

Obituaries

Anthony and Maggie Barker (Died 1993)

*Giving and Receiving**

Anthony and Maggie Barker met death as they had lived their devoted lives — in tandem. They were tragically killed by a truck while cycling to the Lake District to celebrate their Golden Wedding. This remarkable couple in their seventies leave behind them a legend of love.

Their death has awakened memories for many in South Africa who knew them as medical missionaries in the tiny village of Nqutu in Zululand. From their arrival in 1947 at the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital — a sorry institution with eight iron beds, several patients, wooden boxes on a cooker to serve as incubators for premature babies and a carpenter's saw as a surgeon's knife — the brilliant surgeon and the compassionate pediatrician left their mark on our land.

Living simply in a thatched rondavel beside a small dilapidated chapel, inspired by the example of Livingstone and Schweitzer and Zululand's own Charles F. Marquart Johnson, they laboured to win the trust of the Zulu people. They laboured too nationally and internationally to raise funds to expand and improve facilities. In this they succeeded mightily. When they left after a stay of almost thirty years they had transformed 'Charlie J' into a spruce, well-equipped hospital with hundreds of beds. To their staff and patients and to the thousands of out-patients whom they treated in clinics they founded and serviced in remote corners of this wild territory, they were affectionately known as 'Umhlekehlatini' ('He who laughs in the forest' — a reference to Anthony's bushy beard) and 'Ngoma', ('She who does not wear shoes').

I first saw Anthony Barker on 22 January 1954, the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Isandlwana. He stood on the plinth of the memorial to the 24th, the South Wales Borderers, set against the backdrop of the eerie Sphinx-like mountain. Beside him a grizzled *kehla* in full battle array brandished shield and assegai and recounted his experiences as a child shield-bearer on that terrible day, whilst the stocky little doctor in his warm Brummagem accent interpreted.

It was a grand theatrical moment and Anthony revelled in it as he did in all occasions. Later that day he performed a *tour de force* in preaching a sermon in Zulu at St Vincent's. He had been only seven years in South Africa and yet was a part of it.

A World War II veteran (as merchant navy ship's surgeon) Anthony possessed something of the rollicking bonhomie of 'Doctor in the House' relishing the fleshpots of the hospitable little village. On Christmas Day after a heavy early morning stint at the clinic he'd float in the Wilmot's pool, a

champagne glass balanced on his stomach and munching contentedly on his ham and turkey. Indeed a feature of his routine visits to outlying clinics was the hearty breakfasts with old Mrs Wilmot, lunches at Mangeni with Blanche van Tonder and dinners with Mrs Mitchell. They welcomed him — he brought love and laughter and good talk.

The Barker's views and behaviour did not always meet with approval. Some white people regarded them, but especially Margaret, as eccentric, sitting on mats instead of chairs, eating traditional Zulu foods and going barefoot in order to establish closer rapport with their patients. Yet their fierce disapproval of apartheid policies was couched in such gentle, temperate terms that they caused little offence. To the government they were a thorn in the flesh and in the end they themselves became victims of high apartheid, for their support of fugitive so-called subversives like Bram Fischer.

Highly disciplined and motivated and endowed with remarkable stamina, the Barkers knew the fullness of life. Driven bounding and slithering over rutted tracks Anthony would read the latest Medical Journal; even walking with Margaret through the forest at Qudeni he would read aloud to her. Photography, needlework and painting were tucked into the frantic programme of surgery and midwifery they faced daily. Yet young idealists from all over the world could sit at their feet for hours discussing the great truths of Christianity or drinking in Anthony's wonderful knowledge of folklore. One remembers gratefully in these violent times quiet happy hours spent padding about the hospital or sitting on the banks of the Buffalo River at Fugitive's Drift. One is grateful for the influence of the wise, compassionate couple upon one's young children. The Barkers left behind them a legacy of love and understanding that will serve the new South Africa well.

They were honoured overseas for their work in Africa, Anthony by the C.B.E. in 1975 and Maggie by the Silver Cross of St George. Anthony's mastery of language could enchant. Michaelhouse school once honoured him by making him guest speaker at Speech Day. He rose, endearing unaffected soul, clad in a quaint suit of lilac tweed, run up by Margaret on the hospital's ancient Singer — a truly homespun contrast to the mohair, custom-made suitings of the Governors. Simply, almost tentatively — he was a nervous public speaker — he began. As the voice rose and the words rolled, the spiritual grace of the man took over. The schoolboys were magnetized, as were the parents. He stood amazed, with a beaming smile, as they saluted him with a standing ovation — for his message had been a challenging and an uncomfortable one for that privileged company.

Such was the Barker's swansong. Inexorably the clamps of apartheid were screwing tighter. Government was to take over control of the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital and no amount of defiance was going to stop it. Moves were made at high level to retain the services of these distinguished medical workers in the Province of Natal or the KwaZulu Government. But Pretoria refused to permit them to stay and minister to the Zulus whom they now loved dearly and who loved them — a relationship too dangerous to contemplate in the era of high apartheid. They were forced to leave in 1975.

Nqutu lost much of its gusto when the Barkers left. They kept in touch through Anglican Church channels, and while working overseas for other good causes, never lost sight of the needs of the Zulu people. Many of us visited them in their leafy eyrie in Wimbledon and felt instantly at home in the warmth and charm of the house decorated with familiar souvenirs of their sojourn in our land — Rorkes Drift rugs and coffee mugs, Vukani baskets, photographs

of smiling black faces. We showed them a video of Rorke's Drift and told them of plans to restore the famous battlefields, build schools, promote the arts and crafts and generally uplift the communities.

Typically, a few months later a cheque for a hundred pounds arrived, with a special plea for the care of St Vincent's at Isandlwana. Anthony and Maggie had pedalled through France and raised the money as they went.

It is good that they rode to meet their Lord, still full of love for each other and for mankind at large. At Christmas we shall miss their striking hand-scripted cards bearing a message that touched the heart — the heart of our personal dilemma and of our nation's agony. It is tragic that at this juncture our land is deprived of the wise and loving counsel of Anthony and Maggie Barker.

SHEILA HENDERSON

* The sub-title of the obituary refers to the title of Anthony Barker's book (with its own sub-title 'An adventure in African medical experience'). It was published by the Faith Press in 1959, and by Fontana Books in 1962, under the title *The Man Next to Me*.