

*The Letters of Peter le Page Renouf (1822–1897)*, edited by Kevin J. Cathcart, 4 vols. (University College Dublin Press, 2002–2004).

*A review by Patricia Usick*

Less well-known than either his predecessor Samuel Birch or his eventual successor Ernest A. Wallis Budge, the Egyptologist and Orientalist Peter le Page Renouf was Keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum from 1886 to 1891. Unlike the long reigns of Birch and Budge, Renouf was acrimoniously forced out of office after five years, despite being acknowledged as an outstanding scholar. His writings were collected and published after his death by his widow and to these are now added his correspondence, published in four volumes as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations of University College, Dublin (formerly the Catholic University). Each volume is prefaced with a resumé of his life and an appendix containing brief biographies of those mentioned in the letters. Translations are given for the German letters but not the French.

Born in Guernsey, Renouf read theology at Pembroke College, Oxford in 1840 but, to the consternation of his parents, converted to Roman Catholicism in 1842 and consequently left before taking a degree, being unable to continue to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church as required. (A list of the books he borrowed from Pembroke library is in an appendix.) He joined St. Mary's College, Oscott, near Birmingham, as a tutor, while continuing his studies in philosophy and theology.

The first of the four volumes covers his college years, 1840–46, when lively and amusing letters home describe college life and his fellow students and teachers. They also reveal the impact of the Oxford Movement, founded by the charismatic theologian John Henry Newman, on the young scholar of Arabic, Ethiopic, Hebrew and Syriac. Renouf was in contact with Newman and other prominent figures in the Anglican/Catholic debate, and by the age of nineteen Renouf had published the first of many articles on theology.

In 1846 the bilingual Renouf moved to Besançon, in France as tutor to the son of the Comte de Vaulchier, and volume two contains his letters home to his family with accounts of his daily life, his travels in France and Switzerland, and the political upheavals of the 1848 revolution; the latter is viewed from the relative calm of a provincial backwater where he developed a passion for the study of butterflies.

Volume three begins in 1854 when he moved to Ireland at the invitation of Newman to take up an academic post at the new Catholic University in Dublin where he first taught French literature, later choosing to become Professor of Ancient History and Oriental languages, because 'My favourite and persevering study is Christian Antiquity...'. The study of Coptic prompted him to teach himself the ancient Egyptian language and scripts in which he quickly became skilled. In 1857 Renouf married Ludovica Brentano and the gossip of family life now enters his letters to his parents and sister. Domestic responsibilities also brought financial worries which remained throughout his life. Renouf became an editor of the Catholic University journal *The Atlantis*, in which he published Egyptological articles and he also contributed to the editing of Sir John Dalberg Acton's *Home and Foreign Review* which had

replaced *The Rambler*, a Catholic literary journal founded by laymen. In 1859, Renouf's paper on the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in *The Atlantis* led to a correspondence with the Revd Edward Hincks (1792–1866), a leading Egyptologist who was also the decipherer of Babylonian cuneiform. Hincks wrote 'I am glad to see that anyone is sensible of the importance of this new branch of knowledge & I think you are likely to take the lead of every one in this country.' At this time Hincks, Samuel Birch and Charles Wycliffe Goodwin were the recognised British Egyptologists of the day. Renouf continued as a prolific writer on theological matters while also publishing an *Elementary Grammar of the Egyptian Language*. In the 1860s there were few professional Egyptologists, and Champollion's decipherment was still being attacked as bogus by notables such as Sir G.C. Lewis and Dr Gustavus Seyffarth. Renouf's refutation of the latter's views resulted in 'a most thundering attack' on him by Seyffarth.

Renouf became unhappy in Dublin, and was able to obtain the appointment of Inspector of Schools in England in 1864, and the final volume covers the years in London from 1864 to his death in 1897. After so many earlier letters devoted to the intricacies of theological argument the final volume reveals a poignant indictment of Renouf's treatment by the British Museum, and continuing insights into the progress of Egyptology. Dictionaries and grammars, fundamental to any study of ancient history, chronology or culture were being compiled in these years and Renouf's 'acute and penetrating studies of ancient Egyptian philology' (Lepsius's view) and his contribution to transliteration, the pronunciation of hieroglyphs, made the breadth of his scholarship universally respected, even though Amelia Edwards could still complain of the inaccessibility of his work. She found his *Egyptian Grammar* useful but begs for an English rendering in the 2nd edition since 'some of your students may be ladies to whom Greek & Aramaic are deadly stumbling blocks, & who sigh over your Latin illustrations'.

For 22 years, while working long hours as Inspector of Schools, with special responsibility for the Catholic schools, he used any spare time to 'stick to hieroglyphics' as Goodwin had advised, studying, writing for journals such as the *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* and corresponding with his academic colleagues abroad. (We learn incidentally that the much-reproduced Illustrated London News picture showing the 1874 International Congress of Orientalists gathered round the iconic Rosetta Stone does not show Birch explaining its significance, as the caption claims, but the bearded figure of Renouf.) Beyond a reference to Brugsch as 'a careless transcriber', Renouf's letters are free from attacks on other Egyptologists or rancorous relationships; he was tolerant of error, believing that the harder one works the more mistakes will be made but that was the only way to move the study forward. The appalling events of the 1880s are therefore shocking and unexpected.

A single letter from Mrs Renouf describes their trip to Egypt in 1875 via Syria and Palestine. They visited Cairo, Asyut, Abydos and explored Thebes; Renouf copied inscriptions but, disappointingly, Mariette was not in Cairo, the museum was closed for a religious festival and Renouf returned with a debilitating attack of gout.

Despite Sir John Acton's championing him as 'the most learned man I know of in England' Renouf failed to obtain the post of Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. However, following Samuel Birch's death in 1885, Renouf, then aged 64, was appointed Keeper of Oriental Antiquities; a role for which, as he himself said in his application, he was uniquely suited, being the only person in England competent to continue Birch's work. In the event it was the question of his salary which provided a slight hitch rather than what Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (the Assyriologist and a Trustee) called 'his foreign name' or 'his adopted creed'. The parlous state of British Egyptology compared with the number of eminent scholars in university posts in Germany is a distinct theme of the correspondence. Renouf wrote

in 1888 that 'In England the case is hopeless. No man however distinguished can make his way by Egyptology' and suggested the young Egyptologist in question should look for work in America.

Renouf seems to have attacked his new role with considerable administrative experience, great scholarship, and humour, although the letters do not reveal much about his work. While his assistant, Budge, travelled to Mesopotamia to purchase or obtain antiquities, being determined 'to "acquire" as much as I can for nothing', Renouf initially experienced a leisurely couple of months, 'But after some time people discovered that there was some one at last at the head of this department, and then began torrents of correspondence & visits from persons, many of whom, after some conversation proved to be qualified for entrance into lunatic asylums'. His years as Keeper saw the arrangement, modernization, and enlargement of the Egyptian collections and the cataloguing of cuneiform tablets and inscriptions. In 1887 his request for an assistant to deal with the influx of inscribed Mesopotamian antiquities was refused, but he had 'trained' Budge to put the Egyptian side in 'good order'. However just five years later, in 1891, he was stunned to receive a curt letter from the Principal Librarian Edward Maunde-Thompson, warning him that the museum's Trustees were demanding he leave his post because the Civil Service had now introduced compulsory retirement at 65. He was further informed that the Trustees had refused an application to 'retain our elder officers' and that if Renouf wished to contest this he must put his claim in writing. Renouf's position may not have been helped by long absences abroad. Maunde-Thompson offered to pay Renouf to catalogue the museum's papyri, but Renouf refused; it was not a proper job and in order to make up the difference between his former salary and pension he would need to work deliberately slowly. In any case it would be intolerable to work with Budge, who, he wrote privately, would never rise above mediocrity. Maunde-Thompson supported Budge, as Renouf realised (a row ensued when a member of staff describes the two as 'conspirators') and his position cannot have improved by his open opposition to Budge. Renouf wrote privately that he favoured Édouard Naville to succeed him over Budge or F.L. Griffith. Budge 'would make the Museum unapproachable to scholars whom he disliked. And he dislikes all... And we want a gentleman!' Renouf was removed despite the outraged complaints of twenty-five distinguished European Egyptologists who signed a letter of protest to the Prime Minister. Brugsch wrote that his loss was a 'mortal blow' for Egyptology. An attempt to have Renouf made a Trustee failed, making it all but impossible for him to obtain access to the Egyptian collections to continue his translation of the *Book of the Dead*. Renouf himself recommended that the department be divided into Egyptian and Assyrian sections but this did not occur until 1955.

Renouf was appalled at the promotion of Budge to Keeper in 1894. It is not entirely clear but it appears that Maunde-Thompson had taken responsibility for the department in the intervening years. In 1893 Renouf gave excoriating evidence in court against Budge, who had falsely accused Hormuzd Rassam of being corruptly involved in the illicit trade of cuneiform tablets, calling Budge a 'cowardly, mendacious, and dishonourable scoundrel'. Despite Budge losing the case, a subscription was organised to pay his damages, it did not affect his career and his subsequent promotion endorsed his integrity and merit. There was a further skirmish when Maunde-Thompson apparently accused Renouf of making improper use of official information confided by Budge, but no details were given and Renouf denied, but found himself unable to refute, what remained an unspecified charge. Renouf was knighted in 1896 for services to the British Museum and elected President of the Society of Biblical Archaeology in 1887. He died peacefully at home in London in 1897, still embittered, and declaring Budge, to the last, a charlatan and plagiarist. He was buried in Guernsey.

Over many years the letters show all the great names in Egyptology unstinting in their praise of the

quality of Renouf's contribution to philology, so that it seemed extraordinary, on reading David Wilson's *The British Museum—A History* (London 2002) to find Renouf described there as having had a 'chequered career' and being 'a second-rate scholar—not a patch on Birch, Pinches or even his new assistant E.A. Wallis Budge.' Wilson wonders why the Assyrian scholar Theophilus Pinches was not chosen instead of Renouf and states: 'We may perhaps see Renouf's appointment as a mixture of unrecorded jobbery and as a holding exercise so that Budge could succeed him when he was more mature.' The correspondence here makes it clear that following Renouf's retirement Pinches was deliberately passed over by Maunde-Thompson, who forbade him to apply for the post and then made his day-to-day life in the museum impossible by constant harassment. In contrast to Wilson, the anonymous biography, or rather hagiography, prefacing the fourth volume of *The Life-Work of Peter le Page Renouf* (Paris 1902–07), numbering his many achievements in the museum, hints darkly of opposition to his improvements, culminating in a number of actions 'contrary to his instructions' on the orders of the Principal Librarian.

The Romantic epic of decipherment, which seemingly ends with Champollion's ground-breaking discoveries, devotes less attention to the eminent scholars who followed him, slowly and painstakingly consolidating his work of grammar and interpretation. In 1863 Renouf could still write of his studies as 'a hobby', hoping that Oxford University might institute a Chair in the subject of Egyptology, which 'has never been introduced for the simple reason that Birch, Goodwin, Hincks and myself are the only Englishmen who have scientifically studied the matter.' Their names may not strike a chord today with the general public but are not forgotten by present-day Egyptologists who continue to progress the study of ancient Egyptian language and culture.