

Monthly Meeting 25 March 2021

"Secrets of the Attic"- Dr. Tony Nicholson

Have you ever moved to a new house and found that previous occupants have left something of historic interest behind and which became a life changing obsession? Well, this happened to Tony Nicholson who was the March zoom speaker for Teesdale u3a. Tony bought a Georgian house in Brotton near Saltburn in 1999 and unexpectedly found a treasure trove of old Victorian photographs, letters and souvenirs when clearing out a hidden loft. He bagged them and three months later when he was about to throw them away, he decided to take a closer look inside the bags. This led to the unfolding of a fascinating love story which has engaged Tony for many years. Using a laundry invoice to an Annie Johnson and an invitation to a Moonlight Dance in the gardens of the Vicarage in Gainford, he began to piece together a romantic story. Why had these and many other items been kept? Presumably because they were meaningful memories to possibly Miss Annie Johnson. Does Annie meet Charles Bowen (Gus), the son of the vicar, at the Moonlight Dance? Did they marry? A later letter to Miss Johnson, now Mrs Bowen, from a friend refers to '...there are some women that would tempt the best men born with their fascinating ways.... the vile drunken hag...' So, Annie did marry and perhaps things did not turn out too well for her. Gus had been a Porter and a seaman and spent a lot of time away from home. Many other letters were discovered from Gus to Annie where Gus is promising his love, asking her to forgive him and looking forward to better times. Often, he is unable to see her for not very convincing reasons. He has in effect abandoned her. He frequently asks for money and uses bullying tactics to persuade her. There is even a mother's letter in which she advises Annie to 'think of yourself'.

Tony has been in touch with many of Gus's descendants who live all over the world. He was given a photograph of Gus in a sailor's uniform. It was clear from Tony's correspondence with Gus's relatives that Gus had been involved in many scrapes during his life and there is a link with Jack the Ripper which Tony did not elaborate upon.

Throughout all this time, Annie had kept Gus's letters and other souvenirs, but there was no photograph identifying her. Except recently an elderly man had called at Tony's house asking for a look around as he used to live in the house. He was able to show Tony a photograph of Annie taken in the 1930s in Redcar High Street. Using this photograph Tony re-examined the old photographic collection and is 'convinced' that he has now identified Annie as a younger woman in her 20s.

This was a gripping story told by an accomplished storyteller which also shines a light on Victorian attitudes of the time. It is in fact the first instalment from Tony's book 'The love of Dangerous Men' which is available from Amazon and there is a kindle edition. The vote of thanks was given by Annie Clouston.

Ian Reid