

Obituaries

Benjamin ('Pitch') Christopher 1919 – 1996

*His life was gentle and the elements
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world,
This was a Man.*

Benjamin Christopher was a man of distinction, a cultivated man with the common touch and a puckish humour. His moral stature made up for what he lacked in physical height. His displeasure could be awesome, yet he was the most endearing of good companions. To those who shared his full life, his varied talents, his remarkable enthusiasms, his stern and unflinching values, his loss is acute; for historians particularly, his loss is irredeemable. There are few like him – none with his wide knowledge and sympathies.

History was in his bones. Born in Ladysmith, from a line of strong, individualistic pioneers both British and German, he spent his youth in a house whose name *Selborne* recorded the family's link with the famous Gilbert White of Selborne in England. His married life he spent in nearby *Budleigh*, an old colonial house built by his grandfather. It had been requisitioned during the Siege by General Sir George White and it was here that White had dined the young Winston Churchill. Both houses overlooked the historic old town. Friends recall magical evenings under the stars, the moon shining over the black Platrand and Mbulwane with the street lights twinkling below as Pitch wove his spell. Young and old hung on his every word as he evoked the drama of the South African War. He was a great raconteur.

Long before it became fashionable, Pitch developed an absorbing interest in Ladysmith's battlefields. As a child he had roamed the hills around the town. He was knowledgeable about, and sympathetic to the Boer side of the story, developing a friendship with Professor Boshoff, their leading chronicler. But he also regularly entertained the representatives of such British regiments as the Manchesters and the Gordons whose forebears had defended the town. He felt the tragedy and cost – to both sides – of those far-off battles as if they had happened yesterday.

Familiar with every nook and cranny of Ladysmith itself, and friend and confidant to Siege survivors, every few yards down Poort Road or Murchison Street he had another tale to tell. His knowledge was encyclopaedic, yet he would share it with struggling students as readily as with renowned authors such as James Michener and Thomas Pakenham. Heaven protect the unwary and ill-informed enthusiast, though, who dared to quarrel with this authority – he'd be buried under an avalanche of irrefutable facts.



'Pitch' Christopher
(Photograph: Mrs Eileen Christopher)

In later days, when illness confined him to his armchair in his study, Pitch loved to show fellow devotees his Africana treasures – rare and ancient maps, glorious prints, and his Van Riebeeck Society and Brenthurst collections. Thanks to a fine memory – Pitch never kept a diary and never forgot an appointment – he could always lay his finger on the item under discussion.

It was no chance that he was a brilliant military historian. A mere youngster at the outbreak of World War 2, he went north with the Royal Natal Carbineers and distinguished himself in battle, ending as Adjutant to the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders and decorated for valour with the American Silver Star. His peacetime legal career was equally brilliant. Top student in the South African law exams for ex-servicemen, he chose to join the old family firm of Christopher, Walton and Tatham. His integrity and devotion to the interests of his clients ensured that over the next 40 years it grew into one of the most successful and respected law practices in the North.

Those 40 years coincided with the abhorrent apartheid era in South African politics. Pitch's opposition to the policy was open and consistent. A founder member of the Progressive Party, he stood firmly for the rule of law and the dignity of the individual. A dedicated Freemason and a devout Anglican – he was a lay minister in the church for 40 years and also served as a Diocesan Trustee – he voiced his support openly and fearlessly for the victims of forced removal and detention. Though his service in public office amounted to no more than a couple of years on the Town Council, his influence for good was great. The voteless and disadvantaged could always look to him for help in adversity.

Benjamin was a boon companion. The compleat traveller, bedecked with cameras and binoculars, maps and guide books, he travelled Africa and the world, avidly absorbing every known fact possible of history, geography and natural science. Shooting or fishing or game-watching in the wilds, a youthful rollicking jollity displaced his professional dignity and decorum.

Loyalty was the mainstay of Pitch's character – to his beloved country, to his church, to his regiment, to his schools, Cordwalles and Michaelhouse, to his community, his profession, his friends and above all, to his wife and family.

Sadly, Pitch never wrote the details of the rich life he'd led with such panache, nor did he ever record the profound knowledge he had of northern Natal. The late Dr John Clark read a fine article by Pitch in the Women's Institute's *Annals of Klip River* and dubbed him 'a distinguished Natal historian'. That article and a few recordings – a walk-about in Ladysmith, visits to Caesar's Camp and Spioenkop – are all we have to pass on. It is a sorry loss.

Pitch was as modest about his achievements as about his benefactions. His reliability, his wisdom and generosity were legend in Rotary, the MOTHS, on the Board of Cordwalles school, in the Synod of the Church of the Province, on the Council of the Natal Law Society, and the many other organisations and movements he supported. Publicity he shunned. But the youthful, mirthful innocence that clung to him to the end will be the abiding memory.

SHEILA HENDERSON