

When Europe Shook

Ottie Shook's Trip Abroad in 1929

By Patrick Elb

Exotic locales. Foreign flavor. Nocturnal train travel. Visits to ancient catacombs. Playing cards with a colorful array of fellow adventurers. And a single traveler who fully embraces it all. A plot to an episode the classic Agatha Christie series, *Poirot*? It certainly fits the bill. But this time, the excursionist is not a small Belgian detective. No, this is an adventure for Cowan's own Miss Ottie Lillian Shook nee Kiningham.

In 1929, Ottie Kiningham left the comforts of home in Franklin County, TN to travel across Western Europe. The reason? Because it was there. From Sunday, 23 June to Wednesday, 28 August 1929, Ottie engaged in the trip of a lifetime. Via Washington DC, Philadelphia, New York, and Montreal, this Tennessee traveler sailed across the Atlantic and took in the sights and sounds of Great Britain, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, and Switzerland.

And she kept a diary to record her thoughts and memories. This diary is the gateway to what happened on her trip abroad in 1929.

Half the fun is getting there, as the adage goes. As Ottie made her way to Montreal, where her seafaring was to begin, she stopped in Washington DC and toured George Washington's home, Mount Vernon. While visiting the White House, she saw then First Lady, Lou Henry Hoover. On to Philadelphia she went, taking in Independence Hall and the Betsy Ross House. In New York City, Ottie took her first ride on the subway and had a small bout of homesickness. But not to be deterred, she went on to Montreal, boarded the S.S. Minnedosa, and set sail for Europe, encountering some icebergs and a couple stowaways along the way.

Ottie's first port of call – after a brief stop at Belfast to left off some of the passengers – was Glasgow, Scotland. Also immediately, she's off to Edinburgh, where she visited Edinburgh Castle, the Robert Burne monument, and the University of Edinburgh. After a quick shot through the Scottish Highlands and Shakespeare country, she arrived in London for shopping, museums, and the theatre.

Belgium awaits, and Ottie Kiningham crosses over the English Channel and puts feet down on the Continent. By way of Ostend, Ghent, and Bruges, she travels to Brussels and to Waterloo, where Napoleon had been defeated. The Low Countries cede to France, specifically Paris. Versailles, the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, and the opera are enjoyed by Ottie.

On to Switzerland, where Ottie visited Geneva, took in the Alps, and bought two Swiss watches. Outside of Geneva, she sees the Grindewald Glacier and Lake Lucerne. On the train trip to Lake Lucerne, she comments on going through a tunnel nine miles long.

Italy is where the sightseeing really ramps up. In Milan, she tours The Great Cathedral and sees Leonardo de Vinci's "Last Supper." Venice provides a chance for her to visit St. Mark's Square, take a gondola ride among the canals, and try gelati for the first time. In Rome, she tours the Coliseum and the catacombs. At Genoa, she visits the home of Christopher Columbus.

Heading back westward, Miss Kiningham has brief stays at Nice and Monte Carlo, where she watches the gamblers and comments on how good the Coca-Cola is there. Finally, she gets to Cherbourg via Marseilles, and she boards the S.S. Montroyal for home.

It is Ottie's handwritten diary that paints the picture of her visit to The Continent. At the very beginning of the diary, in the spots reserved for days not spent on the journey, she breaks up her destinations into sections, and in a stream-of-consciousness style, she lists "things to remember." For example, for her trip over the Atlantic, she lists "coming down the St. Lawrence [from Quebec]," the roughness of the Irish Sea, and seeing the ship yards where the

Lusitania was made. One notable addition is listed last in this particular section: “The stowaway taken by police,” from a ship starting for India. Whatever happened to this stowaway? What was his story? This tale is lost to time, but Ottie’s observation makes it all the more tantalizing. Other sections include Glasgow, Scotland, where there is “twilight till eleven o’clock;” the trip between Brussels and Paris, where she saw the “torn up buildings” and “bullet shots” left over from the Battle of the Marne;” Interlaken, Switzerland, where on the national holiday celebrated on July 4th, “the maids sang the Swiss National Song;” and Venice, where she heard of “the prison where the water would sometimes come up to the prisoner’s knees.” There are many other items of note; these are but a taste of what she made a point to remember.

The mysteries of the trip that whet the appetite include the case of Mr. Forte who traveled on the same train as Ottie, leaving Venice. When they reached their destination on the evening of Thursday, the 8th of August, he and Ottie decided to go to the casino. After mentioning the beauty of the place, she states, “He got peeved because I wouldn’t dance.” Two days later, Mr. Forte tries his chances with Miss Edith Fawn, a fellow traveler, and apparently has better success. The same night Mr. Forte and Miss Fawn hit the dance floor, Ottie writes, “Remember how the man across the court entertained us tonight. Oh, what happened.” Apparently, this man from across the court “tried to watch us dress,” and then “followed us to the concert.” Upon their return from the concert, “somebody tried to get in our room tonight but the door was locked.” Talk about international intrigue.

Peppered throughout the diary are little asides that are never referred to again, ratcheting up the delicious mystery. On Sunday, 28th July, she scribbles at the end of her daily entry, “Remember people across street looking in our windows.” On Sunday, August 11th, she writes, “Remember the man with the dog.” No other mention is made of this individual. The very next day, she writes, “Remember the egg and the fat man.” On Wednesday, August 14th, she writes, “Remember the peculiar woman in white gambling.” Who are these people? Why are they worth remembering? We will never know, but the hints leave the reader to ponder. Characters this distinctive would be fodder for the likes of Ian Fleming or Agatha Christie.

The wonderful thing about this collection supplied by Miss Kiningham is that the accompanying scrapbook illustrates the places discussed in her diary. Decades before the advent of the internet, one interested in far off lands had to amass his or her own information. And amass information she does. Ottie discusses her visit to Edinburgh Castle in her diary, and in her scrapbook are not only several photos of this place but some additional comments written in the margins. Next to an image of the Market Place in Brussels, she writes, the “Germans occupied most of these buildings during the war.” How important it is remember that this adventure took place between the wars. How sad it is to think that these same buildings would be occupied once again by the same enemy just over a decade after Ottie’s observation. “Horrible!!!” she exclaims next to a photo of Cimitero del Cappucicini in Rome where the rooms are decorated with the skulls and bones of monks. The reader can see the photo and agree or disagree. Looking for a bottle of perfume in Paris? Ottie found some at Le Narcisse Bleu. In search of delectable oat cakes? According to Ottie, they are to be found at the Caledonian Temperance Hotel in Glasgow. But watch out for the loud and colorful wall paper. She makes special note of that bit of information. How about a walk on the wild side? Ottie was shocked by the beautiful bawdiness of The Follies Bergere in the City of Love. In need of a bridge partner whilst in England? Mr. Albert Copeland is at your service. His business card is proudly pasted in the scrapbook. Among the mementos she collected are the last vestiges of the candle she held as she toured the catacombs under Rome. No matter how much of a resource Wikipedia may be, there is no substitute for the sense of touch. There it is – there is the candle she refers to in her diary. It is this menagerie of memories that brings the trip truly to life. Ottie’s words coupled with these pictures, postcards, ticket stubs, and business cards paint the tableau for the reader.

There are a variety of polite, little touches in Miss Kiningham’s diary. She refers to her fellow travelers as “Mr.” and “Mrs.” It is a quaint reminder of the formality of yesteryear. No matter what cultures she is exposed to, she never compromises herself. When asked to dance, she declines. When others are imbibing, she moderates. She is who she is. And while travel broadens the mind, Ottie Kiningham knows when to say when.

There is one final tantalizing teaser in Ottie Kiningham’s diary: the last page of her daily recordings is torn. The last sentence has been ripped out. What was that last line in her diary? One supposes we will never know. Was the page torn on purpose? Was her final thought on her trip abroad in need of a permanent edit or was the tearing of the page a simple mistake? For a trip so thoroughly documented, this tantalizing mystery leaves the reader even more intrigued.

In her final analysis, Ottie states, “Yes, there will be many pleasant thoughts connected with this. But no matter where we may roam, there is no place in the world like home – We like new sights and strange adventures but for real contentment we want home.”

Noted historian, Dr. James Y. Simms, Jr., said, “History is the memory of things said and done.” With Ottie Kiningham’s diary and album of mementos, the reader can truly appreciate the rich history created by all the things this intrepid traveler from Cowan, TN said and did. And the community is the richer for it.



Mrs. Ottie Shook



Booklet from Mrs. Ottie's trip abroad



Postcard of Holland from Mrs. Ottie's trip abroad
