

Caroline Louise Ransom Williams, 1872-1952 by Barbara S. Lesko

America's first professionally trained woman Egyptologist was born on February 24, 1872 into a prominent Methodist family in Toledo Ohio, the daughter of John and Ella Randolph Ransom. Although she first attended the local Erie College, the fact that her aunt Louise Fitz-Randolph (q.v.) (after whom she was named) taught on the faculty of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts persuaded her parents to allow Caroline Louise to finish her college years away from home. This association with her aunt proved to be the major factor in determining her life's career. Professor Louise Fitz-Randolph's field was art history.

In 1896, following her graduation (Phi Beta Kappa), Caroline Louise accompanied her aunt on a grand tour of Europe, which was extended to include Egypt, and Caroline Louise fell under antiquity's spell and began to consider a career in Egyptology. By happy coincidence, the discipline of Egyptology had just been inaugurated in the United States as a degree program at the University of Chicago by the appointment of James Henry Breasted as a professor of Egyptology. Chicago was a new school, co-educational, and located in the Midwest and thus easily connected with Toledo Ohio by train. After Caroline taught at Erie College for a year, she began graduate studies at the University of Chicago 1898-1900, and received an AM in classical archaeology and Egyptology. She was regarded by Breasted as a promising scholar, and he encouraged her to continue her studies abroad, as he had done, under the leading German Egyptologists (he entertained a dim view of French Egyptologists of his day and a high regard only for the German school).

Backed by Breasted's strong recommendation, Miss Ransom was accepted as a student in Berlin where from 1900-1903 she was a student of the eminent Professor

Adolf Erman. It is possible that she was the first woman student this Egyptologist ever had; indeed, she was one of the first woman in continental Europe to study Egyptology at a university, although the Englishwoman Mary Broderick had read Egyptology at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France under Maspero as early as 1888. Once Egyptology was offered in England, a large number of English women became students of Petrie and Murray at University College, London.

In 1903, Caroline Louise was given an Assistanceship in the Egyptian Department of the Berlin Museum, which indicates Erman's respect for her abilities. However, she soon returned to Chicago to write her doctoral dissertation under Breasted and was rewarded by a Ph.D. in 1905, the first American woman to receive an advanced degree in Egyptology. Her dissertation topic was: "Studies in ancient Furniture" later published in book form.

Although she had a suitor who pressed her to marry him, Caroline Louise put her career interests first and stayed single so that she might accept a teaching post at the prestigious woman's college of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Archaeology and Art she began her teaching career in the Fall Semester of 1905. She eventually became the chair of this department. However, in 1910 she accepted an appointment as Assistant Curator in the recently established Department of Egyptian Art of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, indicating that she enjoyed working with ancient artifacts directly. Pierpont Morgan had decreed that the Metropolitan's Egyptian department should "rank permanently as the best in America." Albert M. Lythgoe was lured away from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to undertake excavations on behalf of the Metropolitan in Egypt and to be First Curator. He put together a brilliant staff for field work: Winlock, Mace, Hall, and Mr. and Mrs. Davies (q.v.) were all to remain important figures in Egyptian archaeology for years to come. Meanwhile someone (Caroline Louise) was needed in New York to translate inscriptions and catalogue the collection, receiving pieces, not only from the

Metropolitan's own excavations, but from the Egypt Exploration Fund in London and other donors. The galleries in the newly extended north wing of the museum numbered ten by 1911. In that year Williams co-authored a *Handbook of the Egyptian Rooms*.

Her position gave Caroline Louise immediate access to an important collection of Egyptian antiquities and she kept the job for six years. In this same period the Metropolitan allowed her some time to return to Germany to further her research in the museum collections there and to confer with Dr. Roeder, and Professors Erman and Meyer. While there she also helped out her aunt at Mount Holyoke by examining and making notes on various casts that could be purchased to enhance the study collection at her Alma Mater. Later Mount Holyoke College presented her with an honorary Doctor of Literature degree during its seventy-fifth anniversary year

The First World War put a temporary halt to the Metropolitan Museum's operations overseas, however, and some staff cut backs were made. Whether Caroline left of her own free will at this point is not known. After her six years in New York, her return to Toledo in 1916 also meant a return to Grant Williams and an acceptance of his proposal of marriage. Mr. Williams was seven years her senior and was an established realstate developer. That she did not sever completely her association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art is evidenced by the fact that in 1932 they published her *Decorations of the Tomb of Per-Neb*, the Old Kingdom mastaba that had been sold to the Museum by Egypt's Antiquities Service.

The winter of 1916-17 was spent in studying and classifying small Egyptian collections at the Cleveland Museum of Art and at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. In 1918 Dr. Williams also became an honorary curator of the Egyptian collection at the Toledo Museum of Art, where she catalogued objects.

Meanwhile in 1917, she was offered the curatorship of the Egyptian Collection of the New York Historical Society and was asked to prepare a scientific catalogue of the thousands of Egyptian objects of the Abbott Collection then in their possession. She

maintained her residence in Toledo and commuted to New York to pursue her duties to the Society for the next seven years. The collection had been created by an American physician living in Cairo in the 1830's and 40's. Upon his family's return to the States the antiquities were exhibited in New York City and left there to be sold due to Abbott's mounting debts. Eventually the large collection was purchased by the New York Historical Society. Later all their Egyptian antiquities were transferred to The Brooklyn Museum. The catalogue Dr. Williams worked on became a 250 page publication: *Gold and Silver Jewelry and Related Objects*, and was published in 1924, dealing with some 4000 items. In preparation for this, her research explored the origin and use of metals in Egypt and she utilized the microscope effectively to study the methods of ancient craftsmen and to discern forgeries among the pieces under scrutiny.

The previous summer Dr. Ransom Williams had been elected to a life member of the New York Historical Society, in appreciation of her work for them. Appreciation of her generosity is also recorded in the first volume of the monumental *Aegyptisches Wörterbuch*. The Berlin dictionary of hieroglyphic vocabulary spanning three millennia had been the major work of the great Professor Erman, completed by his successor Prof. Kurt Sethe and Hermann Grapow. The first volume appeared in 1925 and in the Introduction Erman wrote: "We thank our friends abroad, above all Mr. J. H. Breasted and Mrs. Ransom Williams, that the *Dictionary* has not been forced to stop in the post war period." This suggests that each had made personal monetary gifts to the *Wörterbuch* once financial support expected from the German government evaporated as a result of the World War and its expenses. In the end, however, it was a larger grant, by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., which ensured the publication of this valuable tool of Egyptological research at a reasonable price.

The publications of Dr. Ransom Williams are mostly concerned with objects, but she is also responsible for identifying and drawing the notice of Professor Breasted to a papyrus scroll in the Society's collection. This was the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus,

dating to the 17th Century B.C. but was probably a copy of a much earlier work of the Old Kingdom. Breasted published this important work in 1930 after some ten years of study.

After many years of quiet, diligent museum work, Caroline Louise, who had no children to concern her, was open to wider horizons and accepted the offer by her former professor and mentor Breasted to become a member of his fledgling Epigraphic Survey in Egypt. This would mean she had to spend at least half a year at Luxor, living in the mud brick facility that was the first (and now known as the Old) Chicago House on the west bank, amidst the necropolis of ancient Thebes. Unlike the subsequent directors of the Survey, Breasted had no reservation, apparently, about including a woman as a member of this staff, under the directorship of Dr. Harold H. Nelson, a staff which also included William F. Edgerton and John A. Wilson, both of whom were to become professors at the University of Chicago. Of course, Caroline Louise was married, in her fifties, and of a serious nature. Breasted records his "profound appreciation that Dr. Williams worked an entire season at Medinet Habu out of pure interest in the project and with almost no remuneration." He and his biographer-son were quick to state that Dr. Ransom-Williams was one of Breasted's "ablest students" However it would not be until the 1970's that a woman was again asked to be a member of the Epigraphic Survey's Staff, the successors of Nelson and Breasted being less liberal in their attitude.

Dr. Ransom-Williams thus worked as an epigrapher in Egypt for the Oriental Institute at the great mortuary temple of Ramses III in 1926-27, and she again worked in Egypt in 1935-36, helping with the Coffin Texts project at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Between these foreign assignments, she represented her State of Ohio on Ohio Day at the Sesaucentinnial Celebration in Philadelphia and also taught again, giving courses at the University of Michigan in Egyptian art and in the Middle Egyptian phase of the ancient language during the academic year of 1927-28. It was the first time these

subjects had been offered at that University. In 1929, Dr. Ransom Williams was elected president of the Mid-West Branch of the American Oriental Society, the first woman to hold office in that scholarly organization. She was a member of the Archaeological Institute of America and also a corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute and other Egyptological and archaeological societies. In 1937 this industrious woman was again awarded an honorary degree, this time from the University of Toledo. A few years later she lost her husband Grant, who died on Christmas Eve in 1942 at age 77 after a long illness. Soon afterward, recovering from a serious illness herself, she donated her small collection of Egyptian antiquities in 1943 to Mount Holyoke College. Perhaps it was then that she moved into Toledo's Park Lane Hotel, because that is the address she gives in her entry in the first issue of the *Directory of American Scholars*. Interestingly, she listed for this her career interests as Classical Archaeology and then Egyptology, even though she had done nothing with classical antiquities since her dissertation. Does this indicate something of a disappointment with the world of Egyptology in which, although possessing the credentials, she had never played a major role?

Dr. Ransom Williams lived as a widow in Toledo for ten years and died on February 1, 1952 after an illness of one week, just short of her 80th birthday. She was remembered by her College for her devotion to "family, church, each Alma Mater, to friends in all walks of life at home and abroad." "Erudite in her field, she was also warmly interested in contemporary life and in people. Her devotion to Mount Holyoke was evidenced in gifts to the library and to Dwight Art Memorial, and more substantially in her renunciation, in 1945, of the quarterly annuity assigned to her for life by her aunt Louise Fitz-Randolph, "so that the Louise Fitz-Randolph Fellowship in Art might operate immediately."

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