

The Natal Literary Society

Bazaar 1876

as described by Lady Barker

Introduction

Of the various commentaries on nineteenth century Natal, Lady Barker's *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa* (London, Macmillan 1877) must be one of the most lively. This is evident in her letter dated 3 June 1876 in which she described the bazaar held in Pietermaritzburg to raise funds for the Natal Literary Society in its effort to establish a Public Library and Reading Room.

Lady Barker was born Mary Anne Stewart in Jamaica in 1831, the eldest child of the Island Secretary, Walter Stewart. She joined her first husband, Sir George Barker, in India after the Mutiny and camped across the country with the army. When he died in 1861, she returned to England and later sailed to New Zealand with her second husband, Frederick Napier Broome. Her letters from their sheep station, 'Broomielaw', some forty five miles from Christchurch, were published as *Station Life in New Zealand* (London, Macmillan 1870). In 1868 they returned to London where Lady Barker published eight books and served as Lady Superintendent of the new National School of Cookery. In 1875 Frederick Broome was appointed colonial secretary of Natal and Lady Barker followed with their two young sons, Guy and Louis. Her letters 'home' during her year in Natal form the basis of *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*. Weakened by dysentery, she returned to England in November 1876. After a later spell in Mauritius, she accompanied Broome to Western Australia in 1883 when he became governor of that colony. The Broomes left Perth in December 1889 and returned to England. After a short spell as acting governor of Barbados and governor of Trinidad, Broome died in 1896. Lady Barker died in London on 7 March 1911 after a widowhood of considerably reduced circumstances.

Altogether, Lady Barker published 22 books. These included, among other things, travel experiences, children's stories, and cooking and housekeeping guides. Only her last one, *Colonial Memories* (London, Smith, Elder & Co. 1904) was published under the name of Lady Broome. Tradition has it that she used the name Lady Barker until Broome received a knighthood in 1884. Perhaps a fairer explanation would be that it was customary to retain a title on which receipt of a posthumous pension depended.

Lady Barker was a prominent Victorian personality who fulfilled various roles: author, editor, traveller, soldier's wife, farmer's wife and a woman well-versed in the ways

of the colonial service. She had moved in London society and literary circles and did not hesitate to assess her surroundings in the light of how British ‘civilised’ standards were in evidence and to what extent she could further them. She found ‘poor sleepy Maritzburg ... the shabbiest assemblage of dwellings I have ever seen in a colony.’ In November 1875, soon after her arrival in Natal, she joined the committee planning the Natal Literary Society Bazaar for May 1876 and worked with vigour and humour towards transplanting this aspect of British culture into the infant colony.

Any serious historical assessment of Lady Barker would have to take account of present trends in the study of white colonial women, which go far beyond their role as transmitters of the British way of life to ‘heathen lands afar’. In the immediate context of commemorating the founding of The Natal Society, it is of interest, indeed of appreciation if not a little amusement, that one reads Lady Barker’s superior and not altogether politically correct account of early Maritzburg society – with its multicultural character not escaping her observant eye – setting out on its literary and educational pilgrimage.

SYLVIA VIETZEN

Lady Barker’s account

A bazaar in Africa

MARITZBURG, June 3, 1876

Dust and the Bazaar: those are the only topics I have for you. Perhaps I ought to put the Bazaar first, for it is past and over, to the intense thankfulness of everybody, buyers and sellers included; whereas the dust abides with us forever, and increases in volume and density and restlessness more and more.

It is very wrong to pass over our great Bazaar with so little notice. I daresay in England you think that you know something about bazaars, but I assure you you do not: not about such a bazaar as this, at all events. We have been preparing for it, working for it, worrying for it, advertising it, building it – of zinc and calico – decorating it, and generally slaving at it, for a year and more. When I arrived the first words I heard were about the Bazaar. When I tried to get someone to help me with my stall I was laughed at. All the young ladies in the place had been secured months before, as saleswomen. I don’t know what I should have done if a very charming lady had not arrived soon after I did. No sooner had she set foot on shore than I rushed at her and snapped her up before anyone else knew she had come, for I was quite desperate, and felt it was my only chance. However, luck was on my side, and my fair A.D.C. made up in energy and devotion to the cause for half-a-dozen less enthusiastic assistants.

All this time I have never told you what the Bazaar was for, or why we all threw ourselves into it with so much ardour. It was for the Natal Literary Society, which has been in existence for some little time, struggling to form the nucleus of a Public Library and Reading-room, giving lectures, and so forth, to provide some sort of elevating and refining influence for the more thoughtful townspeople. It has been very uphill work, and there is no doubt that the promoters and supporters deserve a good deal of credit. They had met with the usual fate of such pioneers of progress; they had been over-

whelmed with discouraging prophecies of all kinds of disaster, but they can turn the table now on their tormentors. The building did *not* take fire, nor was it robbed: there were no riots; all the boxes arrived in time; everybody was in the sweetest temper; none of the stallholders died for want of fresh air (these were among the most encouraging prognostics); and last, not least, after paying all expenses, 2,000 guineas stand at the Bank to the credit of the Society. I must say I was astonished at the financial result, and very delighted, too, for it is an excellent undertaking, and one in which I feel the warmest interest, but this sum, large as it is for our slender resources, will only barely build a place suitable for a library and reading-room, and go to form the nucleus of a museum. We want gifts of books, and maps, and prints, and nice things of all kinds; and I hope some day it may occur to some one to help us in this way.

Everybody from far and near came to the bazaar and bought liberally. The things provided were selected with a view to the wants of a community which has not a large margin for luxuries, and although they were very pretty, there was a strong element of practical usefulness in everything. It must have been a perfect carnival for the little ones: such blowing of whistles and trumpets, such beating of drums and tossing of gay balls in the air as was to be seen all around. Little girls walked about hugging newly-acquired dolls with an air of bewildered maternal happiness, whilst on every side you heard boys comparing notes as to the prices of cricket bats; for your true colonial boy has always a keen sense of the value of money or the merits of carpenter's tools. There were contributions from London and Paris, from Italy and Vienna, from India and Australia; to say nothing of Kafir weapons and wooden utensils, live stock, vegetables, and flowers. Everybody responded to our entreaties, and helped us most liberally and kindly, and we are all immensely delighted with the financial result. Some of our best customers were funny old Dutchmen from far up-country, who had come down to the races and the agricultural show which were all going on at the same time. They recklessly bought the most astounding things, but wisely made it a condition of purchase that they should not be required to take away the goods. In fact they hit upon the expedient of presenting to one stall what they bought at another; and one worthy, who looked for all the world as if he had sat for his portrait in dear old Geoffrey Crayon's *Sketch-book*, brought a large wax doll, dressed as a bride, and implored us to accept it at our stall, and so rid him of its companionship. An immense glass vase was bestowed on us in a similar fashion later on in the evening, and at last we quite came to hail the sight of those huge beaver hats with their broad brims and peaked crowns, as an omen of good fortune.