Opening Extract from...

A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 21 WOMEN

Written by **Jenni Murray**
Published By **Oneworld Publications**

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'I can't think of any more seductive way of learning about the past than meeting its principals as if they were friends in a room. That's the gift that Jenni Murray gives us; a rare gift because these principals are women.'

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Dr Anna Whitelock, author of *Mary Tudor: England's First Queen*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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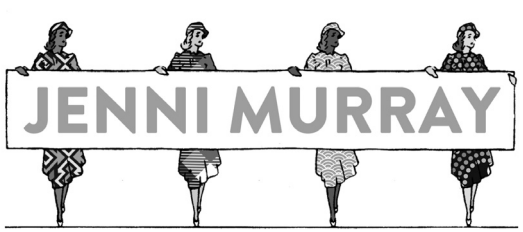
A HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN 21 WOMEN

A PERSONAL SELECTION



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

First published by Oneworld Publications, 2018
This paperback edition published 2019

A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78607-628-1
eISBN 978-1-78607-411-9

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

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INTRODUCTION

OK, Thomas Carlyle, famous and greatly respected nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher, I'm going to quote you again, with the purpose this time of completely demolishing what are probably the best-known few words you ever said: 'The history of the world is but the biography of great men.' Wrong, wrong, wrong! And this time I have the whole wide world with which to prove how utterly mistaken you are and were, even in your own time. I wonder that a man of such erudition was so blind to the presence of all those great women, from the past and from his present, who spent their lives in defiance of the conventions that for centuries and across all cultures attempted to confine them to hearth, home and domestic servitude.

Perhaps it's simply been convenient for you and for many men like you to ignore the fact that women the world over are, like men, people and not some sort of enslaved lower life form with no purpose other than to breed your children, cook your food and make and mend your clothes. How strange, Mr Carlyle, that at the very time you took up your pen you should have remained oblivious to women across the globe questioning and challenging

the status quo. In your own time a woman stood up and asked why it was that, even though she worked, as so many had to or chose to, and was expected to contribute to general taxation, she didn't have the right to vote and decide what kind of government ruled her. Had you, Mr Carlyle, not heard that other familiar saying 'No taxation without representation'? Or, as Susan B Anthony, one of the American leaders of the suffrage movement, put it during its campaign for the vote: 'Men their rights and nothing more. Women their rights and nothing less.' Women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after a long and hard battle, finally forced the agreement that, as citizens, we must be acknowledged to have won the right to vote and take a full part in democracy.

In the UK, universal suffrage for all women and men over the age of twenty-one was granted in 1928. Britain was a good way down the list of countries that finally gave in to the fact that so many men, and indeed, some women, had found so difficult to believe: women and men are equal citizens. New Zealand was the first, in 1893, quickly followed by Australia in 1902 (although Aboriginal women were excluded and did not win the right to vote until 1962). Finland, Norway, Denmark, Canada, Austria, Germany, Poland, Russia, the Netherlands, the United States and Sweden all came before Great Britain. Other countries you might have expected to be quick off the mark lagged behind well into the twentieth century; women in Switzerland won the right only in 1971.

Saudi Arabia came to its senses regarding the vote in 2011, and for a time it seemed the country's young Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, heir to the throne, would be taking the Kingdom in a more progressive direction. While the long-standing ban on women driving was finally lifted in 2018, early the following year reports emerged of female activists being tortured in custody. There remains, too, a significant restriction on the free movement of what the Kingdom continues to regard as the

lesser sex. In conversation with a Saudi professor of women's studies, Hatoum al Fassi, at a literary festival in Dubai, I learned that the 'guardianship rule', which dictates that a woman must be accompanied by a man when she appears in public, still applies. It is, she told me, essential that the law be changed and written down clearly so there can be no argument or debate about a woman's right to personal freedom. This would, she said, be the most important step towards changing the culture. Whether or not the law will change in my lifetime is quite another matter.

All over the world, there is still a long way to go for women and girls. As Hillary Clinton, who has her own chapter in this book, said, 'Women are the biggest untapped reservoir of talent in the world.' In this collection of twenty-one of that reservoir – a tiny number when you trawl the entire globe, venture back in time and discover how many women have simply said no to the limits placed upon their hopes and dreams – I have tried to include as wide a range of clever, talented and determined women as possible. There must, I felt, be politicians, writers, artists, musicians, scientists and athletes, and there must be women of different ethnic backgrounds.

It's always necessary to emphasise that feminism and the fight for women's rights is not only the concern of white middle-class women. 'Intersectionality', the somewhat awkward word coined in 1989 by an American professor, Kimberle Crenshaw, means certain groups of women have to navigate multiple layers of discrimination. For instance, a black woman may have to deal with both sexism and racism, and the feminist movement has to account for class, race and gender when seeking to improve women's lives.

I have to admit that the word 'intersectionality' caused me one of the most embarrassing moments of my broadcasting career. I was interviewing Professor Crenshaw and asked her why she'd chosen such a difficult word to introduce what is, in effect, a pretty obvious concept. What exactly did it mean?

'Well,' she said, 'it's a crossroads, it's where these problems of race, class and gender intersect'.

'Of course,' I mumbled, blushing. 'We are indeed two nations divided by a common language.' The penny had dropped – Americans don't have roundabouts and their 'crossroads' are commonly called intersections. I really should have cottoned on quicker! What unites my chosen twenty-one is that each has faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles to achieve her ambition, regardless of her colour or class.

It's also important to emphasise that the women in this book are my personal choices and, inevitably, lots of truly great women will have been left out. In some cases, I have been privileged to meet the women, as a result of my thirty years as presenter of the BBC's radio programme *Woman's Hour*. They have impressed and influenced me beyond measure. Some have raised their heads so high above the parapet that they have faced ridicule, torture, and in some cases assassination, for having dared to pursue their beliefs and challenge male authority.

I hope this book will go some way to demonstrate how widely women's fight for justice and recognition of their human rights has spread, and how long it's been going on. In the twenty-first century, we often speak of role models. It is my passionate desire that others – male or female, young or old – should learn of the determination and courage of so many women throughout the history of the world. They should be known, remembered, cheered and emulated by we who follow them.

1

Pharaoh Hatshepsut

c.1500 BCE–c.1458 BCE

It was on a trip to Egypt in October 1988 that I came across the legendary figure of Hatshepsut, the first woman in recorded history to hold real power and certainly the first woman in ancient Egypt to have declared herself a Pharaoh – a regal position strictly restricted to men. A producer, Mary Sharp, and I had been asked to travel to Cairo to put together a *Woman's Hour* programme on gender issues in the country.

Hosni Mubarak had taken over as Egypt's President after the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. He had outlawed the more extremist Islamic groups that had been pushing for stricter control of women's freedoms, so our programme examined what was going on in the lives of ordinary women. Why were so many beginning to wear the hijab, or head scarf? Was it a fashion statement or the return of a religious requirement? Why was the genital mutilation of girls still so common, even though it had been made illegal? Why was Egypt's family court described as the most backward in the world? And why was violence against women and girls a common occurrence?

Our best-informed commentator was Nawal El Sadaawi, a doctor, writer and activist who had long been a thorn in the side of Sadat's presidency. Nawal believed the country was facing a dark phase, and she fully expected women to be its first victims.

She described how, under Sadat, her feminist writings had been censored and how she had spent time in prison as a result of political campaigning against the increasing economic imperialism and geopolitical influence of America, genital mutilation, the rise in religious fundamentalism, the ever-present requirement for women to cover themselves and the common practice for a man to take up to four wives. She was not hopeful that Mubarak's regime would free women from what she described as 'those old issues'.

I remember asking her about a question that has long worried western feminists. Was it any of our business to poke our noses into the way women in other cultures lived their lives? Not only were they women, with all the discrimination that brings, but they lived with religious and cultural expectations that we could barely comprehend. Should we simply leave it up to women like her, on the ground, to develop feminist politics and fight for women's rights in their own way? Her response has stayed with me. 'When I was in jail – afraid, deprived, in the dirt and the dark and the heat – I felt the influence of western feminism washing over my feet like warm, comforting waves. Never fear the impact you can have.'

From Nawal's flat in Cairo we travelled back in time to uncover the history of Hatshepsut. It meant a short flight from Cairo to Luxor, once the ancient city of Thebes, centre of the greatest of all early civilisations and home of the Pharaohs. From there we could travel easily by taxi to the great temple of Karnak, dedicated to the god Amon, and cross the Nile by car ferry to the Valley of the Kings, the burial place of the rulers of Ancient Egypt.

My memories of that trip are somewhat mixed. There was much pleasure and excitement in the anticipation of exploring the great temple of Hatshepsut, where the story of her rise to power was engraved in the stone. There was also a degree of pain

in the unwise decision made by poor Mary to accept, with impeccable British manners, the small glass of tea offered by the charming taxi driver hired to take us across the river. 'Don't drink it,' I warned. 'Tip it out of the window when he's not looking. It'll be Nile water and it won't have been properly boiled.'

My tea never passed my lips. Mary, raised a strict Leicestershire Methodist, told me I was rude and ungrateful. She drank hers. I have never witnessed such a speedy onset of Cairo cramp; Mary's exploration of the great temples and the rest of our trip was quite the most miserable event I've ever witnessed. I add this merely as a warning should you decide to follow in our footsteps and seek out Hatshepsut.

We stepped out of the taxi into a blazing hot desert. Sheer limestone cliffs rose before and above us. In this stunning and peaceful atmosphere, we found the extraordinary temple of Hatshepsut, cut deep into the rock. At the height of the summer heat there were few tourists around; we were able to spend as much time as we liked examining the temple's engraved walls. There was, in 1988, no thought of terrorist attack, although nearly ten years later, in 1997, Hatshepsut's name echoed around the world when fundamentalist terrorists attacked a group of sightseers visiting the terraces of her temple. Some thirty people from Japan and Switzerland died in the massacre.

Hatshepsut was the only surviving child of Pharaoh Thutmose and his wife Ahmose, but as a girl, had no right to inherit the throne. She married her half-brother, Thutmose II, the child of one of her father's lesser wives. On the death of her father, when she was around twelve years old, she became Queen and her husband the Pharaoh.

Her husband died only four years after their marriage, but by a lesser wife he had a son, who did not have Hatshepsut's royal status. This toddler was named as the next Pharaoh, Thutmose III, and his stepmother, the teenaged Hatshepsut, was appointed

as his regent. Within seven years she had decided she would be Pharaoh and declared herself the ruler. A wonderful picture of her carved in the stone of the Karnak temple shows her sitting at her desk; I could almost hear her saying, 'I can do this job!'

Egyptologists have achieved intellectual miracles with often contradictory, patchy sources; it's amazing that we know so much about this incredible civilisation. But, as ever, there are gaps. It's impossible to know whether Hatsheput took such a step from personal ambition or because of her determination to preserve a dynasty that was still young. I prefer to think it was ambition and an assertion of her belief that a woman could be as effective as a man, if not an even more successful ruler. She clearly believed in the capabilities of women; during her rule, she made a sustained effort to have her daughter, Neferure, empowered to succeed her. She failed: her stepson Thutmose III was to take what he considered to be his rightful place as Pharaoh when Hatshepsut died.

The story of Hatshepsut's claim to the throne of ancient Egypt is told in pictures and hieroglyphs in the stones of her temple. Egypt became one of the world's first nation states and it's no exaggeration to describe it as a cradle of civilisation. At every corner are iconic monuments, whether it's the pyramids, the last surviving Ancient Wonder of the World, the Sphinx or the stunning treasures discovered over the years by Egyptologists. They've uncovered the riches of the burial places of leaders such as Tutankhamun and deciphered the words and pictures of the art and architecture of a wonderful culture.

With the aid of an interpreter, Mary and I followed the elaborate fiction Hatshepsut created to convince her people that she had as much right to rule as any man, in a time of fierce and vicious warfare between competing tribes. First, she told of an invented conception: the god Amon, she claimed, was her real father, not Thutmose I. In a very detailed tale she described what had taken place:

> He found her [Queen Ahmose] as she slept in the beauty of her palace. She waked at the fragrance of the god, which she smelled in the presence of his majesty. He went to her immediately. He imposed his desire upon her. He caused that she should see him in the form of the god. When he came before her she rejoiced at the sight of his beauty. His love passed into her limbs, which the fragrance of the god flooded. All his odours were from Punt.

The land of Punt is described in ancient Egyptian texts as 'the land of the gods'; in Hatshepsut's time it was a place famous for its riches. It's thought the location corresponds to what is now Somalia.

The pictures of the event are unusually graphic. Two figures are shown facing each other and very close. The first figure, to the left, is the god Amon, distinguished by a crown of feathers. He's seated, and, as our interpreter put it, is 'giving her the spirit of life or his seed'. Queen Ahmose is on the right, touching the god, knees to knees, feet to feet. In the words of the interpreter: 'he's giving her the key of life by touching her hand and nose as well, twice. She will be getting pregnant with her daughter Queen Hatshepsut.' Certainly, the images, explicit as they are, make it clear beyond doubt that Ahmose becomes pregnant because she is given the 'key of life'.

The picture that follows is highly unusual as it shows Ahmose is pregnant – an unfamiliar image even today. Then come the pictures of the birth of Hatshepsut. Even though it's known she was born as a girl, she is portrayed as a boy and later in the series, as a man.

It's now believed she would never have been accepted as ruler of Egypt had she not commissioned this extraordinary gender-bending fiction to be carved in the stones of her palace. In later drawings she is portrayed as a man, with a beard, male headdress and open, flat chest, kneeling in the classic position adopted in such art by any Pharaoh of the period.

After we left Hatshepsut's temple we spoke to expert Egyptologists who had long been fascinated by the ascendance of a woman to the position of Pharaoh and by the way she had conducted her reign for twenty-two years. Dr Fayza Haikal, professor of Egyptology at Cairo University, and Angela Millward Jones, an Egyptologist with the American Research Center, were both full of praise for the way Hatshepsut ruled Egypt.

At a time when cruel wars were commonplace, her reign was marked by peace. It's said that military campaigns were rare, and few enemies were prepared to challenge her might. She organised trade missions to Punt and greatly increased Egypt's wealth, using the vast resources she brought together to begin a nation-wide programme of development. She oversaw an extension to the Karnak temple complex and was responsible for the building of the Deir el-Bahari mortuary temple in the Valley of the Kings, one of the most beautiful monuments of the dynastic age.

It's clear that Hatshepsut could not have ruled so successfully, despite her 'fake news story' of the nature of her birth, had she not been supported by Egypt's aristocratic elite, who recognised her abilities as a ruler. Her treatment of her stepson, Thutmose III, is interesting. A more ruthless woman might well have had him despatched; he embodied a permanent threat to her authority and to that of the daughter she hoped might succeed her. However, she took no steps to remove him, had him trained as a soldier and promoted him to general of her armies. The fact that he made no attempt at a *coup* would seem to suggest either that he recognised how much he owed his Pharaoh, or he made a *realpolitik* calculation based on his knowledge that Hatshepsut carried the people and the elite with her: a case of straightforward self-preservation.

As Angela Millward Jones explained, it was remarkable that Hatsheput survived as long as she did in a man's world and achieved as much as she did. It took courage for her to become

and remain Pharaoh. That implies a strong will, political *nous* and religious power, not only inside Egypt, but also throughout Asia Minor, because she was determined to establish Egypt as a power in the region. 'To sum up,' said Angela, 'she was very successful artistically and politically – look at the wealth of that period and the peace that reigned. She was clever enough to invent a story, which meant the people accepted her as Pharaoh and as divine. The rulers of Egypt had to be divine, it's the sign that they are the heirs of the gods who created the world and ruled the world first.'

It was only after Hatshepsut's death in 1458 BCE, at the age of forty-nine, and her burial alongside her father in the Valley of the Kings with all the honour due, that her stepson and son-in-law revealed his true colours and exacted a posthumous revenge. At the Temple of Karnak, on the opposite bank of the Nile from the Valley of the Kings, Dr Mohammed El Sadir, director of antiquities for Upper Egypt, showed us how Thutmose III had attempted to wipe his stepmother from history.

Hatshepsut had ordered two great obelisks to be placed in the Karnak temple, on which the story of her reign would be told. One of the two was simply demolished on the orders of the new Pharaoh. Dr El Sadir believes his actions were the result of pique because he had long considered himself the true ruler of Egypt and was determined that there should be no record of Egypt having been ruled by a great queen who had kept the peace and boosted the economy. The second obelisk, the biggest in Egypt, was spared demolition, but was instead surrounded by high walls to cover the inscriptions in praise of Hatshepsut. Thutmose had not accounted for inquisitive Egyptologists, who came so many years later and uncovered the obelisk. In a – to me – delightful twist of fate, his high walls protected the hieroglyphs from damage and erosion and they now appear as some of the best-preserved examples of writings of the period.

Opinions vary on why Thutmose was so determined to scrub Hatshepsut from popular memory. Some believe it was because

she had been his opponent, but, according to Angela Millward Jones, the fact that she had him trained as a soldier and appointed him to a senior role in her army suggests the animosity he felt towards her was unlikely to stem from rivalry. More probably, Thutmose moved to act because of the very fact Hatshepsut had been a woman in a man's role. She had falsified her origin and upset the cosmic order.

Thutmose not only tried to erase Hatshepsut from recorded history, with which, of course, the ancient Egyptians were obsessed, leaving their legacy writ large in stone throughout the land. It's also believed he had her mummy removed from the grave where she had been buried with her father – a step in the rewriting of history not unlike the actions of James I of England when he succeeded Elizabeth I. Elizabeth was moved from her prime position in the chapel of King Henry VII to a side chapel alongside her half-sister, Mary Tudor, and James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots. James's positioning of those graves questions the primacy of Elizabeth and Mary Tudor, and, through the positioning of his mother's tomb, emphasises his right to inherit the throne. Similarly, Thutmose was obviously a man who understood the principle that 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.'

The British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Hatshepsut during his excavations in the Valley of the Kings in 1902. His further explorations in 1920, two years before he discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun, found two sarcophagi, one for Hatshepsut and one for her father. But both lay empty. A separate tomb, known rather unromantically as KV60, that offered no indication that royals may have been buried there, was found to contain the decaying coffins of two women, lying side by side. One bore the inscription of Sitre-In, Hatshepsut's wet nurse; the other had no name. In 2005, Zahi Hawass, said to be Egypt's foremost archaeologist, began research on the unidentified mummy.

The sarcophagus was taken to Cairo for a CT scan and a long investigation led Hawass to confirm that the mummy was that of 'an obese woman between the ages of forty-five and sixty who had bad teeth and had suffered from cancer, evidence of which can be seen in the pelvic region and the spine'. The mummy was unquestionably, he told the press, the remains of Hatshepsut and he described his work as the 'most important discovery in the Valley of the Kings since the discovery of King Tutankhamun and one of the greatest adventures of my life'.

I was rather sad to find the great and splendid Hatshepsut had suffered from obesity and bad teeth and died relatively young from cancer. I suppose it's true that – as Gray wrote of a later memorial – 'the paths of glory lead but to the grave' whether you're a man or a woman. Despite the colossal efforts the Egyptians made – pyramids, sarcophagi, mummification – to cheat death and to preserve their mortal remains, it all comes to this.

I prefer to end her story with the words of one of her greatest fans, Angela Millward Jones. 'She was beautiful. Her statues are so beautiful, with a smile that can be recognized. Many people say Egyptian statues are all alike. I could recognize Hatshepsut anywhere, she is so distinctive.'