

## Sylvie Nickels 1930–2020

Sylvie lived life to the full. What follows can only be a flavour of a remarkable life that spanned almost 90 years. I'm ably assisted in this by Sylvie herself who wrote a memoir of her life and that of her late husband, George Spenceley.



Sylvie and George moved to Deddington in 1992 and Sylvie soon became involved in village life. She edited the Deddington News from 1994 to 1997 and was the driving force behind the establishment of Daeda's Wood. In 1996 she was contacted by the Woodland Trust which wanted to create a woodland near Deddington, as part of their Woods on your Doorstep project for the millennium. Daeda's Wood was the first to be created. Sylvie organised public meetings and with other enthusiasts raised the £9,000 needed to buy the land. A community planting day led to the planting of 3,500 trees and a grant from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council enabled planting of more trees and wildflowers. Sylvie chaired the Friends of Daeda's Wood until 2007.

Sylvie's life revolved around writing and travelling: 'My Swiss mother and British father met on a ship travelling to New Zealand so my profound interest in travel was probably predestined. Indeed, we spent all our school summer holidays in Switzerland until WWII began. It was during the war that I began writing – nearly 80 years ago. My Swiss grandfather wrote books and poetry so perhaps my writing was predestined too.'

Sylvie's career was spent as a travel writer for national newspapers, magazines and guidebooks. One speciality was the former Yugoslavia, another was Finland. In 1955 a short assignment in Finland 'marked a turning point in my life'. She continued to visit the country throughout the 1960s. She fell in love with Lapland and in her late twenties spent almost a year in that remote place. In 1961 Sylvie visited what was then Yugoslavia, a country she returned to over a period of 40 years. She made many friends in both countries.

The 1960s also saw some life changes for Sylvie. In 1960 she met George Spenceley, photographer and lecturer, after he wrote to her asking for advice on Lapland as he was preparing a lecture on northern Scandinavia. They married in 1977. Never one to shy away from the truth, Sylvie acknowledged her growing dependence on alcohol that insidiously crept up on her. She won the battle for sobriety and went on to support and mentor others.

A few years after they were married George, always the adventurer, proposed a long canoe trip, the length of the Danube. At 2,588km it passes through seven countries. George calculated that they could cover 25km a day, camping wild along the route. Another mammoth canoeing trip followed. This time George chose the Mississippi – over 4,000km and passing through or alongside ten states. It took two years just to organise and during the planning period Sylvie experienced a return of the depression that would affect her on and off for the rest of her life.

In 1984 they set out on their Mississippi journey in an 18ft open canoe. It took them four months. Paddling through the headwaters of the river they had to negotiate several beaver dams but this was as nothing compared to the river traffic and locks they encountered further down. They attained celebrity status

during the trip and when they neared the end of their epic journey in Louisiana they were greeted with 'a voice, god-like, from the sky: "Are y'all the British guys we've bin waitin' for? We bid y'all welcome"'. Sylvie's 1992 book, *The Big Muddy*, tells the story of their journey. More travelling followed, their swansong being a world tour to celebrate Sylvie's 70th and George's 80th birthdays and the start of a new millennium.

After that tour and a visit to Bosnia and Serbia in 2001 Sylvie began her first novel, using the conflict of the former Yugoslavia as a backdrop. She self-published *Another Kind of Loving* and went on to write two more novels continuing the story of Jasminka, a Bosnian refugee fostered by a British couple. More self-published books followed including *So, What Next?* a memoir of her and George's lives.

Sylvie maintained links with her family in Australia after her sister, Sinette, and brother-in-law, Len, moved there in the early 1990s to be closer to their children, Nick and Claire. Sinette died in 2011 and Sylvie lost her 'great mate' George in 2013. Sylvie travelled to Australia to celebrate her 85th birthday with Nick and Claire and she was planning to go there to celebrate her 90th. It may have been premonition that led her to bring forward the visit to 2019.

***Alison Day***