

Nina M. Davies (1881–1965) by Nigel Strudwick

Nina M. Davies was born Anna Macpherson Cummings in Salonika in Greece on 6 January 1881, the eldest of the three daughters of Cecil J. Cummings. On her father's death in Salonika in 1894, the family returned to Scotland, to Aberdeen, and subsequently moved to Bedford, where the girls attended a large private school. The family moved from Bedford to London so that Nina could continue training as an artist. Aldred's obituary indicates that Nina trained at the Slade School of Art and the Royal College of Art; it seems somewhat odd that enquiries to both institutions have been unsuccessful in tracing any record of her.

In 1906 she decided to visit some friends in Alexandria in Egypt, which kindled in her an interest in Egypt and its monuments, and it brought her into contact with Norman de Garis Davies. They became engaged, and were married in Emmanuel Church at Hampstead in North London on 8 October 1907. Almost immediately they departed for Egypt together.

Norman de Garis Davies (born 14 September 1865) was far and away the most profound influence on her subsequent career. He took M.A. and B.D. degrees at Glasgow University, and then went to Marburg University with a post-graduate scholarship. Back in Britain, he took up work as a minister at a Congregational Church at Ashton-under-Lyne. He first worked in Egypt as a copyist with Petrie at Dendera in the 1897–8 season. Subsequently he was put in charge of the Egypt Exploration Fund's (EEF) Archaeological Survey, for which he produced eleven volumes of copies of tombs at Saqqara, Sheikh Said, Deir el-Gebrawi, and Amarna. Nonetheless, the Fund never gave him the security of employment he sought, and between 1905 and 1907 he also worked with George A. Reisner at Giza and James H. Breasted in Nubia. In early 1907, he was offered employment as the head of the graphic section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new expedition to Egypt.

Nina as Egyptologist and copyist

Nina began painting almost as soon as she settled in Thebes. Although not officially in the employ of anyone, she was clearly assisting Norman in the tombs in which he was working, since her earliest dated paintings in the MMA are from 1908, made in Theban tomb 45 (TT45, the tomb of Djehuty usurped by Djehutiemheb).

Paramount among those whom Nina impressed was Alan H. Gardiner. He saw the important archival value of the paintings which Nina was producing, and in 1909 he came to an arrangement with Nina that he would acquire as much of her painting as he could afford. He collected her work until 1929. From 1913–14 Norman Davies was able to engage Nina as a part-time worker for the MMA.

Nina's technique of painting in colour

Colour facsimiles were of course the only way of representing polychromy available at that time. Much is rightly made of the painting materials she and Norman Davies employed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was normal for paintings in Egypt to be made using watercolours, which produce a rather flat finish. Not long after the Davieses settled in Qurna, they chose Theban Tomb 45 as a testing ground for experiments in colour copying. One of Davies's first assistants, Francis Unwin, is then credited with suggesting the use of tempera, specifically egg tempera. The opaque result of this was much more satisfactory, and this technique became the basic method.

The first step in producing a colour or line facsimile of a scene was to make a pencil tracing against the wall. Their basic material was tracing paper in sheets averaging about 90 × 50 cm. For it to be made into a painting it had to be transferred to the intended paper or board, and this was done using graphite (carbon) paper. Nina would then draw a rectangular border around the desired area, and probably enhanced some of the transferred lines in pencil. She then painted the rest by eye, but in front of the wall. Light was normally provided by mirrors and diffusers; sometimes several mirrors were required.

The key to the success of her work is the method of application of paint. She found the best way of reproducing most aspects of the painting was to use the same sequence of colours as the original artist. Thus, when painting a male figure wearing a white robe through which the body colour is partially visible, she would paint the background, apply a solid area of colour for the body, overlay it with the white for the robe, and draw the red-brown outline, cleaning the figure up, as had the ancient painter, by application of further background colour. Nina did not, however, decide to facsimile the damage to a scene, but rather she developed a way of recording it using 'indeterminate washes', which indicate the texture and the composition of the holes, but do not distract the viewer of the painting. Cracks in the original wall were carefully drawn, and often seem three-dimensional.

A slightly different approach had to be taken if the tracing were to become a line drawing. It seems that the tracing paper was then put on a drawing board in front of the wall, and details added in pencil by hand, with constant comparison to the wall. While the paintings must have been made in front of the wall, inking was perhaps divided between the tomb, their dig house, and time spent between seasons in England. Areas of damage tended to be left blank in line drawings, and traces of sketches were not always recorded.

The publications rarely indicate which line drawings were produced by whom, and, where Nina is specifically credited, as in *The Tomb of Amenemhet* and *The Tomb of Huy*, there are no obvious differences from publications solely drawn by Norman. A more specific division of labour is indicated in the publication of the tomb of Ramose, where Nina appears to have been responsible for the line drawings of the one painted scene (Davies, *The Tomb of Ramose*, pl. XXIII–XXVII).

Nina's projects in Egypt 1907–39

The Theban Tombs Series and work for the Egyptian Exploration Fund/Society

When he began working for the MMA, Norman Davies offered to spare what little time he could to try and give some Theban material to be published by the EEF.

The first result of this policy was *Five Theban Tombs* (ASE 21, 1913). In the meantime, Gardiner had engaged Nina to make colour copies for him, and discussions with the Davieses resulted in the EEF's Theban Tomb Series (TTS). The five volumes of the series which eventually appeared were a combination of the efforts of the three individuals; Nina was co-author of three of them, and contributed colour plates to the others. She later contributed plates for the Mond Excavations at Thebes (MET) publication of the tomb of Ramose.

Work for the Metropolitan Museum

The Metropolitan Museum possesses an unmatched collection of facsimile paintings of Egyptian scenes, the output of the Graphic Section of the Egyptian Expedition (Wilkinson and Hill, *Egyptian Wall Paintings: The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Collection of Facsimiles*). Over 120 of these paintings are by Nina Davies, and nearly 50 by her husband, and many of these found their way into Norman Davies' publications for the MMA. Her paintings encompass all the tombs which the Expedition published and a great many more. The greatest period of her painting activity for the MMA seems to have been from about 1920 until the beginning of the 1930s, with the earliest example in 1908 and the last in 1938.

Amarna and Beni Hasan

In 1926–7 both Davieses were permitted by the MMA to go and help the Egypt Exploration Society at Amarna. Charles K. Wilkinson made a number of preliminary tracings, and then the Davieses made colour copies and studied the paintings. This resulted in Frankfort (ed.), *The Mural Painting of el-'Amarna*, to which Norman contributed a chapter, Nina colour plates, and both of them made some of the line drawings. In 1931–2 they took two months away from Thebes to work at Beni Hasan, mainly so that Nina could copy some of the major scenes.

Ancient Egyptian Paintings

The Beni Hasan work in 1931–2 also formed part of a major project which can be regarded as the encapsulation and pinnacle of Nina's achievement in Egyptology.

Gardiner conceived the idea that Nina's colour work should be presented on its own in as lavish a manner as possible. James H. Breasted put him in touch with J.D. Rockefeller, Jr, Breasted's great supporter and sponsor, with whom the project was discussed, and who agreed to sponsor it in 1929.

The scope of the 104 paintings presented in the two volumes of *Ancient Egyptian Paintings* runs from the Old Kingdom to the 20th dynasty. Most of the paintings used for the book were already in existence, since those newly made for the books were relatively few in number, and were subsequently presented to the Oriental Institute, where they still reside. The new paintings were mostly Theban scenes, but there are also some from Beni Hasan and Abydos, and the British and Cairo Museums. The project was completed in 1936, and shows Nina Davies at her best.

Exhibitions

Gardiner collected as many of Nina's paintings as possible, and was anxious to display them to the public once he had a sufficient number. The first exhibition was organised at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1923, and subsequently in Bruxelles in 1925, and Oxford in 1929 and 1933. 22 of them were presented to the British Museum some time before *Ancient Egyptian Paintings* appeared, and the remainder were donated to the Ashmolean Museum in 1939 and 1947. Samples have been on display in both institutions, and the Ashmolean organised an exhibition in 1943. The Metropolitan Museum mounted a display of some of its facsimiles in 1930. More recent exhibitions including her work of which I am aware are 'Artists in Egypt 1920–1935' at the Oriental Institute in Chicago in 1978, which included many of the Institute's paintings from the Paintings project, and 'Joseph Lindon Smith: paintings from Egypt' at Brown University in 1998. The Metropolitan Museum's permanent installation includes one whole gallery devoted to the facsimiles from its work in Egypt.

The Gardiner hieroglyphic fount

For his *Egyptian Grammar* in 1927, Alan Gardiner resolved to produce a hieroglyphic fount based on 18th dynasty forms, and naturally turned to Norman

and Nina Davies. With their experience of New Kingdom tombs, they set to work in their spare time to collect the material, in the form of both line drawings and also individual coloured samples. Nina continued to paint examples of hieroglyphs, and she used the collection thus amassed as the basis of *Picture Writing in Ancient Egypt* published in 1958.

The end of work in Egypt

Nina's output of paintings for the MMA in the 1930s continued at much the same rate as it had while she was working on the Egyptian Paintings project (3–5 per annum), but a tapering off can be noted in the period 1935 to 1939, and in the latter year none are recorded. The precise reason for their departure from Egypt in 1939 is not yet clear, but it is very likely to be a combination of MMA policy and Norman's age. The uncertain political situation may have played a part, since it is clear that the house in Qurna was by no means finally closed and emptied, clearly implying that there was some expectation of a further visit to Egypt.

But before anything further could be done, Norman de Garis Davies died in his sleep of heart failure on 5 November 1941, at the age of 76. This event, and the ongoing war, meant the effective end of the Davieses' work in Thebes.

Nina 1941–1965

In a combination of dealing with her obligations and to take her mind off her bereavement, she immediately set herself to sorting out the mass of material left over from their years in Egypt. She had also become involved during the war years in cataloguing the textile collection of P.E. Newberry. In the afternoons she would undertake voluntary war work; later in the war she would conduct American servicemen around the Oxford colleges. She organised the donation of Norman's collection of objects to the Ashmolean Museum in the war years, and likewise his books to University College, London. Also in the war years she deposited a number of Norman's papers in the Griffith Institute.

During the war she was much concerned with Norman's publication of the Temple of Hibis in Kharga, for which she reorganised the material and had the drawings photographed and sent to the MMA, although she is given no credit for this in the book, which finally appeared in 1953 (*The Temple of Hibis in el Khargeh Oasis III. The decoration* (PMMA 17).). She was working on the material relating to a putative volume on Thutmoside tombs, inking drawings and writing notes; this never appeared, but some of the material was later used for *Scenes from some Private Tombs* and her *JEA* articles, as well as Säve-Söderbergh's *Four Eighteenth Dynasty Tombs*. She also aided Gardiner in his editing of *Seven Private Tombs at Kurneh*.

In the early 1950s, she visited Egypt again, to complete the painting of a box of Tutankhamun. She had painted two sides of this before, and it was at the instigation of Gardiner that she finished it, the publication appearing in 1962. The 1950s were a productive time for Nina, as no fewer than four publications of her paintings appeared, to most of which she also contributed a text: a number of plates from *Ancient Egyptian Paintings* in a French edition, a King Penguin book on Egyptian Painting, *Picture Writing* (see above), and a selection of paintings of scenes in the British Museum and Bankes Collection, also translated into German. Her swan song, published in 1963, was *Scenes from some Private Tombs*, in which she assembled records which had been awaiting publication since the 1920s.

She was busy with matters Egyptian and artistic until she was over 80. She was a supporter of artistic and intellectual pursuits, and loved her garden and knew all the botanical names of the plants in it. She continued to live in Hinksey Hill, Oxford, until around 1964, when she had to go into a nearby nursing home. Her death on 21 April 1965 was as a result of cancer of the kidney and of a stroke.

Personality of Nina

Nina Davies, like her husband, was small in physical stature. She was always smart and neat, and despite her labours in the tombs, she always managed to appear fresh and unruffled. By all accounts she was charming, and recollections from

Egypt indicate that she was an excellent and sociable host, yet with a firmness of purpose and punctiliousness in her which made sure she continued with her work on time. She would correct errors firmly but politely.

Recollections from the 1950s indicate that she was often shy and retiring but dignified, although she was very kind and sociable with her friends. She seems to have lived a simple and frugal existence. It seems likely that after Norman's death she deliberately moved into the Egyptological background, almost as if she felt he had given her much of her Egyptological legitimacy, despite the reputation she had established on her own. It is said she jealously guarded his memory.

An overview

Nina Cummings came from a middle-class British family, and might well have gone into a conventional career as an artist or teacher if she had not met and married Norman de Garis Davies. Starting out in his shadow, she rapidly established her own reputation, but always within her limits. She did occasionally publish papers on her own, but it is clear that she was more comfortable painting and drawing than writing; her preferred approach seems to have been to compile notes which were then written up by someone else, usually Norman Davies or Gardiner. She can rightly be accused of few mistakes and inaccuracies in her work, and the value of her output can only grow as more and more monuments deteriorate; her work will endure long after pure written scholarship, regrettably often given a higher value at the time it appears, is out of date.

She represents an almost unique strand in Egyptological women, that of the spouse who developed her own area of professional specialisation while at the same time also maintaining the role of *mudira*. She worked most of her productive life in Egypt doing something few others, male or female, could do, and none so well. Her work clearly meant everything to her, and Egyptology has been forever and immeasurably enriched by her contributions.

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Individuals: Jesse K. Aldred, widow of Cyril Aldred†; Margaret S. Drower; Oliver R. Gurney; J. Gwyn Griffiths; John R. Harris; Mary E. Hulin, widow of Peter Hulin† and former neighbour of Nina Davies; T.G.H. James; Sir Laurence Kirwant†; Arpag Mekhitarian; Helen Murray; Joan Ritchie, Education Service Guide at the Ashmolean Museum, and acquaintance of Nina Davies; Harry S. Smith; B.H. Strickert†; Diana Woolner, daughter of Cecil M. Firth†.

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