

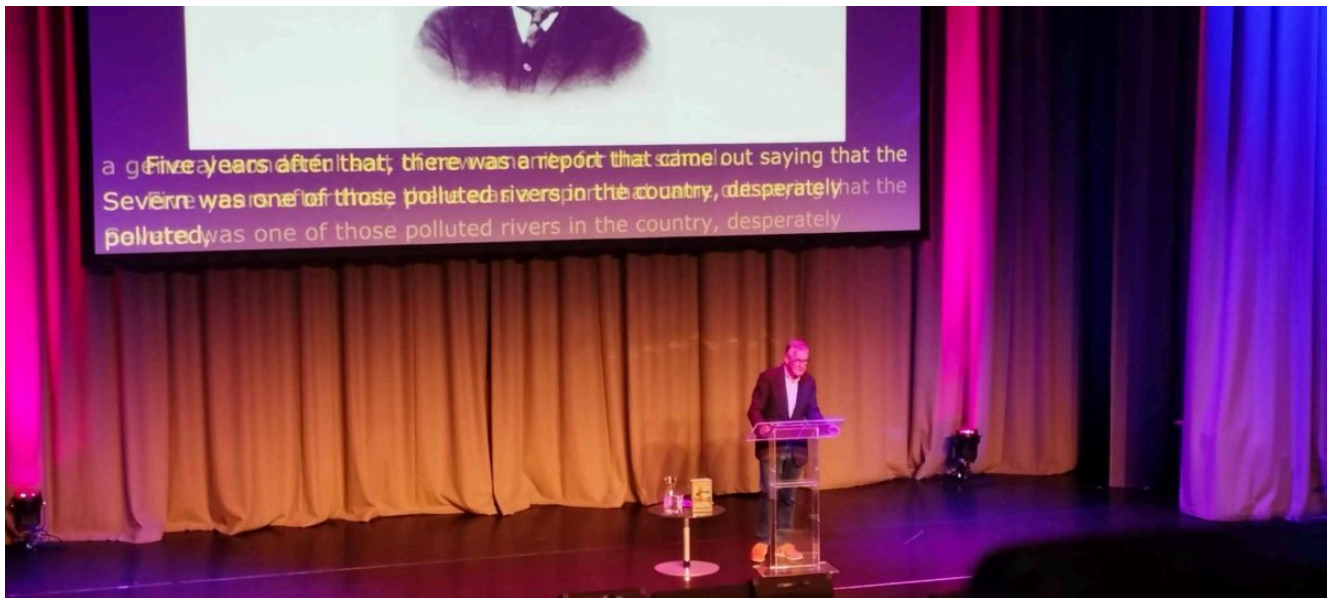
# Palin's poignant tale told at Assembly Rooms

**The actor, writer and broadcaster Michael Palin attracted a packed audience to the Assembly Rooms on Tuesday evening.**

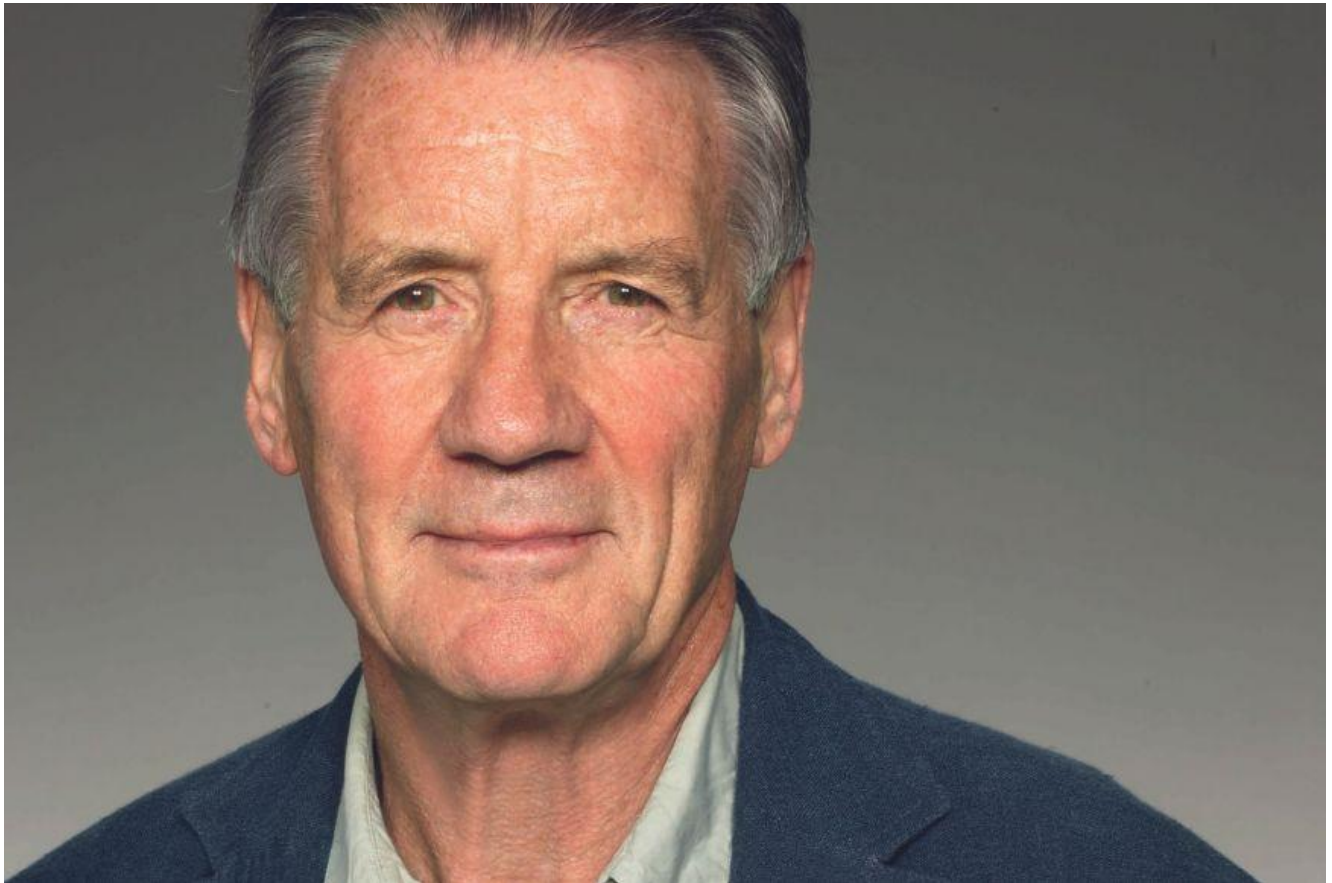
There he gave an entertaining and engaging talk, based on his new book [\*Great-Uncle Harry: A Tale of War and Empire\*](#). This special event was the first presided over by the Edinburgh International Book Festival Director, Jenny Niven. She was "delighted" that her first event was a "full house".

In her introduction she talked of Palin's "amazing back catalogue" as a performer and as "a true story teller". This included his reinvention as a travel broadcaster and writer in the late 1980s. Apparently his next adventure will be to Nigeria, the largest country (by population) in Africa. This will be his first travel series since the death of Palin's wife of 57 years, Helen.

Palin was greeted with warm and extended applause. He then outlined that Edinburgh was close to his heart as the place "where I started my career" – at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It was in the Cranston Street Hall, just off the Canongate, that featured the very first Fringe appearance by Palin (alongside his friend and comedy partner) Terry Jones – in 1964. It was there, following good reviews (and a visit from David Frost) that Palin first had an inkling that he could make a living from the arts. Or, as he put it on Tuesday, that there were alternatives to getting a proper job in a bank.



Michael Palin at the Assembly Rooms. Photo by Eva Vaporidi



Michael Palin

Palin's talk began with the background to his current book. This was some earlier family research he'd conducted for the 1991 film *American Friends*. Palin starred in the film, which he also co-wrote – based the tale on a real-life incident involving Palin's great-grandfather, Edward Palin. In his talk, Palin brought this "successful and well-managed family" to life, detailing interesting aspects of their lives and the

village they lived in. His current book focuses on the life of his great uncle Harry, something of a misfit who struggled to get on in life. Palin suspects that this may be partly explained by the 11-year age gap between Harry and the oldest of his other 6 siblings. Harry was unable to break out of the shadow of his much respected father.

Palin's account of Harry's life has been enriched through his research, making use of family records and various archives. These included the archives of the tea importers Findlay's of Glasgow. In these he was able to trace Harry's struggles to progress well while working at a number of tea plantations in Assam and other Indian regions. After being let go by Findlay's, he went to work as a farm hand in New Zealand, working as part of a large team transforming an area of scrubland into a productive farm. It was while in New Zealand that Harry Palin was called up to fight in the First World War.

He found himself being transported by cruise ship to Egypt and then became a member of the ANZAC forces in the infamous Gallipoli Campaign. While many of his comrades died in battle or from illness and disease (which was rampant), Palin survived and was moved to the Western Front – fighting in the battle on the Somme. So, in the space of a few months, Palin was at the heart of two of the bloodiest campaigns of the war.

Michael Palin's account relies partly on detailed diaries that his great uncle kept. While the entries were "not particularly eloquent", they provided detail, including the fate of his comrades.

What was striking was the stark juxtaposition of "the mundane and murderous". For example, recording the arrival of a pack of mint creams from his family in one entry, immediately followed by descriptions of battles ("absolute hell for two hours"). It showed the value of keeping a diary; something which Palin has himself done for many decades – with extracts

published in a series of volumes.

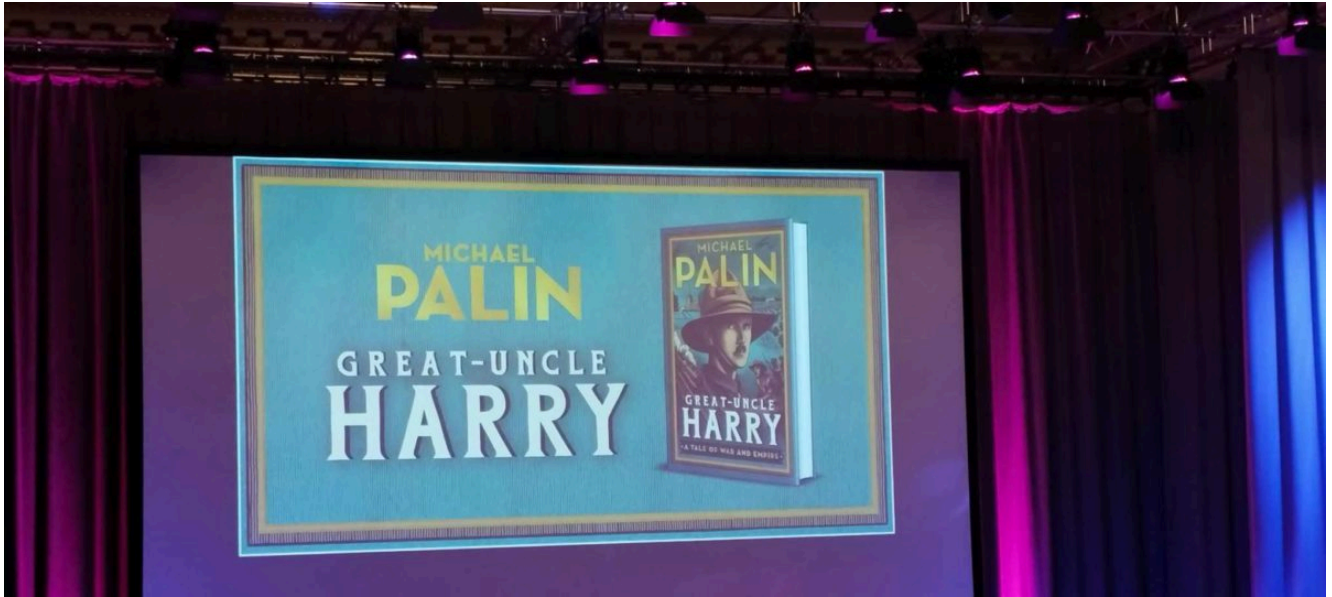


Photo by Eva Vaporidi

Palin's account was enhanced by some excellent photos – projected behind him. These included some from the family archive but also included some found by a team of researchers working with the film director Peter Jackson on *They Shall Not Grow Old*. With AI they have been able to search through millions of photos taken during the First World War and find particular individuals. This included many taken by soldiers using early primitive portable cameras such as the Kodak Vest Pocket Autographic Kodak, which facilitated many unofficial images of the war.

Uncle Harry died at the Somme. His body was never recovered and lies, along with thousands of other members of 'The Missing of the Somme' beneath what is now gentle farmland. The evening ended with moving film footage of Palin visiting one of (the many) war memorials, and finding his uncle's name engraved on a memorial. It brought an engrossing and moving talk to a sobering conclusion.

What came through Palin's account was the very ordinariness of his great uncle. He was no war hero or a man of great abilities. Most of us will have such people in their families. This is a truth about war more generally. This was something

that came through when talking to a Ukrainian student recently. She had attended an event at the Ukrainian Community Centre on Royal Terrace to meet and express gratitude to a group of young soldiers currently training with the British Army. What struck her was the sheer ordinariness of the young trainees -“they were just a bunch of young guys”. She found it difficult to imagine them on the frontlines. It emphasised the relevance of Palin’s tale of events 107 years ago.

The evening also showed how new projects have kept Palin going during difficult recent times, the death of his wife Helen, and his best friend (Terry Jones), as well as his own health issues (heart surgery for a “leaky mitral valve”).

New projects and new adventures also keep Palin energised and inspirational at 80 years of age.