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A WORLD BENEATH THE SANDS

The Golden Age of Egyptology

Toby Wilkinson



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SIX

A thousand miles up the Nile



Lucie Duff Gordon, lady of letters and friend of the Egyptian poor.



The work of destruction, meanwhile, goes on apace. There is no one to prevent it; there is no one to discourage it.¹

AMELIA EDWARDS, 1877

From the death of Cleopatra until the middle of the nineteenth century, the history of Egypt, and of Western engagement with Egypt, was written by men. Women played little or no public role in Roman, Byzantine, Arab or Ottoman rule over the Nile Valley; none of the early European travellers to Egypt was a woman; there were no female members of the Napoleonic expedition, nor of the subsequent expeditions led by Champollion or Lepsius. Only Sophia Lane Poole, with her first-hand account of life in the harems of Cairo, brought a female perspective to Western understanding of Egypt, and shone a light on the lot of Egyptian women. But the mores of the age demanded that her groundbreaking work be published semi-anonymously: her name is absent from the title page, which instead makes reference to her already famous brother: *'The Englishwoman in Egypt: letters from Cairo written during a residence there in 1842, 3, & 4, with E. W. Lane, Esq Author of the "Modern Egyptians". By his sister'*. Sophia's own name only appears inside the book, at the foot of the preface.

Nineteen centuries of male-dominated encounters and experiences were finally brought to an end in the 1860s and 70s thanks to two remarkable women: women from very different

backgrounds and with very different motivations, but who had the same passion, the same indomitable spirit, and an equal affection for Egypt. One developed a deep fascination for the modern Egyptians and found her calling as a friend of the downtrodden fellahin, bringing their plight to wider attention. The other was captivated by the ancient Egyptians, and, scandalized at the wholesale destruction of pharaonic monuments, launched a campaign to save Egypt's patrimony for future generations, in the process establishing Egyptian archaeology on a permanent footing. Lucie Duff Gordon and Amelia Edwards: while neither has achieved the worldwide fame of Champollion, Lepsius or Mariette, their names and contributions are writ large in the history of Egyptology, and their stories exemplify all the contradictions of European relations with Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century.

Born in 1821, the year before Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphics, Duff Gordon was blessed with remarkable parents. Her father, John Austin, was a professor of jurisprudence and a noted intellectual. Her mother, Sarah, was unusually well educated for a woman of the time (Sarah's own mother had been a strong supporter of abolitionism, and had been used to discussing politics and literature on a par with men). The young Lucie inherited her parents' talents and, from an early age, developed an insatiable appetite for reading. A friend described her, with great perspicacity and not a little understatement, as 'a great reader, a great thinker, very original in her conclusions, very eager in impressing her opinions, her mind was not like those of many women.'² Lucie's natural inquisitiveness was fed by early exposure to foreign countries and cultures. The family lived in Boulogne-sur-Mer from 1834 to 1836, where Sarah was known as '*la belle anglaise*', and where Lucie's childhood neighbour and exact contemporary was none other than Auguste Mariette. Whether the two ever

met is not known, but they are likely to have had friends in common.

When the Austin family returned to England, Lucie was on the verge of her 'coming out'. At her first society ball, at Lansdowne House – the London residence of the Marquess of Lansdowne, a leading Whig statesman, former Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary – her eyes fell upon a man more than ten years her senior. Sir Alexander Duff Gordon was of impeccable pedigree, being descended from Scottish nobility, and a baronet to boot. Despite the age difference, Alexander and Lucie fell in love and were married on 16 May 1840 – overcoming initial opposition from Alexander's mother, who disapproved of her son marrying a woman with no dowry. They made their home in Westminster, where, with Lucie's intellectual connections and Alexander's aristocratic cachet, they enjoyed a wide circle of friends. Tennyson used to come and read his poems at their house. Other visitors included the historian, Macaulay, and the novelists, Dickens and Thackeray; the prime minister, Lord Melbourne, and the future Emperor of France, Napoleon III, then in exile in London; the founder of the influential *Edinburgh Review*, Sydney Smith; and the travel writer, William Kinglake (whose first literary work, *Eothen; or Traces of Travel Brought Home from the East*, 1844, recounted his adventures in Egypt). To supplement the Duff Gordons' meagre income, Lucie put her academic and linguistic talents to good use by translating Niebuhr's *Stories of the Gods and Heroes of Greece* from German into English. She also demonstrated her concern for more distant lands and peoples when she took in a Nubian boy, who had been enslaved before being rescued by English missionaries, as her servant. Hassan el-Bakeet, always known as Hatty, remained a cherished member of the Duff Gordon household until his death from congestion of the lungs on Christmas Day 1850.

Indeed, a title and connections were certainly no protection against illness in mid-nineteenth-century London, and the Duff Gordons, like so many of the capital's families, were touched repeatedly by misfortune. Lucie's second child (her first, Janet, was born in 1842) died at only a few months old. Alexander nearly died of cholera in 1846. And, after the birth of their only surviving son, Maurice, in 1849, Lucie herself began to succumb to tuberculosis. She struggled against the disease, and gave birth to a second daughter, Urania, in 1858; but by the winter of 1861, Lucie was so ill that her doctors advised her to go abroad for a warmer, drier climate. Like many Britons, she headed first for the Cape, but then decided to try Egypt, newly fashionable as a winter resort, especially for consumptive Europeans.

She had read the Bible and Herodotus, the *Arabian Nights* and *Eothen*, but nothing could have prepared her for the grim realities of life in Said's Egypt. On her arrival in Alexandria in October 1862, she wrote 'what is not pleasant, is the absence of all brightness or gaiety, even from young and childish faces'.³ From that moment on, her support for working-class politics back in Britain found an outlet as a champion of the hard-pressed peasantry of Egypt. Moreover, in her mother (if not in her husband), she knew she had a correspondent who shared her progressive views and who would not be shocked by her frequent scathing remarks about the British abroad. Duff Gordon's clear-sightedness and openness to other cultures made her an unusually sharp observer of colonial attitudes. 'Why do the English talk of the beautiful sentiment of the Bible and pretend to feel it so much,' she wondered, 'and when they come and see the same life before them, they ridicule it?'⁴

Lucie's dismay at the lives of ordinary Egyptians was compounded by her swift realization that the cost of living was far higher than she had expected, at least in Alexandria with its

growing European population. (By 1864, there were over 60,000 Europeans in Alexandria, one-third of the city's population; fourteen years earlier, the entire European population in Egypt had been just 50,000.⁵) Only days after her arrival, she wrote: 'I regret more than I can say that I ever came here, for I fear it will be utterly impossible to live as cheaply as I had hoped.'⁶ But she was nothing if not stoical in the face of adversity, and she decided to make the best of her situation, travelling on to Cairo where she found a more 'golden existence, all sunshine and poetry, and, I must add, kindness and civility'.⁷ There she took a servant, Omar, known by his nickname Abu Halawy ('father of sweets'), and, like all European visitors, set off on a journey upstream. 'If this voyage does me as much good as it has done to others,' she wrote, 'I shall be well enough for anything.'⁸

The Nile soon worked its magic. After just ten days on the river, Duff Gordon began 'to eat and sleep again, and cough less'.⁹ As her health improved, so her fascination and sympathy for the Egyptians themselves began to grow. She was struck by their 'tolerant spirit'¹⁰ and noted, with rare understanding, that 'the much talked-of dirt is simply utter poverty. The poor souls are as clean as Nile mud and water will make their bodies, and they have not a second shirt, or any bed but dried mud.'¹¹ By the time her boat reached Asyut, nearly three weeks into the voyage, Egypt had her in its thrall. She wrote: 'I heard a boy singing a *Zikr* (the ninety-nine attributes of God) to a party of dervishes in a mosque, and I think I never heard anything more beautiful and affecting.'¹²

But Egypt was changing: internal currents of political awakening were mixing with the external forces of nascent colonialism, and the results were often felt most acutely by the ordinary people. On 17 January 1863, while Lucie was in Aswan, the viceroy Said died and was succeeded by Ismail, a ruler who wanted Egypt to be, and to be seen as, part of Europe – dynamic

and modern – not part of Africa (then cast as backward and primitive).¹³ Yet one of Ismail's very first acts as viceroy was to receive, in an audience at the royal palace on Roda Island, the explorer John Hanning Speke, lately arrived from Khartoum having discovered the source of the Nile. By opening up Africa, Europe was preparing it for imperial subjugation. Indeed, a few years earlier, during a trip up the Nile, Flaubert had presciently remarked: 'It seems to me impossible that within a short time England won't become mistress of Egypt.'¹⁴

The sense of a country at a tipping point, poised precariously between a time-worn past and an uncertain future, comes across vividly in Duff Gordon's letters from Egypt. Unlike virtually every traveller to the Nile Valley before her, she was pointedly uninterested in the ancient monuments, declaring: 'It is of no use to talk of the ruins; everybody has said, I suppose, all that can be said . . .'¹⁵ A visit to the greatest religious complex of the ancient world merited barely a mention: 'Yesterday I rode over to Karnac . . . Glorious hot sun and delicious air.'¹⁶ Yet she could not be insensible to the layers of history visible at every turn, memorably describing Egypt as 'a palimpsest, in which the Bible is written over Herodotus, and the Koran over that'.¹⁷ There were reminders of pharaonic civilization all around, and not just in the ruined temples and tombs. She observed that the Nubian women around Aswan still wore clothing and ornaments 'the same as those represented in the tombs',¹⁸ while 'the ceremonies at births and burials are not Muslim, but ancient Egyptian'.¹⁹ Away from 'the highroad and the backsheesh-hunting parasites'²⁰ life in the country was largely unchanged for millennia, and Lucie was greatly taken by 'the charm of the people',²¹ declaring – for she was still, in her own mind, on a short-term visit – 'I shall say farewell to Egypt with real feeling.'²²

Yet, even in the countryside, modernity was encroaching fast. The American Civil War, which had been raging for two years, had boosted the market for Egyptian cotton, and Ismail had responded, ordering vast new irrigation works in order to increase the acreage of cultivable land devoted to cash crops. Egypt's new-found prosperity did not escape the attention of the Ottoman sultan, Abdel Aziz. In 1863 he paid a visit to his upstart province (as Egypt still was, officially, if not in any practical sense), 'to see for himself a country which was stated to be more advanced than his own and where foreigners were investing money'.²³ One of Ismail's advisers was in no doubt what was going through the visitors' minds:

The Sultan, and still more the Sultan's ministers, cannot bear to think that of the large revenues of Egypt not a tenth comes to his hands. They believe that if it were a completely dependent province, like Syria, they would have the spending and the plundering for themselves of the sums that are spent here for Egyptian purposes. They are continually intriguing against the Viceroy's quasi-independence. He is surrounded even in his hareem by Turkish agents and spies. This naturally throws him on foreign support.²⁴

While Abbas had looked to England, Said and then Ismail turned to France. Nothing summed up the Franco-Egyptian relationship more powerfully than the Suez Canal project. But, in contrast to the wide-eyed wonder of most Western commentators, Lucie saw the human cost behind the impressive statistics. 'Everyone is cursing the French here,' she wrote. 'Forty thousand men always at work at the Suez Canal at starvation-point, does not endear them to the Arabs. There is great excitement as to what the new Pasha will do. If he ceases to give

forced labour, the Canal, I suppose, must be given up.²⁵

But Ismail was too focussed on Egypt's modernization, and his own legacy, to listen to the grievances of his subjects; France's influence, and the canal project, continued without interruption.

Duff Gordon went back home to England in June 1863, but returned again to Egypt that October – not only for her health (which was failing month by month and year by year), but also because she was entranced by her adopted country. Despite missing her children, and pained by the anxiety her illness was causing her family, she freely admitted: "The more I see of the back slums of Cairo, the more in love I am with them. The dirtiest lane of Cairo is far sweeter than the best street of Paris . . . I am in love with the Arab ways and I have contrived to see and know more of family life than many Europeans who have lived here for years."²⁶

Cairo, however, was too cold and damp in the winter months for a consumptive, so Lucie headed back to Upper Egypt and persuaded the French consul-general to let her take up residence in 'the French house' on the roof of Luxor Temple. The ramshackle dwelling had been built around 1815 by Henry Salt. Belzoni had lived there while supervising the removal of the 'Young Memnon', and Rosellini had stayed during the Franco-Tuscan expedition in 1829. But the moniker 'French House' had been acquired in 1831 when the dwelling was used as a base for the French naval officers who had come to Luxor to remove one of the obelisks and take it to Paris. Duff Gordon found the house charming: "The view all round my house is magnificent on every side, over the Nile in front facing north-west, and over a splendid range of green and distant orange buff hills to the south-east, where I have a spacious covered terrace."²⁷

With 'glass windows and doors to some of the rooms'²⁸ and a few items of second-hand furniture, it became Lucie's 'Theban palace', and her home for the next six years.

With her bird's-eye view and her lucid prose, she would chart the transformation of Egypt during Ismail's reign, not so much through his *grands projets* as through their impact on Egypt's ordinary inhabitants. Back in 1855, Said had issued an edict compelling every master to free any slave who asked for freedom,²⁹ but a decade later the rural population was still effectively enslaved by the demands of the *corvée*: 'the poor fellaheen are marched off in gangs like convicts, and their families starve'. 'No wonder,' Lucie observed, 'the cry is, "Let the English Queen come and take us".'³⁰ Having inherited a radical streak from her grandmother, Duff Gordon had found her voice as a champion of the Egyptian poor. She became increasingly outspoken against Ismail's profligacy, lamenting the fact that 'money is constantly wasted more than if it were thrown into the Nile, for then the fellaheen would not have to spend their time, so much wanted for agriculture, in building hideous barrack-like so-called palaces'.³¹

This was dangerous talk in a country swarming with spies and informers. Lucie's letters were intercepted by government agents – she discovered only later that many never reached England³² – and on one occasion Ismail tried to bribe her boatman into drowning her; but her popularity locally saved her. Because of her fair-mindedness and caring attitude – 'I am, perhaps, not quite impartial, because I am *sympathique* to the Arabs and they to me, and I am inclined to be "kind" to their virtues if not "blind" to their faults'³³ – she gained a reputation among the people of Luxor and the surrounding villages as a trusted friend and advocate. When an epidemic swept the land in the spring of 1864, people preferred to visit her, not the government clinics, travelling up to twenty miles for treatment. She soon gained a reputation for having a 'lucky eye', and was asked for all sorts of favours, 'to go and look at young brides, visit houses that are building, inspect cattle, etc., as a bringer of good luck'.³⁴

But even Duff Gordon's magic touch could not dispel the growing deprivation and oppression caused by the government's policy of rash, unbridled development. By January 1865, there was 'hunger, and pain, and labour without hope and without reward, and the constant bitterness of impotent resentment'.³⁵ Lucie felt that: 'The system of wholesale extortion and spoliation has reached a point beyond which it would be difficult to go'³⁶ and reported the mood among the townspeople of Luxor: 'The discontent is growing stronger every day. Last week the people were cursing the Pasha in the streets of Aswan, and every one talks aloud of what they think . . . The whole place is in desolation.'³⁷

Hers, however, was a lone voice. Most European commentators – from the safety of their comfortable drawing rooms – were wholly supportive of Ismail's 'reforms'. British diplomats rarely ventured beyond the cities, and all were wilfully blind to the seething resentment building up beneath the surface. Duff Gordon alone could see what was coming, and wrote to her husband: 'I wish you to publish these facts; they are no secret to any but those Europeans whose interests keep their eyes tightly shut, and they will soon have them opened.'³⁸ She would, of course, be proved right, but only when it was too late.

While modern Egypt was lurching towards repression and revolution, the study of ancient Egypt was experiencing its own transformation under Mariette and the recently established Antiquities Service. Duff Gordon was no stranger to the world of oriental archaeology – Sir Henry Layard, discoverer of Nimrud and Nineveh, was a family friend – and every Egyptologist passing through Luxor could not fail to make her acquaintance. In February 1864, de Rougé and Mariette arrived

by steamer; Lucie's main concern was that 'they will turn out good company'.³⁹ A more permanent companion was the American adventurer and antiquities dealer Edwin Smith, who was also living at Luxor, and for whom Duff Gordon procured the latest archaeological books from England.⁴⁰ As late as the 1860s, a few surviving links with Napoleonic Egyptology could still be found in a place like Luxor; one of Lucie's Egyptian acquaintances, whom she fondly referred to as 'my old "great-grandfather"', had been Belzoni's guide, and 'his eldest child was born seven days before the French under Bonaparte marched into Luxor'.⁴¹

Alongside these echoes from the past, new rivalries were beginning to shape the discipline. Lepsius's pupil, Johannes Dümichen, was in Egypt to copy inscriptions, and got to hear about a king list that Mariette's workers had uncovered at Abydos. He dutifully sent a copy to Lepsius, back in Berlin, who published it without even acknowledging Mariette. In the resulting furore, with national pride at stake, Dümichen and Mariette almost came to blows.⁴² In truth, since Lepsius's expedition and the foundation of the Antiquities Service, German scholars had largely been shut out of fieldwork in Egypt.⁴³ Not even popular novels, with titles like *An Egyptian Princess* (1864), published by the Leipzig professor, Georg Ebers, could mask the sidelining of German Egyptology.

Mariette, meanwhile, was unstoppable, opening up excavations throughout Egypt and, to Duff Gordon's disgust, 'forcing the people to work'.⁴⁴ With all his power and authority, he was not immune to thinking himself above the law. On one occasion, no doubt after a heated argument about access to antiquities and fired by competing national interests, he struck the British consular agent at Luxor, Mustafa Agha Ayat, before flatly denying any wrongdoing. With her sense of fair play, Lucie was incensed, and wrote to the British authorities who

sent a Foreign Office official to conduct an enquiry.⁴⁵ The Austro-Prussian War of 1866 led to a weakening of the French position in Europe, and the strengthening of Prussia under Bismarck; but none of this seemed to affect Mariette, secure in his position and master of all he surveyed. Duff Gordon, though, continued to cock a snook at her childhood neighbour: 'A man has stolen a very nice silver antique ring for me out of the last excavations – don't tell Mariette . . . My fellah friend said "better thou have it than Mariette sell it to the French and pocket the money; if I didn't steal it, he would" – so I received the stolen property calmly.'⁴⁶

Well may Lucie have pocketed the odd illicitly acquired antique, for she was constantly worried about money, and struggled to make ends meet, even with her frugal lifestyle. An outbreak of murrain had swept Egypt in the autumn of 1863, killing large numbers of livestock and raising prices still further. Duff Gordon was forced to eke out an increasingly precarious existence: 'I live in the open air altogether. The bats and the swallows are quite sociable; I hope the serpents and scorpions will be more reserved.'⁴⁷ In the summer months, the heat could be unbearable; the only solution was to drop her European reserve and opt for something more practical: 'It has been so "awfully" hot that I have not had pluck to go on with my letter, or indeed to do anything but lie on a mat in the passage with a minimum of clothes quite indescribable in English.'⁴⁸

Despite being settled in Luxor, Duff Gordon experienced bouts of terrible homesickness, still missing her children, and feeling she was gradually losing them. But by July 1864 she had begun to accept that she would never return to England. She wrote to her husband: 'I do not feel at all like breathing cold damp air again. This depresses me very much as you may suppose. You will have to divorce me.'⁴⁹ Far from damaging her

reputation, however, her heroic existence in a distant land captured imaginations at home, and the publication of her *Letters from Egypt* in 1865 cemented her fame.

The Egyptian climate may have been beneficial for those suffering from tuberculosis, but other diseases were rampant. On a journey down the Nile in May 1865, Lucie nearly died of pleurisy, and had to be nursed back to health by her faithful servant Omar. (After recovering, she wrote to her husband: 'I beg you won't ever forget Omar's truly filial care and affection for me.'⁵⁰) A few months later, in Bulaq, Mariette's wife was not so fortunate, and succumbed to cholera. Meanwhile, the plight of ordinary Egyptians continued to worsen. When desperate peasants had vented their anger by attacking a Prussian boat on the Nile, Ismail himself had paid a visit and 'taken a broom and swept them clean, *i.e.* – exterminated the inhabitants'.⁵¹ One Egyptian had confided in Duff Gordon: 'I only pray for Europeans to rule us – now the fellaheen are worse off than any slaves.'⁵² In Lucie's own view, a combination of factors had conspired to make life intolerable: 'The country is a waste for want of water, the animals are skeletons, the people are hungry, the heat has set in like June, and there is some sickness, and, above all the massacres . . . have embittered all hearts.'⁵³

Ismail, however, carried on as if the day of reckoning would never arrive. In April 1866, he visited Constantinople and obtained from the Sultan, for a large sum, the right to pass the title of viceroy to his son, rather than to the eldest surviving relative, thus breaking with Turkish custom and effectively establishing his own dynasty. (The following year, the Sultan recognized the new reality and granted Ismail the title of khedive – also in return for a hefty payment.) By July, the Egyptian government was nearly bankrupt; Duff Gordon's own son-in-law, Henry Ross, was hit hard when his employer, the

Egyptian Commercial and Trading Company, suffered losses. But Ismail, instead of reining in his spending, merely clamped down on dissent 'The espionage is becoming more and more close and jealous,' Lucie wrote, 'and I have been warned to be very careful.'⁵⁴ Farmers were beaten to pay taxes for the following year, which they were unable to pay. Fellahin were conscripted to fight alongside Turkish troops to put down a rebellion on Crete. And, all the while, able-bodied men were plucked from the fields to work on government construction projects. The combined results were calamitous:

The hand of the Government is awfully heavy upon us. All this week the people have been working night and day cutting their unripe corn, because three hundred and ten men are to go tomorrow to work on the railroad below Assiut. This green corn is, of course, valueless to sell and unwholesome to eat; so the magnificent harvest of this year is turned to bitterness at the last moment. From a neighbouring village all the men are gone, and seven more are wanted to make up the *corvée*.⁵⁵

In the summer of 1867, Ismail accompanied his new best friend, the Ottoman sultan, to Europe, where they were feted by their hosts. The first stop was Paris, to view the Exposition Universelle. Duff Gordon remarked tartly: 'The universal prayer now is, "may he not return in safety, may he die in France and be buried in the graves of unbelievers".'⁵⁶ The khedive's next port of call was London, where Ismail was made a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath and the Sultan received the Order of the Garter. Egyptian officials who accompanied the royal visit were not just there to bask in the reflected glory: Ismail wanted them to learn about the modern developments taking place in Europe – for example, the remodelling of Paris

under Hausmann – and copy them back in Egypt. Ali Mubarak, an engineer, was made Minister of Public Works and Minister of Schools on his return from France, and duly set about transforming the city of Cairo and establishing government schools throughout the country. Cairo witnessed its greatest construction boom since the Middle Ages as waste land was levelled and filled, new avenues and public squares laid out, dirt roads surfaced, and sewers dug. The unifying philosophy was *tanzim*: organization, regulation and modernization, an extension of military order into every aspect of civilian life.⁵⁷ It was also a deliberate attempt to turn Egypt into a Western nation. Plots in the new quarter of Cairo were made available to anyone who promised to build a building with a European facade. Ismail's eyes were fixed firmly on modernity, even if, in a nod to the growth of tourism, he adopted a pyramid-and-sphinx design for his country's new postage stamps.

Just as tourists expecting a scene from the *Arabian Nights* were disappointed by the remodelling of Cairo, so tourism itself was reshaping Egypt. In 1867, the year that Mark Twain first visited the country (to climb the Great Pyramid), Duff Gordon wrote 'Americans swarm in the steamboats, and a good many in *dahabiehs*'⁵⁸ and added: 'This year I'll bolt the doors when I see a steamer coming.'⁵⁹ No longer a quiet backwater, Thebes had been transformed into 'an English watering-place. There are now nine boats lying here, and the great object is to *do the Nile* as fast as possible.'⁶⁰ In January she entertained the writer Edward Lear, and in the autumn her mood was greatly lightened by a visit from her son, Maurice, who seems to have spent most of his time shooting water fowl. But time was catching up with Duff Gordon and her way of life. In December that year, she wrote laconically: 'Half of the old house at Luxor fell down into the temple beneath six days before I arrived; so there is an end of the

Maison de France, I suppose.⁶¹ Lucie's mother, Sarah Austin, had passed away in August 1867, and Duff Gordon's own health continued to worsen. By January 1869, she wrote to her daughter: 'I am more ill, I believe, than you quite suppose. I do not like your father to be worried, but I may tell *you* that I think it hardly possible I can last much longer . . . I think Maurice had better go home soon . . . I wish I could hope to see any of you once more, but I do not see any possibility of reaching Europe.'⁶²

Later that month, she sent Maurice home, with the tart observation that: 'He ought to be doing something.'⁶³ In February, she was just about well enough to receive a visit from the Prince and Princess of Wales, during their trip up the Nile. (Since the publication of Duff Gordon's *Letters from Egypt* she had become something of a celebrity.) But, by the late spring, she knew the end was coming. Cairo would provide better terminal care, so she left Luxor amidst much weeping. She almost immediately regretted it, writing to her husband: 'If I live till September I will go up to Esneh, where the air is softer and I cough less. I would rather die among my own people in the Said [Upper Egypt] than here.' (She added, with just a hint of maternal exasperation: 'Don't think please of sending Maurice out again, he must begin to work now or he will never be good for anything.'⁶⁴)

Duff Gordon's final letter, written to her husband on 9 July 1869 from the spa resort of Helwan, just south of Cairo, ends: 'God bless you, my dearest of all loves . . . Kiss my darlings all . . . Forgive me all my faults toward you. I wish I had seen your dear face once more – but not now. I would not have you here now on any account.'⁶⁵

She died in the early morning five days later, aged just forty-eight. The faithful Omar was by her side until the very end. In an obituary in *The Times*, Lucie's friend, Caroline

Norton, summed up her life and legacy succinctly: 'Lady Duff Gordon lived in Egypt, and in Egypt she has died, leaving a memory of her greatness and goodness such as no other European woman ever acquired in that country.'⁶⁶



Khedive Ismail has been described as 'an ugly man of the greatest charm'.⁶⁷ His subjects may have begged to differ, at least on the latter point. Charming or not, he certainly had a taste for opulence (Sauternes was his drink of choice); and his extravagance was notorious, especially when it came to entertaining foreign guests. When Empress Eugénie visited Egypt in 1869, for the official opening of the Suez Canal, Ismail ordered an eight-mile long road to be laid from central Cairo to enable her 'to drive out to the Pyramids without fatigue (she perversely rode out there every morning on horseback) and had built under their shadow a stone mansion in which she might repose for a single night'.⁶⁸ As for his own palace at Giza, its gardens were intersected by mosaic pavements laid by craftsmen brought from Italy, all at a reputed cost of 30,000 Egyptian pounds. It was his love of European fashion and progress that caused him to remodel and modernize not just central Cairo, but virtually the whole of Egypt. In addition to his greatest project, the Suez Canal, opened in the year of Duff Gordon's death, he presided over the reclamation of 1.25 million acres of desert land, and the construction of 8,400 miles of irrigation canals, 1,185 miles of railways, 500 miles of telegraph, 4,500 primary schools, 430 bridges, sixty-four sugar mills, fifteen lighthouses, the Suez docks and a new harbour at Alexandria.

In Cairo, many of the buildings were jerry-built – outwardly ostentatious, but lacking in structural solidity. None demonstrated his love of indulgence and his obsession with European culture more than the Opera House. Built on one side of

the Ezbekiya Gardens, facing Shepherd's Hotel, it was a monument to Western taste par excellence. Modelled on the Paris Opera, it was decorated inside with crimson hangings and an abundance of gold brocade; an opulent royal box included screened pews for the ladies of the king's harem. The first performance, a production of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, took place on 1 November 1869. Had Duff Gordon still been alive, she would no doubt have excoriated this latest demonstration of the khedive's vanity. Empress Eugénie sat in the royal box between Ismail and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria. Few Egyptians were invited that evening, and few would attend in the years to come. Instead, the Cairo Opera House became a favourite haunt for Western expatriates, where they could cocoon themselves from the harsh realities of life beyond the marble foyer.

Another of Verdi's works had been intended for the Opera's opening night, but was not ready in time. *Aida* received its premiere two years late, on Christmas Day 1871, to great critical acclaim. In typical Ismailian fashion, the first performance featured 3,000 performers, including Nubians and slaves 'bearing in procession statues and figures of the ancient gods borrowed out of the museum for the occasion'.⁶⁹ As befitted an opera set in the time of the pharaohs, the libretto of *Aida* had been commissioned from the greatest Egyptologist of the day, Mariette. Having presided over the Antiquities Service and Egyptian Museum for over a decade, he was at the height of his reputation and influence. But events far from the banks of the Nile soon threatened not just Mariette's position, but his very life.

Throughout the mid- and late 1860s, the rivalry between France and Prussia had been building, in Egypt and across the continent of Europe. The spat between Mariette and Dümichen was a symptom of a wider malaise. While Germans may not

have been actively involved in excavations, they were impressively productive in other areas of scholarship, building on Lepsius's achievements a generation earlier. One of the leading lights of this second generation of German Egyptologists was Mariette's friend, Heinrich Brugsch. He had studied under Lepsius and assisted Mariette at the Serapeum. In 1863, he founded a learned periodical, the *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*; it remains to this day one of the discipline's most respected organs, and arguably the premier journal for ancient Egyptian philology. In 1864, Brugsch served briefly as Prussian consul in Cairo, before returning home to take up a professorship at the University of Göttingen. In 1869, at the apogee of Ismail's flirtation with Europe, Brugsch was invited back to Cairo to be head of a new Khedivial School of Egyptology. Mariette had considered Brugsch a friend; now the two looked like rivals. The Frenchman opposed the School of Egyptology from the start: not only was it run by a German, it also threatened to create an alternative centre of scholarship in competition with the Egyptian Museum. Under Brugsch's leadership, the school gave back to German Egyptology a prestige it had not enjoyed since Lepsius's expedition. For Mariette, this was anathema.

Worse was to come. On 16 July 1870, the French parliament, fearing the spectre of German unification and the growing assertiveness of its neighbour, declared war on Prussia. It was a disastrous mistake. The Prussian-led coalition of German forces mobilized quickly and invaded north-eastern France. A series of rapid German victories culminated in the siege of Metz and the battle of Sedan. The French army was defeated and Napoleon III captured. In Paris, on 4 September, the empire was abolished and the Third Republic declared; but it was not enough to assuage German wrath. Two weeks later, German troops surrounded the capital and began to draw the noose

tight. After a four-month siege, the French capital fell on 28 January 1871. France's defeat paved the way for what it had most feared: German unification under an all-powerful Prussia. Worse still, the Treaty of Frankfurt which brought the war to an end gave most of Alsace and part of Lorraine to Germany, upsetting the balance of power in Europe that had prevailed since the defeat of the first Napoleon in 1815.

By a stroke of singularly bad luck, Mariette had returned to Paris for his summer vacation when the siege broke out, and found himself trapped in the city for months. This was not just a personal misfortune: in his absence, rivals in Egypt started plotting to replace him. Brugsch was mentioned as a candidate for a possible German takeover of the Antiquities Service, but was loath to move against a former colleague, and Mariette's enemies failed to press their advantage. As soon as the siege of Paris was lifted, Mariette hurried back to Bulaq to reassert his own position, and, with it, France's leadership of the Museum and Service. He bore no ill will towards Brugsch, telling him: 'For me you are not a German, you are Brugsch . . . I love you as a true friend.'⁷⁰ Two years later, Mariette appointed Heinrich's younger brother Emile Brugsch, who had joined the School of Egyptology as his brother's assistant, to a post in the Museum, where he served loyally for the next forty years.

Mariette reaped the rewards of determination and magnanimity with a series of spectacular discoveries during the course of 1871. The painted fresco of geese, and the statues of Rahotep and Nofret (still some of the greatest treasures of the Egyptian Museum), were uncovered at Meidum, while the sands of Saqqara yielded the spectacular decorated tomb of Ti. But France's grasp on the levers of archaeological and cultural influence had been weakened, and no amount of digging for antiquities could change that fact. Following the Franco-Prussian War, the study of German was introduced into

Egyptian government schools alongside French, as Ismail and his ministers sought to hedge their bets on which European power would ultimately triumph.⁷¹ Mariette had other concerns too. Not only was the Khedivial School of Egyptology under German control (in the person of Heinrich Brugsch), so too was the new Khedivial Library. Ludwig Stern became director in 1873, and was followed in post by four more German orientalists, the Library remaining a bastion of German influence until the outbreak of the First World War. When the Egyptian Society, founded in 1836, disbanded in 1873-4, its remaining books were donated to the Khedivial Library, bolstering the latter's position as one of the leading academic institutions of Cairo.

In Europe, too, Germany was challenging French pre-eminence in Egyptology, with a series of chairs established in all the leading universities: Göttingen in 1868 (created for Brugsch), Strasbourg – under German control since the Franco-Prussian War – and Heidelberg in 1872, and Leipzig in 1875 joined Lepsius's chair at Berlin as major seats of learning. What made matters worse, as far as French sensibilities were concerned, were the close ties between German and British Egyptology, dating back to the participation of Bonomi and Wild in the Lepsius expedition.

The long-standing competition between France and Britain for control of Egypt was thus replaced during the 1870s by a keenly felt Franco-German rivalry. So, when senior vacancies arose at France's two most prestigious institutions, the Collège de France and the Louvre, Mariette declined the chance to return home. Although Egypt had carried off his beloved daughter Josephine in March that year, following the death of his wife in 1865, he knew that his destiny – and his national duty – lay in Cairo, not Paris. As his biographer would later write, Mariette, 'had the choice once more between Egypt and

France, and he chose Egypt: he remained faithful until his death.⁷²

It was into this heady mix of major-power rivalry, old-fashioned digging and newfangled scholarship that one woman sailed in the autumn of 1873, rather by accident than design. She had no academic training and no governmental support. Yet her brief sojourn in Egypt would change her life and alter the course of Egyptology forever.

Amelia Blandford Edwards (1831-92), known to her family and friends as Amy, was born into a comfortable middle-class home in London, almost ten years to the day after Lucie Duff Gordon. Edwards's father was a bank clerk, who had previously served as an army officer under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular War against Napoleon. But it was Edwards's mother who encouraged the little girl to indulge her love of reading. Educated at home, like most young women of her generation, Amy developed an independent mind and a lively imagination, fired by travel books and the *Arabian Nights*. When she was six, Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* was published, and she devoured it from cover to cover. She later recalled: 'I had read every line of the old six-volume edition over and over again. I knew every one of the six hundred illustrations by heart.'⁷³ Inspired by such accounts of life in far-off days, she wrote a poem at the age of seven called 'The Knights of Old', which was reproduced in a penny weekly. It was her first published work. Beside reading and writing, another passion was drama, encouraged, once again, by her mother who took her on trips to the theatre at Sadler's Wells. Amy had a carefree childhood, combining cultural experiences in London with summers in the country, staying with her uncle and aunt in their Suffolk farmhouse.

There, she showed an early aptitude for painting, decorating the whitewashed walls of her room with a mural she titled 'The Landing of the Romans in Britain'. The combination of artistic skill, a vigorous and confident hand, and a love of historical drama would serve her well.

Alongside this wide range of accomplishments, Edwards's principal passion was music. She had natural talent, a good voice, and clear enunciation, and she hoped to make a career as a singer. When illness thwarted her attempts, she tried her hand as an organist, but found it insufficiently creative. With a career in music thus ruled out, she would have liked to become an artist, but that was considered entirely unsuitable for a respectable young woman in early Victorian England. So she fell back on writing, and into a career as a journalist, contributing to the *Saturday Review* and the *Morning Post*. The job was steady but not lucrative, so Edwards supplemented her income by publishing history and fiction. Perhaps to her surprise, she turned out to be rather good at it. Her writing was filled with an extraordinary range of information, reflecting her catholic interests, a sharp eye for contemporary customs, and a satirical wit.

In the early 1850s, Edwards travelled to France, Germany and Switzerland, developing a love of foreign travel and a receptiveness to other cultures – not to mention a connoisseur's knowledge of wine. More intriguingly, her visits to Paris seem to have brought her into contact with a Bohemian circle of artists and political radicals from whom she learned a determined, if largely concealed, sense of social justice. Armed with a host of experiences and a wealth of insight, she published her first novel, *My Brother's Wife*, in 1855, to favourable reviews. A second novel, *The Ladder of Life*, followed in 1857, and a further six novels together with a series of short stories in subsequent years. Meanwhile, Edwards's personal circumstances

were not without incident. In 1860, in what she would later describe as 'the great misfortune of my life',⁷⁴ both her parents died, within four days of each other. She had been especially close to her mother, and, seeking company, decided to move in with friends, Mr and Mrs Braysher. They introduced her to upper-middle-class society, providing abundant material for a satirical novelist. When Mr Braysher died in 1863, Edwards and Mrs Braysher decided to set up home together, moving to a house in Westbury-on-Trym, which they shared for the rest of their lives.

By the late 1860s, Amy was settled and successful, but restless for new adventures. Remembering fondly her youthful excursions to the continent, she decided once again to travel. In the summer of 1871, she set out for Switzerland and Italy. She wintered in Rome, spent the spring in southern Italy, and moved on to the Italian lakes for the summer. So far, so conventional. Then, on a whim, she decided to explore the Dolomites, a region still largely unknown to tourists, accompanied by her friend Lucy Renshawe. The two women travelled alone, exploring the dramatic scenery and isolated mountain villages. The result was Edwards's first extensive travel book, touchingly entitled *A Midsummer Ramble in the Dolomites* (later reissued with the more romantic title *Untravelled Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys*). The trip to Italy was such a success that Edwards and Miss Renshawe set out again the following summer, for a walking tour of France. But, thwarted by bad weather, they decided to follow the footsteps of countless travellers before them and embark on a journey up the Nile instead. They braved a storm-tossed crossing from Brindisi to Alexandria and forty-eight hours in Egyptian quarantine before finally arriving in Cairo on 29 November 1873. As Edwards put it: 'In simple truth we had drifted hither by accident; with no excuse of health or business, or any serious object whatever; and had just

taken refuge in Egypt as one might turn aside into Burlington Arcade or the Passage des Panoramas – to get out of the rain.'⁷⁵

As soon as her publisher, Longman's, heard that she was in Egypt, they commissioned a book, giving the trip a purpose. With her novelist's eye for detail and her openness to new experiences, Edwards set out on her journey through Egypt and Nubia, a thousand miles up the Nile.

Egypt had changed a great deal during the first decade of Ismail's reign. The rebuilding of Cairo had swept away much of the traditional Islamic architecture, replacing it with modern constructions in the European style. New factories had sprung up in the towns, while extensive irrigation works and land reclamation had transformed the countryside. Tourism, too, had changed. Thomas Cook had conducted his first escorted tour up the Nile in 1869, using two hired steamers for 'the first publicly advertised party to the First Cataract and back'.⁷⁶ The following year, Thomas Cook's son John negotiated the use of the khedivial steamer *Beherah* to take forty-four guests up the Nile, 'the largest party of English and American tourists that had to date ascended the river as one party'.⁷⁷ It was said that, 'at every village landing-stage he scattered largesse, from great sacks of copper coins' to ingratiate himself with local people and trinket-sellers.⁷⁸ By the autumn of 1870, Cook's had been granted the sole agency for a passenger service by Nile steamer. The resulting explosion in tourism meant that, by the time Edwards and her companion arrived in Egypt, all the items that Wilkinson had listed in his 1847 *Handbook* as difficult to obtain were readily available in both Cairo and Alexandria.⁷⁹

Eschewing the rapid steamer, Amy opted instead for the more traditional *dababiya*, a more leisurely way to see the sights. She and Miss Renshawe were joined by twenty-three fellow-travellers. During the course of the next few months, as they

sailed upstream, through the First Cataract and into Nubia as far as the rock of Abusir, they encountered all the hazards faced by shipping on the Nile: headwinds and periods when they were becalmed, sandbanks and rapids, sandstorms and a hurricane. For Edwards, these merely added to the adventure. So did the trials and tribulations involved in visiting some of the archaeological sites: 'It might be necessary to crawl into a tomb or slide down into the darkness on one's stomach.'⁸⁰ A further touch of spice was provided by a sense of competition, for sailing alongside Edwards and her party in another *dahabiya* were the diarist Marianne Brocklehurst and her companion Miss Booth. Brocklehurst and Edwards were firm friends and fierce publishing rivals. As it turned out, Amy had nothing to worry about. For while Miss Brocklehurst was dismissive of the ancient monuments and contemptuous of the modern Egyptians, Edwards was entranced. All those well-thumbed illustrations in Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs* had come to life in front of her eyes. She knew she was gathering the material for a bestseller.

Like many a traveller before her, Edwards was captivated by the climate and scenery – 'the skies are always cloudless, the days warm, the evenings exquisite'⁸¹ – but she was no mere tourist. From her earlier travels in Europe, she understood that 'the mere sight-seeing of the Nile demands some little reading and organizing, if only to be enjoyed',⁸² and indeed believed that 'To "see" Egypt is to be required to learn'.⁸³ To this end, she took in every detail and sought out information on every tomb and temple she visited. At Saqqara, she took lunch on the terrace of Mariette's former dig house, and made a point of visiting Memphis, but was disappointed to find it reduced to 'a few huge rubbish-heaps, a dozen or so of broken statues, and a name!'⁸⁴ In general, though, with her romantic bent and love of the dramatic, Edwards could not fail to be moved by

the antiquity and mystery of Egypt's pharaonic past. At Philae, she felt: 'If a sound of antique chanting were to be borne along the quiet air – if a procession of white-robed priests bearing aloft the veiled ark of the God, were to come sweeping round between the palms and the pylons – we should not think it strange.'⁸⁵ She was also unusually sensitive to ancient Egyptian religion, writing: 'One cannot but come away with a profound impression of the splendour and power of a religion which could command for its myths such faith, such homage, and such public works.'⁸⁶

This open-mindedness did not, however, extend to sympathy for the modern Egyptians. Despite Edwards's political radicalism in a European setting, she was wilfully blind to the sufferings of the fellahin, arguing that 'there is another side to this question of forced labour . . . How, then, are these necessary public works to be carried out, unless by means of the *corvée*?'⁸⁷ When confronted by grinding poverty, her usual insight seems to have deserted her, and she fell back on European stereotypes: 'It seemed to us that the wives of the Fellahin were in truth the happiest women in Egypt. They work hard and are bitterly poor; but they have the free use of their limbs, and they at least know the fresh air, the sunshine, and the open fields.'⁸⁸

From the vantage point of a comfortable *dahabiya* – 'our Noah's Ark life, pleasant, peaceful, and patriarchal'⁸⁹ – it was all too easy for the pampered to slip into prejudice. Edwards's description of ordinary Egyptians is as cruel as it is colourful: 'A more unprepossessing population I would never wish to see – the men half stealthy, half insolent; the women bold and fierce; the children filthy, sickly, stunted, and stolid.'⁹⁰

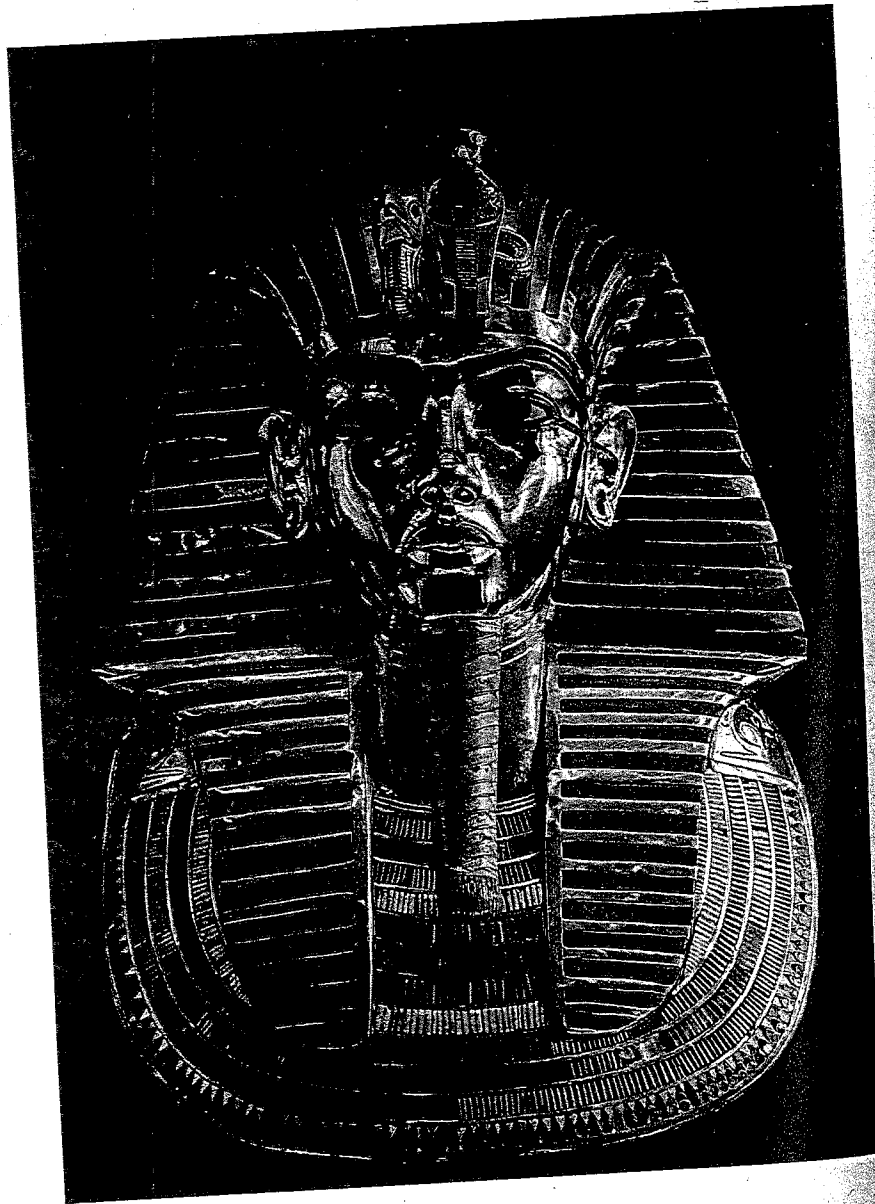
It was ironic, therefore, that in Luxor, she made a point of visiting the house lately occupied by Lucie Duff Gordon, remarking that 'her couch, her rug, her folding chair were there

still', and noting that 'every Arab in Luxor cherishes the memory of Lady Duff Gordon in his heart of hearts, and speaks of her with blessings'.⁹¹

On Edwards's return to England in the spring of 1874, she spent two years writing up her notes and preparing her book. Although intended for a popular readership, she wanted it to be accurate and informative. So she consulted specialist journals and sought advice from leading scholars, including Wilkinson's friend and member of Lepsius's expedition, Joseph Bonomi; Edward Lane's nephew Reginald Stuart Poole; and Samuel Birch at the British Museum. The result of all this research was both a triumph of scholarship and a captivating travelogue. European experiences of Egypt had, of course, for well over a century, provided fertile ground for writers of all sorts, 'soil already so heavily tilled, soil which has yielded literature of every grade down to the lowest level of banality'.⁹² Not so Edwards's book. Published in 1877 to great critical acclaim, *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* was both colourful and clever. It began diffidently, prefaced with a witty French epigram and a throwaway line: "A donkey-ride and a boating-trip interspersed with ruins" does, in fact, sum up in a single line the whole experience of the Nile traveler.⁹³ The opening sentence was carefully calculated to draw in the casual reader: 'It is the traveller's lot to dine in many table-d'hôtes in the course of many wanderings; but it seldom befalls him to make one of a more miscellaneous gathering than that which overfills the great dining-room at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo during the beginning and height of the regular Egyptian season';⁹⁴ and there were further nods in the direction of carefree travel-writing: 'Happy are the Nile travellers who start thus with a fair breeze on a brilliant afternoon.'⁹⁵ A tart put-down of the Paris obelisk—'already scaling away by imperceptible degrees under the skyey influences of an alien climate, looks



1. Napoleon Bonaparte, whose expedition to Egypt in 1798 laid the



23. The golden mask of Tutankhamun; thanks to Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, a once-obscure boy-king has become the most famous of all Egyptian pharaohs.

down with melancholy indifference upon the petty revolutions and counter-revolutions of the Place de la Concorde⁹⁶ – was designed to have her anglophone readership smiling with approval. But, slowly, almost stealthily, Edwards's true interests began to make themselves apparent. Liberally sprinkled throughout the text were quotes from Wilkinson, Lepsius, Mariette and even Duff Gordon. An entire chapter was devoted to the life and reign of Ramesses II. The Egyptian Museum was described in detail, and it was deemed worth the journey from Europe even if 'there was nothing else to tempt the traveller to Cairo'.⁹⁷

Edwards's unique, intoxicating blend of romance and scholarship reached its culmination in her description of the great stone-hewn temples at Abu Simbel. Following in the footsteps of Burckhardt, Bankes and Belzoni, she detailed the various historical inscriptions; but reserved her most vivid and quotable prose for the special magic of seeing the colossal stone statues of the temple's facade at sunrise: 'Every morning I waked in time to witness that daily miracle. Every morning I saw those awful brethren pass from death to life, from life to sculptured stone. I brought myself almost to believe at last there must sooner or later come some one sunrise when the ancient chasm would snap asunder, and the giants must arise and speak.'⁹⁸

But all this was a mere preamble to the main point of the chapter, the closing peroration which forms the spiritual heart of the book. Having thrilled her readers with her fabulous description of Abu Simbel, she brought them down to earth with a bump: 'The work of destruction, meanwhile, goes on apace. There is no one to prevent it; there is no one to discourage it. Every day more inscriptions are mutilated – more tombs are rifled – more paintings and sculptures are defaced. The Louvre contains a full-length portrait of Seti I, cut out bodily from the walls of his sepulchre in the Valley of the Tombs of

the Kings. The Museums of Berlin, of Turin, of Florence, are rich in spoils which tell their own lamentable tale. When science leads the way, is it wonderful that ignorance should follow?⁹⁹

Edwards's true purpose was thus revealed: an appeal to scholarship to set an example – 'students in their libraries, excavators under Egyptian skies, toiling along different paths towards a common goal'¹⁰⁰ – and to rescue Egyptian archaeology from the clutches of treasure-hunting and national rivalries. She had found her calling at last: her journey to Egypt had turned her, unwittingly, into an Egyptologist. Following the publication of *A Thousand Miles*, Edwards abandoned fiction and reoriented her whole life. Her new mission would be to establish a society to undertake scientific excavations in Egypt, to record and publish its surviving antiquities more accurately than ever before, to protect them for future generations, and to win the public's backing for the task.

As if to confirm the dawn of a new age, Baedeker's published its first guide to Egypt in the same year as *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* appeared. Tourism to Egypt was now a truly international, mass-market affair. The year 1877 also witnessed another milestone in the British affair with Egypt. One of the two small obelisks in Alexandria, known erroneously as Cleopatra's Needles, had been given to Britain by the Ottoman authorities soon after the expulsion of Bonaparte's troops in 1801. At the time, the government in London was unenthusiastic about the prospect, never mind the expense, of bringing a piece of old stone to London. Two decades later, in the excitement surrounding the decipherment of hieroglyphics, George IV had ordered the Foreign Office to reconsider the plan, but once again Parliament had balked at the cost. From

time to time, Egyptian rulers, from Muhammad Ali to Ismail, reminded the British that the obelisk was theirs for the taking, but there was little public appetite.

Interest in bringing the obelisk to London was temporarily piqued when Prince Albert heard rumours that the French might be about to steal a march and add it to their collection of Egyptian monuments. Fearing a national disgrace, the prince consort wrote to the prime minister, Lord John Russell, asking him to take swift action. Questions were duly asked in Parliament, and the government decided to act. The cost of transport was estimated at £15,000. The politicians bit the bullet, but instead of receiving a chorus of approval, they found their decision criticized by the very people they might have expected to support it, the small but vocal Egyptological community in Britain. The objections were led by Wilkinson, supported by a group of his scholar friends. Hay, for example, argued that Cleopatra's Needle was so inferior to the Luxor obelisk that it would be a national disgrace to bring it to London. Wilkinson's criticism of the plan was motivated more by aesthetics; he wrote to Birch: 'I do think it is a great mistake bringing obelisks to this country . . . we always place them in a position ill suited to them.'¹⁰¹ (By contrast, Wilkinson had lobbied hard in the 1830s for the colossus of Ramesses II at Memphis to be brought to England; perhaps he felt it was easier to site a statue.) With such eminent figures expressing vocal opposition to the proposal, it was killed stone dead. Cleopatra's Needle remained on the Corniche in Alexandria.

It was only in 1877, a few years after Wilkinson's death, that the prospect of another calamity reopened the question of bringing the obelisk to London. This time it was not the perfidious French who forced Britain's hand, but a Greek landowner who planned to cut up the monument for building stone. With slim prospects of Parliament voting the necessary funds,

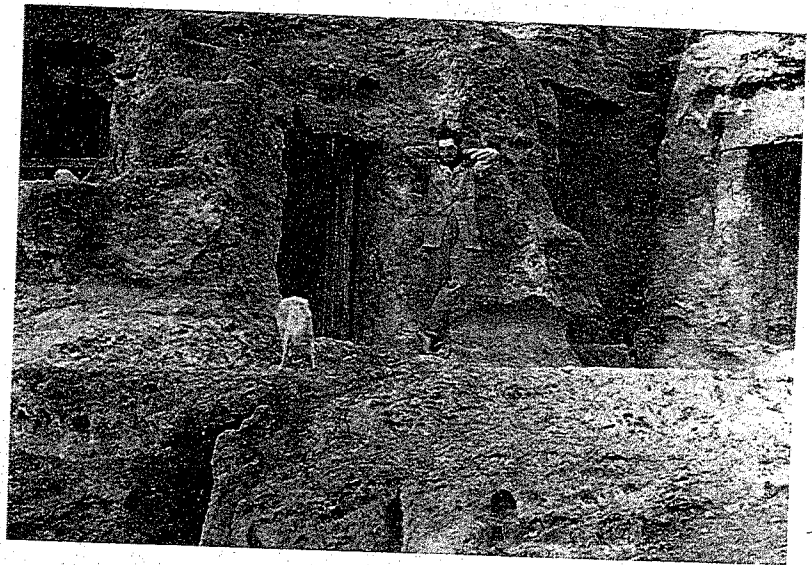
A World Beneath the Sands

a wealthy businessman, Erasmus Wilson, offered to pay for the whole project. A barge, aptly named the *Cleopatra*, was dispatched to Alexandria, and the obelisk carefully lifted aboard from the quayside. Slowly but surely, the tow ship *Olga* began to pull the *Cleopatra* and its precious cargo out into the Mediterranean. Along the North African coast, past Malta, and through the Straits of Gibraltar: everything went smoothly until the ships entered the Bay of Biscay. There they hit a storm, and the *Cleopatra* began rolling uncontrollably. It looked as if it might capsize, sending its monolith to the bottom of the Atlantic. The *Olga* sent a rescue boat, crewed by volunteers, but it foundered in the waves, drowning all six onboard. With the *Cleopatra* drifting helplessly and threatening to sink at any moment, it had to be rescued by a Glasgow steamer and taken to a Spanish port for essential repairs. Eventually, it was towed around the Breton peninsula and up the English Channel, arriving at the mouth of the Thames on 21 January 1878.

Eight months later, amid great ceremony, Cleopatra's Needle was erected on the Victoria Embankment — where it, too, is now 'scaling away by imperceptible degrees under the skyey influences of an alien climate'. It may have been incongruous to see this monument from a sunny Mediterranean land on the banks of the cold, grey Thames, but the obelisk's symbolism was what mattered. Since the days of Julius Caesar, new empires had announced their arrival on the world stage and proclaimed their might by usurping the monuments of earlier empires, especially the empire of the pharaohs. Rome, Constantinople, Paris all had their obelisks; now it was London's turn. By bringing Cleopatra's needle to London, 'Britain signalled its inheritance of world power. London would thus become virtually a "New Rome"'.²¹⁰² Those who had cried out to Lucie Duff Gordon: 'Let the English Queen come and take us!' were about to be granted their wish.

SEVEN

A permanent occupation



Flinders Petrie outside a rock-cut tomb at Giza (which served as his home) on the first of his many archaeological expeditions to Egypt.