

Paul Carton Sykes, 1903-1983

Philanthropists and practical humanitarians who keep in the background very seldom receive the recognition they deserve. One such man was Paul Carton Sykes who spent nearly fifty years in Southern Africa and who is remembered with affection by many, especially in the Indian community in Natal.

Paul Sykes was born at Stratford-on-Avon in 1903 and died in Durban in 1983. A conventional upper-middle-class Englishman in many ways, he was unconventional in his aims, out of step with his generation and had ambitions which his family and peers found difficult to understand. The third son of a British army officer who was stationed at such well known military establishments as Aldershot and Sandhurst, Paul Sykes described how, during the First World War, he used to pray every night that the war would not end before he was old enough to fight in it. Yet he grew up with a hatred of violence and became a lifelong pacifist. In a family which was probably no more than conventionally religious, he became a deeply committed Christian filled with a desire to serve his fellow men in any way or in any place to which he was called. And, although brought up in the stratified society of early 20th century England, he refused to acknowledge differences of class and was completely colour blind.

Sykes and his two brothers were educated at Christ's Hospital, Horsham and took an active part in sport. He learnt and excelled at the traditional skills of riding and shooting and was taught to box by Jimmy Wilde, a former featherweight champion. On leaving school in 1920, he informed his family that he intended to study for the Anglican ministry. They refused to take the idea seriously which upset him and he decided to leave England, accepting the offer of a job in Rhodesia. To pay for his passage he worked as assistant teacher at a number of preparatory schools. At the same time, encouraged by the army chaplain at Sandhurst, he began to read for the ministry and to assist at services.

He left Britain for Rhodesia in 1923 and for the next few years he worked as a rancher at Marandellas for five shillings per month with his keep. Later he moved to the enormous Nuanetsi ranch with its 127 000 head of cattle. His riding and shooting skills were put to use on the ranches but by 1926 he realised that his interests lay with men rather than with steers. His close contacts with the missionaries working in the rural districts persuaded him that they were 'doing most important work for the future'.¹ He left the ranch, took a post as clerk at Dombashawa African industrial school and became involved in the educational life of the school, organising games and competitions on British public school lines. Just as he was beginning to

believe that he had found his niche, he experienced a number of severe haemoptyses and was admitted to hospital with tuberculosis. The long stay in hospital, at a time when rest and diet were the only treatments, gave him the opportunity to consider his future plans. He realised that if he was to continue in the teaching world he would have to improve his qualifications. As soon as he was discharged from hospital he registered at the University of the Witwatersrand to read Bantu languages and social anthropology. He earned his keep as paid organiser of the Pathfinder organisation, with the rank of District Master, working among African boys throughout the Witwatersrand. Later, as Special Commissioner in the Pathfinder movement, he started groups in Botswana, Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Throughout his period as a student, from 1929 to 1933, he lived in the home of Dr and Mrs Rheinallt Jones at Florida and was present at the birth of the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Joint Council movement.

In 1934, without writing the final examination in anthropology, he returned to England for a holiday. While there he was offered, and decided to accept, a teaching post near Broken Hill at the Lubwa Training College, run by the Church of Scotland where he taught until the end of 1937. It was while he was at Lubwa that he 'adopted' three young African men, assisting them with their fees and taking an interest in their progress. In the case of I. Braim Nkonde this interest extended to paying for his education at Adams College and sharing in his subsequent career which was remarkably successful. Sykes now suffered recurring bouts of malaria and then amoebic dysentery which adversely affected his health and he returned to Southern Rhodesia. He spent some time as assistant to Bishop Paget through whose recommendation he was appointed principal of a reformatory at Figtree. Thereafter he was employed for a short time as assistant secretary to Sir Godfrey Huggins, later Lord Malvern, who was then Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia.

In 1939 Sykes returned to South Africa and acted as locum for the assistant-secretary to the Agent-General for India, Sir Benegal Ram Rau. It was only when he came into close contact with the Indian community that he realised the full extent of racial prejudice in South Africa at that time. The Agent-General, despite his rank and position, had to endure insults and slights on numerous occasions, especially in Natal. He was turned away from elevators in city buildings and had to accept that 'No bloody Coolies in 'ere'² was the way of life. Sykes was introduced to the special problems of the Indian community at this time, and when the Agent-General's permanent assistant returned, he accepted the post of research assistant in the University of Natal's Department of Economics, under Professor Raymond Burrows. In his work among the Indian community Sykes had at last found a worthwhile cause to espouse and a cause very much in line with his Christian view of justice and the equality of all men.

The project on which Burrows was engaged was a survey of the economic and social conditions of the Indian community in the Durban area. Sykes was expected to visit Indian families in their homes and to assist them to complete questionnaires. Immediately he came face to face with the poverty and slum conditions in which many Indians were forced to live. His own experience had made him aware of the dangers of tuberculosis and he found

it rife in the Indian community. In 1942 there were 1 300 known cases and only 81 hospital beds available for them. It was this situation and the inability to get anything done about it that eventually led to the formation of the Friends of the Sick Association, or Fosa, by a group of concerned men.

The nature of tuberculosis was not well understood in the 1940s and the Indian community had a superstitious fear of it. Almost as much they feared the prying eyes of officialdom if they reported cases within their families. Health inspectors might condemn the shack in which the patient lived and there was such an acute shortage of houses in the Indian areas that there was no hope of finding any other accommodation. Inspections by building and sanitary officials would mean expensive repairs and, in a rented house, the landlord would probably give them notice as trouble-makers.

Sykes found the worst living conditions in the Corporation's Magazine Barracks which consisted of old mule stables partitioned off and with no lighting, no privacy and no proper sanitation.

Kitchens consisted of a row of temporary wood and iron structures, open to the weather, while ablution blocks were communal; 'hence it was no one's business to keep them clean'. When efforts made through the usual channels to have something done about the barracks failed, Sykes persuaded the mayoress, Mrs Claire Ellis-Brown, to accompany him one night on a tour of inspection. He described her reaction: 'She was appalled. I shone the torch on the ground (in the latrines) and she screamed in horror. As far as one could see there was an obscene, creeping carpet of cockroaches'.³ No doubt the cleaning-up operation began soon afterwards.

To explain why the living conditions of the Indian community were so poor in the 1940s and 1950s one must look at the effects of the depression of the 1930s and steady urbanization after the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of people of all races had moved to the towns in search of work. The unexpected influx caught local authorities with insufficient low cost housing and no instant means of remedying the situation. White attitudes prevented the settling of Indian families in many parts of the city and resulted in overcrowding in those places where Indians were settled. Large families, low wages and high unemployment added to the problems of overcrowding and made an ideal breeding ground for disease, particularly tuberculosis. Despite the completion of enormous housing schemes at Umhlatuzana and Chatsworth in the following decades the shortage of Indian houses continued and still exists today. Sykes was an admirer of the Indian people noting that 'there runs throughout this outward evidence of poverty and sordidness, a silver thread of striving for the higher things, of a determination through hard work and application to improve standards . . . if not for the older ones but for the young so that they may have a fuller inheritance than was ever realisable for themselves'.⁴

During the years that he worked with Burrows, Sykes became a close friend of the Rev. Harold Satchell, the parish priest of St Aidan's Anglican Mission in Durban who, like Sykes, was an admirer of the philosophical ideas of Ruskin, Tolstoy and Gandhi. Together they read and discussed the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Arthashastra, the Gita, the Mahabharat and many Hindu philosophical works.⁵ Both men had come under the influence of V.S.S. Sastri and through him became interested in the Servants of India Society, a voluntary organisation dedicated to the service of India and its

people. Satchell and Sykes decided to form a similar society to be called the Society of Servants of South Africa although the name sometimes resulted in its being mistaken by some for an employment bureau! The five founder members, two Indians, two whites and an African, who undertook to remain anonymous, met weekly to discuss the problems and needs of the society in which they found themselves. Having identified these they tried to stimulate existing organisations to meet these needs. They issued a journal, *The Servitor*, in which social issues of all kinds were aired, one of the first being the neglect of physical education and open air activities in Indian schools. They were able to persuade the Indian Teachers' Society to take an interest in the matter by arranging displays and encouraging competition. Eventually physical education became part of the curriculum of every school. Next they turned their attention to the establishment of a library at St Aidan's since the municipal library was, at the time, open only to whites.

The high incidence of tuberculosis and the shortage of facilities was the next problem the group turned their attention to and since there was no existing organisation to take up the challenge, the Friends of the Sick Association, or Fosa, was founded in 1941. The first meeting was held at St Aidan's and a care committee was formed. Fund-raising and the dissemination of information about TB were the priorities. Members of the organisation were asked for a small donation and active participation. Most of the original members were young Indian men who were prepared to give practical help in their own community, but Fosa was from the beginning open to all races. Fosa was to work through care committees, one in each area, the second to be formed being the Sydenham committee with Mr Pat Poovalingam as secretary. Others followed in places as far afield as Stanger and Dannhauser. Care committees were responsible for locating TB patients, using the weekly lists of cases provided by the State Health Department, and for looking after their welfare and that of their families while they were receiving medical attention. Disability grants were applied for on behalf of the patients and financial assistance was provided until the grants were received. Despite the enthusiastic response of the members of the committees and the increasing interest within the communities, it was soon apparent that unless patients could be removed from their environment the disease would continue to spread. It was for this reason that Sykes decided to act on the recommendations of the Tuberculosis Commission of 1912 and to open a TB settlement. He was not at all worried about how the settlement would be financed since he was convinced that the money would be forthcoming for the purpose and in any case he attached very little importance to material comforts.

The treatment of tuberculosis had hardly changed since the 19th century. There was a choice between treating the sufferer in his own home with rest, plenty of fresh air and a nourishing diet, or of admitting him to a sanatorium where the same procedure was followed but under medical supervision. The patients living in cold climates could also be removed and sent to Switzerland or to the highveld of South Africa but this certainly did not apply to the Natal sufferers. For Sykes and his advisers, aware of the crowded and unsatisfactory conditions under which most of the Indians lived, the sanatorium or settlement was the only solution. Sanatoria for paying patients existed in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith and

Estcourt and were run by the Augustinian Sisters but most of the beds were for white patients and even if Sykes' patients had been able to pay this was not at all what he had in mind. He wanted to treat the TB patient *within his family group* and not remove him from his nuclear family. He envisaged from the start that the family would be involved in the treatment. They were to be housed in cottages on the settlement and would be trained in the care of the patient and of themselves to prevent the spread of the disease. He also wanted to remove the financial worries from the sufferer so that his recovery could be unimpeded and once he was on the way to recovery he could live in the cottage with them.

To find suitable land within reach of Durban and on public transport routes was far from easy. Eventually after considering offers of land at Shallcross, Jacobs, Camperdown and Phoenix he found a suitable site at Newlands East. The property, consisting of 25 acres, was owned by the Paruk and Lockhat families and in 1944 they generously agreed to lease the land on a quitrent basis for one shilling per year for five years. Eventually the land was transferred to Fosa.

In December 1942, before the property transactions had been completed, Sykes, who had resigned from his research post to concentrate on Fosa, moved out to the site with three young African workmen. They lived in tents with no facilities of any kind and put up the first buildings. The workmen were paid £3.10 per month; Sykes and the secretary, Poovalingam, £5. Fund-raising continued and whenever a few large donations were received building materials were bought for the next section of the settlement which slowly took shape. Once the first buildings were ready Sykes appealed for voluntary workers and among the first volunteers was a young Dutch nursing sister, who had been working in District Six. Miss Pieterella van Vlaanderen arrived in Durban in January 1943 and, to Sykes' delight, proved to have received specialist training in TB sanatorium work in her native Holland. Eventually she was to become Mrs Sykes and to carry a full share in the development of the project which, when fully functional, included a children's hospital, cottages for the families of TB patients, a school for their children, vegetable gardens, a poultry section and a weaving school to help in the rehabilitation of convalescent patients.

With Fosa settlement on its feet Paul Sykes offered his services to assist with similar schemes. He was active in the establishment of the South African National Tuberculosis Association (Santa) in 1947 and in 1952 travelled widely in a nation-wide fund-raising appeal and also assisted with the establishment of branches. One of his colleagues at this time writes: 'Paul was the enthusiastic sort of person you needed when you wanted to get something started — his enthusiasm was infectious and support flowed in'.⁶ In June 1950 he volunteered to assist with the establishment of a Fosa settlement on the Cape Flats. The Natal enterprise was by now run largely by members of the Indian community, and the year he spent in Cape Town enabled him to lay the groundwork, explaining and demonstrating the principles on which the Care committees worked.

During this period he had been thinking seriously about entering the Anglican church — his old ambition perhaps never completely abandoned. In 1954 he approached Bishop Inman and arranged to be accepted for a shortened form of training for the ministry and only when this was settled

did he break the news to his wife. Nell Sykes, who had devoted all her energies to the Fosa work and who had been brought up and confirmed in a Dutch nonconformist church, was astonished to learn that Paul intended to abandon the Fosa work and make a complete change of direction. Both were members of the Liberal Party and Nell knew that Paul was deeply concerned about the political situation in South Africa. His reasons for joining the ministry were that he admired the strong stand taken by the Anglican Church in speaking out against what they believed to be unjust. He wanted to associate himself with this stand and felt he could best do this as a priest. In his capacity as chairman of Fosa he felt he could not speak freely while accepting financial grants for the TB work; as a priest he would be able to. The change was a difficult one especially for Mrs Sykes who had devoted 25 years to nursing the sick, of which eleven had been spent at the Fosa settlement. At this time there were over 200 patients and she had been involved in every aspect of the work, confident that her contribution was both useful and appreciated. Now she feared that she would not be able to assume the role of helpmeet and co-worker in an Anglican parish, especially as she did not feel at home with the Anglican liturgy and form of service.⁷ In the middle of 1954 the Sykes family — they now had two children — left the Fosa settlement for a new life in Pietermaritzburg where Paul was ordained to the priesthood in 1955.



Rev. Paul Sykes with his family, Margate c. 1956.

(Photograph: Author's collection)

1956 was a year of readjustment while both learned what was expected of them. Paul was attached to St Peter's but continued his Santa work while Nell became interested in the National Council of Women, as adviser on Indian affairs, and learnt to be a vicar's wife. She also did private nursing to assist with the family finances. The following year Sykes was transferred to Margate as parish priest and his real ministry began. His opposition to apartheid and to racial prejudice was stronger than ever and his liberal views were shared by many of the Anglican clergy. Ignoring the fact that the Anglicans in Margate were mostly white and the majority conservative in religion and politics, Sykes immediately had a notice erected stating: *This is God's House. It is open to all people for all services and at all times.* Among the first reactions was the resignation of the four Women's Guilds whose members rejected the idea of racially mixed services. Sykes recalls that to persuade his parishioners to change their attitude was a long and hard struggle but when he left there in 1965 the prejudice had largely disappeared, with all races taking communion together and sometimes from a black priest.⁸ Both Sykes and his wife looked back on the period in Margate as active and fulfilling, with increasing congregations and the opportunity to make new friends and to meet old ones, many of whom were later banned or placed under house arrest.

In addition to the parish work among all population groups in Margate, Sykes continued his work for the control of tuberculosis in the area as far as Port Shepstone. A Santa branch was formed and mobile X-ray clinics revealed 100 cases to be followed up out of the 1 000 examined. Fund-raising, food parcels for the needy and the establishment of a clinic in the location followed in an attempt to help both the sick and their dependents. By 1963 there were three TB clinics as well as the Hibberdene settlement to be visited. In addition Paul was heavily involved in fund-raising as part of Santa's R6 million appeal. Both Paul and Nell seemed to find fulfilment in never-ending work and service.

In 1960 Sykes decided to accept the exchange vicarship at Pembridge, Herefordshire. He had become increasingly unhappy about the political situation in South Africa, particularly after Sharpeville. In June 1960 he wrote despondently:

'Affairs in this country are grim and the pattern has been set, a pattern planned by those in power. Many of our friends are inside; all honour to them. I see little possibility of any change from within and change when it does come, will come from outside, but not for a considerable time. The tension is a bit wearying and we shall be glad of the relief a year in England will give us before entering the fray once more.'⁹

His memories of the green and peaceful English countryside of his youth made retirement seem particularly attractive after his pleasant year at Pembridge. He returned in 1961 and, although the parish and TB work were deeply satisfying, the political situation was as depressing as ever to him. In 1965 he decided to return to England and wrote:

'It is with great reluctance that we uproot ourselves from South Africa, where I have been for 42 years now . . . Materially there can hardly be another country so really blessed with this world's wealth and with such a wonderful climate. But man does not live by bread and butter alone, and as I could not lay my bones down in peace here, the move

has to be made while I still have a reasonable number of years of vigour in me . . . the position does not improve in this country.'¹⁰

It was in July 1965 that Paul took his departure from the Margate parish which he had grown to love. The family returned to England where he was given charge of four churches in a rural parish in Herefordshire. The differences between Margate and his new parish were enormous. He wrote: 'Parish life is at a very low ebb here, particularly as regards religion. Frankly I wonder whether I am the person to galvanise it. It requires superhuman effort to rouse any interest . . . they are dear lovable people on the whole but when the total Sunday attendance at three different churches is 6,1 and 7, who wouldn't be a bit depressed'.

The lack of enthusiasm, the poor attendance and the lack of generosity in the English villages compared poorly with his active Margate parishioners. In 1970 Sykes and his wife spent six months in Estcourt on an exchange visit and renewed their contacts with friends all over Natal and the following year he retired from the active ministry.

For a few years Paul and Nell worked as warden and matron at Dowty House, a home for the aged. Nell was heavily involved in nursing and Paul's duties allowed him time for visiting and the spiritual care of the bedridden in the district, a ministry that he was particularly good at. During this period there were regular visits to South Africa, their fares being paid by numerous friends and benefactors. They were able to buy a cottage in Cheltenham which they named 'Pondokkie' and Nell organised a luncheon club for the housebound. Paul's health began to decline after 1976 but he never gave in and always hoped that he would feel better after his next period in the sun. It was during one of the visits to South Africa, in 1983, that he suffered a stroke and was admitted to the King George V hospital where he died peacefully on 7 May. The funeral was held in St Aidan's Church, with which he had had a long association, and was attended by hundreds of friends of all races. His ashes were interred beside the original cottage at the Fosa settlement.

Paul Sykes left a loving family and a wide circle of friends in all communities. He has been described as friendly, outgoing, gregarious, overflowing with love for humanity, a sincere Christian and a thoroughly good man. Perhaps his ideals are best summed up in his own words: 'Let us never be afraid to climb a little higher, to see a little further, to give of ourselves — our energy and our youth — so that we may put into practice the almost limitless project of care for our fellows'.¹¹

NOTES

- ¹ P.C. Sykes, *An old patchwork quilt*, p. 3.
- ² *Ibid.* p. 3.
- ³ P.C. Sykes, *The story of FOSA*, instalment VI, p. 17.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, instal. VII, p. 19.
- ⁵ Information contained in a letter to the author from Pat Poovalingam, Cape Town, 9 April 1986.
- ⁶ Rev. Sydney Knight in a letter to the author, George, 12 February 1986.
- ⁷ Letter from Nell Sykes to the author, 20 March 1986.
- ⁸ Sykes, *An old patchwork quilt*, p. 4.
- ⁹ Sykes, *Circular letter*, Margate, June 1960.
- ¹⁰ Sykes, *Circular letter*, 'early 1965'.
- ¹¹ Message from Rev. Paul Sykes to Greenwood Park Care Committee, 1958.