

Footprints

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time*
— Longfellow

Anthony and Margaret Barker

E B Adams

It is appropriate that the Barkers should have been chosen for the first in a series of articles on those who made a great contribution to medicine in South Africa, since their justifiable claim to fame lies in their pioneering work in a rural area. Surely it is here that the country's health care system, viewed as a whole, has so often been sorely lacking in the past — and still is. Without doubt, the Barkers and what they achieved should become role models for the future.

Who were they? Maggie (as she was affectionately known by all who came into contact with her) grew up in England. She was the daughter of Dr Arthur Newton, who had wanted to be a medical missionary but was not accepted for health reasons. Anthony came from a legal family. Both were well educated: he at private schools, she in a less conventional manner. They were contemporaries at medical school in Birmingham, where they graduated during World War II. Perhaps her father's frustrated ambition and certainly her own strong Christian faith influenced Maggie, while still a student, to commit herself to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to serve for 3 years as a medical missionary wherever they might send her. Deeply in love with her, Anthony refused to accept the Society's injunction that Maggie not marry during this initial 3-year period. With characteristic determination, he persuaded the Society to waive their rule if he also became a medical missionary in order to work with her. And so it was that they married and found themselves early in 1945, just before the end of hostilities, setting sail for the unknown — a minute mission hospital at Nqutu in Zululand.

These details highlight two of the Barkers' major characteristics: their strong determination and their abiding Christian faith. Hers was a wise, reserved determination. He was also full of wisdom and, in contrast, a man of boundless energy, with an ebullience to match and, on occasion, no small measure of flamboyance. As I have described elsewhere,¹ there was a special quality to their marriage in most respects, especially in their teamwork as doctors, although, regrettably for them, they had no children.

The Barkers' achievements at Nqutu are legendary. Despite its impressive name, the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital was rudimentary when they arrived there in 1945: a few dilapidated buildings, a matron, six student nurses and seven patients. Anthony had learned the basics of joinery from the ship's carpenter during his service as doctor in the merchant navy at the end of the war — his ship had been sunk by torpedo but all on board had been saved. He and Maggie soon had ambitious building plans for their hospital and the whole district it served. Anthony therefore turned what he had learned on board ship to good use at Nqutu. Early on, he did much of the joinery and other building work himself. Both he and Maggie would dig drains and turn their hands to whatever else needed to be done, like sewing mattresses or making hospital furniture. The hospital was grossly underfunded at the outset and remained so for many years to come. Indeed, early visitors to Nqutu, like Eleanor Nash, will remember having to help with all manner of tasks, inspired in most cases by Maggie's determination and quiet wisdom and Anthony's enthusiasm. The inadequacy of the tiny mission hospital they came to in 1945 fired their determination and in 30 years they transformed it into a fine rural hospital of 600 beds.

But while they slowly built up the hospital to enable them to provide a much-needed service to the 80 000 inhabitants of the district, they did three things that eventually led to their outstanding success as missionary doctors. They started to learn the language and the culture of their patients, the Zulus; they built up the fine system of remote clinics in the district which enabled them to begin what I should like to call the Barker system of total health care; and, at a time when the evils of apartheid were at their peak, they saw to it that their hospital was a happy oasis where racial discrimination was taboo.

When they came to Nqutu, Anthony's postgraduate experience in operative surgery was minimal but the remoteness of the hospital forced him to undertake all manner of emergency surgery. He studied the texts in isolation from formal teaching and passed the examinations for the FRCS in London on his first long leave from Nqutu. Some criticised what he tackled through force of circumstance. When others had seen him at work, however, none doubted his expertise. In the early years, because of



Anthony and Maggie Barker with their beloved tandem. (This photo appears in *Lives in Tandem*, the author's biography of the Barkers, reviewed by Peter Wagenaar on p. 1166 of this issue.)

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the need for and the distance from more sophisticated hospitals, Anthony perfected caesarean section under local anaesthesia and became proficient in cataract operations, the need for both of which was great in the district. Later, when additional trained staff came to Nqutu, he was able successfully to undertake demanding tasks like spinal laminectomy and surgery for carcinoma of the rectum — to mention only some of his field of surgical work. In fact, he was to become a most competent surgeon. Professor LeQuesne of Middlesex Hospital, having been delightfully entertained by both Barkers at Nqutu, and having performed operations with Anthony there, commented in a letter to me that 'Anthony was certainly one of the most complete, remarkable men that I have known — indeed, the most.' And his expertise was not limited to surgery. From my own experience as an occasional visiting consultant, he was also a skilled physician. Indeed, his excellence as a doctor covered most of the spectrum of medical practice.

Anthony was much in demand as a public speaker. Many will remember his forceful, wise and witty speeches. He was also a talented writer. His book, *Giving and Receiving*, first published in 1959,² and reprinted twice since then, is a delightful and thought-provoking account of rural medicine as he and Maggie practised it at Charles Johnson Hospital. After their tragic deaths on their tandem in 1993, Anthony left behind him a mass of unpublished material to which I have had access. It makes fascinating reading, especially for his turn of phrase, his wit and his descriptive writing. His depth of care for the welfare of others comes through strongly. Elsewhere I have reproduced excerpts from his writings.¹

Lacking Anthony's flamboyant, exuberant, highly articulate persona, Maggie was quiet, deep and wise — and an excellent doctor. Those visiting Nqutu briefly might have thought her content to make her role in the marriage a supporting one. This, clearly, is an incomplete picture. She was talented and innovative in her main area of clinical competence — children and maternity cases, introducing much that was well ahead of her time, as Larsen³ has pointed out. Elsewhere the practice was to send mothers of premature babies home, but Maggie fitted them in somewhere in the hospital so that they could breast-feed and bond fully with their babies. Moreover, she rejected the current practice of sending premature babies home on formula feeds, realising the vital importance of breast-feeding to their survival. Maggie was undoubtedly a powerful driving force in the setting up of the outstanding health care system that the Barkers created in the rolling hills of KwaZulu-Natal. Perhaps she was the main source of their success. She certainly played a central role in providing impressive antenatal care away from hospital and nearer to the homes of their patients, whose customs, it should be added, both Barkers always respected. Maggie also played a most important part in the training of nurses whose competence was widely acknowledged.

In her own certainty that what they were doing at Nqutu was right, Maggie happily accepted Anthony as the front man. He undoubtedly had all the characteristics. What was so important to their dual role as man and wife working as a missionary doctor team is the fact that they discussed all manner of issues together, first one having new ideas, then the other. Only when consensus was reached did they put

their plans into action. His speeches, too, often revealed her thoughts as well as his own, as did his writings.

Both Barkers were deeply concerned about much that was outside the bounds of their profession, like 'green' issues, the dangers of nuclear power, and the care of the elderly. They lived frugally and donated handsomely to charity. Indeed, keen cyclists as they were, Anthony and Maggie rode together on many sponsored rides, best known of which was the 1 000-mile ride from Slovenia to Calais in 12 days, in the course of which they travelled over the Dolomites and Austrian Alps and through Germany and France, often sleeping rough, to collect £12 000 for Alexandra Clinic (where they had worked in their retirement). In all, they were to raise some £60 000 for various charities, and sometimes covered as much as 100 miles each day. Sad as it was, perhaps it was appropriate that they died together on their tandem in a road accident in the English Lake District, both in their 70s.

Honours were showered on Anthony, of which his most prized were perhaps his CBE, honorary degrees from Natal and Birmingham, and his election to the London FRCP. Maggie was rather unfairly overlooked. All who knew the Barkers well, however, recognised how inseparable they were in their major contributions to the times in which they lived.

Their personal influence on others is probably immeasurable. Many a young doctor or nurse happily acknowledges the profound influence of the Barkers on their lives; many of these now live abroad, in Britain especially, but also in the USA, Germany, Scandinavia and elsewhere. Literally thousands of visitors came to Nqutu, perhaps to stay for several days; and when Anthony and Maggie left the 'Charlie J' after 30 years to return to England and work at the Accident and Emergency Department of St George's Hospital in London, they again affected the lives of countless others. They were indeed a legend in their own time and, to quote Longfellow, are among those who have left 'footprints on the sands of time'.

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