

MARJORIE'S JOURNEY - ON A MISSION OF HER OWN

ISBN: 9781910895474

Scotland Street Press Publishers, Edinburgh

Reviewed by

Rinelle Evans

Rinelle.evans@up.ac.za

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

This book is marketed as a 140-page WWII biographical memoir – an easy and interesting read especially for teachers and historians. Told with pathos, off-set by humour, it documents an unusual wartime story.

The author - Ailie Clegghorn - had close familial ties with the key character – Marjorie Marnoch – a young Scottish woman of remarkable resilience and resourcefulness. The trigger for penning this memoir was a 28-page letter Ailie stumbled upon in some forgotten family files.

This letter written by Marjorie in 1980 had been a response to Sandy's request as an adult for the story of their wartime experiences in South Africa. At the time of their sailing from Glasgow to Cape Town aboard the *Winchester Castle*, Sandy had been a tiny nine-month-old infant.

Using several voices, diary entries, personal interviews, letters, telegrams and photographs, the reader is provided with an astonishing account of how Marjorie took 10 children, all younger than six, – at the agreement of their parents - through the treacherous U-boat infested waters to safety in South Africa in 1941.

The opening chapters provide context for how Marjorie came to be part of the author's family history. Marjorie did not have a happy childhood – her mother died when she was barely three and her father left her in the care of the author's grandparents in Aberdeen for twenty-six years while he served the Empire in Canada. This most difficult period in Marjorie's life was characterized by rejection, resentment, and dislike particularly on the part of Lady M who wielded strange control over Marjorie's decisions including the termination of a relationship with a beau. Upon finally being permitted to leave the household in 1936, she was told as she walked down the steps: "You haven't tipped the

servants”! suggesting that she had been considered an unwelcome guest all those years.

Marjorie soon set in motion her plans to provide young children with happier circumstances than her own and as a trained Montessori teacher she set up a pre-school and home for children whose parents were mostly working in West African colonies. Her natural affinity for young children and her loving, motherly nature ensured that parents confidently entrusted their children to Marjorie who thrived in her care.

At the outbreak of the war, all families were sorely disrupted by absent fathers and evacuee children. Late in June 1940, Marjorie received a call from a British Brigadier General with a surprising request: to take his daughter and all the other children in her care “away from the war”. Marjorie was given only a few hours to consider “this enormous responsibly and frighteningly dangerous mission”.

A fascinating and detailed description of the journey undertaken from Bournemouth up to London then on to Glasgow and finally the three-week voyage to Cape Town follows. From there again, a new place to stay needed to be sought as already two more children had joined Marjorie’s’ troupe. The search for such a place and the fortuitous culmination of various events and persons, allowed Marjorie to sign a lease for a spacious, most suitable house in Robertson, a small town near the Breede River some 200 km inland from the South African harbour they had docked in several weeks earlier.

The house was aptly named *Bairnshaven*; bairn being the Scottish word for young child and haven a place of peace and safety. The children now as adults recall with great nostalgia their happy times spent together over several years.

Marjorie’s children did indeed escape the horrors of war and lived a care-free, idyllic life filled with love, companionship, a large menagerie of pets, loving domestic help, Afrikaans-speaking school friends all crowned by many adventures in a sun-filled pastoral environment. They were even presented to the Royal Family on their first post-war trip out of England after receiving a letter written “at her Majesty’s command” requesting to meet Marjorie and the children.

This true story throws new light on how early childhood hardships may foster the tenacity and purpose in some for becoming accomplished, confident adults. It certainly highlights – in particular – how severed parental relationships affected families. A poignant remark by Sandy when asked by the Queen whether he missed his mother suffices: I don’t remember Mummy.

The book closes with tales of many of the children’s lives after returning to England. Their tributes to Marjorie having given them the “best possible childhood” testify to their enduring and endearing relationship with her and each other. Marjorie’s own

story culminates in her establishing another school, *Fledglings*, in Richmond. This school accepted children from all walks of life sans discrimination on the basis of appearance, parental wealth or intellectual capability. Here too, she continued the caring, encouraging ethos until the school closed in 1974 upon her retirement. Her mission accomplished in more ways than one.

The cultural cameos provide insight into the societal mores and pretensions as well as class divisions of urban, 20th century Scotland, the stark social and environmental differences found in rural South Africa and the unrecognized role that women played in this war. I was intrigued at how – with apparent ease – the young ones adapted to being taught “that awful stuff” (Afrikaans). I marvel at how one, single woman could offer so many children hope, and unconditional kindness. Her physical strength, fortitude, and ability to adjust and surmount challenges are the hallmarks of a true teacher whose passion is her calling.

I had the privilege of seeing the gold pocket watch returned to Sandy as well as facsimiles of the correspondence Marjorie shared. The author has painstakingly traced the various historic and familial threads and enriched her research with exquisitely clear watercoloured photographs. The book has all the makings of being turned into a riveting film.

Perhaps the family secret related to Lady M’s disdainful treatment of Marjorie may yet be revealed some day!