

Books – Joan Rowe's second book **Duty**



Most of us would be thrilled to find a World War I diary.

Edinburgh writer Joan Rowe was not only thrilled, she was inspired. At Morningside Library this week, Joan introduced her new book, **Duty**, and explained how this wonderful find led her on a journey of discovery – a journey that she is still making.

✖ The diary – now 102 years old, and written in meticulous copper-plate script – was unearthed when Joan was helping to clear her husband's aunt's house in London. Joan dug deeper, and found that it belonged to Albert Anderson who, with his friend Alfred Charles Rowe, had enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1912. Aged 18, Albert was taken on as a 'third writer' – a ledger clerk whose duties also included supervising boys as young as 14, many of whom were illiterate and had little idea how to look after themselves. Some of their mothers were so poor that they were entitled to collect half of their son's meagre wages. Albert was by now way out of his middle class comfort zone. In 1914 war was declared, and Albert sailed on HMS Halcyon, whose task was to protect the Scottish fishing fleet and assist the French. Albert's friend Alfred was lost at sea on the eve of his 21st birthday, when HMS Goliath sank in the Dardanelles. Alfred was Joan's daughter's great-uncle.



Joan shows off the
locket

Alfred's sister (a lady who had once been in charge of silk directoire knickers at Debenham & Freebody) would never speak about him in later life, but showed Joan a locket he had left her. Joan realised that someone needed to tell the story of these 'lost boys' and the suffering of their families. *Duty* is a work of fiction, but much of it is based on the diary, and of what she learned from family members. It spans the period 1894 – 1918 and features two families from very different social strata at a time of great social change throughout Europe. The Richards live in affluent Highgate; the Coles are their servants. The action moves from London to Edinburgh when Charles Richards is sent with his young wife to sketch the first Forth Bridge for the Illustrated London News; their journey from Waverley to Queensferry takes an hour on a horse-drawn bus – a travelling time which may sound quite familiar to today's frustrated drivers. Meanwhile, Arthur's brother John Junior runs away to join the navy at Devonport and has adventures of his own. When Charles inherits a house in Kensington, the two come up with an amazing plan...

Joan, with the able assistance of her friend Vicky Hobson, showed the audience some fascinating replica documents from the time, including propaganda leaflets, Suffragette posters, and photographs of Albert himself. Joan has researched the social conditions of the era in great depth; she visited the Fine Art Library to study pictures of Edwardian clothing, sketching the drawings herself when she found she was not allowed to photocopy them.

✖ Joan would love to find any surviving descendants of Albert, and is planning to visit the village of Crich in Derbyshire, whose parish records include many Andersons *and* a Rowe. She has discovered that the Andersons also had connections in Greenford, which is where Auntie Mabel Rowe (in whose house the diary was found) also lived.

And what of the diary itself? It has been promised to Dr Richard Potter of the Britannia Royal Naval College at

Dartmouth. Dr Potter describes it as 'a valuable insight into life on board ship at that time' – it is particularly interesting because Albert refers to hearing rumours of war long before the British public knew anything.

An absorbing story. A memorial to a lost generation. In *Duty*, Joan Rowe has fulfilled two of her ambitions – and soon she will be off to Crich to attempt the third.

Duty is published by Troubadour Publishing Ltd (www.troubadour.co.uk) and is available from the publishers direct for £9.99 + £2.70 p & p. You can also find it in Edinburgh libraries and it can be ordered at any bookshop.