Egyptian Art in the Nicholson Museum, Sydney
eds: K. N. Sowada and B. G. Ockinga
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<td>AA</td>
<td>Ägyptologische Abhandlungen (Wiesbaden)</td>
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<td>Acta Or</td>
<td>Acta Orientalia (Nedeln)</td>
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<td>ADAIK</td>
<td>Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Kairo (Glückstadt)</td>
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<td>ÄF</td>
<td>Ägyptologische Forschungen (Glückstadt/Hamburg/New York)</td>
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<td>AJA</td>
<td>American Journal of Archaeology (Boston)</td>
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<td>ARE</td>
<td>J. H. Breasted, Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest times to the Persian Conquest, I–V (Chicago, 1906–7)</td>
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<td>ARp</td>
<td>Archaeological Report, Egypt Exploration Fund (London)</td>
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<td>ASAE</td>
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<td>ASAW</td>
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<td>AV</td>
<td>Archäologische Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Archäologisches Institut, Kairo (Mainz)</td>
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<td>BACE</td>
<td>Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology (Sydney)</td>
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<td>BD</td>
<td>Book of the Dead</td>
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<td>BdE</td>
<td>Bibliothèque d’étude, Institut français d’archéologie orientale (Cairo)</td>
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<td>BiAe</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca (Brussels)</td>
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<td>BIE</td>
<td>Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte (Cairo)</td>
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<td>BIFAO</td>
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<td>BiOr</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Orientalis (Leiden)</td>
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<td>BM</td>
<td>British Museum, London</td>
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<td>BMMA</td>
<td>Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York)</td>
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<td>BSFE</td>
<td>Bulletin de la Société française d’Égyptologie (Paris)</td>
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<td>CAA</td>
<td>Corpus Antiquitatum Aegyptiacarum: Lose-Blatt-Katalog ägyptischer Altertümer</td>
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<td>ÇdE</td>
<td>Chronique d’Égypte (Brussels)</td>
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<td>CG</td>
<td>Catalogue Général (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)</td>
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<td>Egypt Exploration Fund/Egypt Exploration Society, London</td>
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<td>GM</td>
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<td>FFAO</td>
<td>Institut français d’archéologie orientale</td>
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<td>JARCE</td>
<td>Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt (Winona Lake, Ind.)</td>
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<td>Kush</td>
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<td>LAAA</td>
<td>Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology (Liverpool)</td>
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Foreword

This is the second book in a series of scholarly publications about the collections in the Nicholson Museum at the University of Sydney, and forms a companion volume to *Classical Art in the Nicholson Museum, Sydney*, conceived by Professor Alexander Cambitoglou and published in 1995.

The majority of the papers in the book are about objects acquired by Sir Charles Nicholson, founder of the museum, during his visits to Egypt in the mid-19th century, and attests to his astute eye as a collector and great foresight as a benefactor.

Many objects in the book belong to the initial donation, and thus the establishment of the Nicholson Museum in 1860. The Egyptian collection in particular is very much entwined with Nicholson's scholarly interests in archaeology, his vision for the University, and the cultural development of the colony of New South Wales. It is a collection of historic importance.

The book also attests to the interests of those involved with the University over a hundred years ago, who added to Nicholson's benefaction, as he had envisaged. They were inspired by the great discoveries in Egypt of Flinders Petrie and others. Their financial support for the work of the Egypt Exploration Fund ensured a steady flow of objects from many important excavations which took place during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Nicholson Museum’s Egyptian collection is the largest in Australia, and is noted for its diversity and quality. Its holdings represent some of the most popular objects in the museum. However, despite its importance, much of the collection has never been published before, thus it is not well-known to scholars or indeed the wider public. This is slowly changing and this book, along with new publications aimed at different audiences, seeks to redress that.

This book contains contributions by scholars from Australia, Europe and the United States. We greatly appreciate the time and expertise they have provided to this project. I would also like to thank the editors, Dr Karin Sowada, former Assistant Curator of the Nicholson Museum, who initiated the book, and Dr Boyo Ockinga, Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at Macquarie University, for their collaboration on this volume.

*Egyptian Art in the Nicholson Museum, Sydney* has been produced with the generous support of the Alexander Cambitoglou Nicholson Museum Endowment Fund.

The general interest in Egyptology that spurred Nicholson to acquire many of these pieces remains unabated, inspiring the work of writers, scholars, artists and designers, and the imaginations of adults and children alike. This publication will make the Nicholson Museum collections better known and accessible to those who study Egyptology and add to our understanding of the lives, beliefs and rituals of the peoples of ancient Egypt.

David Ellis
Director, University Museums
The University of Sydney
Sir Charles Nicholson: an Early Scholar-Traveller in Egypt

Karin N. Sowlda

In 1860, the University of Sydney received one of the most significant historical collections ever acquired by a university in Australia. Sir Charles Nicholson (1808–1903) (pl. 1a), antiquarian, scholar, philanthropist, statesman and arguably Australia’s first patron of the arts, donated over 400 ancient Egyptian artefacts to the new institution, collected during a visit to Egypt in 1856–7. This donation became the basis of the Nicholson Museum at the University of Sydney, now the country’s most important collection of ancient art and objects from the Eastern Mediterranean (pl. 2).

Despite his importance to the University of Sydney and the wider history of the early colony of New South Wales, Sir Charles Nicholson remains a singularly unrecognised figure beyond the sandstone parapets of the University. Likewise, little is known about his travels to Egypt and his observations of the people, the land and ancient monuments of the Nile, conducted in the mid-19th century at a time when many Europeans and Americans were making the same journey. The source and provenance of many objects he acquired is likewise not fully understood and can be pieced together only from fragmentary records, letters and from the objects themselves.

This great paucity of information is largely the result of a fire that engulfed The Grange, his home at Totteridge (Herts., UK) in 1899, destroying a lifetime of scholarship, archives, personal papers and part of his library (pl. 1b). Such was Nicholson’s interest in scholarly matters, that had this treasure-trove of documents survived, undoubtedly his recollections as an early scholar-traveller would have earned him a more prominent place in the pantheon of these intrepid early visitors to Egypt. Fortunately, a small number of his letters and papers survive in public archives.

A BRIEF PROFILE

Charles Nicholson was born on 23 November 1808 either in Cockermouth (Cumberland, UK) or Bedale (Yorkshire, UK), to a respected family with mercantile interests. Tutored privately as a youth, he then studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, where he was an outstanding student. Even at this early stage Nicholson was fascinated with antiquity, art and classical studies. In 1833, he travelled to Sydney in the new colony of New South Wales to join his uncle, Captain William Ascough. Ascough was himself a wealthy businessman and landowner with extensive holdings, and when he died in 1836 his property passed to Nicholson. This fortune helped Nicholson expand his local business interests and rapidly gain a position of influence, which included his role as one of several founders of the Australian Gas Light Company Ltd (in 1836) and his membership of the NSW Medical Board from 1838. In 1843, Dr Nicholson was elected to the Legislative Council, the colony’s local governing body. He was talented, respected and well-liked on all sides of politics with the result that in 1846 he was made Speaker of the House, a position Nicholson held with distinction until he resigned in February 1856.

In the same year, Nicholson left Australia for a three-year journey that took him back to England and afforded him the opportunity to visit Egypt and Europe. He returned to Sydney early in 1859 and was prevailed upon to assist with the establishment of the Queensland Parliament as a member and President of that legislature until he resigned in 1860. In 1862, he left the colonies once again for England via India and Egypt, but this time he was never to return. However, Sir Charles Nicholson continued his interest in the welfare and advancement of Sydney, and the University of Sydney in particular, becoming an adviser to the British government on colonial matters until he died in 1903.
When Nicholson arrived in Sydney Town in 1833, he found a rude and materialistic place. Founded as a British penal settlement in 1788, the new colony was a mixture of convicts, emancipated felons, soldiers, ne'er-do-wells and free settlers making their fortunes in a squallid and unruly outpost of the British Empire. There was little room or even interest in cultural pursuits, and the provision of education for the growing population was rudimentary. Into this scenario Nicholson used his newly found wealth and position to indulge in the scholarly pursuits that had so fascinated him from a young age. By writing to dealers in Britain and Europe, he purchased books, works of art, coins, scrolls and manuscripts, amassing a collection that must have made him seem quite unusual against the vulgar backdrop of early Sydney.11

This interest in scholarship, collecting and education was to see Nicholson take a leading role in the development of some of Sydney's most important institutes of learning. He was instrumental in establishing the Museum of the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts in 1835, only the third museum in the colony, designed to educate the 'working classes'.12 He was actively involved in the governance of the Australian Museum from 1840 onwards, in addition to the Australasian Botanic and Horticultural Society, the Philosophical Society (later the Royal Society of New South Wales) and the Australian Subscription Library (eventually to become the State Library of New South Wales).13 From the mid-1840s, he made a significant contribution to the development of government school education in New South Wales and served as a Trustee of the Sydney Grammar School.14

But his crowning achievement in the field of education was his vision, work and persistence in establishing the University of Sydney, Australia's first university. Nicholson and his colleagues envisaged an institution that was more egalitarian than the colleges of Britain; it was to be an open university founded 'upon a liberal and comprehensive basis, a University which shall be accessible to all classes', regardless of their religion.15 He was actively involved in the development of the new institution, from its curriculum, to building plans, the charter, and many other details. This contribution was recognised by a seat on the University Senate and his subsequent appointment as the first Vice-Provost from 1851 to 1854 and then Provost (or Chancellor) from 1854 until 1862.16

In Nicholson's view, education was a great civilising influence, and museums had a key role to play in this process, with their collections enlightening and cultivating the mind.17 In particular he noted the absence of museums illustrating the historical past in the new colony, which were so important in a country which apparently had no real history.18 Thus it is not surprising that his personal interest in antiquity, combined with the absence of any ancient material in Sydney Town relating to the origins of western civilisation, resulted in his purposeful donation of antiquities to the University of Sydney.

NICHOLSON THE SCHOLAR-TRAVELLER IN EGYPT

Little is known about Nicholson's trips, but the extant records indicate that he visited Egypt in 1856–7 and again during his final voyage home from Australia (via India) in 1862.19 Even less is understood about his collecting activities, or the sites he visited, although it is likely that his route down the Nile was similar to that of other western visitors. However, unlike many other travellers, Nicholson was no mere tourist: his visit to Egypt involved a serious scholarly intent focused on art, archaeology and history.

Nicholson arrived in Egypt from England in mid November 1856, almost certainly via the port of Alexandria (fig. 1).20 By late November he was in Cairo, where he wrote to Mrs James (Emily) Macarthur, commenting that the climate was 'the very counterpart of that of Australia [with] the same sky...'.21 He was also much taken with his new situation, describing the city as 'thoroughly oriental in all its aspects', its streets resembling a scene from The Arabian Nights.22 Despite this rather romantic assessment, he was not beyond
Fig. 1. Map of Egypt showing the known route of Sir Charles Nicholson’s visit to Egypt in 1856–7.
noting the ‘dirty’ and ‘destitute’ nature of his surroundings when compared to the more civilised aspect of England. Moreover, his letter complains of the food, largely eggs with little other variety; so much that he wished he had brought sustenance from England! Undoubtedly, he was able to share these rather parochial observations with the fellow countrymen he met in Cairo, including two companions who were to accompany him up the Nile. In the same letter, Nicholson wrote that he ‘had already collected a good many things’, which he was sure would interest his correspondent ‘if I succeed in getting them to the Colony’. Thus he was already determined that the objects would have their home in Australia. It is not known which pieces were acquired, or from where, during this early phase of his travels, but they undoubtedly included a fragment of an inscribed stone from a Giza tomb (R46) collected during a visit to the Pyramids. It is also possible that some of the objects may have emanated from Nicholson’s own archaeological explorations in northern Egypt during this period. This is suggested by a letter to Nicholson from noted Egyptologist A. H. Sayce dated 6 January 1895, which makes the following oblique reference to such activities:

Mr de Morgan wishes me to thank you very much for your kindness in presenting him with your book. I was last with him at the mound of Memphis just at the spot where your very important excavations were made.

Although his collection does contain material from the Memphis/Saqqara region, whatever might have been found during Nicholson’s excavations at Memphis cannot be identified amongst the objects donated to the University, and no other records of this archaeological activity have surfaced to date.

Nicholson also evidently visited Saqqara, where he walked over the desert sands of the plateau and picked up various pieces himself or bought them from locals. Several early catalogue references speak of objects acquired from the necropolis, and indeed some pieces are undoubtedly from this source, although no provenance is given. For example, the findspot of a Saite era coffin (R29) is given as ‘Memphis’ in Reeve’s Catalogue, but the origin of this object must surely be Saqqara, where the type is known. Other objects stated to be from Saqqara include animal mummies from the Sacred Animal Necropolis (R35 and R36), inscriptions from the vicinity of the Serapeum (R45 and R101) and an ‘ancient Egyptian skull’ (R425). In addition, many of the inscribed mummy wrappings are almost certainly from Saqqara (see Coenen, this volume).

Nicholson’s papers also speak of a relationship with Joseph Hekekyan Bey, a man of Turkish origin who excavated at Memphis in the early 1850s. Nicholson acquired an important inscribed limestone talatat block (R1143) from Hekekyan, excavated by him in 1854. This block, shipped to Australia in 1864, is the only extant talatat from the Aten temple at Memphis, which was constructed by Akhenaten in c. 1340 BC (see Jeffreys, this volume). Of interest is the letter Hekekyan wrote about the piece in 1862, which includes an archaeological section outlining the position of the pavement from which the block came (pls. 25 and 26a). Nicholson’s interest in the block and the site was sufficiently scientific for him to require this level of detail about its provenance and indeed the illustrations and archaeological data from this letter were later repeated by Nicholson in a scholarly paper and reproduced in Aegyptiaca. It is highly possible that Nicholson’s own excavations at Memphis, alluded to in Sayce’s letter, were encouraged and facilitated by Hekekyan; thus Nicholson’s archaeological interest in the site may have been the reason why Hekekyan gave him the block. Reeve’s Catalogue also records a further object (R1136) given to Nicholson by Hekekyan, being a ‘kiln-burnt brick from Upper Egypt...dug up, at considerable depth in the Nile mud, by Hikekeyan Bey [sic], in the exploration conducted by him at the instance of the late Leonard Horner.

For the rest of Nicholson’s donation, the provenance of many objects is only now being established by detailed research involving the study of texts, iconography and stylistic analysis of the objects. We know
that he purchased some pieces from Cairo dealers, including the well-known Massara brothers, who sourced many of their objects from Saqqara and Mit Rahineh. Most of the purchases made by Nicholson during his visit in 1862 were acquired from the Massara brothers and probably came from the Memphis/Saqqara region. Of this consignment, Nicholson wrote that

...[the objects were] collected by me with some trouble and...at considerable expense...some of them perhaps [are] objects of philological and historical value.

Dispatched to the University in 1864, these included a naophorous statue (R1144), which is said to come from Memphis but a tomb at Saqqara is more plausible; the well-known blocks from the Saqqara tomb-chapel of Mose (R1131-5); a stela with an inscription in hieroglyphic and Carian (R1141, see Ray, this volume) and the well-known upper torso of General Horemheb (R1138). The mudbrick from Hekekyan, noted earlier, was also donated with this group.

The scanty accounts of Nicholson's Egyptian travels make mention of his time in the region of ancient Thebes, and, judging by the number of objects of Theban origin in his collection, Nicholson must have acquired many pieces from sources in Luxor. While few artefacts have a specific provenance, they bear the artistic hallmarks of the region in their construction, style of carving, decoration and texts. A number of the objects published in this book are identified as Theban on this basis.

As to whether Nicholson conducted excavations in the area is not known, but he did walk around the monuments and tombs of the Theban west bank, making notes and copying inscriptions. Indeed, his familiarity with Greek was greatly beneficial in transcribing early graffiti, especially at the Colossi of Memnon, which had been visited by many ancient travellers. At this monument, Nicholson observed that amongst the curious inscriptions on the back of the Colossus is one by a Greek who describes himself as a Torchbearer at the Eleusinian Mysteries [sic] and who speaks in terms of [...] eulogy of Constantine. Nearly all the inscriptions testify to having heard the voice of the Memnon. None of the inscriptions appear earlier than the time of Trajan, and only one by a Christian [...] the curious story of [Emperor H]Adrian and [Empress] Sabina. The inscriptions at the Tombs of Biban el Molak [sic], seem many of them by the same travellers who have left their names on the Memnon. A curious custom of the time appears in the record they give of relations such as wives or children of the writers.

In addition to making many scholarly observations as he walked around the Theban hills, Nicholson collected objects on his own account and from opportunistic local fellahin, which included obvious fakes in addition to genuine objects. The catalogue entry for a Theban funerary cone (R63) suggests that Nicholson simply picked this up from the ground. He also states having purchased an inscribed coffin fragment (R78) from 'an Arab at Thebes', who probably had a personal cache of objects and had sawn the base of a coffin trough into three to maximise the profits from separate sales (see Niwiński, this volume). Similarly, the statue of a Kushite royal woman (R41) was 'bought at Thebes' but from whom is not stated (see Morkot, this volume).

Nicholson also visited the major east bank temples. A red granite fragment, said to be from Hatshepsut's obelisk at Karnak (R44), was undoubtedly picked up from the ground as Nicholson scavenged over the precincts of the great temple. Whether or not he 'picked up' the beautiful torso of a goddess (R40) from the site, or purchased it from a Luxor dealer is unknown. However, its Karnak provenance is now certain thanks to the discovery by Dr W. Raymond Johnson of the joining head which was excavated at Karnak and is now on display in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (see Eaton-Krauss, this volume). The joining of our original
torso with a facsimile copy of the head in the Nicholson Museum was triumphantly made in 1998; this event was replicated in Cairo, and today the more complete statue can be seen in both institutions.

The same attempt by locals to maximise profits is probably the reason why Nicholson purchased the mummy of a man in a Theban coffin of a woman from the 21st Dynasty (R27), although it is unlikely that he would have been aware of this deception at the time.49 Recent DNA testing on a bone sample from this mummy, part of research for the Nicholson Museum Mummy Research Project, revealed that either the dealers who sold this ensemble rustled up a spare mummy to put in an empty coffin, or less likely, it is evidence of ancient re-use of the casket for another occupant.50

Nicholson continued travelling south, and by 23 December 1856 he reached El Kab (fig. 1), where he acquired ‘a portion of coloured sandstone, with [an] inscription taken from the Crottos’ (R43 I ).51 From there he continued on to Aswan (Graeco-Roman Syene),52 where he acquired a ‘fragment of a Mohammedan tombstone...from the ancient cemetery’ (R9).53 While in Aswan he visited a number of monuments including

the ruins of massive fortifications where a garrison was maintained to keep in check the unconquered tribes of Nubia and Ethiopia. In these buildings, which are of brick, the peculiar style of construction adopted by the Roman architect is visible—the bricks are not much thicker than tiles, and in the courses of every few feet there is a zig-zag arrangement, a sort of herring-bone structure called ‘opus [ ... ]’ which is very remarkable, and enables you to recognize Roman masonry wherever you see it.54

The precise location of this building is not known. Aswan was, however, to be the southern-most extent of Nicholson’s journey. The entire trip, which included a visit to Italy, took three months.55

NICHOLSON, HIS COLLECTION AND THE UNIVERSITY

Nicholson’s acquisitions followed him to London, where they were catalogued by Joseph Bonomi and Samuel Birch, then Assistant Keeper of the Department of Antiquities at the British Museum, and published in a catalogue under the former’s name in 1858.56 Although Nicholson had some knowledge of Egyptian, the complex task of deciphering the ancient texts was left to more expert scholars in addition to Birch, such as Rev. D. I. Heath, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge; Professor H. Malden of University College London and Mr C. W. Goodwin Esq. of the ‘Inner Temple’, who handled the Coptic artefacts.57 The objects were then dispatched to Australia, and on arrival were apparently kept for a time at Nicholson’s then Sydney residence, Lindesay, at Darling Point.58 The collection was presented to the University Senate in 1860, along with a substantial number of Etruscan, Greek and Roman antiquities collected during Nicholson’s travels in Italy.59

On returning to England via Egypt, Nicholson sent a further shipment of material that arrived at the University in 1865 (the 1864 Consignment Note is reproduced on pl. 26b).60 He donated books and other material to the University throughout the course of his life.

After leaving Australia, Nicholson’s scholarship and interest in the Egyptian objects continued despite his distance from them: he read papers to the Royal Society of Literature on several pieces, notably on the talatat from Memphis (R1143) and the blocks of Mose (R1131–5).61 For Aegyptiaca, Nicholson wrote another paper on a large and impressive collection of papyrus fragments from the Book of the Dead, a group which was never sent to Sydney.62 As Nicholson’s paper on the Memphis talatat illustrates, he was fascinated by Egyptian history and archaeology for its own sake. However, in line with the scholarly interests of many of his peers, Nicholson was attracted to the intersection of ancient Egyptian culture and history with the Bible. This interest even led him to studies in Hebrew language.63 For example, as his paper to the Royal Society of Literature illustrates, he found the correspondence of the Biblical Moses to the name on the blocks from the Saqqara chapel of Mose (R1131–5) a fascinating coincidence. Furthermore, stimulated by an inscription
mentioning King Taharqo (one of the few Egyptian kings named in the Bible—see 2 Kings 19:9 and Isaiah 37:9), in 1901 or early 1902 Nicholson requested a set of photographs of Râil, and sent many copies of these prints to noted Egyptologists for their edification and comment.\(^{64}\) Remarkably, although he was in his nineties and near the end of his life by this time, Nicholson’s interest in the Sydney University museum and in scholarly discourse continued unabated.

In addition to these modest efforts of scholarship, Nicholson maintained his contact with Hekekyan and many other archaeologists and Egyptologists of note through his correspondence, social circle and membership of various learned societies. His acquaintances included Sayce, curators and Trustees of the British Museum, Flinders Petrie, and those who founded the Egypt Exploration Fund.\(^{65}\) He was a member of the latter and also actively supported Petrie’s work through the Egyptian Research Account.\(^{66}\)

For all his research, however, it must be said that Nicholson’s importance to Egyptology does not lie in his scholarship. This may have much to do with what survived the Totteridge fire, as were the records of his trip to Egypt still extant, they would certainly offer the modern scholar a rich source of information about the monuments as they appeared 150 years ago. Secondly, the notes from his work at Memphis would be of considerable interest even now, had they not perished in the fire, as presumably they did. That said, Nicholson’s contribution to the discipline in terms of published research does not rank with other better known and more accomplished scholars of the late 19th century. Rather, it is his visionary benefaction to the University that has cemented his place in Egyptology.

From the outset, Nicholson believed that a major donation to the University would, in time, attract other similar material and thus create the foundation for a great museum.\(^{67}\) He held that

in a country like Australia, where all is new, objects comparatively insignificant in themselves, yet illustrative of the manners, religion, and thoughts of those who lived during earlier periods of the world’s history, possess a value and an interest far beyond what would belong to them in European states, where collections of such objects are to be found in all great cities, and have been made, regardless of all expense, upon the largest scale.\(^{68}\)

Therefore, as a place devoid of history and collections illustrating the historic past, Sydney would benefit more from his generosity than a European institution with already substantial holdings. But Nicholson’s largesse did not stop with antiquities: he also donated books, manuscripts, paintings, stained glass windows, tapestries and many other important objects to the University.\(^{69}\) As van Leeuwen has noted, and as the above quotation illustrates, Nicholson’s donations helped create a sense of ‘instant history’ for the University, in the traditions of great British and European institutions.\(^{70}\)

The prevailing view was that Australia was a country without a past, despite the presence of Aboriginal people on the continent for the previous 60,000 years.\(^{71}\) Thus it was Nicholson’s belief that the museum was an enlightening influence, and a necessary European cultural and civilising norm, in what was a far-flung outpost of Western society. Crucial to this view was the need to develop an understanding in the community of the ancient past and of the colony’s roots in western civilisation, which art, literature and antiquities could help illustrate and magnify. In effect, the ‘civilising’ effect of the classical world would help bring order to a rude, vulgar and materialistic colony where a cultured, learned and educated man such as Nicholson must have seemed very out of place.\(^{72}\)

CONCLUSION

Although the records of Nicholson’s travels are scanty, sufficient evidence exists to suggest that he was an important early scholar-traveller in Egypt. He was motivated not only by the antiquarian’s acquisitive impulses, but by a desire to understand ancient Egyptian history and culture through the study of its
monuments, texts, artefacts and archaeology. This is illustrated by the fact that he apparently conducted his own excavations at Memphis, made many observations about the monuments and their inscriptions during his travels, and engaged in serious scholarly inquiry into the artefacts he acquired. These interests continued until the end of his life.

His importance as a collector and benefactor is evident to anyone who walks into the Nicholson Museum today. The overall impression created by Nicholson’s original donation of Egyptian artefacts is of objects carefully chosen for variety and completeness to illustrate a broad spectrum of Egyptian material culture, rather than a collection of fragmentary items from an archaeological dig, especially from a settlement site like Memphis. Nicholson was clearly acquiring a collection with a donation to the University of Sydney in mind. This was motivated by the desire to help civilise a new colony far from its British roots and nurture the uncultivated minds of its inhabitants. For the University, this and his other endowments helped give the new institution a sense of history in a land that was seen to have none prior to the arrival of European settlers.

While we have certainly moved on in our thinking of Australian history, the views of Sir Charles Nicholson reflected the prevailing attitudes of the time. It is hoped that further research into his collection will enable Sir Charles Nicholson to receive fuller recognition as an important scholar-traveller of the mid-19th century.

1 This paper was originally delivered on 1 October 2002 to the ICOM International Committee for University Museums and Collections Annual Conference, held at the University of Sydney. I am indebted to Dr Nicholas Hardwick, Michael Turner, Dr Boyo Ockinga and Jana Jones for their assistance with the research for this article.


accompany an exhibition of Nicholson Museum objects held at the David Jones Gallery, Sydney, in 1979. Of course, many scholarly articles have been written about specific objects in the collection over the years, too numerous to mention here.


In 1856, the Legislative Council became the first Parliament on the continent, having been granted responsible government by Queen Victoria’s administration. For a summary of the positions held during Nicholson’s parliamentary career, see Draft Index to the Minutes of Proceedings of the Legislative Council 1843–1856 (Sydney, n.d.), 1098–103. I am grateful to the Clerk of the New South Wales Legislative Council, Mr John Evans, for providing this information.

Macmillan also states that at this time Nicholson bought ‘fragments of inscriptions on stone from Egypt’: Macmillan, Charles Nicholson, 6. These alleged purchases of Egyptian antiquities prior to his visit up the Nile might have included the inscription from Giza (R428, see note 26), which was not part of the original collection catalogued by Bonomi in 1858. However, the large-scale acquisition of Egyptian antiquities prior to Nicholson’s voyage in 1856 seems unlikely.

The 1838 Annual Report of the Sydney Mechanics’ School of Arts states ‘...of all branches of knowledge, Archaeology, or enquiries of an antiquarian kind, are furnished with the fewest materials for their successful cultivation in this colony...’. Lawler, History of the Nicholson Museum, 21. See also van Leeuwen, Communicating Cultures, 66–7.

The reference to only one trip in W. R. Dawson, E. P. Uphill and M. L. Bierbrier, Who was Who in Egyptology, 3rd ed. (London, 1995), 311, is erroneous, as is the 1854–5 date for Nicholson’s first visit to Egypt.

In a letter to Alexander Berry dated 2 November 1856, Nicholson states that ‘I am just about to start for Egypt, and from thence return to Italy.’: Berry Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, ML MSS 315/51, Item 5, 579–82. A fragment of a mosaic pavement (R424) was almost certainly collected by Nicholson in this region. It is described as coming from ‘Nicopolis—the City of Victory—about two miles from Alexandria’: Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 42, No. 424. It is only a small piece and has the character of an object that was picked up from the ground.
Letter to Emily Macarthur from Sir Charles Nicholson dated 28 November 1856, Emily Macarthur Miscellaneous Correspondence 1840–1879, ML MSS A4347. The weather in Cairo would have been extremely mild at that time and not unlike that of Sydney in late November.

Macarthur MS, 295. This kind of romantic observation was common for European travellers. Sometimes they were known to dress up in local clothes, which El Kholy describes as part of the ‘wealthy Victorian experience’ of Egypt and the Near East: see ‘Romances and Realities of Travellers’, in P. and J. Starkey (eds.), Unfolding the Orient. Travellers in Egypt and the Near East (Reading, 2001), 262. There is no evidence that Nicholson ever wore oriental garb during his travels to Egypt.

Macarthur MS, 296.

Macarthur MS, 294.

Macarthur MS, 295.

Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 16–17, No. 46; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 7, No. 46; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 20–1, No. 46. Another piece (R428), described as a ‘fragment of sandstone, with incised hieroglyphs, from the tombs at Ghizeh [sic]’, was probably acquired by Nicholson on his first trip to Egypt although it did not form part of the group of objects catalogued by Joseph Bonomi in 1858: see Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 42, No. 428.

Charles Nicholson MS, University of Sydney Archives, Accet 951/952 Group P4 Series 4 Item 15. The book referred to here is Nicholson’s Aegyptiaca, which was published in 1891. The other person mentioned is undoubtedly Jacques de Morgan, the French archaeologist who was Director-General of the Egyptian Antiquities Service from 1892 until 1897: Dawson et al., Who was Who in Egyptology, 297.

Macmillan states that Nicholson conducted fieldwork in Egypt, with objects from his discoveries forming part of his collection: Charles Nicholson, 25. The letter from Sayce is the only primary source identified by the writer referring to such work; Sayce may have mistakenly meant Hekekyan’s excavations of 1854.

In 2002, the writer was present when Dr Ann McFarlane, working on behalf of the Australian Centre for Egyptology at the Teti Cemetery at Saqqara, found an almost identical intact coffin south of the tomb of Ka-em-hesit. For catalogue entries of the Nicholson example, see Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 10, No. 29; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 5, No. 29; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 15, No. 29; Trendall in Handbook to the Nicholson Museum, 48–9, stated that the coffin was empty, but this is not the case.

Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 14, 16, 29, Nos. 35–6, 45 and 101; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 5, 7, 13, Nos. 35–6, 45 and 101; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 16, 20, 38, Nos. 35–6, 45 and 101. The skull was not catalogued by Bonomi but is almost certainly from Nicholson’s 1856–7 trip and is described as coming from ‘the Burial place of Sakkara, near Memphis’: Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 42, No. 425.

See Jeffreys, this volume. David Jeffreys has conducted detailed research on the archaeological work of Hekekyan at Memphis, whose papers are now lodged in the British Library. On Nicholson’s relationship with Hekekyan, see also K. Sowada, ‘A Late Eighteenth Dynasty Statue in the Nicholson Museum, Sydney’, JEA 80 (1994), 139.

On the gift of this object to the University, see the letter written by Nicholson to the University: Nicholson MS, Item 5. See also Jeffreys, this volume.

The location of two other blocks from the pavement, apparently once in Nicholson’s possession, is not known. Málek is of the view that, contrary to Nicholson’s own recollection in Aegyptiaca, 115, the remaining blocks were never sent to Sydney: J. Málek, ‘The “co-regency relief” of Akhenaton and Smenkhkare from Memphis’, in P. Der Manuelian (ed.), Studies in honor of William Kelly Simpson, II (Boston, 1996), 555 n. 16. Jeffreys is also of the same opinion: see this volume.

Nicholson’s paper, delivered to the Royal Society of Literature on 20 May 1868, was first published as
Sir Charles Nicholson: an Early Scholar-Traveller in Egypt


Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 90, No. 1136.

I am indebted to the University for providing a Sesquicentenary Grant that enabled Sir Charles’ original donation from Egypt to be catalogued in detail.


Nicholson MS, Item 5.


Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 90, No. 1138; Trendall, Handbook to the Nicholson Museum1, 46; Sowada, JEA 80, 137–43 and references.

A book of eight squeezes ‘from Bas-Reliefs found in Tombs in Egypt’ made by Nicholson (R 1162) does not cite a provenance for the images, but they are certainly taken from Theban tombs of the 18th and 19th Dynasties: see Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 93, No. 1162. Roger De Keersmaecker, who has made a study of travellers’ graffiti from the Theban area, reported that the name ‘Nicholson’ has not been found: De Keersmaecker, personal communication. It seems that Nicholson’s respect for the antiquity of the monuments prevented this particular act of despoliation.

The ‘voice of the Memnon’ refers to a phenomenon reported in the Roman era, when the northernmost statue would ‘sing’ at certain times of the day. Apparently this ceased after repairs to the statue by Septimius Severus. The ‘curious story’ mentioned here by Nicholson may be the visit to the Colossi by the Roman Emperor Hadrian and his wife Sabina, who came to hear the statue sing, only to find it silent; the statue did, however, perform for them on the following day: A. Bowman, Egypt after the Pharaohs. 332 BC–AD 642 (London, 1986), 44–5.


Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 19, No. 63; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 9, No. 63; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 24, No. 63.

Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 139–40.

Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 16, No. 44; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 7, No. 44; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 20, No. 44. See also Lawler, History of the Nicholson Museum, 67.

On this coffin, see Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 7–10, No. 27; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 4, No. 27; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 10–13, No. 27; Trendall, Handbook to the Nicholson Museum1, 48–9; A. Niwiński, 21st Dynasty Coffins from Thebes: Chronological and
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C. Nicholson, ‘Recollections of Italy’, lecture delivered in Sydney in 1862, the original and typed copy in Nicholson MS, Series I Item 2.

Bonomi, Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, 3, No. 9; Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, 2, No. 9; Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 4, No. 9.

Nicholson MS, Item 2.

Nicholson MS, Item 2.

Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, ii. See also note 2. For information about Bonomi and Birch, see Dawson et al., Who was Who in Egyptology, 53–4 and 45–6 respectively.


Book of Benefactions, 80–2, University of Sydney Archives. For further general information about Nicholson’s donation of other antiquities, see A. D. Trendall, ‘The Nicholson Museum’, Art and Australia 5/3 (1967), 528–37. The museum was originally known as ‘The Museum of Antiquities’: Lawler, History of the Nicholson Museum, 41–2. By 1870 it was also known as ‘The Nicholsonian Museum’ in honour of its principal benefactor: Reeve, Catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities, i. For photographs of the museum around 1900, see pl. 2. Note the framed panels displaying inscribed mummy wrappings hanging on the wall.

Nicholson MS, Item 5.

See note 34 and note 40. His paper on the blocks of Mose was read to the Royal Society of Literature on 4 January 1865: Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 95–112.

‘Notes on Hieratic Papyrus’, Aegyptiaca, 139–50. This artefact evidently escaped destruction in the Totteridge fire, and eventually came into the hands of St Boniface College (UK). It was offered for sale at Sotheby’s in 1990: Auction Catalogue, London, 10 July 1990 (London, 1990) Lot No. 345. This, along with statements in a letter written by Nicholson in 1896, indicates that he maintained a collection of papyri well into the 1890s: Nicholson MS, Series 4 Item 14.

Some of Nicholson’s notes in Hebrew can be found in his notebook Adversaria, Nicholson MS, Item 6.

Many of the replies he received, including one from Hilda Petrie, are still in the Sydney University Archives: Nicholson MS, Series 4 Item 13.

Various letters in the University of Sydney Archives include correspondence from Flinders and Hilda Petrie and Emily Paterson of the Egypt Exploration Fund: Nicholson MS, Item 13. Letters written by Nicholson held by the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum reveal that he maintained a lively relationship with Birch on his return from Australia. I am grateful to Dr John Taylor for providing me with copies of these letters.


Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 115.
Sir Charles Nicholson: an Early Scholar- Traveller in Egypt

Nicholson, Aegyptiaca, 115–16.


van Leeuwen, Communicating Cultures, 66–7.

Only in more recent years has this error been formally rectified in our political and educational structures. The High Court of Australia’s Mabo judgement in 1993, which saw the doctrine of terra nullius overturned, formally recognised that Australia was occupied before the arrival of white settlers in 1788. The doctrine of terra nullius held that Australia was not inhabited prior to white settlement. It was the legal basis on which Aboriginal people were dispossessed from their land by Europeans: see B. Attwood (ed.), In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia (Sydney, 1996).

He was later to write that Italy in particular ‘may be regarded as the parent of European civilization’ and ‘as the origin al home of all modern civilized nations’: Nicholson MS, Item 2.
(a) Sir Charles Nicholson, by G. Koberwein, 1864. Charcoal, pencil and pastels. Photograph courtesy of Sydney University Art Collection.

(b) Sir Charles Nicholson in his study at The Grange, Totteridge (UK), c. 1890. Photograph courtesy of Sydney University Archives.
(a) View of the Egyptian Room, Nicholson Museum, c. 1900.

(b) View from the Egyptian Room into the Graeco-Roman Room, Nicholson Museum, c. 1900.

SIR CHARLES NICHOLSON (Sowada)