

Veronica Seton-Williams: A proud Australian Archaeologist

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Abstract: The archaeological life of Veronica Seton-Williams is briefly sketched, drawing largely on her autobiography, and her contribution to archaeology and Egyptology is discussed in the context of personal recollections.

Veronica Seton-Williams belonged to a pioneering generation of women archaeologists who had to overcome many hurdles on the way to their chosen profession. Born in 1910 and brought up in Melbourne where there were no opportunities to study Old World or for that matter Australian prehistory, she left in 1934 for England, as many academically inclined Australians did and still do. She had obtained a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Melbourne University, and was enrolled at University College London to do a Prehistoric Postgraduate Diploma. Her real love was ancient Egyptian and she subsequently lost no opportunity to engage in Egyptological research. In the course of her archaeological career, she carried out excavations and surveys all over the Near East, including Cyprus. She survived the 1935/36 season of fieldwork with Sir Flinders and Lady Petrie at Sheikh Zuwayid in the Sinai, ending up digging at Tell el-Fara'in in the Nile Valley Delta from 1964/65 to 1968. Veronica spent the rest of her days in England, where I first met her, but she never forgot her Australian origins and deeply resented being introduced on a return visit to Melbourne in 1948 as an 'English cousin'. Before she died in 1992, she produced an autobiography entitled *The Road to El-Aguzein* (1988), where she recorded, without elaboration, the frustrations she had had to endure in Melbourne and London, and the way she succeeded in fulfilling her ambitions, without ever having held a permanent, full-time academic position.



Figure 1: The 1935-36 Sheikh Zuwayid team, from the left, Veronica Seton-Williams, Carl Pape, John Waechter, Jack Ellis, Sir Flinders and Lady Petrie.
Photo: courtesy of University College London



Figure 2: Veronica at the time of her graduation from the University of Melbourne 1934.
Photo: from Seton-Williams (1988: 88)

Veronica never received the recognition she was due either in England or Australia. She was nevertheless well connected with the archaeological communities in both countries and aware where their interests intersected in the Old World. While it is not known whether she had any dealings before the Second World War with Mr Walter J. Beasley, founder of the Australian Institute of Archaeology in Melbourne (AIA), there are a number of associations in common which may have been more than co-incidental. The second Near Eastern dig in which Veronica took part was the 1936 season at Jericho, conducted by a Liverpool University expedition under the direction of Professor John Garstang. This site was visited by Mr Beasley a year earlier in the course of its excavation by Garstang. Beasley provided funds to Garstang and was in turn receiving objects from Jericho (Beasley 1938). It is to be expected that Garstang at some point spoke with Veronica about his contact in her home town. However Veronica does not mention Beasley's name in her autobiography.



Figure 3: Jericho 1936, Veronica and Mrs Garstang ‘watching’ the excavation of the Neolithic strata. Veronica went on to excavate with Professor Garstang at Tell Keisan and Mersin.
Photo: courtesy of the Palestine Exploration Fund.

Beasley began collecting antiquities in 1934. Just prior to the 1935/36 season at Sheikh Zuwayid, Petrie sent Beasley a rich collection of Tell el-‘Ajjul material (AIA

doc 3510) and later sent objects from Sheikh Zuwayid (Petrie & Ellis 1937); this is now the only material from that site readily available for study. It is therefore probable that the Petries also asked Veronica about Beasley. These assemblages became the nucleus of the AIA’s collections, which also benefited from further consignments sent by Lady Petrie in the late 1940s. Veronica records in her autobiography that Petrie was very proud of the fact that his grandfather was Captain Matthew Flinders who first circumnavigated Australia, and that she checked Petrie’s recollection of some the details of his forebear’s exploits by writing to Professor Ernest Scott, an authority on Flinders, who taught her history at Melbourne University (Seton-Williams 1988: 17, 43).



Figure 4: Jerusalem 1935, Veronica at the Swedish Consulate - written on the reverse - ‘wearing “the Bradleys coat and skirt!” before the mouse got at it’. Clothes are always an issue when starting life in a new environment. Photo: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections.

Though she publicly acknowledged she had become an expatriate by the end of the Second World War, Veronica did not end her relationship with Australia. In 1948 she spent nine weeks in Australia, primarily on family business after her mother’s death, but managed a brief visit to the Nicholson Museum in the University of Sydney. She later became involved in the excavation of a Late Bronze Age site at Myrtou *Pigadhes* in north-western Cyprus in 1950 under the sponsorship of Sydney University and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. According to her autobiography, she resumed her fieldwork at Tell Rifa’at in Syria in 1960 with the support of what she calls the ‘Melbourne Institute of Archaeology’ (Seton-Williams 1988: 120). Veronica had excavated there in the 1955 and 1956 and the AIA had provided £100 for each season (AIA docs 955, 956, 996-1001). Just as fellow Australian, Professor Vere Gordon Childe, Director of the Institute of Archaeology London, had helped Veronica find employment in extramural teaching, so Veronica took a comradely interest in my own welfare and solvency while a postgraduate

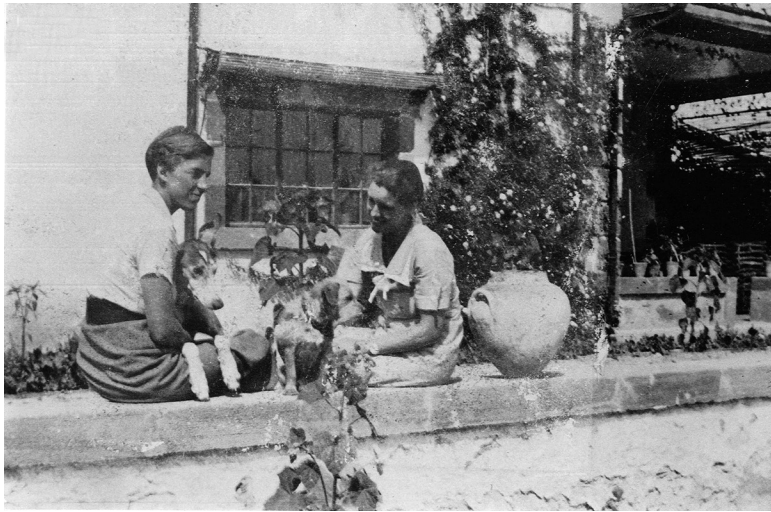


Figure 5: Cyprus about 1938, Veronica (left) with her life-long friend Joan du Plat Taylor at Joan's house in Nicosia. Photo: courtesy Nicolle Hirschfeld, from the archives of Margaret Walker-Brash (née Beazley).

student in the Department of Egyptology at University College London in the early 1960s. So when I was invited in 1996 to contribute to a volume in Veronica's memory, I did not hesitate to prepare and submit a personal tribute, but the work never eventuated and my reminiscence was never published. I am grateful to Christopher Davey for this opportunity to put on record my appreciation and debt to Veronica, which complements the account of her life by Barbara Lesko (2004: accessed 13/12/2013):

In this liberated and more enlightened age, when women in the Western world do not have to scale legislative barriers to succeed, it is difficult to imagine what obstacles, prejudices and discrimination a single, unconventional, Colonial female had to overcome in Britain before and after the Second World War to make her way in the academic profession. In fact Veronica Seton-Williams never held a permanent university appointment but made her living as a free-lance archaeologist through a great range of activities that not only did an enormous amount to popularise Egyptology and indeed Near Eastern archaeology in general but gave her a wide and devoted circle of friends and admirers. That she never lost her enthusiasm and generosity of spirit despite the numerous set-backs to which she was subjected during her life time is a glowing tribute to one of the most warm-hearted people to frequent the fringes of the incestuous world of Egyptological scholarship in London.

I first met Veronica in London though the intervention of fellow-Australian, James R. Stewart, later first Edwin Cuthbert Hall Professor of Middle Eastern Archaeology at the University of Sydney, who had taken me with him on a study trip to England and France in 1958/59. I only got to know her better when I returned for a postgraduate degree in the early 1960s. My abiding impression

from that early acquaintance, apart from Veronica's distinctively sensible manner of dressing, was amazement that the small flat she shared with Elsa Coult in Bloomsbury could bear the weight of the books which occupied every spare space. Then, as always, she was willing to lend a helping hand, especially to another being from Down Under, and I remember being given the opportunity to read and take notes from her doctoral dissertation on Syria in the 2nd millennium B.C., whose own history she recounts in her autobiography (Seton-Williams 1988: 111-113). It was the only comprehensive archaeological synthesis of its kind in English at the time, and the way it had been imposed on her as a subject, initially referred by the University of London, and never published, rankled but never riled her. It can now be accessed

through the British Library's invaluable Electronic Theses Online Service (EThOS 241915). Getting her PhD in 1957 did not, however, materially improve Veronica's academic prospects.



Figure 6: Cyprus about 1938, Veronica liked the water having spent much time around Port Phillip Bay. Photo: courtesy Nicolle Hirschfeld, from the archives of Margaret Walker-Brash (née Beazley).



Figure 7: A wartime picnic, possibly at Hampstead Heath, Veronica with friends Joan du Plat Taylor, left, and Margaret Munn-Rankin. Photo: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections

Her dissertation, entitled *An Archaeological Examination of the Material from the Syrian Sites of the Second Millennium 1800-1300 B.C.*, had particular relevance to a research interest that was beginning to engage and finally ensnared me - the location of the ancient place name of Alashiya, long considered and still held by many to be the island of Cyprus. I became convinced at an early stage of my studies that the evidence for this equation was too flimsy for it to be sustained. I not only extracted from

Veronica's work information relating to copper deposits in Syria, with a view to demonstrating that Cyprus was not the sole possible Near Eastern source of the metal with which Alashiya was closely associated, but also drew on her epic 'Cilician Survey' (Seton-Williams 1954), of which she gave me an off-print, for a possible site for Alashiya. Since all the circumstantial archaeological data pointed to the Western Asiatic coast for the location of this place, I sought a settlement in the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean and lit on Kinet Hüyük, the most imposing tell around the Gulf of Iskenderun. Veronica was not impressed by my hypothesis and drew on her unrivalled first-hand knowledge of the region to cast legitimate doubts on this idea and suggest that the mouth of the Orontes better suited the topographical criteria. I included her comments in a post-script to my first paper on Alasia, and was always grateful for her forthright response (Merrillees 1972 : 119).



Figure 8: Wartime London, Veronica in her Air Raid Warden's Uniform. She and her friends had a number of close shaves during the Blitz. Photo: courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections

Like Veronica, I had no grant or regular source of income to maintain me during my years in London as a student in the early 1960's and with typical thoughtfulness she once suggested that I take over her extramural lecturing while she was away guiding a tour in Egypt. Nothing during that somewhat demanding period could better have illustrated the strong attachment felt by her followers to their accustomed mentor than their unambiguous indication that I did not come up to her standards! In fact some of the audience had been attending her courses for years, and I realised then that I lacked the touch for teaching and indeed the patience with which she was amply endowed. This memory is recounted in my section on Veronica's contribution to Egyptology in *Living with Egypt's Past in Australia* (Merrillees et al. 1990: 43, 46, 48), of which I sent her a first draft. This gave me the happy excuse to



Figure 9: Myrtou Pigadhes 1951, Team photo, front row from the left, James Mellaart, Hector Catling, Lord William Taylour, Joan du Plat Taylor, Veronica, Linda Melton, Second row, Elizabeth Catling and the host and hostesses, Photographer, Basil Hennessy, Absent: Margaret Munn-Rankin, Diana Kirkbride and Mick Wright.
Photo: courtesy of Linda Hennessy from the archives of Basil Hennessy

draw on her knowledge of 55 years' involvement with the British archaeological community, and her reactions to the text were typically robust, ironical and to the point.

In her autobiography Veronica recounts her introduction to hieroglyphs through the lecturer who taught German to science students in Melbourne (Seton-Williams 1988: 19). His name was Egremont, and according to her letter to me of 3 April 1989,

his wife developed cancer so he told me, and to take his mind off things he learnt hieroglyphs while nursing her. One way to do it I suppose. I also had a letter from him the following year (1935). I must have written to him saying I was thinking of coming back to Australia and he strongly advised against it. Rather 'better 50 years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay', or words to that effect.

In 1953 she was invited by Stewart to join the Department of Archaeology at Sydney University but, according to her published account, declined because she did not want to sever her connections with the Middle East (Seton-Williams 1988: 111). In her letter to me of 23 July 1989, she stated:

To be perfectly honest the reason I turned down the Sydney job was that I was very uncertain that I could work with Jim Stewart, specially working at his home (in Bathurst), half the time. However, the other reason sounds better and is partly true.

I can sympathise with her predicament.

Veronica never lost her essential Australianness and sense of fair play. It says much for her forbearance that she never harboured a grudge against W.B. Emery for allegedly blocking her appointment to an academic position in the Institute of Archaeology on the grounds of her gender (Seton-Williams 1988: 121). She amplified this episode in her letter of 23 July 1989 in the following way:

It was impossible to work in Egypt because of the tabu that Emery put upon women in field work. He thought that no Egyptian would take orders from a woman. In fact when I was appointed Field Director at Tell el-Fara'in in 1964, the only question he asked me was did I expect to have trouble with my men. To which I replied - no. I wonder what he would have said if he could have seen some of the workmen from Ibtu that I had sacked for some misdemeanour, putting my foot on their head and saying they were my men!!

I can just see her doing that without the slightest inhibition. In fact it was not true that Emery did not allow women to join his expeditions to Egypt. There were undoubtedly other reasons for his reaction.

It is perhaps symptomatic of the ambivalence with which her status and profession were viewed in Britain that the fourth revised edition of *Who Was Who in Egyptology* should still describe Veronica as a 'British-Australian archaeologist' (Bierbrier 2012: 503). She was particularly sensitive to any suggestion that her work might not be

treated seriously by the experts, especially Egyptologists, of which she was presumably not considered one, and when in the first draft of *Living with Egypt's Past in Australia* I referred to her scholarly output as 'popular', the reaction was as usual brisk: 'I do not think I would call my books on Egypt exactly popular. [She then listed her publications in a different order to the bibliography in *Who Was Who in Egyptology* and went on] One might call Tutankhamoun a coffee table book, but certainly not popular. Also Nile Handbook for Swans about four editions from 1974 to 1984. All my publications are in the Baillieu Library of the University of Melbourne, where I sent them as they came out' (letter of 23 July 1989). With due deference to Veronica, 'popular' became 'authoritative' in the final version of my study (Merrillees et al. 1990: 46). I am sorry I shall not receive any more of her inimitably typewritten letters!

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