

D K BROSTER



D. K. Broster is by no means as well-known as she was, for up to her death she was a best-selling author of well-researched historical novels. Perhaps the best-known is *The flight of the heron*, published in 1925.

Dorothy Kathleen Broster was born in 1877 to a ship-owning family in Liverpool. Her parents lived at Devon Lodge in Grassendale Park at the southern end of the city. She was clearly most intelligent and parental resources allowed her the best education available. This meant a girls' school in Liverpool followed by Cheltenham Ladies College when the family moved to Gloucestershire in 1893. She went on to St Hilda's College, Oxford, in the days when women could not obtain a degree although taking the same courses and examinations as men (this discrimination ended in 1920). She became private secretary to the Regius Professor of History (then Sir Charles Firth) and served as a Red Cross nurse in the First World War. In the 1901 census she described herself as authoress, which suggests that she had published at least something by then. After 1918 she took to writing full-time.

Her obituary in *The Times* describes her style of writing:

Miss Broster wrote in a tried and rewarding vein. The romantic bias of her imagination was, as a rule, unconcealed, but on the other hand she almost always showed firm restraint in her handling of the essential historical facts; the history in her novels, in brief, was usually sound. To this virtue she added a genuine story-telling gift, good craftsmanship and a flow of graceful sentiment. Her earlier work lacked something of spirit and much of it kept rather too close to the cloak and dagger convention to attain any real individual quality; while some of the later books, perhaps, tended to be a little mechanical in style. But at her best she was an accomplished, lively and picturesque storyteller who provided graceful reading.

As with so many others, she was committed to her writing and these works were published:

Novels

Chantemerle: A romance of the Vendean War (1911) (with G. W. Taylor)

The vision splendid (1913) (with G. W. Taylor)

Sir Isumbras at the ford (1918)

The yellow poppy (1920)

The wounded name (1922)

Mr Rowl (1924)

The Jacobite Trilogy

The flight of the heron (1925)

The gleam in the north (1927)

The dark mile (1929)

Ships in the bay! (1931)

Almond, wild almond (1933)

World under snow (1935) (with G. Forester)

Child royal (1937)

The sea without a haven (1941)

The captain's lady (1947)

Collections

A fire of driftwood (1932)

Couching at the door: strange and macabre tales (1942)

Poetry

The short voyage (1951)

Other

The happy warrior: A. A. C. de Brunet, Count de Neuilly (1926)

Trying to establish much about Broster's life is difficult because of her reclusive habits. She never married and lived with her friend Gertrude Schlich at Broomhill in Farthings Lane, Catsfield. This lane is about as distant from disturbance as one can find: a single-track cul-de-sac through farmland, pointing towards Battle Abbey, and probably not even part-paved during her lifetime. Broomhill is close to its western end, a large detached property – of no architectural significance but with extensive gardens and a good view over the unspoilt landscape towards Battle.

She seems not to have kept up with her family. Her father Thomas died in 1899 but her mother Emily lived to 1938, and she had a brother and sisters. She died in February 1950. Of the family, only a nephew attended the funeral. It seems that no photograph of her was ever published. Nor were there any memoirs. Understandably no biography has yet been published.

We know rather more about her companion, if still insufficient. Gertrude Louise Minnie Schlich was slightly younger than Broster, having been born in about 1878, in Darjeeling. Her father William, born in 1840, was German in origin, from the small town of Flonheim in the Palatinate, part of Bavaria until 1945. It is reported that he left home for England after the Six Weeks War of 1866, one result of which was the conversion of Bavaria, then still an independent kingdom, into a client state of Prussia. (Whether his leaving was political is unknown.)

Very shortly he went to India and through his abilities rose to become Inspector-General of Forests, though remaining a Bavarian citizen. In 1874 he married Mary Smith, who in 1877 became Gertrude's mother and who died in the following year. Schlich was appointed to the new chair of forestry at the Royal Indian Engineering College at Egham, where he remained until 1905 when the College closed. By then he had taken British citizenship. He was then the first professor of forestry at Oxford, where he remained until his retirement in 1920. His second wife was Belgian. Schlich was elected FRS in 1901 and awarded the KCIE in 1909. He died in 1925 and merited a long obituary in *The Times*.

Other than her family origins very little is publicly known. The 1911 census records her as a private secretary but does not give a residence because she was a visitor to the premises recorded. It is likely that she and Broster met at Oxford, sharing the same kinds of work. Together they developed the interest in the Jacobites that informs Broster's major works, and in 1953 Schlich gave to the British Museum their collection of original documents bought from its first collector. She presumably died abroad, for no record exists in Britain.

The pair make an occasional appearance in the Hastings Observer through their making small gifts, for example to the Buchanan Hospital; but they seem not to have been much engaged with local activities.

George Kiloh
© BDHS July 2017

Sources
The Times, 10 February 1950