

Omm Sety 1904-1981 by Barbara Lesko

Omm Sety was born Dorothy Louise Eady, January 16, 1904, to Reuben Eady and Caroline May Frost Eady, in the London suburb of Blackheath. Draughtswoman for the Department of Egyptian Antiquities and Keeper of the Abydos Temple of Sety I, her life furnished "one of the Western world's most intriguing and convincing modern case histories of reincarnation."--John Anthony West, *The New York Times Book Review*.

Believed, by a medical doctor to have died after a serious fall in 1907, she revived but showed symptoms of delusions almost immediately. From the early age of three, if her biography is to be believed, she longed for her "other home" and recognized this as Egypt upon first seeing illustrations in Arthur Mu's *The Children's Encyclopaedia*. Also, in 1908 she visited the British Museum for the first time and became obsessed with staying in the Egyptian halls among "her people," and ran about kissing the feet of the statues.

When she was ten, Dorothy met Sir Wallis Budge in the British Museum and he, taken by her enthusiasm for learning hieroglyphs, volunteered to teach her himself and was amazed at her rapid mastery of the hieroglyphs. Between ages 10 and 12 she spent as much time at the museum as possible. After narrowly escaping a bombing of her dance school in London during the First World War, she was sent for safety to Sussex to help out on her grandmother's farm. She was able to find books on Egypt at the Eastbourne public library which sustained her during those years.

At age 15, she began having "visitations" from Pharaoh Sety I and recurring impressions during adolescence of being in an Egyptian environment. She recalled suffering significantly from nightmares and somnabulism, for which she was committed to a mental hospital for observation several times. Leaving school at age 16 in 1920, Dorothy continued to read and visit museums and archaeological sites in Britain, such as Stonehenge.

Her father, having begun his career as a master taylor, saw the future for large cinemas and invested in one in Plymouth which became enormously successful. Dorothy became a part-time student at the Plymouth Art School and collected inexpensive Egyptian Antiquities. She also joined a local theatrical group and performed at her father's theatre. At 27 she moved to London and took a job with an Egyptian public relations magazine for which she wrote articles and drew political cartoons which reflected her passions for Egyptian political independence from Britain. She had been very pro-Egyptian all her life, long before ever moving to Egypt.

During this employment, she met an Egyptian student named Imam Abdel Meguid with whom she kept up a correspondence after he returned to Egypt. Eventually he proposed marriage and at age 29, over the objections of her parents, she accepted and in 1933 booked passage on a boat sailing for Egypt. She kissed its soil upon landing and felt she had come "home" to stay. Upon her marriage into the upper-middle class Egyptian family she received the name of Bulbul (nightingale) Abdel Meguid. As a young wife she continued to be absorbed in ancient Egypt and to have apparitions of King Sety, to the annoyance of her new family. During these Cairo years she had several out of body experiences. In 1935, her husband took an offer of a teaching job in Iraq and the couple separated, she keeping their young son whom she had named Sety, after her favorite king. She then moved to the village of Nazlet El Simman, closest to Giza's pyramids. Living so close to the Giza plateau, at night she would pray and make offerings before the Great Sphinx and often spend the night in the Great Pyramid, as she became a devotee of the ancient Egyptian religion.

Having now to support herself, she obtained work in the Department of Antiquities, as a draftsman--the first woman ever hired by the Department, and worked for Dr. Selim Hassan (1886-1961), who had discovered Queen Khentkawes' tomb and published ten volumes on his Excavations at Giza, in which he credits Dorothy Eady for her drawings, editing, proofreading and indexes for three of the volumes. She credited

him with teaching her much. She arranged his library and continued her studies of hieroglyphs. She utilized his library and that at the Cairo Museum of Antiquities and transcribed Sethe's multivolume *Aegyptische Wörterbuch* into English. With Mme. Selim Hassan she embroidered ten enormous tapestries depicting ancient Egyptian scenes. Nine of these are today in the Wilbour Library of The Brooklyn Museum.

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Both Egyptian and American Egyptologists who came in contact with her were impressed by her knowledge of ancient Egypt: both its language and its art. Dr. Klaus Baer, who also worked with Fakhry, recalled that Dorothy Eady "had visions and she worshipped the ancient Egyptian gods" but "she understood the methods and standards of scholarship which is usually not the case with nuts." ¹ Dorothy Eady is remembered from the 1950's as a "large, vigorous woman, bubbling over with enthusiasm;" "vivacious, feisty and eccentric." ² She was a great help to Egyptian scholars, especially Hassan and Fakhry, correcting their English and writing English language articles for others. So this poorly educated Englishwoman developed in Egypt into a first rate draftswoman and prolific and talented writer who, even under her own name, produced articles, essays, monographs and books of great range, wit and substance. For the English language newspaper *Egyptian Gazette*, she wrote articles on education, social and political topics. During the 1950's she did publicity work for the Egyptian State Tourist Department.

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the ancient deities. When Ahmed Fakhry's Dahshur project terminated in 1956, he got her a low paying draughtsman's job at Abydos, so at age 52 on March 3, 1956 she moved permanently to the ancient sacred city, the place which she believed she had been, in a previous life, originally born and raised.

At Abydos Dorothy Eady was known, in keeping with the peasants' practice as the mother of her son, thus Omm Sety. She catalogued and translated the inscribed blocks from the ruins of the ancient palace and magazines at the site, and prepared drawings and plans of the architecture of the Sety temple. She located the temple's gardens just where she had previously imagined she would find them. She spent months in the ruined temple of Ramses II copying down every inscription.

Omm Sety adapted very well to life among the very poor peasants in the primitive village. She displayed some remarkable abilities, for instance she was not afraid of cobras and even fed them like pets and used ancient spells to "spellbind" them. Due to such powers, the local people regarded Omm Sety as a witch and feared her powers. Thus she was not in danger living alone at Abydos. Being outgoing and friendly, she was soon sought out by tourists and visiting scholars alike. It was on her insistence that the modern macadamized road that now connects Abydos with nearby towns, and thus the world, was laid. Both Hassan and Fakhry had always spoken highly of her and many in the Antiquities Department spoke of her "uncanny sixth sense about the terrain on which she walks" and about how she "stunned" people with her very deep knowledge of the temple and its surroundings.

In the 1960's Eady began to write a series of articles and reports for the American Research Center in Egypt that revealed the endurance of the ancient folk and religious traditions as they manifested themselves in the daily lives of her village neighbors. Although age sixty is the mandatory retirement age in the Egyptian Civil Service, the Organization of Egyptian Antiquities made an exception for Eady so she could work five

more years. She retired in 1969 but continued to guide tourists around the Sety temple, subsisting on a tiny pension and the proceeds of the sales of her needle point embroidery.

During sleep she frequently had visions of the past that often proved to be quite accurate. Regarded by the Egyptian Antiquities officials as "indispensable for any archaeological mission attempting any serious work in the Abydos area," and as the testimonies of many of the "biggest names" in English, Egyptian and American Egyptology indicate, Omm Sety did not strike her visitors as crazy at all. Her belief in re-incarnation was put down to a harmless "bee in her bonnet" and she did not try to convert anyone to her religious or psychic ideas. She never discussed the intimate details of her "other life" and the visitations by Sety I with anyone until she met Hanny El Zeini a chemist who became the President of the Sugar and Distillery Company in nearby Nag Hammadi. This well educated and widely traveled man befriended Eady in her last years and recorded many of her reminiscences. Together they collaborated on a major publication of the temple: *Abydos, Holy City of Ancient Egypt* published in 1981. Professor John A. Wilson of the University of Chicago praised its "comprehensive coverage of every ancient element in Abydos and termed Omm Sety "a responsible scholar." New York Times reporter Christopher Wren wrote of "how lucid and rational she seemed." ⁴

In 1980, shortly before she died, Omm Sety was featured in two TV documentaries. The BBC program "Omm Sety and Her Egypt" was filmed on site in October and features interviews with T. G. H. James and Rosalie David as well. *The National Geographic* also made a film with Omm Sety and the staff of Chicago House in Luxor called "Egypt: Quest for Eternity." She died on April 21, 1987 and is buried at Abydos.

Publications by Dorothy Louise Eady

1949: *A Dream of the Past*. Cairo: Egyptian State Tourist Department

1970: "A Question of Names," *American Research Center in Egypt Newsletter* 71, 10-15.

1970: "Some Miraculous Wells and Springs of Egypt," *American Research Center in Egypt Newsletter* 75, 17-22.

1972: "Warding off an Eclipse," *American Research Center in Egypt Newsletter* 80, 25-27.

1979-80, 1982 "Omm Sety's Abydos," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities.* [Toronto] 10, no. 1.2.3: (1979-1980), 1-19; 75-103; 175-193 with one plan.

1981 with H. el Zeini *Abydos: Holy City of Ancient Egypt*

Sources:

J. Cott. *The Search for Omm Sety*, New York, 1987.

L. Habachi, "Omm Sety, A Personal Tribute," *Newsletter, American Research Center in Egypt*, 116 (1981/82) 5-6.

M.L. Bierbrier, editor, *Who was Who in Egyptology* Third Revised Edition, London, 1995, 135.

Christopher S. Wren "Briton Feels she Belongs Among Pharaonic Ruins," *The New York Times*, April 17, 1979, A8.

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Notes:

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