

### **Margaret Benson (1865-1916) by William Peck**

The early history of archaeology in Egypt, as elsewhere in the exploration of the Mediterranean world, was entirely dominated by men and essentially closed to women until very nearly the end of the nineteenth century. Those women who expressed a keen interest in the history and antiquities of Egypt were essentially restricted in the employment of their talents to the roles of amateur collector of artifacts, author of travelers' accounts, or as a supportive wife of a male scholar/adventurer. In the study of ancient Egypt it was not until 1895 that a woman was given some measure of authority over her own archaeological project. Margaret Benson, daughter of the presiding Archbishop of Canterbury, was the first woman to be granted permission to conduct her own excavation under a concession awarded by officials of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities. The site in Luxor that drew her attention was the Precinct of the goddess Mut, in its remote location to the south of the temple complex of the god Amun at Karnak. The precinct contained the ruins of three temples and a number of smaller structures but its most distinctive and picturesque feature was a "sacred lake" of horseshoe shape, partly encircling the Temple of Mut in the center of the complex. This temple itself had only been investigated in the most cursory manner until Margaret Benson expressed an interest in exploring it.

At the time she began her work Margaret Benson was a thirty year-old woman with no training in archaeology and no experience in excavation. She had visited Egypt for the first time only the year before; she had little knowledge of the ancient Egyptian language and her command of modern Arabic was rudimentary. In addition to a nearly complete lack of preparation, her health was so poor that she was regarded by her family as a semi-invalid who had to be cared for and catered to. On the positive side, she was a member of a distinguished and influential English family with, for a woman at the time, the rare benefit of a university education. It was perhaps more important that she was accustomed to being taken seriously in her intellectual pursuits and that she was used to having her opinions listened to.

Margaret Benson's claim to inclusion in an account of women in archaeology rests on only the three seasons of work she carried out in 1895-97, although she had hoped and had planned to return to Egypt for further periods of excavation. In 1899 she published *The Temple of Mut in Asher*, an impressive report of her activities, augmented by Percy Newberry's translations of the texts of the inscriptions on the sculpture found. Her main co-author was Janet Gourlay, who had joined her during the second season, and who was to continue as her close friend and companion for most of the remainder of her life. In the introduction to the publication, Margaret was careful to emphasize the fact that it was the first time any woman had been given permission to lead an excavation in Egypt on her own. Her sense of accomplishment was as strong as her self-effacing tone was slightly apologetic.

Our first intention was not ambitious. We were desirous of clearing a picturesque site. We were frankly warned that we should make no discoveries; indeed if any had been anticipated, it was unlikely that the clearance would have been entrusted to inexperienced direction.

Margaret, the fourth of six children of Edward White Benson and Mary Sidgewick Benson, was born June 16, 1865.

At the time of her birth, her father, having been an assistant master at Rugby, was the first headmaster of the newly founded Wellington College. He rose in the service of the Church of England as Chancellor of the diocese of Lincoln, first Bishop of the new diocese of Truro and, finally, Archbishop of Canterbury. Each advancement in his illustrious career meant a necessary relocation for the family, causing Margaret's childhood to be spent in a series of impersonal official residences. In characterizing their father, her older brother Arthur was to write about him that he had founded a famous public school, lived an almost ideal canonical life and built the first cathedral since the Reformation - a succinct list of accomplishments to the credit of this self-made man.

Archbishop Benson was a learned person with a wide knowledge of history and a serious concern for the education of the young, but he was also an excessively demanding father in his expectations of his children. These expectations were partly satisfied by the careers of three of Margaret's siblings, Arthur Christopher Benson (1862-1925), Edward Frederick Benson (Fred) (1867-1940), and Robert Hugh Benson (1817-1914), who all became noted authors in their time. For the young Bensons, the family circle was literally a hive of intellectual activity presided over by the father, who took advantage of virtually every free moment for the improvement of his children's minds and to further some aspect of their education. A standing joke was made later about the need for a family publishing house in order to accommodate the works of the prolific Bensons.

Margaret's formal education began in 1883 when she was enrolled at Oxford at the age of eighteen. She was one of the first generation of female scholars to attend Lady Margaret Hall, the women's college founded only four years before her arrival. University education for women was only beginning to be accepted in England at the time and, even then, it was not expected that they would attempt to compete with their male counterparts in academic matters. It is worth mentioning that Gertrude Bell, who made her own name in the annals of the archaeology of the Middle East, was also one of the first students at Lady Margaret Hall

One of Margaret's tutors expressed his regret that Margaret had not been able to read for "Greats" in the normal (male) way. He felt that she had such potential that he would have liked to have had her compared with male scholars of her own standing. When she took a first in the Women's Honours School of Philosophy, he commented sadly that "No one will realize how brilliantly she has done." Since her work was not evaluated against all of her contemporaries, male and female, it would have probably escaped notice.

In her studies she concentrated on political science, economics and the 'moral sciences' but she was also an active student and, in terms that seem far more modern than the 1880's, extremely well-rounded. She played cricket and field hockey and she learned to swim so that she could participate in boating. She was active in clubs and societies, debated, and took part in amateur theatricals. She belonged to the Shakespeare and Browning societies and took the part of Romeo in a student production, but her most outstanding talent was expressed in the arts of drawing and painting in watercolor. Her work was praised by no less a critic than John Ruskin who extended a personal invitation for her to study at his school. Ruskin was of

the opinion that she was so much more skillful than her fellow students he thought she should be appointed drawing mistress if she decided to remain at Lady Margaret Hall for any length of time.

As befitted the daughter of the Archbishop, Margaret maintained a serious attitude toward her scholarship with serious concerns. She began a work titled "The Venture of Rational Faith" which occupied her thoughts for many years. It later saw publication as did another of her writings entitled "Capital, Labor, Trade and the Outlook." Both of these are mentioned often by her literary brothers but they seem to have had little lasting effect outside the family. From the titles alone they suggest a young woman who was deeply concerned with problems of society and the spirit and this preoccupation with the spiritual was to continue to occupy her thoughts throughout the rest of her life. In some of her later letters from Egypt it is clear that she was constantly challenged by an attempt to understand something of the spiritual life of the ancient Egyptians, not a surprising interest for the daughter of a churchman like Edward White Benson. She was not a frivolous person and the impression of her childhood garnered from the various comments published by her brothers is one of a seriousness not befitting her young years.

Margaret was never an example of robust good health. In 1885, at the age of twenty she was taken with scarlet fever at Zermatt in Switzerland. This was her first serious illness of which there is a published record. It was also the first indication of a life of continuous ill-health. By the age of twenty-five she had developed the symptoms of rheumatism and arthritis. From then on her life was interrupted by a series of journeys in search of cures or some type of physical relief. She was advised to travel to Egypt in 1894 because the warm, dry, climate and unpolluted air was considered to be beneficial for those who suffered from her ailments. Wintering in the south of Egypt at Luxor or Aswan was highly recommended at the time for a wide range of illnesses ranging from simple asthma to "mental strain." Margaret's situation was similar to that of Lord Carnarvon, Howard Carter's sponsor in the search for the tomb of Tutankhamun. Carnarvon was typical of many English and Europeans who went to Egypt for reasons of health. Like Margaret Benson, Carnarvon also stayed onto pursue an amateur interest in archaeology.

In 1894, on Margaret's first visit to Egypt, she arrived at Alexandria in January, visited Cairo and Giza and as a tourist new to the country, went on by stages as far south as Aswan and the island temples of Philae. Her letters from this first trip are full of comments typical of the educated traveler, about what she saw and experienced: the "wonderful calm" of the Great Sphinx, the physical beauty of the Nubians, the color of the stone at Philae, and even the descent of the first cataract by boat, which she characterized as "not at all dangerous". By the end of January she had established herself in Luxor with a program of visits to the monuments set out for her to follow. Her letters give some indication of her growing interest in the antiquities of Egypt:

This place grows on one extraordinarily. I don't feel as if I should have really had an idea of Egypt at all if I hadn't stayed here --the Bas-reliefs of kings in chariots are only now beginning to look individual instead of made on a pattern, and the immensity of the whole thing is beginning to dawn--and the colours, oh my goodness! You get to see them more every day.

Her letters from this trip are full of details of the sights and sounds of the country, the animals and birds, the little gossip concerning other visitors and tourists, occasional comments on ancient Egyptian religious beliefs and her reactions to the

contemporary Egyptians she encountered. A typical observation, somewhat indicative of her attitudes: "The children are very nice when they are not either lying or begging."

During her first visit she began a study of both ancient Egyptian and Arabic languages. She found the ancient language and script fascinating but she was perhaps put off by the classical Arabic of the Koran. Her interest in the variety of animal and bird life was a natural extension other existence at home in England for she had always been keen on keeping pets and had been surrounded by domestic animals. By the time her first visit to Egypt ended in March, 1894, she was so taken by the country that she had already resolved to return in the fall. Sometime in the interval between the first and second trip she conceived the idea of excavating a site and thus made her application to the authorities in charge of the antiquities. Having visited the Precinct of the goddess Mut at Karnak the previous year, she asked for permission to clear the principal temple of Mut but her request was refused. Her application was denied even though the site that she had chosen seemed unimportant to the officials of the time and no professional archaeologists had evidenced an interest in it or had proposed plans for conducting an excavation there. Edouard Naville, the Swiss Egyptologist who was working at the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahari for the Egypt Exploration Fund wrote on her behalf to Henri de Morgan, Director of the Department of Antiquities to plead her case. Her application was reconsidered and permission to excavate was given at the beginning of January, 1895. It is clear from her letters that this was one of the most exciting moments of Margaret Benson's life. She was free to embark on what she considered a challenging project and a great adventure.

Margaret's physical condition was not to be forgotten so easily. At the commencement of the excavation there was considerable concern for her family. Her brother Fred (E F. Benson) wrote about this at length.

Did ever an invalid plan and carry out so sumptuous an activity? She was wintering in Egypt for her heath, being threatened with a crippling form of rheumatism; she was suffering also from an internal malady, depressing and deadly; a chill was a serious thing for her, fatigue must be avoided, and yet with the most glorious contempt of bodily ailments which I have seen, she continued to employ some amazing mental vitality that brushed disabilities aside, and, while it conformed to medical orders, crammed the minutes with such sowings and reappings as the most robust might envy.... All the local English archaeologists were, so to speak, at her feet, partly from the entire novelty of an English girl conducting an excavation of her own, but more because of her grateful and enthusiastic personality...

Margaret was thirty years old when she began the excavation. That her devoted brother would refer to her as a "girl" is probably indicative of the responsibility he felt for her. As has been noted, Margaret Benson had no particular training to qualify or prepare her for the task but, lacking in experience, she more than made up for it with her "enthusiastic personality" and her intellectual curiosity.

In the preface to *The Temple of Mut in Asher* she wrote that she had no prior intention of publishing the work because she had been assured that there was little to find. She also said that if she had had any expectation of what was to come of it she would have kept better records and "ordered many things differently." In 1901, four years after her work at the Temple of Mut was halted, she wrote to her mother:

"Such a lot of times in my life I've been driven this way and that.. things stopped just when I thought I was getting to them, or like Egyptology, opened just when I could do nothing else..."

Her health had made it necessary for her to find suitable conditions soothing to her maladies. She had been led to excavation

because her ever-active mind needed stimulation and the recovery of some vestige of antiquity seemed a project of interest to her. The romance and mystery of buried artifacts and art certainly appealed to her as well.

As the work progressed and eventually extended to three seasons, and as she became familiar with the work of others, the obligation of the excavator to publish became obvious to Margaret Benson. In the introduction to *The Temple of Mut in Asher* acknowledgments were made and gratitude was offered to a number of people who came to her assistance in various ways. The list of professional Egyptologists and archaeologists who she credited with helping included W. M. F. Petrie, Edouard Naville, Jacques de Morgan, Emile Brugsch, Ludwig Borchardt, Georges Daressy, and D G Hogarth. Percy Newberry, who translated the inscriptions on all of the statues found, was singled out for special thanks. Miss Katharine Gent (Mrs. Lea), a Colonel Esdaille, and Margaret's brother, E. F. Benson, helped in the supervision of the work in one or more seasons. Funding was obtained from a number of individuals including members of the Benson family.

It is usually assumed that Margaret Benson and her friend Janet Gourlay, who joined her in the second season, worked only as amateurs, with little direction and totally inexperienced help. It is clear from the acknowledgments in the publication that Naville helped to set up the excavation and plan the work. Hogarth gave advice in the direction of the digging, and Newberry was singled out for his general advice, suggestions and corrections as well as "unwearied kindness." Margaret's brother, Fred, had university training in classics and archaeology with some practical field experience in England and Greece. He helped his inexperienced sister by supervising some of the work as well as by making a measured plan of the temple which is reproduced in her publication. Photographs in the publication were by a diverse group including A. Beato (the commercial supplier of photographs), Dr. Page May, H.B. Gourlay (presumably Janet's father), J.F. Vaughn, M. Werli, Brugsch Bey (probably after statues were taken to the museum), as well as by Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay.

It is interesting to speculate on the reasons that would lead a Victorian woman to be drawn to the Temple of Mut. She was the goddess who was the consort of the great state god Amun, and she was variously titled "Lady of Heaven," and "Mistress of all the Gods." Her precinct is a compelling site and was certainly in need of further exploration in Margaret's time. The site is still somewhat deserted in appearance today, but it was much more so in the 1890s. Its isolation and the arrangement with the principal temple enclosed on three sides by its own sacred lake made it seem even more picturesque, romantic, even compelling.

When she began the excavation a total of three days was considered enough time for the average tourist to "do" the monuments of Luxor. Margaret observed that few people could be expected to spend even a half hour in the Precinct of Mut. On her first trip to Egypt in 1894 she had visited the temple because she had heard about the "granite statues with cats' heads" (the lion-headed images of the goddess Sakhmet). The donkey-boys knew how to find the temple but it was not considered a "usual excursion". In Margaret's day the typical tourist would have passed within sight of it on the way to the precinct of Amun, as Karnak street had not been replaced at that time by the corniche on the Nile as the principal route of access. From a distance the precinct would have given the appearance of a series of rolling mounds of rubble and would have held little

attraction because of the poor state of preservation of the ruins. After her early visits to the site Margaret's assessment was that "The temple itself was much destroyed, and the broken walls so far buried, that one could not trace the plan of more than the outer court and a few small chambers".

Margaret chose to restrict her work to only the central structure within a complex which is comprised of an extensive field of ruins measuring about twenty-two acres in size. Connected to the southernmost pylons of the larger Amun Temple of Karnak by an avenue of ram sphinxes, only recently completely excavated, the precinct of Mut contains the remains of three major temples and a number of smaller structures in various stages of dilapidation. She noted some of these details in her initial description of the site, but in her three campaigns she was only able to concentrate on the interior of the Mut Temple proper and to clear a little of its exterior on the south.

The antiquarian interest in the Precinct of Mut can be traced back to the late eighteenth century when an Arab sheikh is said to have excavated statues of Sakhmet for a Venetian priest. The Napoleonic expedition at the end of the eighteenth century focused a new attention on the antiquities of the country. Artists and engineers attached to the French military corps measured the ruins in the precinct and mapped the site as part of the greater Karnak complex. They also produced engravings of the two colossal statues still to be found in the precinct today. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the great age of the European treasure hunters in Egypt, Giovanni Belzoni, working for the English Consul, carried away a number of the lion-headed statues and pieces of sculpture to European museums.

Champollion, the principal decipherer of hieroglyphs and Karl Lepsius, the pioneer Prussian Egyptologist, both visited the precinct, copied inscriptions and made maps of the remains. The Prussian expedition of Lepsius mapped the site with considerable accuracy, recording much architectural detail not present on the Napoleonic maps. August Mariette later excavated in the precinct and believed that he had exhausted the site. Most of the travelers and scholars who visited the area or carried out work there left some notes or sketches of what they saw. The works of James Burton, Robert Hay and Sir John Gardner Wilkinson were particularly used as references for the new excavation. Since some of the early sources are quoted and discussed in her publication, Margaret Benson was obviously aware of their existence or, more likely, had had them called to her attention by Newberry.

On her return to Egypt at the end of November, 1894, she stopped at Mena House hotel near the pyramids at Giza where she could be out of the noise and activity of the city. She then went on to spend a short time at Helwan, south of Cairo. Helwan was highly regarded among the European tourists for its sulfur springs and from about 1880 it had become a popular health resort, particularly suited for the treatment of the kinds of maladies that afflicted Margaret. When she finally arrived in Luxor she was greeted by her acquaintances of the previous year as an old friend. People at every turn asked if she remembered them and it was said that her donkey-boy almost wept to see her. Later, when the excavations were in progress and the workmen sang their impromptu songs they called Margaret "the princess" and her brother Fred "the Khedive".

The Luxor Hotel, about a mile and a half from the precinct, served as the headquarters of the Benson group. This meant a donkey ride each day but it was probably the most convenient arrangement for the excavation staff. The first season of

excavation began on the 1st of January with a small crew of men and boys. Naville came from his work at Deir el Bahri to help Margaret organize the work, give her an idea of how to proceed and to get her started. It was decided to begin the clearance of the Temple of Mut in the first court where August Mariette had undoubtedly worked, where earth was piled on the north side from where it had been dug out on the south.

In the remains of the first monumental gateway, a stone portal in a mud-brick pylon, the earth had accumulated ten to twelve feet deep over the preserved paving stones. The clearance revealed fallen blocks, presumably from the gate, a lion-headed Sakhmet lying across the way, and a detached sandstone hippopotamus head. This quantity of material gave an early indication of the potential of the site. As the court was cleared and the bases for four pairs of columns were exposed it became possible to consider making corrections and additions to the earlier maps.

In the first court eight more Sakhmets were disengaged from the rubble, presumed to be close to the ancient positions. The first find of historical significance was a block statue of Amenemhet, a royal scribe in the reign of Amenhotep II. In the late nineteenth century the general assumption was to date the temple to the reign of Amenhotep III, mainly because of the number of Sakhmet statues inscribed to him that had been found in the site. The discovery of a statue obviously inscribed to an earlier ruler suggested that the temple might have also been founded earlier even though the presence of an inscribed statue in a temple context cannot be used to securely date the building. Margaret Benson, like subsequent excavators, was to find woefully little inscriptional evidence in an unquestionable context in the Temple of Mut.

The statue of Amenemhet was immediately confiscated by the Inspector appointed to keep an eye on the progress of the work. Margaret appealed to Georges Daressy, in charge of the excavations at Karnak. He relented and allowed the statue to be taken to the Luxor Hotel where Margaret could enjoy it until the end of the season. In addition to the block statue, the other finds in the first campaign included two sandstone baboons dated to the time of Ramesses III, the upper part of a large female figure, and the usual miscellany of coins, terracottas, pottery and broken bits of bronze. In the short time of five weeks the untrained amateur had begun to expose the remains of the architecture of the temple, had been able to make obvious corrections on the plans then available to her, and had begun a modest program of sculptural restoration and reconstruction

Margaret's health was extremely uncertain during this first experience of excavation. She was often bed-ridden and she was subject to fits of depression. She whiled away hotel evenings in visiting with the tourists or in playing parlor games with her brother, Fred. She even appeared at a fancy dress ball at the Luxor Hotel attired as the goddess Mut, complete with vulture headdress. The second season began at the end of January, 1896, with a slightly larger work crew. Since Margaret considered that the first court had been sufficiently cleared the previous year and it was not likely that there was more to find the work was pushed on into the second court. The most important development in the conduct of the work was the realization that more care had to be taken. More attention was paid to the observation of building techniques and construction sequences. The amateur excavator was being made aware of what to look for in Egyptian temple building and was developing some sensitivity as to how to record it.

The second court proved to be a virtual treasure trove of sculpture. A monumental lion head was found there, with

most of its sun-disk preserved. It ended up in the Cairo museum with about thirty other statues eventually excavated by Margaret Benson. Two statues, a larger than average Sakhmet and a large seated king, clearly of the New Kingdom but unfortunately with his names effaced, were reconstructed and are still in situ in the temple. Smaller pieces of sculpture, relief blocks and other miscellaneous finds continued to come light as well.

Margaret had been made aware of the possibility of finding dedicatory foundation deposits which might give information for dating supplementary to the meager inscriptional material preserved. She pursued this suggestion by excavating under the centers of doorways and the appropriate building corners but with no success. However, the search for foundation deposits led to an examination of the southernmost walls at the back of the temple. While this revealed no deposits, it did produce an important statue of Senenmut, the architect and high official of Queen Hatshepsut and another of Bakkenkonsu, a High Priest of Amun in the reign of Ramesses III. The inscriptions on the statue of Senenmut provided more reason to believe that the temple had its origins, not in the time of Amenhotep III, but earlier in Dynasty Eighteen.

A second contretemps developed with the antiquities authorities over the recent finds. Once again an attempt was made immediately to spirit away the new discoveries, and again, after another entreaty the excavators were allowed to keep the statues until the end of the season. Margaret was eventually awarded at least three pieces from the excavation including the large upper fragment of a royal statue, then identified as Ramesses II. This was to remain in the family for many years and act as a constant reminder of the days when Margaret had excavated in Egypt.

In the second season Lady Jane Lindsey, a school friend of Margaret's, brought a young woman named Janet Gourlay to help in the excavation. A personal relationship between Margaret and Janet blossomed immediately and continued with considerable love, affection and fervor for most of Margaret's life. Although the year had begun auspiciously for Margaret, her excavation and her new friendship with Janet Gourlay, it was destined to end in family tragedy. Archbishop Benson died in October. The impact of her father's death on Margaret can only be estimated, but it was certainly immense. Edward White Benson had been a force in her life for which there was to be no substitute.

Four members of the Benson family went to Egypt for the 1827 season of excavation. The household had been recently disrupted by the Archbishop's death, Margaret's health was still not good and her youngest brother Hugh was also not well. Mary Benson, their mother, accompanied them. Fred continued to help with the supervision of the work and make the measurements for a plan of the temple.

Work was begun on January 10 with a larger party for the supervision and more money available for the employment of the workmen. The three activities anticipated for that season were the continued clearance of the temple, a concerted search for foundation deposits, and the reopening of the area around the southeast corner of the temple where a cache of statues had been discovered. An accurate plan of the temple was to be made, correcting the errors of Mariette and other earlier efforts in so far as was possible.

On the first day of work two important statues were discovered. One of these was a headless block statue inscribed for Mentuemhat, Fourth Prophet of Amun, of Dynasty 25-28. The second was the upper portion of a statue which preserved

part of an inscription but did not give the owner's name but it included titles that made the identification virtually certain as Mentuemhat, as well. It was a life-sized representation, preserved to below the shoulders, with a bald pate fringed with hair, rare in Egyptian art. It was certainly one of the great masterpieces of sculpture regardless of its period. These two finds formed the subject of an article later published jointly by Newberry and Janet Gourlay. As far as is known this was the only publication about the work in the Temple of Mut Gourlay was involved in other than the excavation report.

The excavations near the southeast corner of the temple were enlarged. In the first day's work of this trenching process fourteen pieces of statues were uncovered, including one remarkable head attributed to the Saite Period. A second trench was opened to the west of the contra-temple attached to the south end of the Mut temple proper. From the two areas came pieces of fifteen inscribed statues, a sphinx, three heads and parts of an alabaster statue. Added to the clever statues from the same area the previous year, this became an impressive haul. Based on this success a third section was cut from the southeast corner up the east side of the temple for about forty feet, where a massive fall of cornice blocks deterred further excavation. The results were not so impressive although fragments of sculpture were still found. An incidental discovery in this area was a clay pot containing forty-nine coins dated to the reign of Nero. In three short seasons the work had progressed from the first court to the shores of the lake behind the temple.

The publication gave little indication concerning the conditions under which the work of the third season was carried out. It is necessary to turn to the fragmentary accounts left by Arthur (A.C. Benson) and Fred (E.F. Benson) for some idea of the circumstances. The 1897 campaign nearly ended in tragedy. Margaret was taken with a chill which developed into pleurisy. Her condition was deemed so serious that she was expected to die. As a last resort the fluid around her lungs was tapped and drained by a doctor at the Luxor Hotel under conditions that are best only imagined. Her brother Fred maintained that it was only through a feat of faith and will that Margaret managed to hold onto life. Although she was to return to Egypt once more, it was not to excavate. 1897 was her last season of work in the precinct of the goddess Mut.

On the return from Egypt the family had to face the necessary move from the archbishop's official residence at Lambeth Palace. Arthur was occupied with his duties as a master at Eton but the others had to adjust to a completely revised living routine without the central and commanding figure of the Archbishop. A large house with garden was secured at Winchester, near the cathedral, and life began to be reorganized. Margaret helped Arthur with the research in family papers as he prepared an official biography of his father. Even this diversion was not enough to keep her from falling into periodic bouts of depression. Her health was precarious at best and it was described that she "suffered much from exhaustion and listlessness."

The climate of Winchester was soon found unsuitable for Margaret's fragile condition. After a search, the family settled on Tremans, near Horsted Keynes, north of Brighton. This large old house was to be her happy residence for the next eight years. There she was able to lead a relatively normal and productive life.

The illness at Luxor was followed later by a heart attack. In 1900 she returned to Egypt with Janet Gourlay but my as a visitor. For the better part of the first decade of the century Margaret, still in bad health, managed to engage in an active

intellectual life. She worked on her book *The Venture of Rational Faith* and she edited and wrote prefaces for some of her father's works for publication. These included *Addresses on the Acts of the Apostles*, *The Apocalypse, an introductory study of the Revelation of St John...*, and *God's Board, being a series of communion addresses*. She carried on an extensive correspondence with friends and relatives, particularly her cousin, Stewart McDowell, with whom she shared many of her ideas and concerns about religion and philosophy.

Newberry had envisioned a project in which Margaret would join him in the production of an exhaustive history of Egypt. Although there is scant preserved evidence, the relationship between her and Newberry seems to have been one of mutual respect and cordiality. The proposed history would certainly have been a work to which Margaret could have lent her critical and literary abilities. She even suggested a tentative plan to spend time visiting museums and Egyptian collections in Europe collecting material for the project. Newberry published *A Short History of Ancient Egypt* in 1904 with John Garstang. This may have been the substitute for the original projected work, never carried out.

Margaret's concerns with education and her interest in sharing her enthusiasms led her to be instrumental in the organization of the St. Paul Association for Biblical Study. This body had regular London meetings, invited lecturers and a theological lending library. She also organized a Vacation Term for Biblical study, meant to be held at Oxford or Cambridge, and she also supported the organization of the Archbishop's diploma in theology for women. For one with limited energy and frail health, Margaret managed to keep herself occupied.

Shortly after the last trip to Egypt she had begun to complain in her about serious problems with her lungs and by 1906 there are numerous references to periods of nervous depression. By 1907 she had suffered a mental breakdown and from that time to her death in 1916 she was rarely free from mental suffering, derangement and hallucinations. It is difficult to know the precise sequence and progress of her illness from the writings of her brothers but there were times in which she was considered capable of harming herself. Sometime after 1907 she was entrusted to an order of the Sisters of Mercy for care. From them she was transferred to the Priory, Roehampton, a private institution for the mentally ill. Her older brother, Arthur, pointedly wrote that he was able to visit her in 1910, the implication being that her condition had been so grave that even close members of the family were not able to see her, even though she was corresponding with her family and friends in perfectly intelligible letters as late as 1915. Around 1913 she had been moved to the family care of a doctor and his wife at Wimbledon where she was able to lead a more or less normal life.

Arthur wrote of her death in May, 1918: "At last a physical malady of the heart developed and once or twice her mind was cleared of all delusion; but her strength slowly declined." Margaret Benson, talented artist and author in her own right, daughter of the Archbishop of Canterbury, sister of three authors famous in their own time, and the first woman to conduct her own excavation in Egypt, died peacefully in her sleep.

There is evidence to suggest that Margaret Benson and her companion Janet Gourlay, would have continued to excavate in Egypt if Margaret's health had not made that impossible. This is attested by a letter from Gourlay preserved in the Newberry correspondence at the Griffith Institute, Oxford, in which Janet Gourlay discusses the building of an excavation

house for further seasons of work. Certainly Margaret Benson had the talents of an inspired amateur archaeologist who could have developed through study and experience into a distinguished Egyptologist. One only has to mention Petrie and Carter, both "amateurs" at their beginnings in Egyptology, as a reminder of what was possible in the infancy of the discipline.

Margaret Benson's main contribution to the Egyptological literature, *The Temple of Mut in Asher*, stands up to as careful scrutiny as many other excavation reports of her time. It was perhaps ill advised in that it was cast as more than an excavation report. It was also an attempt to write a history of Egypt as illustrated by the significant discoveries made in the Precinct of Mut. When the descriptions of the actual excavation work are separated from this framework it may be seen that there is considerable narrative explanation of the course of the work and the importance of the material found. In practical testing of what was done during her excavations, it has generally been possible to follow her descriptions with some accuracy. As might be expected, there are some vague or ambiguous sections of the narrative which would have been more useful if stated more precisely or explained with more precise details. A typical example is the mention of the search for foundation deposits with no positive indication of which doorways or what corners were examined. Like many nineteenth century excavation reports, measurements are frequently omitted so that the exact location of a find spot is often impossible to determine. With these and other shortcomings in mind, the report of the three short seasons of excavation still forms a useful document, particularly in regard to the excavation of a number of important pieces of sculpture. When the *Life and Letters of Maggie Benson* by her brother Arthur is read with the *Temple of Mut in Asher* many details of the excavation become clearer, as well as providing some penetrating and interesting insights into the complex personality of Margaret Benson.

## Bibliography

### *Works by Margaret Benson:*

*The Temple of Mut in Asher;*  
London, London, 1899

*Capital, Labor and Trade and the Outlook*  
London, 1891

*The Count of the King; and other studies*  
London, 1913

*The Soul of a Cat, and other stories*  
London, 1901

*Subject to Vanity*  
New York, 1895

*The Venture of Rational Faith*  
London, 1908

*Works by Edward White Benson (1829-1896), edited by Margaret Benson*

*Addresses on the Acts of the Apostles*

London, 1901

*The Apocalypse, an introductory study of the Revelation of St John...*

London, 1900, editor's preface signed by Margaret Benson

*God's Board, being a series communion addresses*

London, 1904

The second version of the list is modified for book store searches, and includes two general works on the Benson family

*General works on the Benson family:*

Betty Askwith:

*Two Victorian Families*

(the Strachey Family; the Benson Family)

London, 1971

David Williams:

*Genesis and exodus: a Portrait of the Benson Family*

London, 1979

*Works by members of the Benson Family with reference to Margaret Benson*

Arthur Christopher Benson:

*The Life of Edward White Benson*, 2 vols., London, 1899

*Beside Still Waters*, London, New York, 1910

*The Leaves of the Tree*, London, New York, 1944

*Along the Road*, London, 1913

*The Life and Letters of Maggie Benson*, London, 1917

*The Trefoil*, London, 1923

Edward Frederick Benson

*Our Family Affairs*, London, New York, 1921

*Mother*, London, New York, 1925

*As We Were*, London, 1932

*Final Edition*, London, New York, 1940

1. *Temple of Mut*, p. v
2. Arthur Christopher Benson, *The Life and Letters of Maggie Benson*, p. 169, Margaret to her Mother, Luxor, Feb. 1, 1894
3. E. F. Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, George H. Doran, New York, 1921, pp.312, 313.
4. *Life and Letters*, pp. 291, 292.
5. It was Mrs. Lea's brother who was Margaret's tutor for her studies at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford.

6. Presumably the father-in-law of Margaret's paternal cousin, Kitty McDonnell Esdaile
7. *Temple of Mut*, p.9
8. In a section beginning on page 288 in *The Temple of Mut* she discussed the notes of James Burton (1840) and manuscript maps of Burton and Hay (all preserved in the British Museum and called to her attention by Newberry). She also mentions the work of the Lepsius expedition of the 1840s, *The Monuments of Upper Egypt* by Mariette and notes made by Bouriant.
9. E.F. Benson's work in Egypt has gone largely un-noticed. In addition to his work at the Temple of Mut he also was the co-author with D. G. Hogarth of *Report of Prospects of Research in Alexandria in the Archaeological Report of the Egypt Exploration Fund*, 1894-5. Since this was reprinted by the Society for the promotion of Hellenic Studies, Benson is sometimes cited as having worked for the Hellenic Society in Egypt.