

Dorothy Mackay: A Forgotten Female Pioneer in Archaeology

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In 2022, the author of this paper came across four letters regarding epigraphic documentation of some elite tombs in the Theban necropolis, Egypt, written by Dorothy Mackay and addressed to Alan H. Gardiner, at the archive of the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford. The author of the letters was the wife of Ernest Mackay (1880–1943), a British archaeologist best known for his later work on the Indus Valley Civilisation, who was excavating on the Theban west bank between 1913 and 1916. However, as further investigation revealed, Dorothy, until recently an obscure figure, was an accomplished scholar in her own right, who worked together with her husband, acted as a curator of two museums, and published extensively in times when it was far from easy for women to obtain an education, let alone conduct research. Despite that, the only recent sources discussing Dorothy and her scholarly accomplishments lack some vital details on her life. The aim of this contribution is to provide some further information and context on Dorothy Mackay and her research in the first half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Dorothy Mackay, archaeology, museology

Introduction

In 2022, the author of this paper came across four unpublished letters regarding epigraphic documentation of some elite tombs in the Theban necropolis (opposite the modern city of Luxor, Egypt), written by Dorothy Mackay and addressed to Alan H. Gardiner, at the archive of the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford. Their author was the wife of Ernest Mackay (1880–1943), a British archaeologist best known for his later work on the Indus Valley Civilisation, who was excavating on the Theban west bank between 1913 and 1916. However, as further investigation revealed, Dorothy, until recently an obscure figure, was an accomplished scholar in her own right, who worked together with her husband, acted as a curator of two museums, and published extensively in times when it was far from easy for women to obtain an education, let alone conduct research. Despite that, the only recent sources discussing Dorothy and her scholarly accomplishments are the excellent studies of Amara Thornton (2018), which however lack some vital details on her life.¹ It is hoped that this paper will provide some further information and context on Dorothy Mackay and her research in the first half of the twentieth century.

¹ Thornton's monograph (*Archaeologists in Print*, London, 2018), as well as her later blog entry, also from 2018 (*Discovering Dorothy*, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.readingroomnotes.com/home/discovering-dorothy>).

First steps in archaeology

Dorothy Mary Simmons was born on November 11, 1881 in Ardencote, Thornhill Road, Croydon, to Agnes Grace Simmons (formerly Bayliffe) and Thomas Frederic Simmons.² As stated on her birth certificate, her father was a commercial traveller. In 1883, Thomas Simmons established a company manufacturing prams – a venture which placed him among the most successful entrepreneurs in the area.³ Dorothy became a student at University College, London, where she was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1902 (she took courses in Greek and French), and then a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology in 1909.⁴

It would seem that she was a supporter of the women's suffrage movement: this is certainly suggested by the fact that she was a member of the Croydon Branch of the Women's Social and Political Union.⁵ The February 20, 1907 issue of the *Croydon Times* contains the following note: "The committee hope that the Croydon women will show their appreciation of this courage and devotion to the cause [this is a reference to the imprisonment of several women protesting at the House of Commons] by joining the Branch. The hon. Secretary, Miss Dorothy Simmons, B. A., will be glad to receive their names at her address, 5 Heathfield-road".⁶

Dorothy married archaeologist Ernest John Henry Mackay: the ceremony took place on December 7, 1912 in the church of St Peter in Croydon.⁷ Soon afterward they left for Egypt. On March 5, 1913, they arrived in Luxor where Ernest was to start his job as an archaeologist employed by Robert Mond, responsible for the excavation and conservation of tombs in the famous necropolis of ancient Thebes.⁸

In Egypt, Dorothy took an interest in epigraphic work: she was eager to learn and started working on the documentation of the tombs belonging to some of the most important Egyptian officials of the New Kingdom: Nebamun (TT 90), Amenhotep Huy (TT 40), and perhaps also Dedi (TT 200). At the archive of the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford, there are four letters sent by Dorothy at that time to the Egyptologist Alan H. Gardiner with her account of work in the tombs.⁹ Soon Gardiner hired Dorothy to produce illustrations for his publication.¹⁰

Her documented activity in the Theban necropolis suddenly ends in 1914, when she disappeared from the written record. This is most likely a result of a major event in the Mackay family: on August 16, 1914 Dorothy and Ernest's first son, Richard Dermott Mackay, was born.¹¹ Dorothy came back to Egypt, along with little Richard, in 1915 at the latest to accompany her husband, and perhaps visited him also in 1916.¹² The birth of their second child, Peter John,

² General Registry Office (England and Wales). Births in the Sub-district of Croydon in the County of Surrey: 1881 no 142.

³ SEWELL, Samuel J. The History of Children's and Invalids' Carriages. In: *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 71/3694, 1923, p. 720.

⁴ *Discovering Dorothy...*

⁵ PETHICK LAWRENCE, Frederick W., EDWARDS, Joseph. *The Reformer's Yearbook 1908*. London, Manchester, Reddish, 1908, p. 266.

⁶ CREIGHTON, Sean. Croydon's Suffragettes. In: *Croydon Radical History Notes* 1, 2015, p. 4.

⁷ Copy of an entry of marriage issued by the General Registry Office (England and Wales).

⁸ KACZANOWICZ, Marta. The War Years in Thebes. Ernest Mackay's Work in Theban Tombs. In: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, in press.

⁹ Gardiner MSS 19.6.1, 19.8.1–2, 19.11.1–2, 19.14.1–2.

¹⁰ KACZANOWICZ, The War Years..., in press.

¹¹ General Registry Office (England and Wales). Births in the Sub-district of Clifton in the County of Bristol C.B.: 1914 no 107.

¹² KACZANOWICZ, The War Years..., in press.

took place on September 1, 1916.¹³ Two months later, Ernest joined the army and served as a captain in the Royal Army Service Corps in Egypt and Palestine until 1919.¹⁴ Soon the family was struck by a tragedy: Richard died of tuberculous meningitis on April 7, 1917 at the age of two.¹⁵

Excavating with Ernest

The war years and those immediately following them constitute blank pages in Dorothy's known biography: her employment by Gardiner apparently did not result in any publications, or even documentation, which could be explicitly attributed to her. Ernest remained in Palestine to conduct an archaeological survey there,¹⁶ but I was unable to verify whether his wife was with him at that time. The situation changed after 1922. In the 1920s, after a rather unfortunate episode in Ernest Mackay's work for the Penn Museum, ending with the abrupt termination of his employment,¹⁷ he began excavating in Iraq, first as a field director of the Oxford University – Chicago Field Museum Expedition to Mesopotamia at Kish. Dorothy was present at Kish from October 1923; in the lists of mission members in subsequent seasons, given by McGuire Gibson in his much later monograph of Kish, she is present, but merely as a “Mrs. Mackay (unofficial)”.¹⁸ Her contribution, however, was substantial: she produced all the line drawings for Ernest's final publication of the site.¹⁹ In March 1925, Dorothy, Ernest and E. Burrows visited the site of Jemdet Nasr and were the first ones to identify the archaeological remains there.²⁰ Dorothy's account of the visit was published in *The English Review*.²¹

It was during the Mackays' stay in Iraq when Dorothy authored her first book: an archaeological guide entitled *Ancient Cities of Iraq: A Practical Handbook*.²² As noted by Thornton, in time Dorothy became a communicator of archaeology, with an interest in disseminating archaeological research and “improving the intellectual accessibility of sites to visitors”.²³ The popularity of the handbook can be attested for example by its mention in a memoir by the popular Polish writer Ferdynand Ossendowski, published in 1931: “Od Bagdadu do ruin Babilonu – 54 mile angielskie nikiemnej drogi. Tak twierdzi w swoim przewodniku miss Dorothy Mackay.” (From Baghdad to the ruins of Babylon – 54 English miles of a terrible road. This is what Miss Dorothy Mackay claims in her guidebook.)²⁴ In 1952, the Arabic translation was released.²⁵

¹³ General Registry Office (England and Wales). Births in the Sub-district of South Croydon in the County of Croydon C.B.: 1916 no 407.

¹⁴ BIERBRIER, Morris L. *Who Was Who in Egyptology*. London, 2012, p. 348.

¹⁵ General Registry Office (England and Wales). Deaths in the Sub-district of South Croydon in the County of Croydon C.B.: 1917 no 217.

¹⁶ THORNTON, *Archaeologists in Print*, p. 68.

¹⁷ POSSEHL, Gregory L. Ernest J. H. Mackay and the Penn Museum. In: *Expedition* 52/1, 2010, pp. 41–43.

¹⁸ GIBSON, McGuire. *The City and Area of Kish*. Miami, 1973, pp. 174–175.

¹⁹ MACKAY, Ernest. *Report on the Excavation of the “A” Cemetery at Kish, Mesopotamia. Part I*. Chicago, 1925, p. 8.

²⁰ MACKAY, Ernest. *Report on Excavations at Jemdet Nasr, Iraq*. Chicago, 1931, p. 225; MATTHEWS, Roger J. Defining the Style of the Period: Jemdet Nasr 1926–28. In: *Iraq* 54, 1992, p. 1.

²¹ MACKAY, Dorothy. Painted potsherds. In: *The English Review* 45, 1927, pp. 81–89.

²² MACKAY, Dorothy. *Ancient Cities of Iraq. A Practical Handbook*. Baghdad, 1926.

²³ THORNTON, *Archaeologists in Print*, pp. 68–69.

²⁴ OSSENDOWSKI, Ferdynand Antoni. *Gasnące ognie: Podróż po Palestynie, Syrii, Mezopotamji*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Polskie, 1931, p. 250.

²⁵ MACKAY, Dorothy. *Mudun al-'Iraq al-qadima*. Transl. by Y.J. Miscony. Baghdad: 'Ahd Bagdad, 1952.

Eventually, Ernest was appointed the director of excavations at Mohenjo-Daro (1926) – the famous urban centre of the Indus Valley Civilisation,²⁶ back then located on the territory of British India (currently Pakistan). Dorothy published extensively on the archaeology of the Indus Valley: among her publications, we find both scholarly papers devoted to particular archaeological problems and articles aiming at publicizing her and Ernest's research (for the full bibliography of Dorothy Mackay see below). Large-scale excavations at Mohenjo-Daro were suspended in 1931;²⁷ Dorothy and Ernest moved to excavate the site of Chanhu-Daro, located around 130 km to the south.²⁸ In the report from the 1935–1936 season, Ernest credited Dorothy with preparing most of the line drawings for the book, and added that “she rendered invaluable assistance in recording the many objects brought into the camp”.²⁹ Ernest's monograph *Early Indus Civilization* was dedicated to his wife.³⁰

Despite working as a team, Dorothy and Ernest did not always agree with each other when it came to interpreting the findings. An account of such a scholarly disagreement, here on the subject of ancient political organisation in the Indus Valley, can be found in Sadanand Kashinath Dikshit's *An Introduction to Archaeology*:

Miss [*sic*] Dorothy Mackay says: “Dr. Wheeler has recently investigated ... a central mass of buildings among the ruins of Harappa, which he regards as a citadel and stronghold of a bureaucratic or priest-king regime. At Mohenjo-daro, there is some evidence that the regime was theocracy, very similar in type to the contemporary theocracies of Sumer.” Dr. Mackay himself, however, urged that “a large, straggling building has been discovered which *may have been a palace*”.³¹

From India the Mackays moved back to the well-known territory: in the 1930s Ernest joined his old mentor Flinders Petrie and Margaret Murray to excavate at Tell el-Ajjul in the Gaza Strip. As usual, Dorothy travelled with her husband: a letter written by the archaeologist Olga Tufnell, dated December 11, 1935, contains the following mention: “Much alarms and excursions in the Committee [British School of Archaeology in Egypt] which now consists of Mrs Wheeler (Chairman) elected by Mrs Mackay (who was voted for by Mrs W.) and Miss Murray I suppose”.³²

At some point before 1939, Dorothy, Ernest and Peter settled in the village of Whiteleaf, Princes Risborough, in a house called Brambledown. In the 1939 national census, Dorothy is described as a “housewife and research worker (B.A., B.Sc.)”.³³

²⁶ MACKAY, Dorothy. Finds at Chanhu-Daro. In: *Asia* July, 1937, p. 501.

²⁷ FÁBRI, Charles Louis (ed.). *Annual Reports of the Archaeological Survey of India for the Years 1930–31, 1931–32, 1932–33 & 1933–34. Part One*. Delhi, 1936, p. 51.

²⁸ POSSEHL, Ernest J. H. Mackay..., p. 43.

²⁹ MACKAY, Ernest. *Chanhu-Daro Excavations 1935–36*. New Haven, 1943, p. viii.

³⁰ MACKAY, Ernest. *Early Indus Civilization*, 2nd edition, enlarged and edited by D. Mackay. London, 1948.

³¹ DIKSHIT, Sadanand Kashinath. *An Introduction to Archaeology*. Bombay and Calcutta, 1955, p. 293.

³² GREEN, John D. M., HENRY, Ros (eds). *Olga Tufnell's "Perfect Journey": Letters and photographs of an archaeologist in the Levant and Mediterranean*. London, 2021, pp. 313–314.

³³ National Archives. 1939 England and Wales Register, E.D. Letter Code DWRG, Wycombe R.D. (Part), Registration District and Sub-district 145/3.

Assistant keeper at the Ashmolean Museum

In 1940, Dorothy was appointed an assistant keeper at the Department of Antiquities, Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, as a replacement for Donald B. Harden, who joined the Ministry of Supply in September of that year.³⁴ In fact, in British academia, both world wars opened new professional opportunities for women, who often took over the academic posts of their male colleagues that left to join the military, at least in the fields of archaeology and anthropology.³⁵ Dorothy and Harden had probably known each other before the war: the latter published some glass finds from Kish, albeit only after Dorothy and Ernest left the expedition for excavation in India.³⁶

According to the annual reports of the Ashmolean Museum, Dorothy was working on curating the collection of Coptic textiles and on a list of Egyptian place names and a corresponding map. Her letters exchanged with Percy Newberry, dated between September and December 1941 and currently kept at the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford,³⁷ confirm this: they contain Dorothy's inquiry about a reproduction of a textile donated by Newberry to the Ashmolean, as well as information on the preparations for an exhibition of Egyptian textiles.³⁸ In March 1944, Dorothy resigned from her post.³⁹

Interestingly, hardly any information on Dorothy's activity at the Ashmolean can be found in places other than the Museum's annual reports. For example, the textiles donated by Newberry to the Ashmolean have attracted considerable attention in recent times, yet I was unable to find no mention of the fact that it was Dorothy Mackay who was responsible for this collection in the 1940s.⁴⁰ One of the few mentions of her work at the Ashmolean can be found in Gibson's aforementioned book on Kish: "Mrs. Dorothy Mackay worked for some time in the 1940's for the Museum, trying to put some order in the records after much of the material was lost or destroyed".⁴¹

Beirut years

Ernest Mackay died on October 2, 1943,⁴² when Dorothy was still working at the Ashmolean. For Dorothy, contrary to many "archaeologist wives" of the period, the death of her husband did not mean the end of her own research. In the 1945 report of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, there is a mention of a sum of £100, given to "Mrs. Mackay" for her forthcoming book on Palmyra,⁴³ while in the following year, grants to "Dr. Gurney

³⁴ HURST, John G. Donald Benjamin Harden (1901–1994). In: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94, 1997, p. 524.

³⁵ POPE, Rachel. Processual archaeology and gender politics: The loss of innocence. In: *Archaeological Dialogues* 18/1, 2011, pp. 68–69; LARSON, Frances. *Undreamed Shores: The Hidden Heroines of British Anthropology*. London, 2021.

³⁶ HURST, Donald Benjamin Harden..., pp. 527–528.

³⁷ NEWB2/488.1–3, formerly Newberry MSS 1.30.32–34.

³⁸ KACZANOWICZ, The War Years..., in press.

³⁹ Alison Roberts, personal communication (March 2023).

⁴⁰ For example, in Ruth Barnes' article on the textiles exhibited in various museums (BARNES, Ruth. Textiles and Museum Displays: Visible and Invisible Dimensions. In: *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 2014, p. 1 n. 1), one can find information that the Newberry textiles were donated to the Ashmolean in 1946; however, at least the reproduction mentioned in Dorothy Mackay's letter must have been donated earlier.

⁴¹ GIBSON, *The City*..., p. 179.

⁴² POSSEHL, Ernest J. H. Mackay..., p. 41.

⁴³ *British School of Archaeology in Iraq. Report for 1945*, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://bisi.ac.uk/sites/default/files/report%20for%201945.pdf>.

and Mrs. Mackay”, £500 in total, are listed among the expenditures;⁴⁴ these probably refer to the same payment. Soon after editing and enlarging the second edition of Ernest’s *Early Indus Civilization* (1948), Dorothy was invited by the American University of Beirut to help reorganise the AUB Museum after the havoc of war. All the objects belonging to the Museum, packed up when the building had been turned into a storage space for “food, athletic equipment and other wartime necessities”,⁴⁵ required careful unpacking and rearrangement. Dorothy arrived in Beirut in January 1948 and quickly began working on the Museum’s collection (Fig. 1). Her stay, originally intended to last six months, eventually turned into more than three years of intense work (she left Lebanon in 1951).



Fig. 1: Dorothy Mackay 1948–1951 (phot. AUB; originally published in *Outlook* 4 no. 8, 1951)

In Beirut, Dorothy eventually had a chance to not only work with archaeological material but also use her expertise in one of her original degrees: zoology. The museum’s collection was divided into three sections: Archaeological, Geological, and Zoological Galleries, with the last one being “really a still-life zoo”.⁴⁶ Additionally, Dorothy produced a new, illustrated guide to the archaeological collection,⁴⁷ praised in recent scholarship for its inclusion of Islamic artifacts, which was unprecedented in the Museum’s history.⁴⁸

While in Beirut and afterwards, Dorothy continued her interest in the study of the Indus Valley Civilisation, as attested for example by the presence of her letter to Tom Penniman (the curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford) regarding ivories from Mohenjo-Daro and Chanhudaro, dated October 23, 1951, together with her other archival materials currently at the Pitt Rivers Museum archive.⁴⁹ To the same museum, she also donated a collection of Ernest’s lantern slides from the two aforementioned sites, and spent a week in 1952 labelling and cataloguing these objects there.⁵⁰

Another donation by Dorothy to the Pitt Rivers Museum included a murex shell from the ruins of a Roman villa south of Beirut.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *British School of Archaeology in Iraq. Report for 1946*, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://bisi.ac.uk/sites/default/files/report%20for%201946.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Museum Curator to Bid AUB Adieu. In: *Outlook* 4/8 (1951), p. 1.

⁴⁶ Museum Curator..., p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ AUJI, Hala. Tales of Tiles: Shifting Narratives of a Museum’s Islamic Artifacts. In: *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique moderne et contemporain*, 3, 2020, p. 22.

⁴⁹ *Penniman Papers*, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/penniman-papers>.

⁵⁰ *Report of the Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum (Department of Ethnology) for the year ending 31 July 1952*, accessed March 10, 2023, <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/sma/index.php/museum-annual-reports/252-1951-52-annual-report.html>.

⁵¹ HICKS, Dan. Asia and the Middle East. In: D. Hicks and A. Stevenson (eds), *World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum: A characterization* (pp. 455–470). Oxford, 2013, p. 462.



Fig. 2: *Dorothy Mackay's unmarked grave at St Dunstan's churchyard, Monks Risborough* (phot. Peter Godden)

Dorothy Mackay died on February 8, 1953 in St Joseph's Nursing Home, Beaconsfield, of pancreatic cancer. In her death certificate, her profession is given as: "Widow of Ernest John Henry Mackay. Archaeologist";⁵² a final acknowledgment of her position as an archaeologist in her own right – though only after giving her status in relation to her husband. Three days later, she was buried at St Dunstan's churchyard, Monks Risborough, in what is now an unmarked grave (Fig. 2).⁵³

Conclusion

"After devoting almost 40 years of her life to archaeological studies in Egypt, Iraq and India, Mrs. Dorothy Mackay, the present curator of the AUB Museum, will be leaving for her home in England in June", reads the notice issued upon her leaving from Beirut by the AUB.⁵⁴ However, despite dedicating almost half a century to research, becoming one of few women of similar academic accomplishments at that time, she remains practically unknown among professional archaeologists nowadays.

⁵² General Registry Office (England and Wales). Deaths in the Sub-district of Amersham in the County of Buckingham: 1953 no 350.

⁵³ Plot 146/1 (Peter Godden, personal communication, March 2023).

⁵⁴ Museum Curator..., p. 1.

In fact, having obtained her BA degree in 1902, she was one of the first women in England to do so.⁵⁵ Her pursuit of higher education had started long before she met Ernest, though her engagement in archaeological research clearly dates from after the two got married. Despite not having obtained formal archaeological training, Dorothy formulated her own opinions on the excavated material and eventually published her papers in such renowned archaeological journals as *Antiquity* (1944, 1945). She continued her research until the very end. Even though she was survived by a son, much of the information on her life was lost after his premature death, when the Mackay family emigrated to Canada. According to Mrs Adele Mackay (widow of Dorothy and Ernest's grandson Richard), in the family archive was correspondence between the Mackays and other prominent archaeologists of the time, such as T.E. Lawrence and Max Mallowan, as well as archaeological notes, including those in Dorothy's handwriting. The majority of these had to be sold during Peter Mackay's lengthy illness. Hopefully, these documents will come to light one day and allow more details to be added to Dorothy Mackay's extraordinary life story.

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⁵⁵ In 1878, UCL was the first British university to award degrees to women (HARTE, Negley, NORTH, John, BREWIS, Georgina (eds). *The World of UCL*. London, 2018, p. 89).

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