

Empires of the Plain – Henry Rawlinson and the Lost languages of Babylon
by Lesley Adkins.
Harper Collins 2003.

I first encountered the name of Henry Rawlinson nearly thirty years ago as a young undergraduate. He was the fabled decipherer of the cuneiform language who commenced a life long passion for his subject after a chance 'encounter' with the giant Persian rock inscriptions at Bisitun.

In *Empires of the Plain*, among the top five books that I have read this year, the archaeologist Lesley Adkins writes a superb biography of Henry Rawlinson's life, from his birth in Oxfordshire in 1810 as the second son of a wealthy farmer to his death in 1895, a knight of the realm, doyen of the Royal Geographic and Asiatic Societies, and one of the most feted, and controversial figures of his time.

Rawlinson was initially nothing more than a lowly officer of the East India Company when he set out from England for India in 1827. He was not to return to England until 1849. In the intervening time, wholly through dedication, determination and at times obsession, he was to copy and decipher the monumental inscription of Darius the Great, carved 200 feet above the ground into a rock face, in three different languages written in the cuneiform script, inspire and initiate many other great archaeological discoveries from the Fertile Crescent, and work with other eminent 'gentleman' archaeologists in securing for the British Museum some of the most fabulous treasures – artistic, historic and linguistic – of the ancient world.

What makes Rawlinson's achievements even more extraordinary is that throughout his time in the Middle East he battled against serious ill-health, as well as following a demanding diplomatic and military career. He emerges as a true hero of the time in which he lived, an honourable man and dedicated scholar, and the world of biblical scholarship, as well as many related fields, owes him an almost unparalleled debt.

Anyone fascinated by the histories of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, by the origins of some of the monumental sculptures that they have seen in the British Museum, as well as those who seek to gain a greater knowledge of the place occupied by our ancestors in the ancient Near East, should read this superb book. For anyone who wants to learn about one of the most admirable and redoubtable figures in 20th century linguistic archaeology, *Empires of the Plain* is a real treat.

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