

## ERNEST SIBREE (1859-1927)

[Aidan Dodson](#)

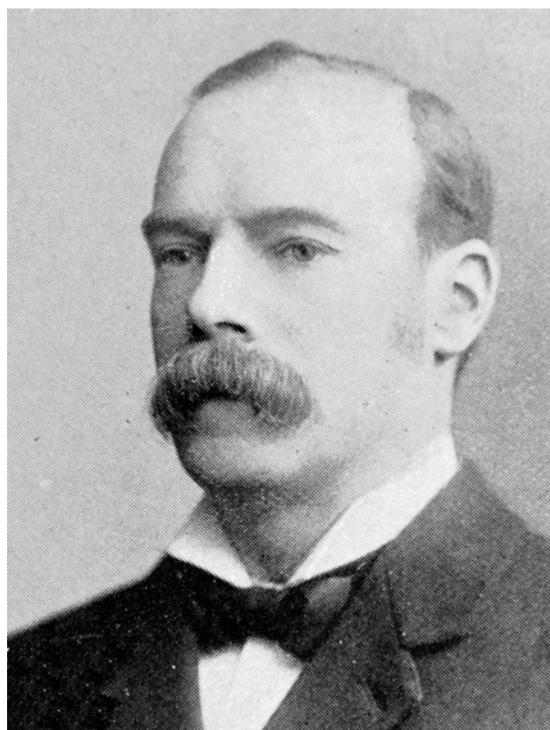
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It is a little-known fact that in the late 1890s the ancient Egyptian language was being taught at [University College Bristol](#) – and continued to be taught in Bristol until the 1920s. Still less known is the teacher, Ernest Sibree, whose surviving publications were not concerned with Egypt, but rather a Neolithic stone circle, Stanton Drew, in Somerset.

Sibree was born in 1859 at Painswick, Gloucestershire; the family originated in Frome, Somerset, but his grandfather had relocated to Coventry, while Ernest's father had moved to Gloucestershire in 1852/3, where he was a schoolmaster.

Ernest was educated at his father's school and spent some time at the University of Bonn in 1876. On his return he did some tutoring at the school while studying at University College London, but he never graduated from London, instead going up to Oxford in 1883, receiving his BA in 1887 and advancing to MA in 1890. He was appointed Assistant Keeper (effectively librarian) of the [Indian Institute at Oxford](#) on 26 January 1888, but was made redundant in 1894.

In the autumn of 1896, Sibree married Kate Budgett (b. 1849, a distant cousin), and moved to Bristol. They lived at what is now 48 Manor Park, Redland, Bristol 6, in a newly built terraced house, given the appropriate name of 'The Study'. Soon after the marriage, Ernest became Lecturer in Oriental Languages and Literature (from the following year, just Oriental Languages) at University College Bristol. During the 1897/8 academic year, Sibree offered classes in Egyptian (including Coptic) on Thursdays, between 3 and 4 o'clock, and again between 8 and 9 o'clock. He also



*Sibree's home: 48 Manor Park*

offered Sanskrit and Arabic – each course costing 7 shillings and 6 pence (= £0.37<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> – equivalent to about £30 at 2006 prices).

Clearly a man with an ear for foreign tongues, by his death he had acquired over a dozen languages. As regards Egyptian, his surviving transliterations and translations betray a strong reliance on the works of Wallis Budge, which also formed the

basic textbooks for his hieroglyphic Egyptian classes.



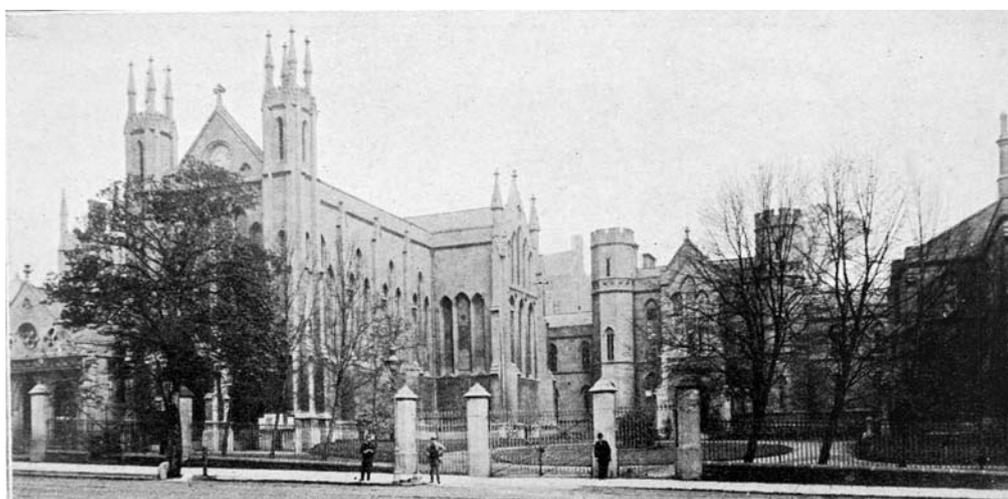
*The former Stuckey Lean Building on University Road, Clifton, one of the University Library's homes during Sibree's tenure as Librarian. Part of the original University College building is on the left.*

These classes were clearly a success, as for 1900/1 Sibree added a new elementary Egyptian class on Tuesday evenings. However, Sanskrit was dropped and a Persian option added, which was in turn superseded in 1902/3 by Assyrian. One of his Egyptian evening class students during 1900 was Gerald Avery Wainwright (1879–1964), soon joined by Ernest Mackay (1880–1943). Both were to have significant careers in Egyptology, Mackay as one of Petrie's assistants and Wainwright ultimately as Chief Inspector for

Middle Egypt. During his earliest years in Bristol, Sibree also undertook to copy, transliterate and translate many of the hieroglyphic texts in Bristol Museum.

Perhaps because of his previous experience in the Indian Institute, Sibree became additionally the Honorary Arts and Science Librarian of University College in 1901. In 1905, there were changes in the oriental language provision at the College, with Arabic being dropped. This was reflected in the re-naming of Sibree's post as a Lectureship in Egyptian and Assyrian. The following year saw Bristol's long-time Lecturer in Hebrew, Rabbi the Rev. Joseph Polack, being brought into the new Oriental Languages Department, renamed Semitic Studies in 1908 and now embracing Egyptian, Assyrian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Syrian History and Hellenistic History. The latter five subjects were taught by the Rev. De Lacy Evans O'Leary (1872–1957), newly appointed Reader in Aramaic and Syriac, who chaired the new departmental committee, of which Sibree was Secretary.

In 1909, University College became the [University of Bristol](https://www.bristol.ac.uk), and in the restructuring that followed, Sibree became once again Lecturer in Oriental Languages, in charge of the department as a whole. Sibree also retained his library responsibilities, expanding them to be Librarian for the University as a whole. In 1911 he moved the Arts and Sciences Library into the chapel of the former Bristol Blind Asylum, which lay behind the old University College building.



*The former Bristol Blind Asylum on Queen's Road, Clifton, which housed parts of the University of Bristol during its early years; it was demolished in the early 1920s to make way for the Wills Memorial Building. The present City Museum & Art Gallery was built in 1905 on a site directly to the left of the Blind Asylum chapel.*

In spite of an intimate involvement with the Egyptian language that lasted for three decades, Sibree seems to have published nothing on ancient Egypt. He did have, however, wider antiquarian interests, in particular as regards the stone circle at Stanton Drew, just outside Bristol. He retired in 1923, but was then appointed part-time Lecturer in Comparative Philology by the University, and retained the post until his sudden death at home on 29 March 1927; his body was cremated at Golders Green, London. Sadly, his wife Kate survived him by only a few months; there were no children.

*This is abstracted from a much more extensive biographical note on Sibree by the present author, entitled 'Ernest Sibree: a forgotten pioneer and his milieu', scheduled to be published in The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 93 (2007)*