

Lady Borton

by Katie Jacobs

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The honorific “Bà” or “Lady” has been bestowed upon some of Vietnam’s greatest women from warriors like Hai Bà Trưng and Bà Triệu to poets like Bà Huyện Thanh Quan.

A historian, writer, academic, cultural expert and activist, when it comes to English language interpretations of Vietnam and the war era, Lady Borton is a colossus. Katie Jacobs catches up with the author of After Sorrow at her home in Hanoi.

The entrance to the building is dark. I was warned this would be the case so I push open the tall French doors and wander into what seems to be an office reception-cum-storage-cum-lounge room. Taking a seat next to a photocopier old enough to fetch a hefty price in a vintage store, I find myself surrounded. Family photographs plaster the peeling walls, women with big hair and hand-knitted sweaters hang next to snaps of grinning blue-eyed children peering over the edge of pastel-coloured bathtubs. It’s like looking at my family photo album. The room is silent and I wonder if I’m in the right place.

Without warning, a tall, thin woman with a mass of curly grey hair emerges from a back room. Reaching out her hand in greeting, I feel my throat go dry as I desperately try to think of something intelligent to say. “Nice photos,” I blurt.

Lady Borton smiles and I feel as though her clear blue eyes are looking straight through me. Intimidated does not even begin to describe how I feel meeting one of the most notable English-language historians of Vietnamese culture and history. Not that she would describe herself as a historian. In fact, explaining exactly who Borton is, is something impossible to summarise in a single word — writer, historian, academic, interpreter, cultural expert and activist only do her partial justice.

“This building was originally a French catholic seminary and we still have the original tiles,” she says, keenly aware that my eyes are glued to the floor. A sucker for snippets of Hanoi’s colonial history, I can’t help but strike up a conversation about the French era, and Borton

seems only too happy to oblige. It's like talking to an encyclopaedia, except much warmer and funnier. Two hours pass until I realise that I've completely forgotten to ask any of my questions. So, we switch tracks and she begins to tell me a few stories from her remarkable life.

An Intense Beginning

Borton grew up in Alexandria, Virginia — a suburb of Washington, DC, in the US — during what she describes as the “apartheid era”. “I lived in a sad time,” she says, “when there were two types of women’s bathrooms — those for white women and those for black.”

These days, when not in Hanoi, home is a small farm in southern Ohio, a world away from Hanoi’s crowded streets. “It’s really quiet and I can’t even see another house from the farm,” she says. But when I ask if she misses it, she shakes her head. “I love being there, but when I’m here in Hanoi it just seems like another life. This is my home for now. I feel as though I have roots here, this is where my friends and my life are.”

Arriving as a young volunteer for the Quaker organisation American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) during the American War, Borton was stationed at a neutral civilian amputee hospital in Quang Ngai Province where she describes her work as “that of a messenger”.

“It was my responsibility to run all the errands and help with the patient transfer,” she says. “Unlike many of my colleagues, I spent a lot of time out in the villages. I learnt about the culture and language.

When I ask if she was ever scared living in a war-zone, she shrugs, “I was never a target. I made an effort to talk to people, get to know them. I would tell them about the work I did and explain that we were a neutral organisation. It was the Americans who actually scared me the most. I would drive our patients home in a local-style pickup truck, and the Americans would often try to run me off the road.” Without being able to see that it was an American woman driving the truck, they just assumed she was the enemy.

A Return

Since first arriving in 1969, Borton has travelled back and forth between Vietnam and the United States more times than she can count. Although returning for months at a time during the 1980s to work on her book *After Sorrow* — a memoir of her time in rural Vietnam during the war — it wasn’t until the 1990s that she moved to Hanoi to work.

AFSC, the Quaker organisation she had been working with in Quang Ngai, was opening an office in Hanoi and, given her familiarity with the organisation and Vietnam, Borton was put in charge. As one of the first international NGOs to open offices in the capital, Borton was critical in establishing the foundational systems to allow international organisations to operate. “Initially the term was translated incorrectly, and instead of [reading] as non-government organisation, iNGOs were called anti-government organisations. I had to fix that,” she laughs.

These days Borton focuses her energy on translating and recording Vietnamese culture and history. Working closely with prominent Vietnamese scholar Huu Ngoc, they have published numerous books and essays, such as the popular *Wanderings through Vietnamese Culture*.

On the Side of Compassion

Never one to focus on a single task, Borton also contributes to several research and interpretative projects, including a few about General Vo Nguyen Giap. As we talk about her

friendship with the Giap family, one of his nephews knocks on the door and Borton ducks out to talk about the upcoming biography of Giap that is due to be released by the end of the year.

“I worked with General Giap and his family quite a bit. I still do,” she explains. This then leads into another of Borton’s many remarkable stories. In 1988, she arranged for Morley Safer from the US television programme 60 minutes to interview General Giap. Borton watched, horrified, as Morley ignored the pre-approved questions and began pressuring Giap into talking about how he felt when so many of his people died during the American War.

Borton said Giap was upset with the questions and compared every life lost to losing a brother or sister, but when the episode was aired, the producers had cut most of the interview and edited his answers. “It completely changed the sentiment of the interview. I was absolutely mortified and furious with Morley,” says Borton. “I’ve spent the decades since trying to make up for this mistake.”

In the foreword to Borton’s book *After Sorrow*, famed writer and political activist Grace Paley said of Borton — “I understood that she had sworn herself in love and understanding of the Vietnamese people, all the people. But she was not sentimental or neutral.”

When I asked Borton what she thought Paley meant by this comment she laughed and shrugged. “I have no idea what she means. I suppose she’s referring to the fact that I don’t take sides.” We’re silent for a moment and I can tell Borton is thinking over the quote. “Well, I am neutral,” she says. “But this shouldn’t be confused with being passive, I’m not passive.” Escorting me back past the family photo-album walls and through the French-style doors, four hours have passed in what felt like minutes. The late-afternoon sun is fading as she hands me a few books, insisting that I will find them interesting. “See you around,” she waves. Then she’s gone, disappearing as suddenly as she appeared.

Some of Lady’s books (either as author, editor or translator):



