

Llandrindod Wells & District U3A Lecture Meeting May 2018

Killing and Dying in East Africa - Professor Richard Rathbone

Report by Clive Barrett

The Chairman Berwyn Woolnough welcomed everyone and gave news of the following interest groups, film, rail riders, theatre visiting, and virtual travel. He then introduced Professor Richard Rathbone whose subject was entitled “Killing and Dying in East Africa : An ignored but terrible chapter in the history of The Great War”. He spoke about the little known, but complex part of the First World War which took place in Africa. This was a sideshow to the European War, however it involved imperial expansion, control of the railways and areas, command of ports, with the final act being the scramble for Africa. Germany were keen to retain control the areas they already dominated, this involved prestige, ambitions in gold and diamonds plus trade domination. This resulted in a hard fought war between Germany, and soldiers drawn from very different places of the other nations. Britain used seaplanes, aerial photography, and the campaign was described as “hell on earth” with many British troops saying they would prefer the war on the Western Front. Significantly the death toll exceeded the loss of USA forces in World War II, and also surpassed the carnage on the Somme.

The question could be asked why did this primitive war similar to those which took place in the previous century, take such a destructive form? Gunboats (one was a converted tug boat) were used, but the main contributing factors were tropical disease e.g malaria, with insect life such as mosquitoes and also reptiles was fought in extremes of heat, on plateaus with temporary camps the size of small towns. The conditions were life threatening, as well as infections and diseases, the soldiers wore heavy clothing and carried heavy equipment, and to add to all this the medical staff and supplies were limited. Not surprisingly there were large number of casualties in terms of numbers involved, soldiers dying like flies from disease or fatigue, with the damage to the local areas such crops stolen and seeds, so farmland became overgrown by bush with starvation resulting years after the war. It is recorded that 10 per cent of the male population died following the campaign. Professor Rathbone ended by saying the above war was one of the reasons we buy poppies, and he thought that we should remember this campaign and its victims in November 2018, the 100th anniversary of the end of the Great War.

The lack of questions at the end showed how comprehensive the lecture had been, those which were asked involved the varying strengths of Germany in different parts of Africa, the fact that some Africans remaining loyal, and interestingly the campaign lasted two weeks longer than the European War. In giving his customary vote of thanks Chairman Berwyn Woolnough stated that the speaker had thrown light into an area of a black hole, reminding members of the awful things which happened.

At the next Llandrindod & District U3A lecture meeting at the Metropole Hotel on Monday June 11, the speaker will be Dr. Brenda Davies, whose topic is entitled “Working to abolish racism and the death penalty in America.”