

In Memoriam

by Karen Spink

This year we have been commemorating the thousands of young men who lost their lives at Gallipoli in the First World War. One not so young was the writer George Calderon, aged forty-six. Had it not been for his untimely death, his name might be better known today. On the 4 June the following notice appeared in *The Times*:

CALDERON *George Leslie,
Russianist, journalist, dramatist,
anthropologist, adventurer,
killed at Gallipoli 4 June 1915.
'What he believed, he did' (Laurence Binyon).*

The same day, admirers of George gathered outside his last home in Hampstead to commemorate him and keep a two-minute silence at noon, when he was killed at the Third Battle of Krithia. One of the readings was from Laurence Binyon's memorial ode to Calderon, which contains the above-quoted line. Binyon was a close friend of George's since their Oxford days and is the author of the famous war poem, 'For the Fallen' ('... At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them').

Some RNELHS members may recall from my article in our *Journal* for 1999 that George Calderon lived in Eastcote between 1898 and 1900, lodging at South Hill Farm. It was a pivotal period of his life. He scraped a living by doing technical translations from Russian, publishing short stories in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and reviewing for *Literature*, the forerunner of the *TLS*. Most weekdays he also cycled over to Pinner, took the Metropolitan Line to Baker Street, and walked to the British Museum, where he was researching Russian paganism.

But above all, from South Hill Farm he conducted an often daily correspondence with Katharine Ripley, who lived in central London. So as to deceive her mother and the housemaids, George used different-coloured envelopes, addressed them in different hands, and posted them in different places! Katharine was the widow of another of George's close Oxford friends, Archie Ripley, who died in October 1898. She and George could meet socially, but they also met clandestinely at a flat he rented in Great Titchfield Street.

In March 1900 George started a job at the British Museum as an assistant librarian with responsibility for Russian and other Slavonic-

language books. He moved from South Hill Farm to central London that summer, and he and Katharine ('Kittie') were married at St James's Church Piccadilly in November.

Kittie Calderon was dynamic, from a higher social drawer than George, had excellent contacts, and acted as his literary agent. After they moved to Hampstead in 1901, George's career as a writer took off. It was here he wrote his satirical novels, his play *The Fountain*, and translated Chekhov's *Seagull* and *Cherry Orchard*, the first published translations of Chekhov plays into English. George's own production of *The Seagull* in Glasgow in 1909 was an amazing success – amazing because productions of Chekhov in London flopped for years.

The notice in *The Times* also calls him an 'anthropologist' and 'adventurer'. This refers not only to his folklore research and his contributions to international conferences on the history of religions, but to his visit to Tahiti in 1906 and his years in Russia 1895-97. While in Moscow he observed the aftermath of the stampede at Nicholas II's coronation, which killed 1,389 people. He returned with fluent Russian and a knowledge of Russian life and literature unsurpassed in Britain at the time.

There was certainly an element of adventurism in his decision to sign up in August 1914. Because of his age, at first he could go to the Front only as an interpreter. After being wounded at Ypres, however, he got himself accepted as a second lieutenant with the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, and in May 1915 he volunteered to join a draft to Gallipoli, where he was attached to the King's Own Scottish Borderers. He died within days of arriving.

George's body was never found and for years he was described as 'missing'. When his death was officially accepted, *The Times* wrote that 'Calderon's loss was the heaviest blow which struck the English drama during the war'. In 1914 his writing career had been poised for greatness; it is touching to think that this career was launched in Eastcote.

Footnote

The biography *George Calderon: Edwardian Genius* by Patrick Miles will be published in 2016.