H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Weston Fields. *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Full History.* Leiden: Brill Academic Pub, 2009. 608 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-17581-5.

Reviewed by Jaqueline S. du Toit (University of the Free State, South Africa)

Published on H-Judaic (September, 2011)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Tales of the Early Days

In 1998 Weston Fields set out to interview the dwindling number of âfirst generationâ witnesses to the Dead Sea Scroll discovery. The over forty interviews were conducted worldwide between 1999 and 2003. A number of the scholars interviewed have since died–John Strugnell and JÃ³zef Milik come immediately to mind–and one can only be grateful for the perseverance of Fields and his team in capturing what Frank Cross nostalgically referred to as âtales of the early days when we were young and engaged in the most exciting project imaginable.â[1]

This project is a landmark addition to a revival in Dead Sea Scrolls historiography established when Neil Silberman decided to return to the archival record but also re-interview some of the original actors for the writing of *The Hidden Scrolls*.[2] It also highlights the importance of memory for the contextualization and *interpretation* of this history especially because of Fieldsâs interviews with the more reticent of voices such as Milik, Claus Hunno-Hunzinger, John P. M. Van der Ploeg, and Dominique BarthÃ©lemy. Because of this unique opportunity, Fields is strongly urged to expand the current publication project to add a volume with full transcripts of all the interviews conducted and supplemented with annotated commentary. At present, as in the case of Judith Brownâs biography of her father, John Allegro,[3] the reader is dependent on the authorâs editorial hand for what is included and how it is presented, as Fields acknowledges (p. 16).

Since Silbermanâs publication the historical reflection supplemented by the hitherto unpublished memories of the participants has been added to by the aforementioned recollection of Cross in a 1997 address on the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery. John Strugnell followed suit in 1999 in Edinburgh.[4] The difficulty lies in the evaluation of these accounts in light of the acrimony generated by the strife within editorial circles; Gerald Lankester Hardingâs dismissal as Jordanian director of antiquities and the nationalization of the scrolls; the struggle for funding; the battle for access; the lag in publication; and an all too human tendency towards revisionism and selective recall that separate the reminiscences of the subjects from the events described. Remembering, oral historian Paula Hamilton reminds us, is a âconstant, ongoing revisionâ[5] and therefore what is not mentioned proves as important as what is put on record. As format, the personal interview offered Fields the opportunity to direct the subjectâs reminiscences to matters which would otherwise be left unexplored by a public address or published report.

In short, *The Dead Sea Scrolls. A Full History* is therefore, as the cover claims, an attempt at âa more complete account of the discovery of the scrolls and their history over the past 60 years since the first scrolls were discovered in a cave near the Dead Sea.â The project, of which this is only the first volume, was anticipated in 2006 by Fieldsâs *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Short History*, also published by Brill. The current first of a projected two volumes of the âfull historyâ (henceforth referred to as vol-

ume 1) sets out to record the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls from the moment of discovery in the late 1940s until the present day. Much necessary ink is spilt on the relationships between the primary actors in the drama of the scrollsâ discovery, purchase, reconstruction, decipherment, and the often less than successful attempts at publication of the first decade. As is to be expected, of the thirteen chapters, the predominant number (chapters 4 to 13) are devoted primarily to the discovery and management of what became known as the Cave 4 cache of fragments and the establishment of the international coterie of scholars that would become known as the âCave Four Teamâ–a term Fields prefers to âInternational Teamâ or âInternational Committeeâ (pp. 191-192) for its emphasis on the nature of their work.

Volume 1 includes a little more than the first decade after discovery in 1947 until 1960 when the funding by the Rockefeller Foundation to the Palestine Archaeological Museum for the Cave Four Team ended. This is an acknowledgment of a recurring theme, the continuing battle to find funding for the purchase, conservation, study, and publication of the material. But Fields admits that the demarcation for volume 1 is also pragmatic: âIn the end it was simply space that dictated the choiceâ (p. 493). This represents a lost opportunity and leaves the reader mildly dissatisfied with the lack of resolution that will undoubtedly be addressed by volume 2. Because the historical narrative is framed predominantly in terms of the Cave 4 discovery and the Cave Four Team, the narrative arc would have been better served by ending volume 1 with Jordanâs decision to nationalize the scrolls in 1961. This brought to an end any likelihood of a dismemberment of the reconstituted Cave 4 collection after publication–until then a real possibility never emphasized in previous histories, because of the purchase agreements with McGill University, Manchester University, the Vatican, and others in order to secure funds in the mid 1950s to buy the fragments from the Bedouin. Many of these agreements offered ownership after publication and physical distribution of a subsection of the fragments based on the size of the monetary contribution made by the institution to purchase the scrolls. But the 1961 nationalization also unintentionally contributed to the long period of virtual inactivity in publication output (the fifth volume of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* was Allegroâs much maligned 1968 contribution; the sixth only appeared in 1977), for want of access and funds for scholars to travel to Jerusalem to work on the fragments. There is no doubt that the preservation of the collection intact (insomuch as it could be reconstructed after discovery) is of paramount importance. But one cannot help but speculate whether at least the publication project would have been accelerated had material found its way to McGill, Manchester, the Vatican, McCormick, Heidelberg, etc., in the wake of the decision by Roland de Vaux to prepare the material for shipment to these institutions in anticipation of threats of nationalization looming since 1957.

Speculation aside, Fieldsâs integration of oral history with the archival record contributes the voices of those he was not fortunate enough to interview such as Harding, de Vaux and, of course, Allegro. Jerome Murphy-OâConnor already pointed to Fieldsâs important contribution in highlighting Hardingâs role in early scrolls history.[6] Fieldsâs portrayal of Allegro, based on personal papers (the same used as basis for Brownâs biography), combined with comments by Cross, Strugnell, and others, is also essential to a rounded portrayal of this contentious, yet oddly tragic figure given that Brownâs account may be considered to be tainted by an effort at redemption. Fieldsâs depiction of Strugnell is also noteworthy. He deftly used interviews and Strugnellâs correspondence with Allegro, in particular, to portray Strugnellâs pivotal role in first-generation scholarship despite subsequent events that have obscured historyâs appreciation of his central position within the Cave Four Team. But Fields is also candid about the quandary he faced in synthesizing interviews and archival resources in this fashion: âI have vacillated between two poles: to tell the story in my own words, based on whatever information I have been able to gather, or to let the scholars and others tell the story themselvesâ (p. 13).

The book is a selective blend of the two approaches that leaves the reader involved and sympathetic to the endearing personal engagement of the author-historian, but at times also dissatisfied by the overly intrusive authorial voice. This is most evident in the prevalent asides. I quote a random comment following an excerpt from a 1948 William H. Brownlee letter describing his decision to allow John Trever to lead the negotiations with Mar Samuel on behalf of ASOR: âWhat an insight into Brownlee, the man!â (p. 70); and the important 1952 account of the discovery of Cave 4: âBut from the day de Vaux and Harding found out about the Cave 4 scrolls they only had the weekend to mount an official excavation. Impressive!â (p. 144). The intrusive authorial presence is exacerbated by an overenthusiastic application of both punctuation (especially the exclamation mark) and italics. The latter is aggravated by the fact that so much is in some instances highlighted that the reader is often un-

able to determine what the author wanted to emphasize. The endnotes are not always helpful either, as information is often inconsistently presented. Sometimes explanation of the italics are given (see, for example, chapter 8, note 10), but in other instances only the source is provided, with no further explanation (see chapter 8, note 14, where, given the highlighting of a publication schedule by Skehan in 1955, some comment might be expected on the obvious discrepancy between the schedule proposed vis-Ã -vis the actual publication date of some of the manuscripts). The prevalence of archival sources and interviews creates further confusion. The minimalist approach to referencing (forty pages of endnotes offer the date and context only the first time an interviewee is referred to) is presumably due to the dual purpose of this book as academic and popular history, but creates immense frustration. Two lists, added to the second volume, might alleviate this: one of subjects, the number, and the dates of all interviews conducted; and another of archives consulted, both private and public.

The volume suffers from a large number of typographical errors and the index from lenient editing. As for the attractive presentation of the volume, the glossy paper, and visual display, it ironically detracts from a satisfactory reading experience. The book is extremely heavy because of the paper quality and therefore difficult to read for long periods. It leads to the temptation to use it as reference or coffee table curiosity rather than as the easily accessible, semi-popular history that is intended. The weight also makes it a challenge to consult endnotes while reading. Furthermore, the ample pictures, a vital contribution to the historical record, are often disruptive and distracting to the flow of reading because of the placement framed by text and where used as background.

In conclusion, volume 1 of *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Full History* is an inestimable contribution to scrolls historiography. It will appeal to scholars and students of biblical scholarship, but also to academia in general and a popular audience. Despite its price, which curtails its mass appeal, it is highly recommended. And, based on the riveting narrative still unfolding, volume 2 is awaited with great anticipation.

Notes

[1]. Frank M. Cross, âReminiscences of the Early Days in the Discovery and Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls,â in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Fifty Years after their Discovery*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. Vanderkam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 932-943; 932.

[2]. Neil Asher Silberman, *The Hidden Scrolls: Christianity, Judaism, and the War for the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: BCA, 1995).

[3]. Judith A. Brown, *John Marco Allegro: The Maverick of the Dead Sea Scrolls.* Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).

[4]. John Strugnell, âThe Original Team of Editors,â in *On Scrolls, Artefacts and Intellectual Property*, ed. Timothy H. Lim, Hector L. MacQueen, and Calum M. Carmichael (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 178-192.

[5]. Paula Hamilton, âThe Oral Historian as Memorist,â *The Oral History Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 17.

[6]. See Jerome Murphy-OâConnor, âDecision to Buy Scrolls from Bedouin Reflects âGreatness,ââ *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 4 (2010): 20, 76 .