

This Month in the not so distant past

Looking back at historical moments that happened in December,
John Davis highlights **Minnie Haskins**.

*'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied:
"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of
God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known
way."
So, I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into
the night.
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of the day
in the lone East.'*

This passage forms the preamble to a poem called *God Knows* written by a largely unknown poet called Minnie Haskins who grew up in the Warmley area just outside Bristol late in the Victorian era.

It became well-known nationally as it was used at the end of King George VI's Christmas speech in December 1939—a very appropriate choice as he was speaking to the nation several months after the declaration of the Second World War.

Tradition says that the poem was recommended to her father by Princess Elizabeth (later Queen Elizabeth II), aged thirteen, and is said to have remained a favourite of Her Majesty throughout her reign. It is inscribed in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle and was used at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother in 2002.

King George VI did not name the author of the poem but the following day (Boxing Day), the BBC announced that it had been written by Minnie Haskins.

Haskins, then sixty-four years old, had not known beforehand that the King would quote her words and did not hear the actual broadcast. When interviewed by a journalist from The Daily Telegraph several days later she said modestly, 'I heard the quotation read in a summary of the speech. I thought the words sounded familiar and suddenly it dawned on me that they were out of my little book of poems.'

Miss Haskins, who never married, was the daughter of a local businessman who started out a shopkeeper but later owned a local pottery, mass producing

clay pipes. A deeply religious woman, she studied informally at the University of Bristol before carrying out social and charity work at first in London and then at Madras in India. There she wrote the small book of poems entitled *The Desert* which included the poem *God Knows* with its preamble to raise funds for the cause.

King Charles is reported to write his own speech without assistance.

Poor health forced her to return to Britain from India in 1915 where she supervised the labour management department (probably known as HR today) in a government run munitions factory. Somehow, she also found time to publish a second volume of poetry, *The Potter*, in 1918.

At the end of the war, she attended the London School of Economics to study for the Social Science Certificate. After gaining further qualifications, she worked as a tutor at the LSE in the sociology department. In 1921 she co-authored *Foundations of Industrial Welfare*—a treatise aimed at promoting close co-operation between worker and employer. She also helped to found organisations that were the precursors of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

Despite her academic work, Minnie Haskins still wrote two novels *Through Beds of Stone* (1928) and *A Few People* (1932) and a further volume of poems, *Smoking Flax* (1942). She returned to teach at the LSE at the start of the Second World War and finally retired in 1944 at the age of sixty-nine. She died in 1957, aged eighty-one.

The tradition of an annual speech broadcast to the nation and the commonwealth on Christmas Day originated with King Charles' great-grandfather, King George V in 1932 and has become an integral part of the festive celebrations. Over the years it has acted

as a chronicle of global, national and personal events which have affected the monarch and their audience.

It was the original idea of the founding director-general of the BBC John Reith who approached King George V in 1922 about making a short broadcast on the newly created radio service. The King refused. Ten years later Reith asked again and this time King George was persuaded to deliver the broadcast by his wife, Queen Mary, and the current Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. The first royal Christmas message was written for the King by the poet and author, Rudyard Kipling.

Queen Elizabeth II delivered her first speech in 1952 and only failed to appear on three occasions, in 1959 and 1963, when she was expecting two of her children and in 1969 when it was replaced with a special documentary film Royal Family and only a written message given. The pre-recorded broadcast is usually timed to go 'on air' at 3.00 p.m. The idea of using 'ghost writers' has long disappeared and King Charles is reported to write his own speech without assistance.

Footnote 1: The verse mentioned at the beginning of the article is often used in conjunction with a painting by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood artist William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) called *The Light of the World*. It shows a Christ-like figure standing by a doorway. His right hand appears to be opening the door while in the left he holds a candle glowing in a lantern,

Footnote 2: I have to admit a personal interest in writing about Minnie Haskins for the December edition. The clay pottery owned by Minnie Haskins' father was only several hundred metres from the house in which I was born and the site was an important part of the local industrial landscape when I was growing up. At the secondary school I attended one of the teams for sports matches etc. (we called them houses) was named Haskins after the local family.

Semi-retired and living in Lyme Regis, John Davis started working life as a newspaper journalist before moving on to teach in schools, colleges and as a private tutor. He is a history graduate with Bachelors and Masters degrees from Bristol University with a particular interest in the History of Education and Twentieth Century European History.



The Light of the World - William Holman Hunt (1827 - 1910)