

Her Edit

HER ISSUE | HER VOICE



Issue Twenty-six
Winter 2019

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Front cover picture
Courtesy Nicole Lawler

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Welcome to Her Edit

My very good friend Adrian has a very special talent. A keen meteorologist, he can tell you what the weather was like on any day you care to name. Of course it has to be a day that is important enough to you, that you can remember what the weather was like. A special birthday or celebration or a loss.

Dates can become important markers for all our lives as reminders of loved ones or landmark events. For this reason, our latest issue is published today, 8 February, the day, five years ago, when Zane Gbangbola died. His mum, Nicole, wrote for Her Edit almost two years ago about the events which led to Zane's death, her and husband Kye's campaign to uncover the truth of the tragic events and the pain of their loss. In this issue Nicole updates us on the growing support from Trade Unions, the Fire Brigade, the Green Party and others, all calling for an inquiry into Zane's death and the dangers of landfill sites.

Another campaign dear to our hearts is Justice4the21, still seeking justice for the 21 people murdered in the pub bombings in Birmingham, over four decades ago. Campaigner Julie Hambleton, who lost her sister Maxine, writes about healing the fractures which formed in the city with the Irish community.

In these turbulent times, Ismene Cole's article about focusing on positive news is also very healing. There is certainly positivity in spades in our interview with award-winning teacher Cat Davison in which she talks about supporting Ghanian education projects, and we continue our series on historical women with Penelope Buckley's spotlight on the first woman historian.

Hope you enjoy and share this issue. Thank you for your support.

In love and solidarity

Her Edit

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IMAGES

Clockwise from left: Supporters of the Truth About Zane campaign; Julie Hambleton; Ismene Cole; Reading Spots in action in Ghana.



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In 2014, Nicole Lawler and her husband Kye, lost their seven-year old son, Zane, in the most distressing of circumstances following nearby extensive flooding which flooded their home.

The inquest was flawed and Nicole and Kye have campaigned for the last five years for an inquiry to establish cause and responsibility for the death of their child.

The Truth About Zane campaign has gathered support from politicians, parties, Trade Unions and many other organisations concerned with truth and justice. Here Nicole gives us an update on the campaign.

Words and images courtesy of Nicole Lawler

The Truth About Zane

NICOLE LAWLER

My husband and I are parents to a beautiful boy named Zane Gbangbola. He died in horrendous circumstances when much of the country was flooded in 2014. The basement of our home was flooded during the night; it is our belief that the flood water passed through a toxic landfill site and consequently our house was infused with hydrogen cyanide gas (HCN).

The Surrey Fire Brigade specialist Hazardous Materials (HAZMAT) incident team attended with specialist detection equipment and found presence of the gas in our home. My husband Kye was left paralysed.

In case you're wondering what HCN is or does, then I can tell you it was used by Nazi German forces in the gas chambers in World War II. You'll be aware of the nerve agent attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury earlier this year; it is very close to my family's experience.

The inquest concluded that Zane's death was attributable to carbon monoxide poisoning, but failed to include crucial evidence and omitted expert testimonials which suggested otherwise.

The existence of the landfill site was initially denied by the authorities. It was only several months after Zane had died that BBC journalists uncovered the truth that there had been eight decades of dumping on the site and migrating hazardous gas. HCN is commonly linked to historic landfill sites.

This year marks five years since our precious child was taken from us. We were denied legal aid at the inquest as the case was not deemed to be 'in the public interest' despite two public bodies, the Environment Agency and Spelthorne Borough Council, being represented by QCs.



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We raised £70,000 from public donations and continue to crowd fund our campaign for the truth.

We have been supported by former MP Andy Burnham, who championed the families of the victims at Hillsborough and their 30 year campaign for truth and justice. In 2016, he called on the then Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, to intervene. In a letter, he wrote:

'It seems utterly unjust for this family, who have been living every parents' worst nightmare and are now on the brink of bankruptcy, to be thrown into a court room for the inquest on their child without proper legal support and representation.

'But we also believe the Legal Aid Agency's ruling on lack of public interest is flawed. There are many thousands of properties in the UK at risk of flooding and which are located close to landfill sites.'

In addition to Andy we are supported in our call for an independent panel inquiry (like the one for Hillsborough) by the Labour Party, Trade Unions and other organisations, celebrities and the public, appalled at the blatant injustice and attempts to discredit Kye and myself.

There has also been support from the media. The Mail on Sunday headlined as the story, 'The Most Toxic Cover Up of Them All'.

As we approached Zane's birthday last year, the Green Party Annual Conference unanimously passed a motion in support of the TruthAboutZane campaign. It was the final and most memorable motion of the conference and an emotional one.

There has been incredible support from the Public and Commercial Services Union, UNISON, the

Fire Brigade Union and the Union campaign group Save Our Services in Surrey. Over 34,000 members of the public have signed our petition for an inquiry.

While Zane's death is at the heart of our struggle, I believe there are wider issues which have prompted people to take up our cause; fair access to justice, public accountability, how we protect the environment and manage environmental hazards.

We believe authorities have lied and there is a conspiracy of silence over landfill and the potential harm it causes. In 2017, Surrey and Spelthorne local authorities warned residents of migrating landfill gases building up beneath properties near landfill; 80 per cent of our population live within 20 km of a landfill site.

Austerity measures have impacted on resources to protect the public as well as the environment from the movement of chemical and waste toxins into residential areas. Climate change has a role in the increased incidences of flooding.

Zane would have turned 12 years old this year. We miss what he was and what he would have become. We remember him most for his love of people and nature. He wrote,

'Sustainability and being green is not just tidying up your own garden – it's about keeping tidy an even bigger garden that belongs to everyone'

I think of Zane as the country's youngest Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) Ambassador and believe he would have been an advocate for the natural environment when he grew up.



The facts about Zane's death

The coroner ruled that Zane had a carbon monoxide level of eight per cent in his blood when he died – but experts say death from poisoning normally occurs only at 30 per cent or above;

Neighbours living 20 yards away never heard the petrol pump that the coroner insists was used for six hours – even though it makes a noise equivalent in decibels to a speeding express train;

Firefighters detected a lethal level of cyanide in the house, but found no carbon monoxide;

Blood samples were not taken until three days after Zane's death – by which time experts say cyanide gas would have left his body;

Vital evidence, including minutes of an emergency Cobra meeting, was withheld from the inquest.

Please support our campaign by signing our petition (go to this website www.TruthAboutZane.com and click petition).



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Ismene Cole is a coach who supports entrepreneurs, creatives and visionaries to believe in themselves, achieve their goals joyfully and create the foundations for a successful life and career.

Word and images courtesy of Ismene Cole

Accentuating the positive ISMENE COLE

I have always loved the magic of words. Growing up with a bohemian mother, my creativity and imagination were encouraged; from a young age, I developed a love of positive and inspiring words. As a child you would find me amongst piles of books or writing stories, which later led me onto reading creative writing at university.

However, it wasn't until my mother's death, and I found myself in a therapy room, that I discovered just how transformative words could be. Those early conversations helped me not only understand my often critical dialogue, but also to unpick the belief systems that were keeping me stuck, unhappy and limited.

In the midst of depression, I would write out what I felt grateful for and tried to make sense of how I felt in my journals. Voicing

what often felt un-voiceable, empowered me to choose better thoughts, and start the journey of re-writing my future.

Those experiences made me acquire a passion for personal development and a hunger to share what I'd discovered was possible. I knew first-hand that we are able to transform our inner worlds and use this as a catalyst to create lives and careers that are fulfilling, authentic; and use our unique voice to create positive change in the world. This began my career as a counsellor and coach.

What we say to ourselves, to others, or what we read, listen to, or who we choose to surround ourselves with, all have such a profound effect on us.

Words and stories have the power to heal, inspire, connect, empower, bring together



or transform. They also have the power to scare, hurt, humiliate, shame, corrode and disconnect.

From the moment we are born, we are all constantly internalising messages and stories; stories from our childhoods, opinions from our peers, rules passed down through the generations. We are also influenced by the media in its many forms.

These messages create a belief system that informs how we view ourselves, others, our communities and the world at large, and what we believe is possible. While some of these belief systems are helpful, there will be others that are outdated or which are keeping us small, stuck, scared and unhappy.

Throughout my nearly seven years of owning my own business, I became interested in the idea of positive media and using platforms such as social media or blogs to encourage, inspire, connect and uplift people. An outlet where motivating messages could not only help one-to-one, but one to many.

While without doubt there are tragic, deeply sad issues going on in the world, in equal measure, they are so many incredible acts of kindness, inspiration and genius in the world. I work with so many incredible people who have such gifts to share that are vastly under represented. There tends to be a fear-based, negative bias in the majority of newspapers.

So, when Positive News, the first media organisation in the world that is dedicated to quality, independent reporting about what is going right, became a co-operative, I knew that I wanted to invest.

‘Positive News is a pioneer in constructive journalism - a new approach in the media which is about rigorous and relevant

journalism that is focused on progress, possibility and solutions.’

When we consume frequent negative bias or fear-based stories, it feeds into the primal part of our brain that is already looking out for threat or danger, an inbuilt survival mechanism.

When there is no apparent solution to the problems in the world, we can feel hopeless, believe that we are unsafe or feel disempowered. As a result we can begin creating a negative bias within our own minds, or use these stories to confirm old belief systems that feel familiar.

However, when we choose to look at, watch, or read constructive journalism or media with a positive message or solution, its function goes way beyond simply feeling good.

It ties into core psychological needs such as: Empowerment and a sense of purpose that we can, even as individuals, make meaningful change in the world. We get a sense that we are moving forward as a society and making progress. It reminds us of our connectivity and gives us a sense of belonging as well as feeling a part of a wider community. It builds belief in the goodness of others and the wider world, creating feelings of safety and happiness. It inspires us to find solutions within our own lives, relationships and careers.

Generally, as a society, we accept that we must be mindful about how we treat our bodies. There is lots of information about eating healthy or fitness, yet rarely do we think about, or are taught about, being equally protective of what we feed our minds. What we choose to focus on grows and what we consistently think about, creates our reality and how we feel. We have the power to choose.



Positive News is published 4 times a year. To subscribe to Positive News or to become a supporter visit the [website](#) and connect with Ismene on [her website](#) or on Instagram or Facebook @ismenecole

In 1974, bombs planted in two pubs in Birmingham killed 21 people and injured over 180 more. Six innocent men were convicted and served almost 17 years in jail. Julie Hambleton, whose 18-year old sister died in the atrocity, has been at the centre of the campaign of the families and loved ones of the victims for the truth and to bring those responsible to account. Julie updates us on the campaign and the memorial in Birmingham which is bringing together and healing damaged local communities.

Words by Julie Hambleton

Finding reconciliation in the search for truth

JULIE HAMBLETON

It has been another tumultuous year for the Justice4the21 campaign. The murder of our loved ones is probably one of the most heinous crimes in Britain of the 20th century, yet the establishment has doggedly refused to pursue their murderers, instead conspiring to allow six men to serve time in prison for crimes they did not commit.

Over 44 years later, there has still been no attempt to arrest and convict the perpetrators. What does that say about our police? What does that say about successive governments? What does it say about the future of our society, where murderers are allowed their liberty without any fear of retribution?

This year we challenged the Coroner's Ruling on Scope, where he used his wide discretion to exclude the perpetrators from the inquest which we have fought for for so long. We were refused legal aid yet again, for the sixth time, and told by the Legal Aid Agency that they saw 'no merit' in our case; yet, we won.

However, the Coroner appealed this decision in the Court of Appeal in London, where our success was overturned by Lord Chief Justice. We had neither the resources nor the stamina to take our challenge to the Supreme Court as at least two of our campaigners were suffering serious health problems.

In between all of this, our fantastic supporters came to our aid to help us raise over £85,000 towards the funding of our court battles; a tangible act of benevolence.

Our families are always humbled by the generosity of people from all backgrounds, cultures and socio-economic circumstances. On the whole, it is those who have the least to give who give the most. When I say 'give', I'm not referring to money, but to people's own time, effort, energy and expertise that have helped and supported us in so many ways, not least their positive thoughts.

Another tangible example of benevolence can be found at Grand Central concourse, formerly





©TheIrishTimes

New Street Railway Station in Birmingham. It is just yards from the site of the two pubs in which our loved ones perished. There is a plan to build three trees where each of the 21 names of all those who were slain 44 years ago, will sit on the branches waiting for the sun to shine through, so their names are forever cast over the city where they lived and sadly died.

This new memorial has surpassed anything our families could ever have dreamt of and has been made possible through the sheer determination of some incredible people. They say 'charity begins at home'; well, this is a prime example of that.

The memorial has only been possible because of some very kind donators, sponsors and volunteers who have given up their own time, effort and expertise to make it a truly positive change for Birmingham; it is hoped that it will help to 'heal the heart' of our great city's community.

When our loved ones were murdered, the Irish community suffered too. Not only in the sense of losing loved ones, but in the sense of community too. They were ostracised, faced with prejudice & physical attacks and hatred. After the bombings, the community in Birmingham no longer had any sense of solidarity, particularly for the Irish community.

This was something that my brother Brian and I had always wanted to try and 'mend', but had no idea how to go about 'healing the heart of Birmingham' especially amongst the Irish community.

Professor Gavin Schaffer, who lectures at the University of Birmingham, heard about our plight and conducted a modern history seminar about this tragic time in our city's history. Professor Schaffer learned of our desire to try and solidify the fracture in our society; so began his journey to help us to do so.

He made contact with a range of people from the Irish community where we were invited to meet with Maurice Malone the Chief Executive of the Birmingham Irish Association, Risteard Sinclair, Chairman of Birmingham Irish Heritage Group and Maureen Slattery-Marsh of the Immigrant Counselling and Psychotherapy (ICAP); four years later, we are known as the Misneach Memorial Committee.

We have managed to overcome so many obstacles from a range of organisations and people, that we now see that anything can be accomplished as long as you have the fortitude, nous, patience and sheer determination to complete something worth fighting for.

Without Professor Schaffer, we would never have met with any of these fantastic magnanimous individuals who have each given more than money can buy. They have given their hearts and souls to reach out to remember those that they never knew, but care about enough to make sure that the 21 are never forgotten.

There are so many people our families wish to thank. We are always totally astonished at the overwhelming kindness, generosity and spiritual humility amongst folk, in comparison to the cold, callous and contemptible treatment of the British Establishment, who could learn a thing or two from those who pay their salaries.

The Establishment are the worst kind of libertines, they speak of democracy and The Rule of Law and they legislate to (allegedly) protect us all from heinous crime. Yet, when push comes to shove none of them have the backbone to enforce the laws they implement.

Our supporters are based across the globe, many of whom travel from far and wide to stand shoulder to shoulder with us. Enid took the bus from Manchester to attend the unveiling of the

memorial (and took the bus back the same evening). She says,

'It was very important to me that I attended and made the effort, because it was a very special and significant occasion that I didn't want to miss for any reason'.

Other supporters travelled from Kent and London to demonstrate their support. Yet more came from the West Midlands with their children, to stand in the bitter cold to pay their respects to those who we lost.

Without Maurice Malone and his fantastic staff, Professor Gavin Schaffer, Maureen Slattery-Marsh and Risteard Sinclair, our new memorial would still be merely a pipe dream. We were also delighted to have the support of Maureen's brothers, Tom and Tony Slattery, who sang one of the most beautiful and poignant songs and the guitarist Pete Harris.

We are sincerely thankful to Anu Patel who designed the trees for us; her respect for our loved ones and the links with the Irish community were considered within the design, and also to Tom Elliot of M-TEC who brought our Memorial to Life.

Sincere thanks to, Birmingham Council Leader, Ian Ward, Azhar Quaiyoom from Network Rail, Simon Delahunty-Forrest, who is the City Design & Conservation Manager at Birmingham City Council, and Craig Stenning, the Deputy Station Manager at Grand Central station, who, along with Chris Hodgkiss of British Transport Police, made the evening possible.

We are also grateful to Ocean Vision for the very generous free space on their digital advertising boards and West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street. Special thanks to Archbishop Bernard Longley, the Bishop of Birmingham, Lord David Urquhart, who both led the tribute on the evening alongside,

Muhammad Afzal, Rabbi Margaret Jacobi, Mr Amrick Ubhi, Mr Dinesh Chauhan. We thank them all for their spiritual support.

The Stage Bus Company, Professor Ray Linforth and Vice-Principal Michael Harkin of University College Birmingham for their unstinting support and generosity. Helen the manager at 'All Bar One' next to Grand Central, and her fantastic staff the West Midlands Area Manager of MacDonald Hotels, Derek McDonagh at the Burlington Hotel, who provided hot food, drinks and warm hospitality.

Heartfelt thanks to our superb legal team KRW LAW LLP, who took time out of their very busy lives to come and lend their spiritual support. It is the families' belief that our legal team have set the benchmark for others to aspire to; as they not only have represented us pro bono for nearly four years, but their moral compass could be considered equivalent to any paragon of virtue alongside that of Maurice Malone, Professor Gavin Schaffer, Maureen Slattery-Marsh and Richard Sinclair and the Birmingham Mail.

In 2019, our inquest is set to begin in February, where the Coroner, Sir Peter Thornton QC has stated that it will last only nine weeks. That statement in itself should highlight the concerns our families have; that this will be a whitewash of an inquest. The biggest and longest unsolved mass murder on English soil of the 20th century and the Coroner believes it will only last nine weeks. The Hillsborough inquest was due to last six months; it lasted nearly two and half years.

Find out how you can support the Justice4the21 campaign at www.justice4the21.co.uk



Cat Davison is the founder of Reading Spots which enables remote communities in Ghana to have access to educational resources by creating community-led education centres, which are free for all to use, and shared between all schools in an area. The charity won the 2018 TES International Award for its work in global learning with Brighton College pupils. Cat spoke to Ann Clark about how the charity has developed and her life has changed.

Interview Ann Clark
Images courtesy of Cat Davison

A good read CAT DAVISON

Cat Davison is the founder of Reading Spots which enables communities in Ghana to access educational resources by creating community-led education centres, which are free for all to use, and shared between all schools in an area. The project won the 2018 TES International Award for its work in global learning with Brighton College pupils.

Cat's clearly driven by a joyous determination and effervescent passion. She is now Director of the Institute of Service and Social Impact at Sevenoaks School, with a brief to embed an education in how to enact positive social change within the school's curriculum.

Cat had previously run a school partnership scheme with a single Ghanaian school and organised annual visits from her UK school students. This experience sparked her passion to create a Ghana-wide project which focused on collaborative community action with the shared goal of providing equitable access to educational resources and support.

On one of the school trips, she serendipitously met Francis Yeboah, a driver. He took her to other schools in more rural areas. At one school Cat asked the head boy, Dennis, what limited

him and he spoke eloquently about the power of books as a tool for self-advancement. Francis had been buying books (using his generous driver tips) to take to this remote area for several years and had long held his own vision of providing learning resources to rural areas.

From these encounters the charity for Ghanaian-led communal resource centres in Ghana's remote areas where educational resources are lacking was born. Francis is now the charity's Ghanaian Manager. A fellow teacher, Paul Wilson, with experience of working in Uganda, quickly joined the emerging project as a trustee.

By now Cat was working at Brighton College, who were supportive and part-sponsored a sabbatical year which enabled her to complete a part-time Masters at UCL in Education and International Development, while based in Ghana, and develop the project further. There are now 20 Reading Spots of various sizes. Half of the projects are powered by solar, with the solar installation completed by a team of Ghanaian volunteers from Elmina.

Much of the fundraising for these projects is done by pupils in the UK, with the six founding pupil ambassadors at Brighton College raising nearly



£20,000 for the second project in Akumadan. Reading Spots has also gained the support of 6 six trust funds, also forming impactful partnerships with Book Aid International, Teach for Ghana and Dext Technology.

CD: Some of the problems of working in Ghana relate not only with the obvious wealth imbalance compared with the UK, but also with it being a former British colony. There is still a belief, in some remote areas in particular, that 'we' have better knowledge so it's critical to ensure that our kids rebalance that power dynamic so that any participation is as equal partners. If they do any cultural sharing it is done by both UK and Ghanaian students.

My ambition was that involvement with Reading Spots would provide volunteers, both in the UK and Ghana, with a longer-term educational process. The idea of the 10 week online international development ambassadors course, with blog posts, discussion board and [resources](#), is that they will have been engaging with their African counterparts before they go there and they critically analyse everything we do, and evaluate everything they do once they're there. For the Ghanaians this course is important in order for it to become embedded in their education system so they will become the experts in their own development.

Some UK students, including some from Marlborough College, Repton, Roedean, Brighton College and Sevenoaks School, do not visit, but take the course because they are interested in international development and want to hear the African voice rather than just have a discussion amongst themselves. For the Ghanaians my aim is that we create partnerships to help provide funding and perhaps technical advice for their ideas.

AC: Tell me more about your sabbatical year and what you learned.

CD: The aim was to understand the particular community contexts that we are working in. So a large proportion of my time was spent living in different communities observing how the centres were being used, talking to parents and students and understanding what the volunteers were doing. I also spent time in the African Science Academy which gives an incredible education to girls who are studying maths, physics and further

maths A level in one year - trying to empower young African girls in STEM and support them with the application process for entry into top international universities.

I helped the girls with their university applications and talked to them about what educational disadvantages they may have had. I observed that very small disadvantages such as broken sandals or a lack of a quiet space to study could greatly undermine the confidence and performance of pupils. Listening to these small but hugely significant experiences helped me understand what the context of the disadvantage to students might be.

I also wrote the online course and wrote my dissertation - writing it in great heat with poor wifi and students constantly wanting me to read to them or play. The dissertation examined how people engage with the libraries from a sociological perspective. Literacy has meaning and values that are locally determined; being illiterate can affect a person's daily life in not being able to use their mobile phone or write letters relating to property or voting. If no one can read or write in a family then there is a dependency on others.

You need a good local understanding of the particular value to a particular community of certain literacy practices. Of course I accept that being literate broadly leads to well-being, but you need to understand and have made a close contextual examination of what the impact is on individuals. I also didn't want to simply assume the libraries have a positive value - I wanted to look at the power dynamics within a particular community and the context of the library.

I interviewed 15 parents on how literacy had an impact (in English or local dialect) on local lives and general questions on attitudes to reading. But the main thrust of the dissertation was on the idea of the symbolic power of the Reading Spots projects. I was interested to know what they represented and what local parents saw as the function of the Reading Spot and the role it played. The centres were seen as a symbol of hope, development and pride.

The problem is that while that may be the way the community wished to see them, it may not be the reality in terms of impact. One community wanted to site the library at their entrance way because when people passed through they wanted to



convey that education was at the heart of the community. Elsewhere where the project had been initially led by us and then handed over, the community had less pride than the ones which had led the whole project themselves.

AC: What was the highlight of your sabbatical year?

CD: We hosted a conference which brought together five volunteers from each area and then ran workshops which were led by people engaged in best practice - mostly youngsters. One volunteer was leading a health walk from the Reading Spot, writing plays on malaria prevention and sanitation. He also ran a summer club in local churches for the children, put them into different ability levels and then tested them, giving them awards at the end.

Awards were given for Librarian of the Year and Reading Spot of the Year. This created great motivation for people to want to feel part of the community and many are already preparing to compete for next year. A number of other community libraries built by other individuals and organisations have asked to be part of the network. They often don't want money just better support for the work they do, and to be part of our network.

AC: Your dissertation also touches on the potentially divisive impact that Reading Spots might have. Can you say something about that?

CD: You can't assume it is good for all parents in the community. Of those interviewed, half were users and half were non-users. Those parents who were illiterate themselves, but had kids going to the library, saw it as a place for the educated, so not for people like themselves. It is interesting to consider what the impact is when you put a new building in a community that certain people feel they can't access because they perceive it as an exclusive thing.

We also have to be wary about not imposing silence as part of our cultural context, but let the Africans rebrand libraries as vibrant places for cultural and information exchange by word of mouth. Books might be there, but they don't need to copy a western model of a room full of books.

AC: What's the role of women in Ghana?

CD: The hierarchical communities are traditional with male chiefs and village elders - roles passed down through the family. There is a queen mother who plays a central role and they say that women do play an important role, but behind closed doors. The dilemma for the charity was wishing to include more women in local committees, but not wanting to impose a quota or even suggest such a thing. Instead we launched a bit of the organisation to promote young female leaders and give young women grants in smaller scale projects.

The upshot was that when we ran the conference bringing the volunteers together, we were able to show women on the stage giving their ideas. My hope is that such role models will have the effect of a nudge.

AC: Has the project distorted the power base in communities?

The libraries are owned by a combination of district elders and elected district assemblies who are often involved in the selection of who is going to be looking after the library. It's on community land, so there may be a political bias, but it is very difficult to ask them to interview in non-biased ways. In practice, those in charge are either volunteers or teachers linked to schools.

AC: The personal impact must have been enormous. You've spoken about feeling you have to justify spending money and you now feel like a 'joint inhabitant'.

CD: I feel like I am part Ghanaian, and return each break. At first I had a strong cultural and environmental fascination with Ghana - an adoration of the vibes, smells, sounds and colour. I have always had a real appreciation of the community values, individuals and teachers. But now that I have lived there for a year, I am no longer an outsider. I like the pace of life and the warmth of the Ghanaians with their community focussed values. Everyone has an interest in what everyone else is doing, not just following insular pursuits.

In the UK I am overwhelmed by the amount of objects in every room. In Ghana there is so much more of the natural environment - you're closer to a natural human habitat and closer to existence and humanity somehow. Returning here is hard. My world view has shifted, but friends and family don't always get it. Also, the potential to raise



Cat's ambition is that the Reading Spots become community centres not only for accessing books, but for the loan of computers and resources, for example science equipment. The Reading Spots are led and run by the local communities. The charity only takes an advisory role in managing, recruiting volunteers and sustaining the projects and supporting with strategic advice. Additional resources (such as Dext Technology's 'labs in a box' and IT kits to enable global learning via skype) are given to those communities who make the most effective use of the equipment, constantly monitored by Francis. Currently, the shipments of books are new or in good condition and many are from Book Aid International. The charity is trying to raise funds for books in local languages or African books in English. Ghanaians are taught in English - a decision taken at independence in 1957 because of the 80 distinct dialects.

Read more about [Reading Spots](#), how to [donate](#) and follow on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) or email contact@readingspots.org

funds for Reading Spots through reduction of unnecessary costs can have a profound effect on my financial outlook and my social habits - it still jars when I spend £3.50 on a cup of coffee and that is what many Ghanaians have to live off for a week, despite rising prices.

People there survive on very little and when someone needs to go to hospital everyone contributes - money is held more collectively. It is also interesting that their perception of the west is that everyone is wealthy.

When one of the Ghanaian school directors came to the UK he was shocked by the number

of homeless. There are definite differences in values between Ghana and the UK - some that are easy to adjust to, and others that have been more difficult.

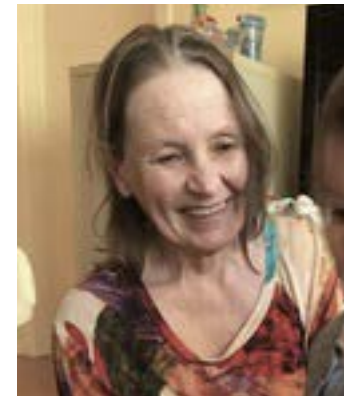
However, the strong belief in the potential impact of running Reading Spots projects to improve educational opportunity in Ghana's remote areas, and the willingness of volunteers across Ghana and the UK to give time to the organization has created an unbreakable bond between all the volunteers that can certainly transcend any cultural differences that we may have.

Follow [Cat's work](#) on Twitter

Penelope Buckley (Curtis) is a former lecturer in the English Department of Melbourne University and is currently a Fellow of its School of Philosophical and Historical Studies. She has written the first full-length study of the *Alexiad*, a medieval historical and biographical text written around the year 1148, by the Byzantine historian and princess Anna Komnene, about her father Emperor Alexios I Komnenos.

Here Penelope tells us about the woman regarded as the first biographer and her remarkable writing.

Words and image Penelope Buckley



Making history

PENELOPE BUCKLEY

The first known woman historian was Anna Komnene, writing in classicising Byzantine Greek in the twelfth century. Her history of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, her father, remains one of the greatest Byzantine literary texts, as well as an historical resource endlessly mined.

Komnene – a scholar of philosophy and the classics – shaped her history as an epic modelled on Homer's and Virgil's, calling it the *Alexiad*, and built ancient heroic feats into her figure of her father together with the achievements of Alexios' own great predecessors. Her other classical model was Thucydides, and, following his example, she also gives a conscientious and analytical account of events across the empire.

Her great literary Byzantine mentor was Michael Psellos, a towering eleventh-century philosopher who wrote with unparalleled brilliance and counselled emperors. His lively and original *Chronographia* charted the 14 tempestuous reigns before Alexios' time. He maintained that no emperor could govern well consistently, being human and always under scrutiny. Komnene seems to have set herself task of proving Alexios the exception.

Alexios mounted a successful rebellion at a particularly unstable and threatened period for

Byzantium. He reigned for 37 years (1081–1118), establishing a dynasty which survived for a century. He pushed back the empire's narrowing and threatened boundaries, centralized its government, and weathered the disturbances of the First Crusade.

He made his family the centre of his administration, entrusting it wholly to his mother when he was away campaigning, and married his daughter to a general who became his Caesar, so that Anna heard army plans and reminiscences at home as well as going with Alexios on campaign.

Her strategy is unusual: she admits at every point that Alexios faced problems and she creates a symbiotic relationship between him in his time and herself as hindsighted writer in which she rehearses his thought processes and dilemmas.

She exercises her conscience in parallel with his and creates a strong sense of the complexity and difficulties both face in prioritizing, and acting or reporting, justly. But she is lively, sharp and funny as well. Her account of the First Crusade and its internal tensions is more coherent than contemporary western accounts and gives an eastern perspective to balance theirs, while her sketches of the Norman leaders are subtle and

and its internal tensions is more coherent than contemporary western accounts and gives an eastern perspective to balance theirs, while her sketches of the Norman leaders are subtle and brilliant. She moves into tragic mode as Alexios nears death and completes her history with a ringing condemnation of his successors. The *Alexiad* is both passionate and disciplined, with a strong sense of the changes brought by time.

Her reception as a woman writer has been savage and fraught with double standards. A Byzantine historian,¹ writing 60 years later, claimed that Komnene had plotted a rebellion against her brother's rule and reviled her husband for not supporting it; a mistranslation into English made his unsupported accusation scurrilous.²

¹ Choniates, Niketas, Nicetas Choniatae *Historia*, CFHB 11. Ed. J.A. Van Dieten (Berlin and New York 1975).

² O City of Byzantium: *Annals of Niketas Choniates*. Tr. H.J. Magoulias (Detroit 1984).

³ Neville, L. (2016) *Anna Komnene: the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian* (O.U.P.)

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Howard-Johnston, J. (1996). 'Anna Komnene and the *Alexiad*' in Mullett and Smythe (eds.), *Alexios I Komnenos. Papers of the Second Belfast International Colloquium*, 14–16 April 1989 (Belfast).

⁶ Gouma-Peterson, T. (ed.) (2000). *Anna Komnene and Her Times* (New York). e.g. Frankopan, Conor, Kaldellis, et al.

⁷ e.g. Frankopan, Conor, Kaldellis, et al.

⁸ Buckler, G. (1929) *Anna Comnena: A Study* (London).

⁹ Buckley, P. (2014). *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth* (C.U.P.); Neville, L. (2016) *Anna Komnene: the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian* (O.U.P.); Vilimonovic, L. (2018). *Structure and Features of Anna Komnene's Alexiad* (Amsterdam U.P.).

This entrenched tradition has been deconstructed only recently.¹ Gibbon poured scorn on her female presumption while continually using her work and, again, it is only recently that serious attention has been paid to her negotiations with her readers as a woman taking on the male role of historian.²

She explained her undertaking as a duty to complete a history which her husband had begun before he died, and pays obeisance to that work. In fact, her history shows purposeful differences from his, yet this did not prevent a modern historian from claiming that the *Alexiad* had been written by the husband, with a little top dressing from her.³

His arguments were promptly rebutted and the *Alexiad* is acknowledged as certainly hers,⁴ but other historians have almost routinely swept aside as 'biased' anything they disagree with, while happily drawing on her work when it does not run counter to their own.⁵ She has always been simultaneously taken seriously and abused, but the balance has been shifting in the last few years: the first full-length scholarly study of her work in 1929⁶ has at last been followed by three more of different kinds, all of which take her very seriously.

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