

***And Nobody Woke up Dead* by Jan Levi**

Book review by Sian Cameron

I've never been climbing in the Northern Fells of the English Lakes District but Mabel Barker's prose made me feel like I was up there with her; in the wild wind, the thrashing rain and the pelting snow.

Jan Levi presents a meticulously researched biography of Mabel Mary Barker; a leading female rock-climber in the 20s and 30s from Northern England. Mabel led a remarkable life, which included various interests and followed many paths but had only two passions; rock climbing and education.

From a young age Mabel was a keen 'fell' climber and spurred on by a number of male climbing companions, participated at any opportunity. She completed 25 recorded first ascents and was the first female to ascend the Central Buttress in the Lakes Region in 1924, its 4th ascent in turn.

Mabel's training as a teacher in 1904 preceded a Bachelor of Science in Geology and in 1907 her teaching life officially commenced. She never seemed to settle at one school and taught at many locations throughout England and France. It wasn't until the tragic death of a close climbing companion, Claud Frankland, that Mabel decided to establish her own school, Friar Row in Caldberk, where students were taught respect and knowledge of the surrounding environment.

It was her own deep respect and love for the environment that fuelled Mabel's teachings. Rarely using a conventional classroom, she began her outdoor-oriented teaching by taking groups of students out during term breaks on short expeditions. By the time she opened Friar Row in 1927, the schools brochure read:

The school aims at giving an 'Education for Life,' and that by living as fully, happily, and healthily as may be. Regional study and occupations will be given prominence in the methods employed, for the Principals believe in the value of real experience as the basis of all education, as apart from mere instruction. They aim at the education of "Head, Hand and Heart' (pp. 172).

Mabel firmly believed that human beings must live in balance with the earth they depend so much upon. This has as much, if not more, relevance today as it did in her time. Her scathing opinion on the derogative ways that humans use the environment was evident in her 1925 thesis:

Is it really necessary for the human race, as it grows and evolves, to take the forests, to vanquish them and use them for their own needs, like the stones and the beasts?...But when man takes to dominating his environment, this environment that he has changed, it in its turn dominates him again (pp. 154).

There are fantastic passages direct from Mabel's diaries that correlate well to Unit 1- Outcome 1 Outdoor and Environmental Studies (OES). Mabel's diaries are honest, passionate and expressive and detail not only her personal relationship with nature but her motivations for seeking outdoor experiences.

Similarly, Levi's book covers information that could be applied to Unit 1 – Outcome 2 OES to focus on the ways in which humans value and encounter nature and the factors which affect access to outdoor experiences. On page 209 there is a wonderful passage describing the lack of technology and safety equipment used in the 1930s during rock climbing and would be a practical example to compare to current technology.

I found Levi's book fascinating, engaging and a wonderful historical novel. It holds so much more information than simply one lady's life. What made it so engaging was that so many of her theories and ideas could be implemented today to the betterment of our education system, our environment, our climate and ultimately our lives.

Much of Mabel's writing was prophetic, giving insights into the origins of outdoor and experimental education that we use in our profession today. However, I found that the book focused a great deal on her climbing adventures and not as much as I had hoped on her educational pioneering.

Be patient if you choose to read this book, it may take a few goes before you 'get into it'. Remember that the greater part of the biography are diary excerpts written in the early 1900s and assume a different language to what we are used to today. But don't disregard it now; it's an intriguing book about an amazing woman of whom we can all learn something from: Miss Mabel Mary Barker.

It is the experience of the earth that gives us the comprehension of life. . . We return for the moment, to the one simple fact that there exists nothing but The Earth, we have no other means of production, and all aspects of our existence are the results of actions and reciprocal actions between humans and the earth (pp. 252).

Jan Levi. (2006). *And Nobody Woke up Dead: The Life and Times of Mabel Barker – Climber and Educational Pioneer*. Edmunds, UK: The Ernest Press.