Howard Carter and the Case of the Canary

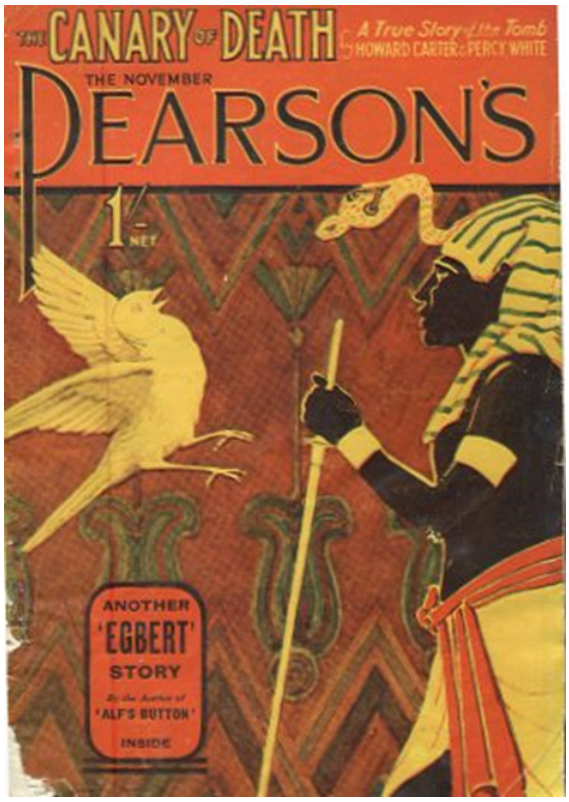
The Tutankhamun Excavations and Cultural Mythmaking

Dr. Eleanor (Ellie) Dobson

Ellie Dobson is Associate Professor in Nineteenth-Century Literature in the Department of English Literature at the University of Birmingham. Her current work focuses on the reception of ancient Egypt in nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, with a focus on materiality and history of the book, as well as notions of the supernatural and the occult, particularly as these ideas operate at the edges of a range of scientific discourses.

Wonderful things

Ellie explained that the story of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun has captivated her since she was a child. Recently, she has been looking at literary sources and archives to portray a "new angle" on this most famous of archaeological stories by emphasising the importance of imaginative writing published in connection with and around Howard Carter's dig. Ellie explained that we all feel we know the story of the first look by Carter and Carnarvon into the tomb as it is possibly the most famous moment in archaeology; however, to delve deeper into it, Ellie read from the original edition of *The Tomb of Tutankhamun* by Carter, which was published in three volumes, starting in 1923. She noted that a few phrases from Carter's books are 'culturally indelible', and are known to a wide range of people, even if they have never read the original text – such as: 'Can you see anything?' It was all I could do to get out the words, 'Yes, wonderful things'.



Pearson's Magazine, 56 (November 1923). *Source: http://www.philsp.com/mags/pearsons_uk.html*

Ellie explained that this style of writing in Carter's books replicated late 19th century adventure literature, with buried treasure and sensationalised discoveries. Ellie wanted to investigate the origins of this writing style, and so read Carter's original journals (digitised online thanks to the Griffith Institute). She was fascinated to see that, in his journals, Carter rarely wrote full sentences or paragraphs and so posed the question whether *The Tomb of Tutankhamun* was an edited record of his journal. In his original text, Carter writes that he was asked, 'Can you see anything?' and then records his response as 'Yes, it is wonderful.' Ellie expanded by saying that in Lord Carnarvon's writing for *The Times* he wrote that Carter simply said, 'Yes, there are some marvellous objects here' – both accounts being somewhat anticlimactic compared with the published version! So where did this more sensationalist style come from?

Egyptology for mainstream audiences

Ellie's theory is that the published version of Carter's journal was "amped-up" for entertainment value – and this reflects almost certainly the influence of Carter's friend, Percy White, who was a professor of literature in Cairo University. He'd been successful as an author earlier in the century, writing adventure fiction. When White's letters (auctioned by Bonhams in 2012) were read, it was found that Carter thanks Percy for his 'literary help' and White wrote to Carter, 'I have recast [your diaries] into narrative form. Don't worry about writing. Rough notes will suffice. The nature and magnitude of your adventure grows on my mind.'

Ellie noted that Carter's books were expensive, with lots of photos and colour on the inside boards. They were things to pore over and enjoy for a long time. Interestingly, Arthur Mace was Carter's named co-author on the first volume, and Mace's writing style also employs a heightened tone. So, in addition to Percy White, Arthur Mace may have worked over Carter's text, too – which Ellie noted was highly likely given the 'orientalist trope of the treasure trove' that Mace himself wrote about and speculated that consumption of news materials about Tutankhamun's tomb was 'nourishing an intellectual appetite that has hitherto been nourished surreptitiously on detective stories and murder cases in the press.'

All these factors help explain the whipping up of the curse stories and the morbid elements of the Tutankhamun story, which were then easy to read and talk about with friends. Above all, they very much kept the audience interested.

The Tomb of the Bird

The Tomb of the Bird (Nov 1923) by Carter and Percy White was published in *Pearson's Magazine* shortly after Lord Carnarvon's death (5 April 1923).

The text on the front-page states that it is a true account and not fiction, yet it was written in a pulpy, magazine style. His patron and friend, Lord Carnarvon, had died suddenly, and, while Carter claimed to be upset by people's reaction – Arthur Mace referenced the large volume of 'letters from cranks' focused on the 'mummy's revenge' – Carter used White to give this short story a gothic fiction element, capitalising on it even further.

The story is told as if Carter is narrating, and dismissing those who believe in the supernatural, it tells the story of a canary, which Carter claims he had at the dig site. At a key moment in the excavation of

Percy White (left) and Howard Carter (right). Source: The Tribune *(Scranton, PA), 22 April 1924.*

the tomb, the bird was killed by a cobra (either swallowed or killed by fright). Carter presents this as a true incident yet used gothic fiction style text and descriptions - noting the canary had strange eyes with 'some sort of intelligence at work in that bird head'. When the steps to the tomb are discovered, the canary stops singing; when the tomb is opened, it is killed by the cobra!

In contrast to the "purple prose", Carter's pocket diary in fact says that, on 24 November 1922, Lady Evelyn brought the bird to him in Luxor but the canary is never mentioned again in his diaries. Even more tellingly, the steps to Tutankhamun's tomb were found on 5 November – so the timelines don't match up at all…

Interestingly, the illustrations for Carter's story were by Howard Elcock, who in the Victorian era illustrated Arthur Conan Doyle's murder stories, and also promoted train companies and spiritualists. His work mainly involved illustrations for magazine fiction. For *The Tomb of the Bird,* he used a style associated with adventure fiction, borrowing images of real artefacts and the *Book of the Dead* to lend authenticity to Carter's story with his images – thereby helping make Egyptology seductive for the broadest possible audience.

Conclusions

Ellie concluded that in her research she noted:

- the telling of stories involves embellishment
- we see different kinds of expertise drawn together
- we see events manipulated to make them more readable, more creative – more "tabloid"
- the common denominator is the idea of storytelling as something we want to consume and to be part of
- Carter's stories became embedded in the cultural narrative up to the present day, with everyone having a view and feeling part of a real-life adventure story: the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Report by *Neil Robson*
(PMF trustee)

Howard Carter's Excavation Journal

(Nov. 26 continued)

It was sometime before one could see, the hot air escaping caused the candle to flicker, but as soon as one's eyes became accustomed to the glimmer of light the interior of the chamber gradually loomed before one, with its strange and wonderful medley of extraordinary and beautiful objects heaped upon one another. There was naturally short suspence (sic) for those present who could not see, when Lord Carnarvon said to me 'Can you see anything'. I replied to him Yes, it is wonderful. I then with precaution made the hole sufficiently large for both of us to see. With the light of an electric torch as well as an additional candle we looked in. Our sensations and astonishment are difficult to describe as the better light revealed to us the marvellous collection of treasures: two strange ebony-black effigies of a King, gold sandalled, bearing staff and mace, loomed out from the cloak of darkness ... stools of all shapes and design, of both common and rare materials; and, lastly a confusion of overturned parts of chariots glinting with gold, peering from amongst which was a mannikin. The first impression of which suggested the property-room of an opera-house of a vanished civilization. … Our sensations were bewildering and full of strange emotion. We questioned one another as to the meaning of it all.

TAA Archive I.2.1.35
The Griffith Institute