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Limited Edition

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The poetry
detective

Professor
Richard
Parkinson on
the 'Scotland
Yard of
Egyptology'

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Watching the
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The poetry detective

Sylvia Vetta talks to
Richard Bruce Parkinson,
Professor of Egyptology and a
director of Oxford's Griffith Institute
of Egyptology

In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

An ancient Egyptian poem has special resonance for Richard Bruce Parkinson, Professor of Egyptology and a director of Oxford's Griffith Institute of Egyptology, tucked away in a wing of the Sackler Library, just behind the Ashmolean in St John's Street.

"My two schoolboy enthusiasms collided in the masterpiece of ancient Egyptian poetry, *The Tale of Sinuhe*," Professor Parkinson explained. "I became aware that poetry need not be modern or European. In this poem the hero tells how his life journey took a wrong turn — it is a sort of portrait of a voice trying to find itself."

Professor Parkinson says the Griffith Institute, which this year is celebrating its 75th anniversary, has been described as the 'Scotland Yard of Egyptology'. And as 'Parkinson of the Yard' many of the ancient mysteries he has investigated have involved

poetry. It should not really be a revelation that a culture which created such beautiful art also wrote beautiful words.

As an 11 year-old, Professor Parkinson was inspired by poetry and the beauty of the hieroglyph — and his interests eventually led to an intriguing career.

Professor Parkinson was born in 1963 in Teesdale, in County Durham, the only child of two teachers. His mother, Jessie, taught home economics. Professor Parkinson said: "She had wanted to study history but when she was growing up academic choices for women from her background were limited.

"My father, Harold Parkinson, was an artist, and because he had been interested in Egypt as a child, I grew up surrounded by art books on the subject. I must have been about 11 years-old when I was struck by the beauty of the Egyptian script."

Professor Parkinson went to Barnard Castle School in the county town of the same name, where an inspirational English teacher, Alan

Wilkinson (who happened to have studied at The Queen's College, Oxford) sparked a passion for literature in his young pupil.

"I can remember the precise moment in class when I asked myself how poetry works," Professor Parkinson said.

But it is *The Tale of Sinuhe* that has echoed throughout Professor Parkinson's life. He says he enjoys how it shows that lives are not perfect or simple, and the awkward facts of the 'inner life' have power.

"One of my chosen objects has to be the copy of *The Tale of Sinuhe* which is on display in the Egyptian galleries of the Ashmolean," he said.

"Another would be Dad's drawing of Tutankhamun's tomb, done to teach me measured perspective as a schoolboy in 1978. It was based on material from the Griffith Institute, where it now hangs. It was included in the recent *Discovering Tutankhamun* exhibition at the Ashmolean, which would have delighted him."

The young Richard was not attracted to

Professor Richard Parkinson, a director of the Griffith Institute of Egyptology, photographed in the Library at The Queens College, Oxford

Photograph: Ed Nix



Egyptology by mummies, gold and gruesome curses – but by something much more human and deeper. But this came at a cost.

Aged 13 he was in his mother's living room using red ink to copy out the hieroglyphs of *The Tale of Sinuhe*.

"I clumsily spilled the ink onto the new carpet," he recalled. "My parents were not particularly well off and I will never forget my mother's horror and grief. She nobly kept her temper, we tried to clean it as much as we could, and then moved the settee to hide the stain."

Professor Parkinson studied English, French, Latin and Art at A-Level and applied to read Egyptology at The Queen's College, Oxford which has a long association with the subject. He graduated with a first in 1985.

But during his time as an undergraduate at the university he sometimes felt like an outsider.

"I was very happy, but sometimes Oxford seemed to be really intended for people who

were white, male, heterosexual, rich and privileged – and southern. My father never visited me in Oxford. I think he worried that his northern accent would be an embarrassment," Professor Parkinson said.

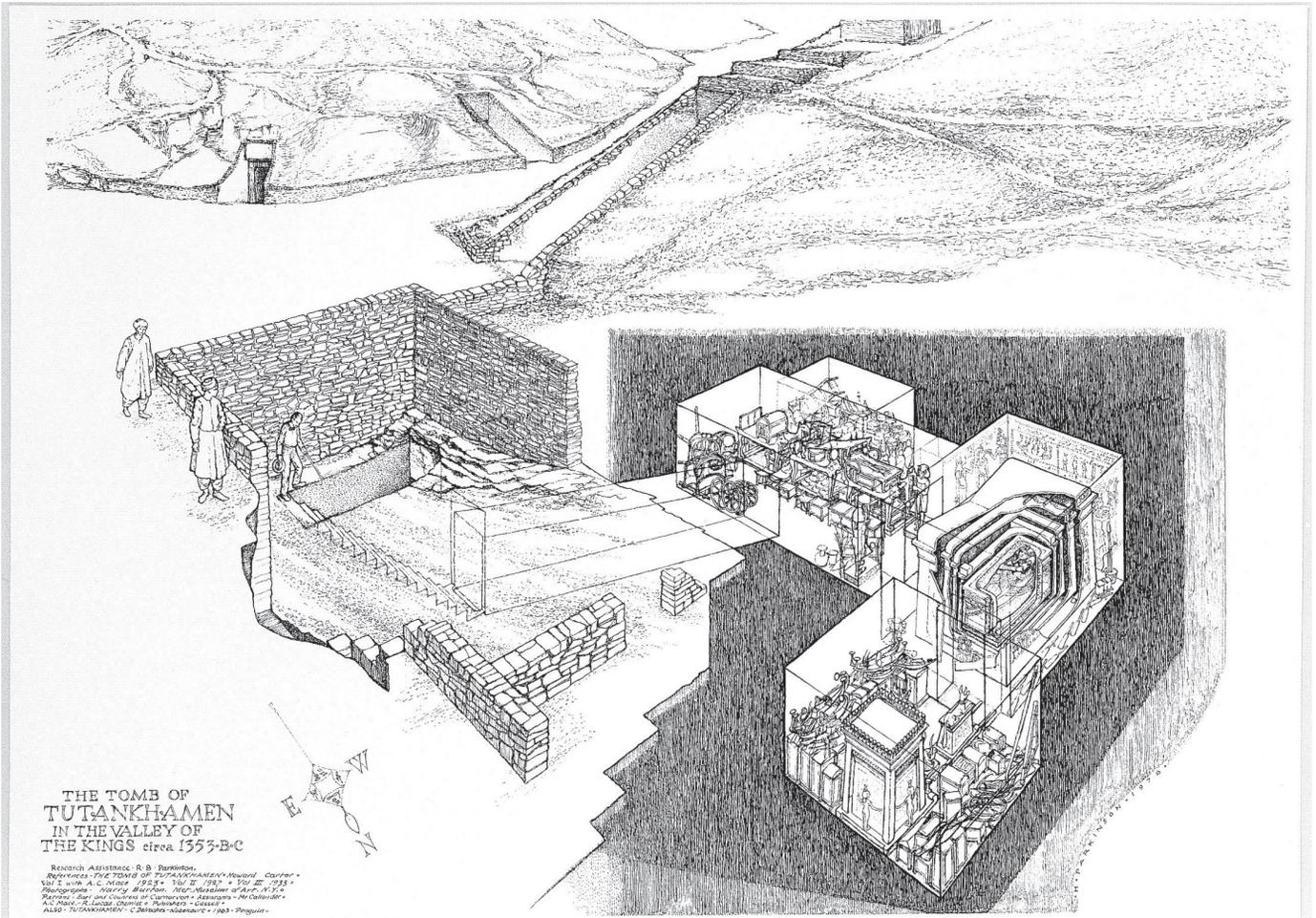
"I felt culturally and socially marginal in the way many young gay people do, and I felt far too stupid to do anything worthwhile or useful – I still feel that.

"A friend and I would always joke about the 'Great Social Event To Which We Were Not Invited'. Remembering these feelings, I thought twice about returning to work here, but it has been marvellous to come back to the Institute and especially to Queen's, which is an immensely supportive and welcoming place.

"My only problem is that as I walk through the college now I am never entirely sure whether I am 20 or 50, and whether I am going to bump into old or new friends, or both."

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THE TOMB OF
TUTANKHAMEN
IN THE VALLEY OF
THE KINGS circa 1353-B-C

Research Assistance: R. B. Parkinson,
Reference: THE TOMB OF TUTANKHAMEN, Howard Carter &
Vol 1 with A. C. Mace, 1925 + Vol II 1927 + Vol III 1933 +
Photographs - Joseph Bonington, Major Walters of Art. N. Y. A.
Pictorial - Carl and Dorothy Sauer - Publishers - New Canaan
A.C. Mace - E. Lucas - Christie's - Publishers - Chelsea
ALSO: TUTANKHAMEN - C. Bonington - H. Parkinson - 1933 - Penguin

The Tomb of Tutankhamun, drawn by Professor Parkinson's father Harold in 1978

© The Griffith Institute, Oxford

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Despite those worries, in 1985, Professor Parkinson remained in Oxford to read for his DPhil. His thesis was an edition and commentary on another poem, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*.

He said: "It is about a quest for social and divine justice. It dies on the page if you read it only for the vocabulary and grammar, but not if you read it for its passion – then it is a living work of art. It is still cited by modern Egyptian writers such as Ahdaf Soueif in connection with the Arab Spring."

Professor Parkinson is best known internationally as an expert on the poetry of the classic age, 1940–1640 BC.

He said, "As well as the philological study of manuscripts, I work on material contexts, literary theory and modern receptions in literature, art and film.

"What I enjoy is the experience of attempting an integrated reading of ancient texts, thinking about their changing contexts and their emotional and intellectual impact on their audiences – what they meant for their original audiences and what they can mean now."

Being in the Egyptian landscape is very important to Professor Parkinson.

"You cannot read a poem without knowing the feel of its landscape," he said. "But I have been an insulin-dependent diabetic since I was 11, and when I was in Egypt on excavation as a graduate student it all went badly wrong when I experienced a 48-hour coma. After that I

could never ask another fieldwork team to take me on, but I spend as much time as I can in Egypt, lecturing on Nile cruises whenever possible."

One work of art made a mark on our castaway's life in 1987—the release of the film *Maurice*, based on the novel of the same title by E M Forster. It is a tale of same-sex love in the early 20th century.

Professor Parkinson said: "I was already a great admirer of E M Forster and his advocacy of the 'inner life', and his novels were very important for my own self-awareness. When I saw the Merchant Ivory film, I found it very inspirational—it is wonderfully romantic and quietly heroic.

"By a strange coincidence I met my husband Tim in Oxford exactly three years to the day after seeing the film. So I would want a DVD of that on the island."

In 1990, Richard was still in Oxford as a junior research fellow at University College Oxford.

He said, "Florence has always been a favourite city, thanks to my father and to Forster—it was the first place I ever travelled on my own, using the advance payment from my first book, and I went there with Tim soon after we met.

"We privately exchanged rings in Santa Croce—sometimes one has to reinvent rites for oneself. We would often eat sandwiches in Piazza S Maria Novella under a loggia, and we picked up a small fragment of pietra serena

(limestone) which was lying in the gutter. It now sits on the mantelpiece at our flat in North London.

"That I must have for the island, to remind me of all the times in Florence with Tim and all the works of art created with that lovely grey stone from the hills of Fiesole."

In 1991, there was a job opening at the British Museum.

"Permanent jobs in Egyptology are few and far between," Professor Parkinson said. "Part of the job requirement was that the candidate needed to be able to copy inscriptions. I could read hieroglyphs and, thanks to dad, I could draw. I ended up with the job and stayed for more than 20 years."

At the British Museum, Professor Parkinson became a curator in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan. His academic responsibilities included curating the papyri, as well as inscribed material such as the Rosetta Stone, the iconic key to Egyptian hieroglyphs.

He said: "On the bicentenary of the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, we had it conserved and cleaned, and discovered that it was not black basalt but grey granite with a pink streak. It was a bit of a shock, but that is what works of arts do. You think you know them, but they always surprise you.

"What I particularly like about the museum world is the emphasis on public service and accessibility, and I enjoy seeing the effect

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encounters with art have on people, how they can change lives.

“My biggest project was a permanent gallery with the wall-paintings from the tomb of an official called Nebamun (around 1325 BC). A friend, the artist Simon Davis, painted me with them as part of a series of portraits of people in their workplaces. They are very spectacular, and when we placed the fragments together the most beautiful bits of painting often turned out to be at eye level. You cannot explain that exclusively through politics or ideology,” Professor Parkinson added.

“Perhaps a beautifully painted butterfly is sometimes simply that – a beautiful butterfly. Sometimes academics are, as the philosopher Raymond Williams said, trained to detachment. What appeals to me is not the abstract and the academic, but the material and the emotional, the touch of the real.”

“Working with designers, conservators, museum assistants and performers is such a privilege. That’s why for my inaugural lecture at the Griffiths Institute – about Sinuhe of course – I was accompanied by a great friend, the actress and novelist Barbara Ewing, who can bring insights to a text that an academic like me never can.”

Richard has published numerous papers and books on Ancient Egypt, for both academic and general readers. But one recent publication had a broader remit.

A Little Gay History (British Museum Press 2013) draws on 40 objects, ranging from prehistoric carvings to prints by David Hockney. One reviewer said that its “academic power made it as explosive as a bombshell”, and the small book tries to present the diversity of human desire across the world from Indian gods to the Emperor Hadrian.

Hanging on the wall of his office is another island choice which features in the book – a copy of a Piranesi print of the ruined chapel in Hadrian’s villa at Tivoli (c. 1770).

The chapel was thought to have been built by Hadrian for his dead lover, the handsome Antinous. Richard explained that Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memoires d’Hadrien* (1951) was inspirational for his academic interests as a student, and that he always tends to take a copy of the book with him when he travels.

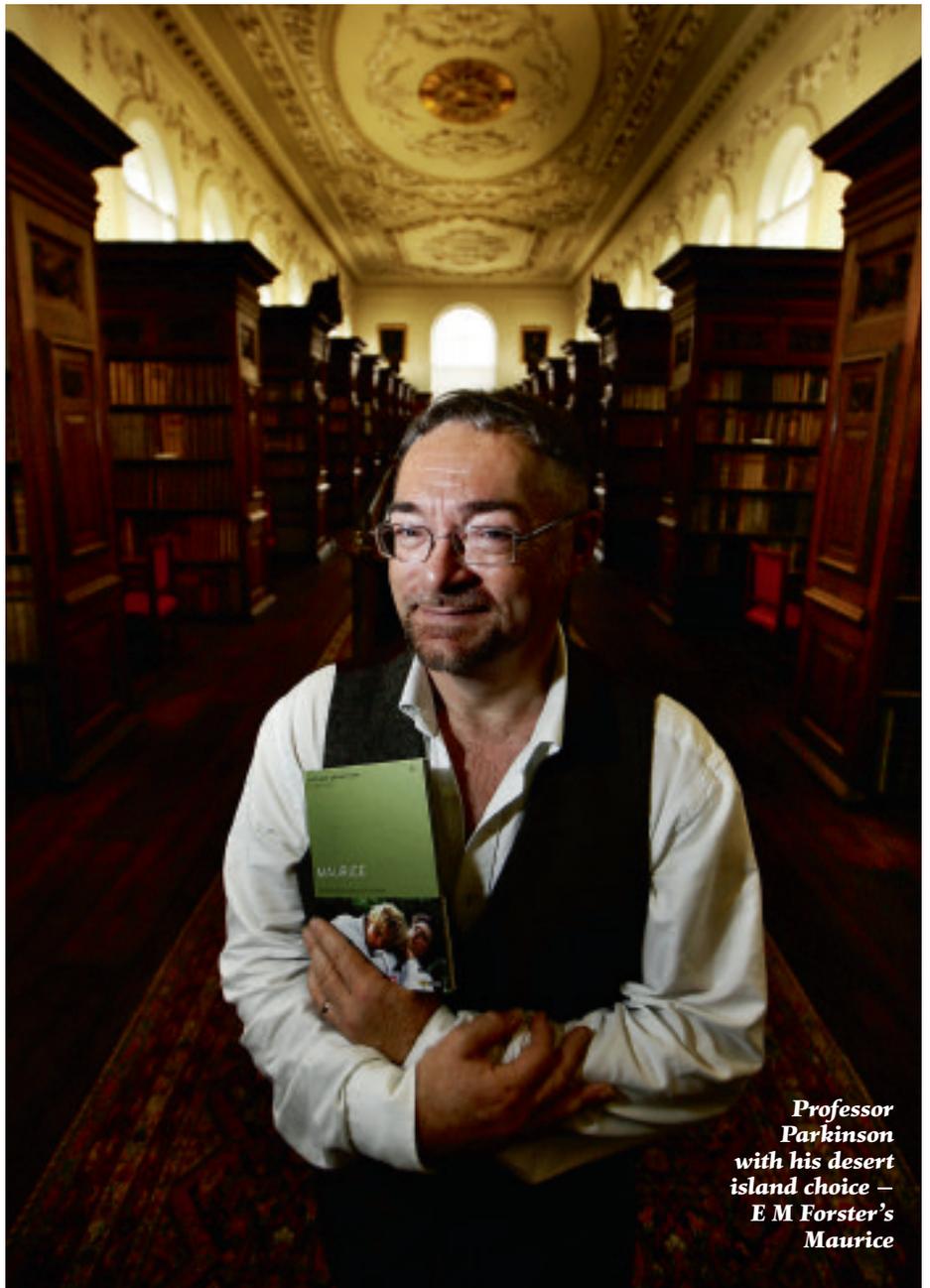
He said: “For Yourcenar, this print evoked the interior life of the Emperor’s love and grief, and a copy of it hung in the home she shared with her partner. So for me it speaks about things that are past, and present, and above all personal.”

Professor Parkinson was appointed Oxford Professor of Egyptology in the Faculty of Oriental Studies in October, 2013. His first term was part-time due to commitments at the British Museum, and he took on the position full-time in January 2014.

He said: “The idea of a job where I was paid to read texts with students was irresistible, and such an immense privilege. This year – the institute’s 75th anniversary – has been a horribly exciting time to start, but it has also been a perfect moment to take stock and to consider how to move the subject forward.”

The Griffith Institute houses an archive of wonderful things – containing the collective memory and life works of some of Egyptology’s greatest scholars, including its founder Professor Francis Llewellyn Griffith.

Professor Parkinson said: “With this archive



Professor Parkinson
with his desert island choice –
E M Forster’s
Maurice

we are uniquely placed as a home for Egyptology in Oxford, with the Ashmolean collections next door, and the Sackler (one of the world’s greatest Egyptology libraries) – and, of course, the students. We hope to fully digitise our archive and research resources so that it is all accessible free of charge anywhere in the world, especially for scholars and students in Egypt.

“Accessibility is the key thing,” he added. “When I started in the British Museum, I was told that you had to bear in mind two audiences when writing a label – an 11 year-old school pupil and a visiting professor from Germany. You had to speak to both simultaneously, and I think it is intellectually very important to write for a diverse and inclusive audience.

“The *Discovering Tutankhamun* exhibition was an amazing opportunity to connect the university’s research with the public. In the past, the Griffith Institute has benefited from many endowments, but they need refreshing if we are to connect with new researchers across the world. We are now looking for new

sponsors to help us project the Institute into the 21st century.”

Richard took me into the temperature controlled room where the archives are stored and showed me a leather-bound album of exquisite watercolours by Howard Carter, who famously discovered Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922. Carter copied hieroglyphic signs of birds and then painted the same birds from nature. Surprisingly, it is the hieroglyphs that are more animated.

So we had gone full-circle back to the young Richard copying out Egyptian signs and wrecking the front room carpet.

It was time for him to look at his list for the desert island and pick which item he would choose. The answer was immediate.

“James Ivory’s *Maurice* – the inner life must always come first.”

■ If readers would like to learn more about the poetry of pharaonic Egypt, Richard has translated some for the Oxford World Classics series: *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, available from Amazon