

Bert Underwood At Work?

Paul Nicholson

The company of *Underwood & Underwood*, founded in 1882, is well known both as a dealer in stereoscopic views (stereocards) and, later, as publisher of them (Darrah 1977, 46). The views they sold initially were by Bierstadt, the *Littleton View Company* and others, but gradually they began to supplement these with original images.

Their best-known set of original views is also the first set actually to be photographed by one of the Underwood brothers, Bert. According to his unpublished reminiscences Bert Underwood "had never held a camera in his hands" before he took a brief photographic course from M. Abel in Mentone, France, in 1891 (Darrah 1977, 47). With his new found skills Bert was to photograph widely in Italy, Greece, the Holy Land and Egypt. It is this latter set of views taken during a tour in 1896, which has come to be regarded as one of the finest dealing with Egypt (the other notable set being by Frances Frith and published by *Negretti and Zambra* 1857-59). The views appeared as a boxed set of 100 cards in 1900 (Darrah 1977, 132) and were, mistakenly, believed by the Underwoods to contain the first stereo views of Upper Egypt¹.

Each card in the Egypt set bore, on its reverse, a text by Professor James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) then Professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Chicago, an institution which is still one of the foremost for the study of Egyptian archaeology. In addition, Breasted produced a book for *Underwood and Underwood*, "*Egypt Through the Stereoscope*" (1905) which described each view in greater detail than was possible on the reverse of the card itself. These views were carefully linked to *Underwood & Underwood's* patented map system, which showed the position from which each view was taken and the field of view encompassed by it. Breasted's text replaced an earlier and less scholarly volume *Egypt and its Wonders through the Perfecscope* presumably written by the Underwoods themselves (Underwood and Underwood 1897). This earlier book, and the cards which it accompanied were much more concerned with the daily life of the Egyptians than with antiquities, which makes the set valuable as an ethnographic record.

Although the latter set of views is justly famous, and has been re-published in book form (Veasey 1978)² relatively little seems to be known about its origins. Bert Underwood's reminiscences remain unpublished, and as a result there are some interesting questions regarding some of the images. One in particular has recently come to my attention.

This is the view in 'Position 5' of the *Underwood & Underwood* 100 card set of 1900 (*Plate 1, opposite page*). It is captioned: 'A "Ship of the Desert" passing tombs of bygone Moslem rulers, Cairo' and shows two camels supporting an elaborate carrying box (akin to a large sedan chair) in which are seated two women. The tombs of the Caliphs are visible in the background (reproduced in *Veasey 1978, 33*). Breasted's text on the reverse of the card informs us that this mode of transport was already virtually obsolete in Cairo, having once been the standard means by which a bride was conveyed to her wedding ceremony. He also notes that in this image the ladies have removed their veils so that there "is much doubt whether they belong to the class of reputable ladies from the upper ranks of society". Here we have a hint that this is a 'staged' photograph, perhaps substituting the female relatives of the vehicle owner for those who would normally have been conveyed in such a vehicle.

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- 1 Egypt is conventionally divided into Upper and Lower. Upper Egypt is the Southern part of the country, conventionally the Nile Valley south of Memphis near Modern Cairo.
 - 2 Veasey's name does not appear on the cover of this work, but rather that of J.H. Breasted whose text on the reverse of each card is reproduced. To avoid confusion with Breasted's 1905 work, the name of this modern editor is cited here.

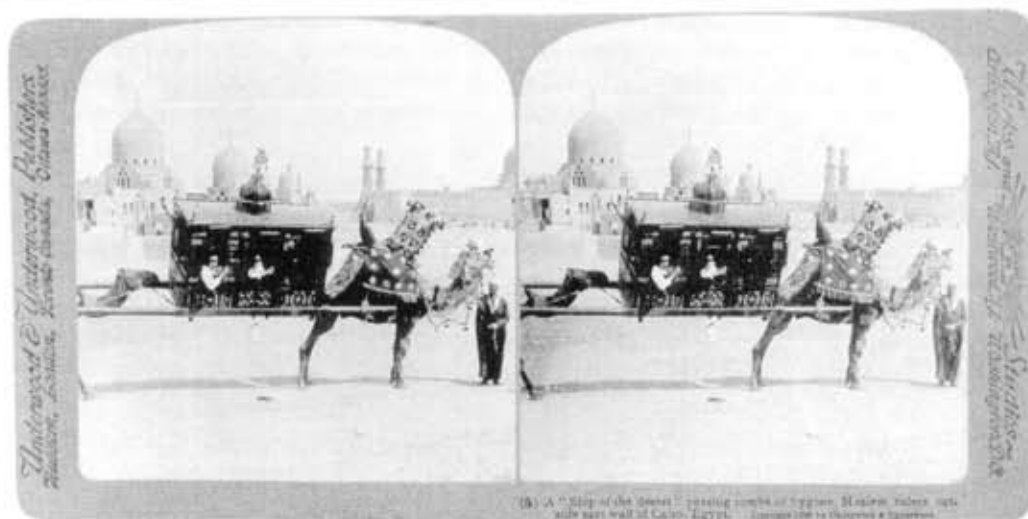


Plate 1. A "Ship of the Desert" passing tombs of bygone Moslem rulers, Cairo, Egypt. Copyright 1896 by Underwood & Underwood.



Plate 2. 152. Egyptian Types And Scenes.- A Marriage Procession. - LL (Louis Lévy).

The copyright date on this view is 1895; a year *before* the Underwood brothers made their trip to Egypt. Most other views in the set are dated 1896 or 1897. It should be noted that the set was amended over time, and some earlier views replaced by later ones, many bearing the copyright date 1904³. It is this later set which is the subject of Breasted's 1905 text.

3 Many of these later views are reproduced in Veasey's volume.

4 The reverse of the card has the French title *Scènes et types d'Égypte* and titled 'Procession de Mariage'

The writer has recently located a postcard with an almost identical view to that shown as 'Position 5' in the *Underwood* set (*Plate 2*). This was published as number 152 in a set of postcards entitled *Egyptian Scenes and Types - A Marriage Procession*⁴, published in Paris by the *Lévy fils*. Both sides also bear the initials LL, the mark of Louis Lévy the well known French photographer.

That the *Underwood* and *Levy fils* images were taken on the same day, and in the same session is clear from a number of points. The man holding the leading camel is identically dressed in both images, a figure in the middle distance has his head obscured by the central panel of the carriage in the *Underwood* view, and the same figure has his head obscured by the rear carrying pole in the *Lévy* view. All other details of the scene are exactly similar, right down to the pile of camel droppings behind the lead animal! The tombs in the background make it clear that this is the same spot, but viewed from two slightly different angles.

By coincidence, I have recently located a third view of this same scene, and it is this view which is particularly interesting for the history of the *Underwood & Underwood* Egypt set. The photograph is published in *Egypt a Knopf Guide* (*Khalidy, 1995*), itself a translation from the French edition of 1994 published by Gallimard.

The photograph (*Plate 3*) (*Khalidy 1995, 328-9*) confirms that this was a 'staged' scene and quite clearly indicates that there were at least two photographers present that day: one who made the image concerned and another who appears at the far left of the photograph. The latter photographer can be seen viewing the scene, his head shrouded by the cloth cover at the rear of the camera. On the ground, to his right, are two leather bags, presumably containing his photographic equipment. In this view the staging of the whole scene is visible. The two women are seated in the carriage, one of them in the position she adopts for the final photograph. Both of the camels are visible, the rear one being attended by two Egyptians, one of whom is featured in the *Lévy* photograph. Another Egyptian, in a dark *galabbiya*⁵ is partly visible to the rear of the carriage, while a fourth holds the leading camel, and appears in both the *Lévy* and the *Underwoods* image. In front of the leading camel, and visible only in this image, are a crowd of local people who have turned out to watch the performance.

This informative view was taken from slightly in front of the carriage, so that the protruding front window is clearly visible. It is invisible in the *Lévy* view, and only visible in profile in the *Underwood* view. The question remains as to the identity of the photographers concerned.

It is suggested here that the photographer shown in the view (*Plate 3*) is Louis Lévy himself, or possibly one of his staff, since the angle of view for this individual would render a photograph like that on the *Lévy* postcard. That leaves the identity of the second photographer, the one who produced this general view, and who is quite probably the one who made the *Underwood* view which was taken when the carriage had advanced a few paces (*Plate 1*). Could this be Bert Underwood? For the moment this must remain uncertain. The vantage point of this unseen photographer is close to that from which the *Underwood* photograph was taken, and the Egypt set is usually said to be the work of Bert himself, however, the copyright date of 1895 is problematic, given that his trip is not recorded as having taken place until 1896. There are several possible solutions:

1. The photograph given here as *Plate 3* is the work of Bert Underwood who, having arrived in Egypt late in 1895, was acclimatising in Cairo before going on to make most of his pictures the following year.

5 A *galabbiya* is a long shirt-like garment worn by Egyptian men. Similar garments are worn throughout the Middle East, but known by a variety of names.

6 I am grateful to Bob Aldridge for this suggestion.

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Plate 3. A scene showing the photographing of Plates 1 and 2 by an unknown photographer. The photographer at the far left may be Louis Levy or one of his staff.

(Copyright Roger Viollet).

2. The Underwoods, or possibly Bert alone, made a brief exploratory - and unrecorded trip to Egypt in 1895, prior to the longer trip in 1896 and this image (Plate 3) was taken then.
3. The photograph given here as Plate 1 is not by Bert Underwood at all, but is one bought in from another photographer and it is he who took Plate 3.

Whoever these photographers were, they have rendered a doubly important service to us today. First, in the recording of a conveyance which had almost died out as early as 1895, and which was presumably gone completely by 1904, when many of the original *Underwood & Underwood* views were replaced, so that it could not be re-photographed. Second, in recording the backdrop to some of the carefully staged photographs for which *Underwood & Underwood* are rightly famous. Both are valuable contributions to social history, and the second to the history of photography⁷.

7 I would be grateful for any information relating to these, or other photographs in the Egypt series.

References

- Breasted, J.H. (1905) *Egypt Through the Stereoscope*. New York: Underwood & Underwood.
- Darrah, W. C. (1977) *The World of Stereographs*. Privately Published. (Reprinted by Land Yacht Press, Nashville 1997)
- Khalidy, S. (Ed.) (1995) *Egypt*. New York: Knopf
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