



## MATHESON, SYLVIA ANNE

---

**MATHESON, Sylvia Anne** (b. London, 20 May 1916; d. Javea, Spain, 2 March 2006), writer, traveler, photographer, and archeologist ([FIGURE 1](#)).

In the world of Persian art and archaeology Sylvia Matheson will be especially remembered for her pioneering work, *Persia: An Archaeological Guide*, first published in 1972. Far more than a simple gazetteer of Iranian sites up to the Mongol period, it is a remarkable sum of precise information on all academic aspects required by both travelers and specialists. A quarter of a century later most of the information remains valid, although traveling has become far easier and a few new sites have come to light.

She was born Sylvia Anne Terry-Smith in London and trained at Wimbledon Technical College. By the age of 16 she started work as a journalist while attending evening classes at the Wimbledon School of Art. She interviewed celebrities such as Charles Laughton (1899-1962), Compton Mackenzie (1883-1972), and P. G. Wodehouse (1881-1975) who in a letter allegedly wished her good luck in her career. At this stage of her life she was briefly married to Angus Matheson.

Her contribution to the war effort during World War II included work with the BBC's secret monitoring unit (see [GREAT BRITAIN xiii](#)), then with the Foreign Office in its Political Intelligence Department where she wrote pamphlets to be dropped over German and Italian troops. After a time in Algiers, she joined the headquarters of General Mark Clark (1896-1984) in Florence as a field correspondent of the S2 Force. Special missions took her to



Venice and Bolzano. She was particularly proud of her appointment as an honorary colonel in the US military police of the 88th division, the Blue Devils.

After the war she achieved her childhood dream of going to India where she worked in Delhi in advertising, on film scripts and booklets. As a teenager Sylvia had started to learn Urdu (Hindustani), and in her free time she discovered Rajasthan and [Baluchistan](#) and became fascinated with shards and beads found on sites. When she visited Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1890-1976), the general Director of the Archaeological Survey of India, he was struck by her enthusiasm and sent her to the British Museum with her finds.

By 1949 Sylvia was back in London, working in advertising as well as training at the Institute of Archaeology, thanks to the recommendation of Sir Mortimer. In 1955, she worked on an excavation, an experience which she described in her memoir *Time Off to Dig* (1961). This narrative concerns her work with Jean Marie Casal (d. 1975?) and his French team in Afghanistan, at Mundigak near Kandahar (Qandahār). The site was memorable for its discomfort and prehistoric finds. But it gave her the possibility to travel further afield to Baluchistan and report on the land and its people to the BBC and national papers. It was there that she met Henry Schofield, a supervisor of the gas fields for Burma Oil. They married in 1956 and for the next nine years, from Sui (Pakistan, at the border between Baluchistan and Panjab), she was able to discover the land and the habits of the local tribe, the Bughtis. *The Tigers of Baluchistan* (1967) was the result of her research which she had pursued through films, sound records, and photographs. Later she received the title of honorary chieftain of the tribe.

In 1965 Henry was posted to Tehran where they both remained until the Revolution of 1979. Sylvia was soon a part of the city's international archeological community as she started to travel around the country and bring back vivid narratives and pictures of her explorations to the local paper printed in English, *Kayhan International*. Her gifts as a writer and the professionalism she put into her research, including the most recent discoveries of her colleagues in Tehran, all led to the publication of her famous archeological guide in 1972, which was to be reprinted so often and illegally in Iran. Neither snowstorm nor dust storm ever deterred her from getting either to the oasis of Ṭabas or to the solitary Armenian church of Saint Taddeus, known as Kara Kilise (western Azarbaijan). She was most methodical in her collecting of data, always calculating timing and distances, measuring potshards, and photographing buildings from all angles. On a trip to Nā'in she



also brought to the notice of the general public a delightfully decorated palace of the second half of the 16th century (see [PALACE ARCHITECTURE](#)). Her guided tours were very popular with British touring organizations, and on one occasion she was nearly killed when her bus had a head-on collision with a local lorry.

Their dream of sailing a boat in the Mediterranean never came to fruition, but in 1981 Henry and Sylvia retired to Javea on the Spanish coast. Sylvia would still lecture locally in Spain, and come to London for scholarly meetings at the British Institute of Persian Studies, the Royal Geographical Society of which she was a fellow, and the Crime Writers Association. Max Mundy was her pen name for the several mystery novels she wrote over the years. Her last important historical writing, yet unacknowledged, was the text which accompanied Roloff Beny's picture book on *Rajasthan: Land of Kings* (1984). Her husband Henry predeceased her.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Her important photographic archives are now at the Khalili Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East, Oxford.

Obituaries.

Yolande Crowe, "Sylvia Matheson or Schofield," *Iran* 44, 2006, pp. xiii-xiv.

"Sylvia Schofield," *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 2006.

Publications as Sylvia A. Matheson.

*Time Off to Dig: Mundigak – An Afghan Adventure*, with a foreword by Mortimer Wheeler, London, 1961; repr., Karachi and London, 1982.

*The Tigers of Baluchistan*, London, 1967; repr., Karachi and Lahore, 1975; 2nd ed., with an introduction by Paul Titus, Oxford and Karachi, 1997.



*Persia: An Archaeological Guide*, 1st ed., London, 1972; rev. ed., London, 1976.

“Digging in Afghanistan,” *Popular Archaeology*, 1979, pp. 26-28.

*Rajasthan: Land of Kings*, design and photography by Roloff Beny, London, 1984.

*Persepolis*, with Werner Felix Dutz, photographs by Afshin Bakhtiar, compiled by Faramarz Ghani, *Archaeological Sites in Fars 1*, Tehran, 1997; with a Persian preface.

*From Pasargadae to Darab*, with Werner Felix Dutz, photographs by Afshin Bakhtiar, compiled by Faramarz Ghani, *Archaeological Sites in Fars 2*, Tehran, 1997; with a Persian preface.

Publications as Max Mundy.

*Death is a Tiger*, London, 1960.

*Dig for a Corpse*, London, 1962.

*Pagan Pagoda*, London, 1965.

*Death Cries Olé*, London, 1966; repr., Chivers, 1991.

Selected Reviews.

A. D. H. Bivar, Review of *Persia*, *BSOAS* 37, 1974, p. 702.

W. C. Brice, Review of *Time off to Dig*, *Man* 62, 1962, p. 80.

Elizabeth Carter, Review of *Persia*, *JNES* 35, 1976, pp. 202-203.

G. J. Glover, Review of *Persia*, *Man* N.S. 8, 1973, pp. 485-86.

H. A. Kanitkar, Review of *Tigers of Baluchistan*, *Man* N.S. 2, 1967, p. 653.

Edward J. Keall, Review of *Persia*, *JAOS* 95, 1975, pp. 502-503.

(Yolande Crowe)

March 6, 2009