

Amelia Blanford Edwards, 1831-1892 by Barbara S. Lesko

An American newspaper called her in 1889 "the most learned woman in the world" for her dexterity in writing, research, and public speaking. In England today she is called the god-mother of Egyptology, for her dedication to the Egypt Exploration Society, which she founded, and the Edwards Chair in Egyptian Archaeology, which she funded, at University College London. Amelia B. Edwards was an extraordinarily talented woman who excelled in music, art, writing, and public speaking. She was an early career woman who tried four different careers in her lifetime and never married.

Amelia Edwards' talents were early recognized by her family, and she was encouraged as a child to be expressive and daring. For the first forty years of her life she did seek adventure, even to the point of, like George Sand, dressing like a man and frequenting establishments off limits to ladies of her class in order to learn more of life and to find models for her drawing. Her career interests included music (voice and organ) at which she excelled and also art (drawing), which she eventually put to use as an illustrator for her books. She loved travel and would produce two of the most successful travel books of all time. In her youth a Bohemian who found her friends of both sexes among artists and writers, both in France and Britain, she was always a radical in politics, religion, and social thought. However, later she would suppress her beliefs and personal yearnings to become a successful writer and fund raiser for archaeology. She published nine novels and many stories, including romances and ghostly tales, early in her career, but she was also a journalist on the staff of two magazines. During the last two decades of her life, Edwards devoted herself to Egyptology, not only fundraising and lecturing, but research and writing scholarly as well as popular articles.

Amelia Edwards was born in London, June 7, 1831 to a middle aged couple, Alicia, an energetic and intellectual mother descended from the Walpoles, and Thomas, a retired army officer who had served under Wellington in the Peninsular War, but later in civilian life occupied a minor banking post. Young Amy was an only child on whom her mother doted and made sure she was given every cultural advantage affordable by a middle class family of the time. Amy seems to have been born with a pen in hand, writing her first story at age four, and by twelve showing great promise in story writing and illustrating. A voracious reader too, as a child she delved into Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the ancient Egyptians*, but her first choice (in her mid-teens) was for a career in music, both voice and organ were her strengths. This was in a few years set aside, however, for a more lucrative path of writing.

As the only child of old parents with modest means, Miss Edwards took up the responsibility of wage earner and during the 1850-70's journalism was her profession, working on the staffs of two magazines, the *Saturday Review* and the *Morning Post* and contributing articles to even more. She reported on current events of every sort, excepting the Houses of Parliament and police reports. During the 1850's she produced histories of England (London and Boston, 1857) and France (London, 1858). She also wrote nine novels and numerous short stories. Her first novel, *My Brother's Wife* was published in 1855 and was well received by critics. Four of her novels are still in print.

Amelia enjoyed travel and spent much time in France and Italy. One of her sojourns in Italy, when she traveled with a wealthier single woman, resulted in her producing the highly successful *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys* (1873) about their hikes in the almost uncharted Dolomites. This book is still a classic for devotees of mountain climbing. In the winter of 1873-74, due to inclement weather in Europe, with the same companion Edward's travel plans were changed to head for Egypt's sun and warmth. There the women hired a large houseboat and spent many weeks on the Nile. The result was not only the still popular *Thousand Miles up the Nile*,

but a radical change in Amelia's career. After her experiences in Egypt, on this one and only trip there, she sacrificed a successful writing career to devote herself exclusively to Egyptology and most of all to the cause of rescuing the ancient monuments and archaeological sites so that they might be studied before they were totally destroyed.

Edwards had been appalled by the destruction and mutilation of antiquities and sites she had viewed, but she also found great enjoyments at hand. Moored for two weeks at Abu Simbel, she discovered a small chapel in the temple of Abu Simbel which had been hidden in a sand dune. Bitten by the archaeology bug and also seized by the need to do something to quell the destruction of historical records, Amelia took up the challenge of alerting the world to the plight of ancient Egypt's legacy.

"I am told that the wall paintings which we had the happiness of admiring in all their beauty and freshness (in the chapel she discovered at Abu Simbel) are already much injured. Such is the fate of every Egyptian monument, great or small. The tourist carves it over with names and dates, and in some instances with caricatures. The student of Egyptology, by taking wet paper "squeezes" sponges away every vestige of the original colour. The "Collector" buys and carries off everything of value that he can, and the Arab steals it for him. The work of destruction, meanwhile goes on apace.. The Museums of Berlin, of Turin, of Florence are rich in spoils which tell their lamentable tale. When science leads the way, is it wonderful that ignorance should follow?"

Appearing in 1877, her *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (with illustrations by her hand) was an instant success. In its writing she had corresponded with Egyptologists for information: Birch and Poole at the British Museum, Maspero in Paris, (who had read her novels and for whom she would translate some of his books, such as his *Manual of Egyptian Archaeology*). Her care for obtaining facts, her serious efforts in research and

self-education (she learned to read hieroglyphs) set her apart from the other non-professional writers of the time whose approach was much more that of the dilettante.

Publicity of the plight of Egypt's monuments had to be followed by practical measures for their study and conservation. Apparently, it was Edwards who conceived the idea of an English organization to support archaeological work and publication in Egypt.

In December, 1879, appeared a letter from the Swiss archaeologist Eduard Naville's letter in the *Morning Post* outlining the urgent need for foreign financial support for archeological exploration in Egypt, as Egypt itself was now bankrupt and archaeological work under the direction of the government's archaeologist August Mariette had stopped due to his ill health. This gave Edwards the “ammunition” she needed. Soon she was writing a number of scholars urging support and seeking funds by appealing to the then current interest in finding evidence to prove the Biblical stories were authentic. Birch of the British Museum refused to help this effort, seeing no gain for England. Stuart Poole, keeper of coins and medals there was enlisted however, and Edwards and Naville combined forced and pushed ahead, writing Mariette of their plans to raise money for him. He soon died, but Gaston Maspero, already friends with Edwards, succeeded him, which boded well for the English. Birch did suggest, however, that an endowed teaching chair and preparation of future students was needed in London. Meanwhile Maspero asked Edwards if she might not find a young English archaeologist to excavate in Egypt.

In 1882, the Egypt Exploration Fund was founded with R.S. Poole and Sir Erasmus Wilson, with Amelia Edwards taking subscriptions from Americans as well as the English. She served jointly with Poole as the Fund's Honorary Secretary. This would be the first foreign organization to be granted concessions to excavate in Egypt by Egypt. However, political events there worsened, and soon Maspero was in a difficult position, daring not to seem to the Egyptians or French as an English agent. He still wanted an

Englishman sent out, but accepted the Swiss Naville as the EEF's representative and allowed him any site he wanted in the Delta.

Funded by Erasmus Wilson's £500. (Wilson, a wealthy physician with a passion for Egypt, had spent £10,000. pounds bringing the obelisk from Egypt to the Thames embankment), Naville started with the Wadi Tumilat, because the Egypt Exploration Fund was interested in establishing the route of the Exodus. In 1882 Amelia Edwards wrote an immense number of popular articles (over 100 to *Academy* alone) publicizing Naville's excavations which had discovered the city of Pithon in the Delta.

The next season (1883) the Fund sent out young Flinders Petrie, who had initially been overlooked as inexperienced, but his first book on *the Pyramids and Temples of Giza* impressed the committee, especially Edwards. She then concentrated on publishing notices of Petrie's work in the *Times*. Another young man who would later become a giant in Egyptological history was helped in the beginning by Edwards who raised funds for a scholarship on his behalf. Francis Llewellyn Griffith, who had taught himself hieroglyphs and was eager to accompany an archaeological expedition to Egypt, would later become the first professor of Egyptology at Oxford. Edwards insisted that Naville take Griffith with him to the Delta, and Petrie was impressed by him as well and welcomed him as an assistant, finding his knowledge of the ancient script particularly helpful.

Petrie paid for small objects found by his workers so that they would not be lost. Later the EEF would often distribute these in exchange for donations. When in 1884 Petrie, working at Tanis, brought home 16 cases of pottery and many small objects, Edwards presented a paper concerning this work at the Congress of Orientalists in Leyden. By 1885 Petrie had discovered Naukratis and, seeing him as a genius, Edwards conceived her idea of endowing a university chair for him. The Edwards Chair would be the first in England, but had to wait until the benefactor was dead as she was a woman of modest means. An active defender of women's rights, Edwards wanted this academic

appointment created at London's University College. Then the only school admitting women, UCL was founded 1820's with disregard to race, creed, or sex, unlike Oxford or Cambridge.

In 1886 Naville found the great temple of Bubastis, and Edwards presented another paper at the Congress of Orientalists, meeting this time in Vienna. In 1887 Naville excavated at Tell Yahudieh. The EEF often had three expeditions in the field at one time. Petrie resigned from EEF due to disagreements with its administration, but kept up close relationship with Edwards, asking her for advice on his program of digging sites in Egypt. She tried but failed to get him an appointment at the Cairo Museum.

In 1889 Edwards again had a paper read at the Congress of Orientalists, Stockholm. Totally self-taught, she had become quite a celebrity from all her Egyptological writings which included the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *London Illustrated News*, and *Harpers Weekly*. She was more than a popularizer, however. As an example: in 1889 Petrie, excavating in the Fayum, set her facsimile sketches of graffiti found on potsherds, and she was able to write him back regarding their identifications with Cypriot, Phoenician, Phrygian, Etruscan and other ancient languages.

The winter of 1889-90 found her undertaking a 120 stop lecture tour in the United States, invited formally by 200 leading Americans, but organized by the EEF's chief American supporter the Bostonian William Copley Winslow. Speaking at learned societies and major universities on the East Coast and in the Midwest as well as before influential groups such as the New England Women's Press Association, Edwards made a very favorable impression for her speaking ability, her humor, her gracious unassuming personality as well as for her obvious learning. At this time Edwards was also awarded honorary degrees by Columbia University, Smith College, and the College of the Sisters of Bethany in Topeka, Kansas. Her friend Kate Bradbury (quoted by Margaret Drower in *Petrie*, page 199) once observed to Petrie that Amelia Edwards "did not love many people for all her seeming geniality." She went on to tell him that he was one of perhaps

three people she was very fond of, but that Edward's had stated she "might just as well be fond of a young obelisk." This sad observation tells us as much about Edwards as it does of the brilliant and arrestingly handsome Petrie.

Edwards has been criticized for not writing forcefully for women's rights and has even been called a racist by one woman commentator (B. Melman) recently for her apparent abhorrence of the squalor which sometimes confronted her in Egypt. However, the very same book where this supposedly narrow attitude of Edwards' surfaces contains many expressions of sympathy for the impoverished fellahin and, if anything, reveals more understanding than would be expected from someone of her background and time. Indeed, Edwards had a long record of extremely liberal opinions and beliefs. Another biographer (J. Rees) has pointed out her probably communistic sympathies and possible atheism. She certainly was in favor of rights for women and left her money only to a school which accepted women students. If any label should be attached to Amelia B. Edwards it would have to be "liberal" for her times.

Unfortunately the years of being "chained" to her desk, the long days and nights of writing letters and articles (in one year she hand wrote 4000 solicitations for funds for the EEF) took their toll. Edwards died relatively young, not long after her celebrated tour of the United States. In 1891 she underwent an operation for a malignant tumor in a breast, and possibly the cancer weakened her resistance to disease sufficiently that she fell victim to the flu of 1892. She added a codicil to her will in March, stipulating that the candidate for the Edward's Chair must not be over 40 years old. As Petrie's biographer M. Drower suggests, Amelia must have known she had not long to live. She died at her home, "The Larches" in Westbury-on-Trym" near Bristol on April 15th. The publication of her lectures in the U.S.A. appeared posthumously as *Pharaohs, Fellahs, and Explorers*. It was seen through to publication by her devoted disciple Kate Bradbury, who would later marry the Professor of Egyptology at Oxford, Francis Llewellyn Griffith. Bradbury and Petrie settled Edwards' estate and saw to it that Amelia Edwards'

grave was marked by a giant stone ankh sign lying flat. Her marble portrait bust once graced the National Portrait Gallery in London (it is now in Bodelwyddan Castle, near St. Asaph, Clwyd, Wales) and there is a reproduction and other portraits of her in the Petrie Museum at University College London.

She left her library, collections and £5000. to support the Edwards Chair in Egyptology. Her will stipulated not only that the professorship must go to someone under the age of 40 but that no one at the British Museum must be considered for it. In this way she assured that her candidate Petrie would be the first Edwards Professor of Egyptology. He, of course, went on to become the greatest name in the history of archaeology, a credit to his patron's foresight and support.

To succeed enough to be self-supporting Amelia Edwards had to suppress her liberal views and hide from public glare her own personal habits and history. She was so successful in creating a public persona for herself that she is today an enigma whose biographers despair at knowing the "real" Amelia. Her scholarly colleagues have often deliberately overlooked her considerable contributions and talents as seen from her obituaries and the attention that has been paid to her only lately. She was, as an independent and middle class woman, in many ways the victim of a very patriarchal and class conscious society in 19th and early 20th century Britain. While her legacy lives on in the Edwards Chair Professorship at University College London, Amelia B. Edwards's papers, including watercolors and a notebook from 1881 recording several Egyptian objects in private collections in Britain, are in the Archive of the Griffith Institute in Oxford.

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