

## **Myrtle Florence Broome (1887-1978) by John Ruffle**

Myrtle Broome is known amongst Egyptologists as one of the finest exponents of the art of epigraphy. Along with Amice Calverley (q.v.) she spent eight seasons copying some of the finest painted scenes in the temple of Seti I at Abydos, work which made possible the publication of this important material with an accuracy which almost surpasses photography.

Myrtle Florence Broome was born in Muwell Hill, London, England, the daughter of a music publisher, Washington Herbert Broome. She lived for most of her life in Bushey, Hertfordshire, an educated, middle class woman quietly painting and practicing other arts and crafts but for ten years, between 1927 and 1937, the even tenor of her life was dramatically enlivened by a series of visits to Egypt where she not only made a notable contribution to Egyptology but lived a full and adventurous life in a small Egyptian village.

Her impressions are recorded in absorbing detail and with delightful clarity in her frequent letters to her parents, now preserved in the Griffith Institute, Oxford and in her drawings and paintings many of which are now dispersed in the care of her family.

Apart from her period of work in Egypt it is difficult to reconstruct much of Miss Broome's life. An album of snapshots and comments in her letters suggest that she enjoyed sailing and riding but she appears not to have been in any kind of regular employment. She followed a course of training in art at the school founded in Bushey by

Sir Hubert Herkomer and

between 1911-13 she studied at University College London for the Certificate in Egyptology where she was a pupil of Sir Flinders Petrie and Margaret Murray (q.v., Breaking Ground). She obviously kept up her knowledge of the subject and her connection with Petrie because in 1927 she was invited to join a party, including Olga Tufnell (q.v.), who were engaged in copying inscriptions in tombs at Qau el-Kebir. On her first visit Egypt made a profound impression on Miss Broome and her enthusiastic descriptions of the landscape and the people reveal her artist's eye. In the course of this visit she was greatly smitten by the attentions of a local police officer who subsequently invited her to visit his family home. The visit, duly made a few months later and properly chaperoned by her uncle was a disaster and Miss Broome reluctantly admitted, cryptically, "it would never have worked". Thereafter she seems to have settled quite happily for the spinster life,

In 1929 Miss Broome joined Amice Calverley (q.v.) who had just undertaken a season of work at Abydos. Amice Calverley was a Canadian artist, with many varied talents, especially musical, and the two ladies made a well-matched pair. They were both deeply committed to their work at Abydos and took great interest in the life of the local villagers who invited them to all their feasts and ceremonies.

The staff of the expedition was relatively small, usually consisting of Miss Calverley and Miss Broome and a couple of other artists. They lived in a mudbrick house near the temple and Miss Broome kept an interested and informed eye on its construction and repairs, reporting details which she thought would interest her father who had contributed to the decoration of the Arts and Crafts family home in Bushey. The household was presided over by a housekeeper whom Miss Broome called Nannie

and Sardic, probably Miss Broome's transliteration of Sadiq, a man who seems to have been an adviser, bodyguard and general factotum. Other servants are referred to from time to time but life was frugal and Miss Calverley took seriously the need to live within their budget. Miss Broome noted with indignation the attitude of some of the other artists who expected to have meat every day.

The temple of Seti I at Abydos c. 1300 BC is famous for the quality of its painted relief decoration which is remarkably well preserved and it was the object of the expedition was to make a permanent record of these reliefs. Much of the recording was done using large photographs which the artists went over with a pencil strengthening those lines which were parts of the inscriptions and reliefs, checking them against the walls as they proceeded. At other times a camera lucida was also used to draw the outlines. Miss Broome and Miss Claverley also made a number of watercolor copies of some scenes, the only way to make an accurate record in the days when colour photography was still relatively new.

The work was no doubt a fascinating project, full of interest and challenging, but the day-to-day execution must also have been, at least at times, tedious and frustrating, demanding intense concentration but allowing no freedom of expression. Other artists who worked on the project from time to time with Miss Calverley and Miss Broome did not possess the requisite temperament and at least one of them reduced to nervous breakdowns. Miss Broome found an outlet for her artistic nature by sketching and painting scenes of the local village and its inhabitants.

As well as their archaeological work, the two ladies provided rudimentary medical help to the local villagers who were suspicious of hospitals. In most cases this amounted to little more than a good dose of Epsom Salts, but occasionally they became

involved with more serious problems and one case in particular of a farmer with a badly infected wound was reported in detail as a great triumph. Arabic lessons with the local schoolmaster were another point of contact with the local community which Miss Broome relished.

There was time for exploration of the area and Miss Broome was greatly attracted by the desert, making many short explorations of the neighborhood in her free time, usually attended by the faithful Sardic. Expeditions farther afield included one in March 1935 to Kharga and Dakhla oases in the Western desert, traveling by train to Kharga then by truck to Dakhla and in 1936 and 1937 the two ladies made the desert crossing from the town of Qena to the Red Sea in Miss Claverley's Jowett, affectionately known as Joey. They explored the many Roman quarries and mines along the route and showed themselves to be proficient in the art of desert motoring.

The work of Miss Calverley and Miss Broome was jointly organized by the Egypt Exploration Society, London and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago with financial support from John D Rockefeller, Jr. The results were published in four volumes appearing between 1933 and 1958. Miss Calverley and Miss Broome continued to work at Abydos until 1938. They prepared drawings for a fifth volume, but the project was interrupted by World War II and this volume is as yet unpublished. The recording and copying work has recently been resumed by Professor John Baines of The University of Oxford.

The two ladies remained good friends until Amice Calverley died in Toronto in 1959. Miss Broome became heavily involved in caring for her aged parents and was never able to return to Egypt or to the project. She died in 1978.

Although Miss Broome was 40 years old when she first went to Egypt there is an

air of almost girlish innocence about her letters. She and Miss Calverley entertained many distinguished Egyptologists at Abydos and a number of touring royals. All this was duly reported to her parents with a mixture of awe and reverence, suitably leavened with sharp observation and humour, and she never allowed these occasions to go to her head. She much preferred the warm relations that she developed with the local people. A letter written during the last season makes it plain that she continued to be fascinated by her life in Egypt even if she did have some very down-to-earth comments to make about the scholarly view of her contribution to Egyptology.

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