

Gayer-Anderson: The Life and Afterlife of the Irish Pasha
By Louise Foxcroft

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In 1923 Robert Gayer-Anderson, oriental secretary to the British high commissioner in Egypt, attended the official opening of Tutankhamen's tomb. The body of the boy-king, who had been mummified with his penis erect, lay in gorgeous state, surrounded by gods and funerary artefacts, among them toy boats from which Gayer-Anderson correctly guessed his age at death – seventeen. The Irish-born empire-builder, who felt he had occult powers and thought himself fated to view an intact pharaonic burial chamber, was awed by the 'annihilation of time'. And when, soon afterwards, two of his servants were brutally murdered and he himself was nearly assassinated, he wondered if there was any substance to the much-touted curse of King Tut. That aside, the whole experience was a fitting climax to his career as a collector of antiquities and paedophile.

Born in 1881, Gayer-Anderson had an identical twin, Tom, who called him Pum, an unexplained but convenient nickname adopted by Louise Foxcroft in this absorbing biography. Their father, Henry, an erratic, peripatetic and sadistic Irishman who made money as a banker, land speculator and stockbroker, dominated his mild Welsh wife and subjected his offspring to Spartan discipline. He forced them to march waist-deep through muddy water and to bash each other with sticks to demonstrate their manliness. They also had to practise a 'Self-Control Drill', sitting stock still while he bullied and harassed them, slapping them if they flinched. Eventually the twins did receive some education at Tonbridge School, though Henry explained the facts of life in such a way as to convince Pum that he would beget kittens. Their father blighted the children's lives, not least through his Scrooge-like obsession with keeping the family accounts. These, in an exquisite act of revenge, Pum obliged Henry to burn shortly before his death.

In 1898 Pum began medical training at Guy's Hospital. He

formed a relationship with a prostitute and became infatuated with a young girl, who eventually rejected him. Fundamentally, however, he was disgusted by the 'two-backed beast' and thought all women were 'whores at heart'. Instead he was attracted to boys, considering their immature form the acme of beauty and embracing a kind of erotic paganism in which orgasm was the means of achieving heaven on earth. Once qualified, Pum joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and in 1907 he was posted to Egypt, which became his spiritual and carnal home. He learned Arabic, smoked hashish, revelled in the native quarters and haunted the bazaars, buying and selling antiquities. At home he took to wearing Arab dress and gathered around him a menagerie of animals and a 'happy family of boys', though he was not above hitting them when he lost his temper.

Pum spent two adventurous years in Sudan, where he investigated sleeping sickness and leprosy, and developed a passion for the desert, getting lost on safari more than once. He hunted big game, experiencing the familiar emotions of revulsion and elation at the kill. He witnessed floggings and oversaw public hangings in Kordofan. He also went on a punitive expedition to quell a Nuban uprising, taking the opportunity to boil down the heads of several dead warriors in order to send their skulls to the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, later the repository of his collection of ancient pornographic objects. Pum regarded Africans as 'essentially different creatures whose cruelty, bestiality, ritual-murder, voodoo, mutilation, witchcraft and superstition, to us so dark and appalling, cannot be judged by civilised standards'. Apparently he admired some of the 'magnificent' young Nuba males, but he also descanted on the black savage's 'ape-like ugliness'. And, virulently anti-Semitic, he termed Jews 'intellectual niggers'.

Pum had a good war. He served in the Arab Bureau of Intelligence, meeting T E Lawrence, whom he thought a devious genius. He escaped from a Turkish ambush under fire and worked with a field ambulance in the trenches at Gallipoli. He went on desert patrols and treated women in a sheikh's

harem. Finally, suffering from dysentery and diphtheria, he was invalided home. He returned to Egypt in 1919, occupying various senior posts, which brought him into conflict with the Wafdist independence movement. Reckoning their revolt to be inspired by the Bolsheviks, he supported stern measures of repression and experienced a 'horrible lust' for revenge. In 1923 he retired, buying the timbered Great House in Lavenham market square and finding a woman to provide him with a male heir – a previous arrangement of this kind having only produced a daughter, whom he sent to South Africa. After a bitter falling-out with his son's mother he also exiled her. He subsequently found he could not love the boy and packed him off to boarding school. Until his death in 1945 Pum spent most of his time in Cairo, where he acquired a magnificent 16th-century bey's mansion, the Beit al-Kretliya (used in the James Bond movie *The Spy Who Loved Me*), which is today the Gayer-Anderson Museum. Cosseted by his juvenile domestics, he devoted himself to antiquities, accumulating a vast hoard (the Fitzwilliam Museum alone holds over 7,500 of his pieces). His greatest treasure was a superb life-sized bronze statue of an ancient Egyptian cat, which he smuggled out of Egypt and which now resides in the British Museum.

Loot and sex were prime imperial incentives and Pum was anything but alone in yielding to them. But his proclivities, even when compared with those of other homosexually inclined empire-builders and adventurers such as Gordon, Rhodes, Kitchener, Baden-Powell, Lawrence, Montgomery and Thesiger, were unusual in that he seems to have been mainly drawn to pre-pubescent boys. Unfortunately, Foxcroft does not indicate the precise nature of his paedophilia, which would have been useful in the current climate of hysteria surrounding the subject. Evidently, details (including sketches of naked boys) are available in his papers and in his unpublished memoir, 'Fateful Attractions', on which this biography is largely based. But some kind of censorship apparently prevented their publication now. There is also a complete absence of references and the bibliography is disappointingly thin.

Nevertheless, this is a fascinating study. Foxcroft is perceptive, accurate and knowledgeable. She writes well and with proper detachment, not least about Pym's psychic theories, supposed paranormal capacities and claims to have seen ghosts and witches. In fact she sees him plain, setting him vividly in the context of his age. Stephen Spender described Pym as a 'rare and lovable personality'. On the evidence of this book he was an absolute horror.