

### Acknowledgement

*I would like to thank John Sutton, Merrick Posnansky, and Fred Wendorf for their insights and discussions of the work and personality of Gertrude Caton Thompson, Gina Dubois for proof reading this article, the librarians of the University College London Special Collection in their help to access her archive and Anne Thomson, librarian of Newnham College for making her portrait available for publication.*

# Gertrude Caton Thompson (1888-1985). Famous Footsteps to Fill

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France, Malta, Egypt, Rhodesia and Yemen: in the first half of the twentieth century Gertrude Caton Thompson's work took her to three continents, and the quality of her excavations, surveys and publications is such that they are until today important points of reference. Her excavation methods were distinctly ahead of their time (Hoffman 1991: 139). Working in the northeastern Fayum since 2003, I find myself referring to Caton-Thompson's work in exactly the same terms as colleagues working in Kharga Oasis (Kleindienst *et al.* 2004): we all realize these are large footsteps to fill. There are many reasons why she is considered a role model by present day archaeologists – especially, but not exclusively, by female colleagues. She was one of the first persons who understood the importance of prehistoric research in Egypt, and she pursued this work not only there, in the Nile Valley, the Fayum and the Kharga Oasis, but also in Yemen. Her role in the Zimbabwe debate was instrumental in settling a highly politicized and racially colored debate.

To learn about her life and work, we have not only her scientific publications, included at the end of this article, but also

her biography, *Mixed Memoirs*, privately printed in 1983 and distributed among friends and to a few libraries, when she was 95 years old. She based her memories on a diary which, as she describes in the prologue to her memoirs, she started when she was eleven years old, for want of other activities during foul weather in the Bay of Biscay on a ship heading to Malta. She meticulously kept that diary, and jotted down notes on her activities, friends, opinions, and thoughts. The voice of the eleven year old girl, written down and reflected on by the 95 year old woman, show that from early on Gertrude was quite opinionated. Predominantly based on these memoirs, Margaret Drower recently wrote a biographical chapter, which is an excellent summing up of a very full life (Drower 2004).

An archaeologist reading Caton-Thompson's memoirs will find herself impatiently reading chapters of activities and musings that bear no reference at all to archaeology. Her first remarks which betray a certain interest in things ancient date to when she was approximately 25 years old.



Fig. 1

Portrait by Andrew Freeth 1955, commissioned by, and courtesy of Newnham College, Cambridge.

Born in February 1888 and passing away in April 18, 1985, at the age of 97, Gertrude Caton Thompson (**fig. 1**) saw almost a century pass. Her father, William Caton-Thompson, was 21 years older than her mother, Ethel Gertrude Page. He was head of the legal department of the London and North-Western railway, fell ill when he was 57, and moved the family from Kensington, London, to Bassett near Southampton. He died when Gertrude was only five years old, and she never had much contact with her grant parents and uncles from his side of the family. Gertrude had one brother, Arthur, four years older, who, in later life, suffered from mental illness. Gertrude's mother had three sisters and four brothers, a large, severely puritan family, which nevertheless offered warm family surroundings for Gertrude and her brother, during frequent family visits in her youth. Her brother went to

Eton, and later Oxford, but Gertrude was schooled by governesses at home.

Gertrude took as her surname the name of her father's family (Caton-Thompson), but at some point, it is not entirely clear when, she dropped the hyphen. Some writers refer to her last name as "Thompson" only (e.g. Stark 1953 in the index). Presumably, Caton was her grandmother's surname, taken on by her father as a double name. Dropping the hyphen may have been an attempt to avoid the impression that she was married. Since most of her publications are written under "Caton-Thompson", this is what is consistently put in the bibliography below, while in the text I refer to her according to her own preference, as "Gertrude Caton Thompson". The family had moved to the vicinity of Windsor ('Flint House'), but resettled in 1900 in Maidenhead, after her mother remarried. George Moore, Gertrude's step father was a medical doctor and a widower with a large family. Gertrude was happy in this extended family, which gave her four additional brothers and Nancy, a girl of about her own age. The two girls were given lessons by a series of governesses and from their 12<sup>th</sup> year they were sent to a small boarding school, "The Links." Gertrude's diary notes, often opinionated and full off humor, shine through in the writings of the 95-year-old. Of her education she remarks:

"No science was taught; arithmetic was minimal, Latin not compulsory. One modern language was compulsory (in my case French, which required no effort) and given a high priority along with drawing and music. History and Geography were I now think, adequately taught – the history rather more than adequately, since it comprised in addition to English, that of the Church and the all-embracing Holy Roman Empire." (p. 22)<sup>1</sup>

The small boarding school, with approximately 25 girls, would travel and stay for several months in a European city. In Gertrude's four-and-half years at the school she spent time in Dresden (where she discovered the music of Wagner)

1. All page numbers without author or year refer to Gertrud Caton Thompson's *Mixed Memoirs*, published in 1983.

and Florence (which she absolutely adored, and where she developed an appreciation of art).

The concerns of her youth, born to a well to do family, are reflected in her daily activities. She spent much time playing golf, tennis, and cricket; fishing, hiking and skating. She was an avid hunter, participating fully for the first time when she was 15, and owning three horses by the time she was 20. She played the violin and loved music, regularly attending concerts in London and conversing with like minded friends. During the season she was occupied with hunting during the day, and dancing at night.

In 1905 Gertrude went to Paris for the last stage of her schooling. This consisted of French lessons, visits to art museums, riding and intense violin lessons, including at least three hours of daily practice. Music was the mainstay of her life, and in her memoirs she quotes from the youthful opinions she jotted down (and commented on when writing her memoirs):

“A series of Lamoureux Orchestral concerts was more to my taste. At one of them Casals performed (what?), and at another the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Beethoven symphonies were given, which electrified me. At yet another they did the ‘Pastoral’ (“lovely”) and Backhaus played the Second Piano Concerto (“very poorly indeed”)!” (p. 39)

Thus her education was finished when she was 18. She was quite pampered and healthy (with the exception of regular bouts of bronchitis), and apart from music, had no specific interests or drives. Her time was spent hunting, partridge shooting, dancing, visiting music performances and more violin practice. In 1907 she accompanied her mother, who was a keen traveler and could not stand the cold English winter, to Athens, Crete and the Holy Land, with a brief five-day visit to Alexandria and Cairo.

Gertrude never married and in her memoirs she discusses her love-life only in the most terse of sentences. She had grown to love Carlyon Mason-McFarlane, the second son of friends of the Moore family, two years her junior, whom she had known during her childhood at Maidenhead. From early boy-

hood on Carlyon was prepared for a military career. He went to Sandhurst, graduated loaded with honors and left for a post in India with the 7<sup>th</sup> Hussars. In 1913 she refused a marriage proposal of an admirer because her “heart was with Carlyon though in a totally unpossessive way.” In 1916 he was posted in Egypt, in command of a troop of the Imperial Camel Corps, whose task it was to patrol the western edge of the Libyan Desert. In September of that year he was murdered by the Senussi and his body, horribly mutilated, was found near Bahariya Oasis and buried in the British Army Cemetery at Minia. Gertrude had never declared her feelings towards him, but she describes how many years later, Carlyon’s mother expressed that she was aware of how she had loved him (p. 47, 54, 62, 70-71).

1910 was a difficult year for her. Her mother had been seriously ill and when she recovered, decided to divorce Moore due to his infidelity. Escaping England, the two women decided to travel through late 1910 and 1911. After several weeks in Mentone, at the French Mediterranean coast, “at that time much favoured by English fleeing from an English winter” (p. 55). They left in January 1911 from Marseille to Alexandria by boat, and traveled by train to Cairo and on to Luxor and Aswan, where they stayed a month. Here Gertrude met Ella Stephens, who would remain a life long friend and cultural mentor. She was in Aswan for health reasons, suffering from tuberculosis, and died in 1937. Gertrude’s brother Arthur joined them in Egypt, and together they “did” the sites. Gertrude writes in her memoirs: “... although the long day excursions on donkeys to the Theban temples and tombs across the river with my brother had been enormously enjoyed, I cannot remember that they raised any intelligent interest” (p. 56). The only remark on the antiquities of Egypt was an expression of outrage at the threat of flooding of the temple of Philae by the new dam.

The style of Gertrude’s Mixed Memoirs is remarkable, in that she seems to prefer the use of the passive, as if she is trying to create distance between her older and younger selves. Her observations and comments are often humorous, but rarely does she let her



Fig. 2

Gertrude Caton Thompson driving the car at Qasr el-Sagha. Courtesy of UCL library, Caton Thompson archive. Not published earlier.

emotions play a role. Personal and professional remarks follow one another in rapid succession. On the same page she writes about her surprise of being nominated for the British Academy and, in relation to a friend's child "My reaction to babies (...) has always been one of avoidance verging on dislike; they seemed to me the least attractive of all vertebrates." (p. 219).

Visiting Syracuse on the way back, the family arrived in London in the summer of 1911, and found a new home in London, 76 Albert Hall Mansions, 7<sup>th</sup> floor, near Kensington gardens, where they would live for 30 years. In London, Gertrude became involved in Women's Suffrage and in addition spent her time with violin lessons and visits to performances. She came into her inheritance when she was 24 years old, and her circumstances were quite comfortable (p. 6). At the start of the war in the summer of 1914 she stayed with family in Scotland and learned how to drive (fig. 2) a car. She involved herself in stimulating soldiers to recruit by writing a pamphlet "Why We Are At War" (p. 64). Back in London she joined the Women's Emergency Corps, whose tasks she considered futile. During the early war years, life in London seemed to go on quite ordinarily. In November 1915, she and her mother left via Paris for Menton, in Southern France, to improve their health. Their

stay had to be expanded to seven weeks because of troop movements, but she considered this one of the happiest times in her life, which she spent with her dear friend Ella Stephens, whom she met in Aswan in 1911. During that time she developed her first interest in prehistory (p. 68). Before the war she had attended a course on Mycenaean, Minoan and early Greek at the British Museum by a compelling lecturer, and she had been reading on palaeolithic prehistory. In France, she visited ongoing excavations at the Roches Rouges and was allowed to help out. This made her decide that she wanted to make a serious study of prehistory, but the war situation prevented her from doing so immediately.

She described the optimism in London in early 1916, and the devastating news of the battle of the Somme, where several of her relatives died. In early 1917 she met Arthur Salter, a civil servant at the Transport Department of the Admiralty, and was asked to help out there. She started a lowly administrative job ("government slave", p. 72), and became the personal secretary of Arthur Salter. This was her first work experience and she found herself fascinated by it, and by the fact that she was doing something consequential. With Salter she visited the Paris Conference of 1919 as part of the British Delegation.

In April 1921 she visited the Stephens' again, after having just recovered from an appendicitis removal, which at that time was a serious operation, from which it took her months to recover. She once more engaged in excavations at the Rochers Rouges. Returning to London she took, at the age of 33, classes at University College, Arabic lessons at the School of Oriental Studies, and private lessons in surveying from a young man from the School of Mines at Kensington Gardens. She came into contact with Petrie<sup>2</sup>, and befriended Margaret Murray, and Dorothea Bate, who was connected to the Natural History Museum. Determined as always, she wrote: "I allowed myself few social engagements unconnected with archaeology" (p. 82). The same dedication that she had shown her violin, now was given to archaeology.

In November she left for Abydos, to join Petrie, and she "learnt what travelling with the Petries, second-class on trains, boat and hotels was like" (p. 83). Upon her arrival in Cairo, she booked her return ticket for March 1922 first-class.

Her description of Petrie is worth quoting:

"At 73 he was ageing though still indefatigable. His splendid head well-carried, with aquiline features, very wide-apart eyes of penetrating quality, and plentiful silky grey hair and beard was off-set by a loosely-framed body, with an ungainly stride. His contempt for reasonably good living was proverbial. Food and drink to him were an unfortunate necessity to be endured as swiftly and cheaply as possible; a raw carrot was a meal. His mode of life was aided by a devoted wife, who would have been conspicuously good-looking if given the chance. (...) In one thing he failed to impress. His voice was high-pitched and apt to squeak when he was annoyed. (...) Temperamentally he was dictatorial and obstinate; everything must be so and so however improbable." (83-84)

Gertrude's task was to map out the Palaeolithic around Abydos, and she left the camp in the morning with her assistant Mahmud

Radwan, who would work with her for 13 years to come. In Cairo, the director of the Geological Survey, Dr. Hume, had assured her that there was no Palaeolithic in Egypt, but she soon proved him wrong by finding Mousterian type flint implements on the high desert plateau west of Abydos. She published a Christian hermit's cell, found during her survey, in her 1926 publication. The hermitage was stocked with food and water as a refuge, because it was a time of unrest and increasing protests against the British occupation of Egypt, culminating in the murder of three British officers.

In February the operations were moved from Abydos to Oxyrhynchos, where Petrie wanted to save as much as he could from the ongoing looting of the site by sebbakhin and papyrus hunters. This area was of no use to Caton Thompson's work and she decided to travel alone to Helwan, where she stayed in a nice clean hotel, and identified several sites near the golf links. A week of collection study in the Museum in Cairo ended her third visit to Egypt, but the first that was work-related. On the way back she stayed with her friends in Southern France and visited the sites and cave paintings in Dordogne.

The exhibit of the British School of Archaeology in Egypt, which displayed the 2000 palaeoliths she had collected, drew attention to her work, and brought her new opportunities. She joined Margaret Murray on an expedition to Malta for two months, to excavate the Neolithic and/or Bronze Age temple at Borg-en-Nadur and a prehistoric cave at Ghar Dhalam. She realized that her knowledge of geology was lacking and decided not to return to Egypt for the 1922-23 season, but to concentrate on further training instead. She was accepted for three terms at Newnham College, Cambridge, supervised by Dr. Gertrude Elles. Under Dr. Elles's tutelage she took classes in zoology, paleontology, geology, surveying, prehistory (with Miles Burkitt) and anthropology. Through contacts of Lady Darwin, in whose house at Newnham Grange she boarded, she became acquainted with the Cambridge academic elite.

2. See Midant-Reynes this volume.

Upon Petrie's request she returned to Egypt in January 1924, to examine a curious collection of mineralized animal bones at Qau. She lived in a Middle Kingdom tomb, sharing the cool space with a family of three cobras "who lived by daylight in a rock fissure and went away by night to hunt. By mutual consent they were as polite to me as I was to them, though I took the precaution of laying sand on the rock floor in case they wandered towards my bed. The cook offered to kill them, but I would have none of it."

The study of the mineralized bones resulted in a conflict with Petrie, who was convinced that they had been swept down by a wadi from the Eastern Desert in Quarternary times. Caton Thompson doubted this, because the bones did not show any evidence of turbulent rolling, but obliged by exploring the wadi for three days. Petrie did not, however, accept her judgment and the following year invited Kenneth Sandford, lecturer in Oxford, over to give an authoritative opinion. His conclusion was the same, however, and he surmised the bones came from a former Nile channel, evidenced by soil remains in the teeth of some of the animals (91). In 1924 the team was split in two camps: Petrie, Caton Thompson, the camp manager Mrs. Brunton and three students, and a second camp made up of Guy Brunton and his wife, with two students, among whom J.L. Starkey. Brunton was working on a cemetery site with a large labor force, which Caton Thompson did not deem suitable for the more sensitive work on predynastic settlements. Upon the find of a hitherto unknown very fine rippled pottery, dubbed Badarian, Caton Thompson convinced Petrie to allow her to explore the talus slopes of the cliffs and the cultivated flood plain. She discovered a stratified settlement, Hemamieh, with the remains of seven wattle-and-daub huts, dated to the Amratian Period, with Badarian underlying it (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928). Petrie was wildly enthusiastic, and Wainwright, Inspector of Antiquities for Upper Egypt, proclaimed this a find that rivaled the importance of Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb (p. 92).

Caton Thompson had to leave the excavation to the next year, because she had promised to return to Malta in March 1924, to continue work on the Ghar Dhalam cave, the results of which was disappointing, especially after the exciting discoveries in Egypt. All through the year, her thoughts were with continuation of that work, and Petrie arranged that she would get a £ 500 stipend from the British School of Archaeology to finish her work in Hemamieh. She finished the work there in March 1925, finding increasing evidence that the Badarian was underlying the Amratian. Before setting out to Hemamieh, however, she decided that she first wanted to take two months to explore the Fayum desert, because of certain similarities with the Badarian flints. Her small team consisted of Edith Hughes as personal companion and camp manager, and five Quftis, hand-picked by Petrie. Upon arrival in Cairo, political unrest caused her permit to be held up. She was advised to leave Egypt, but decided to make further enquiries by phoning officials in the Fayum. "his report "made nonsense of the Cairo advice, provided I could settle matters in person with the Egyptian Governor of the Fayum Province. So I bought a second-hand box Ford for £ 150, complete with Nubian chauffeur, and we set off for Fayum, luggage and equipment piled high." With support of the Governor of Fayum, and her friend J.L. Starkey, who worked with the University of Michigan Expedition in Karanis, she could start the work. "Details of those two months' reconnaissance in utter bliss without an anxiety in the world has been published" (Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934). With our present day equipment, well maintained 4WD vehicles, GPS receivers, dig house with running water, electricity and internet, our work seems to be far removed from the small expedition that set forth in 1924. The modern world has encroached upon the Fayum desert, and the sites are under immediate and enormous threat (Wendrich & Cappers 2005). Yet a very similar feeling of utter bliss does land upon our much larger team, when turn-

ing our faces towards the desert, and away from the bustle of modern development. The first exploration of the Fayum desert was important, but the most spectacular work was done the year after, when Caton Thompson returned to the Fayum with a woman who would be a lifelong colleague and friend. Elinor Gardner's role has been much underestimated. Very little is known about this modest woman, who quietly has done incredibly important work. A chapter dedicated to her in this issue of *Archéo-Nil* would have been fitting. On the other hand, it may have proven difficult to find much information. She was a trained geologist, who had worked for three years as head of the Geology Department of Stellenbosch University, while the professor was enlisted for work related to the war. By the time Gertrude was looking for a geologist Elinor had returned to the UK and was employed as teacher in a girls' school in Sheringham. She had experience with field work, and was very eager to participate in the Fayum expedition, so much so that she simply quitted her position, without having foreknowledge that she would gain a position as lecturer in Geology at Bedford College, after returning from the field (pp. 100, 102).

Petrie provided the subvention for Gardner's participation, in order to solve a geological conflict between him and Gertrude, rising from the first season of work in Fayum. During an early visit of the Fayum,

Petrie had decided that the lake had filled the Fayum depression around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, fitting Herodotus' assertions. Caton Thompson's initial observations discerned two or more distinct lakes, the last of which "seen by Herodotus, showed a history of recession from an already relatively low level." (p. 99)

At that time Petrie had left Egypt for good, after a conflict with the French director of the Antiquities Organization, and refocused the British Archaeological School to Palestine.

The results of the 1926 Fayum season were spectacular. The concession area covered 100 square mile. Elinor Gardner concentrated on drawing a contour map of this area, while Gertrude excavated the Neolithic settlements of Kom W and Kom K. While scraping the surface of a high ridge north of Kom K, Gardner discovered round, basketry-lined silos, of which 67 were excavated (fig. 3 & 4). Only in 2004 it became apparent that the hard layer, covering the contents of the pits, noted by Gertrude in the *Desert Fayum*, were not a natural phenomenon, but purposely mixed and applied lids (Wendrich & Cappers 2005). The discovery of domesticated wheat and barley, woven linen textiles and extremely finely made decorated basketry, as well as coarse coiled silo linings, were spectacular, and brought a new light to the interpretation of the Fayum Neolithic (Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934).

Fig. 3

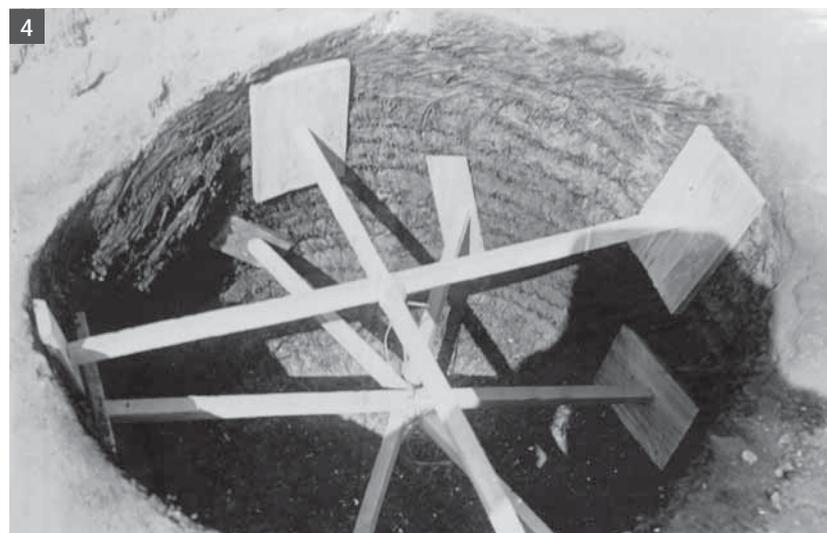
Excavating a Neolithic basket in the Fayum. Courtesy of UCL library, Caton Thompson archive. Not published earlier.

Fig. 4

Excavating a Neolithic basket in Fayum (method of stabilization). Courtesy of UCL library, Caton Thompson archive. Not published earlier.



3



4



Fig. 5

Camp at Qasr el-Sagha. Courtesy of UCL library, Caton Thompson archive. Not published earlier.

In addition, the team (fig. 5) explored an Old Kingdom road leading up to the diorite quarries of Gebel Qatrani, the Greco-Roman site of Soknopaiou Nesos (Dimai el-Sebakh), a Middle Kingdom cemetery and Old Kingdom remains. Based on the results, Caton Thompson and Gardner developed the theory that the lake level gradually dropped and that two cultural phases could be discerned, the Neolithic Fayum A people, who made a crude type of pottery, were apt at flint working, and were growing domesticated wheat and barley, and at a later date, after the water level dropped further, the Fayum B people, who did not have the same level of development as the Fayum A. As quite common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a change in material culture was explained as a new group of people coming into the area. Caton Thompson saw the Fayum B people as a primitive tribe, overrunning the Fayum A inhabitants of the Fayum, and settling in the area, without adopting any of the more advanced technology. In 1976 Wendorf and Schild published the work they did in the Fayum in 1969. They had studied the deposition sequence and came to the conclusion that the development of the lake had been much more complicated. The Fayum B was actually considerably older than the Fayum A. The correspondence between Wendorf and Caton Thompson is referential and polite from his side, quite prickly from Caton

Thompson's site. She was a scientist to the core, so she had no difficulty in accepting that her theories were reviewed. She was quite interested to learn the results of new techniques such as Radiocarbon and Thermoluminescence dating. What she objected to was Wendorf and Schild's interpretation of the Pleistocene lake levels, an issue which was not at the center of their work, as well as the identification of her Fayum B with their Terminal Palaeolithic. Wendorf and Schild argue convincingly that the Fayum B sites they re-examined were in fact made up of several deflated surfaces and, therefore, a mixture of Neolithic and Terminal Palaeolithic assemblages.

Exploring the high desert, and the ancient road to Gebel Qatrani, was not easy (fig. 6). In Gertrude's words: "During the preliminary season of reconnaissance I had found a possible way of ascent for a car, with the aid of ropes and four stalwart Quftis. The first attempt was rather tense and we nearly lost the car; but with experience in the second season it became easy enough".

The third Fayum season was fraught with difficulties. Petrie's change of focus of the British School of Archaeology to Palestine deprived Gertrude from an institutional base in Egypt, as well as financial backing. In the end the Royal Anthropological Society provided institutional sponsorship, while the 1927-28 season was financially supported by eight institutions, including several mu-



**Fig. 6**  
Preparing to haul the Ford up the escarpment at Qasr el-Sagha. Courtesy of UCL library, Caton Thompson archive. Not published earlier.

seums, and by many private friends. The troubles in organizing the expedition merely foreshadowed even greater problems ahead. Breasted, of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago appeared to have been granted a large concession, which included the areas that Caton Thompson and Gardner had studied in 1926. Breasted had asked Sandford to excavate a cave, which had been discovered by an American, Count Byron de Prorok (the title was bought with property in the Balkans). The count had been wandering through the area after Caton-Thompson and Gardner left, and he claimed that the cave contained important late palaeolithic remains. Lacau, director of the Antiquities Organization, thought that Caton-Thompson had the moral right to continue her work in the area. When she called upon Sandford in Cambridge, he refused to get involved in matters of concession rights. Thus Gertrude and Elinor were left with a small concession along the north shore. As it turned out, the “late palaeolithic cave” and a “Neolithic cemetery”, both appeared to be non-existent, and Sandford’s time was wasted.

Gertrude, Elinor and her brother Guy Gardner, on the other hand, excavated 109 more storage pits (published as the ‘lower K gra-

naries’), and explored the Old Kingdom gypsum quarries at Umm el-Sawan. For the first time that season fortune was with them: after heavy rains the desert sprouted myriads of green plants, which were growing in a puzzling pattern: green pathways with clear main and side branches. It appeared that the water concentrated in an ancient canal system of Ptolemaic date, now completely filled in, and under normal circumstances invisible from the surface (Caton-Thompson & Gardner 1934: I, 140-145; II, pl. 87-92).

Because of the concession problems Caton Thompson planned to move operations to the Kharga Oasis for the following year. Out of the blue, she received an invitation by the British Association for the Advancement of Science to undertake a politically extremely sensitive assignment: “To undertake the examination of the ruins of Zimbabwe or any other monument or monuments of the same kind in Rhodesia which seem likely to reveal the character, dates, and source of culture of the builders. You are asked to go to South Africa as soon as you can; to spend such time as you may think necessary, or the season may require, in preliminary travel and study, to conduct excavations as soon as the season allows, in a sit selected after conference with local archaeologists, and

approved by the Government of Rhodesia; to make as full a report as is possible to the British Association at Cape Town or Johannesburg at the meeting in July-August 1929; (...) and to prepare for publication, as soon as possible, a full account of your researches and conclusions." Rhodesia, named after Cecil Rhodes is called Zimbabwe since 1979, after the region where the impressive stone monuments of 'Greater Zimbabwe' are found.

She was to weigh in on the debate by re-examining the sites published by Randall MacIver in 1906. Why was she asked for this endeavor? In her memoirs she does not consider that question. John Sutton, Africanist archaeologist of the next generation, supposes the following: "Why was she approached to work at Great Zimbabwe? My guess would be that (...) the British Association for the Advancement of Science which was to meet in South Africa in 1929, wanted a British (rather than a colonial) archaeologist to investigate a running controversy authoritatively. Her not being bound by university or museum commitments may have been a factor in finding someone available for a long and distant expedition. Also,

having already archaeological experience in the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt, she would have had the right background - or so it may have seemed then - to test (as a follow-up to Randall-MacIver some twenty years before) the various outlandish hypotheses about Great Zimbabwe. Although other archaeologists were working in parts of Africa then, there was little sense of Africanist Archaeology as a subject as such, or as a developing body of knowledge and reference" (personal communication).

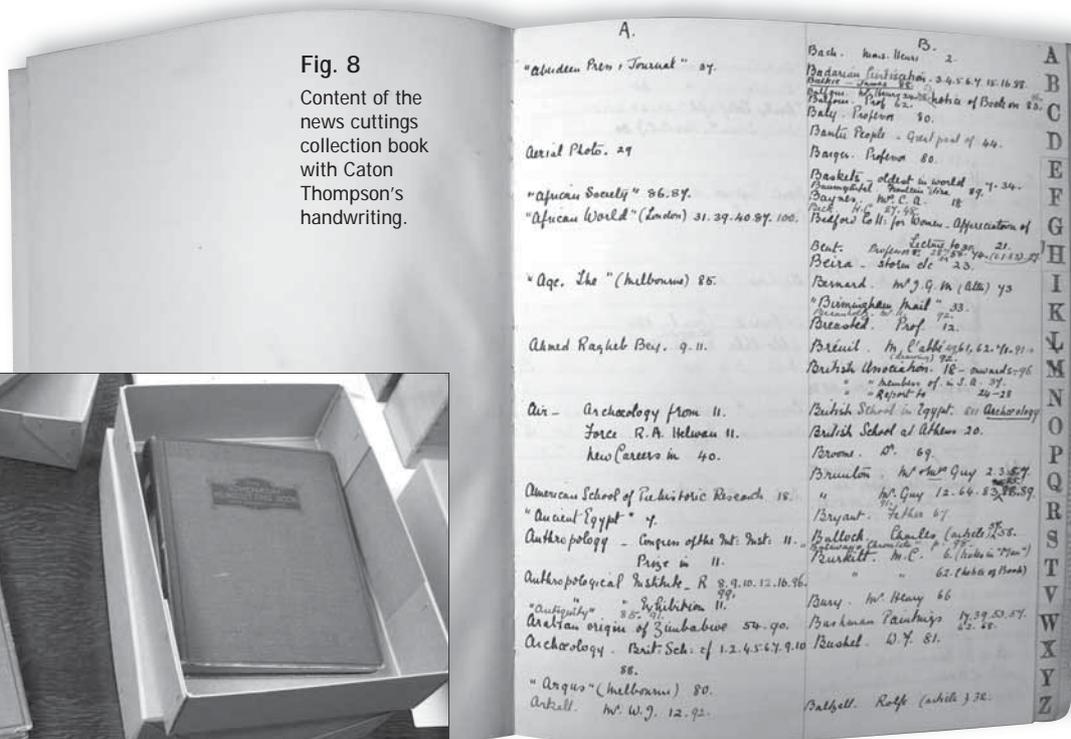
Caton Thompson was well aware that this offer "needed careful consideration" (p. 111). Her archive (fig. 7, 8 & 9), at the special collections library of University College London, contains three thick books of newspaper articles that relate to the work in Zimbabwe. Predictably she landed into fierce debates when she concluded that Randall-MacIver's conclusions published in 1906 were basically correct: the impressive stone buildings of greater Zimbabwe were not built by Arabic travelers, a Red Sea culture, or the Queen of Sheba, but were a local architecture, expression of an African culture dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. Her main opponent, supported with

Fig. 7  
Archive in London:  
the news cuttings  
collection books.



Fig. 8

Content of the  
news cuttings  
collection book  
with Caton  
Thompson's  
handwriting.



grants from the Rhodesian government, was the German professor Frobenius, who maintained that the Zimbabwe monuments were a late phase of a wide spread culture spreading from Sumeria or Babylonia. (Caton-Thompson 1931d; Frobenius 1931). Of course there are clear racist overtones in the criticism on Caton Thompson's work. "Proof" that her conclusions could not be correct were based on two main arguments. The first one was based on a type of historical-continuity argument: the present day kaffirs are inept, and the contrast with the builders of Zimbabwe

is simply too large. And secondly: the gold mines in the region are from an older date, and were an attraction to the overseas rulers (Trigger 2006: 197-202).

Caton Thompson's 1931 publication on the Zimbabwe Culture outlines the enormous amount of work that she and her team did from March to September 1929. From a large number of interested scholars, she selected two young female archaeologists to join her. D. Norie was an architect, and Kathleen Kenyon's task was general assistance and photography. The latter, daughter of the director of



Fig. 9  
Newspaper clipping on the Kharga Oasis expedition. To the left of the photograph Caton Thompson. Courtesy of UCL library, Caton Thompson archive.

the British Museum, would become a famous archaeologist in her own right, but at this time she was at the very beginning of her career and had just graduated from Oxford. In seven months the team undertook the arduous trip to Rhodesia: by boat from Port Said to Beira, in Portuguese Mozambique. Because the ship arrived late, causing her to miss the bi-weekly train to Rhodesia, and stayed in the local hotel. A few days later a cyclone hit Beira, and the railroads were destroyed. Sailing further south, to Lourenço Marques, she could take a train to Johannesburg, and from there travel on by railway to Bulawayo, Rhodesia, arriving almost a month later than expected. Because the roads were flooded by a late Monsoon rain, she could not travel on to Zimbabwe and she used her time to do research in the neighborhood, concentrating on the ruins of Dhlo-Dhlo, where MacIver had excavated a trial trench to confirm the medieval date of the type of buildings also found in Zimbabwe.

She finally managed to get to Zimbabwe and stayed a week to make preparations for the excavations which would start as soon as the late rains would abate. She then traveled to Salisbury, the capital of Rhodesia. Between the lines of her memoirs the racial tensions and the tense courtesy she met during her work are clear: "At a dinner party at Government House (Sir Cecil Rodwell, the Governor) expressed the opinion that the ruins were of great antiquity, to which I replied that I had no idea one way or the other, and only hoped I might get an answer. Lady Rodwell remarked that her two young children would be glad to help me dig in their holidays. But when I replied that the digging would be done by natives the matter dropped as I intended." (p. 117).

Great Zimbabwe consists of the Elliptical Building, with a conical tower and great encircling stone wall, and the Valley Ruins. In the vicinity are other similar buildings at Chiwona Kopje (hill-top buildings), Matendere Ruins (girdle walls built directly on a smooth granite surface), and the Mshosho Ruins (a stronghold of terraced villages). Because the Elliptical Building had been excavated by MacIver, and before him Bent

and Hall, Caton Thompson, Kenyon and Norie concentrated on the valley ruins and started at the Maund Ruins, stripping the entire complex of approximately 2000 m<sup>2</sup> to bedrock. The Zimbabwe buildings are characterized by hard cement floors, contemporary with the walls, under which well stratified earlier material was found, comprising iron tools and weapons, slag and coiled bronze wire and pottery, which Caton Thompson dubbed "Class A," which was earlier than her classes B and C.

Excavations then moved to the Acropolis summit, where three test trenches were excavated. Beads, probably from Indian origin, were found at different strata and provided approximate dates that were all thoroughly CE. With permission of the Colonial Secretary, the team then decided to explore the ground under the dry wall conical tower. This was a risky endeavor, and Caton Thompson employed a mining engineer to ensure stability for the safety of the workers, and protection of the most important monument in Rhodesia. The excavation was disappointing: the careful excavation and wet sieving of a thin bed of hill-wash soil overlying sterile decomposed granite did not result in any dateable material. It was, however, the only exploration left open, because the other parts of the Elliptical Building had been excavated multiple times by archaeologists and looters.

After the presentation for the British Association in Johannesburg, a sub-committee came to Zimbabwe to inspect the trenches. That was the end of the official exploration, but while Norie was in charge of backfilling at Zimbabwe, Caton Thompson and Kenyon spent their time excavating in Hubvumi and Dhlo Dhlo.

While in Rhodesia, the news had reached Gertrude that her brother's mental stability had collapsed. Without any of the family being aware, he had been under serious and prolonged stress of 'homosexual blackmail', as Caton Thompson formulates it (p. 115). Upon her return home she was involved in decisions on how to care for her brother. On the doctor's advice he was infected with Malaria, a draconic measure

which at that time was thought to improve his mental condition, but in fact only made it worse. He ended up in a small, private nursing home in the country side until his death in 1940, and was kept unaware of the death of their mother in 1934.

Gertrude was occupied writing articles for *Nature*, *Antiquity* and *Man* on the results of the work in Zimbabwe (Caton-Thompson 1929; 1931c; 1938). She was elected a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute, and was guaranteed financial support for her work in Kharga. In the midst of the Depression a sum of £ 2000 was raised.

Before heading out to Kharga in late 1930, Gertrude decided that Elinor should see something more of the country than Cairo, Fayum and Kharga, so the pair set out for a week long stay in Luxor. Howard Carter was, seven years after the discovery of the tomb, still working on recording and conserving the objects and Caton Thompson remarked in her memoirs: "He showed us the multitude of things still awaiting attention and I pitied him cooped up for years in the electrified darkness of the tomb" (p. 148).

In contrast to the Fayum, where the cars had proven less than ideal, it was decided to use camels for the work in Kharga. With seven camels they set out from Abydos for the five and a half day walk to the Kharga depression. On the first trek to the north the expedition was hit by a violent sandstorm and needed to return to Kharga Village to recuperate. They started their work with the excavation of a 9-meter-deep trench of dry fossil springs, around which they found an Aterian assemblage.

Gertrude had met Lady Bailey, a daring public figure, about 38 years old, who owned an airplane, a double seater Puss-Moth, and had agreed to come out for two weeks to enable aerial exploration and photography. Her arrival was announced shortly after the work had started and the crew had to rush to prepare a landing spot. Many of the newspaper clippings in Caton Thompson's archive refer to this archaeologically useful, and suitably glamorous episode, illustrated with photographs of Lady Bailey and her airplane (fig. 9). In contrast there are hardly

any photographs of Gertrude herself, from any period of her professional life. This is partly due to the fact that on most expeditions she was the photographer, but nevertheless, it is remarkable how little photographed she was herself.

On the flight back to Cairo, Gertrude asked Lady Bailey to fly over the Fayum, but to her disappointment nothing could be seen of the canal system discovered so fortuitously in 1928. Immediately upon landing in Cairo the two ladies were arrested, because they had left Kharga without permission and had flown over Fayum, which was strictly forbidden for civil planes. In two days this problem was solved through the many contacts they had in the government.

The second Kharga season, in 1931-32, once more concentrated on the prehistoric use of the fossil springs, each of which seemed to have been active for limited time, giving either evidence of Acheulian, Mousterian or Aterian assemblages. It was also established that the Kharga Neolithic was not related to the Badarian. Halfway the season the team changed focus to the Kharga escarpment, along which they had noted very rich deposits of flint tools. Revisited from 1987 onwards by the Kharga Oasis Prehistoric Project (KOPP) much work still remains to be done in this area. As in the Fayum, the present day more detailed work is still firmly based on Caton Thompson's pioneering forays (Kleindienst *et al.* 2004; McDonald *et al.* 2005).

Back in London most of her time was dedicated at Bedford College to the publications of Zimbabwe and Fayum. She obtained help from a young prehistorian, who made the drawings of the flint implements for both the Fayum and Kharga publications. Her name was Mary Nicol, later to become Mary Leaky F.B.A., who became Gertrude's dear friend, and the archive in London has a great deal of correspondence between the two. She had regular contact with her 'working friends', Louis Leaky, Gordon Childe, Crawford, Abbé Henri Breuil and Dorothy Garrod (fig. 8).

Elinor Gardner worked in Kharga from November 1932 until March 1933, but Gertrude did not return to the oasis until 1934. In the time between the second and third Kharga

seasons, her mother's health deteriorated, and it appeared she had cancer. Gertrude wrote: "From then onwards until she died it was a ghastly and heart-breaking nightmare of pain unrelieved by the narcotics which made her sick." She died of liver cancer at 75 years of age. After her mother's death she lived alone with a house staff of three persons.

Professionally, she received several distinctions for the contributions she made to science, and especially the quality of her field work was recognized. She was elected to the Council of the Royal Geographical Society, the first woman to be honored for field work. She also received the Rivers Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute and in preparation for the Rivers Lecture, on April 9, 1935, she traveled to study museum collections in Oran, Algiers, Constantine, Tunis and Carthage (Caton-Thompson 1935). She was offered a three-year Research Fellowship, which consisted of free residence at Newnham College in Cambridge, and it gave her the opportunity to work on the Kharga publication. The publication of Zimbabwe in 1931 and the Desert Fayum in 1934 were admirably timely, but the Kharga publication was held up because of a conflict with the Antiquities Organization about the number of illustrations, following by the disruption of the Second World War. Therefore, the Kharga material did not appear until 1952, when Gertrude was 64.

In 1935 she also tried to volunteer for the Red Cross in Abyssinia, where the Italian invasion caused much suffering. She writes in her memoirs "I felt very strongly about the invasion for I had been in Kharga in 1932 when the Italian invasion of Siwa Oasis had caused hundreds of refugees – mainly old men, women and children, mad to escape the bombings of their homes – to set out on the waterless 300 mile journey for the safety of Kharga and Dakhla (...) very few survived". To her surprise she was told that her heart was not in sufficient condition to work at high altitudes. This would not stop her from venturing out to Yemen a year later.

In 1937 Elinor and Gertrude once more returned to the Fayum, to augment their research, which was contested by the Geo-

logical Survey of Egypt, in an article by Little (1935-36). They worked together with Dr. S. Huzzayin. To their surprise and delight the work was supported logistically and financially by the Egyptian Minister of Public Works, which allowed them to hire 90 workmen. The discussion focused on the beach ridges corresponding to different lake levels (Caton-Thompson *et al.* 1936; 1937). They wrote the article partly during a trip to Israel in the spring of 1937. Just before returning to England, Gertrude heard of the find, by an amateur, of a burial near Kom W. Since one of the most puzzling features is the absence of cemeteries in the region, she immediately took off to check the spot, which consisted of two skeletons, without grave goods, matting, coffin or other dateable material.

During the summer of 1937, Gertrude, who had a self-confessed lack of talent for languages, tried to learn better Arabic in preparation for fieldwork in Yemen. This would be undertaken together with Elinor Gardner and the adventurous anthropologist Freya Stark. Tribal unrest was rampant, and the expedition was not without danger. They traveled from Mukalla to Terim and Seiyun, Shibam, Hureidha, concentrating on the Moon Temple and several cave tombs in the Hadhramaut.

From both Freya Stark's diaries and Caton Thompson's memoirs, it is clear that the two women did not get along. They both were opinionated and used to being in charge. In *Winter in Arabia* Freya refers to Caton Thompson consistently as "The Archaeologist" (Stark 1940). Her criticism of Caton Thompson was so harsh that her publisher urged her to tone it down, or else to take any reference to Caton Thompson out of the book (Stark 1953: 266-267). Even in the mellow publication *The Coast of Incense* (Stark 1953: 164, 182-186, 207 & 214) she ridicules the enormous amounts of equipment and supplies that Gertrude and Elinor brought along on the expedition. She was equally exasperated by the long hours that she had to wait around, while the two archaeologists ventured out into the desert to look for flints. She harshly criticized Gertrude's lack of Ara-

bic, the fact that she and Elinor were wearing trousers, and their disinterest in interaction with the local population. In turn, Caton Thompson thought Stark willful, unorganized, disinterested and uncooperative and she was well aware of the discussions around the publication of Stark's memoirs (Caton-Thompson 1983: 195). In January 1938 they received news from the murder of J.L. Starkey, with whom Gertrude had worked in Badari. She writes: "It was a personal loss and shock to Elinor and to me, and a great loss to archaeology. He was beloved by his large staff of Europeans and natives. When told of it, Freya Stark, always willing to support an Arab act however outrageous, remarked "How they must have hated him," a cruel and unjustified comment. The murderers were caught and hanged, but it emerged at the inquest that they had shot Starkey in error for someone else." (p. 189).

One of the issues Gertrude was faced with upon returning to the UK, were questions about ancient relations between Yemen and Zimbabwe. She compared building methods, and finds and came to the conclusion: "that cultural contact across the narrow seas between the two continents had not been established at the earlier period involved, though the slave-trade from Africa and the presence of Arabs on the African coast probably had an unknown age-old history before the Roman period".

In 1939 Dorothy Garrod was appointed the first female professor at Cambridge, and held the prestigious Disney Chair of Archaeology until 1952, when she retired and was succeeded by Grahame Clark. Former Disney Professor Glyn Daniel wrote in his memoirs that "the Electors first offered the Chair to Caton Thompson, who had not applied, and (...) when she declined, appointed Dorothy Garrod" (Daniel 1986: 98). It has been suggested that she was not interested in a teaching position (Champion 1998). This may well have been the case. Dorothy Garrod was a close friend and also a Newnham College fellow. Gertrude Caton Thompson was independently wealthy: she had to raise the funds for her expeditions, but she did not require an income. By now she was 50 years old, Elinor a

few years younger, and both were looking for a more settled life style. In late 1939 she had to renew her lease on the flat in London, but with the threat of war looming over Europe, she decided to give it up, and she was offered to come and live with Elinor and her sister Emily who had been given a small cottage for life time use. They lived there safely, but in 1940 a bomb hit the storage room in which all Gertrude's possessions were stored, and she lost everything she had, with exception of the furnishings of her room in Cambridge.

She often stayed with friends from Cambridge, Dorothy Hoare and Toty de Navarro, senior lecturer of archaeology, who had inherited a large, beautiful house at Court Farm, Broadway. Music came back into her life, and she took up the violin again, after a pause of twenty years. In 1945 she decided to buy a house in Cambridge, renaming it from the original ominous sounding "Grithowe Fields" to "Conduit Rise", after the underground spring over which it had been built. In 1956 she sold this house and moved in with Dorothy and Toty (p. 291).

In her later life she received several important academic honors. In 1932 she received the Cuthbert Peek Award, in 1934 the Rivers Medal and in 1946 the Huxley Medal from the Royal Anthropological Institute. The Burton Medal was granted her by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1954. From 1940-1946 she was the first female president of the Prehistoric Society, and Vice-President of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1944 (Weedman 2001: 13). In that same year she was nominated for the British Academy, the second woman after Beatrice Webb 21 year earlier. She found the Academy a dreary place, until the regular participation of "a human dynamo" Mortimer (Rik) Wheeler (p. 220). In 1945 she was asked to be one of the five members of the Governing Body of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, an honor given for a five year period at a time, and an office she held in total for twenty years. In December 1953 she was awarded the Burton Medal by the Royal Asiatic Society, "for eminent services in oriental exploration and research", celebrated with a lecture in March 1954. On

June 10 1953 she received an honorary degree from Cambridge, together with Ruth Draper the second and third woman to be honored in this way (the first woman ever was the Queen). She was much taken with the speech of the Public Orator: "Wherever she goes, whether on the plain of Egypt or roaming the Libyan desert, as in that Oasis which the ancients called The Great, but the moderns Kharga, or again to Southern Arabia, she is the same lover of deserts, and a lynx-eyed explorer of any traces of ancient civilization which may lie under their sands. For she has that great and singular gift of taking the tenuous material remains of a vanished age and bringing it again before our eyes. Witness the long series of books and articles she has produced. Also the opinion of her fellow archaeologists, who have elected her not only among the members but also to the governing Councils of their societies and loaded her with honours. Of these I mention only the Huxley medal, never before bestowed upon a woman. Let us not be behind but receive her forthwith into the ranks of Doctors."

In 1955 she participated in the Third Pan-African Congress at Livingstone, in what then was still called Belgian Congo, and from her description it is clear that at 67 she was still full of energy and interest. The famous Africanist archaeologist Merrick Posnansky met her several times at conferences in 1959, 1962 and 1964. He commented that Sir Mortimer Wheeler was very deferential to her and that "She was very much the grande dame and had a slightly mesmerizing presence (...) due to age and her unforgettable voice" (personal communication). Afterwards she visited Louis Leaky in Nairobi, while Mary was in England recovering from Bilharzia. It gave her a chance to see, firsthand, the work her former assistant was so much engaged in (p. 255).

Her last Faculty Board meeting at Cambridge was on December 2, 1957, and after that she mainly busied herself with the establishment of the British Institute of Archaeology in

East Africa. Much of her correspondence in the archive in the special collections library of the University College London deals with the lengthy procedure and the many heated debates to establish the Institute (see also p. 260-264). Louis Leaky corresponded with her extensively about the problems he had with the location, financing and personnel, as well as the direction from England, rather than from Africa. The Institute was established in 1959 and Caton Thompson was a member of the board until 1971 when she was 83, at which time she was granted an Honorary Membership of the Institute in recognition of her contributions.

Archaeology did not loose its grip on her, however. In 1973 she engaged in a heated debate with Fred Wendorf about his work in the Fayum, which is reflected both in her correspondence and her memoirs (p. 337-340). In 1974, at the age of 86, she showed keen interest in the thermoluminescence dating results on material from Gerza and Badari (Caton-Thompson & Whittle 1975). She ends her memoirs in 1980 with the demise of her house-mate and friend, Toty de Navarro. Caton Thompson started relatively late in life dedicating her time and attention to archaeology, but when she did she was remarkably ahead of her time in rigor of method and publication. Her deliberate choice to work with women, such as Elinor Gardner, Kathleen Kenyon and Mary Leaky, and her determined refusal to give in to social or gender constraints made her an important role model for female archaeologists of her time and ours. An astute personality, with very firm opinions, courageous and highly intelligent, with a dry sense of humor, she nevertheless was hampered by her surroundings. Although her work was recognized officially, the acknowledgements do not reflect sufficiently the ground-breaking work she has done in the relatively short time that she worked in the field. Perhaps her importance is mostly appreciated by the people who walk in her footsteps and realize on a daily basis what an incredible person she was.

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