

Marjory Veronica Seton-Williams 1910-1992, by Barbara Lesko

An archaeologist born in Melbourne Australia on April 20, M. V. Seton-Williams was the only child of a lawyer father who raised her like the son he had wanted. She was taught to use a rifle by age twelve and hunted and skinned rabbits whose pelts she sold for spending money. Never faint-hearted, she said the judo she also learned young came in handy when she needed it years later in the Middle East. Growing up in lonely circumstances on a farm, Seton-Williams was educated by governesses until her fifteenth year, when she entered a girl's boarding school. Her voracious reading led her early to discover ancient Egypt and from the age of seven she planned to become an Egyptologist.

As this subject could not be studied in Australia at the time, Seton-Williams majored in History and Political Science at the University of Melbourne, but maintained her interest in Egypt and studied hieroglyphs with her a tutor. One of her professors at Melbourne was Jessie Webb a woman numismatist who taught Ancient History. Webb had traveled widely in the Near East before World War I and had dug with Evans at Knossos. Undoubtedly knowing a woman archaeologist who had made a successful career for herself was encouraging. This professor gave Veronica letters of introduction to leading British classicists in England once she determined to go there for further study. She had also been encouraged by meeting Nancy de Crespigny, a South Australian, who had come back from England to take her finals and who was working with Mortimer Wheeler at the site of Maiden Castle in York.

In 1934 Veronica Seton-Williams sailed for England and spent the summer

digging with the Wheelers at their great hill fort on the Dorset Downs, where she lived in a tent, which she did not like, but found she enjoyed picking and shoveling. Tessa Verney Wheeler was really supervising field work here while her husband was in charge overall. Thus another role model of a woman archaeologist came into her life. Later Seton-Williams would write of her deep affection for Mrs. Wheeler and credited her with "much advice and help" in her early years. However, the Wheelers dissuaded Veronica from pursuing a degree in Egyptology, urging her to enter their field of British Prehistory instead, and promising her a job if she did. They stated their belief that there would be no position for a woman in Egyptology, an attitude which reflected their acquaintance with contemporary British Egyptologists. She later came to regret following their advice, however, but she was allowed to do the Prehistoric Postgraduate Diploma in one year when Egyptology would have taken longer. She still studied the ancient Egyptian language and small antiquities with Professor Margaret Murray(q.v.*Breaking Ground*) at University College London during this time, and Murray, too, would become one of her mentors and supporters.

Although always short of money, Seton-Williams joined the Royal Archaeological Institute to gain access to a good library. University College London was an excellent place to learn basics of archaeology: Professor King of University College taught geology, which she later found very helpful; she studied physical anthropology in its Medical School; and learned surveying too. Professor Wheeler taught British Prehistory and the Aims and Methods of Archaeology. She recalled years later in her autobiography that "working with the Wheelers, one was in the center of the British Archaeological world, and by attending meetings at the Society of Antiquaries I gradually met all the leading figures in British Archaeology."

As she was not only taught by but befriended by Margaret Murray (now in her 70's) to whom she must have confided her long love of ancient Egypt, and because

she had studied closely the Petrie Collection at University College London, the younger woman doubtless impressed Murray as a prime candidate for archaeological experience in the Near East. Both Mrs. Wheeler and Margaret Murray were on the Committee of the British School of Archaeology in the 1930's and they ensured that Seton-Williams was chosen to join Petrie's dig at Sheikh Zuwyed in Sinai. She would be the first student of Wheeler's to work outside of England. This site was close to the northern coast of Sinai and on the overland caravan route to Egypt (between Rafah and el-Arish). The fort being excavated dated to the Egyptian New Kingdom. Thus in November 1935 Veronica first set foot in Egypt and was able to visit the Museum in Cairo and nearby sites before catching a train to Palestine. She was grateful for the opportunity of beginning her field work career with Petrie and was glad to experience stratification at this site of many superimposed layers. She also fell in love with the desert here, and was so drawn to the local Arabs that the tribe of the Terrabin made her a "brother" in a blood ceremony.

Convalescing in Jerusalem from influenza caught on Petrie's spartan dig, she met Professor John Garstang of Liverpool who invited her to join him at Jericho. Garstang had been largely responsible for planning the foundation of the British School in Jerusalem after World War I. This final season at Jericho she was in the company of Alan Rowe and Grace Crowfoot (q.v.). On Garstang's dig she was responsible for excavating pre-pottery neolithic levels, but this was his final season at Jericho as next he moved on to Tell Keisan, a large mound near Acre and she moved with him.

That summer of 1936 Seton-Williams rejoined Wheeler at Maiden Castle and helped organize the expedition in the absence of Mrs. Wheeler, who had died the preceding spring. She had formed good friendships with many of the women who worked on this dig, one particularly was Joan du Plat Taylor, with whom she

vacationed often and had a very close personal and professional relationship for the rest of her life. However, she now realized that her true love was the Middle East and its archaeology. Subsequently, she would no longer work with Wheeler, but signed on to rejoin Garstang in the Fall, traveling first to Istanbul, where he had her catalogue all the Syro-Hittite sculpture in the Istanbul museum. Garstang was now interested in the plain of Cilicia in southern Turkey and was intent on finding a prehistoric mound "that would link Thessalian material with prehistoric Jericho," finally settling on the site of Souk Su Hiiyiik (or Yarmuk Tepe) near Mersin, which had a Hittite fortress near the top but many layers of Neolithic below. There Seton-Williams worked as both field supervisor and photographer. The late spring that followed was spent in Cyprus, cataloguing and classifying material in the Museum in Nicosia. As usual, summer vacations included archaeological work—as in 1937 working for the Harvard Mission to Ireland that was excavating a crannog in Meath, a water soaked site that presented entirely different archaeological problems from sites in the Middle East. Illness kept her from returning to the Garstang excavations that autumn, but he sent her to Berlin to examine the Tell Halaf material in the collection of Baron von Oppenheim. More summer work in Nicosia followed an extended trip with friends through Europe. Then it was off to Tell el-Duweir (ancient Lachish) in Palestine where she would be field supervisor with the Wellcome Expedition (1938). Olga Tufnell (q.v.) was on its staff, and its director was John Starkey. The top of the mound had Iron Age levels (8th - 6th centuries), but the cemeteries on the edge of the mound ranged from the Chalcolithic to the Iron Age. Seton-Williams took all the photographs on this expedition.

Palestine was in the grip of the Arab Revolt, and in early January Starkey was murdered on the road--an unsolved mystery until this day--thus ending possibilities of the work continuing beyond that season. In April, after the camp was closed, Seton-Williams went with her friend and colleague John Waechter to Trans-Jordan to

excavate the Wadi Dhobai, a flint desert east of Amman, where they remained until early July. Then they visited Petra and Aqaba before returning to Jerusalem, from which she went back to Cyprus and on to England for the summer.

That autumn she decided to visit the United States with Barbara Parker, in order to study collections at Chicago's Oriental Institute and also museums on the East Coast. The end of that year found her returning to Europe and Cyprus, where she spent the next eight months because she and Joan du Plat Taylor (q.v.) were engaged on making a catalogue of the pottery. Then in April John Waechter joined them to survey sites on the plain of Jabbul in North Syria, after which they made a driving trip to Baghdad to visit its museum and then returned to Damascus. Upon returning to Cyprus, Seton-Williams dug a Mycenaean mining settlement in the mountains above Morphou, an excavation she termed "most interesting and satisfactory" during which she established Bronze Age Mycenaean dating for many of the slag heaps previously attributed to the Phoenicians or Romans. When July arrived, she left for France to join her mother and they returned to England just a few weeks before the Second World War broke out in Central Europe.

Like so many in Britain, the archaeologist immediately volunteered for war service, beginning with London's Fire Brigade, which proved to be both dangerous and exhausting work. After suffering an appendectomy with complications, she needed quieter work and found it with the Bureau of Censorship which had an Uncommon Language Department where she worked using her knowledge of Greek, but also volunteered two nights a week as an air-raid warden. After a year with the Postal Censorship Department, she managed a transfer to the Ministry of Information, again in Press Censorship and later Traveler's Censorship. Next she was invited to work for the British Council which had just lost their Middle East officer in the war. She was with them one year, but did not like administrative work and was dismayed at the Council's lack of knowledge about the Middle East and its people and customs.

Returning to the Ministry of Information, Reference Division, she "wrote background papers for journalists and MPs and others sent abroad on foreign missions." gravitating to the Middle East and Balkans, and stayed with the Ministry after the end of the war. Her experience in the Middle East and her evaluation of the low level of information on the home front encouraged her writing the book *Britain and the Arab States*, published by Luzac in 1948. In 1946 Olga Tufnell had requested her assistance with the publication of the Iron Age volume of Tell el-Duweir. Then in early 1948, following the death of her mother, Marjory Veronica sailed for Australia as part of a round the world cruise on a cargo boat. After settling family affairs in Australia, 1949 saw her once again in southern Turkey re-investigating the lower levels of Sakce Gozii. Upon her return to England she was offered a job as Secretary of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, but turned it down and it was subsequently filled by her friend Barbara Parker.

The year 1950 found Seton-Williams back in Cyprus, where she started digging at a Mycenaean temple site at Myrtou-Pigades. The following year Prof. Sydney Smith again attempted to give her employment by appointing her Annual Student for the British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara. In this capacity she undertook a survey of pre-Classical sites in Cilicia. After a spring and summer of such work, she and Margaret Munn-Rankin (q.v.), who had been part of the expedition, went to Syria to examine material in museums, and then Seton-Williams returned to Cyprus. She prepared a report of the season in Cilicia for the *Journal of Anatolian Studies*.

During the spring and summer of 1952, already age 42, she was employed by the Institute of Archaeology to reorganize and re-label their slide collection. The year 1953 found her with the two women colleagues again in Turkey with a small excavation. Thus for many years Seton-Williams earned very little except her expenses and would have gone on in

this uncertain and part-time professional existence had not professors in London, such as Sydney Smith, persuaded her to work for a higher degree that would qualify her for a real teaching position. Seton-Williams later credited Smith with being one of the most supportive and important influences on her career. She decided to be examined on the Syrian sites of the second millennium, not being permitted to study the development of Neolithic cultures in the Middle East, which was the subject that interested her most. The mid 1950's were thus taken up by studies at the Institute of Archaeology working on her doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Max Mallowan, and earning her Ph.D. in 1957.

During this time Prof. Gordon Childe asked her to take up teaching the extra Mural Diploma in Archaeology, an adult education course, which she then taught for over 25 years. Seton-Williams lectured in Egyptology there and also embarked at the City Literary Institute on a course about "Travelers in the Middle East," when Margaret Murray decided to retire and handed over her course in Egyptology to her as well. This became upgraded to a University Tutorial Course. During subsequent years Seton-Williams varied the curriculum alternating between a year of Egypt and a year on Western Asia. She also wrote and answered inquiries for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

In 1956 she and her two female colleagues--Margaret Munn-Rankin and Joan du Plat Taylor--got back to Syria with a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. They had obtained the concession at Tell Rifa'at. David Stronach also joined them. They returned again in 1960 funded by Cambridge University and the Melbourne Institute of Archaeology and the Russell Trust. She also continued to dig in England during the summers, using some of her extra-mural students as assistants.

The nineteen sixties would bring Seton-Williams back to her first love: Egypt. There in 1962 she met Omm Seti (q.v.) at Abydos: the beginning of a long friendship,

and in the autumn of 1963 she was invited to lecture for a Swan Nile cruise which took her to Nubia and all its threatened temples. This would be the start of a long and enjoyable association for her with Swan. She made over 100 trips to Egypt during her career "always finding something new." At home she was now living in Cambridge in a cottage she had purchased with Margaret Munn-Rankin, and she substituted for Margaret who was on sabbatical from Cambridge University, teaching courses on the Archaeology of Mesopotamia and the History of Western Asia.

When Max Mallowan retired as Professor of Western Asiatic Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, she was urged to put in for his position, but Seton Lloyd also became a candidate and received the position because he was more experienced in Iraq. While her sponsors had been Murray and A.J. Arkell, the Egyptologist on the selection committee, Walter B. Emery, seemed unconvinced that a woman could control a dig in the Middle East, having never allowed women on his own excavations in Egypt. However, in truth, Emery did use his wife to run the camp and he allowed Hazel Smith to accompany her husband Harry on the Emery digs as well.

Just before leaving on a Nubian cruise in 1964, Seton-Williams was approached by a delegation from the Egypt Exploration Society and requested to undertake Society excavations at Tell el Fara'in in the Egyptian Delta. Although she was eager to head her own expedition in Egypt, Margaret was reluctant to accept without first looking over the site. However the E.E.S. gave her no opportunity to do this, but demanded an immediate answer. She later regretted agreeing to excavate such a troublesome site. The details of her problems with the excavations and with the Egypt Exploration Society are gone into at some length in her autobiography The Road to El-Aguzein, the title referring to the name of the modern town closest to her archaeological concession. The ancient "tell" consisted of a series of low mounds extending over some 177 acres, that had been badly disturbed by Sebakin hunters for decades. Like many Delta sites, it had a high water table, and this and other

difficulties presented by the site could not effectively be addressed with the meager budget provided by the sponsor. After five years she felt the project and "faceless men" on the Committee of the Egypt Exploration Society had defeated her, and that her decision to work at Tell el-Fara'in was "the most disastrous one I had ever taken."

During the mid '60's Seton-Williams was also finishing up at Tell Rifa'at in Turkey, and excavated last at Tell el Fara'in in 1968, turning down another offer from the E.E.S. to return there ten years later. Her several trips a year to Egypt for Swan expanded to include tours to Turkey and Syria as well. Throughout her years of excavating, Seton-Williams faced many challenges bravely and effectively, whether calming a group of fighting men or copying an inscription on a cliff face overhanging a river in flood. Living in the most trying of conditions, enduring great physical discomfort and danger, she survived and single-mindedly pursued her goals. She was an extraordinary woman.

In 1977, after twenty-five years of university teaching Dr. Seton-Williams retired, but Professor of Egyptology Harry Smith of University College London arranged for her to become an Honorary Research Fellow there. Her retirement was busy, filling requests for books, such as an art book of the treasures of the Iraq Museum, a book on Ptolemaic temples, and collaborating on writing the new *Blue Guide* to Egypt, research for which took her to many remote parts of Egypt such as the oases. Her autobiography, published in 1988, in her 78th year has been the prime source for this article. It is a very guarded report, focusing almost exclusively on her career and saying little about relations with family or friends. However, in it her great love of the Middle East and the Arabs, Egyptians, Turks and Greeks rings through loud and clear. Death came at St. Helier, Jersey on May 29, 1992, at age 82. Her short obituary in the Egypt Exploration Society's newsletter notes Seton-Williams' service on the Committee from 1969 to 1984. It further quotes M. S. Drower as noting that Veronica Seton-Williams had been "probably the last person still living who had

excavated with Sir Flinders Petrie."

In an age of specialization, Marjory Veronica Seton-Williams mastered an impressive array of languages, cultures, sites, and time periods--digging and researching, cataloguing and publishing over a wide swath of the Old World. As a person, few could have been more fearless, dedicated, and tenacious. Critical and single-minded in her pursuit of accurate facts, generous with her time and abilities, friendly and encouraging to young scholars, she personified all the best one would hope to find as attributes of a woman archaeologist.

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