

Grahame Ross Barnett

Classicist, linguist, Anglican priest, mystic, soldier, librarian, mentor and survivor. Born 9 May 1911 in Scotland. Died of natural causes in Cobourg 15 July 2002.

When Grahame Barnett (1911-2002) told his friend and doctor, John Rose, that he was thinking of donating his body to science John told him to forget the idea. "I can't think of a single person who'd be interested in your body given the condition you're in," he said. "On the other hand, if there were any way you could donate your mind, that would be a different matter." Dr Rose was wrong on both counts.

Grahame Barnett received a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Edinburgh in the thirties and before attending the Theological College of the Episcopal Church of Scotland and becoming an ordained priest in the Anglican Church in Scotland.

He was curate of a church in Ayr, Scotland and then rector of two others, at Arpafeelie and Inverness, which didn't stop him from joining the militia and learning to strip and rebuild a Bren gun in record time. He was commissioned as a chaplain in the British Army and went to France with the British Expeditionary Force at the outbreak of WWII. On the beaches at Dunkirk, under constant attack from Stuka dive bombers, he repeatedly gave up his place in the small craft that came to pluck the Army off the beaches. Among the last to leave, he saw

the fishing boat blown to pieces in which he'd yielded his place to a wounded soldier. There were no survivors. Was it an act of God that he survived? He said he'd never know.

Soon after returning to Britain, he was shipped to North Africa to join what became the Eighth Army and, before leaving for the front line, he experienced the delights of the famous wartime Shepherds Hotel, Cairo. As the Desert Rats and Rommel's Afrika Corps battled it out, the front was in constant movement, moving back and forth like an ebbing and flowing tide.

On one long retreat from Tobruk, Grahame was left behind and collected stragglers. Travelling by night, navigating by the stars, hiding by day, he led his small party back to the British lines. During that harrowing journey the party foot-slogged for over three hundred miles without losing one of their number. It was a remarkable feat of survival.

After the war, he accepted a job in Brazil as headmaster of a boys school in Saõ Paulo, where he learned Portuguese. He was already an accomplished linguist, with a knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and speaking flawless French. He learned Spanish in Mexico later in his life and, from what I knew of him, had a conversational knowledge of Arabic from his time in North Africa.

Emigrating to Canada, he first served the Anglican community of Timiskaming in the Laurentians. By then he was in his forties

and wanting a complete change in his life, he went to the University of Toronto where he gained what must have been one of the first degrees in library science. In this field, on and off, he spent the rest of his life. What a questing life it was too.

At one period, before he finally settled down in the small Ontario town of Cobourg, he became fascinated with Eastern mysticism, so spent two years in Japan. When his money began to run out he returned to Canada via India.

Back in Canada and looking for work to satisfy his modest needs, he applied for and filled the recently-vacated post of head librarian of the Cobourg Public Library. Like many libraries in Ontario, the Cobourg Library was formerly a Mechanics Institute, opened in 1886; some time in its history it became an Association Library whose members paid an annual subscription fee of one dollar. Under the Ontario Public Library Act of 1958, the town council voted to make the town library a 'free library' with a board of directors. Grahame joined the library in June 1959.

The library was small, two dingy rooms in a house on the main street with 12,000 volumes for a population of 11,000. One of his first visitors was an eight-year-old boy, Ian McFarlan, who approached the check-out desk with the determination of an Oliver Twist and asked, 'Please, miss, I'd like some books from

the adult library.' He'd read all those in the children's section. She considered the situation and marched him into the presence of the head librarian across the hall. 'He wants books from the adult library,' she said, and retired to leave Grahame to deal with the situation. He looked at the boy whose head barely rose above the table top. 'All right,' he said. 'You can have two books at a time, but if you plaster them with peanut butter and jelly, you'll be in serious trouble.'

McFarlan was terrified. He was in awe of the great man, took exceptional care of the books and read all the more. Over the years, the dreaded Mr Barnett became his mentor.

Barnett had taken on a pokey little library but he made it work and serve the town. Within a couple of years, he was instrumental in opening the town's first public art gallery on the floor above the library. This soon boasted a permanent collection and moved with the library into new and refurbished premises. Grahame's beloved art gallery found expanded premises in the restored Victoria Hall, centre piece of Cobourg's civic, judicial and social life.

Grahame retired in 1969, a permanent resident of the community and known to legions of diligent library workers and volunteers. He continued to foster and encourage the artistic life of the community. Peter Kolisnyk, whose works hang in the major Canadian art galleries, owes much to Grahame's support; Amelia

Lawson, Barbara Dick, Dr Jack Leeson and the many others who were involved with this indefatigable worker in the sphere of art and literature will remember Grahame Barnett for the rest of their days.

In spite of Dr Rose's advice, Barnett's body was donated to science. He was not interested in a funeral or memorial service. He did donate his mind, to those who knew and admired this -- might we say it? -- weird and wonderful man.

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A. W. Cockerill with the assistance of Ian McFarlan, Peter Kolisnyk, Amelia Lawson, Barbara Dick and Valerie Scott.
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