

RUBY VIOLET OAKLEY-HILL

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There is a YouTube video called *British Christians in Albania*, which traces the work and service of a number of British Christians who spent time in that land from 1824 to 1945, and you may view the 19-minute video by typing the title into YouTube's search box, or, to find my channel, by typing David Young Wrexham in the same search box. The direct link to the video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lv2kto-XBo&t=63s> while the channel also offers more material about Albania and Kosova.

Ruby

One devout Christian who receives a brief mention in the video is Ruby Oakley-Hill, and since making the video I have discovered more information about her and her service. Hers was not directly religious activity, but rather service of a caring, humanitarian character, no doubt motivated by her Christian belief, experience, and spirit. It seems right therefore to add a supplement to the video in the form of this article. Most of the information in the article has been supplied by David Oakley-Hill, the son of Dayrell and Ruby Oakley-Hill (born 1948), and I am grateful for his permission to make it known in this way.

In friendsandrelations.com (the Lifeboats website) he wrote (10th August 2007):

Born in Plumstead in the first World War, she had a fascinating life, grew quickly past 'childish things' and loved learning. Her father Bert was a polymath, keen on medicine, languages, herbal plants and music. He had played banjo or mandolin in a 'glee club' and her mother Violet had played violin in her teens. Her son David still owns this violin, which is on permanent loan to a woman in the London Philharmonic Orchestra and has travelled the world. Ruby's uncle made pianos and ran two music shops in Woolwich. Ruby loved language, and following school, studied French at the Institut Français in South Kensington.

Albania and Greece

David relates that:

Ruby wanted to go to the Lycée in Paris, but her mother would not let her go, as Paris had a certain reputation, but when war broke out, thanks to her linguistic skills, she had a job at the Foreign Office, where she met dad [Dayrell (pronounced Darrell)] a few months after he was released from the Oflag POW camp in Austria. As a group of officers, they were fairly well-treated but he was sent home early due to illness and still recovering from the experience.

In 1943 she joined the Special Operations Executive in Baker Street, in the Balkans section. Dayrell Oakley-Hill was brought in as her boss. He spoke fluent Albanian, thanks to ten pre-war years as a British officer with the gendarmerie for King Zog. Ruby helped him over the psychological problems of being a prisoner of war for two and a half years.

Ruby tells us in *The Time of my Life* that, “We worked all hours through the blitz. I took lessons from an Albanian translator of the BBC.” This was probably Dervish Duma, who began nightly broadcasts in 1942 on the BBC’s new Albanian service.

David Oakley-Hill relates that because of his experience and fluency in Albanian, Dayrell was chosen to lead the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) mission, and Ruby was co-opted to help, working with the Americans, to bring supplies to starving Albanians. They were based both in Bari, Italy, and Tirana. Dayrell had difficulty negotiating with the new Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha, who considered him a spy, and was against anyone connected with Zog. Ruby was in Albania and Italy about a year and a half. She wrote: “...We were briefing young men selected for training who were to be dropped in by parachute to help the resistance movement...”

Friends and relations continues:

Dayrell had taught Ruby something of Albania and its language, and she became Displaced Persons Officer. Enver Hoxha was expelling all Italians: Ruby helped mothers and children get into little boats and climb on to a big ship.

Ruby also helped Greeks go over the mountains to the Greek border in trucks with snow chains. No Greek delegation showed up, and they had to sleep overnight in friendly local houses with bedbugs. She worked there with a Jewish man who knew about concentration camps and who nearly committed suicide. She began to take an interest in Jewish culture, and later studied the Hebrew language and visited Israel. She was always a peacemaker, and believed that different faiths should make more effort to work together.

During the Albanian mission Ruby became partially deaf in one ear. She later had an operation to try to correct it, but they operated on the good ear, removing her hearing from that one and leaving her with the partially deaf ear - a disadvantage for the rest of her life. In later years she refused a cataract operation. It is hard to include someone in social situations when they cannot properly hear what is said. She bore this with fortitude, later managing to use TV subtitles, but was frustrated by weather forecasters with up and down voices and regional accents.

Ruby was only in Albania three days when they received news that devastated Dayrell: his wife, Rosamond, had died. Rosamond had travelled on horseback around Albania with him visiting gendarmerie posts for two years before their son Robin was born in 1932. She was ill when he took on the UNRRA job, but had insisted he should go.

In autumn 1946, Ruby and Dayrell were married, at the Slade Mission, Plumstead. Dayrell may have felt a little uncomfortable, a Church of England ‘fish out of water’.

After Dayrell and Ruby were married and had their son David, Ruby did not want David to be an only child as she had been. Despite a difficult birth, and advice not to have another baby, Ruby, who had taken David on many Greek trips, bravely had Angela seven years later at the end of a 4-year term in Greece, where Dayrell had been working. She joined a friendly American church community where she made friends with and helped a blind woman. One of the houses in which they lived whilst in Athens has a piano, which enable Ruby to accompany a blind violinist practising at the Athens Academy of Music. Dayrell wrote (page 221), “Many such opportunities came through her association with the American Women’s and Church organisations she got to

know through David's schools." She also made several albums of pressed wild flowers, and brought back a collection of Greek pottery she had seen made.

Albanians in England

Back in England, Ruby's parents at Plumstead still had gas lighting and an air-raid shelter. On returning from Greece, Ruby, David and Angela stayed with them in 1955, where Ruby took up the piano again, while Dayrell was with his sisters in Camberley, before they found the house at Eltham in 1956 where the children grew up and she lived the rest of her life.

As Secretary of the Anglo-Albanian Association Dayrell helped Albanian refugees permanently separated from their families, who had fled to England from the cruel Communist regime of Enver Hoxha, with jobs, housing and legal problems, so the family had many Albanian visitors. As the children grew up, Dayrell was constantly on the telephone speaking Albanian. In 1988, three years after Dayrell died (he outlived Hoxha by six months), Angela and David took Ruby on a delightful fifteen-day coach tour of Albania. It was still Communist, and they could not venture far out of sight of the tour guides. Ruby was amazed to see how much Tirana had changed, although there were no private cars. The conifers, newly planted in 1945, were tall around the Dajti Hotel, with the mountain still a backdrop to the capital. Skanderbeg Square was empty of motor vehicles except for the odd bus or an old Chinese lorry, but many bicycles took the workers home.

Ruby's Christian faith and character

Her son David relates:

A favourite story she told is how, on the way across Plumstead Common with her family, on the way to visit her grandfather in Abbey Wood, she heard wonderful singing at the Slade Mission church (named after the valley opposite). Her parents were Church of England, and it took many weeks of pestering her mother to let her go there, where she was befriended, and learnt many uplifting tunes. In her teens, her family sang hymns at home, with Ruby playing piano, her mother violin, and her father the mandolin. The Slade Mission is now the Slade Evangelical Church.

When Ruby was growing up, children were not encouraged (at least, Ruby wasn't by her parents) to play after school or in the street, and she had a rather lonely childhood. Ruby's mother had another child, Daphne, when Ruby was 12, who died days after birth – Ruby was not allowed to see her sister, but was much affected by this, and remained an only child. A kind vicar was there for her at this difficult time.

Later in her teens, Ruby met a man of about her age, Alf Butler, whom she wanted to marry and go with into evangelistic ministry. David has a photo of them together in Southend. There was also talk of his becoming a missionary. Maybe her parents opposed the match because he was of the wrong religious denomination, or perhaps they feared they would never see her again.

Ruby wrote in *The Time of my Life* (pages 267-8):

The war broke out during my last term at missionary training college. It was the little old Swiss pastor in charge of the French branch of the London City Mission who was largely responsible for my being there. I used to hump my huge piano-accordion onto the trains in the morning rush

hour to work ready to help with the evening service and to give a short 'sermon' in French. 'French-speaking Africa is crying out for people like you,' he said. Now all doors were firmly shut. ... I was called up to the SOE branch of the Foreign Office Balkans section to set up a new department for operations in Albania.

This would seem to suggest that her purpose in training for missionary work was to serve in French-speaking Africa. But to return to David's piece in friendsandrelations.com:

Ruby inherited music from both parents. She played the piano accordion, heavy to carry, and played piano most of her life. In her 70s she still played for children's dancing classes and Sunday School, being much involved with Eltham United Reformed church. At Angela's house in Harrietsham, at Christmas 2004, Ruby played carols at the piano when she was 88. She became quite a biblical scholar, with a large book collection, bought and inherited. She was particularly interested in the history and geography of the Bible and the Jewish lands.

Despite arthritis, and failing hearing and eyesight in the last few years, Ruby could talk about any subject with a smile and a twinkle in her eye. She was a very special person, who touched, moved, and influenced a great many people. She had a dry sense of humour, a thirst for knowledge, and a kind, and warm temperament. She was a caring, interesting, humorous person. Everyone loved receiving her thoughtful, witty letters, in beautiful clear, rounded handwriting – a favourite quote was 'Do as you would be done by,' a saying based on Matthew 7:12. She always thought of the reader, and wanted to make sure people could read what she wrote.

There are photos of her in groups at religious holiday gatherings.

In October 2005 she was invited to a thanksgiving service to be held that November to celebrate 125 years of the Church at the Slade, Plumstead (1880-2005), but being housebound from 2000 from 2000 she was unable to go. She couldn't go to church for her last seven years, but friends or her daughter Angela, a nurse, did her shopping. She was fine around the house but after a fall on the pavement decided not to risk the streets.

The day Ruby died, 16 Jan 2007, 3 days after a fall at home, was the worst possible day for her daughter Angela, who had to go the same day to the Royal Marsden Hospital, Fulham for a mastectomy. This was unsuccessful and she died on 24 May aged 51. Three days before she died, Angela married her long-term partner Guy Smith at a packed church in Harrietsham.

Lovely, kind and caring sums up the character of both Ruby and Angela, and they had a good sense of humour.

Rube was indeed a biblical scholar.

She was involved with the United Reformed church in Eltham, formerly Eltham Congregational Church, for many years, so I contacted the minister, the Rev. Ian Gow, in 2020, and he kindly put me in touch with a few people who had known her. In turn, they sent me some impressions, which I include here:

This is a memory from a former church secretary, Guy.

Yes I remember Ruby-Oakley Hill who lived in Elstow Close. She was a deep-thinking Christian Lady with no small talk. My late wife and I were once invited to tea with her. She

presented Helge with a book entitled *An Englishmen in Albania* (her husband's autobiography). In it she wrote: For Helge and Guy with love and blessings in experiences shared. Ruby

A lovely lady, Guy

From Menna, an elder of the church:

I remember her. A very intellectual lady. I never knew her very well but always wished I could have had longer conversations with her

Menna.

From Iris Page, at home with facial cancer when writing, and unable really to talk:

Yes, I did know Ruby and used to sit near her in church. I have a recollection of her going on a course, or possibly a retreat, at Aylesford Priory, I think I drove her there. She took the Sunday School for some time. Ruby had an interesting but I think hard life at times due to her husband's work and life as I recall, but do not remember the detail. She was a lovely, kind, caring lady.

Ruby was a great Biblical scholar, who was always studying and writing, including many notes and letters, and was a deep thinking person. Some of her letters were in response to people with Albanian connections. David's letter reminded me of Ruby's work for the Bible Society, which was important as it was to her.

Dayrell Oakley-Hill (28 May 1898- 5 Nov 1985)

A fuller picture of the kind of person Ruby was may be gained by learning a little more of her husband, Col. Dayrell Oakley-Hill, who receives a fuller mention than Ruby in the YouTube video *British Christians in Albania*.

Dayrell Oakley-Hill, after Bedford School, and a year's training at RMA Sandhurst, leaving on 27th October 1916 to join the Indian army as a 2nd lieutenant. He was stationed in Quetta, then in India, now a dangerous place on the Afghan/Pakistan border. There he met his wife-to-be Rosamond, competing with others via little notes to dance with the Brigadier's daughter.

Col. Oakley-Hill served with the 7th Gurkhas from 1917 to 1921. The regiment took boats up the Gulf and marched north to fight first the Turks then Kurds, based in Mosul, Mesopotamia (later Iraq). He returned briefly to India before coming back to England in 1922. He then retired as an Army officer.

He was an editor at Encyclopaedia Britannica when Joseph Swire, author of *Albania: the rise of a kingdom*, told him that retired British officers were being recruited to train King Zog's Albanian gendarmerie: he responded and was appointed. This was Zog's way of keeping the Italians at bay. He was the only British officer who spent the whole period 1929 to 1938 in Albania. He travelled the entire country on horseback, building good relations with powerful tribal leaders and hundreds of local gendarmes at remote posts, and seeking to establish law and order and settle blood-feuds. He set up an animal hospital in Tirana along the lines of the RSPCA, mainly for horses. He translated the English football rules, helped set up the Albanian

football league and refereed for two years, and started an Albanian version of the Automobile Association. He became King Zog's personal interpreter. In all, he loved Albania and wrote poems about it.

We learn more about Dayrell from this website: <https://family-tree.cobboldfht.com/people/view/11879> quoted with permission:

In Albania he was deputy to General Percy, who with a team of British officers ran the Albanian Gendarmerie (Police) from 1929 to 1938. (The British withdrew in October 1938). Oakley-Hill was Inspector General of the Gendarmerie for the last 3 years. The British withdrew in October 1938. This and, although Albania was very poor, an unwise financial agreement between Zog and the Fascist Italians, triggered the invasion of April 1939.

On the outbreak of WWII Dayrell was appointed head of the SOE office for Albania, in the Yugoslav capital, Belgrade. In 1940 he was central to a mission in north Albania: as a trusted gendarmerie officer, he worked with Albanians and Kosovans in hazardous snowy conditions, hoping to destabilise the Italians who had invaded Albania, but then the Germans occupied Yugoslavia. The Albanians put themselves in the hands of the Germans to escape the vengeance of the Italians. Their leaders had to go into hiding and some were later imprisoned in Italy until the collapse of the fascist government in 1943.

Dayrell, presenting himself as an Albanian refugee, was lucky to get lifts to Skopje and Belgrade, where at the US embassy in Belgrade he was given up to the Germans. He was given up to the Germans by the US embassy in Belgrade and imprisoned in Austria for two and a half years. Released on medical grounds in 1943, he was asked in 1944 to head the UNRRA mission to Tirana, based in Bari, Italy.

He was approached periodically by the Foreign Office on all matters Albanian, and could communicate in up to 8 languages.

Dayrell's autobiography of this part of his life is called *An Englishman in Albania*, published posthumously in 2002 by the family and the Centre for Albanian Studies. He tells us on pages 198 and following that following the death of his first wife he set his heart on working in publishing, and particularly thought of religious publishing. When a prisoner of war in Oflag IX A/H, he had known David Read who pointed him to the Student Christian Movement Press, and he was appointed as a director, to handle book production, sales, and advertising. His salary was "rather small ... only just enough to live on", but he adds that "I was more interested in the job than in the money; however; it seemed so worthwhile." He also adds this rather wry comment: "The output of the Press was mainly theological, and the world of theology is an inlooking one. ... I found myself wondering whether the Founder of Christianity really intended people to think and write all the mass of theology that has poured out through the centuries."

When the family moved to Eltham in 1956 he attended the Church of England in Eltham, where he later became a sidesman, and where there is a small memorial reading 'Dayrell Oakley-Hill, 7th Gurkhas'. He also worked as a consultant for the Bible Society's Albanian translation.

I asked Neil Rees of the Court of King Zog Research Society and author of *A Royal Exile: King Zog and Queen Geraldine of Albania* about contact with Dayrell's family, and in his response he noted that Dayrell "in retirement was a translation consultant for a Bible Society Albanian

translation in the 1970s, he gave me all the paperwork which I passed to the Bible Society in Albania.”

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This information, and these testimonies, explain my desire to add Ruby Oakley-Hill to my earlier record of British Christians who served in Albania before the coming of Communism. Her funeral was held at the United Reformed Church in Eltham on 15th February 2007.

- David M. Young, MA, MPhil, former Director, Albanian Evangelical Mission



Ruby



Ruby serving in Albania



Ruby and Angela visiting Korçë, 1988



Ruby in her eighties



Col. Dayrell Oakley-Hill



Dayrell and Rosamond, Elbasan, 1930