
Mover and Shaker: Grace Mary Crowfoot, Intimate Conversations, and Turnings in Sudanese History

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Résumé

Botanist, archaeologist, textile historian, trained midwife, and mother of four, Grace Mary Crowfoot (1877-1957) was a polymath and super-woman of her era. She spent periods of her life in Sudan, Egypt, and Palestine and published many books, among them *Flowering Plants of the Northern and Central Sudan* (1928), *Methods of Hand-Spinning in Egypt and Sudan* (1931), and *Handcrafts in Palestine* (1944). Yet, despite Crowfoot's achievements, the historian seeking her in colonial-era archives will rarely find her, except when sources mention her as the wife of John Winter Crowfoot (Assistant Director of Education in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Director of Gordon College in Khartoum, and later Director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem). Today, one may find her on the internet in short biographical tributes written by her grandchildren, who celebrate her pioneering role as a woman in archaeology; and in passing references within biographies of one of her daughters. This daughter was Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin (1910-1994), who in 1964 became the third woman to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry (after Marie Curie and Curie's daughter Irène Joliot-Curie), and who trained a generation of chemists, including the future Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Despite her near-invisibility in official British sources, Grace Mary Crowfoot had a decisive impact on early twentieth century Sudanese history, as a result of private conversations – we can call them "intimate exchanges" – that she had with men in northern Sudan. This paper will focus on two places where she made an impact: girls' education and women's health. By showing that a woman could be scholar, wife, and mother at the same time, she inspired the Sudanese educator, Babikr Bedri (1856-1954) – still hailed today as the "father of girls' education" – as he was developing a new system of Muslim girls' schools in northern Sudan. At the same time, through conversations at dinner parties and other social events, she forced British male authorities to confront the challenges that northern Sudanese women faced because of female genital cutting, which, in a common Sudanese form called "infibulation", had grave consequences for many women during menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth. In the Sudan, Grace Mary Crowfoot was what a speaker of American English might call a "mover and shaker": she initiated events and influenced people (even if she did so behind the scenes).

Aside from exploring the importance of private conversations in propelling historical change, this paper has two additional goals. The first is to contribute to women's history in Sudan by considering Crowfoot not merely or primarily as a Briton (a female imperialist of her era!), but rather as a scholar and midwife. The second is to contribute to transnational history by studying the career of Crowfoot, and by association of her daughter the chemist, amidst the global entanglements of Britain, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, and other lands.

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