

GEORGE R. HUGHES

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George Hughes was a fine gentleman and scholar who contributed much to the work and the reputation of the Oriental Institute during his forty-five years of association with it. He was born in Wymore, Nebraska, in 1907; his native language was Welsh and he remained proud of his Welsh heritage all his life. From the proverbial one-room school of his early years he went on to what must have been for him the mammoth University of Nebraska, from which he graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1929. He wished to become a minister and came to Chicago to study at McCormick Theological Seminary. His love of languages and history led him to take courses on elementary Egyptian hieroglyphs and his ability to read and to understand such material impressed his teachers at the University of Chicago. Several major steps occurred in his life and career in 1932. He graduated from McCormick, was ordained, married his high-school sweetheart, Maurine Hall, and enrolled for graduate studies at the University of Chicago, first in the Divinity School and then in the Department of Oriental Languages and Civilizations, from which he received his Ph.D. in 1939. His dissertation, supervised by William F. Edgerton, was a study of a collection of leases of farmland that were written in Demotic (the name given to a stage of the Egyptian language and script used from about 700 B.C. until the third century of our era) and were dated to the middle of the first millennium B.C. This work, which was later published as *Saite Demotic Land Leases*, clearly demonstrated his superb ability to decipher the words, meaning, and implications of the records of ancient Egypt. When the United States entered World War II, Hughes, like so many linguistically skilled academics, turned from deciphering ancient languages to cracking codes, and worked in U.S. Intelligence from 1942 to 1946. At the end of the war, as the Oriental Institute prepared to return an Epigraphic Survey to Luxor, Hughes was selected as epigrapher. He and Maurine went to Egypt for the first time in the fall of 1946; by January 1949, he was appointed Field Director of the Epigraphic Survey.

For almost twenty years he directed the Institute's Epigraphic Survey in Luxor and made Chicago House a center for Egyptological research, both formal study and publication and the informal exchange of information over famous "Chicago House teas." He oversaw the publication of eight of the mammoth volumes of the Epigraphic Survey: four on the temple and associated buildings at Ramesses III's mortuary temple at Medinet Habu; one

on the private tomb of a high official named Kheruef; two on aspects of the decoration of the huge temple complex at Karnak; and one, during the Nubian Salvage Campaign, that recorded the scenes and inscriptions of a temple of Ramesses II in Nubia. During the 1961–62 season of the Nubian Salvage Campaign, he also oversaw the Oriental Institute's excavations at Serra East in the Sudan. His dedication to preservation of the Egyptian heritage and his extraordinary skill at reading damaged wall scenes and inscriptions set the standards for subsequent work by the Epigraphic Survey.

In 1964 he returned to full-time work in Chicago, where he enjoyed the traditional academic life of research and teaching. He was a stimulating teacher. He was a modest, quiet man who never imposed himself, his knowledge, or his ideas; rather, he taught by example, listening to his students' suggestions, helping them follow a train of thought, or providing a reference to keep their research going. Long after a student had become a "colleague," he or she could go to Hughes to try out a new idea, knowing that even if the idea were proved wrong, he would consider it carefully, treat it respectfully, and test it to the full reaches of his knowledge. Hughes also was a very popular lecturer. He had won a prize in seminary as the best preacher in the senior class (he also won the senior class prize in Old Testament, a fellowship which first brought him to the University of Chicago) and he knew how to convey thoughts, concepts, and emotions. When he first returned to Chicago from work with the Epigraphic Survey in Egypt, he spent a couple of years traveling frequently to speak with alumni groups and to present the film "The Egyptologists" (soon he could recite much of the narration by heart). One time he was scheduled to give an Oriental Institute Members' Lecture on mummification or King Tutankhamun (both were big hits), and so many people wanted to come that he had to give a repeat performance the next night.

But he was not allowed to remain "just" a teacher and scholar, for within five years of his return to Chicago he had been selected by his colleagues on the faculty to serve as Director of the Oriental Institute (1968–1972). His modesty, his sincerity, and his commitment to the Oriental Institute enabled him to lead it successfully through a financially difficult period for the University. One of the achievements of which he was most proud was that he had persuaded the University's administration to hire a full-time, professional curator for the Oriental Institute's Museum, which enabled it better to serve the needs of both the scholarly and public communities.

He was an exceptional scholar; his "eye" for reading temple inscriptions was matched by his "eye" for reading Demotic. His publications of documents originally written in Demotic are exemplary, both for his reading of the difficult cursive script and for his analysis of the cultural, social, or economic

implications of the documents. His extensive knowledge of Demotic allowed him to serve the Demotic Dictionary Project not merely as “consultant” or “advisor,” but as basic resource person. If a word in a Demotic text could not be read, or it was thought that the original editor of the text might have gotten something wrong, chances were that Hughes could not only read the word but tell of another occurrence, frequently in an unpublished text of which he had seen a photograph or made a copy. Without his backing and support, the Demotic Dictionary Project would never have begun nor would it have made the progress it has made. He will remain for its staff a model and an inspiration.

When he retired in 1975, he had the opportunity to serve a slightly different community, and to serve in the manner which he had first envisioned when he left Nebraska for seminary. Fellow students from McCormick had frequently persuaded him to give guest sermons to their congregations, but now he was asked by the Hyde Park Union Church, of which he had long been an active member, to serve as interim pastor. He served there as pastor from July to December 1975; his sermons were collected and published by the church, as *Chastened in Time*, in 1976.

During his retirement he continued to come to his office every day, publish significant articles on Demotic texts, answer questions for the staff of the Demotic Dictionary Project, and reminisce with everyone about the old days of Egyptology and people he had known through the years at Chicago House. His kindness, his gentleness, his knowledge, and his constant encouragement will be greatly missed.

Janet H. Johnson