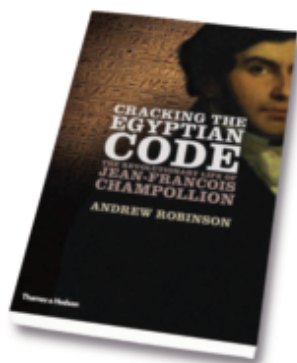


Nor is this a book that will satisfy all Poles. That minority who embraced Communism after the war – admittedly pretty thin on the ground here in Britain – will not find their experience of the war represented here. Different ethnic groups from wartime Poland might also feel short-changed by Kochanski's presentation of what is effectively the mainstream view. Nevertheless, given the delicate nature of much of the historiography, she generally manages the remarkable feat of walking a sensitive yet confident line.

It seems astonishing that there has never yet been a book in English that gathers together all the different aspects of the Polish experience of the war into one place. As the first to do so, Kochanski's book is a subtle but worthwhile addition to the literature.

KEITH LOWE



### Cracking the Egyptian Code The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion

Andrew Robinson

Thames & Hudson 272pp £19.95

Few authors are better qualified than Andrew Robinson to write about the history and science of ancient scripts. His expertise long proven in earlier works, his new book, *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion* fills a yawning gap in Britain, providing a definitive modern history, in English, of Champollion's pioneering translation of hieroglyphs.

In 1798 Napoleon led an invasion of Egypt as part of a strategic attempt to conquer India. However it was no mere military conquest: with him went 167 *savants*, scholars whose task it was to investigate and document

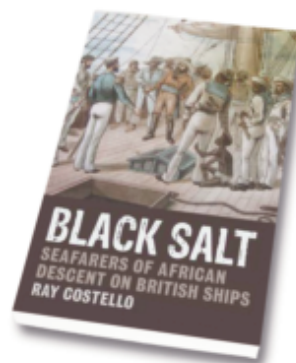
everything they encountered – but they could not read any of Egypt's hieroglyphs, carved on every temple, tomb and monument. With the death of the Egyptian priesthood the ability to read the sacred script had been lost for centuries and Egypt had remained a mystery ever since. The turning point came with the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, found in 1799 by French army engineers. This large fragmented block bore a vital inscription in hieroglyphs, demotic Egyptian and also ancient Greek. The *savants* realised the Greek could be used to translate the hieroglyphs and break the priesthood's sacred code for the first time in nearly 2,000 years, opening the riches of Egypt to the world. The man who cracked the code was Jean-François Champollion.

The story moves from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt to sketch an illuminating and scholarly portrait of Champollion, a self-promoting, arrogant young man (once described by his own tutor as a peacock), who alienated academic peers of all nations, particularly his own. Although the gifted young linguist had a fascination with Egypt from a very young age, his rise to prominence was uncertain. Biographies of Champollion often lack an objective distance and are very much bound up in Anglo-French rivalry, even to this day, but Robinson describes both Champollion's career and details the contentious history of the translation of hieroglyphs and the efforts of Britain's Sir Thomas Young and others in an international struggle to solve the age-old riddle with dispassionate clarity. The reader experiences the bitterness of the falling out between Young and Champollion, who corresponded regularly for a time, the dismissal of the one by the other and the steps taken in a tight-lipped war of words and Champollion's ultimate success.

*Cracking the Egyptian Code* shows how to apply Champollion's translations and read cartouches on the Rosetta Stone, something the finest minds of Europe were unable to do until Champollion's triumph. Based on extensive research accompanied

by breathtaking illustrations, Robinson's book is an evocative and compelling tale of a French national hero, a story of discovery, ego, resentment and a cultural struggle for survival – an illuminating addition to any historian's library.

JONATHAN DOWNS



### Black Salt Seafarers of African Descent on British Ships

Ray Costello

Liverpool University Press 246pp £65

Since the Tudor period generations of black seamen have been serving on British ships

and some of those who travelled to our seaports, including London, Liverpool and Cardiff, made the 'Mother Country' their home. Britain's black population has largely been overlooked by historians. With the exception of the Crimean 'doctress' Mary Seacole, black Britons from history are absent in the school curriculum. In today's culturally diverse Britain this is an appalling situation and it needs to change. A radical shift in thinking must happen if we are to present our young, especially those from African and Caribbean backgrounds, with the true history of our nation. Ray Costello's informative books *Black Liverpool* (2001) and *Liverpool's Black Pioneers* (2007) have done much to shed light on the subject but he goes considerably further with his latest publication, *Black Salt*, which acknowledges in rich detail the experiences of Britain's black seafarers.

Some of the stories will be familiar to those who have knowledge of black Britons from

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