

James Leslie Starkey
Archaeologist
PART 4 (i)(a)

Tragedy in Palestine
10th January 1938

By Wendy Slaninka (Granddaughter of James & Marjorie Starkey by their daughter Mary)

This is my eleventh article for Filming Antiquity and links in with my earlier articles Part 3 'Bethlehem Geology Project', Part 2, 'Lachish (i)-(v)', Part 1, 'Background and Early Career', 'Living at Lachish – Life in Camp', 'First Lady of Lachish – Marjorie Starkey and her family' and 'Olive Starkey – Lady of Lachish' (Leslie's sister), where there is other information and photos of Leslie and Lachish.



Homo proponit, sed Deus disponit
Man Proposes, but God Disposes
Starkey Family Crest Motto

In other words people can make plans but God decides how things turn out (Wendy)

1938 was a year of troubles in Palestine and for the third year, Arab terrorist activities (the Arab Revolt) were directed at the Jewish population and settlements and the British authorities, resulting in constant attacks on the roads, murders, acts of lawlessness, shooting at the Police and military forces. The troopship California arrived in Haifa in early January with 2nd Battalion the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment and the 1st Battalion the Royal Scots.

Starkey set out alone for the 1937/1938 season and wrote to report that *'it was with some uncertainty that the Wellcome Marston Archaeological Research Expedition to the Near East set forth for the sixth season's excavations at Lachish for there were no means of gauging the political feeling of the district, which had not figured to any extent in news reports. It was therefore all the more gratifying to find conditions perfectly normal by 1st November 1937 and all our old workers were assembling and were moving up with their tents and families from south of Gaza, thirty miles away'*. [Throughout the Excavations Starkey wrote bi-weekly reports on the work in progress and these are housed at the Wellcome Trust]. So confident had he been that when questioned on the wiseness of his continuing to remain he had responded with a smile *'but I have only friends among these people'* (Palestine Post 12.1.38) and this was no doubt true as far as the genuine Palestinians were concerned but on reflection was perhaps a little naive. Sir Charles Marston himself had even commented when the present expedition left in November

that the relations between its personnel and local population and Bedouins were so friendly that the disturbed situation elsewhere in the country was unlikely to affect them (Manchester Guardian, 14th January 1938). Although Lachish was located in an Arab area and he was nothing to do with the politics of the country, this did not save Starkey.

He was aware of the dangers and one of his last postcards home to Madge in December mentioned *'Dearest ... All here is quiet so far – plenty of troops in Jerusalem ... heaps of love Leslie'*. The family had not come out this season, partly because of the unstable situation in Palestine and because John and Mary had started at private schools, and indeed when they left after the previous season their car had been stoned on the way to Gaza. The children's lack of proper schooling was a concern, especially for John who was now 8. Starkey had moved the family to St. Margaret's so they could be nearer to Madge's father (who was ill with cancer). The Daily Mail quoted Madge – *'I have been with him on all previous expeditions but I stayed at home this time to arrange for the children's education'*.

The team celebrated Christmas as usual with a decorated tree from Germany donated by Mr. and Mrs. Fast (the Fast Hotel, Jerusalem), but missed the absence of the Starkey children. Starkey desperately missed them too – a postcard home to Madge said *"I so miss you Beloved when I see all the mothers with their children – hope to get news of you soon – love to M.J.M.J. and heaps of kisses.xxxxxxxx"* He had obviously written to his sister Olive too around this time as I have a rather sad envelope at home with her writing on the front *'Leslie's last letter'*.

Despite Starkey's earlier optimism, on the 10th January 1938, a few days after the camp had celebrated his 43rd birthday - his career was tragically cut short. His good relations with his workmen and people from the surrounding villages were well known, he was a keen student of their customs and folklore, so it came as a great shock when he was ambushed and murdered by a group of Arab armed bandits in the rugged hill country around Hebron at the point where the Beit-Jibrin road joins the Hebron-Jerusalem road – a place known locally as 'The well of the stones' - about 4 miles from Hebron.



Image kind permission of Josef Garfinkel / Copyright Garfinkel

Map dating from 1938, showing the location of Lachish

After six successful seasons at Lachish, he had been invited to a private preview of its finds and others the next day, prior to the official opening of the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem (the Rockefeller Museum). This was due two days later and where he was going to

give a Reply to the Address by the High Commissioner, Sir Arthur Wauchope. The preview was cancelled and the Museum opened without ceremony on the 12th, newspapers referring to 'the clouded opening' (The Times).



The Rockefeller Museum

[Photo. Palestine Review No.39, Vol.II, Friday January 14th 1938]

Having worked on his dig for many weeks, not bothering to shave, he now sported a large unruly dark beard¹ and newspapers printed that the robbers may have mistaken his identity. However he had boldly informed them he was British and from the excavation 'Antiqua' dig of Tel Duweir. It appears that a new Jewish excavation was about to start in the vicinity of Tel Duweir and Starkey had only a week before discussed it with the District Commissioner advising against it because of the troubles and adding the rather fateful sentence '*I look rather like a Jew myself, but I am alright in that area because all the Arabs know me*'. (Excerpt from District Commissioner Report 13th January 1938) He left the camp late (4.15pm) when it was already dusk after a full day's work, with a driver in a car which had been hired from the Galluk Brothers, Jerusalem.. The car arrived in good time and members of the Team urged Starkey to leave earlier. He was heading for the Hotel Fast where he had a permanent room. Miss Nina Cumming was due to have travelled with him but cried off at the last moment preferring to finish off the job she was working on - they were both due for supper that evening with Nina's family and I have a long letter from Mrs. Cumming to Madge explaining the worry of that long evening waiting with no news and wondering what had happened. He had also made arrangements the next day to meet Prof. Harry Torzcyner and to have supper at the Iliffes.

About an hour into the journey, at about 5.15 pm, on an awkward bend in the road, they came up behind another car which had been stopped by the bandits (there were approximately 12 of them, some in the road, others hidden behind a wall), wearing white hattas drawn across their faces. The road at this point was too narrow for them to reverse and they were forced to wait. The gunmen spoke to the driver of that car asking who they were and waved them on when they were satisfied they were Arabs – the occupants did not report this incident to the Police and were later arrested. They then beckoned to Starkey's driver to pull forward firing some shots in the air over the car. Starkey was ordered out of the car - the driver was told to drive on. Despite the desperate attempts by the driver to explain who Starkey was, and Starkey's own assertions, he was shot in the chest and abdomen. However the driver said he saw Starkey walking away from the men who had quizzed him, seemingly they believed him and he was rejoining the car, but then it seems he was shot 50 yards further up the road by other men behind the wall. The driver saw Starkey fall in his wing mirror when he had only gone 20 yards and stopped the car but after being fired on drove directly to the Police Station in Hebron. A

¹ Madge had never let him grow a beard and she commented after his death that if she had been there, the lack of a beard may have saved his life – although Olga later wrote to Madge and said she didn't think it would have made a difference.

strong body of police immediately set out and found Starkey's body in a pool of blood. By then it was completely dark and futile to begin any sort of search, so a Guard was placed over him until his body could be conveyed to Hebron, from whence it was transferred to Jerusalem in the morning. The Guard remained at the scene and one of the constables was Thomas Curd who later devoted a couple of pages to 'the sad incident' (see References).adding how the brilliant stars and half moon added to the trauma of the scene.. He goes on to describe the tracker dogs arriving in the morning and the subsequent search over the rough terrain. The District Commissioner, Mr. Keith Roach, Advisor to the Palestine Police, Sir Charles Tegart, Major Alan Saunders, Inspector General of Police, and Sir David Petrie, Advisor on Police Affairs, also participated in the search. Starkey's jacket had been removed and his pockets rifled. However the killers had missed his signet ring and hematite seal in his waistcoat pocket. They also took his luggage, attache case and wallet. They rejected the swatch of red damask he was going to send to Madge and toys/games for the children still in the car.

In response to a telegram from the High Commissioner to London on the evening of 10th January, Madge was informed officially of Starkey's death by telegram and letter 11th January from H.F. Downie, the Under Secretary of State, Colonial Office, London on behalf of The Right Honourable Mr. Ormsby Gore, Secretary; though she already knew from the numerous telephone calls she had received all day. She initially thought her husband must have made another sensational find when asked if she had heard the news. Their son John can still remember the sound of the ringing phone. Harding had already telephoned Mr. Bullock at the Wellcome Trust, Sir Robert Mond and Sir Charles Marston that morning to inform them and Marston immediately drove over to be with Madge. Wauchope wrote a personal letter to Madge and said '*I have always had the highest respect and admiration for your husband, both as an archaeologist, and as a man*'. The funeral took place just hours after she had been informed and no time for her to take in the news or have any input. Olga tried to ring her after the funeral to let her know about it all but couldn't get through so sent a long letter the next day.



Starkey's children were only just 8, 6 and 2

Photo: Family archive, W. Slaninka

[Photographer: Raad, Jerusalem]

Mr. Raad wrote to Madge from Jerusalem '*Human mind cannot grasp nor fathom this great and irreparable loss. There are no words adequate enough to express to you how sad we all feel who knew him personally and had grown to love him so dearly*'. Madge received telegrams and hundreds of condolence letters from the archaeological world – too many to list here - as well as from friends, family, acquaintances and well-wishers (all in the scrapbook). This also included Lady Petrie who wrote '*words cannot express the horror we feel – we hope and pray for you and your children and our sympathy is stirred to the depth of our hearts*'.

CONTINUED IN PART 4 (i)(b) (the second half of this article about the murder) and Parts 4 (ii) Funeral on Mount Zion and (iii) Memorial Service Westminster

Sources/Further Reading/Research: will be given at the end of each Part and will be relevant to all three Parts 4 (i)(a), (i)(b), (ii) and (iii)

Daily Mail, 'Briton murdered in Arab Ambush – Wife on why she stayed at home'. 11th January, 1938

Prof. Josef Garfinkel, (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), The murder of James Leslie Starkey near Lachish, PEQ April 2016, pp 84-109

British Government Report for 1938 on administration of Palestine and Trans-Jordan

District Commissioner Report 13th January 1938, Wellcome Trust

Dr. Kathleen Kenyon, 'Archaeology in Palestine'

'Murdered in Palestine', obituary, Phineas (UCL magazine), Vol.3, no.1, 18th January 1938

Palestine Post, 'His Beard cost him his life', 13th February `1938

Prof. David Ussishkin, The murder of James Leslie Starkey: Addendum to the paper of Josef Garfinkel, PEQ June 2019, pp 146-154

Palestine Post, 'Noted Archaeologist Buried in Jerusalem', 12th January, 1938

The Times, 'Palestine Treasures', 12th January 1938

Thomas Curd, 'Rural Thoughts on the Holy Land' (former Palestine Police, 1938)

Correspondence between Palestine and British Governments

Archives of the Wellcome Trust, London

Extracts from some of the hundreds of condolence letters in the family archive

Plus numerous newspaper articles of the day (mostly from originals in family archive)

Permission has been obtained from the various journals, newspapers and publishers where relevant – many of the original publications of the above are also in the family archive..