



Type: Magazine Article

Egyptology and the Book of Mormon, III

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (April 1923)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 546–554

Abstract: This series proposes that the characters on the gold plates were derived from Hieratic or Demotic Egyptian (Mormon 9:32-33). Analysis of other major written languages available ca. 600 B. C.—i.e. Phoenician-Hebrew, Egyptian hieroglyphs, cuneiform—reveals that they do not meet the writing requirements outlined in the Book of Mormon itself. The nature of the gold plates as an alloy is also discussed. The third and final part covers the Anthon Transcript.

Egyptology and the Book of Mormon

By R. C. W.

III

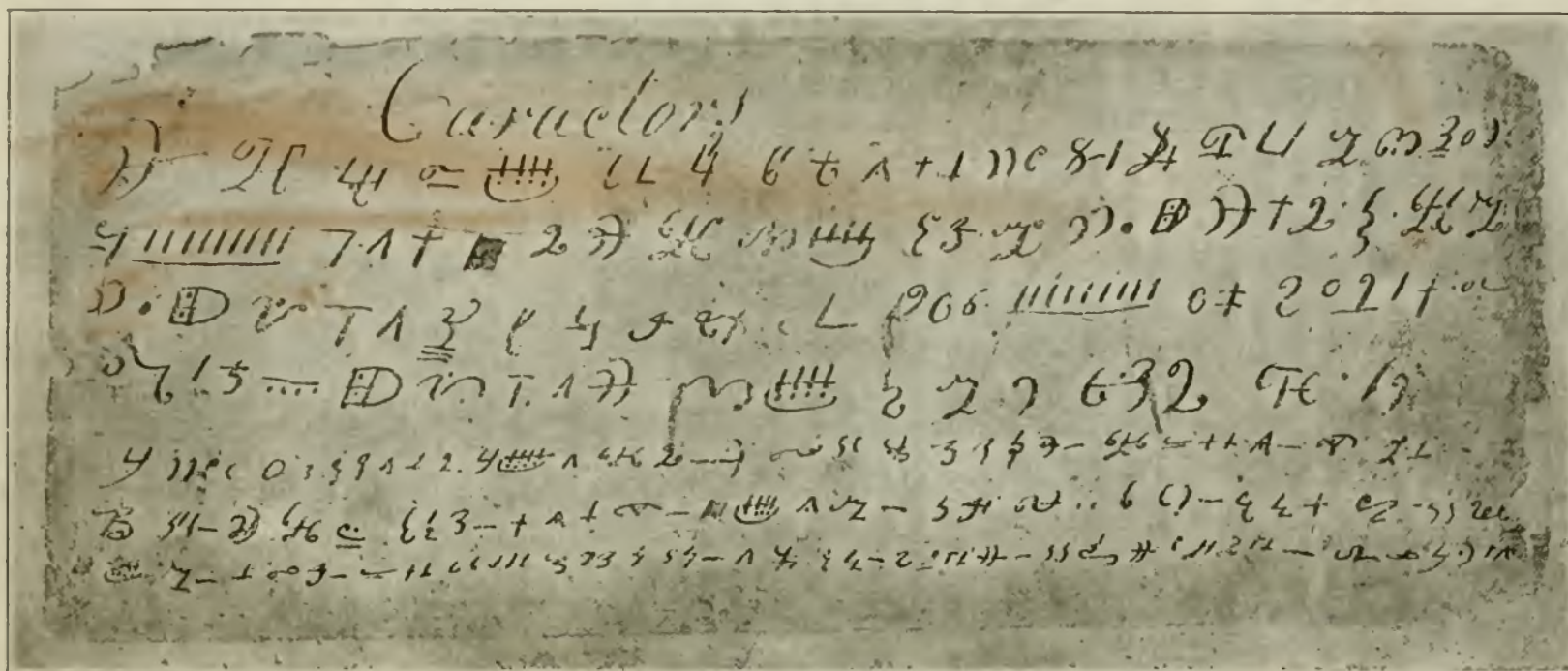
If the foregoing facts and explanations can serve in any sense to illustrate the conditions of making written records in the days in which, according to its own representations, the Book of Mormon was compiled, we may proceed to a brief analysis of the only document extant that can supply anything approaching direct evidence on its claims. Although the "transcript" shown to Professor Anthon seems to have disappeared, another with the same ascribed character has been preserved in Joseph Smiths' family. It is the document labeled "Characters," in script closely resembling the Prophet's chirography, and showing seven lines of unfamiliar figures. . According to traditional understanding, this is another "transcript" from the "plates" of Mormon. While it would seem a quite unpromising task to attempt guesses upon the origin or derivation of this writing, careful examination confirms the opinion that a thoroughly informed mind must render upon it the verdict that "some one has been trying to copy an inscription in a character closely suggesting Egyptian hieratic." Several characteristics are evident in it:

(1) It is evidently the work of a penman unskilled in copying unfamiliar and foreign writing—hence it shows marked irregularity in the formation of several closely similar figures, probably intended to be identical.

(2) It closely suggests a studied transcript from some previously formed original, or originals, in the fact that the separate figures seem to have been shaped deliberately, and in accord with some predetermined plan—just as if the writer were actually copying lines from some document before him—rather than to have been written haphazard, as would have been the case, if each figure had been concocted off-hand.

(3) It closely suggests the copying of a continuously-reading document, rather than the transcription of a series of selected separate figures, in the fact that, while the first four lines are written large, and with some suggestion of care in forming the figures, the last three lines are in reduced size, and show considerably smaller care for details.

(4) While, as we might judge from the relative size and apparently careful formation of the first two figures at the left of the first line, as compared with those following, the writing of this "transcript" seems to have been done from left to right, according to modern custom, it could be held to represent, or to be intended to suggest, a script written from the right, as were most Semitic languages and Egyptian. This conclusion seems to be warranted by the presence of the three square black figures—



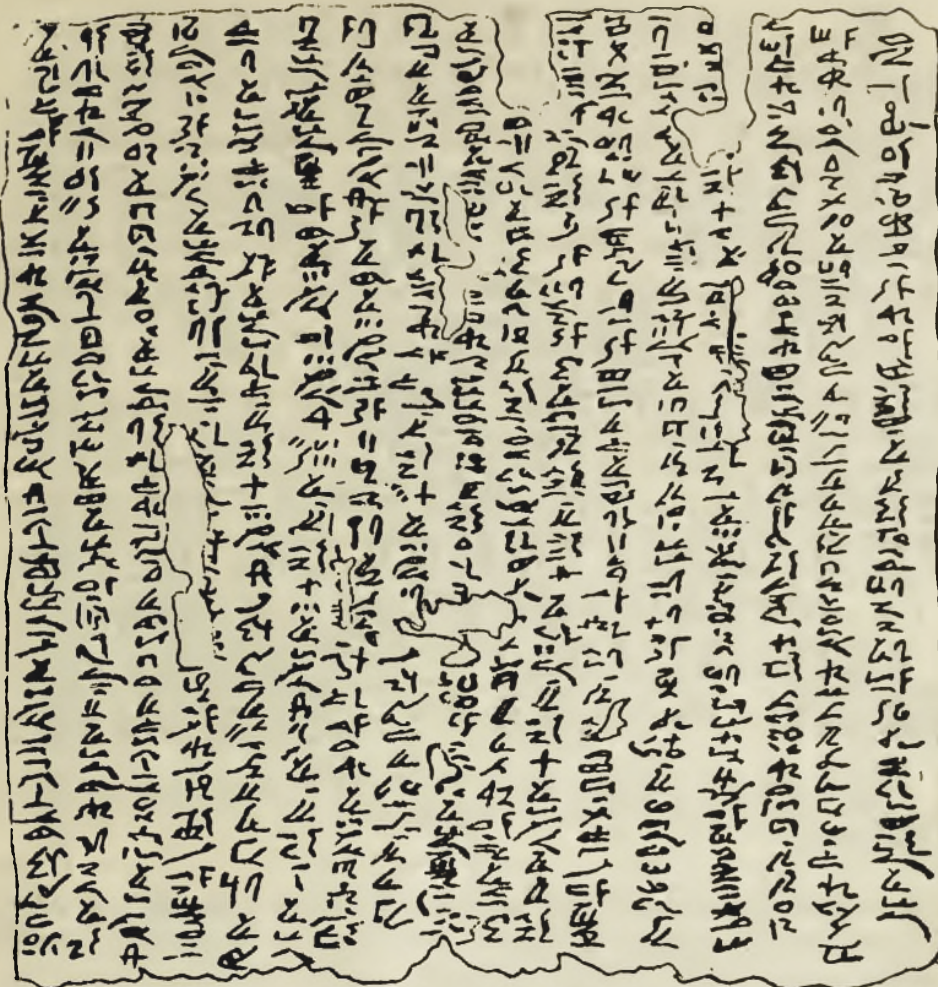
The traditional "transcript" labeled "Caractors," and supposed to be a running copy from a section of the "plates" of Mormon. It is included for the purpose of comparison with the older form of hieratic writing shown in the page from Ptah-Hetep; also for brief analysis of the forms of several of its characters.

the third at the left end of the last line—which might seem to be stops or periods.

(5) While the first four lines of this document are written comparatively large, as if to exhibit the forms of the essential characters used in the writing, the last three are smaller by at least a half, which fact might be held to indicate that the writer had concluded to represent the writing in small size, as it must have appeared on the Plates of Mormon. It would be entirely reasonable to hold that the writer's mind was divided between two ideas: (a) to reproduce the *forms* of the separate characters, as in the first four lines, and (b) to represent the general appearance of the lines as they appeared in the original document. While, in view of the writer's evident lack of skill as a penman, it would be impossible to insist that his copying was entirely accurate in matters of size, detail, etc., of the separate characters, it is interesting to note that each of the first four lines contains approximately half as many characters, on the average, as the last three lines. Thus, there are 26 characters in the first line, 24 in the second (total 50); 26 in the 3rd and 21 in the 4th (total 47); 37 in the 5th, 40 in the 6th, and 49 in the 7th; giving an average of 44.6.

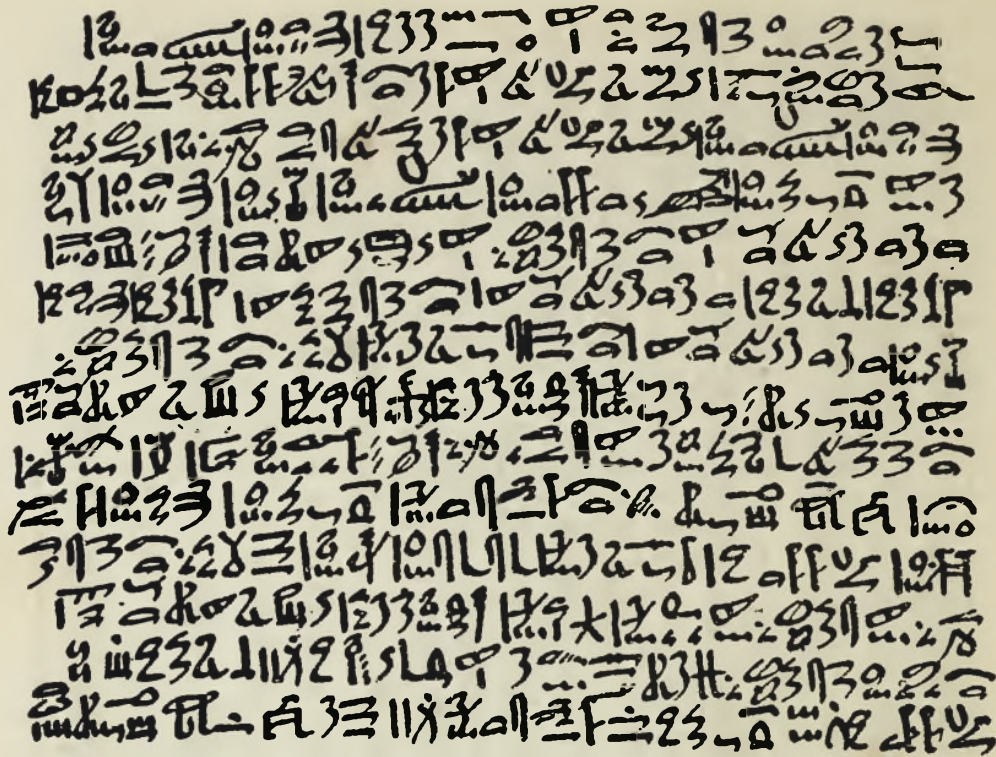
The close resemblance of many of the figures found in this "transcript" to characters familiar in Egyptian hieratic writing invites careful analysis, not because such, or similar, figures might not have been produced by an entirely ignorant person in attempting to justify his claim to possession of a secret writing in a strange language, but precisely because, according to claims, this writing professes to reproduce the characters of an "Egyptian" original. If the writer had stated that this "transcript" represents either Hebrew or Greek writing, an intelligent critic would be in conscience bound to say that it represents neither the one nor the other—nor could represent either of them. But when he has given us to understand that it represents Egyptian writing, no informed and conscientious mind can fail to recognize that he has given us many figures closely suggestive of characters used by writers of that very language. Where did an unschooled American writer of nearly 100 years ago find such characters to copy, unless he had before him the very kind of original which he claims to have possessed? To invoke "coincidence" would be merely unintelligent, since the numerous "good guesses" of Joseph Smith will presently present a situation nearly as interesting—in some scientific particulars—as a full demonstration of the remarkable claims and explanations which he himself has given.

Thus, as seen in the writing of Ptah-Hetep, as given above, there are numerous figures closely suggesting script capital "L," capital "S" reversed, or the numeral "2." Counting the signs in our "transcript" from the left, we shall find suggestions of such forms in line I, no. 22; line II, nos. 7, 14, 20, 23; line III, 12 and 18; line IV, 13, 14, 17; line V, 12, 17, 33; line VII, 2, 17, 28, 40. Because of the evident inexactitude of



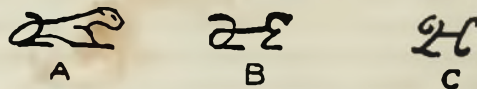
"All sorts of crooked character disposed in columns." Copy made from a fragmentary sheet of personal letters in Hieratic writing, composed by one Hekanakht, an Egyptian priest, about 2004 B. C. The originals, which are in the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, show several characters closely like those to be found in the document labeled "Caractors," supposed to be a transcript from the plates of the Book of Mormon. The resemblances closely suggest that this document is actually a copy of some writing very like Egyptian Hieratic.

the copying, an attempt to identify any of these figures might involve difficulties, although all are characteristically suggestive of hieratic writing. The first figure (at the left) in the first line of the "transcript," while possibly exaggerated on any familiar hieratic character, might be held to represent an attempt to reproduce the hieratic sign for the doubled reed leaves as shown third from the right in the first line of Ptah-Hetep's writing. It seems to be repeated here in line II, 8, 17; line IV, 10; line VII, 33, 38. The second figure in the first line of our "transcript" invites attention, because of its close suggestion of a form of script capital "H," as occasionally written. That



Extract of a page from the Ebers Papyrus, an ancient Egyptian treatise on medical subjects, in Hieratic writing. Included for sake of comparison of its characters.

such should be its real explanation is fairly outside the range of probability—a man capable of so closely imitating hieratic writing must certainly be supposed to have had sufficient imagination to avoid so obvious a blunder as to intrude script capital letters in his “transcript,” otherwise so convincing. As



The Crouching Lioness and the “Capital H.” Showing the possibly traceable form of the problematic character given in the “Characters” document. A shows the hieroglyphic form; B, the hieratic; and C, a copy of the character shown in the transcript. The form shown at B could, imaginably, be miscopied into the form shown at C.

a matter of fact, this figure may be held to be an example of the force of association between a familiar sign and one resembling it in an unfamiliar writing. Precisely this description would lead us to suggest that it might be an attempt to reproduce, in all essential strokes the figure of the crouching lioness—the traditional symbol for the letter “L”—as found in numerous hieratic manuscripts. The resemblance, instead of proving the transcript fraudulent in any sense, is highly significant in further supporting the theory that it is precisely

what it purports to be. It seems to be repeated at line II, 9, 21; IV, 19; V, 16, 28; VI, 4; VII, 38.

Probably the most suggestive fact about this professed "transcript" is that it includes compounded figures, closely like those formed by the familiar Egyptian habit of writing one character above another—"piling" them as we might say—several examples of which may be seen in Ptah-Hetep's lines. Such "piled" figures, closely suggesting some of his, or reminding the reader of the Egyptian practice in general, may be seen in the "transcript," as follows: Line I, 3, 8, 20, 24; II, 1; III, 6, 23; V, 29; VI, 5; VII, 9, 25, 30, 37. So this "transcript"—ignorantly concocted as some ignorantly argue—shows, not only numerous figures very closely like those familiar in Egyptian hieratic writing, but also represents in several cases a manner of writing used in all kinds of Egyptian styles, and nowhere else!

Without pausing to analyze the numerous indefinite strokes in our "transcript," or attempting to guess at the possible significances of the several figures not evidently akin to known, or common, hieratic symbols (e. g., line I, 5; II, 2, 11, 16; III, 2, 16; IV, 5, 6, 12, etc.), it is safe to state that the following are certainly close imitations of probable hieratic originals: line I, 10, 11, 12, 13, 20, 22, 23, 24; line II, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 23; III, 3, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 18, 20; IV, 4, 7, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, etc. Counting these with the characters previously analyzed, we find that, out of a total of ninety-one characters in the first four lines of the "transcript"—all more carefully copied than those in the succeeding three lines—we have a total of forty-two that so strongly suggest characters usual to hieratic writing that they are worthy of mention. When we consider again that the writer of this "transcript" claimed that it was in this very kind of character, and that its general appearance strongly suggests that it was actually copied from some original, rather than invented off-hand, as slovenly theorists would have us suppose, it seems perfectly reasonable to ask, "What was this original? And how did the writer obtain it?" How far a careful study of this document could take us toward justifying the traditional claim that it is an actual inscription in Egyptian characters, this superficial study can not, of course, inform us. We are entitled, however, to the full measure of satisfaction that may be derived from the assurance that its professed representation of Egyptian writing may be partially justified by even a casual examination.

As may be understood, most of the facts and inferences hitherto adduced may be said to constitute argument more or less subsidiary in character—creating favorable impressions, without directly demonstrating conclusions. Since, however,

Joseph Smith claimed acquaintance with Egyptian writing and language, it might seem highly reasonable to inquire whether he has left any evidence which informed minds might construe as partial justifications. To avoid lengthy discussion of this point, it may be in place to select two conspicuous facts, which conclusively demonstrate that he had derived Egyptological knowledge from a reliable source. The first is to be found in the name of the city Nauvoo, which was selected, as we are told, because it connoted the idea "beautiful." It was, in fact, the "City Beautiful". This meaning, he said, belonged to the word in the language, or dialect, which he called "reformed Egyptian". Now, in Egyptian the word for "beauty" is usually rendered *nefer*, and is regularly indicated by the figure of a lute an object which some authorities have held to represent the sound of *nof*, or *nofer*. Nor is there certainty in this case, as also in many others, apart from the analogies of the later Coptic language. In fact, the values of the vowels in most Egyptian words constitute the greatest uncertainties in Egyptological study. In any event, the familiar method of deriving the idea "beautiful" from the symbol for "beauty" was to pluralize it after the noun to be qualified. Thus, on the Rosetta Stone, we find several times repeated the title of Ptolemy Epiphanes, *neter per neb neferu*, literally "god Pharaoh, Lord-of beauties" by which we are to understand "beautiful Lord," or "good Lord." The expression for "beautiful city" would be *nut neferu*, "city-of beauties." The conspicuous difference between the name Nauvoo and the Egyptian plural form *nfrw* is the absence of the letter "r", which could readily be supposed to indicate just such a dialectic change as might be found in a language described as "reformed," or modified. Its close approximation to the essential Egyptian sound, also to the plural form with final "u", can not but be suggestive.* Is this another "good guess"?

The second fact may be called even more suggestive, and bears directly upon the question of ability to read any variety of Egyptian writing. It occurs in the caption to the first of the

*It is interesting to note in passing that the custom of designating cities and countries by names in plural form was familiar in ancient times. Thus, in Greece, we find *Athenai* (Athens), *Thebai*, (Thebes), *Mukenai* (Mycenae), etc., all plural in form. In the Bible, also, several place names follow this custom. Thus we have Succoth ("booths"), Bachim ("weepers") Chittim ("giants"), Anathoth ("answers"), etc. The New Testament name Chorazin suggests a plural form in Chaldee. We find also the dual form *Mitzraim* for the name of Egypt, meaning literally "the two Egypts," upper and lower, south and north, as frequently designated in Egyptian writings. The Hebrew name *Ephraim* seems to have a similar meaning; thus "two lands," etc., but, although the form of the name suggests the dual number, the derivation is not entirely certain.

three plates illustrating the Book of Abraham. In the right hand lower corner of this plate will be seen the figure of an offering table surmounted with flowers and skirted by two other objects of problematical character. It is numbered "10," and is said to indicate "Abraham in Egypt." If we understand that this is the reproduction of a note, really intending to say, "Abraham in Egyptian," we have an interesting evidence of something quite other than guesswork. The hieroglyphic value of the offering table is commonly given as "ab", the figure on the floor at the right, corresponds to nothing more closely than the hieroglyphic symbol for the letter "r", the flower above the table, in its conventional hieroglyphic form, connotes the syllable "ha" (correctly with hard "h", like the German *ch* in *ach*). This gives us five essential letters, *Ab-r-ha*, drawn from familiar hieroglyphic values. The figure on the floor to the right of the offering table is not so clear. When, however, we consider that the wood engraver who originally copied this plate evidently has shown himself neither an Egyptologist nor an artist, we may conclude that this figure has not been copied with entire accuracy. As it stands, it suggests nothing more closely than the familiar scribal rendering of the figure of an owl, which is the well known hieroglyphic equivalent of the letter "m". Whatever it may have been in the original drawing, it is sufficiently close to the owl figure to tempt Joseph Smith, or any other observer to assume that the owl was intended, and to give the fami-



Analysis of Fig. 10, Plate I of the drawings accompanying the text of the Book of Abraham, giving their readily recognizable hieroglyphic equivalents, with phonetic values; spelling the name "Abraham" as indicated in the traditional caption. This exhibit enforces the conclusion that the writer of the caption had some knowledge of Egyptian methods of writing.

liar hieroglyphic value, thus completing the name *Ab-r-ha-m*. If, by any chance, he, or we ourselves, mistook the value of this particular element, the fact can not be held to vitiate the identifications of the other three figures, about the values of which

there is no doubt whatever. This is explained in the accompany diagram. We are not concerned, however, with the possible, or even the "probable," original significance of these figures, but solely with determining how far a man of modern times has been able to recognize the proper phonetic values of objects commonly used as characters in hieroglyphic writing. The man who wrote the caption to this plate undoubtedly had some elements of Egyptological knowledge.

We have attempted in the present writing to go no further than verifiable facts can take us—avoiding inferences, except where facts seem to uphold them. Nevertheless, we have discovered that, in several essential particulars, the allegations of the Book of Mormon have the support of science. How far the demonstration of its accuracy in these particulars can go toward erecting a complete conviction of the truth of its claims, each reader must, of course, judge for himself. We can add merely that as in other matters of definite knowledge, the facts are at hand, also that they are as represented. They were not fully accessible to anyone in the days of Joseph Smith; nor is he known to have made any such investigation on his own initiative, as could have enabled him, under even the most favorable circumstances, to discover them for himself. How shall we account for these *Facts*? That is a fair question.

Stand Together, Mutual Workers

(Tune: "Let the Lower Lights be burning." *Songs of Zion*, page 264.)

Stand together, Mutual workers,
Faithfully stand side by side,
With the Slogan as our motto,
And our constant, daily guide.

Chorus:

Stand together, Mutual workers.
Let the Slogan point the way.
"Pure life through clean thought and action"
Be our watchword, M. I. A.

Happy we, when serving others.
"He who serves best, profits most,"
"Service above self," my brothers,
Ever guide our Mutual host.

Bravely stand and meet the issue,
Never falter, never fail.
Honor leaders, honor Priesthood,
Keep the faith—truth will prevail.

Mutual workers, God is with you,
He will comfort, he will bless.
Mutual work brings mutual blessings,
Mutual help and happiness.

Lethbridge, Canada

D. H. Elton