Searching for a miracle

A Victorian-era English nurse seems an unlikely hero to be celebrated in a remote corner of Siberia. And yet, more than a century after her epic journey to the region, Kate Marsden is still fondly remembered for her altruism and compassion towards leprosy sufferers in the Republic of Sakha. **Felicity Aston** visited far-eastern Russia in the hope of tracking down the miracle herb at the heart of Marsden's story

The Jeep slides to a halt on the icy road as the driver speaks in rapid Russian, pointing excitedly at a row of half-finished houses. Leaping out, he indicates some writing painted on the side of the nearest house and explains that it reads: '3 Kate Marsden Street'.

'The people of Vilyuysk think that Kate Marsden did a great thing for the region,' he announces solemnly. 'It is similar to what Lenin did for the Soviet people. That is why they named the street after her.' While her name is unfamiliar to most people in the UK, in this remote outpost in the vast Sakha Republic of northeastern Siberia, Marsden is regarded as a hero.

Known as Yakutia to the Russians, Sakha is both spellbinding and terrifying in its extremes. Winter temperatures plummet below –50°C; during the summer, they soar above 40°C. Roughly the size of India, it's capped by a thick layer of permafrost and swathed in dense taiga forest. In 1891, Marsden emerged from this wilderness, riding into Vilyuysk accompanied by 15 Sakha Cossacks. She had travelled right across Russia from Moscow, alone for much of the way and unable to speak Russian.

It was an unprecedented journey for a European woman in the late 19th century, but Marsden wasn't an explorer – she was a nurse on a mission. She had heard that the local people in this part of Siberia knew of a herb that could cure what was, at that time, one of the world's most feared diseases – leprosy.

HERBAL REMEDY

A bacterial infection that affects the skin, nerves, and mucous membranes, leprosy is today easily treatable with a combination of antibiotics. During the 1890s, however, it was an incurable disease that afflicted millions of people across Europe and was believed to be highly contagious.

The herb used by the Sakha to treat leprosy was said to be a closely guarded secret, but Marsden, who had devoted her life to the cause, believed that her purely altruistic motives would convince them to confide in her. 'Could they be persuaded,' she wondered, 'to reveal all they knew to a woman who came to them for the sake of humanity, and on behalf of Christ?'

Above: Kate Marsden, photographed in 1892 before she set off for Sakha in Siberia to search for a herb said to cure leprosy; **Opposite:** Marsden in full travelling dress with a map of her route. Unable to bend her knees when dressed, she had to be lifted by four Cossacks and placed in her sledge

Marsden set out into the taiga from Vilyuysk to find those who were suffering from leprosy and had been banished to fend for themselves in the forest. 'Halting at the leper settlement of Hatignach, a scene met my eyes too horrible to describe fully,' she wrote. 'Twelve men, women and children, scantily and filthily clothed, were huddled together in two small *yourtas* [huts], covered with vermin. The stench was dreadful; one man was dying, two men had lost their toes and half of their feet.'

She was so appalled at the situation of the outcasts that she returned to the UK vowing to raise enough money to build a leper hospital in Vilyuysk. Her welcome home was initially enthusiastic. Hailed as a compassionate hero, she was presented to Queen Victoria and became one of the first female Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society.

Contributions flooded in to her fund for the hospital – but within a year, public opinion swung against her. She was accused of embezzling money from her charitable fund, of having leprosy herself and even of fabricating the entire Siberian journey. The reasons for Marsden's sudden vilification are unclear, but, despite being exonerated of all charges, her reputation never recovered. Her hopes of returning to Siberia ruined, she died in 1931.

One of the biggest riddles of Marsden's complex story is the mystery herb that had originally inspired her epic journey. She revealed in her book that a bishop in Vilyuysk had given her a cutting of the herb, but she neither names nor describes it. If Marsden saw it being used, why doesn't she mention it in her account? If the Sakha people had had such an effective cure at their disposal, why was leprosy so devastatingly prevalent in the region? The only way to answer these questions was to return to Sakha.

LOCAL MEMORIES

I'm standing in Vilyuysk's museum with my travelling companion, Bernice Notenboom, and a Sakha interpreter, listening as the museum's vice-director, Ivanov Vasiliev,

explains why Marsden's visit had such a lasting effect on the local people. 'She wasn't afraid of the disease,' he says. 'She went into the rooms of the lepers, tried their meals and showed them how to look after themselves.'

In front of him is a detailed wooden model of a building. 'This is the hospital and leper colony that was built six years after she left,' says Vasiliev. 'The colony and all the buildings were designed by Kate Marsden herself.' He points out some of the revolutionary design features of the buildings: the heated indoor toilets, the separate houses for families and a building for staff to change their clothes and disinfect as they entered and left the colony.

The following day, we ski through the taiga to the site of the hospital and colony, which was operational until 1962. The village of Sosnovka now occupies the site, but many of the original wooden buildings have survived and are in remarkably good condition. The old dormitory buildings are used as houses, the former hospital as a village hall and the storage house as a nursery school.

Today's villagers are the children of the men and women who once staffed the hospital and colony. They have vivid childhood memories of the patients. 'I remember the patients with ears falling off, without noses; some people didn't have fingers,' says one man. 'The patients would tell us not to come close to them.'

Another villager produces an ageing ledger with brittle pages. It's a register of all the patients who were admitted to the hospital, their fate recorded in neat black handwriting. It tells of whole families being brought to the colony: mothers with young children, men in their 20s, teenagers and even newborn babies. Listed beside the names is a progression of symptoms ranging from red spots to boils and numbness. Most of the patients died and were buried in a special cemetery several kilometres from the village.

From Sosnovka, we continue along Marsden's route from Vilyuysk, skiing on the thick ice of the frozen Vilyuy River. Sakha fishermen and hunters live in cabins along the banks of the river, hunting in the forest for furs and chipping holes through the ice to fish. They invite us into their cabins to share thick fish soup and warming vodka around log-burning stoves, where we talk about Marsden.

'I have known about Kate Marsden since I was little,' says one of our hosts. 'One of my ancestors was a personal assistant to her. She called him 'John'. When she was very tired from riding, he used to put two horses parallel and place material between them so that she could travel while having a rest. In every place they stayed, he made a fire to make smoke, just to keep the mosquitoes away from Kate Marsden. She really thanked him at the end. She wanted him to come with her to England, but he refused to leave his country.'

IDENTITY PARADE

We ask everyone we meet about the identity of Marsden's mysterious herb. In Vilyuysk, we describe the symptoms of leprosy to a traditional Sakha healer who practices in the town. She produces a herb whose Sakha name means 'the herb that is eaten by wolves'. In its dried form, it looks like barley and smells vaguely of hops. 'It's very good for healing sores,' she explains. 'It's pulled out of the ground with its roots because you cannot use just the stem. After grinding it, you mix it with soured cream and use it like a salve on the sores.'

Botanists in Yakutsk, the regional capital,

Below: the author's travelling companions, Bernice Notenboom and Slava Mestnikov (their Yakut interpreter), consult with Anatoli, a local hunter and fisherman, on the best route along the frozen Vilyuy River. Anatoli also offered welcome advice on the best way to travel through the dense taiga using frozen channels that branched off the main river

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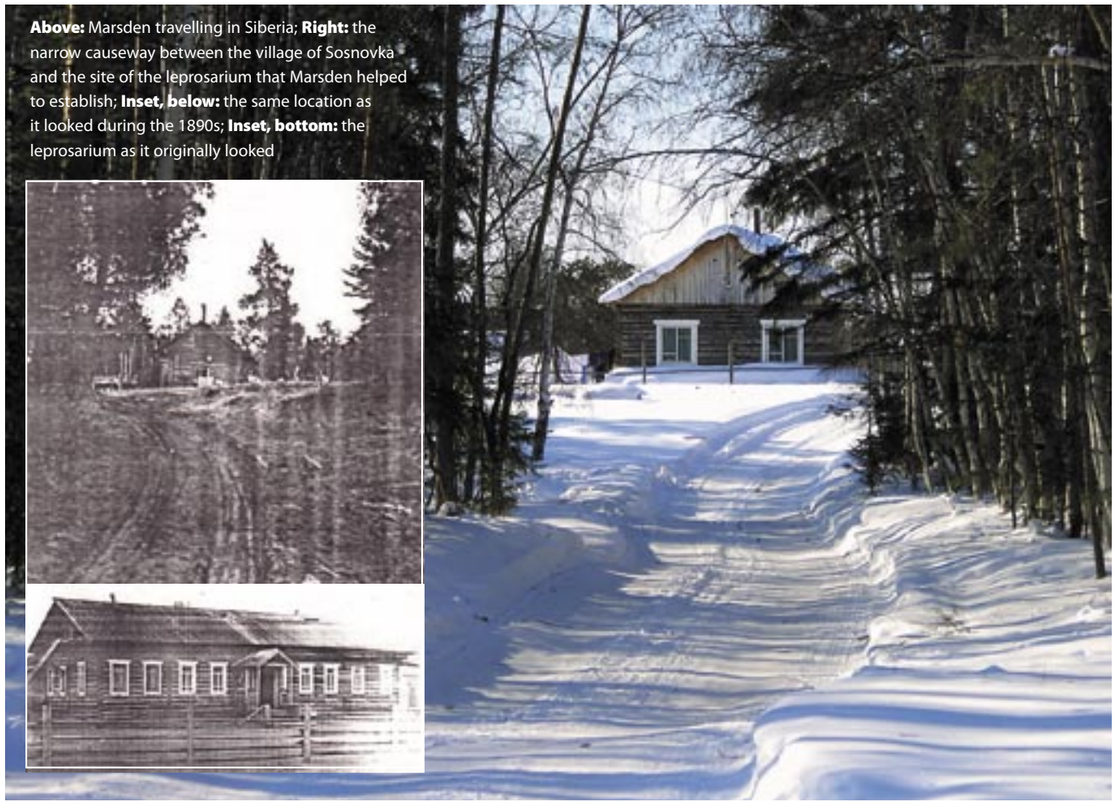
Above: Marsden travelling in Siberia; **Right:** the narrow causeway between the village of Sosnovka and the site of the leprosarium that Marsden helped to establish; **Inset, below:** the same location as it looked during the 1890s; **Inset, bottom:** the leprosarium as it originally looked



Below: the villagers of Sosnovka gather to greet the author and her companion beneath a plaque commemorating 100 years since Marsden's visit, placed on one of the original leprosarium buildings

discovered a book that mentioned a medicinal herb named *Rumex crispus*, which, it claimed, was used by the Sakha people to ease the symptoms of several illnesses, including leprosy. I'm shown a tall grass-like specimen dried between sheets of newspaper. The book says that it grew abundantly along the banks of the Vilyuy, but no-one living along the river on our route recognised either its name or description.

In the hope of getting a conclusive answer, we consult Vladimir Kandakov, the chief shaman and head of the Association of Traditional Healers of the Republic of Sakha. He greets us outside his home wearing an impressive hat of lynx fur. He summarily dismisses our findings. 'The "herb that is eaten by wolves" is usually used for bruising, not for leprosy,' he says firmly. 'The *Rumex* family is used for digestion, not for leprosy.'

However, Kandakov was able to name the mystery herb, claiming that he had found a sample 25 years ago. 'It is a very rare herb and I only found three stems,' he says. 'Sakha people call it *kutchutka*.' As proof, he produces a dictionary written in 1899 to translate the Sakha language into Russian. The entry under *kutchutka* reads: 'This herb is used by the Yakut [Sakha] for curing leprosy.' 'I put the herb into vodka, left it for a while, then gave it to my patients on a spoon, like medicine,' he says. 'I used it against influenza, but now I have used it all and have not found the herb again.'

According to Kandakov, the same herb was widely used by traditional healers at the time of Marsden's visit, but would have been mixed with other herbs to cure any one particular disease. He isn't surprised that Marsden hadn't named the miracle herb in her book. 'Every traditional healer tries to keep secret the herbs he is using because he doesn't want everyone to know about his methods or any ingredients,' he says. 'Perhaps Marsden was told not to say the name of the herb and that's why she didn't mention it.'

As we leave Kandakov, it's clear that although we now have a name for the mystery herb, we are unlikely to find a specimen or gather any more information about its use. However, Kate Marsden – doubted, vilified and ultimately forgotten during her own lifetime – was apparently telling the truth. Her incredible journey had a tangible impact on this small region of Siberia, and her improbable and unique legacy continues to this day. G

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