

“A rare body, a quick mind, a high spirit”: Cleopatra in Interwar Fiction

The period between the World Wars of the Twentieth Century saw wrenching change, so there is little surprise that the reception of Cleopatra VII of Egypt should reflect that. That period coincided with the time between the 1917 Theda Bara silent film and the 1934 Claudette Colbert epic. Novels published in America during this period as well as some of the other aspects of popular culture such as film and advertising, can help us to understand the context of this evolution.

The evidence from film, advertising and general popular culture will be treated briefly, because this paper will primarily examine four novels which can help illustrate this trend. They include Henry Thomas, *Cleopatra's Private Diary* (1927); E. Barrington, *The Laughing Queen* (1929); Talbot Mundy's *Queen Cleopatra* (1929) and Mary Butts, *Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra* (1935). All of these enjoyed publishing successes in the United States but none of them were born here. They could not be more diverse. Mundy had deep roots in nineteenth century pulp fiction, Butts was at the forefront of the modernist movement, while Thomas and Barrington saw Cleopatra almost as a contemporary flapper. One thing they did seem to have in common is that they were apparently influenced to write about the queen based on their reaction to the popular biography written by Arthur Weigall, *The Life and Times of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt* (1924). Together they seem to have created a dialogue which resulted in new way of looking at a woman who had been regarded as a vamp or a *femme fatale*.