



GERTRUDE CATON THOMPSON

*Ramsey & Muspratt*

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1888-1985

GERTRUDE CATON THOMPSON was elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy in recognition of her outstanding services to African prehistory, and it is with these that this notice will be primarily concerned. Yet she also deserves to be remembered as a personality in her own right and as a representative of a class whose contributions to British life are only coming to be appreciated at a time when in the name of social progress it has been virtually extinguished. No doubt many of those possessing private means sufficient to absolve them from the need to seek paid employment were entrapped in lives of idleness which served no useful purpose beyond giving employment to others. This ought not to lead us to overlook the unique contribution made by those rare spirits, of whom she was one, who used their independence to develop tastes and promote activities which only later qualified, in no small measure due to their own pioneering, for public support.

Gertrude was born into a middle class family which, when taxation was still low and money retained its value, was able to ensure a comfortable life for its members. She was only 5 when her father William Caton Thompson, head of the legal department of the London & North-Western Railway, died at the age of 57. Under his will the estate was divided into three, one part for his widow and one for each of his two children on attaining the age of 24. Careful investment of her share—and her brother died without issue in middle age—meant that Gertrude Caton Thompson was free to pursue her own interests without the need to undertake the obligations of paid employment. Like many contemporaries similarly situated no attempt was made to provide her with more than the private education needed to fit her for a life of leisure. Well beyond the age at which young women of comparable ability today would have taken a university degree and proceeded to a doctorate she lived the kind of life expected of her by her family. To judge from the memoirs compiled from her diaries and published when she was well into the middle of her tenth decade, her time seems to have been occupied by a routine devoted to cultivating friendships and family relationships, attending concerts and plays, enjoying flowers, hunting,

admiring views and taking holidays as far afield as Egypt, ensconced in the best hotels or the villas of wealthy friends. The first sign of the interest in archaeology that was to give meaning to her life was the pleasure she derived from a course of public lectures on Mycenaean and Minoan culture given in the British Museum. It was hearing these that led her to 'read back in a desultory way to Palaeolithic archaeology'. This struck a chord to which she responded in her future life. Indeed, while stopping at a friend's villa near Mentone in November 1915—a surprising date considering that the First World War was already well into its second year—she came across excavations being carried on by Canon L. de Villeneuve in a nearby cave and was sufficiently interested to lend a hand for an hour before breakfast.

The decisive turning point in her life came when she was invited by a fellow guest at a private dinner party to join his staff in the newly formed Ministry of Shipping. Early in 1917 she found herself working as 'a very lowly cog in the wheels' of an organization which played a role of crucial importance in winning the war. It says something for the disciplined efficiency with which she responded to her new environment that when shortly before Christmas of that year the Director of Ship Requisitioning, Arthur (later Lord) Salter, needed a new personal secretary she was offered and accepted the post. Salter expected his staff to work flat out to ensure the maintenance of supplies essential to the war effort. His new personal secretary fulfilled her exacting role so effectively that she was asked to attend her chief at the Paris Peace Conference at which he served as Secretary to the Supreme Economic Council under the chairmanship of Lord Robert Cecil. Under Salter's leadership she learned what disciplined work could accomplish. Even more important it revealed capacities which until then had been dormant. She had learned in a hard school that work was not merely rewarding but something which exercised qualities she had not previously known herself to possess. Although for the rest of her exceptionally long life she continued to set a high store on personal comfort and cited idleness as her only recreation in *Who's Who*, her experiences during 1917–19 meant that she could no longer be satisfied with a life without an object beyond her own well-being.

Although she owed her awakening to her service in its ranks, she had no hesitation in turning down the offer of a permanent post in the Civil Service. She set too much store on her personal independence. For a period, extended by appendicitis and the lengthy convalescence that that still involved, she reverted to

family life, but once settled in London in the summer of 1921 she started to equip herself for a possible career in archaeology. She attended classes at University College under Flinders Petrie and at the same time took lessons in Arabic at the London School of Oriental and African Studies, learned the elements of survey at the School of Mines and used her spare time to study museum collections. Her initiation into field archaeology began in the winter of that year when she joined the British School of Archaeology in Egypt's excavations at Abydos. Her journey to Egypt with the Petries gave her a first taste of second-class travel and cheap hotels. At 73 Petrie retained his proverbial contempt for even moderately good living. Although she maintained that she enjoyed every moment, despite the rigours of the Petrie camp, it was with some relief that she withdrew towards the end to a hotel at Helwan more conveniently situated for her search for palaeoliths. On the way home she broke her journey at Cairo to familiarize herself with the Old Kingdom collections and at Les Eyzies to see for herself the classic caves and rock-shelters.

Her experience in Egypt confirmed her in her allegiance to archaeology and in particular to the archaeology of Africa. Petrie's integrity and dedication made a deep impression. There was much in common between them. Both had been privately educated and, though handicapped in some ways by their lack of higher education, each enjoyed the advantage of minds unimpaired by academic weaknesses and undue specialization. Temperamentally they shared relentless energy in sweeping aside inertia and opposition standing in the way of their objectives.

Back in London she occupied herself with the summer exhibition of the British School, including the two thousand palaeolithic implements she had collected, after being assured by the Director of Geology in Egypt that the palaeolithic did not exist there. Then she joined Margaret Murray in her investigation of one of the Maltese 'temples' and went on to test the provenance of a taurodontic tooth attributed at the time to Neanderthal man, by excavating in the Ghar Dhalam cave. Although this attribution was later dropped, it was discussion of a possible land-bridge between Africa and Malta which it aroused that combined with her Egyptian experience to convince her that she needed to know much more geology. Even before her first expedition to Egypt she had broached the possibility of taking a course in geology at Cambridge with Miss Clough, principal of Newnham, the beginning of a long association with the college, while stopping with Miles Burkitt's parents. In the event she spent 1923 in

Cambridge as a guest of Lady Darwin at Newnham Grange with the standing of a research fellow of the college. She attended lectures on geology by J. E. Marr, who had earlier taught Miles Burkitt, on prehistory by Miles Burkitt himself, whose *Prehistory*, published in 1921, had stressed the importance of geology for stone age studies, on anthropology by A. C. Haddon, then at the height of his powers, and on survey by Frank Debenham, the geographer and polar explorer.

Thus equipped she returned to Egypt in January 1924 and joined Petrie's camp at Qau. There she took up residence in a cleared Dynastic tomb. This she shared with a family of cobras and there she slept with a pistol under her pillow as a precaution against angry hyenas. As on her first expedition she chose to follow a line of her own. Whereas the main party under Guy Brunton and his wife concentrated on Predynastic cemeteries, she realized the importance, ahead of her time, of investigating settlements. With Petrie's approval she undertook a systematic search of the talus at the foot of the cliffs bordering the cultivated zone and to his great delight recovered sherds of the newly recognized Badarian ware stratified under successive Predynastic levels. An area on the North Spur, Hemanieh, was chosen for clearance and with a small party she was able to exercise a control over the recovery and recording of data quite exceptional for the time. As was right and proper she was invited to contribute the second part to *The Badarian Civilization* as joint author with Guy Brunton.

In addition to their comparative neglect of settlements the Egyptologists of her time were also guilty in her eyes of failing to pay attention to flintwork in any way comparable with that devoted to pottery and ornaments. One of the questions which caught her attention was the age and provenance of the distinctive 'Fayum' flints to be found in dealers' shops. Petrie gave his blessing and used his influence with the British School in Egypt to secure the necessary funds for an investigation of the Fayum depression which in the event occupied three seasons. The winter of 1924-5 was largely occupied in finishing off the Badarian settlement at Hemanieh, but reconnaissance in the Fayum made it abundantly clear that the services of a trained geologist would be needed to sort out the evidence for fluctuations in lake levels. Whereas prehistorians had long realized the need for geological advice over questions of stratigraphy, Gertrude Caton Thompson was among the first to appreciate its importance for reconstructing the early physiography of territories occupied by early man.

In Elinor H. Gardner, Research Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and sometime Associate of Newnham, she found a colleague well equipped to establish the geological setting for archaeological research in the Fayum as later in the Kharga Oasis and the Hadhramaut.

Following the 1925-6 season in the Fayum the concession lapsed owing to Petrie's withdrawal to Palestine and a year was wasted before work could resume in the winter of 1927-8 under the sponsorship of the Royal Anthropological Institute. The most exciting new evidence from a prehistoric standpoint related to Neolithic cereal farming. The dry soil permitted the survival of basket-work granaries containing wheat and barley, wooden reaping knives with flint insets, linen textiles, and fine baskets, a dramatic vindication of the need to excavate settlement sites. Publication was not only rapid considering the quantity of material but commendably complete. Although her interests centred on prehistory she was, as always, careful to recover and record evidence of whatever period encountered. The report included chapters on Old Kingdom settlements, gypsum workings, flint-work, a temple structure, a Dynastic cemetery, a Ptolemaic irrigation system, reservoir, houses, and coins, and even structures of unknown date. The fullness of photographic illustration and line drawings of objects is particularly welcome since they have been so widely dispersed in museums.

An invitation from the British Association to undertake excavations at Zimbabwe and related sites in preparation for its meeting in South Africa in 1929 opened up a new field of interest. In choosing the same topic as on its previous visit in 1905 the organizers doubtless had it in mind that these ruins continued to hold topical interest. Although David Randall-McIver had demonstrated on the previous occasion to the satisfaction of scientists that the Zimbabwe structures were the work of the indigenous Africans, most South Africans still found difficulty in accepting such impressive monuments as the work of people whom it was in their interest to treat as inferior beings. Instead many preferred to attribute the monuments to people of high civilization such as the fabulous Erythräans dreamed up by Leo Frobenius. Gertrude Caton Thompson, who like her predecessor had been trained by Petrie in Egypt, confirmed his view that they had one and all been built by the native Africans whose pottery and metal bangles were ubiquitous in the excavations. Her main contribution was made by penetrating levels underlying MacIver's base and recovering quantities of glass beads which according to Horace

Beck were most closely paralleled by ones from India and Malaya belonging to the eighth and ninth centuries AD. She was therefore inclined to regard Zimbabwe and its associated ruins as products of an efflorescence of native African culture under the stimulus of trade in gold and ivory overseas. The Zimbabwe report was published with exemplary promptitude in 1931.

While this was still in press she had already embarked on a period of intensive research on the palaeolithic industries of North Africa. To begin with, this focused on the Kharga Oasis of Upper Egypt, where she spent three seasons with Elinor Gardner excavating fossil springs and recovering flint assemblages left by groups of palaeolithic people whose implements ranged in style from Acheulian to Aterian. The unwonted delay in publication stemming from the author's insistence on a fully adequate record was not overcome until it appeared in 1951 as the first book to emerge from the Athlone Press of the University of London. In the meanwhile tenure of a Research Fellowship at Newnham was used to extend her range from Egypt to Algeria and Tunisia by working on the collections of palaeolithic industries housed in the museums of Oran and Tunis. This she was able to draw upon for her Huxley Memorial Lecture on the Aterian and its place in the palaeolithic world.

What proved to be her last archaeological field campaign was conducted in the Hadhramaut between November 1937 and March 1938 in the company of Freya Stark and her old colleague Elinor Gardner. When the opportunity came she accepted it out of the interest generated in Arab trade by her work on the problem of Zimbabwe. This expedition, sponsored by Lord Wakefield and backed by museums at Oxford and Cambridge, differed from her previous ventures by penetrating what was still archaeologically speaking *terra incognita*. Apart from Freya Stark herself and Mrs Ingrams, wife of the Political Officer, they were the first white women to appear in this part of Arabia. To undertake reconnaissance and archaeological excavation in a territory subject to endemic tribal strife under medically insalubrious conditions called for high courage and determination. In the face of sickness, culminating in acute bronchitis and malaria, the party of British women of gentle upbringing displayed the intrepidity traditionally displayed by their kind in the fiercely masculine lands of the Middle East. The most striking results, those relating to the tombs and temple of Hurweidha, were published in 1944 by the Society of Antiquaries of London in a style fitting their importance. The residue, comprising the first collection of palaeo-

lithic implements to be made in Arabia, had to wait longer but were ultimately published by the Prehistoric Society in what proved to be her last scientific paper.

Although she never held a post which involved formal academic teaching—and it is by no means certain that such would have proved congenial to a woman of her temperament—Gertrude Caton Thompson set an example to fellow workers in the field which is still relevant. She never dug without a clearly defined objective, though she regarded it as a duty to record whatever she encountered whether or not it was relevant to her immediate task. However difficult the conditions she insisted on maintaining meticulous records in the field and did her utmost to ensure that publication was full as well as prompt. While careful to avoid drawing conclusions which exceeded the evidence, she did her utmost to extract the most that it would bear by drawing on the most appropriate expertise. She had little patience with those who fell short of her own rigorous standards and her influence was consistently exerted against imperfect fieldwork and failure to achieve the publication of results in time and in sufficient detail to assist the work of others. On the other hand her distaste for abstract thought and her abhorrence of theory limited her influence on the development of archaeology since she withdrew from fieldwork in 1938.

Gertrude Caton Thompson was a feminist in the sense that she felt strongly that women had as much right as men to take the fullest part of which they were capable in any enterprise. For her expeditions overseas she chose women colleagues and she greatly appreciated her periods of residence at Newnham. On the other hand she had a strong admiration for men of achievement, notably Arthur Salter, Flinders Petrie, Mortimer Wheeler, and Louis (as well as Mary) Leakey. Again, although rightly described as a very private person, she played a full part in public activities relevant to her concerns. She contributed notably to the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Royal Geographical Society and served as President of the then youthful Prehistoric Society over a difficult period (1939–46). She also supported Chatham House, the British Association, and the British School in Egypt. She also made it her business to attend international conferences. She served on the organizing committee of the First International Conference of Pre- and Proto-historic Sciences in London in 1932 and was a keen supporter of the Pan-African Congress.

The only recognition she valued was that bestowed by her



peers. She set particular store by her election as a Fellow of the Academy in 1944 and it gave her great satisfaction to be able to enhance its ability to further archaeological research by endowing it with a gift of twenty thousand guineas in 1968. She also valued the academic recognition she received by being appointed a governor of Bedford College and of the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University and not least by her award of the Honorary Litt.D. degree by Cambridge University and her election to an Honorary Fellowship by her old college Newnham. The bestowal of the Cuthbert Peek award by the Royal Geographical Society in 1932 and of the Rivers and Huxley medals by the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1934 and 1946 had served to encourage her at the most active period of her archaeological career.

When the tenure of her Research Fellowship at Newnham expired in 1945 she solved the problem of accommodation by purchasing a house in Cambridge set well back from the Madingley Road. During term time she shared Conduit Rise with a long-term Newnham colleague, the former Dorothy Hoare, and her husband, the archaeologist Toty de Navarro. When the de Navarros decided to take up permanent residence at his family home, Court Farm, Broadway, in 1956 and resigned their lectureships at Cambridge, Gertrude sold Conduit Rise and was happily absorbed into their household. There she spent years of unclouded happiness, sharing a common love of gardening and music and having the added interest of watching the development of their son, Michael. She took an active part in promoting the Broadway Trust and made a gift of twenty thousand guineas to the National Trust at the same time as she did to the British Academy. This did not mean giving up her interest in African prehistory. She played an active role in the third Pan-African Congress held in Livingstone in 1955 which gave her the chance to renew her involvement in Zimbabwe and its problems. The new introduction she wrote for the American edition of *The Zimbabwe Culture* published in 1971 testifies to the impression these continued to make on her imagination. Her final visit to Africa was rounded off by her visit to the Leakeys in Nairobi, where she was able to see the collections in the Coryndon Museum and visit a number of key sites in the neighbourhood. The final service she was able to render to prehistoric Africa was to lend her support to the British Institute of Archaeology in East Africa as a governor from 1961-71.

GRAHAME CLARK

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