The Man Who Deciphered Linear B: The Story of Michael Ventris by Andrew Robinson

The decipherment of Linear B by Michael Ventris some fifty years ago is the equivalent in the humanities of Crick and Watsons discovery of the structure of DNA. Today it belongs in the same rare class as Champollions decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in the nineteenth century. The earliest European writing system that we can understand, Linear B dates from the middle of the second millennium BC. It was rediscovered by Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who excavated clay tablets bearing this ancient script at Knossos in Crete in 1900. Obsessed with cracking Linear B, Evans kept the tablets to himself for some forty years but made little progress. After his death, other scholars tackled the decipherment, but it wasnt until 1952 that the secret was penetrated. Linear B was not an unknown language such as Minoan or Etruscan but actually an archaic dialect of Greek, more than five hundred years older than the Greek of Homer. Michael Ventriss later collaborator, the Cambridge classicist John Chadwick, told the story in his famous book, The Decipherment of Linear B (1958). But what of the man behind the decoding? Here Chadwicks book is exceptionally reticent, because in truth he hardly knew Ventris. Based upon hundreds of unpublished letters and other sources, including Chadwicks papers, Andrew Robinsons biography is the first book to tell the story of both the decipherment of Linear B and the man who broke the code. His research reveals a most intriguing person: a dazzling polyglot with an unorthodox upbringing and socialist tendencies who was also extremely private and lacking in confidence, and who died in a mysterious car crash in 1956 at the age of thirty-four. Ventris trained successfully as an architect, and his design methods shaped his decipherment work. But it was his hobby, Linear B, that would make him immortal. 20 b/w illustrations.

My Personal Review:
The Man who deciphered Linear B - the story of Michael Ventris, by Andrew Robinson, is a book about the monumental task involved in the decoding and understanding what was written in the 1.200 BC clay tablets found by sir Arthur Evans in 1900 in the island of Crete, the home of the fabled character Minotaur. Many were the obstacles imposed on the many scholars who ventured to crack down the code, to no avail to the great majority of them. The most conspicuous hindrance was the fact that, contrary to what happened in the case of the deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphs by the French mathematician Jean-François Champollion, there was not a handy Rosetta Stone with bilinguals, that is, with texts to be confuted both in the language to be decoded as in an already known language (Greek, in the case of the Rosetta Stone). To add to the difficulty, the discoverer of the first tablets, Mr. Arthur Evans, was not the team-work type of man, preferring to work alone and hiding from the others scholars almost all the pertinent tablets. So, the deciphering of the so-called Minoan Linear B scripts was a task compared in its difficulty to the first escalation of Mount Everest and to the discovery of the structure of DNAs, all of them happened in the very same year the professional architect and amateur scholar Michael Ventris announced having first cracked the Minoan code, in 1953. The fundamental enigma was what was the language beneath the Linear B sillabary (different from an alphabet, a sillabary represents pictorially sometimes in just one design syllab sounds, e.g. me, fe, ra, etc.). To everyone's amazement, and even to Michael Ventris himself, who had for a long time contended that the hidden language was Etruscan, a Greek ancient dialect was there all the time, masqueraded by a somewhat similar Cypriot sillabary. The book has all the ingredients of a best-seller and it is a case in point for the preponderance of group work as against the work of mavericks as Arthur Evans. It is also a proof that Natura non facit saltum and that the Eureka cry not always comes from the ones who are in the front line of research, coming instead from people at the second rank as was the case of Ventris, an architect by formation and practice, who now and then made a dive in that type of research. His mixture of intuition and knowledge of the many areas involved proved to be the right one to the cracking of the code. Also, the premature death of Michael Ventris at the age of 34 is a mysterious event that to some people repeats the death by suicide of his depressive Polish and beloved mother; one has also to remember that the Greek alphabet used today was only used since circa 800 BC, surrounded by the many uncertainties regarding the oral background of Homer works like the Odyssey and the Iliad. Was the discovery of such material in Crete and afterwards in mainland Greece to expand the range of research of Greek antiquity? This is a very good book to anyone interested in the peculiarities of genial men like Michael Ventris and in the origin of languages.

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