

REVIEWS

Discovering Dorothea: The Life of the Pioneering Fossil-Hunter Dorothea Bate. By Karolyn Shindler. 2005. HarperCollins London. HB. 390pp. Price £25 ISBN 0 00 257138 2.

This must have been a very difficult book to write. Ms Shindler clearly found a fascinating subject for a biography, but sadly one who has left very little personal detail of her life behind. It is not difficult to understand the attraction of her subject; Dorothea Bate fits in a number of interesting categories. On the one hand she typifies the dedicated “amateur” or self-taught scientist who, by sheer force of personality, hard work and competence forces her way to the heart of her chosen profession and on the other she is one of a surprising number of women who came to the fore in archaeology and palaeontology in the years before the Second World War. Dorothy Garrod, with whom Miss Bate worked on material from Mount Carmel in Palestine, is probably the most famous of these, but this book also touches on the careers of Elinor Gardner, Gertrude Caton Thompson and Harriet Boyd Hawes, amongst others.

In brief, in 1898 as a self-taught nineteen year-old, Dorothea Bate began a professional relationship with the Natural History Museum (NHM) then still known as the British Museum (Natural History), gradually rising in status from “student” to Officer in Charge of the Tring Museum, which became part of the NHM in 1937. She held this position until her death in 1951. Along the way Dorothea gained an international reputation as a comparative zoologist as well as excavating at, mainly cave, sites in Cyprus, Malta, Majorca, Menorca and Palestine, having started at Merlin’s Cave in the Wye Valley.

Sadly, although the NHM holds a number of archives which give a lot of detail of her professional career, virtually no personal material has survived as much was destroyed when her sister’s house burnt down in 1954. As a result Ms Shindler is forced to speculate about such matters, which is never a satisfactory technique for a biography. While this is by no means the author’s fault, this is the book’s great weakness, leaving the reader somewhat frustrated at times and the author forced to pad the volume out with irrelevancies such as an account of the Piltdown forgery.

This is a great shame both for the author and for the reader who, as well as losing the possibility greater insight into the character of someone described by Andy Currant as “the spark that would ignite a project” also lose the possibility of greater insight into professional decisions that would not be made today, such as that to discard the majority of the finds from R.F. Parry’s 1920’s excavations at Gough’s Cave. Although much survived (see for example Tratman, 1976) this decision sealed the fate “of what would now have been a very valuable taphonomic collection had it survived intact” (Currant, 1986).

Graham Mullan

REFERENCES

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