OBITUARY

Sir William Flinders Petrie, F.R.S., F.B.A.

IN NATURE of July 18, p. 84, the respective claims of Sir Flinders Petrie and the late Prof. Reisner to have been the greatest of all Egyptian excavators were here being discussed, and satisfaction was being expressed that the former was still in the land of the living. Now, so shortly afterwards, he has passed from us at the advanced age of eighty-nine, and the mournful duty has arisen of reviewing his achievements and of discussing the influence he exerted upon archaeology in England and in the world generally. One outstanding merit must be emphasized at the outset: it would be difficult to recall a life so wholeheartedly devoted to the task its owner set before himself; no hardship, no lack of monetary resources could make him swerve from the purpose he pursued with an energy for which few have the physical endowment, and none could better have deserved the fame and the honours showered upon him, the latter culminating in the knighthood of 1923.

His was a distinctively British career, exhibiting both the strength and the weakness of an intense individualism, enhanced by a private education and (if the truth be told) undisciplined by academic training. All the more brightly shone forth his undoubted genius. Few have possessed so high a degree of flair, or have obtained such accurate results by such unorthodox means. The writer has been told he sometimes made his plans with the help of an old walking-stick, from the original length of which deduction was made for wear and tear. Be this truth or mere fable, certain it is that his plans display a very high degree of accuracy, as was discovered when one of his rivals thought fit to uncover afresh some of the Royal Tombs of the First Dynasty at Abydos, an undertaking which both in its scientific results and in the material finds proved sheer waste of the rival's time.

The trouble is that the cavalier methods Petrie pursued required the hand of the master, and could not so profitably be adopted by pupils. This suggests another point. No one in England has ever excited so much interest in Egyptology, or has introduced so many fresh workers into the field; some of them, like the papyrologists Grenfell and Hunt, were destined to win great fame, while others, as little academically trained as himself, drifted into field work as a sport and drifted out again a few years later.

There was one regrettable side to Petrie's attitude to his science which must not be passed over in silence. No philologist himself, he tended to discount the importance of philology and to foster in his assistants the belief in some sort of antithesis between philology and archaeology. This was ill-judged, and resulted in a certain amateurishness with which some of his work, for example, his "History of Egypt", and many articles in his periodical *Ancient Egypt*, is stamped. Obviously the Egyptian archaeologist should possess at least a competent acquaintance with the hieroglyphs, just as the most learned decipherer of papyri and inscriptions would be but a poor Egyptologist could he not claim a sufficient working knowledge of archaeology. But this having been said, let us hasten to add that almost any defect could be pardoned in one who owned even three quarters of the skill, the devotion and the driving-power of this greatest of all the British excavators.

It has been thought the more excusable here to offer a personal assessment of Petrie's merits since the facts of his career are so well known, have received such wide publicity in the Press, and are also set forth in his "Seventy Years in Archaeology" and his much earlier summary "Ten Years' Digging in Egypt" (1892).

For this reason also the rest of this account shall be confined to enumerating the greatest of his discoveries and to stressing the most important of his innovations in archaeological method. He had been engaged but four years in the field when, with his work on the Pyramids of Giza and on the city of Tanis behind him, he started digging on the site of what proved to be the Greek colony of Naucratis (1884). Already he had set new standards in archaeology by his attention to the minutest details, by his recognition of the outstanding importance of pottery, and by his personal and sympathetic supervision of his native work-people. His striking presence and personality could not fail to imbue the latter with respect, while at the same time he possessed some of the quick-wittedness with which Kitchenier proved more than a match for Oriental cunning.

The work in the Fayyum in 1888-90 brought much fresh knowledge of the Middle Kingdom, but was transcended in importance by the discoveries at El-Amarnah in 1891 and at Nakadah in 1894. On the former site Petrie unearthed the palace of Akhenaten, the heretic king, finding very valuable frescoes and smaller objects, while in the latter he came upon an entirely new culture not at first recognized by him for what it really was, namely, a prehistoric cemetery of vast extent and wealth. In connexion with these prehistoric remains he inaugurated one of his most valuable contributions to archaeological method, a classification styled by him "sequence-dating". This consisted in segregating the main groups of pottery, ivory, etc., in superimposed layers, and since no inscriptions were present to supply definite dates, in placing them in sequence with numbers theoretically ranging from 1 upwards, but actually starting at 30 for the oldest known remains, and ending at 80 for the First Dynasty.

As regards the tombs of the Kings of the First Dynasty at Abydos, investigated with great skill and care during 1899-1900, Petrie was not the original discoverer, but the previous excavations by Amelineau had been disgracefully conducted, and Petrie's systematic clearing was salvage of the highest order. A comparatively small dig at Thebes in 1895-96 had brought to light a stela of the reign of Merenptah with the first and only hieroglyphic mention of Israel. In 1911-12 at El-Lahun, Petrie's assistant Brunton came upon a great treasure of Middle Kingdom jewellery, later unfortunately disposed of to New York instead of finding a place, as it should have done, in the British Museum.

The above enumeration of the most outstanding finds shows that it was not given to Petrie to chance upon such sensational discoveries as Carter's tomb of Tutankhamun or Reisner's reburial of Queen Hetepheres. Cumulatively, however, his contribution has been considerably greater, for the number of sites and the variety of the objects found are almost incredible as the outcome of a single lifetime. This inadequate statement would contain an unpardonable omission were not reference made to the constant and unfailing help rendered by Lady Petrie ever since their marriage in 1897.

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