

# Sheila Tremaine

A unique and remarkable servant of Jesus Christ;

## 1. Remarkable for what she accomplished

Sheila Tremaine joined Wycliffe Bible Translators in 1958

- and worked for over 55 years as a Bible translator for the Rikbaktsa people of Brazil.
- This was a small and isolated tribal group of very difficult access, who lived in the southern Amazon rain forest.
- It was Sheila's lifelong desire that these people should **not only** receive the Scriptures in their own language,
- but that they would grow spiritually by using them.
- It was heartening to her to see how the Rikbaktsa people grew in their knowledge of the Lord when they worked closely with her in the translation process.
- The NT was finally published in 2001, ... as someone said, "...a small insignificant looking book -- the published Rikbaktsa New Testament -- was the fruit of forty years tenacity."

Until very recently Sheila was still producing Scriptural materials and encouraging their use.

- She translated the Psalms and 8 books containing Old Testament Bible stories.
- She dubbed the Jesus film into the Rikbaktsa language and produced and distributed Rikbaktsa songs on CD.
- She made and distributed audio recordings of the Acts of the Apostles and John's gospel.
- As late as last year, she was distributing DVDs of The Jesus Film in Rikbaktsa around 20 of their villages.

Sheila was committed to help the Rikbaktsa any way she could and was sometimes frustrated when the NT seemed to be under-used because not enough people could read it fluently in their own language

- She had received a Masters degree in education in 1984 and went on to promote mother tongue literacy and also bilingual education
- she also produced other reading materials as she saw were needed, including a translation of Pilgrim's Progress, and a booklet about alcohol abuse.

With her vast experience in Brazil and in Bible translation, Sheila could easily have accepted other less demanding roles,

- but she always regarded the Rikbaktsa as her prior commitment, saying, "If I get involved in that [other thing], who will go in my place to the Rikbaktsa?"
- Although much of the time she worked alone among the Rikbaktsa,
- She was grateful of support from a number of others in the translation team.

Sheila formally retired from the Brazil Branch in 2009 but even then continued to visit the Rikbaktsa twice a year for a month at a time until the deterioration in her sight prevented further travel.

Her dedication to the Rikbaktsa was without equal. Margaret Alford, one who worked in the village with her on bilingual education, said, "Sheila was a hero to go it alone for so many years and to attempt so many things with and for the Rikbaktsa people"

Another said, "Sheila showed a caring, sensitive heart for the families and leaders of the Rikbaktsa people. She was greatly loved and respected by them....she will be greatly missed by them."

Sheila was truly remarkable in that, for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, she committed herself so totally, so joyfully and energetically and for such a long time to such a small group of South American Indians – a group virtually unknown to the outside world.

- To them, she was the living proof of the faithful, steadfast love of God.

- Were she here, the one thing that Sheila would **ask of us** is that we continue to pray for those Indians whom she loved so much.

## **2. Remarkable for who she was in herself.**

### **Without children of her own, she loved the children of others**

To several families in the wider translation team, she became like a favourite aunt, always interested in what they were doing, perhaps teaching them to play “Chopsticks” on the piano.

- When their parents were away, she would have them up to her house, play games with them and feed them ice cream.

### **Great inner strength**

Sheila had a great deal of inner strength and was able to cope with heavy demands not just in Brazil but in the UK

- By commuting regularly between Brazil and England, Sheila was able to balance her work in Brazil with her care for her sister Mary back home in Sidmouth.
- She must have accumulated a large store of Air Miles!
- Rather like a chameleon, she slipped back and forth with ease between very different cultures -- English, Brazilian and the Rikbaktsa.

### **Enjoyed life.**

- Sheila was almost unfailingly enthusiastic and believed in living a life of godly ZEST!
- She was vivacious, positive, abundant, humorous and at times hilarious. She almost always had a little twinkle of laughter on her lips and in her eye.
- She was at ease with herself and the world around her and almost always seemed to be relaxed, tolerant and accommodating.
- She particularly enjoyed keeping fit through swimming, and was capable of swimming considerable distances, whether in the sea or river or pool.
- Her life was filled with extrovertive activity and giving out in her relationships with others

- She valued her many friends highly and would often travel great distances to meet with them.
- She also had many Brazilian friends.

### **Openhearted,**

She was Generous and Hospitable

- She shared her home with Indians, Brazilians and missionaries alike.
- She was famous for her fish suppers and her determination to teach her American co-workers the very important art making a perfect cup of Yorkshire tea!

### **Along with her open-heartedness, Sheila was open-minded**

She was broad minded but wise in her strong Christian beliefs, exhibiting an unusual level of openness to Christians of different views -- that was sometimes not reciprocated.

- For example, when the only church available to her was a Roman Catholic one, she found that she could worship her Lord attending Roman Catholic services -- including the Mass.
- When criticised, she would respond with that quizzical, amused smile of hers, saying “one doesn't have to believe everything they say, does one!”
- She also enjoyed fellowship with a community of Catholic sisters in Brazil.
- For many years among the Rikbaktsa, she was strongly opposed by a very hostile Roman Catholic priest, who did all he could to inhibit her work; but Sheila managed through her tolerance and lack of judgmentalism to build bridges which later stood her in good stead in the village.

### **Her tenacity – and her bravery were extraordinary.**

She had a will of iron and when she set herself to a task, never gave up.

- She faced practical and logistical challenges that would have defeated most other people, but shrugged them off with her trademark nonchalant smile.

We will remember her hilarious tales of how in the early days, it would normally take her at least 3 days of travel to the village.

- The first leg, she hitched a lift on top, on the tarpaulin of a loaded lorry, hanging on for dear life as it pitched and heaved.
- She had to duck to avoid jungle foliage which could so easily have swept her off to the ground.
- Furthermore, travelling with her were rubber tappers -- usually drunk -- whose eager advances she had to avoid! She would add slyly, "Well, you know how it is, don't you?"
- One time these drunken tappers started shooting at each other.
- Sheila lay down flat, prayed and listened to the bullets whistling past her ear as the lorry lurched on!

And that was just the first stage of the journey; then she had to wait around -- sometimes for days -- to hitch a ride to the village in any passing boat.

I understand that, after she had an artificial hip, on one occasion, while travelling in a canoe, her hip dislocated and she could not get it back.

- She suffered intense pain for hours until on arrival, there were those who could put the leg back in place.

### **But Sheila was Gentle**

Her iron will was not a dominating, controlling one;

- it was a self-discipline for her own life, not imposed on others.
- To others, she exhibited her trade mark tolerance, gracious and often mildly amused, listening uncritically to their views, habits and foibles.
- When she disagreed with something, she would often be non-confrontational, offering a relaxed alternative that might begin, "Don't you think that perhaps..." followed by a gentle, good-natured exposition of her view.
- A Wycliffe member said of her: "With a twinkle in her eye and words of wisdom on her lips, Sheila gently encouraged, advised, and even scolded us on occasion. I learned from Sheila's example

how to give of myself, my time, and my resources and leave the results to God."

### **Full of faith and hope**

A leader in the translation team in Brazil said, "If I had to describe Sheila in three words, they would be undaunted, faithful, and loving."

- ... she never seemed to despair. Not only did she fearlessly and lovingly persevere, she encouraged [all the translation] family to follow her lead.
- She never lost hope ... in any of the people God placed in her path.
- On many occasions, when we would gather for prayer, ... our hearts [would be] heavy. Sheila, undaunted, would lead us in a festal shout of "Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord" and somehow our burdened hearts would once again gain perspective and rest in God's sovereignty.

Sheila never gave up believing that God would reign in Rikbaktsa land.

- That faith has been abundantly honoured and now she is rejoicing in heaven with some of those among whom she lived on earth.

We don't meet people like Sheila very often

- She was a unique, extraordinary person who did extraordinary things.
- And she did it all for her extraordinary Lord, Jesus Christ,
- And by the power of His Holy Spirit.