museum via the patronage of his employer William H. Smith of the famed British publisher and book selling family.

Ismail skillfully reveals the nature of patronage in class riven but upwardly mobile Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and by extension of the British Museum as well. The ethos of the age was “self improvement,” but it often only got you anywhere if you had powerful patrons whose interest it was to sponsor mostly young men in their careers and, if I daresay, to unconsciously demonstrate that “self improvement” worked.

Before his induction to the British Museum Budge managed to catch the interest and support of Prime Minister William Gladstone himself, which helped land him a research scholarship at Cambridge University where he studied Semitic languages and literature. He eventually learned Hebrew, Syriac (Aramaic), Akkadian, Ancient Egyptian, and Coptic, while developing a reading knowledge of German and French and, later in life, Arabic and Turkish.

Although Budge did not live up to the near impossible expectations of his own newly arrived patrons (Smith and Gladstone did not come from the landed aristocracy and rose in society through commercial and political means), he learned enough to begin his slow and steady rise within the expanding British Museum as curator and scholar.

Eventually he was sent by the Museum and its supporters on expeditions to collect antiquities to Ottoman Iraq and Egypt which, after 1882, was run as the personal fiefdom of Lord Cromer ("Cromer's Egypt").

Although involved in supervising what were then thought of as excavations (really digging up sites in the hope of finding extraordinary objects, such as hieroglyphic and cuneiform tablets), his proficiency in Arabic and Turkish, his ethnographic ability at dealing with Muslim, Coptic, and Jewish antiquities dealers, he managed to make phenomenal and economical purchases on behalf of the Museum. He did this with the informal help of the British authorities in Egypt as well as soldiers and diplomats in Iraq.

As an illegitimate son of the Victorian age, he was the consummate outsider, which lends itself to the formation of a compassionate personality. He was friendly, warm, and a great raconteur. And he knew how to bargain. Each time he returned from what I can only call "shopping expeditions," his reports, both verbal and written, demonstrated that Budge was the British Museum's "man on the ground." He was not just a rising academic in the capital from some vague rural backwater, but someone who got things done.

Ismail does not just chronicle Budge but gives us a nuanced social portrait of late Ottoman Iraq, early colonial Egypt, and the rediscovery of the ancient Near Eastern world, motivated by Christian Victorians' eagerness to demonstrate the context and truth of Holy Scripture. It took until after World War II for both Egyptology and Assyriology to achieve academic autonomy as cultures and civilizations in their own right, part of universal history and worthy of study.

Budge was cut from such cloth and as a writer and speaker, each time he returned to England with a new "discovery," he knew how to publicize it, satisfying his patrons at the Museum, all the while befriending the upper strata of British

society and gaining fame and recognition. Howard Carter, who discovered Tutankhamun's remains and grave in the 1920s was in essence following in Budge's footsteps, on the road from archaeological obscurity to national and world fame.

Unlike the more famous sexually adventurous explorer Sir Richard Burton (a gifted linguist like Budge), who during the earlier part of the nineteenth century "almost" discovered the source of the Nile, Budge was a happy monogamist. He married Dora Helen Emerson in 1883, a respectable middle-class woman. They did not have children and she died before her husband. In his memoirs Budge describes her as his best friend and companion (he called her his "pal") and she helped him prepare the indexes of the collections at the Museum.

Ismail's book describes every step and stage, twist and turn of Budge's career in exquisite and entertaining detail. Budge's work and life was basically a series of "journeys" to the east by donkey, camel, boat, and train, always collecting, digging, haggling, and smuggling. On these trips he engaged the lowest of the low on the social ladder of nineteenth century Iraq and Egypt. He then got on with the highest of the high, which included the patronage of the British army in the Sudan, which supported his initial excavations there among the Egyptoid but clearly African tombs and pyramids of Nubia.

Each expedition and its discoveries is a story in itself and the bulk of Ismail's book chronicles and details the adventures and publications of this jack of all trades and master of many more.

It is important to point out that the excavators in Egypt and Iraq were usually illiterate Muslim Arabs and Kurds. Supervisors and middle-men were often Iraqi Christian and Egyptian Christian Copts. In Iraq, many of the antiquities dealers were Jewish and then came the Europeans, with their money, intrigues, and power who did everything possible to transfer as many artifacts to the exploding European museums.

This was Budge's world for most of his professional life.

Finally, as ancient Egyptian and Assyrian artifacts became part of the experience of the museum-going public there arose "believers," middle and upper-class men and women who believed that the spirits of the ancient world still existed and its denizens could be contacted through seances and Ouija Boards. These are known as occultists. Budge was one of them and a member of the Ghost Club. One occult poet, Alice B. Head, admired Budge and sent him a poem with lines like this:

My soul is free
To choose the happy fields, or sail with Thee,
Ra, in thy sun-boat of the million years
To follow, spite of terrors and tears
Through the dim shade of Tuat, there to see

One can only conclude that contemporary "New Age" culture has very deep roots.

Over the years, every time I am in London I have gone to the British Museum and spent the lion's share of my time exploring the Egyptian and Assyrian displays, which were once filled and curated by Budge. Having read Ismail's book, I was eager to talk to him on the phone, and he was happy to oblige. What follows are selections of his comments to me in response to questions about his research on Budge.

I suppose you could say that I am one of those incurably curious people whose attention can be seized by something fascinatingly unfamiliar. The fact is that I didn't know much about Budge beyond having held many reprints of his books in my hands in dusty used bookstores over the years . . . The more immediate birth of the book was probably from a few places. I was always interested in the history . . . and perhaps my deepest interest was always in how historical narratives of different cultures are written. You might say I was interested in how historical texts use

literary devices and in the intellectual and cultural assumptions that bind the historical narratives together. I lived in the Middle East for twelve years, from 1999 to 2011, and six of those years were in Cairo. . . I was talking to a friend of mine in Sharjah (where I was then living) in about 2001 or 2002, and I was telling him that I wanted to dive into a research project on one of these British adventurers. This friend, a scholar of Islamic Studies who is interested in the occult, shrugged and said. "Don't write about those guys! Why don't you write about E. A. Wallis Budge?" And I was immediately hooked on the idea . . . I just had an intuition that Budge's life would be of great interest to someone like me with an interest in Modern European Intellectual History, Middle Eastern History, and how the two are all jumbled together. And I was rewarded for my intuition with a fabulously interesting project on a man whose life reads like a Victorian *bildungsroman* and whose story offers endless nurture to anyone interested in modern British social and cultural history, the history of imperialism in the Middle East, the social and political place of museums and collecting in the modern world. . . Since most of what has been written about Budge was written by Egyptologists or archaeologists who were primarily interested in talking narrowly about the methodology and ethics of excavation, there was a huge amount about Budge and his world of Egyptology and Assyriology as yet unexplored.

[T]he question of Budge's smuggling, which I reveal in great detail, is usually the one aspect of his life and career by which he is characterized by the Egyptology establishment, which ignores this fascinating man's protean life and the light it casts on his world to ask only whether you are "for or against Budge"—a question I cannot answer, by the way, since it is irrelevant to a scholarly work. They characterize any attempt to broaden the study of Budge's life in all of its fascinating directions as

“trying to condone his smuggling,” etc.

This smuggling of artifacts is addressed in a curiously simplistic and decontextualized manner in the history of Egyptology: they demand to know if you are for or against the smuggling practiced so widely in the “pre-professional” era of Egyptology and whether you support Egyptology’s modern excavation methods—which is a loaded question, of course, rather like asking if you have stopped cheating on your exams. If you refuse to dismiss Budge immediately and without any further discussion or research as a wicked man, a poor scholar, and smuggler who represents all that is worse in pre-professional Egyptology, then you are characterized as condoning his smuggling of artifacts, etc.

The truth is that we cannot understand the history of Egyptology through such simplistic loaded questions and neither I nor anyone else today (other than smugglers, I suppose) would say that Budge’s smuggling was ethically sound and a desirable approach to building museum collections. But the point of the loaded question is supposedly to demonstrate that there is a clear and undeniable ethical and political separation between the bad “pre-scientific” past of which Budge was a part, and the new and professional Egyptology that emerged, in all of its supposed “scientific” purity, in Western universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yet, this narrative of a pre- and post-scientific Egyptology completely elides the actual history of modern Egypt in the telling—which is the ideological point, of course. Egyptology as a discipline was all bound up with European imperialism from the beginning and into the age of Egyptology as a “science,” and the profession remains completely in denial about this. Budge is used as a whipping boy for their professional origins myth.

So, the question as to whether nineteenth century Europeans

such as Budge were acting for the best, as they clearly believed they were, in exporting artifacts . . . so that they could be better preserved in the West, doesn't tell us much about the ethical question, since the institutions that received the artifacts from the smugglers and from the "scientific" excavators were actually identical, and Egyptology grew out of these profoundly compromised institutions.

First of all, let's be clear that it was European and American museums that created the interest in Egyptian artifacts early in the nineteenth century, and these foreigners were absolutely obsessed with Ancient Egypt, its culture, its art, its history, its language, and its material remains. Egyptians themselves were not then particularly interested in pre-Islamic Egyptian culture. It was really the slow development of a post-Ottoman and post-British Egyptian nationalism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that changed the attitudes of most Egyptians towards Ancient Egypt, not the monopolistic efforts of Western Egyptology, from which they were excluded. When the people of an independent Egypt began to identify with the ancient Egyptians as their own forebears, and the glory of ancient Egypt as their own glory, then they would also (eventually) seize control of the Service of Antiquities and the Egyptian Museum from Westerners and adopt antiquities policies that framed these artifacts as the patrimony of the entire nation. It actually took until the revolution of 1954 to get the last Frenchman out of the position as head of the Service of Antiquities.

Thus, there was a paradox: Egyptology developed primarily among Westerners who were passionately interested in Ancient Egypt as a part of their own biblical and classical past. There was a symbiosis between the British conquerors of Egypt (after 1882), the French service of antiquities, German scholars and excavators in Egypt, and the growth of

collections in rival French, British, German, and American museums. The foreign museums and institutions were driving the excavation of artifacts (legitimate or illegitimate, formal or informal) with their insatiable demands and European Egyptologists (including the Hero of the Establishment, Flinders Petrie) were always deeply alarmed by the prospect of Egyptian self-rule because they thought Egyptians might restrict their ability to export Egyptian antiquities to the West.

There was, indeed, little infrastructure in Egypt to handle the volume of artifacts that was being extracted from the earth by and for Western museums . . . The European justification that the artifacts were better off in Europe, where they could be properly cared for, was surely correct, because the four or five wealthiest and most powerful nations on earth were driving the demand for Egyptian antiquities.

Yet the smuggling and the officially sanctioned excavating were not driven by separate interests or by separate institutions. The British Museum, the Louvre, the Berlin Museum, etc. were all built primarily by smuggling and the purchasing of artifacts from dealers. . . . [T]he invidious question as to whether one supports Budge's smuggling today is rather absurd in this context.

The Afterword for the revised edition of my book is called "Wallis Budge and the Petrie Claque." This afterword demonstrates in some detail the astonishing fact that the hero of the Egyptology establishment, Flinders Petrie, could be characterized without exaggeration as a proto-fascist intellectual whose Eugenic and Social Darwinist ideologies pervade what the establishment like to call his "scientific" approach to Egyptology—including his famed stratigraphy. How could the same people who are so critical of Budge as a "smuggler" and a "poor scholar" choose a proto-fascist as their Founding Father? . . .

The myth says that there is a “Father of Egyptology” (Petrie) who was a “scientist” rather than a “smuggler” (Budge). The myth describes Petrie in glowing, ecstatic, reverential terms as a great scholar and good man, a genius and polymath whose wide-ranging work was based on statistical methods, comparative studies, and sound excavation methodology—much like a modern academic. . . . The fact that Petrie the Founder was appointed to one of the first university chairs in Egyptology is represented as proof that he was a modern and scientific Egyptologist and so were all of those Egyptologists who came after him and were trained by his students. This is the myth of origins of Egyptology as a modern “science” and therefore Petrie must be ideologically cleansed to be a suitable “father.”

Budge the “smuggler” was, and remains, an ideological foil for Petrie the “scientist” in this historical narrative, and this is no doubt one reason why the establishment doesn’t want people to look too closely at the intellectual and political context in which Budge and Petrie worked. Even a cursory reading of a few of Petrie’s books or articles reveals a truly disturbing body of work based in Eugenics and Social Darwinism. . . .

Histories of Egyptology always insist that Budge’s works were not academically sound before moving on to rhapsodize about the great works of Petrie the “scientist.” Suffice it to say, the establishment needs to do some soul searching and start rethinking this historical narrative because Egyptology has built its historical castle on a foundation of rotten sand.

I had a wonderful time working in the British Museum and the people who worked there were a real pleasure to talk to and work with—except about Budge! There is a story among them about the Wicked Budge that will not change no matter what anyone demonstrates, and all the work I have done to uncover Budge’s rich, fascinating, protean life has changed

nothing. Every time I mentioned that I was working on Budge people would explode in anger as if I were mentioning their own worst enemy in the office next door. People who were usually full of good humor and fun could the next moment be stamping their feet and almost shouting because I mentioned Budge. They were unfailingly helpful and polite, and I owe the staff of the British Museum a great debt of gratitude, but it was very perplexing to me, as a curious outsider with no preconceptions about Budge or Egyptology, to experience the demonization of the long-dead Budge. I hope these fine people in the British Museum can one day enjoy reading about Budge's fascinating life and appreciate a narrative worthy of a great Victorian novel.

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¹ Hardinge Simpole.