

BOOKS REVIEWS

When the Duke went tomb-raiding

Edwardians came to Egypt seeking glamour – but they got dysentery instead, finds Robert Leigh-Pemberton

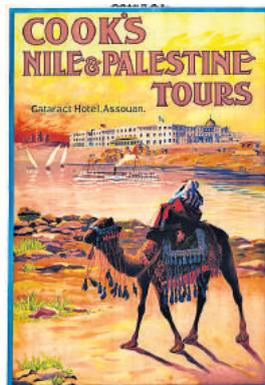
ARISTOCRATS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS
by Toby Wilkinson and Julian Platt

216pp, IB Tauris, £24.95

★★★★★

When Egypt first place ever to have been mourned by the seasoned traveller as “ruined”? At the close of the 1900s, a leisured clergyman and Oxford Professor of Assyriology called the Rev Archibald Sayce, who had spent the previous 18 winters cruising the Nile, sold his beloved “dahabiya” – a kind of houseboat, later incarnations of which will be familiar from Agatha Christie’s *Death on the Nile* – and left Egypt, as “life on the Nile had ceased to be the ideal existence it once was... The smoke of the steamer [had usurped] the sights and scents of the fields”.

Egypt had been known to rich and adventurous British tourists since the Napoleonic Wars. Nonetheless, it was not until the opening of the Suez Canal that Thomas Cook – who had begun his career ferrying local temperance societies on trips between Leicester and Birmingham – realised a fortune to be made if he could introduce a less rarefied clientele to Nilotic



THE ORIENT NON-EXPRESS
A 1901 poster for Thomas Cook, who brought less rarefied tourists to Egypt

delights. The success of his undertaking, aimed firmly at the middle classes, was astonishing. From the late 1870s, the Nile was awash each winter with rheumatic Englishmen of every stamp and their pasty companions, all enthused by amateur Egyptology, a forgiving climate, or both.

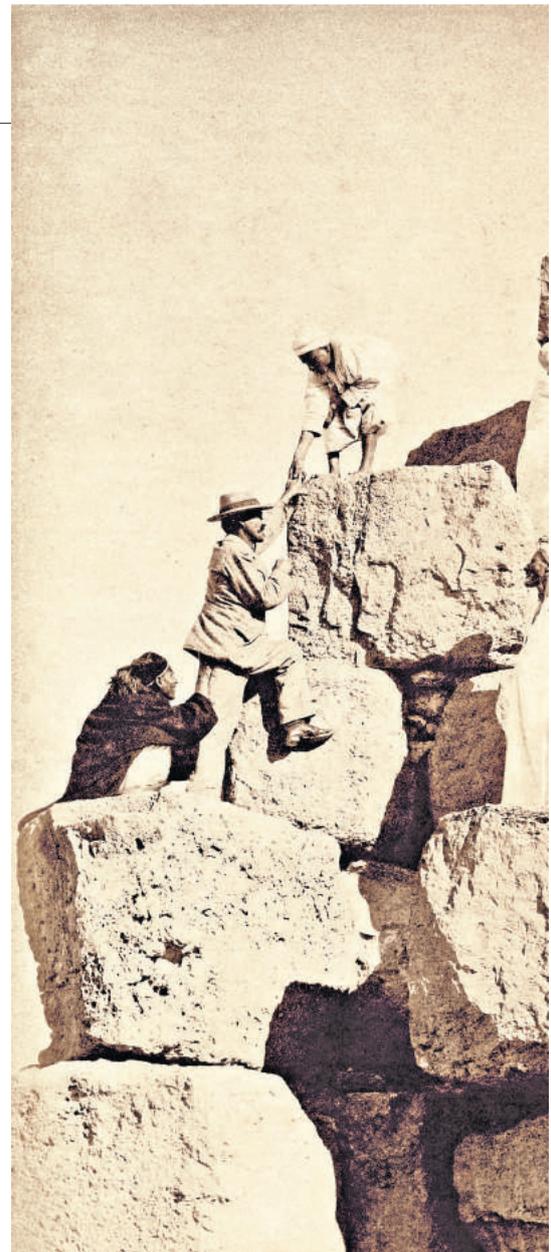
Among them was a young doctor, Ferdy Platt, whose first trip to Egypt in 1890 instilled in him a deep love for Egyptology, which grew into an impressive knowledge, and who was employed by the ailing Duke of Devonshire, Britain’s last great Whig politician, on a recreational cruise down the Nile in the winter of 1907. The series of letters which Platt wrote to his wife in St John’s Wood throughout his three

months on the river form the basis of this idiosyncratic but engaging book by Toby Wilkinson and Julian Platt, a great-nephew of Ferdy’s, to whom the letters were left in a handsome box, illustrated in hieroglyphics by Ferdy himself.

The trip, however, was not a success. For all that one might now romanticise the glamour of such a voyage – picnics amid the deserted ruins of the Temple of Seti I; mummy jawbones and garlands of olive leaves raided from unsealed tombs as amusing gifts for the Duchess – the reality was rather less appealing. Their dahabiya was dirty, noisy and cramped. The Duke and Duchess took little consolation from their surroundings – “they are not moved to enthusiasm very much by anything apparently,” wrote Ferdy – and suffered from heat, cold, mosquitoes and diarrhoea. (As the on-board doctor, Platt was concerned with their graces’ bowels as a matter of routine.)

That the expedition was doomed to farce should have been obvious to all involved. The cast guaranteed it. There was the Duke himself, cantankerous and stubborn – described by Max Beerbohm as “my favourite Duke, the most natural and monumental”. There was his wife Louise von Alten, the “Double Duchess”, previously married to his great friend the Duke of Manchester, whose scorn for any subject but gossip was famous: in Platt’s reverential words, “she seems to talk more about people than ideas”.

With them came their uninspiring descendants, Lord and Lady Gosford, whose only claim on posterity appears to be the loss of a vast fortune through fast living; the rather endearing Sir Charles Cradock-Hartopp, whose stunning lack of concern for every aspect of Egypt is profound enough to arouse something close to admiration in Platt, and who comes alive only when given a chance to shoot duck from the barge or to discuss the breeding of puppies; and finally Lady Theodosia Acheson, in Platt’s words “supercilious and chilling”, the kind of Edwardian woman who, as the novelist AG Macdonell put it, had “no topic of conversation and only one adjective at a time”. It



The things you didn't talk about

This real-life 'Suite Française' is a moving tale of a French Jew betrayed by her country.
By Nicholas Shakespeare

NO PLACE TO LAY ONE'S HEAD
by Françoise Frenkel, tr Stephanie Smeek

304pp, Pushkin Press, £16.99, ebook £16.47

★★★★★

One of the things that makes *Casablanca* such a resonant film is the bittersweet recognition of how many in France welcomed the German occupation as an opportunity to restore their notion of “la vraie France”, a Joan-of-Arc Catholic haven purified of Jews and Communists.

By chance, I was in Paris in 2011 when the head of the French national railway apologised for that network’s role in transporting 76,000 European Jews to death

camps in Poland. Among those herded by French officials into SNCF carriages were the novelist Irene Némirovsky and the bookseller Simon Raichenstein, husband of Françoise Frenkel, author of this remarkable survivor’s memoir – a French equivalent of the anonymous *A Woman of Berlin*, and a non-fiction counterpart, as it were, to Némirovsky’s *Suite Française*.

Writing of the “abrupt intimacy” he experienced when first reading *No Place to Lay One’s Head*, Nobel laureate Patrick Modiano likens it in his fine preface to a “letter from an unknown woman, a letter poste restante for an eternity, that you’ve received in error, it seems, but that was perhaps intended for you”.

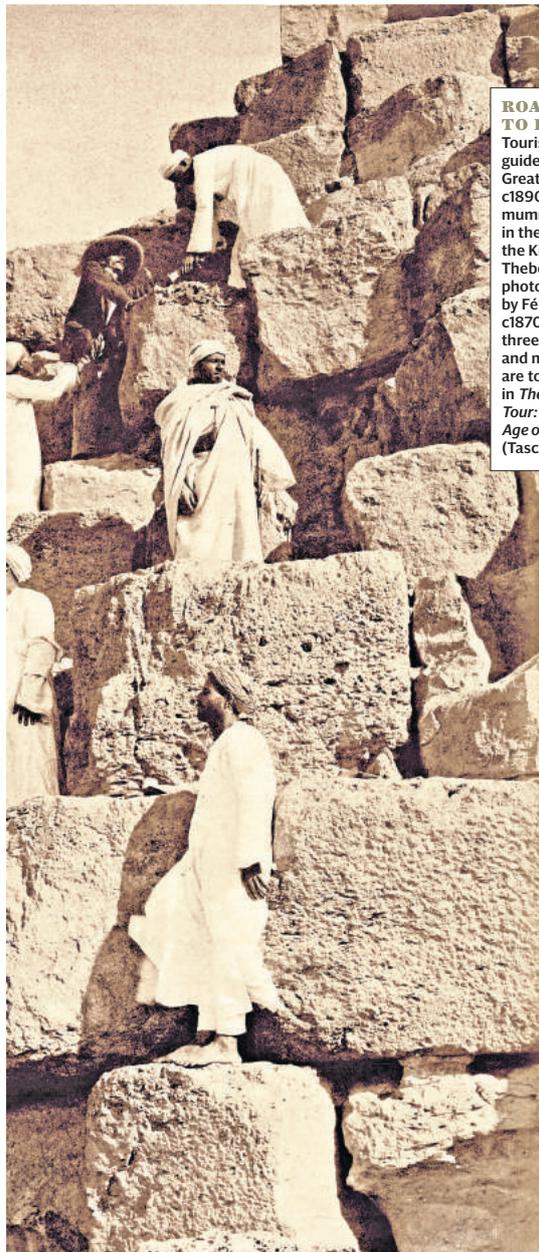
That Françoise Frenkel’s moving epistle, first published in Switzerland in 1945, has taken

so long to reach us should not surprise. What the Nazis made the French do to each other between 1940 and 1945 required another generation to forgive – where it was even acknowledged; for a sizeable number, it remained one of “les non dits”, the things you didn’t talk about. Even up until five years ago, when trying to find out about my English aunt, who was arrested in 1940 by French gendarmes and interned in a women’s “concentration camp” in Besançon, along with 4,000 other British and Commonwealth passport holders, it proved a delicate task to persuade those who had lived through the occupation to speak about it.

Frenkel was an unreserved Francophile: a Polish-born Jew, she grew up in Paris, and was educated at the Sorbonne and at

Leipzig University. In 1921, she and her husband opened a bookshop in Berlin devoted to selling French books. Nabokov was a likely customer; Gide, Colette, Maurois definite clients. Politics was not discussed, no political books were displayed. “Politics leads to injustice, blindness and excess.” She could read her customers just by the way they held her books. “I loved my bookstore the way a woman loves, that is to say, truly.”

In tandem with this passion is a corresponding detachment, a shaving away of personal details. Her husband is never mentioned. Her brother is referred to as her mother’s son. Her Jewishness, the Nazis, Hitler are likewise detoxified into “my racial classification”, “the occupying forces”, “the Chancellor”. On top of the fact that we don’t know



ROAD TO RUIN? Tourists and guides on the Great Pyramid, c1890, main; a mummy vendor in the Valley of the Kings in Thebes, right, photographed by Félix Bonfils, c1870. These three images and many more are to be found in *The Grand Tour: The Golden Age of Travel* (Taschen, £150)

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companions are obvious, but he bites his tongue. One longs for a more acerbic narrator. It is also impossible to shed the knowledge that these letters were written to his incurably respectable wife, to whom Platt does not even feel comfortable writing a “bad word” in Nubian which forms the basis of some joke. Great chunks of prose are instead devoted to reassuring her that his dress – “knickers and Norfolk” – are appropriate to the climate.

And yet there is doubtless much that will appeal to those familiar with the history of Egyptology. Platt was one of the last Englishmen to see parts of Upper Egypt and Nubia before their second, deliberate flooding for the Aswan Low Dam, completed in 1902 and raised during 1907-12. He is at his most engaging when talking of his sadness at the loss of tomb paintings destroyed by damp, or of the once magnificent temple of Philae, already half-flooded: “sad and out of place in all these horribly modern surroundings”.

These letters also offer a quite unintentional insight into the general impending loss of an entire epoch. As the bazaars of Upper Egypt filled with “Birmingham rubbish”, so the Duke’s health deteriorated. He would never make it back to Britain, and died in the Metropole Hotel in Paris in 1908. When the news reached London, Asquith described him to the Commons as “almost the last survivor of our heroic age”. The short narrative to be found in these letters gives one a sense of the inevitability of the collapse of the society that the Duke represented. Adrift on a soot-blackened barge, the dinner-jackets, champagne, stiffness of manner and idées fixes appear much more absurd; and the aristocrats themselves, in the words of Henry Newbolt, the great poet of their own passing age, like “Pharaohs crowned divine/ ...dust among the dust that once obeyed them.”

All pictures are from *The Grand Tour: The Golden Age of Travel* (Taschen, £150). Call 0844 871 1514 to order *Aristocrats and Archaeologists* for £19.99

appears she may have been aboard escaping from an engagement with a young ex-MP, “unseated from Bodmin owing to a technical breach of the Corruption Act”.

It could have made a magnificent comedy: these aristocrats gliding past what Flaubert called the “splendours, shining in the dust”, with surprise visits from Winston Churchill and Howard Carter, on his uppers after losing his archaeological post because he abused French tourists. The trouble is Platt himself. His frustrations with his absurd

The Duke’s doctor had to reassure his wife that he was dressed in ‘knickers and Norfolk’

What the Nazis made the French do to each other required another generation to forgive

what happened to Frenkel after she returned to Nice in 1945, only that she died in 1975, the effect is somehow terribly moving and terribly haunting. Frenkel has the mournful presence of a ghost; even as she breathes on her mirror into occupied France, she is being

made to vanish before our eyes.

In July 1939, aged 50, Frenkel abandons her Berlin bookshop and apartment (“as they were”) for Paris. Advised by her old professor at the Sorbonne to go south, she travels to Avignon a fortnight before the “exodus” of June 1940. She is equipped with a letter from the president of the Council of Ministers: “May she avail herself of every freedom and benefit which our nation has to offer, the nation for which she has so tirelessly toiled.” Weeks later, on showing this document to a young official, she is told in a matter-of-fact tone: “We have a new France now.”

It is a France where, for many pro-collaborationists, life goes on; in which “elegant socialites” still go swimming in the Med, then simply throw “a robe over their costume to do the shopping”. A

fountain murmurs in a courtyard, a bus climbs unhurriedly up a hill, an insect climbs the branch of a tree and falls back to the ground. Yet because of her “origins”, this is a France from which Frenkel, a French citizen, is excluded. Travelling with two suitcases from Avignon to Vichy to Nice, she enters – “as if I were in a dream” – a parallel world of “persistent tension” in which every sound puts Frenkel on alert and floods her with “a sort of vertigo”: “Heavy steps in the stairwell, the bell ringing in the middle of the night, loud voices on the landing all made me sit bolt upright, covered in sweat and short of breath.”

In July 1942, the round-ups begin. One early morning in Nice, she returns with groceries to her hotel when she sees a fellow Polish refugee gesticulate from a third-

floor balcony, pointing her away from the hotel where gendarmes are grabbing women and children by the arm and “shoving them into vehicles”. Panicked, she seeks refuge in a hairdressing salon owned by a couple in their 30s, Monsieur and Madame Marius – who promptly give her sanctuary on a mattress in their bedroom, assuring her: “You’re with decent French here.” Against “the inexhaustible levels of skill and energy” deployed by the police in implementing Vichy regulations, this couple, by contrast, show an “inexhaustible concern” to protect Frenkel – like “a sort of a fragile vase” – at considerable risk to themselves. “I was the beneficiary of one generous gesture after another.” Betrayed several times by those she pays handsomely to protect her, Frenkel is repeatedly

saved by the Mariuses. Their uncommon decency upholds, against all provocation, the eternal verities of courage, compassion and humanity.

Armed with a Swiss visa, she seeks the help of a friendly priest in Annemasse (where my aunt, too, found a benefactor). On the third attempt, after being arrested twice as she tried to cross the border – and once thrown in prison – and after having endured “almost more than any human being could bear,” she clambers over the barbed wire. She begins writing her account almost immediately, still in what Modiano calls “the confusion of the moment”. It’s a surprisingly measured book about one woman’s immeasurable sorrow that everyone should hold in their hands.