# Sir Grafton Elliot Smith: distinguished Australian anatomist and Egyptologist

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Grafton Elliot Smith, the distinguished Australian-born anatomist and an early expert on the excavations of ancient Egypt.

Harold Ellis[1]

Author details can be found at the end of this article

Correspondence to:
bjhm@markallengroup.com

Elliot Smith was born in 1871 in the small town of Grafton, New South Wales (from which derives his first name). His father, who was headmaster of the local school, had emigrated to Australia from England in 1860. Young Grafton received his early education at his father's school. When the family moved to Sydney in 1883, Grafton joined Sydney Boys High School, took an early interest in biology and attended evening classes in this subject. He went on to study medicine in 1888 at the University of Sydney and after qualifying in 1893, gained his Doctor of Medicine degree in 1895 with a gold medal for his thesis on the forebrain of monotremes, which lack the thick connecting commissure between the two cerebral hemispheres of higher mammals.

In 1896, Elliot Smith moved to Cambridge as an advanced student at St. John's College and published a substantial series of papers on neuroanatomical subjects. In 1900, he was appointed the foundation Professor of Anatomy at the Egyptian Government School of Medicine in Cairo. Here he organised the new department and provided the bulk of the teaching programme.

In 1907 Elliot Smith was commissioned by the Egyptian government to investigate the human remains exposed in the area threatened by the rising waters of the Nile, which were resulting from the construction of the Aswan Dam. In this work he was joined by a young anatomist, Frederick Wood Jones, who was later to become the curator of the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, London.

The two of them reported their findings from over 20 000 Nubian burials. Among the many treasures they documented, I found the most interesting to be the oldest bladder stone to be discovered. This was obtained from the grave of a boy of about 16 years in the prehistoric cemetery at el Amrah in Upper Egypt and was dated at about 4800 BC. It was presented by Elliot Smith to the Royal College of Surgeons in 1901 and was fully described by Professor Shattock in 1905. The stone itself had been broken by the excavating workman's pick but was estimated to have been 6.5 cm in diameter. Chemical examination showed that it was made up of calcium phosphate and uric acid. Microscopic examination showed no evidence of bilharzial ova, although Shattock speculated whether the first of the 10 Biblical plagues, blood, might have been haematuria from an epidemic of bilharziasis arising from an infection of the Nile waters. Sadly, this interesting specimen was destroyed when the Royal College of Surgeons was badly damaged in an air raid in 1941.

In 1907, Elliot Smith was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society and was awarded its Royal medal in 1912.

In 1909, he was appointed Professor of Anatomy at the Victoria University, Manchester, where he introduced a revolution in the teaching of this ancient subject. Dull descriptions of the minutiae of macroscopic anatomy were largely discarded; lectures were denoted as the principal form of teaching, leaving time for the introduction of radiological anatomy, the surface anatomy of the living body and emphasis on functional anatomy. His ideas were not to gain wider acceptance for many years, both in this country and abroad.

As a preclinical 1st year medical student at Oxford in 1943, I was among the medical students to benefit, under Professor Sir Wilfred Le Gros Clark, from these important changes in the teaching of this subject.

With the publication in 1911 of his book 'The Ancient Egyptians' and in 1912 of 'The Royal Mummies', Elliot Smith began the development of his revolutionary (and now

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long-discarded) theory that Ancient Egypt was the ultimate source of world civilisation – his theory of 'diffusionism'. He believed that small groups of people from Egypt, travelling mostly by sea, settled at certain places, widely scattered around the world, and there created imitations of Egyptian megaliths of the age of the pyramids. Even the famous (and mysterious) megalithic carvings of heads found on the deserted Easter Islands were interpreted as being of Egyptian influence. He considered that the spread of civilisation was the spread of ideas rather than of people or tribes. Although put forward powerfully by Elliot Smith, this rather bizarre concept failed to be widely accepted, has long been discarded and is only remembered today by historians of medicine.

During the Great War, as it was then called, of 1914–18, Elliot Smith assisted the war effort by studying the neurological problems of shell shock. In 1919, Elliot Smith moved to London, to take up the prestigious chair of anatomy at University College, where he commenced an impressive research programme. His trainees spread far afield. Twenty members of his staff were appointed to chairs of anatomy around the world. He suffered a minor stroke in 1932, although he continued to work, and he was knighted in 1934. He died at Broadstairs in Kent on New Year's Day 1937, a truly remarkable man.

One of his three sons, Arthur, was a medical student at University College. He became a consultant general surgeon at the old Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. As a newly qualified doctor in 1948, I was appointed his house surgeon. My chief bore a striking resemblance to photographs of his father, but sadly he never mentioned the great man to me.

**Author details**

[1]c/o British Journal of Hospital Medicine, London, UK