



Wheat, E. (2011) 'Review: Andrew Robinson, *Writing and Script: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009.' *Rosetta* **9**: 92-95.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_09/reviews/wheat\\_robinson.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/reviews/wheat_robinson.pdf)

---

**Andrew Robinson, *Writing and Script: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xi & 157. Price £7.99. ISBN 978-0-19-956778-2 (Pbk).**

Reviewed by Elizabeth Wheat  
*University of Birmingham*

Andrew Robinson's *Writing and Script* appears as part of the Oxford University Press *A Very Short Introduction to...* series, a collection of over two hundred titles covering topics as diverse as 'Democracy', 'Existentialism', 'Global Warming' and the rather intriguing 'Nothing'. The aim of *Short Introductions* is to provide the reader with a concise history of the subject in question, without assuming he or she has any prior knowledge of the area. Robinson does this particularly well in *Writing and Script*, covering the emergence of various scripts and the reasons for their disappearance, the mechanics of writing and the history of decipherment in less than a hundred and fifty pages. Despite its brevity, however, the book has real merit as a basic guide to a subject which is likely to be of interest not just to the general reader, but to any budding specialist in a particular script who does not necessarily have a wider knowledge of writing systems in general.

One of the strengths of the book lies in Robinson's ability to quickly negotiate the seemingly endless and rather opaque linguistic terminology which often makes any work on writing or scripts virtually impossible to read without the aid of a dictionary of grammatical terms. Due to the introductory nature of the book, however, Robinson does not assume that his readers are specialists in Greek or Latin, and rather refreshingly manages to explain the relevant terminology with both clarity and concision, a rare skill which appears to have continuously eluded many academics for decades. Robinson also clearly has a great personal affection for scripts, and writes in a highly animated and engaging style about a subject which many people, rather unfairly, have often considered rather dull. His infectious enthusiasm for the subject renewed my

curiosity in the world of writing outside my own specialism, and is likely to prompt any new reader to approach this remarkable topic with great interest.

By way of introduction, Chapter One discusses the emergence of writing in Mesopotamia and Egypt in the late 4<sup>th</sup> Millennium BC, from the earliest 'clay tokens' and pictograms of the ancient Near East to the appearance of the full cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts around 3100 BC. The study of the emergence of writing has always been fraught with disagreements between scholars over whether writing was 'invented', 'evolved' or simply 'accidentally discovered', in addition to what purpose it was originally intended to serve. Robinson navigates the most widely discussed theories in only sixteen pages, before moving onto the development and diffusion of writing in Chapter Two. Again, there is no consensus on whether different writing systems around the world emerged independently, or whether they spread from a single origin, but Robinson covers the most salient points of the single versus multiple origin arguments, before providing a short description of Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Linear A and B scripts, Chinese characters and Meso-American writing.

After the necessarily introductory nature of the first two chapters, Robinson moves onto the disappearance of scripts in Chapter Three, a subject which has generally received far less attention than the emergence of writing. The neglect of this topic seems strange, given its potential in revealing something about the appearance of writing, with the seemingly cyclical nature of scripts appearing and dying according to cultural, economic, religious and political needs. Robinson gives both the emergence and disappearance of scripts equal weight, however, using examples from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt in addition to more contemporary writing systems, and reminds us that the history of our own alphabet is by no means certain.

A short history of decipherment and un-deciphered scripts appears in Chapter Four, allowing Robinson to pay homage to some of history's greatest linguists including Michael Ventris and Jean-François Champollion, who made the key

breakthroughs in deciphering Linear B and Egyptian hieroglyphs respectively. Robinson's breakdown of the decipherment process, from initial analysis to substitution and checking against unread material, hints at how frustrating and repetitive the decipherment process can be, leading Ventris to warn of the potential dangers of 'fantasy, coincidence or circular logic' influencing any scholar working with un-deciphered material.

In Chapter Five, Robinson investigates how writing systems work, explaining the concepts of logograms (signs which represent whole words) and phonetic symbols (signs which represent the sounds that can be used to make whole words). As all scripts use symbols to represent the sounds made in human speech, the classification of writing systems introduced in this chapter is simply based on the proportion of logograms and phonetic symbols used in each script. This perfectly illustrates the fact that although writing systems may appear to be vastly different to those unfamiliar with them then, they are all based on the same principle.

A detailed translation of a series of hieroglyphic cartouches is particularly useful in this section, and allows Robinson to illustrate his points with an in-depth analysis of consonantal signs and logograms, demonstrating how their uses complement each other within a writing system. The comparison of scripts in Chapter Five neatly leads into the next section on alphabets, where Robinson investigates the mysterious beginnings of our own alphabet from its Phoenician origins through the Etruscan and Greek writing systems and Latin script. A discussion of the earlier and lesser known alphabetic (also known as Ugaritic) cuneiform and the later European runes bookends the chapter, providing an interesting comparison for those already well acquainted with the history of the Latin alphabet.

Chapter Seven focuses on Chinese and Japanese writing, describing the topolects of China and the spoken languages of Japan and Korea, before classifying and examining their writing systems. The task of explaining the mechanics of the Chinese and Japanese scripts to any readers unfamiliar with

them is extremely difficult, but Robinson draws many useful comparisons with Indo-European languages and their alphabetic scripts, providing enough linguistic and orthographic analogies within more familiar languages and writing systems to ensure that the reader does not become entirely lost.

The concept of writing as art, particularly before the advent of mass education in the twentieth century and the invention of computers, is now becoming increasingly unfamiliar to us, and this massive cultural shift provides the focus for Chapter Eight, which discusses scribes and materials. Evidence of a professional scribal class can be found in cultures throughout the world, from the ancient Near East to the Islamic world and much of Western Europe. Classical Chinese calligraphers used brushes rather than pens or styluses, and achieving a balance between aesthetic value and legibility was often considered an art in itself. Robinson suggests this scope for self-expression makes Chinese calligraphy 'personal', in contrast to what he describes as the 'impersonal' nature of Western calligraphy.

The highly standardised and 'impersonal' nature of writing looks set to continue into the electronic age with the use of computers and text messaging, a subject which Robinson uses to conclude his book in Chapter Nine, in which he also points out that the future of any script is not always guaranteed. Writing systems are frequently adapted in response to specific political, social or economic needs, or they may be abandoned in favour of scripts which are easier to use. Yet it is also evident that writing systems are often preserved because they are most valued for their significance as part of a wider cultural heritage, rather than their simplicity. Whether they are seen as basic tools of communication or instruments of artistic expression, scripts are often the means by which we can see a glimpse of the past and, in some ways, quite possibly the future.