

A Fond Remembrance: William Joseph Murnane, Jr.

March 22, 1945 – November 17, 2000¹

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On November 17, 2000, we lost a beloved colleague. William Murnane died unexpectedly of heart failure at Baptist Memorial Hospital East in Memphis, Tennessee. Bill held a Dunavant Professorship in the History Department and was research associate of the Institute of Egyptian Art & Archaeology at the University of Memphis. He was also director of the Great Hypostyle Hall Project at Karnak Temple, Luxor, Egypt.

Among his scholarly monographs, several are recognized as standard references by historians and philologists alike. These include *Ancient Egyptian Coregencies* (Chicago, 1977), *The Road to Kadesh* (Chicago, 1985; revised 1990), and *Texts from the Amarna Period* (Atlanta, 1995; revised 1998). Other publications, including *The Penguin Guide to Ancient Egypt* (London, 1983; revised 1996) and *United with Eternity* (Chicago, 1980), a comprehensive guide to the mortuary complex of Ramses III, are known to a wider audience. Dog-eared editions of these texts are carried throughout Egypt by tourists who are guided by Bill's encyclopedic knowledge of the ancient monuments, every one of which he had personally visited.

Of Bill, her friend of over thirty-five years, Cynthia Sheikholeslami wrote, "He was unfailingly a gentleman, perpetually kind and patient, and yet unassumingly modest with a gentle sense of humor. He was also one of the best of the Egyptologists of our generation."

Born in New York, but raised in Venezuela, Bill returned to the U.S. and attended St. Anselm's College. He showed an early interest in Egyptian language and wrote letters home to his sister, Annie, in Egyptian hieroglyphs. His professional career began however in 1972 when he joined the staff of the Epigraphic Survey at Chicago House, Luxor, Egypt, shortly before he received his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1973. As field epigrapher, and then as senior Epigrapher until 1986, Bill helped document the texts and scenes on the walls of the major temples of Karnak, Khonsu, and Luxor, and at the small temple at Medinet Habu. He also contributed to the commentaries and translations of the landmark folio publications of the Oriental Institute. With Charles van Siclen he lived under difficult conditions at Amarna in Middle Egypt, a place Bill would have described as "a spot where God left his shoes." The two of them braved challenging circumstances to locate and copy the texts at Akhenaten's capital city, and to publish them in *The Boundary Stelae of Akhenaten* (London, 1993).

Bill's dream of sharing his knowledge and experiences with students as a faculty member at a university came true in 1986 when he was appointed Visiting Associate

¹ This text was first read as a eulogy at the memorial service for William Murnane on November 20, 2000, at the Memphis Funeral Home, Poplar Chapel, Memphis, TN. It was originally published (in an adapted form) in *KMT, A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt*, Volume 12, Number 1 (Spring 2001) and appears here with permission.

Professor of Egyptology at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1987 he was hired by the History Department of the University of Memphis (then Memphis State University). According to Rita Freed, fellow Egyptologist in the Art Department at the time, “When the History Department hired Bill those of us at the Egyptian Institute couldn’t believe our good fortune. To count a scholar of his stature in our ranks immediately catapulted a fledgling academic program to international prominence.”

Bill was promoted to full professor in 1994. Throughout his faculty career, one of the world’s foremost experts taught a wide range of courses— from undergraduate surveys in World Civilization to graduate seminars on the Amarna Period— in which he helped students to decipher the complexities of ancient history. Those who studied with him will always treasure his comprehensive-if-intimidating reading lists.

His role as a mentor to his students was marked by those qualities Rita Freed attributed most closely to him, “his brilliance, his patience, and his generosity” with his time, his ideas and his library. In 1992 his master’s student, Peter Brand, left Memphis to study Egyptology at the University of Toronto where he went on to receive a Ph.D. in 1998. Bill beamed with obvious pride when he presented to his Memphis colleagues a copy of the publication of Peter’s dissertation on a topic inspired by the work Peter had shared with Bill on the Hypostyle Hall Project.

Bill Murnane’s achievements as an eminent scholar were acknowledged by his receipt of numerous awards and prestigious grants. He won three University faculty research awards. In 1994, he was awarded the Distinguished Research Award of the College of Arts and Sciences. In 2000 he was presented with the University of Memphis’ highest distinction: the Eminent Faculty Research Award.

Bill’s commitment to professional service extended beyond the University, where he served on numerous politically significant academic committees, such as the Faculty Senate, and as the University’s representative to the American Association of University Professors. Bill was a member of the editorial boards of journals, in particular *JARCE*, *JEA* and *KMT*, as well as a member of the grant review boards of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Michela Schiff Giorgini Foundation. Bill’s international reputation is evident from the outpouring of reminiscences and condolences the Egyptian Institute received from colleagues all over the world.

For over twenty years Bill served as the director of the Karnak Great Hypostyle Hall Project: its mission to document the disappearing record of texts and scenes on one of the most frequently visited monuments in Egypt. His interest in the project began during his “free time” as a staff member of Chicago House. The project went with him to the University of Memphis. Supported by private donations and two major and increasingly competitive grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Bill took students to work with him in Egypt, some of whom had never left the U.S. before. He guided them through daily life in Egypt and bouts of “mummy tummy” as kindly and generously as he instructed them in the intricacies of identifying deteriorating hieroglyphs on crumbling sandstone walls. Bill had projected twenty more years at the Hypostyle Hall; he considered this work to be vitally important and recognized it as his personal responsibility and legacy. The Institute of Egyptian Art & Archaeology honored

its commitment to the project by appointing Peter Brand as director to complete Bill's planned goals. One of Bill's collection of quaint phrases seems appropriate in this context as he used it often about some exceptionally difficult or daunting task, "If generosity means giving, I give it to you."

James Allen struggled to accept the news of Bill's passing. "It can't be true," he argued defensively against fate on behalf of his longtime friend, "because Bill hasn't yet completed the general textbook of Egyptian history he had contracted to write," on which he was working and had already titled, *Kings and Mortals*. An apt title, another friend remarked, for "Bill was a prince among men." Richard and Helena Jaeschke wrote that they had "felt honored to know and work with such an eminent Egyptologist, but would miss his friendship far, far more." Bill's compassionate humanity touched some who had met him in person only once, and others who had never met him such as the members of an international Egyptological internet discussion group with which he graciously corresponded. Although the list of his publications on esoteric scholarly subjects is prolific, Bill enjoyed sharing his knowledge and ideas in on-screen interviews with television's The Learning Channel and The History Channel, even offering a "historical introduction" to the films "Ben Hur" and "Spartacus" for a local Memphis film series. His last public lecture was for the Southern California Chapter of the American Research Center in Egypt.

On my first visit to Egypt in 1983, Bill Murnane gave me a one-on-one introduction to Luxor Temple that I will always treasure. He also instructed me on the practicalities of getting about Egypt (when I proposed to him my day's itinerary he responded, "Ah, the courage of these Western women"). Ever polite, he was adamantly protective, and stated emphatically, "The fare for the ferry to the west bank is only 2 1/2 cents. Don't let them tell you otherwise." Inevitably, I fell ill on my visit and, while suffering in my room at Chicago House, having actually selected the lemon tree in the back garden beneath which I wished to be buried, Bill appeared with a bottle of ginger ale. He shook his head with an impish grin, "The worst part," he said, from experience, "is that you'll feel so bad you'll wish you would die . . . but you won't!" A decade later, I would work together with Bill on the Hypostyle Hall Project. Although he was a passionate fan of opera and classical music, those who spent 24/7 with him out in the field also knew that Bill had unexpected tastes in other forms of music. None of us will forget Bill's rendition of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I put a spell on you."

Cynthia Sheikholeslami, wrote of Bill, "The most earnest wish of the ancient Egyptian was that his name, the most intimate sign of himself, would be remembered forever. I am sure that Bill's name will live always amongst those of us who were fortunate enough to have been counted his friends, and amongst all Egyptologists now and in the future who benefit from his scholarly publications."

Indeed, we miss him dearly.