



BATTISCOMBE GEORGE GUNN

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1883-1950

BATTISCOMBE GUNN (he rarely used his second name) was the son of the late George Gunn, a member of the London Stock Exchange, and was born 30 June 1883. His father, naturally enough, destined his son for a business career, and actually Gunn did begin life in that capacity, for on the completion of his education at Westminster and Bedale's schools, he entered the service of a City bank. But although brilliant at figures and competent at this work, he found it so distasteful that it was soon abandoned. A second project, that of becoming an engineer, in which his mathematical gifts would have served him well, was likewise dropped. Gunn's temperament was essentially artistic and literary: whilst he was all his life an indefatigable worker, he wished always to work in his own way and in his own time, and rebelled at the discipline and set routine of office work. Had he, indeed, remained in commercial life, he might yet have been the brilliant scholar he became, for business men have made notable contributions to scholarship and science. One has only to mention the names of George Grote, Samuel Rogers, Dawson Turner, William Roscoe, Hudson Gurney, John Henry Gurney, William Backhouse, Joseph Prestwick, Lord Avebury, James W. Bosanquet, Hilton Price, and Walter Leaf—all of them bankers or business men—to realize the truth of this statement. And in Gunn's own field of Egyptology there have been notable instances of the same kind, for Charles Wycliffe Goodwin was a lawyer and François Chabas a wine-merchant; both only part-time workers in the science they did so much to advance and adorn. But in Gunn's case, this was not to be and he sought for a more congenial outlet for his powers.

Gunn lived for some years in Paris where he carried on his studies and made journalism his temporary livelihood, and he was for some time also a sub-editor of the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*. From 1908 to 1911 he was private secretary to Sir Arthur Pinero, an appointment which certainly brought him agreeable employment, though still far removed from the interests that were nearest to his heart.

With a natural flair for languages, Gunn speedily made himself master of several modern languages and a competent

scholar in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic. Even in his schooldays he began to interest himself in the interpretation of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. He did not merely dabble, but set himself with characteristic thoroughness to a serious study of the writing and grammar of ancient Egyptian and its derivative, Coptic. These laboriously self-taught studies were at first carried on clandestinely, for he received no encouragement from his father who regarded such preoccupations as a waste of time. His progress, nevertheless, was remarkable and as early as 1906 he produced his first publication, *The Instruction of Ptah-hotep*, a translation of a well-known early literary text of which the principal manuscript is the Prisse Papyrus in the Bibliothèque Nationale [1].¹ In Paris, Gunn studied the original papyrus, and did not rely, as so many of his predecessors had done, upon the inaccurate published versions of the text. The choice of this text may be considered both lucky and unlucky. It was lucky because it immersed Gunn deeply in the study of the grammar and syntax of Middle Egyptian, to which he so brilliantly contributed later on: it was unlucky because he selected for his first essay a text of extreme obscurity and complexity, which Sir Alan Gardiner has described as 'that most difficult of Egyptian texts'. Looking back on Gunn's translation after an interval of more than forty years, we may now perceive that it was no doubt premature, and Gunn himself said to me, about a year before his death: 'I entirely repudiate my translation of the Prisse Papyrus, so far as one can repudiate what is in print.' *Littera scripta manet*: nevertheless this early effort had many merits. It produced some new readings and is in many respects a considerable improvement on all previous attempts. The little book was immediately successful: after its first appearance in 1906, it was twice reprinted, and a second edition of it appeared in 1912.

In 1913 an opportunity arose for Gunn to gratify his ambition to visit Egypt. He joined the staff of Petrie's excavating party at Harageh, and he worked with the late Reginald Engelbach on that site, his particular charge being the epigraphic material discovered. In the report on the excavations, he published an account of the inscriptions and papyri that were brought to light, reserving the latter, however, for fuller treatment later [18]. Unfortunately he never fulfilled this intention and the Harageh papyri remained in his hands until 1940, when he handed them

¹ The numbers in square brackets refer to the Bibliography at the end of this memoir.

over to Paul Smither who, before his lamented early death, had published only one of them.

Before Gunn could revisit Egypt for a second season, the First World War had broken out. He joined the Forces in 1914, but his military service was of short duration, for ill health caused him to be invalided out of the army a year later. Of his activities between this period and the year 1921, when he again went to Egypt, mention will be made later on.

In the winter of 1921-2, Gunn was a member of the expedition sent by the Egypt Exploration Society to Tel el-Amarneh, where he worked with the late Professor Peet and Dr. (now Sir) Leonard Woolley. He contributed to the memoir describing the excavations [19]. At the conclusion of this campaign he was appointed to the staff of the Service des Antiquités of the Egyptian Government, where for several years he conducted excavations with the late Cecil Mallaby Firth in the Pyramid-field of Saqqara, and contributed to the volume on the excavations [25]. After living for some time during the summer months on the continent, principally at Vienna, Gunn was appointed, in 1928, Assistant Conservator of the Cairo Museum, a post he retained until 1931, when he went to America as Curator of the Egyptian section of the Philadelphia Museum. His letters at this period reveal that he was not altogether happy in his new surroundings and was anxious to return to England. The opportunity came in 1934, when on the lamented death of Professor Peet, the Oxford Chair of Egyptology became vacant and Gunn was appointed to succeed Peet as Professor of Egyptology in the University of Oxford.

It is now necessary to return to the period which fell between Gunn's discharge from the Army in 1915, and his return to Egypt in 1921. During this time he worked as assistant to Dr. (now Sir) Alan Gardiner in the elaborate lexicographical work upon which the latter was engaged for so many years and which culminated in the publication of his *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* in 1947. In the preface to that work, Sir Alan wrote:

From 1915 onward I received invaluable help from my friend Battiscombe Gunn, who working in my London home ransacked all the periodicals and many editions of texts for discussions of individual words.

But Gunn's work was not solely the clerical labour of a mere searcher. He had the knowledge and perception to evaluate and to criticize what he found. This work led to innumerable

philological discussions with Sir Alan and to exchanges of views: it was, in fact, an intellectual partnership that ended only with Gunn's life although it began in the relationship of master and pupil. Both parties have frequently acknowledged the mutual value of this association.

Partly arising out of his work for Sir Alan Gardiner and partly also independently of it, Gunn was amassing the materials for his largest and most important contribution to Egyptian philology, his *Studies in Egyptian Syntax* [20], which appeared in 1924. This book represents the results of the almost incredible labour of working through, with grammatical and syntactical analysis and annotation, almost the whole of the vast body of published texts in Old- and Middle-Egyptian (and not a few in Late-Egyptian) in order to present the impressive mass of examples that he was able to array in support of each syntactical phenomenon that he enunciated and elucidated. One of the principal contentions of the book is thus expressed in the preface:

I hope that one effect of the book will be to convince its readers that Egyptian verbal forms and constructions are specialized to express past, present and future tenses to a greater extent than has been recognized hitherto. I would here state my opinion for what it may be worth that during the last thirty years Egyptian philologists have stood too much under the influence of the Semitic categories of perfect and imperfect—the completed and the non-completed event. In happy contrast with the two or three tenses of the older Semitic languages, Egyptian possesses a great wealth of finite forms and constructions, only one of which goes back to the Semito-Egyptian stock, all the rest being native products.

This, and the many other propositions set forth in this remarkable book, Gunn has proved to demonstration, and most of his colleagues have adopted his conclusions which are now incorporated into the common stock of knowledge.

When entering upon his duties at Oxford, it was as a teacher that Gunn found his true *métier*. He realized that his first duty was to his pupils; and to his classes as well as to the private tuition of the more advanced of his students, he subordinated his own personal studies and researches. As a tutor he was infinitely painstaking and conscientious. Maintaining a high standard of critical scholarship himself, he imparted it to, and demanded it of, his pupils. He had a precise and didactic method, almost to the point of severity, but this did not exclude—indeed it directly created—the warmest friendship and personal interest in the studies and progress of all who sat under

him. In addition to his tutorial work at Oxford, Gunn undertook the exacting task of editing the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* from September 1935 to the end of 1939, when he was obliged to resign it as it made too heavy a tax on his time.

To his numerous correspondents, Gunn was equally self-sacrificing and helpful. He had no patience with triflers and dilettanti, no toleration of slipshod work or uncritical and unscientific habits of thought; but for his colleagues, for his pupils, and even for strangers who sought his aid, once they had convinced him of their earnestness, no trouble was too great, no drudgery too monotonous, to deflect him from the thoroughness and painstaking care which he always bestowed upon his letters. Here the writer of this memoir must be permitted to speak in the first person and I acknowledge proudly the debt I owe to Gunn in the many letters I have received from him during more than thirty years. I first met him in Sir Alan Gardiner's house in 1917 and from the outset he encouraged me to enlist his help freely in my studies. Though we afterwards had few opportunities for personal contact, we corresponded at intervals from that time onward until within a few weeks of his death. I owe an immense amount of instruction, information, and—still more valuable—avoidance of error, to his never-failing, painstaking, and friendly letters. Of his almost innumerable letters to me, I have preserved and filed no less than seventy-two, as containing information permanently valuable to me. Although I blush to think of the amount of his precious time that I thus stole from him, I console myself that I was not the only offender, for almost every Egyptologist, British and foreign, owes an equal debt to him as a correspondent. For instance, when I recently undertook to catalogue the scientific correspondence of the late Professor P. E. Newberry, I found sixty-four letters from Gunn, most of them very long, covering a period of twenty years. Some of my colleagues have assured me that they have received even greater numbers of letters from him.

In spite of his great industry and learning, Gunn's output of published work, in terms of mere numbers, is not great. This is in some measure due to his aversion from any kind of provisional or interim publication and to his reluctance to put forth any work until he felt sure of its finality and of its value to science. This reluctance or over-caution had caused him to postpone from year to year various undertakings he had in hand. Such an undertaking, for instance, was the editing of an interesting series of Middle Kingdom papyri found in 1922 by

the late Dr. Winlock when excavating at Thebes for the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York. These documents, known to scholars as the Hekanakhte Papyri, were placed in Gunn's hands at the time for publication, and now, after twenty-eight years, they are still unpublished.¹

Such were the factors that tended to restrict Gunn's published output, but there was yet another and more potent factor, and that was the great amount of time he devoted to his pupils and correspondents and to assisting his colleagues in editions of texts and other important publications of their own. Gunn was frequently the final court of appeal in matters of especial uncertainty and obscurity. The late Professor Peet, for instance, once said to me: 'Gunn's eye can see through a brick wall. He can always penetrate the obscurities of the most perplexing texts.' There is scarcely an author or an editor of Egyptological studies during the past twenty-five years who has not acknowledged, both verbally and in print, the unseen, unobtrusive, but always valuable help of Gunn. There is no doubt that he had the most extraordinary perception for *minutiae* and a power of immediately 'spotting' points of all kinds that had escaped the notice of his colleagues. This faculty is very evident in his reviews, if so superficial a title can be given to the detailed and exhaustive scrutinies he published of the works of his colleagues. He not only had an eagle-eye for printers' errors and for slips or inconsistencies on the part of authors, but his reviews in every case contributed constructively to the subjects under notice. He worked through every text afresh, word by word and letter by letter, and he set forth his conclusions clearly and concisely. Gunn's reviews were often very long, and he sometimes found it necessary to write from 5,000 to 10,000 words when examining an important work. In this connexion special mention may be made of his reviews of Sethe's *Von Zahlen und Zahlworten* [3]; of Davies's *Tomb of Antefoker* [11]; of Peet's *Rhind Mathematical Papyrus* [22]; of Gardiner and Sethe's *Egyptian Letters to the Dead* [39]; and of Sir Herbert Thompson's *Family Archive from Siut* [47].

The last-named work deals with a series of demotic texts. Gunn had long given his attention to demotic and to the related but very obscure texts written in a peculiar script to which Griffith gave the name of 'abnormal hieratic'. He not only made demotic texts the object of his personal studies, but also read them with some of his pupils.

¹ See, however, the remarks of Sir Alan Gardiner, below.

Gunn's valuable library has been acquired by the University of Durham, now an important Egyptological centre since the extensive collection of antiquities from Alnwick Castle was transferred there by the Duke of Northumberland. His manuscripts, scientific papers, and notebooks, Gunn bequeathed to the University of Oxford for preservation in the Griffith Institute attached to the Ashmolean Museum. Concerning these manuscripts, Sir Alan Gardiner has been kind enough to send me the following note:

As was to be expected from a scholar of Gunn's calibre and industry, the manuscript remains which have now passed into the possession of the Griffith Institute are of very great value. There are a number of notebooks and boxes of slips containing references to grammatical words and constructions from all phases of the Egyptian language, including Coptic. These often betray Gunn's trend of thought, but unfortunately his conclusions and arguments are nowhere explicitly stated. Nevertheless, this material will be of the greatest service both in teaching and for future research. There are many copies, squeezes and photographs of unpublished inscriptions, graffiti, &c., many emanating from his long sojourn in Saqqara, but also some from other sites and from various Museums. In less satisfactory condition are the beginnings of articles never completed, translations not finally revised and so forth; but from these a diligent and skilful editor could construct essays of great originality and interest. The most important material of the kind consists of transcriptions, commentaries and correspondence concerning the famous *Hekanakhte* papyri found by Winlock at Thebes, letters and other documents of the Eleventh Dynasty mainly dealing with agricultural affairs at that little-known period. Happily, steps are already being taken to prepare for publication this long-awaited monograph.

Gunn received the honorary degree of M.A. of Oxford and the Fellowship of the Queen's College; he was elected in 1934 Fellow of the British Academy. By his passing, scholarship has lost a brilliant luminary, and his pupils and colleagues a kind and trusty friend. He died at Oxford after a long illness, 27 February 1950.

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of the works of Battiscombe Gunn

ABBREVIATIONS

ASA. = *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*. Cairo.*BIF.* = *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'Archéologie Orientale*. Cairo.*BUP.* = *Bulletin of the University of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia.*JEA.* = *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*. London.*RT.* = *Recueil de Travaux relatifs à l'Archéologie et à la Philologie Égyptiennes et Assyriennes*. Paris.*ZÄS.* = *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*. Leipsic.

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