

# *A Dream of Maya*



Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in Nineteenth-Century Yucatan



Lawrence Gustave Desmond  
Phyllis Mauch Messenger  
Foreword by Jaime Litvak King

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"Desmond and Messenger have carefully and impartially recovered from archeology's own mythological past the remarkable, indefatigable, uncompromising Le Plongeon. Alice in particular, for the first time receives proper recognition. *A Dream of Maya* not only presents a corpus of stunning archeological photography; it chronicles a devoted wife-husband team who displayed rare self-consciousness and resourcefulness in the field. . . . It is a suggestive story of the conflicts of personality and professionalism in early Mesoamerican archeology."—Curtis M. Hinsley, Department of History, Colgate

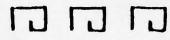
As an archaeologist, Augustus Le Plongeon is remembered as an eccentric diffusionist who believed that the Maya founded world civilization. This biography reveals the man behind the stubborn theorist. Augustus and his wife, Alice, excavated and photographed numerous Maya ruins in Yucatan during the 1870s and 1880s. Their drawings, photographs, and detailed observations, some published here for the first time, make a valuable contribution to the field. Not content with mere observation, the Le Plongeon developed complex speculative theories about Maya civilization, earning them the disdain of many archaeologists.

The story of the Le Plongeon is an important part of the early history of archaeology, when many researchers exhibited as many qualities of the adventurer as they did of the scientist. In this sensitive, thorough, and well-researched biography, Desmond and Messenger evaluate the Le Plongeon's contribution and provide a context for many of the Le Plongeon's photographs of Maya sites.

*A Dream of Maya* will delight general readers as well as specialists and historians.

"We have much to learn from this bizarre, yet compelling couple."—*New York Times Book Review*

A Dream of Maya



*A Dream of Maya*

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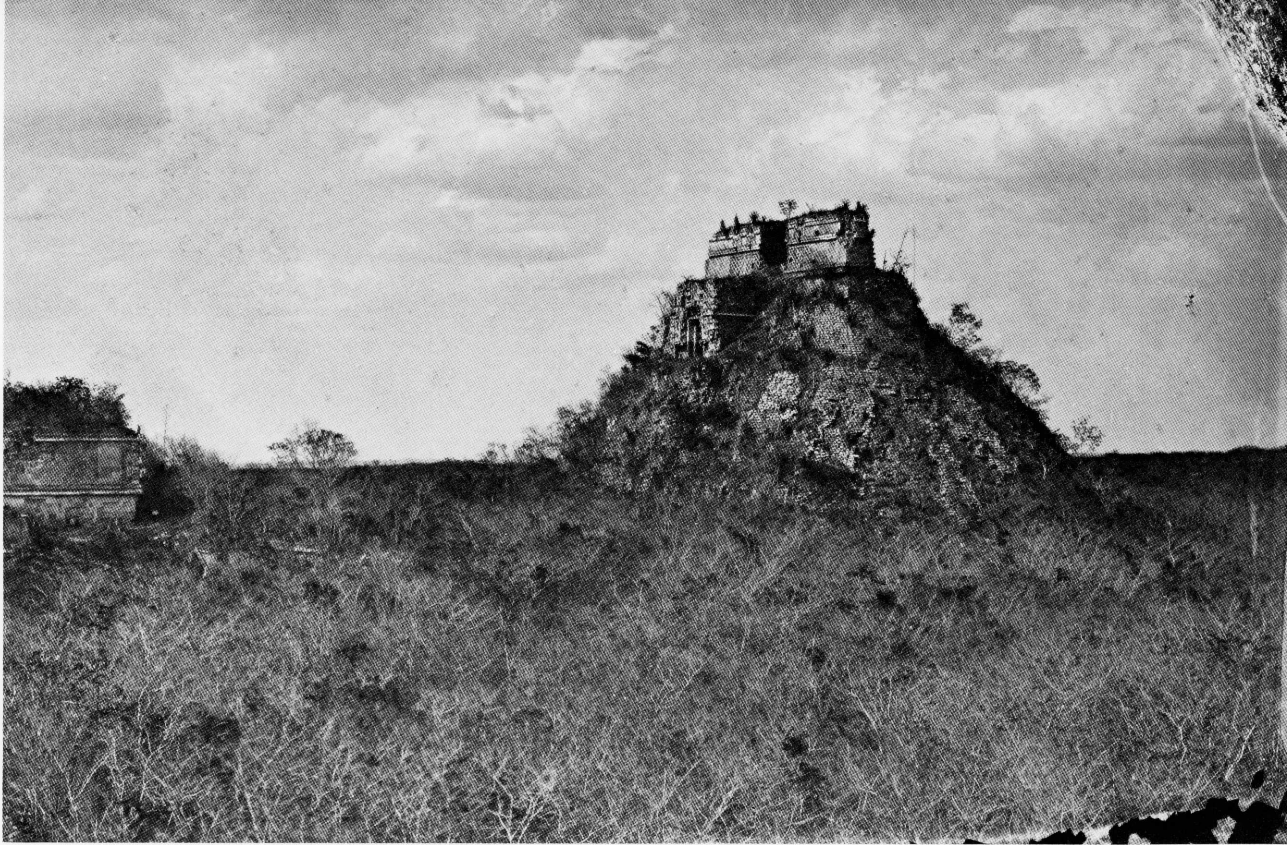
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*Panorama with the Nunnery Quadrangle on the left and Adivino Pyramid on the right, Uxmal, circa 1873. Le Plongeon shot the panorama from the Governor's Palace using two overlapping 5 × 8 inch photographs.*



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University of New Mexico Press  
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Cover photo—A composite photo by Augustus Le Plongeon. The eight reed bas-relief, Alice preparing to mount her horse, and Augustus in his field clothing were photographed at Chichen Itza and later put together to form a single photo in his laboratory. The photos were taken around 1883, but the date of the laboratory work is unknown. Original negatives and prints are lost.

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Foreword

To my parents,  
Lawrence C. Desmond  
and  
Gritli Desmond-Mueller,  
who were loving and understanding.

To D.E.P. and to Skip and Lindsay Carmen Messenger,  
who were all part of the process.

# Foreword

I was about thirteen when I first read Augustus Le Plongeon's *Queen Mío and the Egyptian Sphinx*. I found it in the Benjamin Franklin Library in Mexico City. At the time, I was reading everything I could get my hands on that dealt with archaeology and, since the book was in the section that contained books on ancient Egypt, I took it home and read it. It impressed me quite a bit. For one thing it didn't deal with Egypt but with something closer to home—the Maya. For another it spoke of links between the New World and the Old. Not in vague terms but in a very precise and concrete way. Ruling families, domains, travels, and statues. It also suggested a number of words that, according to the author, proved that the ancient Egyptians were connected to the Maya.

I must have been an inquisitive kid then. I was certainly stubborn for I tried to follow Le Plongeon's train of thought.

I plagued my history teacher with questions and tried to read other books on the subject. There weren't many. My teacher said that Le Plongeon was wrong, that the writer hadn't taken into account that the Maya and the Egyptians lived at very different times. He was right, of course, and when I corroborated it I stopped that line of inquiry.

Many years later, as a student of archaeology, I heard the rumor from others that Le Plongeon had used explosives for digging. We, of course, had just been through Mortimer Wheeler's *Archaeology from the Earth* and had been converted to careful digging, so the old Mayanist was pretty much the epitome of everything we wanted to avoid. I was also able to read Robert Wauchope's *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents*. Le Plongeon was mentioned there, his life told, his assertions questioned, and his theories and ideas dissected and revealed to be nonsense. Wauchope had written his book in a very angry mood and it clearly showed that non-scientific archaeology was not only wrong but also very damaging. He was right, of course.

A few years later I met Larry Desmond. He was starting his research for this book and was falling in love with Le Plongeon. My initial reaction was that Desmond was showing signs of brainwashing. What was there to write about the old geezer? He was a lousy digger and he was wildly wrong in his crazy theories. Why so much work?

In time I understood why. It didn't have anything to do with his ideas, flaky as some of them might have been, or with the quality of his excavations. It had everything to do with the type of activity that archaeology was in Le Plongeon's time and how the general public conceived—and still does to a very high degree—the work of exploring and excavating sites.

Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, was born, large and wise, out of her father Zeus's head. It is a bad allegory. Sciences are never born full-grown. They develop out of lore that is later seen as non-scientific. The first researchers in a given field make assertions that future generations consider nonsense. Aristotle's work is a good example. Science is not fully developed in his writings but its origins are there. After a time those ideas are questioned and other theories, many times as nonsensical as the former ones, are advanced in their place. Both cases are probably the normal result of insufficient, unsystematically collected evidence. It is only when enough data has been collected, when an ongoing discussion of theory and facts has proceeded for some time, and when the field has developed a methodology for gathering, understanding, and explaining the parts of reality that

constitute its scope that modern science, universalist and generalist, can be recognized as such.

In this scheme Le Plongeon clearly belongs to the second phase as do the theory of phlogiston in chemistry, Lamarck's theory of heredity of acquired traits in biology, Flammarion's catastrophism in astronomy, or the work of Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Spurzheim in psychology that developed into phrenology. None of these theories is accepted by modern science but the lives, ideas, and the work that led to them is important for the history of science. This book deals with such a time. Archaeology was contending, as seriously as it could, with the data it had and the body of theory it could develop, attempting to find explanations that made sense. If what was done then doesn't look good now, it wasn't only Le Plongeon at fault. Consider what was being said and done by people like Schliemann or Brasseur. And don't forget what profession swallowed Piltown whole some years later.

The history of archaeology as a field has become quite important and some books, such as Willey and Sabloff's *A History of American Archaeology*, are important compendia. The book on Le Plongeon does not follow that generalistic trend. It concentrates on one character and proceeds on the assumption (correct as far as I am concerned) that his life is relevant to the understanding of his work. Since he was influential in the development of Maya archaeology, it helps in understanding why it is as it is and why it became so. As such it is a significant contribution both for the general history of archaeology and for Maya research.

Every profession projects a stereotype. For the public mind the chemist is a man in a dirty, acid-specked lab coat who holds some container full of a foul-smelling liquid up to the light. An entomologist runs around with a butterfly net. A physicist is an absent-minded being who forgets things. Indiana Jones is the archaeologist.

There is a difference between those stereotypes. Ours is not fiction. Some of the first archaeologists faced dangers no less than the ones Indy went through. Angry natives, savage beasts, and wild country really existed and it was people like Le Plongeon who had to be there to dig. And dig they did, as well as they knew how. Le Plongeon is one of the causes for the stereotype of the archaeologist even today. Romantic adventurer, garrulous adversary, a character out of a Jules Verne novel, Le Plongeon was bigger than life in his time and today, when the world is quite a bit blander, a reminder that things weren't always so. Le Plongeon's life brings us to the reasons for public interest in archaeology.

This book accomplishes its authors' purpose, to synthesize the life of one of the most notable archaeologist-travelers of the end of the nineteenth century and to let the reader in on a number of previously unknown details of his life. Le Plongeon was controversial, even in his time, both for his ideas and for his methods. His wife has never been regarded before as more than just her husband's loyal helper. This book makes important points and provides a new perspective on both its subjects.

Desmond and Messenger have researched their topic well. They have quoted from contemporary papers, have paid attention to American and Mexican scholarly opinion of the time, and have shown due regard for the Yucatec sources. *A Dream of Maya* is not only a scholarly book. It is a very entertaining read. The authors, wisely, have not attempted to enter into a deep analysis of Le Plongeon's work. Such a task would be irrelevant now. Le Plongeon is "history" and should be looked upon as such. He deserves a biography and Desmond and Messenger have given him a very nice one, as good as any other one on the ancestors of modern archaeology—or of Indiana Jones. They are quite plainly sympathetic to their subject, and being conscious of it, they have been careful. The resulting work is well rounded, well written, well revised, and damned interesting. I have enjoyed writing this foreword. Maybe the old geezer was telling us something he didn't say explicitly after all.

Jaime Litvak King  
Cholula, Puebla, Mexico

April, 1987

# Preface

If Augustus Le Plongeon had been given a fair shake by historians of anthropology or history, this book might never have been written. It was the unusual vehemence of the attacks on his work and a fascination with this unique nineteenth-century character that led to a search of archives and photo collections by Larry Desmond in 1977. Desmond's goal was to try to explain why such an absurd-sounding character as Le Plongeon was so intriguing. One of the missing pieces that fell into place was a major collection of the "Old Doctor's" glass-plate negatives and original albumen prints. With that discovery Desmond knew he was hooked. Desmond's research on Augustus Le Plongeon led him to archives around the country, to fieldwork in Yucatan, and to a Ph.D. dissertation.

When Luther Wilson and Beth Hadas of the University of New Mexico Press suggested that Larry and I work to-

gether on Le Plongeon's biography, we wondered why we hadn't considered the idea ourselves. I had been following Larry's progress from the beginning, when he pounded out a draft of his research notes in the basement of our house in Deephaven, Minnesota, but it had not occurred to me to join him full time on the project.

The picture that took shape from Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon's ethnographic writing, photographs, field-notes, and drawings was of an extraordinary couple whose work was not being fairly appraised in the context of the time and situation. We soon found that Alice's role, and the roles Alice and Augustus played in each other's lives were becoming clearer. Their personalities and their part in that period of discovery and exploration began to emerge as we pieced together the sequence of events and let the Le Plongeon speak in their own eloquent voices as much as possible.

For the Le Plongeon, their research was their life, and their psyches were intertwined with their work. They never had children. In a way, the Maya were the Le Plongeon's family and they were as unable to see their imperfections as parents would be. Alice and Augustus could never reconcile themselves to the lack of acceptance their efforts achieved.

I hope that we have succeeded in helping them live again.

Phyllis Mauch Messenger

*Note:* Accents have been used for titles and names but not for place-names.

Some photographs originally shot in stereo by Le Plongeon are reproduced directly from his negatives. Since they are reversed, they cannot be viewed with a stereoscope, but they can be seen in stereo by those who have mastered the "crossed-eye" technique.



# Acknowledgments

Many people have given me assistance and encouragement during the research for this book. It is the sum of their contributions that has made this project possible.

Manly P. Hall, president and founder of the Philosophical Research Society, encouraged this work, and generously allowed me to work with and print the Le Plongeon glass negatives. His staff, including librarian Pearl Thomas and assistant Edith Waldron, were always ready to locate obscure articles and materials in the Society's collections.

Other assistance with Le Plongeon's photographs came from Ansel Adams, Pirkle Jones at the San Francisco Art Institute, Richard F. Carter, Ralph E. Black, and Larry Harwood of the University of Colorado.

At a crucial moment early in my work on Augustus Le Plongeon, Linnea Wren had the good sense to steer me into Gordon Willey's office. He encouraged me to continue, and

expand my research perspective since he felt Le Plongeon's work deserved a closer look.

Later, at the University of Colorado, Russ McGoodwin reviewed my years of work on Le Plongeon and helped me bring that research to fruition as a Ph.D. dissertation.

Fieldwork in Yucatan was facilitated by archaeologists Norberto Gonzales C., and Peter Schmidt of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, and by Susan Milbrath of the Florida State Museum.

A number of institutions and individuals were of great help with archival research. Sincere thanks to Sally L. Bond, Ian Graham, and Daniel W. Jones, Jr., of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University; Gordon F. Ekholm, American Museum of Natural History; M. J. De La Haye of the Société Jersiaise; William Joyce, American Antiquarian Society; Thomas Niehaus, Latin American Library of Tulane University; Franklin Portugal, Carnegie Institution of Washington; Dianne Tubandt, John Q. Packard Library in Marysville, California; the staffs of the Albany Institute of History and Art in New York, Bancroft Library of the University of California in Berkeley, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Brooklyn Museum, California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, l'Ecole Polytechnique of Paris, the Long Island Historical Society, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Mormon Church's Genealogical Library, Musée de l'Homme in Paris, and the Smithsonian Institution.

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The support and interest of the staff at the University of New Mexico Press has been extremely important. Former director Luther Wilson, director Beth Hadas, and editor Claire Sanderson have all played a vital role.

Archaeologist Skip Messenger, who patiently put up with the "Old Doctor's" long intrusion into his household, lent his artistic skills by rendering maps and drawings from the Le Plongeon's mural tracings which are an important contribution to the aesthetics of this book.

# Introduction

*False facts are highly injurious to the progress of science, for they often long endure; but false views, if supported by some evidence, do little harm, as every one takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness; and when this is done, one path towards error is closed, and the truth is often at the same time opened.*

—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871

Augustus and Alice Dixon Le Plongeon entered American Archaeology at a critical juncture in its development. Archaeology was developing as an academic discipline, moving from speculation to description and gathering of facts. By the last quarter of the century the self-trained archaeologists were being replaced by university-trained professionals.

As early as the 1840s, influential men in the field, such as Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian Institution, admonished researchers not to speculate on precolumbian civilization, but to wait until all the facts were in. In his 1857 *Observations on Mexican History and Archaeology*, Branz Mayer wrote,

The American antiquarian should, as yet, avoid the peril of starting in his investigations with an hypothesis, for the chances are very great that, in

the mythic confusion of our aboriginal past, he will find abundant hints to justify any ideas excited by his credulity and hopes. In the present state of archaeology, all labors should be contributions to that store of facts, which, in time, may form a mass of testimony.

Several early researchers and explorers were key figures in the early development of Maya research.

Jean Frédéric Waldeck, who worked in the Maya area in the 1830s, documented the ruined cities on the Yucatan peninsula by illustrating hundreds of structures and motifs. He was later criticized as being too interpretive in a number of his drawings, as well as for proposing Asiatic origins for the Maya.

Following more closely the dictates of the times, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood achieved great success in producing beautifully illustrated books of their travels in Yucatan and Central America. They knew the value of photographs in documentation and attempted to use the daguerreotype photographic process, but found it difficult to use in the field. Catherwood finally resorted to the *camera lucida*, a well-proven method that allowed the illustrator to trace the image directly onto paper. His color drawings were an impressive and important step in the documentation of the archaeological sites, but they lacked the detail of a photograph and were often romantic in style. Their purpose was not only to record but also to impress the viewer. And their text conformed to the admonishments of men like Henry, avoiding almost all speculation or interpretation.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century the scholar Brasseur de Bourbourg spent a number of years in the Maya region. As a result of that fieldwork he wrote the four-volume *Histoire des nations civilisées du Mexique et de l'Amérique centrale* in 1856. At the time of its publication it was well received by scholars, albeit reluctantly, because its conclusions were based on limited factual knowledge. Later he published his *Quatre lettres sur le Mexique*, and was severely condemned as being overly speculative in promoting the hypothesis that America was the mother continent of world civilization.

In the 1860s Désiré Charnay, a French photographer, documented several Maya ruins using the new glass-plate negative process that had been developed a decade earlier. His work produced the first successful and widely known photographs of these structures. While the quality of his photographic work was excellent, his short stays at the various sites limited the number of photographs he took and

prevented systematic recording. His intent was to provide views of the ruins, rather than an in-depth documentary record of the sites.

While Charnay's writings fell within the bounds of description, he did attempt to provide some interpretation. It consisted mainly of comparing Mesoamerican cultures with the civilizations of Asia, and identifying the Toltecs of Highland Mexico as the civilizers of Mesoamerica—a theory that has never found any support.

In 1873 the Le Plongeurs landed in Yucatan prepared to document the ruins by the same new photographic method Charnay had used and by making architectural plans and drawings. Augustus felt well prepared for what he saw as his life's work. He brought years of experience in surveying and photography, most recently in Peru, and he, unlike his predecessors, brought with him a hypothesis to be tested by systematic observation. He openly stated that he came to Yucatan with the hypothesis that the Maya were the founders of world civilization. He would let the facts either prove or disprove that hypothesis.

