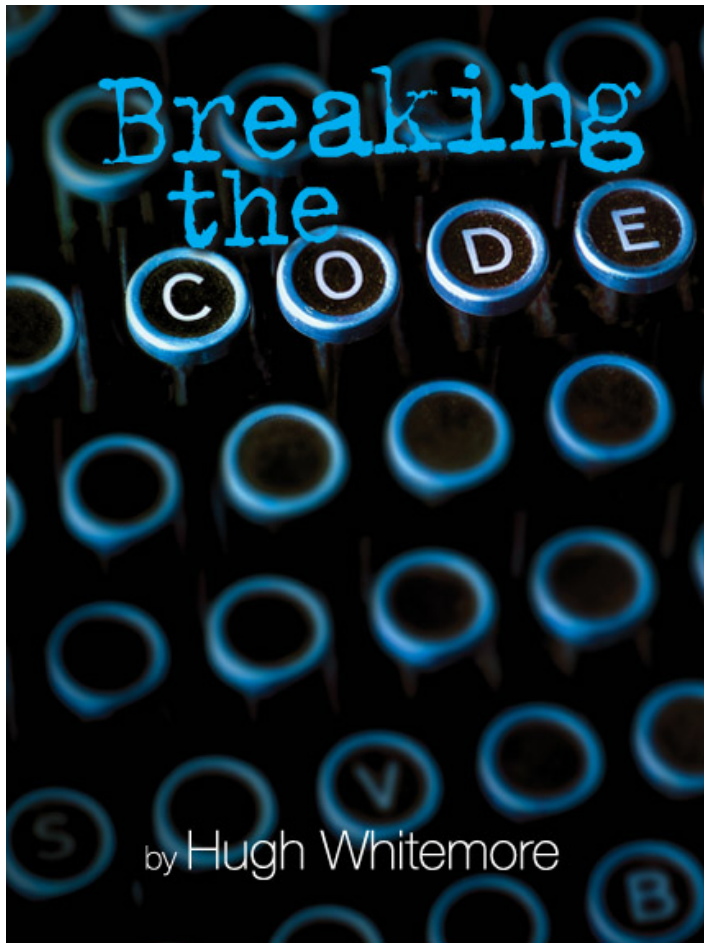


Jewel Theatre Audience Guide

Addendum: Sara Turing Biography



directed by Kirsten Brandt
by Susan Myer Siltan, Dramaturg
© 2019

SARA TURING

Alan's mother, Ethel Sara Stoney Turing, was born in Podanur, Madras, India on November 18, 1881 and died March 6, 1976 in West Sussex, England. Her parents, both Anglo-Irish, were Edward Stoney (1844-1931) and Sarah Crawford (1850-1923). Ethel Sara Stoney and her three siblings (she was the third child) spent their early childhood in Madras as her father worked his way up the Engineering Department of the Madras Railway Company. He became chief engineer, responsible for the construction of the Tangabudra bridge and the invention of Stoney's Patent Silent Punkah-Wheel, all the while amassing a considerable fortune.

Andrew Hodges, in his 1983 book, *Alan Turing: The Enigma*, writes: "Although the Stoney family did not lack for funds, her early life was as grim as that of Julius Turing [he was similarly abandoned by his own parents]. All four Stoney children were sent back to Ireland to be educated. It was a pattern familiar to British India, whose children's loveless lives were part of the price of the Empire".

Edward and Sarah Stoney decided to commit the care of all four of their children to Sarah's brother, William Crawford, a bank manager working in County Clare. Dermot Turing, in his book about his Uncle Alan, *Prof: Decoding Alan Turing* (2015), writes:

The Crawfords were already a full house, with six children, two of whom belonged to William's previous marriage. Late in her life Ethel complained that Aunt Lizzie, William's wife and thus Ethel's foster-mother, showed her no affection – doubtless the fostering arrangement was a trial for all involved. And the Crawfords were not the Stoney's – respectable, middle-class ... but not engineers or fellows of the Royal Society either.

In 1891, when Ethel was ten, the Crawfords moved to Dublin, and after a spell at a local school, both Ethel and her elder sister Evie were sent to board at Cheltenham Ladies' College [in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, England], Evie joining aged 14 in 1892 and Ethel, aged nearly 17, in 1898.

... despite the influences of family and school, Ethel was led not in the Stoney tradition of science and engineering, but in a more conventionally ladylike direction to study art and music. The norm for the Edwardian era was for girls to be educated with a view to social, not academic, achievement: a good marriage was more important than any sort of

technical career. So Ethel spent six months at the Sorbonne, mastering French, and perfecting her skills as a draftsman and watercolourist ... Aged 19, Ethel left the Sorbonne and went back to India with Evie – ‘thrown,’ as John puts it, ‘on the Indian marriage market – that is to say, she went out to India to live with her parents and her sister Evie at Coonoor. My mother and aunt seem to have led a life of singular futility, driving out in the carriage with their mother to drop visiting cards, doing little water-colour sketches of the Indian scene, appearing in amateur theatricals and occasionally attending dinners and balls.

Andrew Hodges continues the narrative:

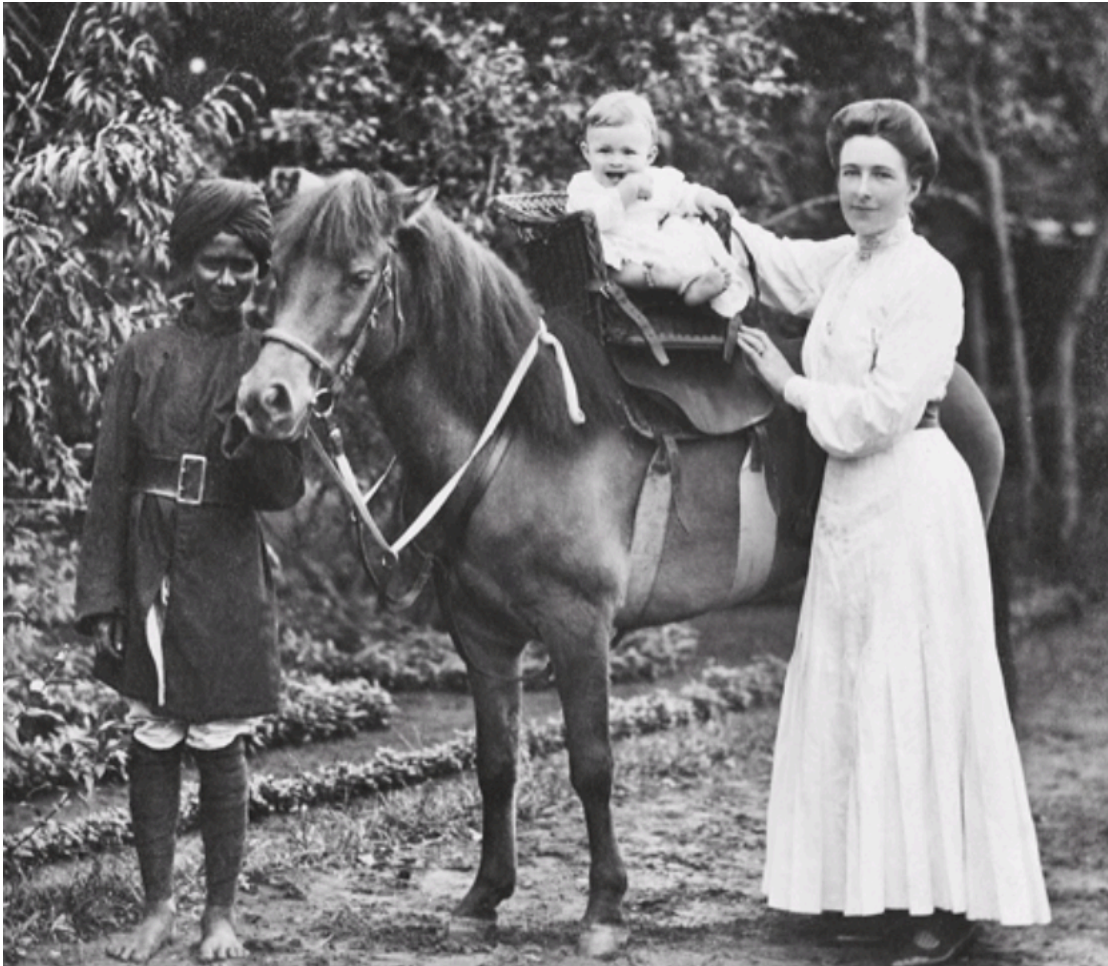
Once her father took the family on holiday to Kashmir, where Ethel fell in love with a missionary doctor, and he with her. But the match was forbidden, for the missionary had no money. Duty triumphed over love, and she remained in the marriage market. And thus the scene was set, in the spring of 1907, for the meeting of Julius Turing and Ethel Stoney on board the homebound ship.



Ethel and Julius Turing around the time of their marriage

They married in Dublin, on October 7 of the same year, returning to India in January 1908, where the first of their two children, John Ferrier Turing, was born on September 1 at the Stoney bungalow at Coonoor. For the next four years, Julius' assignments would take the young family for lengthy treks around

Madras, landing in Chatrapur in March 1911. Ethel learned she was pregnant in the autumn of that year, whereupon Julius arranged a second leave for an extended return to England in 1912. Alan was born there in Paddington on June 23.



Ethel Turing in 1909 in Madras with a very young John perched on a pony, flanked by a bearer

The biography on Alan Turing picks up the story from here. In it, you will find information about Ethel/Sara with regard to Alan, his schooling and his upbringing. What I would like to address now is her relationship with Alan in the later years of his life.

As soon as he could write, Alan and his mother exchanged letters frequently, a practice that continued throughout their lives. They would also visit one another, which Sara writes about in her book, *Alan M. Turing*, which she published in 1956:

We met three or more times yearly: he came to Guildford, except in war-time, almost always for Christmas and at either Easter or Whitsun and again in the summer, as well as for an occasional night or two when he happened to be in London for a meeting. After he got his house at Wilmslow I visited him annually.

Julius died in 1947 following a long illness. After his death, Hodges writes, Ethel “spoke little of him, and kept few reminders of his existence. Her own life was far from declining, and a new independence was reflected in the adoption of her second name Sara in preference to Ethel. She had also taken more interest in Alan’s doings, pleased that he was busy on something useful at last. She had sensed the high hopes of 1945, and sympathised with his complaints on how he had been thwarted”. After many years trying to fit him into a mold, she began to accept and enjoy him to a degree, as he did her. Hodges continues:

Alan had by this time developed a skilful technique for dealing with his family, and his mother in particular. They all thought of him as devoid of common sense, and he in turn would rise to the role of absent-minded professor. ‘Brilliant but unsound’, that was Alan to his mother, who undertook to keep him in touch with all those important matters of appearance and manners, such as buying a new suit every year (which he never wore), Christmas presents, aunts’ birthdays, and getting his hair cut.

In “My Brother Alan”, his afterword to his mother’s book, John Turing has written about the negative entries Alan made about her in the dream books he kept for his psychiatrist when he was undergoing Jungian therapy. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt discussed this in his 1983 review of *Alan Turing: The Enigma*, calling Sara “[Alan’s] devoted mother” and saying that Alan “had of late been having surprisingly (to him) hostile dreams [about her] as the result of a Jungian psychoanalysis”. The operative words here are “surprisingly” and “devoted”. Oftentimes, a patient is unaware of the buried hostilities revealed by dream interpretation and analysis, especially because they aren’t penetrating the surface of their day-to-day life. This seemed the case with Alan—in real life, his relationship with his mother had continued to grow warmer. Hodges addresses this:

The fact that she had taken the news of the trial as she had counted for a great deal. So in her seventieth year, Mrs Turing found herself becoming

one of Alan's few friends. By now she knew that he would never cease to be the 'intellectual crank' she had been afraid of, and he knew that she would always concern herself with matters like fish-knives as though still arranging for dinner parties at Coonoor. A gentle bickering, with 'Really, Alan!' answered by 'Mother, don't be so ridiculous,' characterised the occasional visits. But by this time he had perhaps come to appreciate some of her problems and frustrations, while she, in turn, had come a long way from being the muffled Dublin girl at Cheltenham Ladies College, and had perhaps come to realise that Alan's vivacity offered her a taste of the more artistic life that she had been denied. After looking so long for the higher and better in churches and institutions, ranks and titles, she found something of it in her son. For forty years she had been cross with him for doing everything the wrong way, but she found the capacity for change. Alan, too, became less totally dismissive of her preoccupations.

There was plenty of scope for unburying a forty-year-old resentment of a mother so unlike the sensuous, seductive figure of Freudian theory. Perhaps Alan also confronted the figure of his father, whose strength had somehow cancelled itself out, and who had not shown the marathon-runner's quality of his son. Perhaps too there was a hidden disappointment that his father had never even tried to penetrate his concerns in the way that his mother, however irritatingly, attempted. If Alan's friends heard him disparage his mother, they usually heard nothing of his father. But sorting out such complexities of inner feeling was one thing; coping with his situation in the real world of 1952 was quite another, and in this respect psychoanalysis was bound by the same limitation as his imitation game – it was the world of dreaming, not of doing.

"Exploring Surrey's Past" has pages on its website about famous people who have lived there. Alan Turing's page chronicles the Turing family's various times and residences in Guildford:

Alan's parents separated at the beginning of the war. His father, Julius, relocated to London whilst his mother, Ethel, initially moved to Epsom Road and then 3 South Hill, following her husband's death in 1947. Alan visited his mother there and she recalls in his biography that they spent many hours wandering around Guildford together talking about his work projects. Alan's last visit to Guildford was for Christmas 1953, six months

before his death.

There are other indications that Sara became closer to Alan in the later years of his life. Hodges writes of her "lately increased rapport with her son". In one of the letters to his friend Nick Furbank after his conviction, Alan wrote:

Mother has been staying here, and we seem to be getting on a good deal better. I have been subjecting her to a good deal of sexual enlightenment and she seems to have stood up to it very well. There was a rather absurd dream I had the other night in which I asked mother's opinion about going to bed with some men and she said: 'Oh very well, but don't go walking about the place naked like you did before.'

Alan's will divided his possessions equally among his mother and four friends/colleagues from the University of Cambridge, much to the mortification of his brother John, who found it grossly disrespectful. Dermot Turing had the opposite view: "... this very fact was a much warmer gesture to her than a more conventional allocation which treated her not as an individual friend but as a person to whom he owed a family duty".

In the speculation over Alan's death, the fact that he left no suicide note is often brought up. Many people point out that it was a conscious and caring move on his part to protect his mother from scandal and self-blame. Martin Davis wrote a forward to the centenary republication of Sara's biography of Alan, and echoes the contentions that Alan, by leaving cyanide on a partially eaten apple by his bedside, "had staged his suicide in such a way that it would be clear to friends what he had done, while to his mother it would appear as a vindication of all her warnings about his slovenly habits".

Another affirmation that Alan's relationship with his mother had grown towards friendship can be found in a letter from Sir Geoffrey Jefferson to Sara, written in October 1954, where he mentions, "You yourself were Alan's great friend or so I gathered from him".

Nevertheless, there are conflicting reports, with Sara being criticized for leaving Alan to be brought up in foster homes, her disapproval and incessant harangues, and her denial of his homosexuality and suicide. Dermot Turing addresses this in his book:

It has been a challenge for Alan Turing's biographers to describe his relationship with the family, and I have not found it easy either. Family relations are complicated. What is clear enough is that Alan's interests were quite different from those of his family. Alan's friends were not liked by the Turings, and the best thing back at home was Alan's ability to engage immediately with the children. Alan turned up dutifully for Christmases but not for other family occasions (for example, John turned out with Julius and Sara for Aunt Jean's funeral in December 1945, but Alan did not). [Note: He made it very clear to his mother that he would come if it pleased her—she had only to ask.] Late in life, Sara found an outlet for her energies in putting together a well-researched and well-written biography of her lost son. It is clearly a hagiography, and John cautions us not to take it at face value when it comes to relationships. By his account Mother found Alan exasperating, and he spent much of his adult life trying to swim against her stream of moral maxims ... Even to the obstinately non-technical Turings – those who did not know the existence of the Entscheidungsproblem and had never heard of phyllotaxis – it was apparent that Alan had something special which the rest of us do not. Sara's biography makes that light shine very brightly.

There is no question of Sara's devotion to Alan, as misdirected as it sometimes could be. She meant well in leaving him to be raised in England while she was in India and worked very hard to find a suitable home for him and John. By all accounts, the decision to leave the boys in England was quite difficult. In his afterword to Sara's book, John explains:

Probably it was the right decision for me, for I had given my parents a bad fright with my dysentery in India and by the time my father was due for long leave again I should be seven and a half. But it was a harsh decision for my mother to have to leave both her children in England, one of them still an infant in arms. This was the beginning of the long sequence of separations from our parents, so painful to all of us and most of all to my mother.

John nearly died in India, and Alan had rickets as a baby. Besides the health concerns, there was the matter of providing an education that would ensure a lucrative and beneficial career. Maud Diver, in her 1909 book, *The Englishwoman in India*, advises expatriate families that sending the children home to Britain was "an inevitability, part of the sacrifice implicit in the Service".

The prevailing thought, according to Elizabeth Buettner in her contemporary study, *Empire Families* (2004), was that keeping children in India was likely to leave them “puny, pallid, skinny and fretful,” whereas British food and British “meteorology” would convert them into fat and happy English children.

As I reported in Alan’s biography, in the autumn of 1919, Alan’s parents sailed for India, where they stayed until he was nine, returned for summers and holidays. Late in 1920, his caretaker reported that he was becoming more and more withdrawn. His attention span was seriously reduced as was his interest in reading. When Julius and Sara returned to England for their summer holiday in 1921, Sara found Alan “very much changed,” writing in her book, “From having always been extremely vivacious – even mercurial – making friends with everyone, he had become unsociable and dreamy. He had greatly missed my husband and myself and his brother John, who was away at a preparatory school”. Their holiday over, she endeavored to teach him herself for the equivalent of a school term, believing that her attention and companionship would “get him back to his former self”.

Sara also took great pains to find a suitable upper-level school placement for Alan when he finished Hazlehurst, the equivalent of an American elementary school. She writes about it in her book:

Though he had been loved and understood in the narrower homely circle of his preparatory school, it was because I foresaw the possible difficulties for the staff and himself at a public school that I was at such pains to find the right one for him, lest if he failed in adaptation to public school life he might become a mere intellectual crank [a phrase used by Sara in Act I, Scene 2 of the play]. It will be seen later how Sherborne School justified Mr. Nowell Smith’s hopes and mine [Nowell Charles Smith (1871-1961), Headmaster of Sherborne School from 1909-1927. See biography for John Smith].

In her later years, Sara devoted herself to sustaining Alan’s legacy. Her biography of Alan was initially meant only for distribution to friends and family. She had it published, as she wrote in the preface to the first edition, with the intent “to record details from which a selection may be made by a future biographer”. Published in 1959, it could not cover his war work, still kept in absolute secrecy. Scarcely three hundred copies were sold.

Barry Cooper (1943-2015), a Professor of Pure Mathematics at Leeds, a major

figure in mathematical logic, and a huge fan of Alan's, was Chair of the Turing Centenary Advisory Committee. He lectured and wrote about Alan until his untimely death in 2015. Cooper began efforts in 2010 to get Sara's book republished. He approached Cambridge University Press and convinced them that making it available in time for the 2012 Centennial would guarantee sales, and it did. The republished version is now titled *Alan M. Turing – Centenary Edition* and is in three distinct and complementary parts: a new introduction by distinguished mathematician Martin Davis, a previously unpublished memoir by Alan's brother John, and Sara's original text. Dr. Cooper praises the book in the *Guardian* ("De-coding the Turing family," Apr 27, 2012):

Written from a mother's viewpoint, Sara provides a unique insight into the early years of Turing, with candid descriptions such as, "In dress and habits he tended to be slovenly. His hair was usually too long, with an overhanging lock which he would toss back with a jerk of his head." But the book is full of brilliant treasures, anecdotal accounts of Turing's eccentricity and genius, and insights into his science.

Martin Davis, in his preface to the 2012 centennial edition of the book, also lauds Sara's efforts: "Sara Turing, a woman in her seventies mourning the death of Alan, her younger son, a man that she failed to understand on so many levels, wrote this remarkable biographical essay. She carefully pieced together his school reports, copies of his publications, and comments on his achievements by experts."

Even John Turing, Alan's malcontented brother, manages to squeeze out some praise for his mother's efforts in his afterword to the republication of her book: "My mother has written a biography of my brother Alan. It was certainly a tour de force on her part to write it, as she did, in her seventies. It has rightly been praised, by others better qualified to judge than I am, as a revealing study of a son who became, undoubtedly, a mathematical genius".

Andrew Hodges calls the writing of the book and her curating of Alan's papers and effects "an extraordinary development by any standards, in which a seventy-five-year-old Guildford lady, not hitherto notable for literary or social confidence, and knowing almost nothing about science, was left to piece together some of the debris from the wreck of the modern world's dream. Her Victorian values still unshaken, she retained a strong belief in the idea that Alan's work had been and would be for the benefit of humanity". Although he feels " ... there was

perhaps a better book in Sara Turing, one that would have been a genuine memoir, given that she overlooked so much of who Alan was, including the depth of his friendship with Christopher Morcom, his homosexuality, and the possibility that he committed suicide,” he also praises her for overcoming so many obstacles to bring her version of Alan to the world:

Alan had once compared the work of writing programs to imitate intelligent behaviour as like being set to write an account of ‘family life on Mars’. Mrs Turing had set herself a task of nearly equal difficulty; rather as a computer might be programmed to write sentences of grammatical form, she was able to make a jigsaw of the titles of his papers, bits cribbed from the extant obituaries, comments solicited from other people, and newspaper cuttings.

Yet she had little conception of what it meant. Her position of weakness was accentuated by an extraordinarily obsequious attitude to anyone of rank or office, which meant that by implication she put her son at the level of a promising sixth-former. Indeed her whole book read much like a school report. The flow of tributes bore witness to the fact that she was still having to convince herself that he had turned out satisfactorily after all, and indeed to her astonishment that there was a world in which he had actually been admired. Undercutting him again and again, *Computable Numbers* was good because Scholz had been impressed by it, his interest in the brain was significant because Wiener and Jefferson approved ... Alan might have seen this assessment as a fate worse than death, although it was partly the outcome of his own failure to promote himself.

Yet there was one point his mother grasped that better-informed people could be too sophisticated to see, namely that in 1945 he had set out to build a computer. She stuck to this at a time when everything surrounding the subject was still suffused in embarrassment. And more generally, she displayed an amazing tenacity and nerve in tackling the male institutions from which she was excluded, and in refusing to be daunted by the polite evasiveness that she met ... Tiptoeing among the minefields – and perhaps anyone but her would have found it impossible to continue – she did, ultimately, stand up for him as few others would.

The aforementioned Barry Cooper authored a series about Alan for the *Guardian* in 2012, which was made into the award-winning book, *Alan Turing: His Work*

and Impact (2013), edited by Cooper and Jan van Leeuwen. In "De-coding the Turing Family," the introductory article to his *Guardian* series, dated April 17, 2012, Cooper writes: "There is no mention of the country-saving Enigma decoding in his mother Sara's 1959 biography of Alan; even she was unaware of what her son had done". Whether this is true, we will never know, as Dermot explains in his 2016 book:

Until very recently the activities of the GC&CS at Bletchley Park were a completely closed book. All participants were sworn to lifetime secrecy ... only one formal grainy photo of Alan Turing was shown in *The Secret War* [the BBC series about the WWII codebreakers, which was first broadcast in 1977] and there was no real description of what he'd done ... After the series, life went back into the sharper focus of normal service, where few had heard of Alan Turing and absolutely nobody could spell the name correctly. And no one in the family was much the wiser about Bletchley Park or Alan Turing's role there.

Sara Turing was 94 and living in a nursing home when she received this letter:

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE
COMPUTING LABORATORY

27th November 1975

Dear Mrs. Turing,

I thought you would like to know that the Government have recently made an official release of information which contains an explicit recognition of the importance of your son's work to the development of the modern computer. They have admitted that there was a special purpose electronic computer developed for the Department of Communications at the Foreign Office in 1943. Their information release credited your son's work with having had a considerable influence on the design of this machine. Further, a book has recently been published in the United States entitled 'Bodyguard of Lies' which describes the work of the Allies during the war. This book credits your son as being the main person involved in the breaking of one of the most important German codes, the Enigma Code and thus implies that his work was of vital importance to the outcome of World War II. This latter information in the

book 'Bodyguard of Lies' is not, of course, official information but nevertheless it will, I believe, enable many people to obtain a yet fuller understanding of your son's genius. I am very pleased that this is now happening at last.

Yours sincerely,
Brian Randell

Sara died the following March; Dermot writes, "I am unsure whether she ever had a proper opportunity to understand the true significance of her son's achievements. A facsimile of Professor Randell's letter is on display in the museum at Bletchley Park, next to a first-edition copy of Sara's 1959 biography of Alan. The first English book on Bletchley Park, *The Ultra Secret* by F.W. Winterbotham, was published in 1974. It did not mention Alan Turing. The first significant description of his contribution was made by Gordon Welchman in *The Hut Six Story*, published in 1982 – a book which (in an unhappy parallel with Alan's own experience) led to Welchman losing his own security clearance and receiving a virulent letter of rebuke from the British government".



Sara Turing at 94

RESOURCES

Please see separate resources document provided as an addendum to this Guide.