

Barbara Tyrrell's Caravan Verse

by Elwyn Jenkins

Introduction

Barbara Tyrrell celebrated her hundredth birthday in 2012. She was born on 15 March 1912 in Durban. Her father worked for the Department of Native Affairs, and they moved to Eshowe. She was immersed in Zulu language and culture from birth. Her great-uncle, Frederick Finney, accompanied Cetshwayo as an interpreter on a state visit to Queen Victoria in 1882. At the age of two, she was present at a performance of Zulu dancers given in honour of Henry Rider Haggard.

She trained at the Natal Technical College Art School and obtained a BA (Fine Art) from the University of Natal, after which she worked as a fashion artist and art teacher. From 1944, when she made her first unaccompanied trip into the field, she dedicated her life to researching and recording the traditional dress and ornament of rural people, which she knew was fast disappearing. Fluent in Zulu, she sketched only what her sitters permitted, drawing on her inherited knowledge of African etiquette in recording her subjects, all of whom she knew by name and paid for their time.

*She enjoyed a lifelong collaboration with the writer T.V. Bulpin, illustrating his publications, and he later published her book *Suspicion is My Name* and republished her classic *Tribal Peoples of Southern Africa*. She married the cinematographer Peter Jurgens in 1952 and they made their home in Richmond. The Bhaca people of that region became the subject of her special*

interest. Barbara and Peter had one son, Peter, who later collaborated with his mother on her book *African Heritage*. Her husband died in 1963 and her son in 1998. She retired to Muizenberg, where, on her 90th birthday, representatives of a clan of the Thembu in period ceremonial dress paid her homage.

The University of Natal awarded her an honorary doctorate in 1965, and President Thabo Mbeki bestowed the Order of Ikhamanga (Silver) on her in 2008. An exhibition in her honour was opened in the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town on her birthday in March 2012. Complementing the strong design aspect of her works in watercolour and pen and ink were items of adornment and costume from the Iziko collections. The official announcement of the exhibition, called *Iqholo le Afrika – Her African Pride* – pinpointed her legacy: “[The exhibition] brings to younger audiences the beauty and power of the work and relationships forged by Barbara Tyrrell. Celebrated by her sitters and their descendants, re-evaluated and rightly acknowledged in a post-democratic [sic] society, Barbara Tyrrell has earned her centenary exhibition at last.”

IN THE EARLY 1940s, “when not even station wagons had been invented”, a daring young woman bought an old vegetable-hawker’s van and embarked on an adventurous life that would bring her high respect, an honorary doctorate from the University of Natal, and the Order of Ikhamanga. Barbara Tyrrell’s work, illustrating and documenting the disappearing tribal dress of African people, is a priceless record. An appreciative article about her on the website of the Killie Campbell Library¹ lists her books – *Tribal Peoples of Southern Africa*, *Suspicion is My Name*, *African Heritage*, and *Barbara Tyrrell: Her African Quest*² – but has one gap: it says *Tribal Peoples* was her first book, whereas in fact it was her second.

Barbara Tyrrell’s first book, a little volume printed on wartime paper, was published in 1945 by the Durban publisher, Knox.³ *A Medley of South African Caravan Verse* contains simple poems about her travels in her van, il-

lustrated with equally simple black and white drawings. The illustrations bear little resemblance to her later portraits of models in traditional dress, and reflect, rather, the cartoons she drew while in high school. The poems give us an intimate picture of her playful, sensitive nature that is not openly displayed in her other books. Barbara Tyrrell chuckled when I reminded her of this quaint relic. “My book of poems? People just laugh at me about them!” And indeed, she has always been modest about them. She opened her collection with an “apology”:

This isn’t poetry
Don’t you see?
It doesn’t even pretend to be,
So please don’t ask too much of me.⁴

Barbara was teaching an art class of the Port Elizabeth Technical College in the city library one day, when she looked out of the window. “I noticed, down in the square, a panel van with windows, used for ferrying nuns around the town: in those days a rare



*A Bhaca sangoma dressed in the manner of a married woman. Her long, beaded hair, the goatskin shoulder straps and switches are indicative of her profession. She sits in the bula or "smelling out" posture.
(Barbara Tyrrell, Tribal Peoples of Southern Africa, p. 161.)*

type of vehicle. In that instant an idea was born. In that second I visualised a home on wheels and freedom to paint and travel." The next day she bought a 1934 Chevrolet from a Greek, who bestowed his benediction: "A good van, God bless her."⁵

"Nixie's" her name
Don't you see?
She has given up commerce
For lands faery –
For koppies and kloofs and barren veld
And mountainous ridges where berg
snows melt.⁶

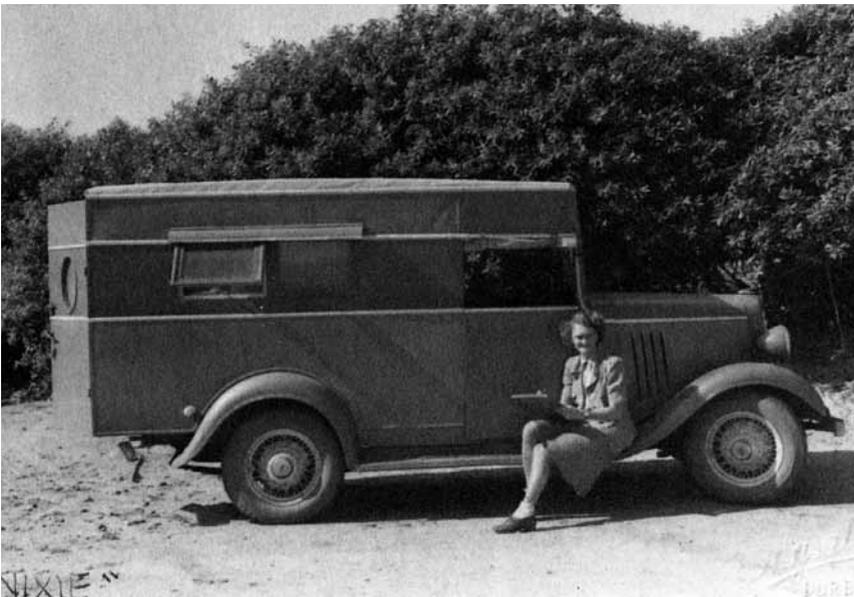
Her kitted-out "caravan" intrigued people wherever she went, whether in cities or in the remote places where she sought out people still leading their traditional way of life. Often she was asked, "What are you selling?"

At a service station back in P.E.,
Two service men discussing
"Nixie" –

Eyed up and down with expert
precision
Then, both heads together, they give
their decision:
"Ambulance!" quoth one, in round-
eyed gloom,
"No!" pronounced the other, conde-
scending, "Bedroom!"⁷

Barbara's poems express her love of travel around the country. In "Nixie's Nostalgia" her little van cajoles her:

Oh I've contracted an aching desire
To release my brake and shake a tyre;
To roll away to those regions high
Where the Drakensberg talks to the
mighty sky!
Oh Driver of Mine, –
I'd like to speak
Of sunrise over Cathedral Peak –
Do you recall that brilliant shine
Of gold on the krantzies, Driver of
Mine?
Surely you long for mists that rise
From dawning valleys to melt the
skies?⁸



Barbara Tyrrell with her van Nixie. (From Barbara Tyrrell: Her African Quest, p vii.)

All illustrations by kind permission of Barbara Tyrrell

Of course she'll give in, as her mother knows:

Just look at that! It gives me pain!
She's poring over that map again –
It means she'll go, as go she must,
She has an attack of the wanderlust!
It really is a heavy load
To own a daughter who loves "the
road"!⁹

Barbara's love of what makes the South African landscape so special speaks in line after line:

A lone white house, spectral in the trees;
Mimosa perfume, floating on the breeze;
A tank with red paint peeling from its side;
An empty yard ...¹⁰

The poet in her relates intimately to the places she passes through and where she camps:

We camped that night near the desolate house
– We nearly left, but on leaving we read
The name on its gate – "Endwell," it said,
Somehow sadly. So back we came;
We could not resist that wistful name.
A moon climbed over the white Dutch gable
Silvered the sheds and deserted stable.
Suffused the night, a spectral scene
As strange as I have ever seen!¹¹

To Barbara, picturesque place names capture the essence of the country. "Read these names" she invites the reader in her poem "Maps", and they roll out:

Malelane and Mafeteng,
Montagu Pass, Teyateyaneng!
Qumbu and Ntonjaneni,
Blanco and Izingolweni!
Pampoenpoort and Paauwpan,
Honeynestkloof and Kuruman!
Tsitsikamma and Kommetjie,
Keiskama Hoek and Coligny!¹²

Coming from KwaZulu-Natal, she has a special love for the Drakensberg. She devotes a poem to the "Berg wind", that typical feature of winter in the Midlands.

Have you ever heard wind
In an old mealie field?
Its rustle and tear
As the mealie stalks yield
Their withering spines! ...
Somehow the song of the wind
– To me –
Hails from the 'Berg
Where it's clear and free.¹³

Lines from "Where my caravan has rested" take an unusual view of her travels:

Thanks to you, oh lovely tree
For shelter you afforded me!
Thank you willow, found so late,
In dreamy dusk at the Golden Gate!
Thank you fir in Basutoland
On "Donkerhoek" near Ladybrand!
Thank you, twirly coastal tree,
At a camping site Amanzimtoti!
Thank you, "thorns" of various races
In Zululand, and other places!¹⁴

She remembers, too, the birds – the coucal, the lourie and the hadeda ibis:

I have heard the fukwe in the cane
First, their beseeching call then the pattering rain
And storm; then that liquid call again
Quietly now, appeased, in the dripping rain.
In the Mtunzini bush I've often heard
The startled chatter of the gwalagwala bird
And watched him creep from branch to branch. Absurd
The way he vanished, without another word!
And floating down to sunset and the evening star
Comes ever anon the cry of "Hah Dee Dah!"
A mocking call, to tease wherever you are
Sailing, trailing, wailing from afar.¹⁵

Her poetry can have power and an eye for detail, similar to that of the English nature poet, John Clare (1793-1864). This is her dramatic description of the burning of a sugar cane field at night:

In the "break", the watchful
Shangaans standing by
Crushing tiny fires as they creep
Across to unlit cane, while the soft
winds sweep
The holocaust on. Each cane a wand
Of leaping menace. And,
Busy on the fringe, small black and
blackened
Boys, beating, and when they
slackened
"Bula, abafana, bula!" came
The voice of the planter. Flame
Lit the Shangaans with the lone
white man,
Like a demon party. Cane knives,
kerries! Can
You see the vivid green of that
adjoining field –
This one still afficker with sultry
flame? Shield
Your eyes! This heat! There a dazed
thing
Flies from the fire on terrified wing –
Flops to the safety of the burn
beyond...¹⁶

Caravan life can be pretty miserable – any caravanner today would recognise this lament:

A caravan life is a halcyon song
And nothing, you say, could ever go
wrong!
But think again!
Rain!
A caravan, I must confide,
Is a tiny place to be cooped inside!¹⁷

Camping on her own, she admits, was not always easy. "In those far-off days when I began the work, there hung a sort of taint over caravanners, a hint of something not quite respectable, a hangover, I suppose, from the old suspicions harboured against gypsies.

Thus in my mobile home I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, especially as there were no camp sites to set the seal of respectability upon gypsies."¹⁸ In "Girl caravanner" she confides:

So much menace in the dark!
So many bogeys to do one harm!
One is, alas, obliged to park
In screaming distance of a farm!¹⁹

In her poem "If – ", prompted by Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same title about "being a man, my son", she regretfully writes:

If I were a man, up there I'd rest
On yon bleak ridge, near the eagle's
nest! ...
And some nights, yes, I'd leave my
van
And trek off alone – if I were a man –
And sub-camp under the eloquent stars
With Venus, Jupiter, Saturn and
Mars!²⁰

In fact, in all her solitary travels, Barbara was never threatened or robbed.

Eventually Nixie was replaced by a larger, purpose-built van. In later years, Barbara had the company of her husband, the cinematographer Adrian ("Pete") Jurgens, with whom she had settled in Richmond. After he died, her companion was her son Peter ("Ottie") – who, she said, as a boy diverted the children while her models posed.

Barbara's close friend was Dr Killie Campbell of Durban, who would provide her with a bath and bed on her return from her travels. The Killie Campbell Library, part of the Campbell Collections of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, purchased 700 of her 1200 original field-sketches in water-colour and pen and ink, while the Oppeheimer family's Brenthurst Library acquired the remainder. Her finished



In her caption to this painting, Tyrrell writes, “Bhaca women dance their way across the hills to a party at a friend’s homestead. They approach in single file as a sign that they come in peace. They wear the gala dress that was common some twenty years ago when beads were plentiful. Today married status is still indicated by lengthened, red-ochred hair, although now sometimes augmented with twists of wool or string. The style of dress is relatively unchanged, but the beadwork on the clothes is missing. Goatskin skirts are still correct and essential wear for married women, and goats are plentiful for feasting and for sacrifice.”

(Barbara Tyrrell and Peter Jurgens, African Heritage, p. 172.)

art works are held in many important collections.²¹

When I telephoned Dr Tyrrell to ask if I could write about her, she cheerfully responded, “Yes, sure!” She ends her *Caravan Verse*:

Over the hills and over the dales
Puffing and panting, the Nixie trails –
She puffs “Tot siens” and pants
“Goodbye!”
“Sala Kahle” – and so do I.²²

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the kind permission of Dr Barbara Tyrrell to reproduce her words and illustrations.

A shorter version of this article appeared in *Country Life*, March 2012.

NOTES

1 Winters, Y. “Barbara Tyrrell and the Campbell collections: a rewarding relationship”, <http://campbell.ukzn.ac.za/?=node/55> (accessed 15 December 2011).

2 Tyrrell, Barbara. *Tribal Peoples of Southern*

Africa (Cape Town, Books of Africa, 1968). Tyrrell, Barbara. *Suspicion is my Name* (Cape Town, T.V. Bulpin, 1971).

Tyrrell, Barbara and Peter Jurgens. *African Heritage* (Johannesburg, Macmillan, 1983).

Tyrrell, Barbara. *Barbara Tyrrell: Her African Quest* (Muizenberg, Lindlife, 1996).

3 Tyrrell, Barbara. *A Medley of South African Caravan Verse: Written and illustrated by Barbara Tyrrell* (Durban, Knox, 1945).

4 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.3.

5 Tyrrell, *African Quest*, p.53.

6 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.10.

7 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.10.

8 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.28.

9 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.12.

10 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.22.

11 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.23.

12 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.13.

13 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.29.

14 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.42.

15 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.34.

16 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.35.

17 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.26.

18 Tyrrell, *Tribal Peoples*, n.p.

19 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.19.

20 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.21.

21 Tyrrell, *African Quest*, p.xix.

22 Tyrrell, *Medley*, p.44.