

ELIZABETH HILDA LOCKHART LORIMER, 1873 - 1954

Hilda Lorimer (she never used her first name) was born in Edinburgh on 30 May 1873, the eldest daughter of the Reverend Robert Lorimer (1840-1925), Minister of the Free Church of Scotland at Mains and Strathmartine, Angus, and his wife Isabella Lockhart Robertson (1849 - 1931). She was the second of eight children; her two eldest brothers became distinguished oriental scholars, and a third, William, became Professor of Greek at the University of St. Andrews and translated the New Testament into Scots. Thus Hilda grew up in an atmosphere of intellectual aspiration and sibling rivalry; "Childhood games owed much to incidents of Scottish and Indian history and Scottish law-court trials; their information was gained from the visits of uncles in the army and the law, and from family reminiscences of their forbears" (obituary notice in the Oxford Magazine by M. Hartley). Gordon, her eldest brother, passed into the Indian Civil Service with top marks in 1891; after a brilliant career he was accidentally killed in 1914. Lock (1879 -1962) worked mainly in the linguistic field, Indian and especially Persian languages and dialects, his wife, whom he married in 1910, had been as Emily Ovend a friend and colleague of Hilda's at Somerville, shared his travels and became a distinguished scholar in her own right.

Hilda was educated at Dundee High School and, from 1889 to 1893, at University College Dundee, where she took a London external BA, earning a First Class. London University began to admit women to degrees in 1878; well into the next century it was not unusual for some Scottish students to take a London external degree before enrolling at Oxford or Cambridge. The Principal of the Dundee College, (later Sir) William Paterson, was a latinist, known for his success with women students. In 1893 Hilda won an open scholarship to Girton College, Cambridge, to read classics.

Girton College, founded in 1868 with five students, in a house at Hitchin, by 1893 had an average yearly intake of 35 to 40; examination success had provided both standing and confidence. On the whole Cambridge tolerated rather than welcomed the women students, and until 1948 repeatedly refused them University membership and full degree titles. It could not however be blind to such outstanding achievements as that of Ag<sup>r</sup>ata Frances Ramsay, placed *alone* in the first division of the first class in the Classical T<sup>r</sup>ipos of 1887, to whom Hilda was by her teachers described as a worthy successor.

During her three years at Girton Hilda never attended a class or lecture *in* Cambridge. External tuition was provided by male dons who went out to Girton in the afternoons. She took the (old) Classical T<sup>r</sup>ipos in 1896 gaining a First Class, and the golden opinions of all who taught her. A. H. Cooke remarked "She has an extraordinary memory, and frequently surprises me by producing evidence for or against a point in dispute for which I should seek in vain from my best *men* students". All warmly supported her application, in her finals year, to become Classical Tutor at Somerville College, Oxford, where she was to remain for the rest of her career.

Somerville had changed from "Hall" to College in 1894, and at once appointed its first tutors in Classics and Modern Languages. In her earlier years there, as earlier in Cambridge, Hilda had little contact with other classical scholars of her age and standing. In a telling anecdote Dr. Lucy Sutherland (later Principal of Lady Margaret Hall) recalls that when Hilda first took up her post at Somerville she consulted Dr. Henry Pelham about research; he replied that none was desirable, since all advanced teaching could be done by men. By one of time's revenges "it was perhaps because the women dons felt a greater need to prove themselves as scholars

that by 1914 the proportion of them who engaged in research was actually higher than among the equivalent cohort of men". (Perrone, *University Teaching*, quoted in *Somerville for Women* 55).

As Classics Tutor Hilda prepared her students for Honour Moderations and Greats (Litterae Humaniores). The former required linguistic proficiency and a wide knowledge of ancient literature, with options, for Homeric and classical archaeology; the latter added study in depth of ancient history and philosophy. It is somewhat surprising that Hilda, first educated at Dundee by a latinist and much commended by her latin teachers at Cambridge (including the great J.P. Postgate) never published any study on latin literature or Roman archaeology. It is difficult to ascertain the point at which her own interests turned strongly towards archaeology, for though that had become an optional part of the Cambridge trip<sup>a/</sup> it seems she did not take it. Her first overt venture in this direction may be seen in her use of sabbatical leave, as Pfeiffer Travelling Student, to enrol at the British School at Athens for the session 1901/2. A photograph in the School archive shows the young Hilda whom a fellow student acclaimed as <sup>Γαλλος</sup> "Paris Athene." In Greece she travelled widely, making nothing of distance or discomfort, and studied under Wilhelm Dörpfeld, who inspired her lifelong devotion. In the preface to her book she concludes the long paragraph acknowledging her debt to his work and teaching "only those who have heard Dörpfeld lecture standing on the scenes of his greatest achievements can fully appreciate his quality; and of that diminishing band the present writer has the good fortune to be one." Attendance at his lectures on the sites of Troy and Mycenae suggests that her Homeric interests were already forming. It is a little surprising that almost her earliest publication was of pottery found by Hogarth at Naukratis (which she never visited), for which however, her study in Greek museums will have equipped her. Records list her as again a BSA student in 1910 - 11, but do not say what she was working on. At Oxford, classical scholars

Trip

cannot have been long in discovering her quality. Gilbert Murray and A. C. Clark became friends, with J. L. Myres she shared work in Homeric archaeology, and with W. Warde Fowler a passionate interest in ornithology.

During the 1914 - 18 war the women's colleges were urged to continue their academic work, though both staff and students found it increasingly difficult to refrain from a more active contribution to the war effort. Somerville's proximity to the Radcliffe Infirmary made inescapable its temporary take-over as an extension to that Hospital; staff and students found other quarters in Oxford, notably in Oriel College which made over a whole quadrangle to the women, and here Miss Lorimer lived and worked in the intervals of her work in London for the Foreign Office. At some point "groups of somewhat reluctant Belgian women were taken to a camp near Broadway run "with strict military discipline by Miss Lorimer and Miss Lodge of Lady Margaret Hall, to be trained to live in primitive conditions as a prelude to their eventual repatriation" (Adams, p.88).

In 1917 Hilda went to work as a nursing orderly in the Scottish Women's Hospital in Salonica. No doubt it was here that she acquired the interest and expertise in Serbian affairs which led the Foreign Office Historical Department to requisition her services in the following year to work on the Foreign Office Handbooks. With R. D. G. Laffan she produced *The Slovenes* (1920) and *The Yugoslav Movement*. Later she contributed to volumes on *Yugoslavia* (1923) and *The history of Serbia up to 1914* in the *Nations of Today* series edited by John Buchan.

In 1920 Oxford admitted women to full university membership, and Hilda promptly took her M. A. Degree. With the steady encouragement of Myres she took an increasing share in the teaching of Homeric archaeology, from 1929 to 1937 she held the post of University Lecturer,

and continued to lecture, even after her retirement, during the first years of the war. Despite the chronically tight finances of the women's colleges Hilda was always a firm advocate of sabbatical leave for their senior staff. She returned to Athens in 1922 when she worked in the Mycenae excavations from May to August, mainly in charge of tombs in the Kalkani cemetery; later she travelled widely in the Peloponnese to study Homeric sites. Among her fellow workers at Mycenae was Walter Heurtley, in whose excavations in northern Greece, Boubousti (1927) and Servia (1930), she later took part. After both these, comparatively short, campaigns she went on to travel extensively in Yugoslavia, Albania and Turkey. In 1931 she took an important part in Heurtley's Ithaca excavations at Aetos, and was responsible for much of their publication. Though nearly 60 she seems to have enjoyed living under canvas; Sylvia Benton recalls (in the *Girton Review* for 1954) how when her own tent (at Aetos) collapsed in a rainstorm she found Hilda's tent-pole "supported by a very large umbrella and under the umbrella, warm and dry, sat Miss Lorimer" (adding characteristically "neither she nor I was responsible for the pitching of those tents). In 1934, supported by the Craven Fund, Hilda dug briefly with Sylvia Benton in Zakynthos at Kalogeros and Akroterion, where they uncovered a (damaged) tholos tomb containing amber. This was never published, though Hilda's contribution was completed well before she died.

A letter to her mother from Servia vividly expresses her delight in the Greek landscape and her interest and understanding of its inhabitants. Not tall and slightly built, she was physically tough; the hardships of Greek travel meant little to her, and she was able to make arduous excursions on foot with the six-foot Heurtley and other British School tough walkers. At Somerville she was a gym enthusiast, and ran through the garden, and a photograph shows her with students in a jiu jitsu class in college in 1924. Well into old age she went about Oxford,

and on excursions into the country bird-watching, sitting very erect on a bicycle with high handle-bars.

As a tutor her standards were very high; reminiscences by her pupils speak sometimes despairingly of the amount of knowledge she expected them to possess - contrasting this however with the kindness and amenity of her social relations with them. "Honest effort and modest unpretending merit always met with encouragement, and for pupils of talent, strenuously exercised, she took immense pains; they were warmed by something of her own passion for knowledge, and they learned from her what an inflexible standard of quality is" (Hartley). It is however clear from her letters that by 1934 Hilda was finding the weight of teaching a burden, and she resigned as Classical Tutor, instead the College appointed her Tutor in Classical Archaeology and gave her for five years the Lady Carlisle Research Fellowship. She welcomed the change with open thankfulness, the more so that it enabled her to keep her position on the Governing Body. After she retired in 1939 she was made an Honorary Fellow, and continued some of her teaching during the first years of the war.

Encouraged by Myres, Hilda had for years been preparing a comprehensive work on Homeric Archaeology; over the years she had published aspects of her research in various journals (see list of publications below) but the appearance of the whole work was delayed by the war, and a serious illness in 1939. At one moment she was considering the possibility of coordinating its appearance with the Cambridge *Homeric Companion* (to which she had been invited to contribute). In fact the *Companion* was delayed until 1962, and *Homer and the Monuments* was triumphantly published in 1950. Its preface bears the double dates of September 1946 and December 1949.

These books are not of course really comparable. The *Companion* was "intended primarily for those who are reading Homer in Greek especially those who, in school or university, are reading him for the first time". *Homer and the Monuments* is concerned with all the evidence bearing upon the *Realien* of the Homeric poems, here collected for the first time since Helbig's pioneer work of 1884. Its appearance in 1950 was a major milestone in Homeric studies; now, inevitably, in parts outdated by new material, it remains an essential source for serious students, not only for its detailed discussion and surveys of the several aspects of Homeric topics, armour and war, dress, architecture and funeral customs, but even more for the wide range of her discussions and the clarity and open-mindedness of her conclusions. New discoveries, the decipherment of Linear B, the bronze corselets from Dendra and Argos, in part invalidate some of these, but we can still endorse Myres' verdict that "Miss Lorimer has not only contributed by masterly handling - not of the monuments only - to a real advance but has greatly facilitated the work of her successors." Serious exception may be taken to her treatment of Ithaca in the *Odyssey*, where her admiration for Dörpfeld caused her to uphold to his Levkas - Ithaca theory even after work in Ithaca, in which she had herself shared, provided serious reasons to abandon it. It is impossible for those who did not know her personally to imagine how Hilda preserved an equilibrium between the pan-Minoan approach to the Late Bronze Age of which Sir Arthur Evans and Myres were the champions, and the "Helladic" interpretation of the archaeology of the mainland first given expression by Wace and Blegen in 1918 and, after the Mycenae excavation of 1921 - 3, generally accepted by the majority of scholars. This unhappy schism made it difficult for several decades for Minoan and Mycenaean studies to be pursued as a whole and without partisanship. In Oxford on the whole the great prestige of Evans and Myres could not but colour the views and influence the teaching of the Classical Faculty. Miss Lorimer however had worked with Wace at Mycenae, and her lifelong

devotion to fact provided a counter balance to what must have been an instinctive inclination to support Myres. At all events the controversy finds no echo in *Homer and the Monuments*.

Scholarship was Hilda's life, the acquisition of knowledge her passion. Concentration on her chosen field did not preclude the exercise of her powers in lighter topics; she was a keen and ingenious student of detective fiction, and held very definite views on political issues. "She could talk with wit and learning on any and every subject, with the omniscience of the great professors" (S. Benton loc. cit.)

She had an abiding affection for Girton and often stayed in the college during long vacations. She took her Cambridge MA. as soon as degrees were at last open to women, in 1948, and was always pleased to come across Girtonians in her profession. She left her library to the college. To Somerville she bequeathed the royalties from her book, and these, augmented by subscriptions, provide the Lorimer Prize for students awarded a first class in Honour Moderations. Other subscriptions raised on the initiative of Vera Brittain were devoted to a posthumous portrait, by A. F. Grant, which hangs at the foot of the staircase. The archive can produce no photograph of Hilda Lorimer engaged in field archaeology, but reproduced here is a picture taken in her handsome prime. A faithful daughter of Scotland, she was affectionately known in Oxford as "Highland Hilda". She continued to live in Oxford after her retirement, and was a frequent and welcome visitor to Somerville. Her last years were clouded by illness, and she died in hospital on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1954; "a brave spirit and one of the most learned and remarkable women of her generation".

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This notice could not have been written without the excellent obituary by Mildred Hartley (Miss Lorimer's successor at Somerville) published in the *Oxford Magazine* and reprinted in the *Somerville Report for 1954* and the *Girton Review*.

Other valuable sources were:

family information provided by the late Robin Lorimer, nephew:

the Somerville archive:

*Somerville for Women* OUP 1996, by Pauline Adams: quotations from this are by permission of the Oxford University Press.

A. Duke, former Registrar of the Girton College Roll:

*Emily Davies and the liberation of women 1930 - 1921* by Daphne Bennett 1984.

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