

Hilda Mary Isobel Petrie, nee Urlin 1871-1956..0000

by Margaret S. Drower

Youngest of the five daughters of Denny Urlin and his wife (born Addis). Her father was a lawyer who had spent twenty-six years as a barrister practicing in the courts of justice in Dublin. When Hilda was four years old the family returned to England to live, settling in The Grange Rustington-- built by her maternal grandparents in Sussex-- a comfortable flint house near the sea, where Hilda enjoyed swimming. The Urlins also bought a London residence for the winter months. Hilda's childhood was rather lonely, as she was the youngest child with the nearest sister six years older, and she spent much time playing by herself and preferring boys' games to dolls. Her parents did not send her to school, instead she joined a small group of children who were taught by a governess at Rustington Rectory.

When she grew older she often went on bicycling expeditions with her friend Beatrice Orme and they explored the countryside sketching, visiting ancient churches, and making brass rubbings. Another of her childhood friends was Philippa Fawcett whose mother, Dame Millicent Fawcett, was the leader of the Suffragette movement. Philippa later went to Cambridge to read mathematics and was to become the first woman Senior Wrangler.

Hilda preferred the country life and disliked London, but as she grew older she enjoyed visiting its museums and art galleries. While in her teens and an attractive redhead, she sat for the painter Henry Holiday, properly chaperoned by her sister, at his studio in Hampstead modeling for the figure of a young girl in two of his much-exhibited paintings.¹ She attended classes at King's College for Women, which though not part of the University of London employed some of its teachers. She took Professor Seeley's geology course and went on field trips armed with notebook and hammer. She also took courses in facsimile drawing, for which she displayed a considerable talent.

When she was twenty-five, finding that she could copy accurately, Henry Holiday sent her with an introduction to the Egyptology Professor Flinders Petrie at University College, London, who needed someone to make drawings of ancient Egyptian dress for a book he planned on the history of costume. The professor was at once captivated by Hilda.² Having long believed that he could ask no woman to share his Spartan life of excavating in the desert, he had resigned himself to celibacy. Encouraged however by Hilda's declaration that she longed to go to Egypt, he subsequently wrote her many letters during the following winter. On his return from Egypt, in the summer of 1896, he asked her to marry him. Somewhat in awe of this mature and bearded professor, Hilda at first showed reluctance. At length however she relented and accepted him. They were married early in the morning on November 25th and, leaving the Urlin family to celebrate the wedding breakfast, hurried off to catch the boat train, the first leg of the long journey to Egypt.

Hilda was enchanted with Egypt from the first. After a few days in Cairo, during which Petrie took her to the Museum and to Giza, where, shedding her skirt, she had climbed to the top of the great Pyramid in her bloomers, they next took a train south to Upper Egypt. Petrie had obtained a permit to dig on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Fund in the cemetery area behind the temple of Dendera, 70 km. north of Luxor. Undeterred by the hardships of the river trip and the ten mile hike to camp, Hilda settled into camp life and soon proved herself invaluable. She was not called upon to run the domestic side of the expedition. Petrie had done this for many years, and the excavators on his staff were expected to live on canned food and ship's biscuits. Nor was she asked to sew: her husband mended his own socks and in camp usually wore none.

Instead Hilda copied and drew, counted and listed. Many of the tombs they were excavating had deep shafts, with vaulted chambers deep underground. Climbing down by rope ladder, she would copy the scenes and inscriptions. One large sarcophagus, impossible to photograph, had some twenty thousand hieroglyphs to record. She lay on

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the ground for days to copy them. She learned to draw the profiles of pots, the beads, the scarabs, and many other small objects found during the excavations. She quickly picked up enough Arabic to converse with the workmen and could take her turn at clinic duty, dispensing bandages, cough medicine and laxatives to the workers, many of whom were just children. She sometimes took over the writing of the day-to-day journal of the progress of the work which Petrie sent home weekly for the information of the Committee and his friends. Many of the line drawings in his archaeological reports (which always came out promptly before the beginning of the next season's work) were by her hand. Although she could not read hieroglyphs, her copies of inscriptions were usually very accurate and needed little correction. At home in England, she helped him with the writing of the report (which was usually written, as she said later 'in a kind of telegraphese' and with the arrangement and cataloguing of the summer exhibition of the season's finds at University College.

The cemetery sites of Abadiyeh and Hu, which they dug next year, provided excavation experience of a different kind. Hilda stood on the edge of the grave while Flinders drew "everything in position, each bone and all the objects." When he handed up the pots it was up to her to find the shapes in the Naqada plates and then write the number of the grave on each pot, slate, and flint after he entered them on his plan. He taught her to help him with surveying, by holding the tape. In the following years when he was excavating the royal tombs and temple at Abydos, she was his constant companion in the field. On market days they would go off together on long walks into the hills, searching for rock tombs, sometimes stopping to sketch. Occasionally they were away for days searching for new sites, accompanied by Petrie's trusted foreman, Ali Suefi. He would ride a donkey, she a horse and the professor would walk. At Abydos the camp was larger and usually included several women. Hilda, however, was the only one of them who spoke Arabic and she often paid and sometimes chose the workforce. The gastronomic rigors of a Petrie camp became somewhat of a joke among fellow archaeologists in

Egypt. Except for occasional eggs, protein was provided only by tins of bully beef, pilchards and sardines. Flaps of local bread were spread with European jam. At the end of the season the unopened cans were buried in the camp to be unearthed next year. The excavation camp was a long line of mud brick huts each of one room, simply furnished. Wooden boxes were the furniture except for a palm-rib bed. At the end of the season the boxes served to transport the antiquities home.

In the winter of 1902, the last season at Abydos, Flinders Petrie decided to give his wife control of an excavation on her own. Preliminary tests the year before in the area of a large depression at the back of the temple of Seti I, had reached a sloping passage whose walls were decorated with funerary texts. It appeared to be the approach to a huge underground tomb. Two other women were on the expedition--Margaret Murray, his assistant at University College whose knowledge of Egyptian religious texts would be important, and an artist Miss Hansard. The three took care of all aspects of the enterprise. It proved to be difficult and even hazardous. The deep excavation was in constant danger of caving in and when the wind blew loose sand and shifting stone blocks threatened the workers below. "To sit in a deep pit under an irregular but continuous fire of small stones with the chance of a big stone coming down too, is an experience more amusing to look back on than to endure" wrote Miss Murray in the final publication, *The Osireion*.³ In the end they had to abandon the cause. Later excavators fared little better until Henri Frankfort, working for the Egypt Exploration society in 1925, was able fully to excavate the building with the aid of a steam engine.

1902-03 was their last at Abydos. Next year they worked together for a short time at Ahnas. In 1905 Flinders Petrie decided to visit the ancient turquoise and copper mines of Sinai. The area of the ancient mines was said to be difficult of access and he arranged camels for his team of assistants and himself, with one or two Egyptian workmen. Hilda, he decided, must stay behind. She was left at Saqqara with two women friends, Miss Kingsford and Miss Eckenstein along with the artist Miss Hansard, to copy reliefs in

some of the Old Kingdom tombs, as Miss Murray and her party had done the year before. They lived in the rest-house which had been Mariette's, and recorded several tombs in the vicinity, Hilda undertaking to oversee the work of unblocking the mastabas and freeing the wall surfaces for the copyists.

In January news came from Flinders Petrie that the party had finished their investigations of the Wady Maghara and had moved further south to a temple site on a hilltop at Serabit al Khadem, where there were large numbers of inscribed stones, statues and stelae, on a high platform, some three miles from their camp. The terrain was very rough and he advised her not to come. Hilda, however, immediately shut down the work at Saqqara and set out with Miss Eckenstein by train to Suez, by boat to el Shatt, and then on camels with Bedouin drivers and one trusty Qufti workman, to join her husband. The rough journey took six days and later she wrote a lively account of it for a lady's magazine, *The Queen*.⁴ At night they slept huddled around a fire of acacia bushes, their equipment included blankets, water skins, a stove and kettle and boxes of food. Each of the women carried a revolver, a whip, a notebook, a compass, a water flask. They met only Bedouin on their journey and upon arrival found that two extra copyists were indeed very welcome, for the site abounded in inscriptions of all kinds, some of them in a hitherto unknown script which, though based on hieroglyphic signs appeared to be alphabetic. This script was dubbed Sinaitic and is thought to be a precursor of the western alphabet.

That summer saw the severance of Petrie's work for the Egypt Exploration Fund as they were committed to Eduard Naville's expensive operations in Deir el-Bahari, and difficulties in the American branch had caused a falling-off of subscriptions. Petrie realized he must (for the second time) cease to depend on the Fund for support and needed to set up on his own. He announced the formation of the British School of Archaeology in Egypt. A number of his friends consented to form a committee, and Hilda and his old colleague at University College, Dr. James H. Walker, were named as Honorary Secretaries. Henceforth, canvassing support for the British School was to

occupy Hilda's energies almost to the exclusion of other interests. She set out to write (by hand as she never owned a typewriter) hundreds of letters to the prominent and the wealthy, canvassing support for her husband's work, while he toured England lecturing and enrolling new subscribers every summer. In later years, Hilda often lectured herself, especially to women's groups.

Hilda spent the winter of 1906-7 in England awaiting the birth of her first child and Petrie went alone to Egypt. In April John was born. Except for a short time in 1908, when she joined Petrie in the Qurna necropolis, living in a tomb, she spent the next two winters in England, busily proof-reading, collecting subscriptions and canvassing for new members. She and her friends started an Egyptian Research Students Association, which gave lectures both in London and the provinces, to popularize the work of the British School. Her daughter Ann was born in August of 1909. The following years were devoted to the affairs of the British School and seeing her husband's publications through the Press, but she always longed to be in Egypt. In January 1913, at her husband's urgent request, she left the two children with friends and joined him at Kafr Ammar for a few weeks. She was badly needed. Rex Engelbach, one of Petrie's assistants, a few miles away at Riqqeh had found three Twelfth Dynasty painted tombs which urgently needed recording. She spent several weeks in considerable discomfort copying the inscriptions. "The closer texts" she wrote in her report "required carefully adjusted top lighting, or electric hand-lamp, to decipher portions of them." One as at the bottom of a twenty foot shaft, another contained an important painted coffin, but "as it stood in the tomb, the copying was always at a difficult angle, and work was hampered by constant falls of loose blocks from a rotten roof." The tombs, with her plans and the copies she made of the wall paintings and coffins, were described in her own chapter of the final publication.⁵ One of the coffins had posed a real problem: "the inner sides being covered with long texts in small cursive writing, where the black work had nearly perished from the dark brown boards."

Again at Tarkhan, in the season of 1912-13, Petrie urgently sent for her by telegram in January. Two hundred alabaster vases and as many slate palettes were waiting to be drawn. Writing to a friend she described her life in the camp: "Flinders has already found 1200 or more [graves] since he began work; I have not been outside the storeroom since I arrived, five days ago, but as I shunt part of the roof to let the sunlight in, the storeroom is as good as out of doors, and there I can work from 7.30 till sunset..." She was copying coffins, and in her tent at the foot of her bed were eighty skulls.

With the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914, Petrie applied for war service but was told he was too old. Thus he busied himself with the arrangement and cataloguing of his unique teaching museum in University College. With their children now in school, Hilda got involved in several women's organizations. As Honorary Secretary of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, she had a new outlet for her fund-raising talents. Founded by her friend, Dr. Elsie Inglis, the organization maintained hospital services for the Serbian division of the Russian Army. Hilda was later awarded the Serbian order of St. Sava. She also helped her friend Lina Eckenstein to run the Smaller Italian Hospitals Fund. In 1915, Professor Thomas Masaryk came to live as a refugee in Hampstead near the Petries. For over a year they gave a home to two of his students from Prague. Later in 1929, when Masaryk was President of Czechoslovakia, he invited Hilda and her daughter Anne to stay at Topolcianky, his country house near Prague. After the war, Mrs. Tufnell organized tours of Czechoslovakia for a dozen or so English people, and for several years Hilda accompanied her to help organize the tours.

Starting in July, 1917, the Petrie family would take their summer holidays in the countryside surveying one or other of the many prehistoric figures cut in the Downland chalk. In later years the outings included Somerset and Wales. In 1919 the parents returned to Egypt sending their children to one of the few coeducational boarding schools which reflected their progressive views on education. The children now 12 and 10 were given their own bank accounts and paid their own school fees. During the Christmas

holidays they would stay with friends, often the Crowfoot family in Suffolk, archaeologists who had four daughters. Hilda would aim to be home for the spring holiday, sometimes leaving before the end of the dig. At Abydos in 1921, where her husband was excavating early tombs once more, she undertook the excavation of a Coptic hermit's cell, which Gertrude Caton-Thompson had discovered in the western hills, when searching for palaeoliths. Her plans and drawings, and a description of the cave and its painted decorations were published in the excavation report for that year.

There was a great deal of unrest that winter in Egypt: two British officers had been murdered in Assiut and the sound of machine-gun fire was heard once or twice near Balliana. That district had a reputation for lawlessness: in their previous Abydos camp in 1902 someone had fired a shot at Hilda as she came out of her hut. Fortunately he had missed. Now the Petries judged it prudent to use the hermit's cave as a cache for supplies of food and water, just in case there was trouble with the local workforce. Happily, they were not needed. Later in the season they moved to Behnesa (Oxyrhynchus). The daily walk to the site involved crossing a ruined railway bridge with wide spaces between the sleepers, high above the canal--an ordeal for most of the party, but the Petries skipped lightly across.

In 1923 Petrie, now 70, was knighted "for service to Egypt" His long years of arduous and austere living were beginning to tell on his health and he came less often to Egypt, and his wife did not always accompany him. The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and its treasures in 1922 and the following tensions between the excavators and the Department of Antiquities led to restrictions being placed eventually on the permits granted to excavating bodies and the export of antiquities from Egypt. Petrie feared that he would be unable to reward with objects the museums and organizations who subscribed to his work and that, in consequence, he would lose their support. Thus he decided to look elsewhere, and in 1926 he moved to Palestine, or "Egypt over the Border" as he termed it. There he looked for sites which had been the frontier fortresses between

Egypt and her neighbor and sometime enemy to the north. The Research Account still kept its name as the British School of Archaeology in Egypt. Several members of his excavating team from Egypt came with him and they settled on a group of large mounds in the Wady Gazzeh, now called the Wady Besor, the first being Tell Jemmeh, south-east of Gaza. For three years Lady Petrie stayed in England trying to raise support for her husband's work, but Palestine did not have the appeal of Egypt for many of their old supporters. In 1933 she wrote a small book aimed at potential subscribers, *Sidenotes on the Bible*, and described some of the items found by her husband and his team in recent years which could be said to throw light on Biblical times: a Philistine coffin lid, the "temple of Onias" from Tell el Yahudiyeh, the Qau Codex (an early Coptic copy of St. John's Gospel) and so on. When the Lambeth Conference of Bishops was due to be held in London at the same time as her husband's exhibition, she wrote to each of them a personal invitation to see it and many of them came.

Her office was a desk halfway down the Petrie Museum in University College. She had a secretary (Olga Tufnell was one of the first) but no typewriter and no telephone. Letters were handwritten and personal. She must have written thousands every year and her appeals were hard to refuse. The office also dealt with the dispatch to subscribers of the annual excavation report, and the journal *Ancient Egypt* which came out three times a year. Flinders Petrie's autobiography, written in 1930 is dedicated "To my wife, on whose toil most of the work has depended."⁶

In the autumn of 1931, the last of their camps was built. The huge mound called Tell el Ajjul (identified by Petrie with ancient Gaza) seemed likely to furnish work for many years. It is located near the sea and within an easy reach of the town of Gaza. Hilda came out again and this was the best equipped and most comfortable camp they had ever had. Their old cook was summoned from Egypt, and Hilda took charge of the commissariat. She learned to drive the truck, rather precariously, as far as Gaza town where fresh food could be bought. Before she got there she would stop by a cemetery and

put on a skirt over her breeches. The Professor was getting old. It was she who now climbed the great mound at sunrise and blew the whistle for the start of work, and it was she who would call the roll call and paid the workers. They were mostly wild Bedouin, very different from the fellahin she was used to, but she found no difficulty in directing their work or calming their disputes. A well-to-do American, Harris Colt, had joined the expedition. At his expense a wooden hut was built near the camp, as a kind of recreation room for the younger male members of the party. Here they could foregather for a beer and a smoke at the end of the day's work--both activities of which the Petries disapproved. Several of the staff disagreed with the way the mound was being dug and dared to say so. The atmosphere became increasingly unhappy and eventually, the young men decided to leave Petrie and set up a new dig at Tell Duweir with John Starkey, his senior assistant, for which they obtained financial support elsewhere. There were other worries too: the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem complained that Petrie's lists of antiquities found were unintelligible and that he was allowing his staff to explore beyond the limits of his concession. He was told moreover that he must no longer reward his workmen for what they found--his invariable custom in Egypt, whereby he reckoned he lost very little to dealers of what was found on his digs. It seemed to him that he must abandon thought of further excavation in Palestine.

The Petries however were now living permanently in Jerusalem. The old man had retired in 1933 from the Chair of Egyptology at University College London, which he had held for forty years, and on his doctor's advice had packed his books and his belongings and moved to Jerusalem, where they found hospitable shelter in the house of the American Schools of Oriental Research, where Petrie would work in his own library and meet other scholars. He decided to go looking for some where to dig outside Palestine. Hilda and a new assistant, Jack Ellis, bought an old bus and converted it into a caravan in which they drove northwards through Syria camping and prospecting for possible sites. On the north coast near Latakia, Petrie found what he thought was the ideal mound, and

Hilda at once wrote to London newspapers announcing the formation of a "Biblical Research Account" and inviting contributions. Her optimism was premature: the Syrian authorities refused them a license. Finally, with the acquiescence of old friends in the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, Petrie got permission to excavate in the desert of Sinai, not far from the sea. The great mound of Sheikh Zoweyd had been a frontier fortress between Egypt and Asia. For two seasons, between 1935 and 1937, they camped in derelict huts by a police post among the sand dunes. One of the new assistants, Veronica Seton-Williams, used in later years to describe the austerities of this last Petrie camp. They could no longer afford a cook, and neither Hilda nor the chauffeur could boil an egg. Again they were back to tins and biscuits.

As the end of the British Mandate approached, there was increasing unrest and lawlessness in Palestine as Arabs protested against the influx of Jewish refugees from Europe and the growth of new settlements on their land. Incidents of violence were frequent, and walking the streets of Jerusalem had its hazards, but Hilda and Flinders continued to visit their friends and go to concerts. A shocking event gave them pause: on the road from his dig at Tell Duweir, Starkey was murdered by a gunman. Nevertheless, the Petries decided to apply for one last season at Tell el Ajjul--not in their own name, but nominating Dr. Margaret Murray and Ernest Mackay, one of Petrie's old assistants, as joint directors. Everyone knew who was really in charge, and the old man was still able to climb the mound. Hilda still paid the workmen and kept the accounts. It was their last season in the field. They had planned to do yet one more, but in September 1939 bandits attacked the camp and completely looted it. When war broke out, their daughter was in the Foreign Office, their son in the army (he was captured in 1942 and spent the rest of the war in a German prison camp); the Petries lived quietly in Jerusalem. In October 1940, Flinders went into hospital, and there he remained, weakened by a bout of malaria but still mentally active. Hilda visited him every day, bringing him books and taking dictation at his bedside, as his memory ranged over the past. Flinders Petrie died on July

29th, 1942, and his wife walked with the Palestine Police behind his coffin to his place of burial on Mount Zion. For the rest of the war she lived on in the American School, sorting and editing her husband's papers and packing up his books., which she determined to send to the newly formed library of the Department of Antiquities in Khartoum. Lady Petrie had many friends in Jerusalem, and enjoyed taking visiting friends on a walking tour of the Old City; striding along in an ankle-length Bethlehem dress and sandals, her gray hair cut in a straight fringe. She was an excellent guide and an entertaining companion. In 1947 her daughter Ann was able to help her despatch the books, pack up her belongings and return to England. For the rest of her life, Hilda lived in the family's Hampstead home in London where she kept busy winding up the affairs of the British School and completing unfinished business..

In 1952 she was at last able to publish the tomb reliefs from Saqqara which she and her friends had copied in the autumn of 1905. She had laid them aside and been too busy with the creation of the British School to do anything about them. Now, with Dr. Murray's translations of the texts, they could at last be published. Gaunt and bent, Lady Petrie was the guest of honor at University College when, in June of the following year, they celebrated the centenary of her husband's birth. Following the lecture in the Professor's honor, eighty people sat down to dinner, many of them colleagues and old students. Lady Petrie replied to the toast. At the end of her short speech, she presented the College with a cheque to inaugurate a fund for a scholarship to enable students to travel and study in Egypt. This was later augmented by the small residue of money left in the account of the by now defunct British School. Not long afterwards, Hilda suffered a stroke, and in 1957 she died in University College Hospital, on the opposite side of the road from the museum where she and her husband had toiled for so many years to found and to fund England's first training school for archaeologists.

1. Hewnry Holiday, *Reminiscences of my Life*. London, 1914. 412.
2. For this and much of what follows, see M. S. Drower, *Flinders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology*. London, 1985; Madison, 1995.
3. M. A. Murray, *The Osireion at Abydos*. (Egyptian Research Account Publication 9), London, 1904, 2.
4. Hilda Petrie, "On Camel Back to Sinai," *The Queen*. 25.11. 1905.
5. Hilda Petrie "The painted coffins and chapel," in R. Engelbach, *Riqeh and Memphis VI*. London, 1915, Chapter X.
6. Flinders Petrie, *Seventy Years in Archaeology*. London, 1931.

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