

COMMUNITY

Grahame Barnett brought a world of experience to Cobourg

When Grahame Barnett told his friend, Dr John Rose, that he was thinking of donating his body to science John told him to forget the idea. "Not with the condition you're in," he said. "On the other hand, it would be a different matter if there was a way you could donate your mind."

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 Arpafeellie 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 a chaplain in the British Army and went to France at the outbreak of WWII. On the beaches at Dunkirk, under constant attack from enemy 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 given 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.

After returning to Britain, he was posted to North Africa to join what became the Eighth Army. In the fight with Rommel's Afrika Corps, the front was in constant movement, moving back and forth like an ebbing and flowing tide. On the long retreat from Tobruk, Grahame was left behind. Collecting stragglers, he led his small party back to British lines, travelling by night, navigating by the stars, and hiding by day. The party made the harrow-

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ing journey of over two hundred miles without losing a single one of its number. It was a remarkable feat of survival.

After the war, he accepted a job in Brazil as headmaster of a boys school in São Paulo, where he learned Portuguese. Already an accomplished linguist, Grahame

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

had a knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and spoke 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.

Before 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 ran out he returned to Canada via India.

Looking for work to satisfy his modest needs, he applied for and became of chief 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 store 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 McFarlane, 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 marched him into the office of the chief librarian across the hall. 'He wants books from the adult library,' she said, retiring 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.'

McFarlane was in awe of the great man, so he took exceptional care of the books and read all the more. Over the years, the dreaded Mr Barnett became his friend and 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 a familiar figure to legions of library employees and patrons. 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.

Despite his friend's advice, his body was donated to science. He was not interested in a funeral. Those who knew and admired this eccentric and inspiring man had for many years the benefit of his brilliant mind even if he couldn't donate it to science.

— submitted by A. W. Cockerill with the help of Ian McFarlane, Peter Kolisnyk, Amelia Lawson, Barbara Dick and Valerie Scott.



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