

BOOK REVIEW

Cleopatra's Needles: The Lost Obelisks of Egypt. By BOB BRIER. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. ix +283. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-474-24293-6.

This book is an entertaining overview of the history of the Egyptian obelisk beginning with the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom, moving to a survey of the obelisks in Rome and then to a chapter by chapter study of the three that were shipped for placement in the Place de la Concorde in Paris in 1836, on the Victoria Embankment in London in 1877 and in New York City's Central Park in 1881. Written in a breezy vernacular style, its author is Bob Brier, an expert in paleopathology, who has traveled the globe giving lectures, leading tours, contributing to various projects with PBS-NOVA, the Teaching Company and the NEH's Egyptology Today program. Designed for a popular reading audience, the book has a minimum of footnotes (only 40), a fairly superficial index, no source list for any of its 84 illustrations and a two page bibliography that is missing at least one important work, namely *Moving the Obelisks: A Chapter in Engineering History in which the Vatican Obelisk in Rome in 1586 Was Moved by Muscle Power, and a Study of More Recent Similar Moves* (New York: Burndy Library, 1950) written by the engineer, industrialist and historian of science and technology, Bern Dibner (1897–1988) who gathered "one of the finest and most complete collections of 'obeliskiana' in the world."¹

Such blemishes are the sort that a reader could easily overlook, if they were the only ones. However, they are not, and caveat lector, there are from time to time errors in fact, spelling and punctuation which bring misinformation to the generalist and disappointment and frustration to the specialist. A few examples will suffice. Spelling errors occur on pages 42, 43, 44, and 234 where "Esquiline" is spelled "Esqualine" three of the four times that the word is used, on page 108 where "lean" should be "learn," and on page 226 where "form" should be "from." The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Temple of Dendur is called "Dandar" on page 117 and "Danour" on page 234. Jean-Baptiste Apollinaire Lebas's 1839 book,

¹ Brian A. Curran, Anthony Grafton, Pamela O. Long and Benjamin Weiss, *The Obelisk: A History*, (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2009), p. 9.

L'obélisque de Luxor (Paris: Carilian-Goeury et V. Dalmont), *Libraries des corps royaux des ponts et chaussées et des mines*, is listed in the bibliography on page 232 as “L’Obelisque De Luxor. Paris. Libraries des Corps des Ponts et Chaussées et des Mines” with a preposition that shouldn’t be capitalized, and missing the adjective “royaux,” a pair of acute accents and the book’s publisher.

Two errors of fact are found on pages 89–90 which concern the Vatican obelisk. This obelisk, erected in the Forum Julium in Alexandria by Augustus’s quondam friend, Cornelius Gallus, once bore an inscription in bronze letters. Brier’s transcription of this inscription has two mistakes: “Caesaria” should read “Caesaris” and “Gallua” should read “Gallus.” He also describes the four lions at obelisk’s base, (the heraldic symbols of Pope Sixtus VI), which were designed by the sculptor Prospero Bresciano (n.d.-1599) and put in place after the obelisk was moved to the Piazza di S. Pietro by Domenico Fontana (1543–1607) in 1586. Brier says that “each lion has two heads, one for each side of the obelisk.” In point of fact the four lions have four heads. What seems perhaps to have been doubled are their bodies whose front paws, chest and shoulders come together at right angles to form the four corners of the obelisk’s square base. A third error is found in a footnote on page 230 where the middle name of the author (Jasper Yeates Brinton) “Yeates,” is used instead of his surname, “Brinton.”

Despite the book’s mistakes, which a proper proof reading would have eliminated, Brier’s narrative is compelling and at times thrilling. His descriptions of the men and the challenges they overcame to move these beautiful monoliths during the nineteenth century make the technical skills and the artistic genius of their ancient Egyptian creators all the more remarkable. In Brier’s book we have “a readable and urbane account” of the diaspora of these obelisks which were already centuries old when the Romans began moving them.²

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² John Ray, “Points of Order,” *Times Literary Supplement* (8 July 2016), p. 25.