



# News & Notes

The Oriental Institute  
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Issued confidentially to members and friends  
Not for publication



JOHN ALBERT WILSON  
September 12, 1899—August 30, 1976  
The Andrew MacLeish Distinguished Service  
Professor Emeritus of Egyptology



GUSTAVUS FRANKLIN SWIFT III  
December 7, 1916—October 1, 1976  
Curator of the Oriental Institute Museum

John A. Wilson was for more than a quarter of a century the most widely known of American Egyptologists and the first to be thought of and sought after for any Egyptological enterprise in the world. A scholar's peers in an academic discipline are sometimes incredulous and a bit cynical about the basis of such a reputation, a distinguished service professorship and election to many honors; and their disbelief is not always heavily laced with jealousy. They did not wonder in the case of John Wilson, as they had not in the case of James Henry Breasted before him. It was Egyptologists themselves who first discovered Wilson, found that they could rely upon his translations of ancient Egyptian texts and gain valuable insights from them. Having come to trust his fundamental scholarship they then began to discover that he could also write imaginatively and yet reliably about ancient Egyptian history as well, and that they could gain understanding and see development through his carefully based but venturesome work. Even if his interpretation of the data did not in every instance recommend itself to them, they found stimulus for their own reconstruction and interpretation of the relationship and significance of isolated events through his thinking. In a sense he did for Egyptology, for the records and history of ancient Egypt, what Breasted had done in his day. Wilson applied the accumulated discoveries of the intervening half century and that application resulted in a wholly new and different product in his hands.

Egyptologists first, and soon afterwards their counterparts in the study of the rest of the ancient Near East, discovered that Wilson was a fresh and confidence-inspiring voice, but a wider public also learned it in the years 1945 to 1950. It was not that Wilson had not written a great deal before that, beginning with an article which appeared in 1927 based upon his Ph.D. dissertation. Nor was it only because he had succeeded the renowned Breasted in one of the most prestigious positions in Near Eastern studies. In fact, it was just after he had resigned the directorship of the Oriental Institute in 1946 that his reputation was established, not only among his fellow Egyptologists but with the literate public; for non-initiates also found that what he wrote was eminently readable. It was in 1946 that *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* appeared, containing Wilson's three-chapter essay on speculative thought in ancient Egypt.

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2 In 1949 the book appeared in paperback as *Before Philosophy*. In 1950 *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* was published, and the very considerable body of Egyptian texts was all in Wilson's translation. The book was to undergo two revisions, in 1955 and 1969. In 1951 there appeared the most significant of all Wilson's achievements, *The Burden of Egypt: An Interpretation of Ancient Egyptian Culture*, and it was to receive a breadth of circulation surprising to him, as a paperback also under the title *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (1956), as well as in Arabic, Spanish, French, Italian, and German translations in the next ten years. This book was indeed of a different kind and, as has been said, it has become a classic. As he wrote in introducing it: "This is not a history of ancient Egypt, but rather a book about ancient Egyptian history," an attempt to state "the significance and 'value' of the story."

Either Wilson got into Egyptology by the merest chance or he was inerrantly destined to it, depending upon one's theological predilections. In high school in Brooklyn, New York, he took pains to learn Latin and Greek, and there was something of an assumption, perhaps a family assumption, that he would become a clergyman as was his father. Many people were to assume throughout his life that he had been ordained a Presbyterian minister. The titles of his books, *The Burden of Egypt* and *Signs and Wonders upon Pharaoh*, taken from the King James Version of the Bible, seemed to confirm this assumption. By the time he entered Princeton University, however, he had himself given up the idea of a career in the church, and he found at Princeton that, as he later wrote, "the best courses were in classics and history, giving the bent to my career." When he graduated in 1920 his future "had narrowed down to the teaching of history, probably that of Eastern Europe." His and his father's assumption was then that he would necessarily undertake graduate study, but the family could not finance him and scholarships were few in 1920. The alternative was to "find a short-term teaching job, save a little money, and then go to graduate school." He was interviewed for a position in a mission college in India, probably owing to his father's church connections, but was not offered it. He was accepted by the Syrian Protestant College, later renamed the American University of Beirut, for a three-year term to teach history. Upon his arrival in Beirut, he learned that he would be teaching college English instead. His lifelong habit of enunciating English with a precision and distinctness that was often exaggerated for emphasis probably began with his teaching of students whose command of English was feeble at best. His invariable practice of preparing outlines, charts, and paradigms for his students in Egyptology later may also have begun in Beirut but it probably owed more to his innate orderliness of mind.

Weekend and holiday trips from Beirut to the sites of ancient monuments soon resulted in the eclipse of any interest Wilson had had in the history of Eastern Europe, and a trip through Egypt in September of 1922 (just about two months before Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun) was conclusive: "My mind turned definitely to that fascinating culture." It was never to turn away again.

Another circumstance that conspired to make the young teacher of English an Egyptologist, and that very soon, was the presence on the Beirut faculty of the late Harold H. Nelson, Professor and Chairman of the Department of History, who offered to teach the young short-term teachers ancient history at his home in the evenings. He also gave Wilson his first lessons in Egyptian hieroglyphs. Nelson had taken a Ph.D. in Egyptology under Breasted in Chicago, and Breasted visited Beirut in the spring of 1923 when Wilson's three-year term was about to end. Wilson was introduced and talked to Breasted and, on Nelson's recommendation, he was offered a then munificent fellowship of \$800 a year in Breasted's four-year-old Oriental Institute. At Breasted's invitation Nelson went the next year to Egypt to inaugurate (and to direct for the next twenty-three years) the Epigraphic and Architectural Survey at Luxor.

Wilson acquired his Ph.D. at Chicago in three years and in the autumn of 1926 he went to Luxor to join Nelson once more, now on the staff of the Epigraphic Survey. In the summer of 1926, between acquiring his degree and going to Luxor, he married Mary R. Rouse, whom he had met in Beirut where she was a laboratory technician in the University Hospital, so she went with him.

In 1931 Wilson returned to Chicago to join William F. Edgerton, with whom he had shared the epigraphic work at Luxor, on the faculty of the University. In 1935 he became Scientific Secretary as an assistant to Breasted and in 1936 he became Director of the Oriental Institute a few months after Breasted's death. The rest is history, history in a very real sense, for he wrote it himself in his autobiography, *Thousands of Years* (1972).

George R. Hughes



Gustavus F. Swift, grandson of the founder of Swift & Company, was a Chicagoan born and reared, as not many members of the University are, and Chicago was home to him throughout his life. His education was begun here at the Francis Parker School and the Chicago Latin School, but he graduated from the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut in 1935. He then entered Harvard College from which he received his A.B. degree in Classics and Fine Arts in 1939.

In the autumn of 1939 Mr. Swift began graduate studies at Harvard University in anthropology and archeology but became ill and discontinued shortly thereafter. When he resumed graduate work it was in prehistoric Aegean archeology in the University of Cincinnati in 1940. In 1941 he began his studies in Near Eastern archeology, history, and languages in the University of Chicago, back home once more.

After only one quarter at Chicago Mr. Swift responded to the call of wartime Washington and went to work in the Signal Intelligence Service from which he was not to return until January, 1946. He then resumed his graduate studies at Chicago. He was a Research Assistant in the Oriental Institute from 1952 to 1965 and earned his Ph.D. degree in 1958 with a dissertation on pottery excavated in the 'Amuq by the Institute's Syrian Expedition.

In 1960 Mr. Swift began a long and significant association with the Harvard-Cornell Exploration of Sardis, the ancient capital of the Lydian Empire, in western Turkey. He became senior archeologist and administrative officer of the expedition, and he and his family spent the summers from June to September each year at Sardis from 1960 to 1966, in 1968, and in 1970. He continued his association with that exploration to the time of his death, publishing preliminary reports of the work annually in the years 1961 to 1967 and in 1969 and 1971; his final publication of the Lydian Market Place and other areas of Sardis for whose exploration he bore primary responsibility was in progress at his death.

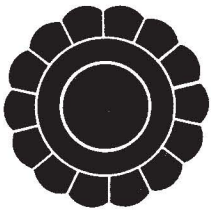
On July 1, 1969, in response to an invitation from the Oriental Institute upon the retirement of the late P. P. Delougaz, Mr. Swift became the first full-time Curator of the Oriental Institute Museum, without any required faculty or field duties. His appointment was announced at the banquet on May 7, 1969 celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Oriental Institute. It seemed then that the Museum had at last come of age and was no longer to be a mere stepchild of the Institute and the University. Mr. Swift entered upon the curatorship with many an idea and he was not adverse to talking about them, taciturn man though he was. He not only envisaged programs dealing with the physical make-up and increased staff of the museum but volunteered to take upon himself relations with the public and the raising of funds. He had to keep telling himself in 1969 that the beginning would have to be modest, impatient though he was, but before his untimely death his constant pondering and investigating had begun to bear results in support from the Institute and its friends, from the University, and latterly from the federal government.

Numerous innovations in and about the Museum, which are already taken for granted as essential, were initiated by Mr. Swift, such as the post of conservator, a conservation laboratory, and organized, usable archives of, for example, the records of the Institute's field expeditions. It was some three years ago that he began inquiries, upon hearing about the possibility of a showing of objects from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun in the United States, to see whether the Oriental Institute could foster and participate in a showing of them in Chicago. He lived to direct the initial planning and to begin preparations for the Institute's participation in just such an exhibition at Field Museum in 1977.

Mr. Swift, as the scion of an old Chicago business family, was involved in the world of corporations as few scholars, certainly archeologists, are privileged or required to be. He was or had been a member of the boards of directors of several companies such as the Wedron Silica Company, the Cal-Sag Terminal Company and the Calumet Development Corporation of the Chicago area, and the Del Monte Properties Company of Pebble Beach, California. He was also in demand and served long but unostentatiously on the governing boards of such civic organizations as the John G. Shedd Aquarium Society, the Hyde Park Neighborhood Club, the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, and the Scholarship and Guidance Association of Chicago.

Despite this large involvement, Mr. Swift's activity in both the Chicago society and the national organization of the Archaeological Institute of America was central to his interests, and he was treasurer of both at the time of his death. In 1965, in recognition of his archeological accomplishments, he was made an Honorary Research Fellow of Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University.

The Oriental Institute owes a great debt to Gus Swift for these seven years, pioneering years in which he helped launch it into its second half-century by assuming a post within it which was new both to him and to it and for the way in which he thoughtfully and persistently began developing his conception of the task he had taken up. He initiated a new era for the Museum, and both he and his wife, Eleanor, gave without fanfare of their time and very considerable abilities much beyond any measure that duty would have demanded.



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