

INTRODUCTION

Upon first reading the letters of Myrtle Broome at the Griffith Institute Archive in Oxford where they are housed, I could not believe the amount of detail contained within them. These letters give us such a valuable insight into the life of two women working and living in the desert of Egypt in the early twentieth century. Not only were the letters detailed, there were so many of them, 415 in total, spanning the years 1927 to 1937.

As I read, researched, and transcribed them, I began to know Myrtle and empathize with the challenges she faced in her life abroad. The letters were written with great humor and vitality, and they contain a genuine and endearing love for the local people. When she described a scene, it was with the eye of an artist, which of course she was.

When collating these letters for this book, my first problem was simply how to fit them all in. Myrtle's correspondence spanned eight seasons in Abydos and one season in Qaw al-Kebir and her letters were sent with an impressive regularity.

Myrtle's first season at Qaw al-Kebir in 1927 is tremendously important. The letters show Myrtle's reaction to and her impressions of living in Egypt for the first time and warrant inclusion for that reason alone. The richness of her account is both informative and entertaining and sets the tone for future seasons.

Myrtle then spent eight seasons at the ancient site of Abydos, near the modern town of al-Araba al-Madfuna, approximately 11 kilometers from the Nile in Upper Egypt. In the first season alone she wrote sixty-five letters and I wanted to include every one of them.

Myrtle recorded every facet of her life, writing about her living arrangements; the local people and their ways; the work of the local artisans and

craftsmen, recording such things as weaving and pot making. She wrote about the important work they conducted in the temple, and their visitors—friends, colleagues, even royalty—who were each entertained according to their status. There were also the less welcome visitors, resonating for the modern reader—the tourists.

When you read her letters you really are there with her, you experience the life she led, you see the local people as she did, with understanding and respect for their ways. Shades of colonial paternalism show through, of course, but her thoughts and words were of her time.

She also gave us insights into the important work she was doing, describing how the work was approached and carried out, the working conditions and her own thoughts on their endeavors. She greatly underplayed her own role, being very modest about her contributions to the epic task undertaken.

So, from this wealth of material, I had to make a decision: to either cut, edit, and curate the letters, trying to capture the essence of all 415 letters and nine seasons' experiences in one book, or to concentrate on the first season alone.

I decided to focus on the first season, rather than leaving out so many letters that I consider to be so central to Myrtle's story. The first season in Abydos is so comprehensive that the following seasons could be seen as simply reinforcing the initial content, so take my word for it, you will not feel shortchanged.

Myrtle is a fluent letter writer. I very much hope that as you read the letters you will imagine yourself there with her, as I did. I also must add that we have included many of her typos and incorrect spellings, such as when she spells "Tutankhamun" as "Tutankhamen." This better reflects how the actual letters appear and read. Myrtle was so eager to get everything down rapidly that sometimes she wrote a name in different forms, as in "Ahmed" versus "Ahmud"; where this appears, we have chosen the most common usage throughout. Some minor punctuation has also been introduced in the editing process, such as periods and commas, to improve readability; all other errors have been intentionally left.

Cultural warning: Users of this material are warned that some letters document observations of people and cultures using scientific research models and language from the earlier twentieth century that may be considered offensive today.

1

THE EARLY YEARS

On February 22, 1888, in the district of Holborn in London, Washington and Ellen Broome became the proud parents of their first and only child, a baby girl they named Myrtle Florence, a much-loved and cherished daughter. The first few years of Myrtle's life were spent in Holborn with the family moving to Bushey, near Watford in Hertfordshire, in 1905. It would be easy to say she grew up in a typical middle-class home in suburbia, but that would not be strictly true.

Little is known about Myrtle's mother, Ellen Dench Broome, but we can assume that, in keeping with the time, she stayed at home and cared for the house and her daughter. From Myrtle's letters, one gets the idea that she was perhaps not the strongest of ladies. She was frequently ill and always required help around the house. This dependency might have influenced Myrtle, whose strong character and ability to put herself forward for responsibility is apparent. This was borne out when Myrtle eventually gave up her career to care for her father when he became ill, her mother not being able to cope. Her mother would eventually succumb to dementia. There was no doubt that Ellen was very close to her daughter and Myrtle cared for her deeply.

Her father, Washington Herbert Broome, was described as a music and book publisher. He worked for a period at William Morris's Kelmscott Press, which operated from 1891 to 1898.

Kelmscott Press produced books heavily influenced by the illustrated manuscripts and early printed books of medieval and early-modern Europe. William Morris was a man of many talents, being an English textile designer, poet, novelist, translator, and social activist. He was also one of the prime movers in the Arts and Craft movement, the international



The younger Myrtle

movement in decorative and fine arts from about 1880 to 1920. It was based on traditional craftsmanship that used simple forms often using medieval, romantic, or folk styles of decoration. His press produced books that he considered to be beautiful, often using friends like Edward Burne-Jones to illustrate them. The press not only published works by Morris but also by Keats, Shelley, and Ruskin amongst others.

In 1902, Broome set up his own enterprise with James Guthrie called The Old Bourne Press using the same principles as Morris, with Broome and Guthrie also heavily influenced by the Arts and Craft movement.

Guthrie would go on to found the Pear Tree Press in 1905, although the Old Bourne Press was still publishing in 1915 and the two men continued to work in conjunction with each other.

Broome was himself a master craftsman whose great love was working in wood and metal, something he shared with his keen daughter. Myrtle loved nothing better than spending time with her father learning these crafting skills, going on eventually to add many more to her portfolio.

These skills were put to good use when the family moved to Bushey, where father and daughter (now seventeen years old) worked on the interior of their new home called Avalon, renting a house on their arrival while Avalon was being built. Unsurprisingly, the house was in the late Arts and

Craft style so popular at the time. An architect was employed to work under Broome's direction and Historic England now describes the house as being "a building created for a designer and craftsman of the Arts and Craft movement, containing a rich variety of decorative elements of the period designed by Broome and his daughter." They make special mention of the fact that "Myrtle created painted panels and decorations throughout the house."

The house is full of the most exquisite decorative carving and metal-work done by the pair; it was said that two whole Hertfordshire oaks were used in the ornate woodwork, much of which still survives today. Craftsmen were even brought in from as far afield as Italy to do the work that could not be done by father and daughter, for instance the tiling around the fireplace, and the house is a monument to this immensely talented duo.

While researching Myrtle, I had the great pleasure of spending a night there a few years ago and sleeping in Myrtle's own room, where her initials are carved into the bedpost together with the date of 1911 and friezes are painted on the walls in classical subjects. Myrtle would add her own distinct touch to the carvings in Avalon; for instance, the mantle shelf she created, signed, and dated 1907 is still in evidence today.

The current owners have done a terrific job of restoring the house, using the original plans to do so, and many views are recognizable from the early paintings done by Myrtle.

Father and daughter would eventually use their skills to set up a business from Avalon called *Designers and Workers in Metal and Enamel*. The talented Myrtle would also design textiles for the Liberty department store in London. The store was renowned for its textile design and still trades today. Of course, Myrtle also designed the textiles that would be used in the house.

Over all others, there was one skill in particular that would shape Myrtle's future life: her talent as an artist. She studied at the art school set up in Bushey by Bertha Herkomer, a cousin of Sir Hubert Herkomer and a former pupil of his from 1886. Sir Hubert Herkomer (1849–1914) was a well-known British artist with German origins. His paintings can be found in the National Collection of the Tate, and in many other collections throughout the UK. He set up an earlier art school in Bushey and his teaching methods were quite unique for the time. He believed in free expression, giving his pupils the freedom to develop their own styles. He believed competition and exams were bad for them and did not encourage a house style. Bertha, being a former pupil, would likely have followed in

his footsteps, which I believe would have suited Myrtle perfectly as she was not a by-the-book person.

Myrtle's Certificate and Flinders Petrie

In 1911, aged twenty-three, Myrtle enrolled in the classes of the eminent archaeologist Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, at University College London (UCL), studying for the Certificate in Egyptology that was to take her two years. She followed in the footsteps of other notable women copyists and archaeologists who worked in Egypt, all passing through the hallowed corridors and going on to establish careers in this comparatively new field. Flinders Petrie has to be credited with giving many women artists and archaeologists the chance to live and work in Egypt, an opportunity usually denied the women of the time.

When these classes were set up in 1893, they were unusual for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were the first classes in Egyptology in the country. Egyptology had previously been taught in Germany, France, and Italy but never in Britain. Secondly, the classes were to be open to both sexes. At that time, the University of London was the only institution that actually awarded degrees to women. Oxford didn't follow until 1920 and Cambridge, unbelievably, not until 1947.

These classes were life changing for Myrtle. She had always had a strong fascination with the ancient civilization of Egypt. There are photos of her dressed in Egyptian costumes as a young woman, and her abilities as an artist soon brought her to the attention of Mr. Petrie. She would soon find herself working in Egypt as a copyist, firstly for Flinders Petrie himself at Qaw al-Kebir, and then for the Egypt Exploration Society, in conjunction with the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, at the great temple of Seti I at Abydos. The work at Abydos would be over a period of eight seasons and would be the most enjoyable of her life, though sadly to be cut short by the ill health of her parents. Myrtle was indeed very close to her parents. While in Egypt she would write over four hundred letters detailing her work and life there. She very much wanted them to be part of her time there. These letters are documents of social history, records of a life long gone, with customs and rituals recorded like seldom before.

We all know the names of the important players in Egyptology, we know the sites excavated and cataloged, and of course the fruits of their labors are now on display in museums around the world. I am not so sure,