



Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter 2010, 336-343  
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## Review/Reseña

Lawrence Gustave Desmond, ed. *Yucatán Through Her Eyes. Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, Writer & Expeditionary Photographer*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009.

## Women's Liberation Through Archaeology in Yucatán

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In 2004, Lawrence Desmond discovered a hitherto unpublished manuscript, as well as numerous field notes and photographs, by Alice Dixon Le Plongeon at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. The volume under review includes the text of that diary, complemented by two narratives: first, a description of the historical and biographical context in which Alice Le Plongeon's diary was written—more precisely, a biography of its author; and, secondly, a narrative of its recent discovery. Both narratives, as well as the document here printed for the first time, take us into the world of early archaeological scholarship in the second half of the nineteenth century. As the wife of the French entrepreneur and amateur archaeologist Auguste Le Plongeon (1826-1908), Alice Dixon Le Plongeon (1851-1910) was one of the few illustrious Victorian women who traveled to exotic places as her

husband's spouse and assistant but who also made her own reputation and career as a writer, ultimately outshining her husband as a public speaker and celebrity. The couple had spent eleven years (1873-84, interrupted by a few months stay in New York City in 1880) in various parts of Mesoamerica—above all in Yucatán, where they undertook substantial archaeological and photographic documentations of the Maya ruins at Chichen Itza and Uxmal, but also in Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, British Honduras, and Mexico City. The stereopticon (3-D) photos they took, on wet collodion glass plates as well as commercially manufactured dry glass plates, are among the earliest photographic images ever taken of these places; they were and still are of invaluable use for later archaeologists. The Le Plongeon's measurements and the molds they made of sculptures and reliefs (most of them now lost) likewise established their reputation as leading Maya scholars of their time.

The positive reception of Auguste Le Plongeon's empirical findings, however, was tempered by the less than enthusiastic response to his extravagant theories about the precolumbian diffusion of Maya culture to the Old World. He claimed nothing less than that the civilization of Egypt, and in its wake that of Greece, were crucially impacted by Maya civilization which had spread via the Bering Strait and Asia to the banks of the Nile. Le Plongeon supported this theory by very subjective interpretations of sculptures and inscriptions he had found in Chichen Itza and Uxmal. While the notion of a precolumbian exchange between America and Africa had been similarly held by previous (especially French aristocratic) amateur scholars such as Frederic de Waldeck (who claimed to have discovered representations of elephants in Palenque) and Le Plongeon's major influence, Charles Brasseur de Bourbourg, the emerging field of archaeological scholarship generally followed non-diffusionist theories expressed, for example, by Alexander von Humboldt and John Lloyd Stephens.

One of the great assets of this book is that it documents the fluidity of historical and archaeological theories as they co-existed in the post-Civil War era, and also the role of professional institutions such as the Smithsonian and the American Antiquarian Society in manipulating the scientific debate. An analysis of the ideological impact of such organizations (later followed by institutions like Carnegie and

Rockefeller) on the formation of modern scholarship has to my knowledge not yet been written. Although less explicitly stated by Desmond (whose approach is primarily oriented at individual historical actors) these conflicting theories may be abstracted in terms of America's historiographical national self-invention: while Stephens's and the AAS's thesis of the independent development of ancient American civilization is clearly in league with the United States' mid-century desire for political and economic independence and hegemony in the Western hemisphere (an archaeological Monroe doctrine, as Evans suggests: 55-6), it can hardly be overlooked that Le Plongeon's thesis that Maya civilization was the origin of civilization on a global scale unwittingly reflects the contemporary imperial expansion of Great Britain and its claims to cultural and economic world leadership (see Evans 285).

The story of Alice and Augustus Le Plongeon superbly links these early archaeological discourses to other cultural formations of the period, chief among them spiritualism and freemasonry. While Alice Le Plongeon's diary gives rather scant and cryptic evidence about the significance of metaphysical experiences in her daily life ("Received a communication from one who called himself *Julius-Truth-Strength-Firmness-I* packed negatives..." 207), the spirit world plays an important part in the Le Plongeon's diffusionist theories. While Augustus spent much of his life trying to convince the world that ancient Maya rulers had migrated to Egypt, Alice "spiritualized" the theory in her narrative poems (such as *Queen M'oo's Talisman*, 1902) in suggesting that she and Augustus were reincarnations of an ancient Maya couple whose story shows striking similarities with that of Isis and Osiris (308-9). Surprisingly, the text, perhaps because it declared itself as a work of fiction and due to the current vogue of spiritualism, received positive reviews (311). Owing to the fact that this is primarily a book about Alice, Desmond has less to say about Augustus Le Plongeon's fantastic claims about the Maya origins of Freemasonry (via the Egyptian connection). As Evans argues (144-5), Le Plongeon's 'translation' of the glyphic messages he found in Maya ruins into a narrative of the origins of Freemasonry must be seen alongside romantic inventions of national traditions, only here on a global scale (in keeping with the couple's international identity).

Not least importantly, this book also tells a story of the colonization of cultural artifacts, the rip-off of the cultural treasures and traditions of nations outside the national borders of the United States. Like John Lloyd Stephens, Le Plongeon apparently had no second thoughts about the legality of transporting ancient Maya monuments or parts thereof to the United States and to sell them as museum artifacts; indeed, the originals and molds he and Alice had collected in the 1870s were repeatedly offered for purchase to different American museums to alleviate the couple's difficult financial situation after the economic crash of 1893. Thus Alice notes in her diary how offended she and Augustus were when the Mexican government prohibited the shipment of the famous Chacmool statue—probably their most important find—to Philadelphia (359). The statue was confiscated by the Mexican government and transported to the National Museum in Mexico City. The staffing of US museums with artifacts from areas outside the United States must be seen as part of a larger strategy of establishing the United States as an imperial power capable to compete with the imperial powers of Europe. These, as Stephens reminds his readers, have already ripped off the cultural treasures of the Old World: “The casts of the Parthenon are regarded as precious memorials in the British Museum, and casts of Copan would be the same in New York. ... They belonged of right to us, and, though we did not know how soon we might be kicked out ourselves, I resolved that ours they should be“ (115-6). The fact that the ca. 250 molds which the Le Plongeon had stored in New York's American Museum of Natural History are lost today may remind us of the ironical ending of Spielberg's first Indiana Jones movie, where the Mosaic arc is finally stored away in a wooden box, unrecognizable among thousands of identical boxes, in some gigantic government storage space.

The life and theories of Auguste Le Plongeon had been well known before the publication of this volume. Attracted by the California Gold Rush, he had traveled to the United States in the 1840s, set up a photographic studio in San Francisco, accompanied the imperial archaeologist Ephraim Squier to Peru in the 1860s where his interest in archaeology was first inspired (Evans 128), then he had met and married Alice in 1873 and set off to Yucatán with her in the same year. What makes this volume so valuable is that it provides us, for the first

time, with an intimate view of Alice's experience throughout her life with the adventurer-archaeologist. An ambivalent personality emerges from these pages—on the one hand the faithful spouse with no project of her own, reliably assisting her husband in dangerous projects, valiantly enduring daily circumstances very far removed from those found in Victorian parlours (poor or no food, unbearable heat, sweat and dirt, insect-ridden bedding, disobedient mules, frequently unreliable Indian helpers). All of this is very realistically documented in her diary of their field trip to Yucatán in 1873-76, and it is very much to be regretted that the continuation of her diary has so far not been found. On the other hand, the person and biography of Alice Dixon Le Plongeon appears like a prism in which different cultural strands of the second half of the nineteenth century meet, converge, and clash. As the discovery of her own writings proves, she was by far not the empty vessel into which her much older husband poured his wisdom. While in Yucatán, it was often she, not he, who operated the camera and developed the photos, often in more than unfavorable climatic situations (an insect or a grain of sand on the wet collodion glass plates could spoil the whole picture). After their return, it was above all Alice who secured their meager living income by writing articles for the popular press and giving lectures, accompanied by lantern slides, on her Yucatecan adventures. Towards the end of their life together and with their financial situation increasingly deteriorating, she had to bear the double burden of breadwinner and nurse for her ailing husband.

Alice faithfully shared her husband's fantastic theories and even clad them in poetic guise at the end of her life. As her editor Desmond suggests on the basis of her own texts, she devoutly believed that her first meeting with Augustus was premeditated by a higher power, and psychic experiences throughout her life and after his death suggest that they entertained an unusually strong spiritual tie. Indeed the documents reveal that spiritualism played a major part in her life as well as his, and while Augustus was a "high-ranking Mason in New York" (Evans 143), Alice adhered to the female pursuit in attending numerous spiritual gatherings and séances. Yet as her public activism as a lecturer and writer shows, she was far from indulging in fashionable escapism in the face of the escalating social injustices of her time.

As Desmond makes very clear, Alice Le Plongeon also played a leading role in the New York suffragist movement, and while in Yucatán, she radically subverted the Victorian dress code:

Wide Afghan trousers, an ample blouse, and high boots –a requisite precaution against snakes– constituted an attire which enabled me to walk, run, or ride [astride] wherever duty called, and to climb dangerous places with confidence in my own movements. Furthermore, the freedom of action made me fear less, conferring a consciousness of independence and ability to escape danger by active agility. I grew stronger and less nervous ... When, on our return to civilization, it was necessary to again adopt conventional feminine garb, this produced a depressing effect which lasted some time. ... The close fitting bodice and long skirts were for many days so trying that I found nothing in city life to compensate for the discomfort of petticoat and whalebone; and therefore came to the conclusion that woman's mode of dressing is prejudicial to health and strength, irritating to nerves and temper, and that it undoubtedly makes her timid in action. ("Yucatán: Its Ancient Palaces and Modern Cities" [1884]; unpublished MS; quoted in Desmond 297-8).

The quotation shows that Alice, as Claire L. Lyons points out in her important Foreword to this volume, belongs to a whole host of female Victorian travelers and amateur scholars whose contribution to the advancement of science is only slowly coming to recognition; women for whom the pursuit of science in exotic places constituted their partial liberation from Victorian gender norms. Alice's radicalism also extended to her outspoken solidarity (articulated in lectures and essays) with the liberation struggle of the contemporary Maya Indians whose rebellion against colonial domination, the so-called Caste War, had been continuously fought for almost forty years when Alice entered the scene, and some of whose leaders she had met in person in the 1870s.

As this review is written less than 10 miles from the birthplace of Heinrich Schliemann (Neubuckow in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), a final note on the famous contemporary of the Le Plongeon is in place. In fact Le Plongeon and Schliemann may have met in California in the early 1850s (John Lloyd Stephens met Schliemann while the latter was crossing the isthmus on the Panama railroad in 1851). The mostly forgotten Maya archaeologist and the famous discoverer of Troy are united by an unusual convergence of the topics of archaeology and gender in their photographs of the Tomb of Clytemnestra (Schliemann, taken 1876, published 1878) and the House of the Governor in Uxmal (Le Plongeon, taken 1881, published 1896). Both photos show a steep

pointed triangular gate with their respective spouses placed at its base (see Evans 146-7). The gates have the shape of the inverted letter "V"; without wanting to delve too deeply into the suggestive ideas of Freud or Pynchon, these strikingly similar images may be seen as sites of desire where the archaeologists' wives converge with their archaeological pursuits, both captured by the possessive photographic look of the male adventurer-scientist. (It is only a small step from here to Marlow's assessment of Kurtz's possessive individualism, when he quotes Kurtz's words "My Intended, my ivory, my station my river, my everything belonged to him" [Conrad 85]). Perhaps without her husband noticing so, Alice Le Plongeon had in many ways emancipated herself from this fateful position, as Desmond's volume powerfully demonstrates. Before these documents became known, Desmond writes, "[t]here was no one living who knew that as a young, strong-willed woman, *she* had chosen to spend her life with Augustus. Or that she had manned the barricades against a Chan Santa Cruz Maya assault, ran excavation crews, photographed people and archaeological sites, received honors from the diplomatic corps in Mexico City, and lectured for more than twenty-five years about the ancient Maya and the people of Yucatán" (342).

The value of this discovery, and this book, can therefore hardly be overestimated; it is a little mitigated by the lack of informative map material (the maps reproduced are hardly useful to guide the reader to the places mentioned in the text) and some avoidable transcription errors. These should perhaps be corrected in a second, paperback edition that would help earn Alice Dixon Le Plongoen's story its place in the minds of university students as well as the educated public.

### Works Cited

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