

Englishwomen on Tour – Saqqara Through the Eyes of Early Female Travellers

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Along with treasure hunters, surveyors and archaeologists, tourists have been drawn to Saqqara since the early days of foreign travel. Situated merely 30 km from Cairo, the enigmatic Step Pyramid of Djoser and scattered tombs from all periods of Egyptian history attracted travellers from the wealthy West even before Cook's steamers navigated the Nile. Conveniently distanced for a day trip on donkey-back, or languidly glimpsed from the deck of a *dahabiyah*, Saqqara was not easily overlooked. Between the official accounts, travelogues and archaeological reports written exclusively by men-on-their-missions, we can discover some gems of storytelling by the rare female traveller.

Amelia Edwards

When the English novelist Amelia Edwards (1831-1892) visited Egypt in 1873, it was a different country. At the height of European glam-travel, wealthy tourists huddled together in Shephard's Hotel in Cairo, exchanging travel advice and gossip. The wooden flat-bottomed *dahabiyah* houseboat was a favoured

means of Nile travel for the elite. The choice between this elegant sailboat and the crude steamer was compared with the choice between post-horse and rail; the one 'expensive, leisurely, delightful', the other 'cheap, swift, and comparatively comfortless'. Edwards valued leisure over swiftness, and took the time to record her journey from Cairo to Abu Simbel and back, which she immortalized in her famous account *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (1877, second edition 1888). After returning to London, she co-founded the Egypt Exploration Fund (now Society), kickstarting the archaeological careers of Edouard Naville, Flinders Petrie and Francis Llewellyn Griffith.

Edwards' tone is warm and humorous as she describes the peculiarities of her ever-changing surroundings. In describing the different paces of a camel: "He has four: a short walk, like the rolling of a small boat in a chopping sea; a long walk which dislocates every bone in your body; a trot that reduces you to imbecility; and a gallop that is sudden death" (p. 187).

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Fig. 1 Amelia Edwards
(photo © Egyptian
Exploration Society).

At Abu Simbel, at the southernmost point of their journey, Edwards describes how her ship's crew paints the face of one of the colossi with coffee, to colour the plaster that was left behind when a cast was taken fifty years earlier: "Rameses' appetite for coffee was prodigious. He consumed I know not how many gallons a day. Our cook stood aghast at the demand made upon his stores. Never before had he been called upon to provide for a guest whose mouth measured three feet and a half in width" (p. 309).

Anecdotes and discoveries are related with down-to-earth Britishness. Luncheon is timed like a sacred ritual and regarded as the pinnacle of civilisation. When a member of the party finds a speos in the mountains of Abu Simbel, he writes a courteous note: "Pray come immediately. I have found the entrance to a tomb. Please send some sandwiches" (p. 328).

Saqqara was visited early on during the trip. The custom was for the *dahabiyah* to sail southwards as fast as it could on the outward journey, making best use of the prevailing winds, and leisurely float down the Nile on its way back, leaving time to visit the sites. All depended on the wind and the height of Nile, and it was not uncommon for a boat to run aground on a sand bank. Part of the ship's crew would then have to jump into the river and tow the vessel to deeper waters.

On the day of their trip to Saqqara, Edwards and her party wake up to great tumult. Needing eight donkeys for the day's journey, their dragoman diligently had sent for 25, in order to make a selection. As a result, the whole village showed up, "so that by the time breakfast was over there were steeds enough in readiness for all the English in Cairo". After clearing up the misunderstanding,

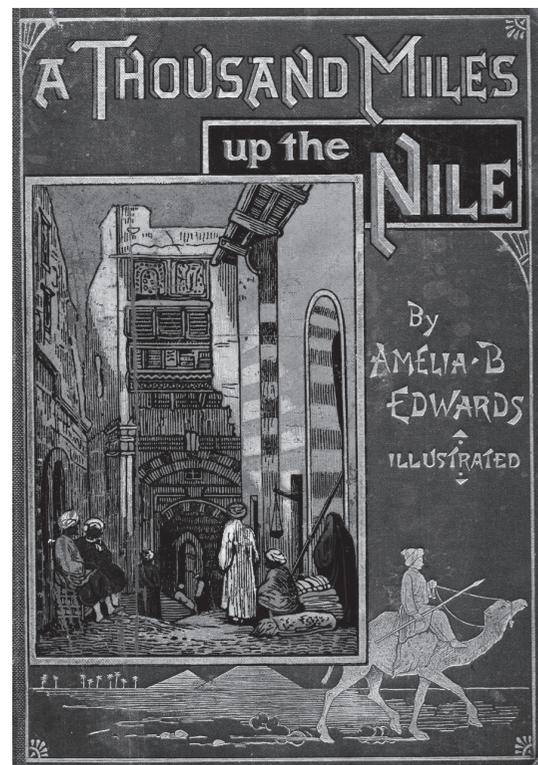


Fig. 2 Cover of *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (photo © Egyptian Exploration Society).



the party sets out “over a dusty flat, across the railway line, past the long straggling village, and through the famous plantations known as the Palms of Memphis”. Leaving behind the village of Bedreshayn, they ride on through endless palm groves, until they mount the desert plateau. There they observe the line of solemn pyramids, of Saqqara in front, Dashur to the left, Abusir to the right and Giza in the remote distance (p. 48).

Like many an archaeologist today, Edwards is struck by the colours of the desert at Saqqara, with its rocks of ‘rusty gold’, pyramids of ‘warm maize’ and ‘tender rose’, and the infinite sky that is ‘pale blue, violet, and greenish-grey’. The place is littered with finds: “broken pottery, limestone, alabaster; flakes of green and blue glaze; bleached bones, shreds of yellow linen; and lumps of some odd-looking dark brown substance, like dried-up sponge” (p. 51). The latter is undoubtedly mummy resin. The party starts picking up shabti fragments, beads and shards, until they realize that the ground is riddled with human bones. Eventually, these scruples are also overcome.

The ‘pyramid in platforms’, as it was called, is admired by Edwards for its position, architectural style and age. At the time, it was not yet ascribed to king Djoser of the Third Dynasty, but Edwards was close in assuming it ‘the most ancient building in the world’. She concurs that it belongs to a ‘runder architectural period’, its construction appearing more primitive than the smooth-sided pyramids of Giza.

The party visits the Serapeum, discovered in 1850 by Auguste Mariette, as the catacombs containing the mummified Apis bulls of Memphis. An avenue of sphinxes lined its causeway. Inside, the vestibule is so large that the guard’s lantern light



Fig. 3 The desert at Saqqara (photo © Nicky van de Beek).

doesn’t reach the walls on either side. As their eyes become accustomed to the gloom, vaulted chambers appear, housing massive sarcophagi of polished granite. It is hot and stifling as the guard shows them the inside of a sarcophagus: “Four persons might sit in it round a small card-table, and play a rubber comfortably” (p. 57). For effect, a pan of magnesium powder is burned, lighting up the huge gallery before plunging the companions into darkness.

Nearby, the tomb of Ti is visited. From the subtle reliefs covering every wall surface, the story of a wealthy man emerges, who owns flocks of birds, geese and ducks, herds of oxen, goats and asses, who was fond of fishing and fowling, spent time with his family and enjoyed the performances of singers and dancers. Edwards remarks that “a child might read the pictured chronicles which illuminate these walls, and take as keen a pleasure in them as the wisest of archaeologists” (p. 59-60). After being “suffocated in the Serapeum and broiled in the tomb of Ti”, the party enjoys lunch on the terrace of Mariette’s deserted house, concluding their visit to Saqqara.



Fig. 4 Harriet Martineau (engraving by Alonzo Chappel).

Harriet Martineau

Before Amelia Edwards, another remarkable woman visited Saqqara. Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) can be regarded as the first female sociologist. The daughter of a textile manufacturer with seven other children, she supported herself by writing books and treatises on sociological, religious and domestic subjects from a feminine perspective. In the Victorian era this was a rare accomplishment, placing her well ahead of her time. In 1846, she toured Egypt, Palestine and Syria together with some friends. On her return to England she published *Eastern Life, Present and Past* (1848). In the first part, she discusses the usual journey from Cairo to Assyut, Thebes, Edfu and Aswan up until the Second Cataract, with a focus on history, religion and the customs of the people around her.

Martineau visited Saqqara on her return journey, and here a dispute concerning donkeys likewise marks the beginning of the day. Herodotus in hand, she discards the Step Pyramid as being of little wonder and beauty. Interestingly though, she pays a visit to the animal catacombs: “We next went to the mummy pits; and first into the underground world of ibises. Here were underground chambers, pillared, painted, and sculptured, excavated into ornamented recesses, and consecrated to the gods; and destined for the burial of birds. And then the cats! In a sort of quarry, lay strata of these bodies, the rags fluttering out, and the layers consisting of hosts of cats. The feline population of a whole continent for ages would be required, it seems, to fill these pits. The cats are swathed like the human body; the ibises are enclosed in red pots, like chimney pots, with the round end cemented on” (p. 211).



Fig. 5 Ibis mummy in a pot (photo © National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden).

Although Martineau is slightly appalled by the overwhelming amount of mummified animals, she comments that “we ought to understand before we despise, and that, usually, the more we understand the less we despise”. She then lapses into a lengthy theory about ancient Egyptian animal religion, only to return to her description of Saqqara with the remark: “There was nothing else to be seen about this buried city but a tomb or two – a sarcophagus here – a mummy case there”. She is saddened by the day, probably caused by the fact that her Nile journey was drawing to an end.



Florence Nightingale

Soon after Harriet Martineau, in the winter of 1849, another young lady arrived in Egypt. Her parents were mostly concerned with arranging a favourable marriage, but the girl was stubborn and maintained that God had spoken to her to call her into His service. The girl in question was Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). She started caring for sick relatives and villagers, when her parents strongly objected. At that time, nursing was frowned upon as an occupation of low standing, inviting drunkenness and promiscuity. Florence persevered and turned down a highly eligible bachelor, when her desperate parents sent her on a trip through Europe together with some friends. The trip eventually led to Egypt, up the Nile on a classic *dahabiyah*, and Florence had the time of her life. In long letters to her family she describes the journey (only published in 1987 as *Letters from Egypt*).

Above all, Florence enjoyed her freedom en route. Moored next to the temple of Abu Simbel: "We shall never enjoy another place like Ipsamboul; the absolute solitude of it – the absence of a present. You look abroad and see no tokens of habitation; the power of leaving the boat and running up to the temple at any hour of the day or night, without a whole escort at your heels; the silence and stillness and freedom of it were what we shall never have again" (p. 99).

Florence had less taste for pyramids: "Hardly anything can be imagined more vulgar, more uninteresting than a Pyramid in itself, set upon a tray, like a clipt yew in a public-house garden; it represents no idea; it appeals to no feeling; it tries to call forth no part of you, but the vulgarest part – astonishment at its size – at the expense" (p. 170). Her distaste is



Fig. 6 Florence Nightingale.

softened by the Step Pyramid: "There is nothing left to testify of man's existence before this. It is not above 300 feet high, and has a chamber excavated beneath it in the rock 100 feet deep, into which you descend by a well. I should like to have seen this mysterious cave, but it was impossible".

From a mound, she overlooks the necropolis, 'sprinkled' with the pyramids of Saqqara, Dashur, Abusir and Giza in the distance. "But their ugliness was softened away by the shadow of death, which reigned over the place – as moonlight makes everything look beautiful. I could have wandered about that desert and those tombs for hours, but fatigue and those screeching Arabs, the two great Egyptian evils, drove us away" (p. 172).



Fig. 7 The pyramids of Dashur and Saqqara (by David Roberts).

Lady Evelyn Cobbold

In the beginning of the twentieth century, two ladies travelled through the north of Egypt. One American, Frances Gordon Alexander (née Paddock), of which little is known, and Lady Evelyn Cobbold (1867-1963), the daughter of a Scottish earl. The latter would go down in history as the first British-born Muslim woman to perform the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. Together with their maids, they started out from Cairo, making an expedition into the Libyan Desert, up until the Fayum oasis.

Their adventures are related in *Wayfarers in the Libyan Desert* (1912). They make it clear in the introduction that they set out “with only an Arab retinue to protect them”: “He provides the camels, donkeys, tents, servants, supplies, and acts as guide, interpreter and majordomo” (p. iv). The

two ladies reassure the reader that this method is “perfectly safe and feasible”, and that “one is free from all responsibility and care”. They don’t board a *dahabiyah*, but travel on camel-back, fully lacking ‘appropriate’ travel companions. Adopting the rhythm of the desert, they have lunch in sandy hollows, resting after long hours in the saddle, when “the Arabs lie inert, with muffled heads to protect themselves from the sun” (p. 30).

Unlike Martineau, they are highly interested in the ruins of Memphis and Saqqara: “The desert sand for miles is honeycombed with tombs and subterranean temples; for this vast plain was once the cemetery of the Pharaohs. Although for several thousand years archaeologist and robber alike have rifled these splendid sepulchres, the buried treasures are inexhaustible, and there must still remain



many sleeping their last sleep, swathed in their fine linen bandages, and surrounded by bas-reliefs representing all they loved in life. The excavators are patiently digging these endless sands, striving to wrest from them the secrets of the past. New treasures are unearthed, history is unmasked, more marvels come to light, revealing the life of ancient Egypt, a human document of absorbing interest” (p. 32-33).

As is custom, they visit the ‘happy tomb of Ti’, which must have been an experience using only candle light: “As we descend into the mysterious silence of the tomb, the Arab guardian lights candles whose feeble rays enable us to see dimly the marvellous drawings on the walls,

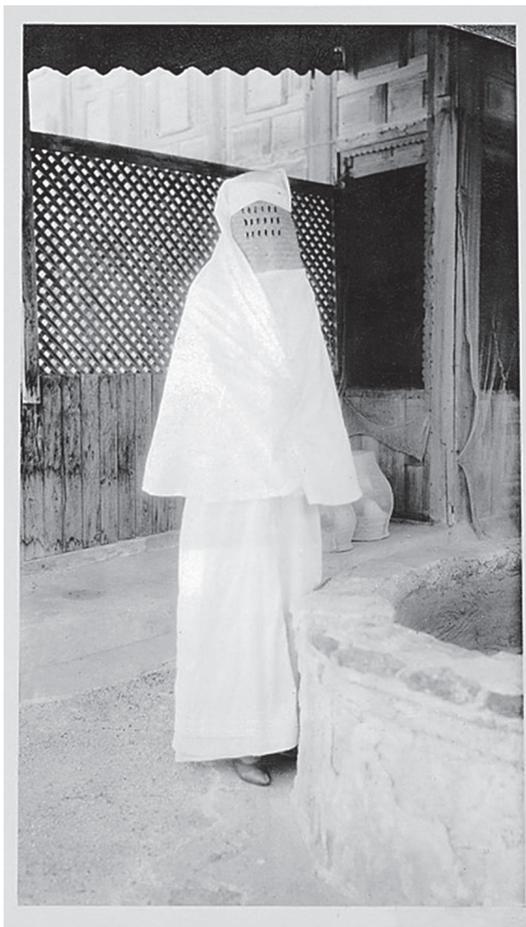


Fig. 9 Lady Evelyn in Jeddah.



Fig. 8 Lady Evelyn Cobbold (© Estate of Lady Evelyn Cobbold).

in those rooms unlighted from above” (p. 42). Their prose is lyrical as they describe the decoration: “In the exquisite bas-reliefs which cover the seven rooms of his mastaba there is such restraint, sense of proportion; above all such delicate modelling, such perfect rendering of every animal, bird, and reptile, that each one is at once an individual portrait and a type” (p. 43). After Ti, they visit the Serapeum and marvel at the Step Pyramid, before they continue towards the ‘blunted pyramid’ and ‘ruined pyramid’ of Dashur.



Spending her childhood winters in a Moorish villa in Algiers, Lady Evelyn was not unfamiliar with Islam and the Arab way of life. From the travel book speaks an interest in the people and their faith that truly manifested itself later during her life. Renaming herself Lady Zainab and claiming to have been a Muslim for as long as she could remember, she finally performed the pilgrimage to Mecca aged 66, after her husband (from whom she was separated) had died – an unusual and impressive undertaking for an elderly British lady in the 1930's. Her wanderings are related in *Pilgrimage to Mecca* (1934).

Today's touristic visits to Egypt are a long shot from the expeditions that were required in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It took women of courage (and wealth) to undertake such journeys. All four women described in this article went on to do amazing things:

Amelia Edwards founded the single most important Egyptological society in England, Harriet Martineau became the first female sociologist, Florence Nightingale invented modern nursing and Lady Evelyn Cobbold became Britain's first female *hajji*. Above all, the trip to Egypt and the Middle East meant a temporary escape from the demands of society, and a plunge into a radically different culture, where – ironically – western women could move about more freely than they could at home. This allowed them to observe their surroundings in a different, more personal way than their male counterparts.

Travelling by camel or *dahabiyah* also slowed down one's pace, leaving time for musings and reflections. At the end of a long, desert day "we are at home once more. Let us eat, drink, rest and be merry; for tomorrow the hard work of sight-seeing and sketching begins again" (Amelia Edwards, *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile*, p. 324).

