

BULLETIN OF THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

VOLUME XL

BOSTON, OCTOBER, 1942

NUMBER 241



Madam Knight's Silver Cup made by John Dixwell, 1680-1725, presented by her to the Church of Christ, Norwich, Connecticut

The Philip Leffingwell Spalding Collection

PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY

SUBSCRIPTION ONE DOLLAR

George Andrew Reisner

WHAT we expected and yet dreaded for many a month has happened: George A. Reisner, "Papa George" as his many friends used to call him, died peacefully in his camp by the Pyramids on June 6th. The sad news came to me from my friends in Boston in these words: "It must have been a release to that active spirit, confined as it had been in these last years by physical limitations, but for us it is a great loss and sorrow. Miss Perkins who nursed him devotedly all these years, Frank Allen his assistant, and his beloved workmen the Qufits, were with him at the end, and we do not think he could have gone in a happier way for himself."

Among the friends who mourn this eminent man and scholar I have the privilege to count myself, for I have been associated with him for more than four decades in personal communion and scientific fellowship. As I try to recollect, under the impact of this irreparable loss, the fullness of his life, I begin to realize that no brief sketch could ever tell it.

In 1895 George Reisner and I, six years his senior, met for the first time in the Berlin Museum. Born on November 5, 1867, he had studied Semitic languages and Assyriology at Harvard, where he graduated in 1889. In Germany he intended to continue these studies. At Berlin University, the *mater studiorum* of Egyptology, Adolf Erman had gathered a group of talented students with whom young Reisner so closely associated himself that he, completely captivated by Egyptian antiquity, soon abandoned Assyriology. Thus in 1897 he heeded the call of Ludwig Borchardt, a personality especially congenial to him, to follow him to Cairo and collaborate under his guidance on the great catalogue of the Egyptian Museum. Reisner's acceptance was decisive for his entire life. Egypt became the realm of his work, later expanded southward to Nubia and the Sudan, and to it he stuck faithfully with but few interruptions, as when in 1908-10 he headed the Harvard Palestine Expedition at Samaria.

The scholarly museum worker soon developed into the excavator, the field-scientist. After his initial successes as head of the University of California Expedition at Naga-ed-Dêr, he began in 1903 his archaeological exploits at the Pyramids of Giza, first on behalf of the California Expedition, and then as head of the Harvard-Boston Expedition which he founded.

At Giza I was his neighbor from 1903 to 1910, laboring alongside him on a common task. And out of this peaceful contest grew our long friendship. The good days at Giza always remained a happy memory to us both. On the desert plateau west of the Third Pyramid, he built his camp with its plain dwellings and its shelters for the workmen. It was his home. For no money on earth would he have exchanged it for any other excavation headquarters, however palatial. Here all his activities converged, even when he was occupied with new tasks on the

Upper Nile, or with his studies on Ethiopian history and civilization. Kerma and Napata, the temples and pyramids of Gebel Barkal, Nuri and el-Kurruw, or the royal cemeteries of Meroë may have kept him for many months in the years during and after the First World War; yet his true love was Giza, and to it he always returned with renewed zeal. At Giza I saw him again for the first time after the bitter years. On March 1, 1926, we met 75 feet below the desert in the burial chamber of Queen Hetepheres, mother of Cheops, which the Harvard-Boston Expedition had discovered and which he, in collaboration with his fellow-worker Dows Dunham, examined before the removal of its contents. No word was spoken about the past. We just shook hands and thus sealed anew our old friendship.

In clearing this royal chamber and in restoring its treasures, Reisner and his co-workers have established the most splendid record in diligent archaeological detail work ever made by any excavator. Furniture and personal belongings now fill a large room in the Cairo Museum, and reproductions of the best pieces in the Boston Museum proclaim the glory of their discoverer.

Thanks to the finds from Reisner's excavations the Egyptian collection in Boston ranks among the best in the Old and the New Worlds. In sculptural masterpieces of the Pyramid Age it is surpassed only by Cairo, in its treasures from royal Ethiopian tombs and temples—statues, inscriptions, works of the applied arts—it is unique.

With Reisner's activities at Harvard, where he became Assistant Professor in 1910, and in 1914 full Professor of Egyptology, I am but little acquainted. All I know is that he lectured most successfully on Egyptian language, history and art. His lucidity of speech I had repeated opportunity to admire during his lectures at the American University in Cairo.

With all his great scientific success "Papa George" remained the simple and unassuming student I had met in Berlin. The hospitality of his camp was as unpretentious as the desert itself. Tea was cordially offered almost every afternoon to his many guests, bidden and unbidden alike. Whenever possible he made his weekly trip to Cairo and attended the Rotary luncheons. Of this rather exclusive circle he was the centre, chatting with friends of every nationality about the problems of his science and the world at large, and always smoking his eternally burning pipe.

When he finally discontinued his regular courses at Harvard and left to younger hands the guidance of the Egyptian Department at the Museum, of which he had been Curator since 1910, he stayed with his work beside the Pyramids, to leave it but once for a short trip to Boston. In June 1939, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from his alma mater and participated in the fiftieth reunion of his class.

Now he has passed into the "beautiful West" and walks the paths of the "Illustrious Dead." A great



Prof. Steindorff and Prof. Reisner (right) at their last meeting in Egypt

scholar has left us, but his work lives on. "Egyptian archaeology would not be what it is without the work of George A. Reisner: Prehistoric and Early Dynastic, Old and Middle Empires, Ethiopia,—from Giza to Meroë—everywhere he has erected for himself a monument in his work, and whenever one takes up one of his publications, then one knows: it is a good one throughout, sound and deliberate—not only the raw material, but complete and worked

through to the ultimate." This I quote from a letter I wrote to a friend in 1937. Today I can but add that the memory of George A. Reisner the man is indelibly graven in the hearts of all those who ever had the great privilege of association with him.

GEORGE STEINDORFF.

Los Angeles, California
August, 1942.