

MARTHA STEEDMAN OBE

(Miss Hamilton)

1929 – 2015

**Tributes from
a Service of Thanksgiving to celebrate Martha's life**

Conducted by Revd Dr Donald MacEwan
Chaplain to the University of St Andrews

Friday 24 July 2015
Holy Trinity Church, St Andrews

Tribute by Andrew Duff

Author of ‘Sikkim: Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom’ and friend of Martha

I had the privilege to get to know Martha Steedman over the last five years. But in a funny kind of way, I also had the privilege to get to know Martha Hamilton, the intrepid woman in her twenties and thirties who fell in love with the Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim during the 1950s and 1960s, when she served as headmistress at the Kingdom’s main Girls School.

I first met Martha on a cold, crisp February morning in 2010. I had started to research a book into Sikkim, and Patrick Harrison had suggested I get in touch with Martha.

She greeted me, dressed immaculately as always, and soon started to regale me with tales of her seven remarkable years in Sikkim. Any of you who talked to Martha about her time in Sikkim will know how she lit up whenever she talked about the place. Although I knew virtually nothing about Sikkim at the time, she displayed that great characteristic of the very best teachers by encouraging my enthusiasm while gently letting me know that I had a lot to learn!

Martha’s love affair with Sikkim began with to a commitment she had made to her grandfather in the last years of his life. He had lost two sons to the First World War, one of whom had planned to do missionary work in India. Martha’s offer to do missionary work in her uncle’s memory was a typically unselfish gesture and meant a great deal to her grandfather.

She had been teaching in Kalimpong for two years when, in 1959, the opportunity arose to take up the post as headmistress at the Paljor Namgyal Girls School in Sikkim’s capital Gangtok. Martha leapt at the chance.

Life in the Himalayas suited her adventurous spirit. Getting to Gangtok was a challenge in itself – entire roads could be washed away in the annual monsoon. Martha got used to dealing with all sorts of eventualities and reveled in the sometimes Spartan conditions: there was no running water in her small home – baths came in buckets of water carried into her house.

As the only European woman living in Sikkim she soon became a popular and much-loved part of the community, taking every opportunity to get out and experience the place with her numerous visitors, in particular her brothers who both developed their own affection for Sikkim.

If it’s true to say that Martha fell in love with Sikkim, it’s also true that many in Sikkim fell in love with her. She made friendships that would last all her life. Families like the Densapas and the Pradhans were immensely kind to her and many from Sikkim visited St Andrews later. The remarkable picture of butterlamps on the reverse of the Order of Service is a reflection of the strength of the bond she formed with people in Sikkim. She took the time to learn Nepali, and also some Tibetan, so she could talk to all the communities.

Above all, she left a legacy at the school itself. It was here that she cut her teeth as a headmistress, the profession at which she excelled. When she left Sikkim in 1965 her students wrote a citation summing up her achievements at the school. Here is some of what they wrote:

‘Since 1959 our school has made a tremendous progress, in that, a new Science block, staff quarters, Canteen, children’s Park and Netball court sprung up under your dynamic drive and supervision. You introduced a variety of extra-curricular activities and made them as parts of educational programme, such as girl guiding, debating, social services, excursions, games and music competitions. In time of crisis, you did your best to keep the morale high, not only of the students but of the Sikkimese people.’

To help me understand Sikkim better, Martha gave me access to the letters she wrote home to her parents. They are a wonderful record, and I just want to end by bringing to life two of her qualities – her humour and her courage – with just a few bits recorded in her letters. In the early 1960s, when the Indian army set up camp below her home next to the school, Martha’s concern was for her sanity, but not, perhaps, for the reasons one might expect. It was the Army Band that concerned her most: ‘The Skye Boat song is being murdered daily till we nearly sent a note of protest. The General leaves tomorrow and I hope they now will stop.’ Later she borrowed records from the Royal family to practise the twist which became her ‘daily exercise in the late evening. At the royal wedding – when the future Chogyal of Sikkim married American Hope Cooke in a ceremony that became a celebrity event covered by Time Magazine and Paris match – she organised an eightsome reel among the guests who included JK Galbraith, at that time the US Ambassador to India. The party on the evening after the wedding was, she wrote, ‘just like a Cambridge May Ball.’ The coronation of the royal couple two years later was an even bigger party, for which she needed no less than six changes of dress over two days.

Perhaps most remarkably, when the Chinese confronted Indian troops in 1965 on the Sikkim-Tibet border, Martha took on the role of air-raid warden, keeping spirits up at a difficult time for the schoolchildren – something that took her onto the front pages of the world’s newspapers.

Martha’s adventurous spirit, her commitment to Sikkim’s people, and her humour and courage will ensure that she lives on in the hearts and minds of many people there.

I’d like to end with what one of her St Leonard’s pupils remembered about how Martha inspired her and many others: ‘No matter how many years passed after school, she still remembered you - and she still remembered your strengths and lots of things about you. She always made you feel like an individual and somebody she thought about, rather than just being a number. She inspired us to go out in the world and give anything a try – that there’s nothing that should stop us.’

Tribute by James Murray DL

Chairman St Leonards Council and friend of Martha

Headmasters and Headmistresses come and go. They mainly do a good job and that's that but from time to time, one really stands out and it is in that latter category I place Martha Hamilton – and I do so without hesitation.

In 1970 when Martha became Headmistress, St Leonards was recognisably Victorian both in its approach and in its infrastructure. Martha was to change all that – and to change all that for the better. And she did that at a pace and energy that few could keep up with. The school changed from being very much shut off from the town and community of St Andrews, protected as it was behind its historic walls to become more outward looking and to embrace change.

And embracing change was necessary as Martha well recognised. For society was changing – the swinging sixties had come and gone and new freedoms were being sought and won. Now I'm not saying that the swinging sixties had reached St Andrews – indeed I can confidently say, they still have not arrived – but there was an imperative that schools should become more relaxed and that pupils should enjoy a little more freedom. And Martha did just that – striking the balance perfectly; loosening the reins to some extent while ensuring that discipline remained firm.

But Martha was well placed to successfully achieve all this. At 40 – that was when she became Headmistress – she was young, stylish and confident. She was more a fashion model than a Head – at least that's what many of the girls thought when reading the press coverage of her appointment. Could someone as glamorous and exciting as this really be our new Headmistress? She was a tremendous role model for her pupils. She set a standard that all her girls should aspire to and most did. And all remember her with both respect and affection even those who were expelled by her.

And indeed even the Council of St Leonards when interviewing Martha for the job of Headmistress and did wonder whether Martha could be the new Headmistress. When asked about her experience in Sikkim, she described enthusiastically and at great length how she ran everything, seemingly single handedly – from teaching most subjects, nursing sick children, putting on plays, coaching games, organising treks into the Himalayas. You name it, she had done it. The Council were apparently mesmerised and exhausted by this performance and all that Ann Lendrum, a Council Member could ask was “Miss Hamilton, don't you think you might find St Leonards a little dull?” Whether Martha found St Leonards dull I know not. What I do know is that St Leonards never found Martha or her outstanding leadership of St Leonards dull.

This was made quite clear on her first morning at St Leonards. Martha asked her Head of School why they had chosen for Assembly such a dreary hymn “Through the night of doubt and sorrow” to which the Head Girl replied “Because it’s the school hymn, Miss Hamilton”.

And while morning assembly was not always exciting it did on occasion have its moments. Especially, on the return to school after the Easter holidays in 1977 when as many of you will recall, Martha asked everyone if they had enjoyed their holidays and before waiting for an answer joyfully said “I did” and waved the engagement ring on her finger for all to see. A stunned silence followed by loud applause resonated round the hall. St Leonards was to have its first married Headmistress – and no-one that morning could have guessed just what Martha’s marriage to Robert Steedman would bring to St Leonards.

Undaunted by anything that came in her way, Martha’s impact on St Leonards was both immediate and long lasting. Her appointment as Headmistress was an inspired one. She had style but beneath that style she had substance. She was a leader but always a leader who led from the front – a leader who inspired staff and pupils alike. She clearly saw what needed to be done and did what had to be done and with a drive and vigour that left others pausing for breath. Many changes took place under Martha’s leadership not least the building of the Music School. This wonderful building, the brainchild, I suspect of Martha, was beautifully designed and built by Robert and shoehorned so successfully into its historic and sensitive setting.

And so Robert increasingly became involved in the life of the school and was a source of great support and wise counsel to Martha – so important because it is often not recognised just what a lonely job being Head of a school can be.

An enthusiasm loved by Martha was travel – to experience different cultures and landscapes. She took parties of girls as far as her old state of Sikkim in the Himalayas, where they received a great welcome; and to China with Robert taking a boat down the Yangtse, visiting the Forbidden City, The Terracotta Warriors (before the others got there), and to the Great Wall. On their return from this magical adventure she was disappointed to overhear one of her girl’s first remark to her mother at the airport, “Mummy there was a rat in our bedroom”.

A Fund has been set up in memory of Martha, to enable St Leonards’ pupils to go abroad, the Martha Hamilton Educational Travel Fund. She would have approved of that.

Throughout her time at St Leonards, Martha maintained its cherished traditions while moving the school quickly forward. Her energy was formidable, her attention to detail remarkable. She knew every girl’s name within days of the start of a new year and as importantly knew each girl’s skills and talents. There were exceptions however. When Princess Alexandra opened the new Music School, Martha introduced a somewhat startled young girl as “This is our Double Bass!”

During her time as Headmistress Martha masterminded two royal visits – never an easy thing to do because of protocol. Both visits involved much planning with dress rehearsals where Martha took on the role of the royal guest which she did so well that girls were subsequently

heard to whisper that their Headmistress had been much more regal than their visiting guests. (May I be forgiven for repeating this!). Both visits went extraordinarily well due without doubt to Martha's remarkable ability to organise such occasions.

I said earlier that when Martha came to St Leonards aged 40 she was young, stylish and confident. And that stylishness, confidence and poise never seemed to desert her. She was just as commanding a figure at 80 as she was at 40. Every room continued to be lit up by her presence. Her former pupils continued to hold in her awe while at the same time adoring her.

After St Leonards she became Vice Chairman of the Fife Health Board, Chairman of the Applied Arts Association for Scotland, the driving force and Chairman of St Andrews University Women's Centenary Committee, where she added pizzazz to the planning of the celebrations, her persuasive skills were infectious, and used to great effect in fundraising. A judge for the Annual Award for the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland, and the Calor Gas Award for the best Community Project in Scotland, and then some! She was her most effective at speed.

Martha was one of the school's greatest friends and supporters throughout her retirement as well as during her headship – a friend and supporter in good times and not so good. Martha was never a fair weather friend. Young and vital to the end – we thought she would go on for ever. We have all lost a very special and remarkable person. The like of her will not be seen again.

Tribute by Dr Scott Steedman CBE

Eldest of Martha's three step-children

Where to start from a family perspective? Martha's talents and personality were everywhere; they shone on all of us. We've heard about her early years in Sikkim and her long and devoted service to St Leonards and to her country. She was passionate about her family. She loved them all and we all loved her.

With her sharp mind and acute sense of style, she lived life to the full. There was no situation she couldn't cope with.

So, what was she like as a lady?

Well, she had great legs; legs for swimming, legs for dancing, legs for waterskiing ... Legs for looking through when she wanted to see the stars upside down.

We were on a family trip to visit Martha's brother Patrick and wife Fiona in Trinidad and Tobago in 1976. Late one evening, in the pitch dark and palm trees, she whooped with excitement and leapt out of the car, pointing at the stars before bending double to look at the great sparkly sky upside down. The Southern Cross! She was thrilled.

We weren't in the Southern Hemisphere of course, but no matter, she said that at the right latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere the Southern Cross could guide you home. Thus it was that my sisters Helena and Sarah and I came to know what it was like to have a great headmistress as a stepmother.

Martha loved the stars; she knew her constellations and loved pointing them out to us, the easy ones, the difficult ones, the planets and their moons. She would remind us that her love of luxury was because she was a Taurean. She was always curious, always wanting to learn more. She loved history, people, places; spy stories, love stories, steel bands, opera. She absorbed everything she could, never missing a moment. She remembered everyone.

She had endless energy and enthusiasm for new things. When my sisters and I first met Martha in the 1970s she admitted that cooking was something in which she had had little experience, having lived her life either in boarding schools or running them.

She was eager to learn how to cook, though, and bought her first recipe book at the age of 48. It was called, 'Cooking from the Great French Restaurants'; they ate at ten o'clock at night; after my father put on two stone his mother suggested they buy a second cook book.

My sisters and I came to visit them in her flat in St Leonards school during the holidays. Martha had a white Samoyed called Nicky and a white BMW, which we thought was a very exciting combination. Beach picnics were never complete without Martha diving into the sea or showing the children how to find crabs in rock pools.

Martha impressed and amazed everyone she met.

She kept souvenirs from her travels scattered round the house. In her dining room at St Leonards lived a particular old friend, a red panda from Sikkim.

Martha loved to tell the story of the panda, which she had first encountered as a pelt hanging on the back of the door of the Chief of Police's office in Gangtok. We never knew why she visited the Chief of Police so often, but she was very fond of the panda and she used to tweak its tail every time she left his room. When she left Sikkim to return to Scotland, the Chief of Police said she ought to take her friend with her. Back in Edinburgh her mother suggested that she should have it stuffed, so she took it to Ward's of Piccadilly, the most famous taxidermist in London.

Little did she know that the Italian rugby team would be on the same flight back to Edinburgh. Amazed at the sight of Martha with her newly stuffed panda under her arm, the Italians rose to applaud her as she entered the plane. The stewardess at once if asked Martha would like to sit in business class where there would be more room for her and her friend.

There are few who would carry a stuffed red panda onto a plane and get away with it but Martha was like that. She never held back and always stood out from the crowd. Every day was an occasion, people and her family always in sharp focus.

Martha bought a tiny cottage in Speyside in 1985. For her it was an idyll, a place of her own where she and Robert could escape the crowds and enjoy the peace and open space of the highlands. Her spirit of adventure was ever present; a clear winter's night meant star gazing after dinner or even tobogganing in the dark, if there was enough snow in the field. She went sailing with sister Josie - who was always such a support to her over the years - and her husband David on his yacht Melusina on the west coast, where she revelled in the challenge of taking the helm.

Martha was the perfect hostess and indeed, the perfect guest. She loved their house at Blebocraigs, which Robert designed. She grew roses, bought paintings for Robert, welcomed family and friends and organised St Leonards gatherings and marvellous Christmas and New Year celebrations.

Martha and Robert each brought their own, distinct strengths to the marriage; they made a sparkling and dynamic duo, respectful and admiring of each other's talents. Martha was immensely proud of Robert's architectural work. There developed a resonance between them that ran deep; together they made their marriage one long honeymoon.

In retirement they were insatiable travellers. Martha arranged villa holidays for the family and exotic expeditions for the two of them. One of her favourite trips was to the Galapagos with brother Eben and his wife Themy, and later to the Barrier Reef; she returned to Sikkim several times, always to a warm and moving welcome, trekked in Mustang and recently visited the town where Robert was born in the highlands of Malaysia.

In Malaysia they stayed in the old club in Ipoh and dressed for dinner, as ever. Martha asked the waiters why the plates weren't hot, as they should be for hot food. 'Madam,' they said, 'the plates haven't been hot since the British left!'

She and the old waiter laughed and laughed.

She swam off a beach in the Antarctic, changing behind the remains of a whaling station instead of on the expedition ship; she whooped with excitement on seeing polar bears in the Arctic; she bought Ferragamo shoes in Florence as she trotted between the Duomo and the Uffizi gallery.

To all her family, Steedman and Hamilton, she radiated excitement and joy. Once finding ourselves on Christmas morning in the local small church alone – having misread the notices – she simply struck up and led a modified service for all the family.

Never daunted, determined to make the best of every moment, she refused to give in right to the end. When I visited her with Robert on the day she died, she said what a wonderful house we had arranged for the family for Christmas this year, adding with a smile and a twinkle, ‘You’ll just have to get me there!’