

Book Reviews

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Yucatán Through Her Eyes: Alice Dixon Le Plongeon, Writer and Expeditionary Photographer
By Lawrence Gustave Desmond, University of New Mexico Press (2009), 387 pages, \$45 (ISBN 978-0-8263-4595-0)

Reviewed by Jim D. Feagins

Desmond offers a rare insider's perspective of early Mesoamerican archeological fieldwork during the latter half of the 19th century. He has produced a fine biography of Alice Le Plongeon.

Of course, the volume's chief value to those interested in archeology is the many halftones of early photographs of Mayan ruins. There is also her transcribed diary. Found a decade ago, the diary and many of her other papers had been lost for over 80 years.

Alice and Augustus Le Plongeon, a husband and wife team, spent over a decade working in Mexico's Yucatan. They labored during an antiquarian age, long before professional archeologists began to place the discipline on a more scientific footing.

Modern students of archeology sometimes forget the coarse roots from which the profession derived. Alice's Yucatan diary is not only a reminder of just how far we have come as a profession, it contains abundant anecdotes expressing the excitement of archeological exploration.

Also presented is the struggle to survive in exotic locations during the 1870s and early 1880s. At that time, transportation, food, shelter, disease, class and political turmoil, and communication with workers (who spoke only Mayan) was difficult, especially with the Le Plongeon's limited funds.

The Yucatan diary, which comprises most of the volume, is not quite an excavation notebook. Rather, it is a chronicle of personal experiences while photographing, excavating, and living among the ruins. At that early date, few individuals, especially women, studied Mesoamerican archeology — it was a relatively new field.

Alice was born in 1851 to a



middle class English family. Her father, Henry Dixon, was a well known London photographer. He taught his daughter all aspects of the trade at an early age. She traveled to North America, and as a young Victorian bride, had surprising

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Back copies of OAS publications are always valuable. They can help fill gaps in the OAS archives, said Mary McHard, publications chairman.

An inventory is under way at the OAS storage unit in Bethany. Shelves are being prepared to move the most valuable material off the concrete floor. Donations of both publications and shelves are appreciated, McHard said.

Archive materials can be donated by contacting Mary at dmmchard@flash.net or calling her at (405) 525-7824. If needed, she can arrange to have the materials picked up and delivered to storage.

stamina and survival skills for one so slight of frame. Alice, a pioneer woman photographer, even wrote several technical articles for photographic journals in a male-dominated field.

Her much older, eccentric French husband, Augustus, was a medical doctor, photographer, and antiquarian/amateur archeologist. They worked together, clearing, excavating, making casts of monuments, and extensively photographing a host of small sites as well as the Mayan ruins of Uxmal and Chichen Itza. They were the first to excavate at these two now famous places.

The couple's extensive, systematic photographs preserve valuable evidence of many monuments before the ravages of later excavations, weathering, restoration, and looting.

During the latter part of their careers, their speculative musings, especially concerning their belief that the Maya were the founders of the early Egyptian civilization, put them at odds with mainstream archeologists. At first, such theories were acceptable. There was so much that was unknown. Later, with better archeological dating showing the Mayan-Egyptian connection was impossible, the Le Plongeon's stubborn adherence to the theory left them somewhat isolated in the profession.

In 1884, Alice, at age 33, and her husband left Yucatan and moved to New York. There she began extensively writing and giving well-received lectures to large crowds. Her Mesoamerican talks were often enhanced with lantern slides she made from the couples' photographs.

She was a multifaceted woman with wide-ranging interests, writing and lecturing on many subjects. She was a social activist. She had great amount compassion for the Mayan people on a philosophical level, while on a personal level, her diary indicates that they were sometimes dealt with high-handedly.

Alice's adventurous, unconventional career ended in 1910. She died at the age of 59. In 2004, her transcribed diary and many of her field notes, manuscripts, and photographs were obtained by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles.

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