Archaeologists in Print

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In 1938 the archaeologist Reginald Campbell Thompson published *Digger’s Fancy*, a 70-page romantic verse ‘melodrama’. As much as the (foreign) field was a central part of scripting spadework, creating a fictional field allowed the archaeological experience to be reinterpreted, reformed and projected in the cultural imagination. Archaeologists both produced fiction and were themselves fictionalised. Focusing on three, often linked genres of archaeological fiction – romance, horror/fantasy and crime – this chapter will introduce and explore how archaeologist-authors and others have interpreted and presented spadework in fiction through the twentieth century.²

**Archaeological romance**

*Digger’s Fancy* stars English archaeologist Alan who, settling down for an evening camping with his Arab caravan at ‘Tell Jiljilah’ in Southern Mesopotamia, is met by travelling English botanist Ann, searching for elusive desert plants. The haunting atmosphere of the landscape and her encounter with thousands of recently unearthed clay frogs of great antiquity along the way has unnerved her. Alone with only her Armenian driver for company, she has lost her way. In wandering they come across Alan’s camp, and he offers her a cup of tea by the campfire. As conversation ensues it becomes clear that she has heard his name before. She asks his views on his work – how he defines himself. Alan waxes lyrical,
not merely about archaeology, but specifically about archaeology in the Middle East.

In *Digger’s Fancy* archaeology is romance and adventure – the exotic allure of biblical names drawing young ‘Ulysses’ away from British barrows to the East. It is a land, Alan says, of ghosts, of ‘soul[s] death free’. During their conversation Ann offers her own morbidly cynical take on ‘the archaeologist’: ‘you who dig bodies up’ only to remove them to London where they can be viewed at the Museum. She joins Alan’s camp for the night, and the next day the conversation continues. Both have been affected during the night, the surrounding landscape inspiring access to ancient pasts. Ann inhabits the spirit of Nefertiti, while Alan channels the spirit of an Assyrian soldier on campaign. Alan’s lengthy description of his dream taps into the (un)conscious knowledge of the archaeologist to draw a vivid depiction of ancient daily life. Later on the pair encounter a Sheikh on the road, whom it transpires knows Alan from his wartime exploits. To the Sheikh, Alan ‘is my very son’. Yet with British aerial bombardment campaigns wreaking havoc among the local population, the Sheikh is no longer in a position of power. When Alan and Ann are captured by the Sheikh’s rebellious men he seems unable to help them. Alan hopes that his ‘Orientalist’ knowledge and past experience in managing local relationships and expectations will see them successfully free themselves from their imprisonment. Ann despairs, turning to Alan for comfort. All seems bleak, but the Sheikh comes to their rescue; having drugged their captors, he provides the means both for their escape and for his own resurrection of power. The adventure solidifies Alan and Ann’s developing romance.

*Digger’s Fancy* was dedicated to Thompson’s friends ‘Agatha and Max Mallowan’ with whom Thompson had worked on his final season at Nineveh. It was on this excavation that Christie wrote *Lord Edgware Dies*, which she had dedicated to Thompson and his wife Barbara. Nineveh was the most significant site of Thompson’s long career in archaeology. It began in 1899 when, a First from Caius College, Cambridge in hand, he had been appointed a Second Class Assistant in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum. The Department was in the hands of Wallis Budge, whom Campbell Thompson (with an eye on the melodramatic) remembered ensconced in an office guarded by the Museum’s own ‘sinister mummy lady’, impervious to the doom that she (reputedly) caused many others.

Thompson’s immediate work colleagues, Leonard King and Harry Hall, were also twenty-somethings. According to Matthew Ismail’s biography of Budge, all three were athletic, intelligent and outspoken: they
worked well together. The Department was particularly concerned with discovering, translating and publishing cuneiform texts uncovered during excavations, and in shedding further light on the ancient rulers and peoples, among them Sumerians, Assyrians, Hittites and Babylonians, who had populated Nineveh and other cities in Turkey, Syria, Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Iran. Thompson and his colleagues churned out detailed transcriptions and translations of ancient inscriptions, published in successive volumes through nearby Luzac & Co’s ‘Semitic Text and Translation’ series. Several of Thompson’s publications focused on the occult: magic and demons, astrology and alchemy.

Within four years of his appointment he was heading east to join the British Museum’s excavations at ancient Nineveh. These were focused on the Mound of Kouyunjik, across the Tigris river from Mosul, in what is now northern Iraq. His colleague Leonard King was already there. Over the year that he spent at Nineveh Reginald Campbell Thompson embedded himself in Mesopotamia, travelling both in that country and in Persia (Iran), where he and Leonard King made copies of the famous trilingual inscription at Behistun.

Thompson enriched himself with experience of a foreign land, taking notes on variations in language and vocabulary, costumes, customs, geography, the changing of the seasons, epidemics, food, pastimes, colours, the biographies and travails of the men who worked with him and for him. He left the Museum at the end of 1905 and spent six months in northeastern Sudan, then took a post at the University of Chicago for two years. Another spate of travel in Turkey followed. Then, in 1911, Thompson joined the British Museum’s excavations at Carchemish, begun under the direction of David George Hogarth with a young Oxford graduate, Thomas Edward Lawrence, and Leonard Woolley making up the team. He stayed one season, but elected to resign after discovering that his fiancée Barbara Brodrick Robinson would not be allowed to accompany him. When war was declared in 1914 Thompson applied for a commission, which he obtained. He was assigned to the Indian Expeditionary Force, section D (I. E. F. D.), for ‘special service’ in military intelligence (Fig. 9.1). After spending a month in India he returned to Iraq, where he remained for four years.

Before he left for India, Thompson had completed his first ‘popular’ book. A Pilgrim’s Scrip was dedicated to his old British Museum colleagues, Harry Hall and Leonard King. It was published by John Lane/Bodley Head in January 1915, in the lead up to the Gallipoli campaign, and marketed along with the other travelogues emerging from that publishing house as an amusing narrative of Thompson’s excavation
In *A Pilgrim’s Scrip* Thompson distils his first experiences in archaeology into an autobiographical tale of a border-crossing transnational nomad – a Burton-esque character who seems to slip quite comfortably into life in the East. The prose is notably antique. Thompson, emphasising the wanderings of his excavator-pilgrim, describes the archaeologist’s ‘trade’ as a ‘bifurcation of employ’ – one in which he spends part of the year on site, ‘digging for the pot of gold beneath the rainbow, seeking the peculiar treasure of kings who like chimney-sweepers have come to dust’, before going back at the end of the season ‘to the dullness of steam, electricity, and policemen’.

An anonymous review in the *Geographical Journal* noted that although the language might not please all readers, the work of archaeologists ‘in the Near East’ was likely to ‘acquire a new political importance’. By the time *Pilgrim’s Scrip* appeared, Reginald Campbell Thompson was working as a member of the I. E. F. D. in the Mesopotamia theatre. His guide to Arabic language for the troops, written with his colleagues in the I. E. F. D., was locally published in 1915. Having been with British troops heading to Kut al Amara (where they were later under siege), in the spring of 1916 he was based in Basra working on intelligence reports; here he crossed paths with Gertrude Bell. She was working for the Arab Bureau, an intelligence agency operating from Cairo and managed by D. G. Hogarth, with T. E. Lawrence and Leonard Woolley also working in intelligence in the Middle Eastern theatre. Bell and Thompson shared an office temporarily, while Bell was organising information collected about various local groups. Thompson’s ‘normal routine’ – so his biographer
wrote – consisted of ‘many hours every day unostentatiously interro-
gating all sorts and conditions of men’. As the war drew to a close he
took up ‘the spade’ once more. His military role came to an end in the
spring of 1918 and he joined the Political Service in the emerging British
administration. While beginning preliminary excavation and survey
work and providing general oversight over archaeology, Thompson
wrote *A Small Handbook to the History and Antiquities of Mesopotamia.*
Intended for the benefit of the troops stationed in the region, it included
a gazetteer of sites along with references to the chief excavators working
on them.

It was Mesopotamia that provided the backdrop for Campbell
Thompson’s two novels, both published under the pseudonym of John
Guisborough. Both *A Song of Araby* (1921) and *A Mirage of Sheba*
(1923) were romances, published by Mills & Boon. Although now almost
entirely focused on the romance market, which they have dominated
for decades, at the beginning in 1908 Mills & Boon was a general pub-
lisher who published a wide range of nonfiction and fiction. In his his-
tory of the firm Joseph McAleer has noted a number of eminent authors
of fiction who published books with Mills & Boon, including Georgette
Gerald Mills and Charles Boon met and worked together at the successful
publishing house Methuen (through which many popular archaeology
books appeared). The firm maintained close links with Methuen in
these early years, and was successful in its early ventures. A postwar
increase in demand for accessible fiction led Mills & Boon to focus on
specialising in romantic fiction, an area in which they saw the most profit
during the postwar period. This was also a time of financial difficulties for
the firm; as McAleer has demonstrated, there was a significant decrease
in first edition sales figures. However, McAleer notes, the firm was still
developing new authors, its target audience the circulating library users.

Thompson, writing as Guisborough, was one of the new authors
taken on by Mills & Boon at this time. *A Song of Araby* appeared in the
autumn of 1921 and was advertised by the firm as a ‘brilliant first novel’;
its author was identified as a former officer of the Mesopotamian front –
a nod, perhaps, to the veracity of the fictional narrative. Mills & Boon
praised its ‘vivid portray[al]’ of Near Eastern peoples and landscapes,
noting that the book would be of real value for those interested in the
region. Published reviews were generally favourable. The *Scotsman*
particularly lauded Thompson’s heroine, while *The Illustrated Sporting
and Dramatic News* felt that, despite some novice novelist flaws, *A Song*
was ‘fascinating’. It went into two editions.
Both of Thompson’s Mills & Boon novels featured archaeologists as protagonists, and in them he clearly draws on his own experiences. He had toyed with a lyrical, highly romanticised and dramatic approach in *A Pilgrim’s Scrip*; in his Mills & Boon books he kept the romance of archaeology intact but toned down the linguistic frolics significantly. Set in wartime Mesopotamia, *A Song of Araby* is the story of explorer-archaeologist Robert Eliot and his quest to confirm the movements of a stray German gun. The book opens with Eliot at his desk in Bombay in 1914. He had diverted his personal explorations in Arabia at the outbreak of war, intending to return to Britain to join up. But his fluent written and spoken Arabic (which we are told is useless for most paid positions in England) and knowledge of the landscape and peoples of the region had been subpoenaed by the India Office. Itching to get away from his desk-based intelligence work compiling lists of Arab ‘tribes’, Eliot takes advantage of an opportunity to conduct a secret reconnaissance mission, offering himself as an ‘independent’ agent:

> I’m free, Sir; I am neither soldier nor Government servant, and if I choose to take the risks of going out there to see for myself, no one else is involved. You are not responsible for me.26

He goes undercover, disguised as an Arab (from Tripoli to explain his blue eyes) who had formerly been employed as a servant to an archaeologist at Nineveh and had then gone on to work for the oil companies further south.27 ‘Mohammed’ Eliot’s ability to blend in is nearly flawless. As an explorer, he is neither fish nor fowl. He can move freely and take all risks on himself as a (semi) independent agent, drawing on his local connections and sources, local linguistic skills and local topographical knowledge to best advantage as an unofficial and highly competent spy. He revels in the necessary physical discomfort as he makes his way north of Basra towards a reservoir that has been the preserve of the German engineer, spy and villain of the piece Herr Blauhammer.

Thompson’s narrative fits into the exotic romance/adventure mould that echoed other Mills & Boon romances being published at that time.28 The romance narrative, along with the espionage theme, is one of the most interesting aspects of the book. Its heroine, Katharine Appledor, is a noted explorer and lecturer, Cambridge-educated and prone to giving papers at scientific societies. With her own mission to recover a secret message en route to Herr Blauhammer thwarted, she finds herself under his threat of captivity and implied sexual violence. Events enable her to join Robert in disguise dressed as an Arab boy in a race to dodge
the Turkish troops on the way to war in support of the Central Powers. Together the pair travel southeast on foot towards Basra and the British Indian Expeditionary Force, due to land in Mesopotamia. They take a night’s refuge at ‘the dead city of Ur’, resting among the city’s ‘ghosts’ in narrow makeshift shelters built of the ancient bricks, safely entombed by the past. To pass the time Katharine quotes from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Ultimately the explorers reach a British naval vessel and shed their false identities (so convincing that even Katharine’s uncle is taken in), allowing their blossoming romance to be fully realised. Thompson’s wife Barbara, to whom the book is dedicated, may have served as inspiration for Appledor’s character, though (to date) Barbara Campbell Thompson remains an elusive figure in the historical record. At the very least Katharine Appledor’s role in the adventure shows Thompson’s healthy respect for intelligent women, echoed in the *Scotsman* review, as well as his awareness of his potential readership.

The sales of *A Song* clearly encouraged Mills & Boon to take on Thompson’s follow-up novel. In *A Mirage of Sheba* the exotic adventure of archaeology is again realised. Unlike *Song*, *Mirage* focuses in more detail on archaeological life in prewar peacetime. The novel’s strength lies in its depiction of archaeological activity as a series of negotiations with antiquities dealers, officials and local residents, and in the dual nature of an excavator’s life: one foot in Britain, the other abroad. The allure of the East, present in all Thompson’s popular books, is equally visible here. *Mirage* opens in northern Mesopotamia, Thompson’s old stomping ground, in 1913. Arriving in Mosul hoping to scout out a site for excavation, Cambridge-educated archaeologist Geoffrey Lyndhurst purchases a cuneiform tablet from a local antiquities dealer who claims it has come from a tell (a mound in the landscape indicative of human occupation) near Nineveh. After translating the tablet’s inscription, he realises that it refers to another older piece from which the tablet is translated. Thompson illustrates the archaeologist’s ability to picture the past as Geoffrey imagines in detail the circumstances of his newly purchased tablet’s last moments in antiquity – a scene that echoes Hogarth’s feverish dream of Hittite invaders in *Accidents of an Antiquary’s Life*. Determined to find what he believes is a hidden cache of ancient texts, Geoffrey draws on the knowledge of his servant Hajji Abdullah and finds the mound. After purchasing the lease of the land, he is ready for a season of excavation once a firman (permit) has been obtained from Constantinople.

He returns to Norfolk for a summer’s holiday on the Broads, where he meets tattooed Felicity Curthoys. Felicity, a young, beautiful, well-travelled novelist and cinema screenwriter, carries a London Library
copy of Ouida’s *Under Two Flags* (1867) as a badge of ‘Character’. Her satirical articles lampooning academic life had nearly led to her expulsion from an Oxford college. A romance develops and at the end of the holiday the smitten Geoffrey (slightly worried that he might be tying himself to a partner who would want to stay at home and start a family while he went exploring) blurts out a proposal of marriage. Felicity refuses. She does not want to give up her writing and has her own worries that a future with Geoffrey in the desert (before children ensued) would ruin her career.

In describing Geoffrey’s internal struggles, Thompson may have been drawing on the memory of his own fears of marriage hampering his life’s work. Equally, in creating Felicity Curthoys and Katharine Appledor as independent, educated women, Thompson was certainly reflecting the corps of women archaeologists, explorers and archaeological wives who must have been known to him. Geoffrey and Felicity part – he to his excavation and she to continue her successful writing career. However success, once achieved, is not enough for Felicity. Unable to forget Geoffrey, she travels to Mesopotamia to experience in person the setting for her latest novel and to declare her affection for him. After he dramatically rescues her from the clutches of an insidious Ottoman antiquities inspector, the two declare their love for each other. At the close of the story, Geoffrey describes what Felicity will be taking on upon marriage:

*Your life is now here, now there! . . . . I must spend eight months a year on this mound for five years; this mound which has been so good to me. I won’t turn back now.*

Through Thompson’s scripting spadework in fiction we see the adventurous *romance* of archaeology in its widest sense; as a 1911 dictionary put it, ‘scenes & incidents remote from everyday life’. Themes such as exploring/documenting local context, hiring/paying locals and relationships on site – not to mention partnerships between explorers – emerge that reflect the archaeological documentary films of the interwar period, created by excavation teams to educate members of the public about their profession. These are further emphasised in the genre of ‘adventure’ feature films, such as *The Mummy* (1932) and particularly strong since the 1980s, with Steven Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones* series, Stephen Sommers’ *The Mummy* (1999) and the *Mummy Returns* (2001) and Luc Besson’s *The Extraordinary Adventures of Adele Blanc-Sec* (2011). All are set in the early twentieth century. These narratives also
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demonstrate that (un)conscious awareness of ancient pasts and ancient lives is part of the romantic adventure narrative, linking us to the next genre: horror/fantasy.

**Fantastical horror and archaeology**

Dorothy L. Sayers noted the long-standing allure of the occult in the Introduction to her 1928 anthology *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, declaring that ‘The art of self-tormenting is an ancient one, with a long and honourable literary tradition’. Margaret Murray acknowledged it in her 1963 autobiography with her observation that ‘...all good archaeologists are expected to have had at least one occult experience...’, while she defines herself as ‘...a bit of a “body-snatcher”’ – as, she states, are most other archaeologists. Murray’s two observations on archaeological life lend themselves effectively to both ‘horrific’ and ‘fantastical’ literature. She neatly encapsulates archaeological characteristics with definite commercial appeal – what Gabriel Moshenska has termed ‘the archaeological uncanny’, drawing on the interaction of the living and the dead through the act of excavation and the alienation from the norm that results. In exhuming the dead and buried and interpreting the remnants of human existence, through scripting spadework archaeologists create an image of past worlds for others to consume. Archaeological work involves constructing a channel through time.

Agatha Christie has vividly described her first tour around the Ur excavations with Leonard Woolley, who created through his narrative a vision of the site in ancient times. She experienced the archaeologist tapping into his knowledge and belief in his interpretation of the site and its objects to create an Ur of a past age. Such a vision, such tapping into the past, can be interpreted as magical, subversive and dangerous – archaeological alchemy. In this sense archaeologists and the history they uncover are prime candidates for inclusion in studies of the reception and reuse of fantastical and occult themes. Brian Stableford’s *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*, for example, includes entries on pre-historic and classical fantasy fiction, mummies and druids, as well as ‘timeslip’ fantasies in which characters are able to access a past historical period. Margaret Murray is also included in the *Dictionary* for her work on witchcraft, classified by Stableford as ‘scholarly fantasy’, and its inspiration for modern Wiccan practices. Although Murray declared to posterity that she had never personally experienced the occult in her work,
she nonetheless included a chapter on it as part of her autobiography – the exploration of her own carefully scripted identity as an archaeologist. Writing stories that mingle archaeological and antiquarian themes with horror, fantasy and the occult is not new.\footnote{42} Horror/fantasy genres allow us to see most clearly how those outside archaeology have reshaped the spadework scripts, presenting evidence of the reception of the archaeological experience in popular literature. A number of authors’ stories featured either ancient artefacts or the people responsible for their discovery and/or collection. These have been anthologised over the decades, with ancient Egypt, and particularly mummies, being a popular and fruitful theme.\footnote{43} One of Arthur Conan Doyle’s most famous Egyptological short stories is the much anthologised ‘Lot No. 249’, with a crazed student-Egyptologist, the ‘reptilian’ Edward Bellingham, ‘reanimating’ a mummy to persecute his enemies on the streets of Oxford. Another Conan Doyle horror story, ‘Burger’s Secret’, written for the Sunlight Yearbook of the philanthropic Lever Brothers’ soap manufacturing company, featured a young German archaeologist driven mad by jealousy of a rival in love; he uses his discovery and knowledge of Roman catacombs to entomb his enemy.\footnote{44}

The archaeologist and medievalist Montague Rhodes James continues to be probably one of the best known authors of archaeology-themed ghost stories. The first compilation of these tales, Ghost Stories of an Antiquary, was published in 1904, and others followed. Edward Frederic Benson, who went on to write the notable Mapp and Lucia books, also wrote ghost stories, drawing on his own experiences in archaeology in Egypt; he and D. G. Hogarth had excavated in Alexandria together in the 1890s. Some of these tales were published in Spook Stories and More Spook Stories. Algernon Blackwood wrote several Egyptian-themed tales and other short stories that feature archaeologists or archaeological themes. In his 1914 short story, ‘A Descent into Egypt’, the narrator watches her excavator friend George Isley become psychologically buried by interest in the past. One scene describes how both of them are sitting at a table in a restaurant when the narrator notices a mysterious presence, The Third, joining them. Later she reflects on its significance, observing that The Third was, in fact ‘the Past’.

The ‘Third consumes the spirit of the archaeologist. Isley pairs up with the fascinating and disturbing ‘speculative archaeologist’ Moleson to conduct experiments attempting to recreate ancient Egyptian religious practices. The sinewy, mummy-like Moleson uses adaptations of ancient Egyptian music, resurrecting the ancient world through his playing, to wield power over others, dragging them back into Egypt’s past.
His work with Isley brings their mutual absorption into (ancient) Egypt to completion.45

Like these authors, Margery Lawrence found the appeal of the archaeologist and the fascination of ancient pasts a fruitful subject for her fiction. A popular author and public figure during her lifetime, she published over 33 novels and short story anthologies between the 1920s and the 1960s, a portion of which drew on fantastical and occult themes.46 She used archaeologists as characters and drew on archaeological themes and motifs in her writing, including ancient gods and artefacts, knowledge of the past and past lives and the reconstruction of the past through interpretation. Archaeologists, in Lawrence’s fiction, are by turns wise, knowledgeable and, to a certain extent, set apart from the ordinary – though not in the negative sense implied in Hall’s 2004 overview of archaeologists’ cinematic portrayals, and in Gabriel Moshenska’s work on M. R. James.47 Her fiction also represents a useful source for exploring the reception of archaeological popular publishing in more detail. In various works she explicitly acknowledged archaeologists and the popular work they produced as an inspiration and a valuable resource.

The earliest representation of the archaeologist in Lawrence’s fiction occurs in her short story ‘The Curse of the Stillborn’, originally published in Hutchinson’s Mystery-Story Magazine in June 1925. The Mystery-Story Magazine was a cheap pulp periodical; issued monthly in Britain, it was priced initially at 7 pence and featured male and female authors. Hutchinson advertised Mystery-Story as the ultimate venue for ‘romantic mysteries’ of ‘detection’ and ‘the weird’.48 Tables of contents for the issues published during this period show a number of Egypt-themed titles – not surprising as newspapers regularly featured Howard Carter’s Tutankhamun tomb excavations and the ensuing ‘Tutmania’ spread its tentacles through art, design, fashion, music and commerce, as well as fiction and nonfiction.49

Work published in Mystery-Story and its companion, Hutchinson’s Adventure Story Magazine, frequently drew on ‘exotic’ settings. ‘The greatest miscellany of stories of Mystery, Crime and the Supernatural’ Mystery-Story was, so Hutchinson’s claimed, ‘A Magazine the public has taken into its heart’.50 The magazine’s colourful covers featured an illustration from one story in each issue. Taking full advantage of the popular appeal of Egyptomania and the uncanny, Hutchinson’s chose to feature Lawrence’s anti-heroine Mrs Bond and the vengeful mummy that terrorised her as the front-cover illustration for the issue in which ‘Curse’ was published.51
In 1926 ‘The Curse of the Stillborn’ was published by Hutchinson in book form alongside 11 other Lawrence tales. The magazine version of ‘Curse’ had been adapted and enhanced to fit Lawrence’s framework for her *Nights of the Round Table* – that it is the product of a monthly dinner party given by one Frank Saunderson. There are 12 guests, each from a different profession, and there is one story per dinner. It is an eclectic group: Saunderson and Lawrence join a policeman, a barrister, a minister, a soldier, an engineer, a golf secretary, a spiritualist, a hypnotist, an Egyptologist and a poet. The Egyptologist is called Frith, and ‘The Curse of the Stillborn’ is his contribution.

The role of the Egyptologist in this story departs from the excavator/discoverer/scholar in archaeology-themed horror as the victim of forces he or she has disturbed in some way and cannot control. In this case the Egyptologist is the sage, both part of a very small British community in Egypt and apart from it; he has knowledge that his fellow Britons do not. He is able to go places where they dare not go, and to see things they cannot see. The story begins one afternoon in a small settlement called Ikn Nessan where Frith meets his neighbour, local missionary Mrs Peter Bond. Mrs Bond and her husband are forthright, British and, to Frith’s mind, very narrow-minded. Mrs Bond is full of the news that the young, heavily pregnant Egyptian girl Mefren, who had arrived in the village with her mother Takkari, had given birth to a still-born child. Mrs Bond was determined to bury the child in a Christian manner, but Takkari had firmly refused to allow her to interfere.

Far from being a foreign invader, Frith is at home in the landscape, living away from Ikn Nessen on the edge of a nearby valley. Having a detailed knowledge of local customs, he warns Mrs Bond not to get involved and to allow Takkari to bury the infant in her own way. Peter Bond then arrives on the scene, announcing his success in persuading Mefren to allow him to bury the baby. Next Takkari appears, joining the Bonds and Frith. She is silent, but her displeasure is clear. She whispers something to Frith and walks away, leaving the village. On enquiring, Mrs Bond discovers from Frith that Takkari has warned against further interference.

Later on the Bonds are closeted up in their small house, curtains closed against the darkness outside. Here they are forced to confront a vengeful ancient Egyptian spirit, determined to make them see their error in interfering with custom. Frith, meanwhile, wanders comfortably alone in the dark through the village streets. The context of Frith’s role as Egyptologist becomes clearer at the end of the story, which includes a new section added for book publication. This details Frith’s analysis of
the events, drawing on Egyptological knowledge of the afterlife – specifically on how the Ka (soul), denied its rightful rituals, would return in vengeance, and how long-forgotten ancient practices might still linger deep in the psyche of Egyptian villagers.52

Lawrence was interested in spiritualism and the paranormal, and several of her books have overtly spiritualist themes: the closeness of the past to the present, the dead to the living, and the ability to tap into or access past time periods. She communicated with dead relatives and friends through mediums, and claimed to have psychic abilities herself. Lawrence held a deep-seated belief that her spirit had been reincarnated several times in different historical contexts, including Egypt, Persia and Greece.53 She spelled out this belief in her spiritualist ‘primer’ for beginners, Ferry Over Jordan. In defending her beliefs, Lawrence pointed out that eminent authorities and celebrities had spent many years gathering evidence of the possible existence of life after death.54 Among those on her list were the Egyptologist Grafton Elliot Smith and Arthur Conan Doyle, whose active promotion of spiritualism in early part of the twentieth century was well known. She also referenced as an example the work of architect-archaeologist Frederick Bligh Bond, whose excavations at Glastonbury Abbey were directed through collaboration with a medium. The automatic writing scripts produced during these sessions suggested the location of a lost chapel in the Glastonbury Abbey complex.55

Bligh Bond was part of a broader network of intellectuals exploring the possibilities of pushing the boundaries of the known world.56 He was a member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in 1882 by a group of Cambridge classicists, philosophers and scientists. The SPR collected evidence of, examined and classified phenomena. These included mental phenomena, such as hypnotism, thought reading and clairvoyance, and physical phenomena such as ghosts, as well as the varied sounds, smells, sights and feelings produced by mediums. The Society then used the data gathered to test the possibility of scientifically proving the existence of another world or other dimensions. Other aspects of psychical research, more applicable to archaeology, were automatic writing and psychometry, or reading the past associations of material through touch.57

Agnes Conway, whose nonfiction travelogue A Ride Through the Balkans was discussed in Chapter 3, explored the potential of psychical connections to the past in the context of her 1929 excavations at the ancient and evocative city of Petra in modern Jordan, home to the Roman-era Nabataean civilisation. Conway’s interest in psychical research stemmed from her days at Newnham College, where her mentor
Jane Harrison had long-established interests in, and links to, some of leaders of the SPR. In 1929, while on site at Petra, Conway collected some sand, probably from a ‘place of sacrifice’ excavated under her direction. She sent three samples of the sand to a contact in Surrey, who gave them to the Kent-based medium L. Margery Bazett. Bazett read the packets psychometrically and recorded her visions in short impactful phrases, accompanied occasionally with small line drawings. The vivid scenes that she reported after holding the packets to her head could have come directly out of a fantasy novel:

Now I see a curious scene here… it is dancing, girls, dancing… they are very lightly clad… a ring of girls, all going to the centre and back, to the centre and back… they may be decorated with some flower or leaf… it was a quick movement, a sort of running to the centre and back ….

During this period the SPR was collecting evidence of the potential for mediums being able to link into the past. Letters to Conway’s close friend and SPR administrator and researcher Helen Verrall in 1924 from SPR member C. Drayton Thomas charts sittings with medium Mrs Osborne Leonard, through whom spirits described ancient Egyptian objects and their uses.

These influences can be seen in some of Lawrence’s novels, which draw upon archaeological knowledge mingled with belief in reincarnation and spiritualist undercurrents to inform the creation of past civilisations. Lawrence’s 1951 ‘timeslip’ ‘spiritualist fantasy’ novel The Rent in the Veil takes place in a house on the Sussex Downs. Its new owner, Liz Anderson, discovers that in a past life during the Roman period she lived in the same house as Bronwen, a British chieftain’s daughter married to Roman centurion and harbour master Lucius Paulinus. As the narrative unfolds, she discovers her ‘mediumship’ is triggered ever more frequently by her domestic surroundings. She exists in both lives simultaneously, initially drawn in through the discovery of a Roman-era statue base in her garden. Though Liz has had momentary disturbing encounters with her ‘past’ before the discovery, the revelation of the statue base is the final key to her dawning realisation of this double life. Local archaeologists Professor Cummings and his wife call on Liz to ascertain the authenticity of the discovery. With their authentication of the base, her new reality is also authenticated. She discovers through the course of the book that husband, brother, friends and neighbours also inhabited Liz-Bronwen’s Romano-British world with their own past ‘doubles’. Eventually her
Roman-British life absorbs her so thoroughly that she kills herself trying to follow her Roman lover and their child across the sea. In its review of the book the *Dundee Courier* noted the power of the narrative to inspire readers to reflect on the potential of time travel.

The book also shows that Lawrence drew on published accounts of archaeology to create an atmosphere that would approximate what was known about Roman society at that time, drawing on communications with experts to inform her interpretation. These experts included Cambridge Regius Professor of History George Macaulay Trevelyan and archaeologist William Hugh Clifford Frend. To strengthen the authenticity of her work, Lawrence included five Appendices in *The Rent in the Veil*, covering aspects of Roman dress, buildings and historical events. She also listed the sources she had consulted, featuring works by Francis Haverfield, a notable archaeologist of Roman Britain, and archaeological artist Jessie Mothersole. Lawrence’s voice and interpretation of the archaeological publications with which she constructs her narrative is evident in the text. She uses footnotes to reference the appendices, define terms and in some cases promote her own views on the expert evidence she consults, such as defining ‘woad painting’ as a tattoo.

*The Rent in the Veil* can also be read as a work of historical fiction, a genre that had been recognised for over a century. Lawrence’s book is among a number of similar works published during the mid-twentieth century that offered a dramatic presentation and interpretation of women’s history. Robert Hale, a regular publisher of Lawrence’s work, also published historical fiction by other women during the 1950s. One of the best known Hale authors was Jean Plaidy, whose fictionalised biographies of famous women – including Eleanor of Acquitaine, Elizabeth I and Marie Antoinette, alongside less famous but no less fascinating women – were and continue to be popular, particularly with female readers.

*Daughter of the Nile* (1956) is Lawrence’s fictionalised biography of the ancient Egyptian queen Hatshepsut. In the book’s opening pages Lawrence compares Hatshepsut to Elizabeth I to help contextualise a ruler about whom readers might know little. As she did in *The Rent in the Veil*, in her Foreword to *Daughter* Lawrence gives insights into her source material – including an acknowledgement to T. G. H. James, then in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, for his advice on reference books. Lawrence’s list of the source material at the end of the novel highlighted the continued relevance of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular archaeological works: Flinders Petrie, Gaston Maspero, John Gardiner Wilkinson, Arthur Weigall and
James Henry Breasted are among the authors listed. In both books, however, she is careful to acknowledge that the narrative has considerably stretched the boundaries of what is actually known about the ancient past. As an author Lawrence takes on an archaeological identity as she interprets and intuits archaeological evidence, creating her own historical fantasy through previously scripted spadework, constructing landscapes and lives of the past and filling in the spaces where archaeological evidence falls short with her own imaginative vision.

Archaeological crime

An alternative ‘dark side’ of archaeology can be seen in the ways in which archaeologists have been represented in crime fiction. Since its publication in 1936, Agatha Christie’s Murder in Mesopotamia has been reissued countless times, in both hardback and paperback. Various cover illustrations for the book – including those of UK publishers Pan and Fontana and the American paperback publishers Dell – reveal symbolic representations of archaeology: skeletons, pots, a dig, the dig house, the landscape, the exotic East. The original dust jacket for the 1936 first edition, featuring a drawing by archaeological architect Robin Macartney, further emphasised the ‘authenticity’ of the work through Christie’s connections to archaeology as Max Mallowan’s wife. In his memoirs Max Mallowan estimated her readership at ‘2,000 million’ people; the many cheap editions of her work produced facilitated this extensive readership. Considering her archaeological mystery novels as very simple introductions to the field and projections of archaeological experience makes her role as a populariser of archaeology highly significant. In this volume Murder in Mesopotamia and They Came to Baghdad will be analysed as spadework scripts.

Christie was born in Torquay, Devon in 1890. Her Belgian refugee protagonist Hercule Poirot made his premier in The Mysterious Affair at Styles, published by John Lane/Bodley Head in 1920. Four years later one of the stories featuring Poirot was the first in which Christie employed an overtly archaeological narrative. ‘The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb’ takes place as Howard Carter’s excavations of Tutankhamun are unfolding and explores, among other things, the value of curses as a cover-up for murder. The relative of a supposed victim engages Poirot to go to Egypt and prevent the same fate befalling her son.

In 1928 Christie went to Iraq. It was an escape: her first marriage had ended in divorce and she was travelling independently for the first
time, via the Orient Express. En route she met the domineering Mrs C., one of what were called the ‘Mem-Sahibs’ – a term originally used for British women in India, but applied in this case to Iraq. She made her escape from so-called ‘Mem-Sahib Land’ by planning a trip to see Leonard and Katharine Woolley’s excavations at Ur, which she had read about in London in the *Illustrated London News*. When she returned to Ur for another visit during the 1929/30 season she met Max Mallowan, the Woolleys’ new assistant; the couple married in September 1930. Five years later she began to draft *Murder in Mesopotamia*, having become by that point familiar with the rhythms and processes of archaeology. Later, when Christie was writing *They Came to Baghdad*, Mallowan was Professor at the Institute of Archaeology, with a budget for excavations. They were excavating at Nimrud, in the northern part of Iraq, but their seasons began and ended in Baghdad.

In *Murder in Mesopotamia* the scene of the action and most of the associated activity is the Expedition House. There are parallels to be drawn between the ‘country house murder’ of the period and the ‘dig house murder’ of *Murder in Mesopotamia*. Christie used floor plans in both her country house mystery, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, and *Murder in Mesopotamia*. Just as she introduces her readers to some country house ‘types’ in the *Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in *Murder in Mesopotamia* she introduces archaeological ‘types’, each with their own distinct role in their own distinct space. Thus Christie’s organised world provides a key to understanding archaeology.

*Murder in Mesopotamia*’s narrator, Nurse Leatheran, has these ‘types’ explained to her before she embarks for the site of Tell Yarimjah. The team is composed of an architect named Mr Carey, an inscription expert Father Lavigny, the bottle-washing Miss Johnson, Mr and Mrs Mercado, photographer Mr Reiter and assorted young volunteers. The Dig Director is Dr Leidner; his wife Louise, like many archaeological wives, joins her husband on site. Unlike many archaeological wives (and unlike Katharine Woolley, on whom she is reputedly based), Louise Leidner seems to have very little to do. Nevertheless readers are informed she has learned Arabic within two seasons and is no intellectual lightweight, as inspection of her room and its small library during the course of the subsequent investigation demonstrates. *Murder in Mesopotamia*’s dig house is slightly more ordered than the rather haphazard plan of the Ur dig house, but there are obvious similarities to the country house plan, with archaeological elements included. Thus the dig house is both familiar and unfamiliar – an example of the ‘familiar strangeness’ of archaeology. The sense of isolation is pervasive in the book, with a
key component of the classic detective story in the country house style translated to and enhanced by a flavour of the exotic in an archaeological context.

Christie’s 1951 thriller *They Came To Baghdad* represents archaeology and archaeologists in a different, more nuanced light. Instead of the claustrophobic dig site with its menacing murderer at large, the site of Tell Aswad in *They Came to Baghdad* is a place of refuge and peace for protagonist Victoria Jones. She leaves dreary London for the bright lights of cosmopolitan capital Baghdad in search of the man she loves. Through a twist of events she finds employment as an undercover agent, assisting the world-weary Mr Dakin to root out the source of an international conspiracy to jettison efforts at global peace. Having been drugged and imprisoned in a small village, Victoria manages to escape her captors. Swathed in an Arab woman’s black Aba (robe), she rests on an ancient mound. Archaeologist Richard Baker arrives on the scene to investigate the mound and discovers Victoria. Believing her to be the English anthropologist due to arrive at the Tell Aswad excavation where he too is expected, Baker takes her to the site. His character reinforces what we now expect of archaeologists – broad cultural knowledge and experience of travel, as well as linguistic skills; Victoria assumes he can easily ‘pass’ as an Arab with his knowledge of Arabic.

Once on site, Victoria becomes ever more captivated by archaeology, using the dig house library to enhance her own knowledge. After a week on site she is capable enough to give a tour of the site to unexpected visitors. Christie describes Victoria’s active imagination conjuring up scenes of ancient life the more she handles ancient objects and understands the layers of history at Tell Aswad. Her developing awareness is a reflection of Christie’s own gradual immersion in archaeology. The narrative explores the roles of photographer and artefact cleaner that she herself took on, and the dawning perception of the processes and practices of the discipline.79

In 1975, under the pseudonym Elizabeth Peters, American Egyptologist Barbara Mertz began publishing her bestselling ‘Amelia Peabody’ series of mystery novels set in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt. Featuring British Egyptologists Amelia Peabody (later Emerson) and Radcliffe Emerson, Peters’ first instalment was *Crocodile on the Sandbank*. Her intimate knowledge of the history of late nineteenth-century Egyptology, and of scripted spadework, shines through the texts. She illuminates key aspects of the archaeological experience with particular relevance to women: education, independence, artistic skill, marriage bordering on equality with an archaeological
partner, even field ‘nursing’ skills – as Amelia is eventually given the title of ‘Sitt Hakim’, or lady doctor. In later books other aspects of archaeology emerge – the seasonality of excavation demanding homes in both England and Egypt, hybrid personal identities, familiarity with Egypt and Egyptian customs, linguistic facility, relationships with local communities and, though participating in British expat life in Cairo, having (in the novels) more overt than subtle resistance to a British colonial establishment (not perhaps surprising given Mertz/Peters’ own post-colonial chronology). Two books in particular help to illuminate these themes: Crocodile, which sets the stage for the series, and the exploration of archaeologists in wartime in the twelfth Amelia Peabody mystery, He Shall Thunder in the Sky.

Crocodile opens in 1884 as well-educated, unmarried Amelia, daughter of a wealthy antiquarian, inherits her father’s property on his death and so gains financial independence at the age of 32. She decides to travel to the ancient sites she had heard about from childhood. In Rome, en route to Egypt, she rescues Evelyn Barton-Forbes, a young aristocratic woman whose elopement and subsequent abandonment leads her to contemplate suicide. Engaging Evelyn as her companion, the women set sail for Egypt. Once in Cairo the Philae, a dahabiya, is secured to enjoy a scenic tour up the Nile (Amelia Peabody’s desire for the freedom and independence of the dahabiya echoes Mary Brodrick’s thoughts on the subject). Before embarking, however, a run-in with irascible excavator Radcliffe Emerson at the Boulaq Museum provides the clinching archaeological (and romantic) link. Emerson and his philologically-inclined brother Walter have been granted a permission to excavate at Amarna. With Evelyn being pursued by a particularly ardent suitor, the two women take to the Philae, using the freedom of dahabiya travel to defy convention by stopping at sites on the way up the Nile against favourable currents. When the Philae reaches Amarna, they visit the Emersons on site and are swept up in the adventure of excavation, even as they are being ‘pursued’ by a mysterious and frightening ambulatory mummy who, while terrorising the camp, also murders several people.

As in Thompson’s Mirage, Peters in Crocodile draws on the fundamentals of the archaeological experience to provide the context of the action. Relations between excavators and the villagers they employ are soured when rumours of the mummy’s presence circulate, for example, nearly forcing the Emersons to abandon the site entirely. Amelia Peabody’s growing fascination with ancient Egypt and the adventure of archaeology leads to her abandoning conventional attire and
behaviours to adapt to the practicalities of site life: a Rational Dress-inspired divided skirt, too radical to wear in Society (whether in London or Cairo), becomes her work-day suit as she conserves a fragile painted pavement with a solution of water and tapioca. Her working relationship with Emerson develops into a romance and marriage, and she eventually finds her calling in life – as equal partner with Emerson in archaeological expeditions. Though her characteristics have been described as a feminist revision of the ‘New Woman’ and a ‘spoon’, Peabody is in essence a composite of late-Victorian female archaeologists.  

Peters’ ‘Author’s Note’ in *Crocodile* reveals that she drew on archaeologists’ publications for inspiration. Her comments highlight the long-term commercial and cultural value of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeological memoirs and travel guides. ‘Real-life’ archaeologists such as Gaston Maspero, Francis Llewellyn Griffith, Amelia Edwards and Flinders Petrie appear as characters in the novels or are directly referenced in them, and among other sources Peters used nineteenth-century guides to influence her phrasing and reflect the state of knowledge and its practitioners at the time. Emerson is a fictionalised alter-Petrie. He is given some of Petrie’s eccentricities, including his use of pink undergarments in the field and requisition of tombs as camp living quarters, while notable Petrie discoveries, such as the painted pavement at Amarna, are also credited to Emerson. In order to emphasise still further the ‘authenticity’ of the Emersons’ adventures as the series progressed and the Emerson family expanded, Peters eventually began to frame the books as, in part, an interpreted archive; she assumed the role of semi-omniscient Editor, on occasion revealing lost or hitherto unpublished manuscripts. Thus by the publication of *Thunder* in 2000 the novels are a compilation of multiple voices/manuscripts – to Peabody’s first person narrative is added ‘Manuscript H’, representing (in third person) the experiences of her son Walter ‘Ramses’ Peabody Emerson and in ‘Letter Collection B’ (in first person), the views of her foster daughter Nefret Forth.

In *Thunder* Peters gives us a glimpse into fictionalised wartime Cairo and surrounds, setting the scene for the city’s role in Middle Eastern intelligence operations. The book opens in the city, recently formally annexed by Britain. Twenty-seven-year-old Ramses Emerson has a reputation as a pacifist and Cairo is full of spies. The Emersons, having lived for half the year in Egypt for nearly 30 years, can assume the role of British expats in the city, inhabiting the same social spaces – Shepheard’s Hotel, the Turf Club and the Opera House – when necessary. However, they are most comfortable in the company of their Egyptian colleagues,
either in the city’s *bazaars* in Khan al Khalili (in the ‘Arabic’ quarter of Muski), where they patronise all the best unhygienic cafes, or at their home in a village nearby. Their relationship with the Egyptian population has been deemed so valuable that Ramses has been recruited to join the Military Intelligence Department and Emerson offered a position advising the British officials on the latest developments in the Egyptian community. With due reference to the role of archaeologists Leonard Woolley, T. E. Lawrence, D. G. Hogarth and Gertrude Bell in the intelligence operations of the Arab Bureau during the First World War, in *Thunder* Peters-through-Peabody acknowledges archaeology’s value to espionage. In fact Woolley and Lawrence both appear briefly in the novel in relation to intelligence work.

Ramses, nicknamed after the Egyptian pharaoh because of his ‘swarthiness’ and arrogance, having spent half his life in Egypt even has an alternate Egyptian nickname. Through the years he has taken an Egyptian identity so thoroughly that he and his best friend David, grandson of the Emersons’ *reis* (foreman) Abdullah, can with clever costuming and imitation be mistaken for each other. Further, Ramses can confidently represent himself as Wardani, the Egyptian leader of a nationalist cell in Cairo, to the other Egyptian members of the group. His loyalties and his identities are divided.

It is easy for the majority of the British official class in Cairo to believe that Ramses is a pacifist; they may even be suspicious of his motives concerning Egyptians in relation to British interests. Certainly Ramses knows his way around Cairo’s byzantine back streets, and uses his knowledge to advance the causes he believes are right. Beyond undercover activities the Emersons’ work during the 1914/15 season involves an excavation in the Giza Pyramid fields, allowing Peters (as in the other Peabody books) to offer readers an insight into the details of excavation life and the archaeological network. When a well preserved statue turns up on their dig site, Antiquities Inspector James Quibell and his artist wife Annie Quibell (see Chapter 3), in the same roles held by their real-life counterparts, are invited to see it.

In 2003 Peters further blurred the lines between her fictional and factual worlds with the publication of nonfiction, quarto-size ‘compendium’ contextualising the nineteenth-century world of Egyptian archaeology and the archaeologists who studied it – the Emersons included. The compendium consists of essays on literature, music, science, travel, chronology, fashion, tourism, religion and society, among other themes. ‘The People of the Journals’ features photographs or illustrations of real and fictional people who appear in the series. As a whole *Amelia*

In 2015 the UK-based role-playing game company Cubicle 7 commissioned a stand-alone novella to accompany their ‘Cthulu Britannica’ series Curse of Nineveh campaign. The Journal of Reginald Campbell Thompson is premised on a ‘lost’ journal of the eminent archaeologist covering a secret journey to the site in 1919 to reveal the secrets of the hidden temple of Assyrian god Nabu. The novella is an artefact to be used to create other scenarios and identities in the Curse of Nineveh role-play. In The Journal, as in other forms of archaeological fiction, archaeologists are outsiders; they have local contacts, but work within a broadly supportive imperial network. Being in the East – on site – is both exciting and terrifying; the archaeologists make new discoveries even as they unleash and battle forces beyond their control. The novella allows its readers/users to inhabit elements of the archaeological identity, with the characteristics of expedition teams, exotic destinations and espionage as a background to the ‘curse’ theme of the game. With The Journal, through play, new spadework fictions can be scripted.