

ANNE HEPBURN 1925 – 2016

Friends, I have been given the privilege of recalling, and paying tribute to, the life of Anne Hepburn. Those of you who knew Anne at all well, and therefore who know that she liked to ensure that she had matters well organised, won't be surprised to hear that it was she who bestowed this responsibility upon me, some time ago. I accepted the honour with pleasure, but also some trepidation. How to sum up the ninety one years on this earth of a missionary, a teacher, an activist; a wife and mother and friend; a woman of Scotland, Africa and the world; a woman of great faith and (as she once commented to her friend Willie Slavin - a priest who dared to suggest she might be past campaigning on women's reproductive rights) a [post menopausal!] woman of terrifying energy. Anne was a restless spirit who was never afraid to take on the powers that be or to confront those who were complacent in the face of injustice. She was truly a changemaker, leaving a unique and lasting imprint on unnumbered people and places.

Annie Burton was born on Aug 20 1925, in the Ayrshire village of Dailly. She was named after her mother Annie Sorrie, the local district nurse, who died when her baby was only 20 months old. Her father Thomas (Tam) – Kirk elder, Temperance flute band master and life and soul of any party - was the village blacksmith. He was a widower in his 60s when he married the nurse, and already had a grown up family. Young Annie loved the smiddy garden and playing in the local woods. Education was highly valued in her family – all her half brothers went to university and sister Mary was a teacher. The village school headmaster told Annie she was just as clever as them. Sure enough, she did well at Girvan High School, though she sometimes found life hard as a shy teenager who had to look after her loving but elderly father. She went to Glasgow University and graduated MA in 1945 – as Anne, because she had never liked being called Annie - followed by a year at Jordanhill Teacher Training College. She began her career close to home at the two-teacher school in the village of Barr, feeling that she owed it to South Ayrshire, which had generously supported her training. By now, her home base was with her maiden aunts in Girvan, but Dailly Parish Church was still an important part of her life, and she cycled back every Sunday for morning worship, led by Rev Stuart Loudon, whose ministry had a significant impact on the young teacher. Anne felt dissatisfied at work, and her sense that she would like to do

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something more interesting and effective found a focus after she heard a missionary speak at a Woman's Guild meeting. Her offer to serve the Church in foreign mission was accepted, and in 1949 she went for a year's training at St Colm's Missionary College here in Edinburgh.

A few years ago I interviewed Anne for a research project about Scotland and the decline of Empire (and I'll return later to Anne's part in the decline and fall of the British Empire!) She told me 'St Colm's blew my mind... The World Council of Churches had just been established, things seemed rosy and there was post-war optimism and hope for ecumenism as the future of the Church... the world was opening up!' The intellectual stimulation, enduring fellowship and traditions of the St Colm's community was of abiding importance to Anne, who particularly loved the St Colm's chapel window depicting the risen Christ and these words 'He calleth his own by name and leadeth them out, and they follow him for they know his voice.'

In 1950 Anne followed that voice to Blantyre in Nyasaland (now Malawi), where she was appointed to take charge of the Girls School, teaching training and boarding village. Also on the ship and heading in the same general direction was a newly appointed young missionary minister, Rev Hamish Hepburn.

In Nyasaland, Anne quickly became friends with some of the African teachers. In particular Molly Bwanausi gave vital support as she started to learn about African life and customs, and the Cinyanja (Chichewa) language. But she felt isolated and somewhat at odds with the other missionaries. It struck her that none of them seemed to have African friends, and she disliked the paternalistic colonial attitudes of most white people in church and government. 'I spent the first year floundering, and then May Scott came out from Aberdeen. She and I had the same background and outlook, and we hit it off'. They worked and played well together, and also became political supporters of the Nyasaland National Congress, which opposed HM Government's establishment of the Central African Federation. Anne told me 'The protestations of Africans counted for nothing, and imposition of the federation went ahead. I got involved in Congress early on, through school. I became very politically aware because of friendships with the African staff, whose brothers were leaders in Congress.'

Meanwhile, *Zanga Phee* – the quiet one – was becoming more than a friendly source of support. Hamish Hepburn of Blantyre mission asked Anne to marry him. She claimed in her

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memoir, 'I gave him many examples of my bad behaviour which made me unfit a minister's wife. Hamish replied "If you are as bad as you make out, it's a minister you need!" They were married in 1954 and then returned on furlough to Scotland. It proved to be a decisive moment for the raising of Anne's feminist consciousness. Having been a missionary in her own right for four years, her name disappeared from the records, while Hamish's was adorned with an asterisk to indicate his new status (though he said that Anne was always a star!) Their three children, Catherine (1955), Margaret (1958) and Kenneth (1962), were all born in Africa. Anne and Hamish were devoted, mutually supportive and loving life partners until his death in 2007.

Back in Nyasaland, the British Government's declaration of a State of Emergency in 1959 was a political watershed for the couple: 'All our friends were in jail, and that cemented those relationships, and our commitment to the struggle'. The Special Branch kept a close watch on the Hepburns, who visited and sent parcels to detainees. On one famous occasion Joyce Ross and Anne visited Rose Chibambo in Zomba prison pushing a pram. The covers concealed not a baby, but lots of goodies for Rose. Back in Britain, Anne was noted by MI5 as 'a minister's wife worth watching'...and indeed Hamish was once told of a warning given to someone not to worship in his Zomba church because 'the wife of you is a communist'.

Old friend Jack Thompson highlights three key things about Anne's love and commitment to Africa – her fluency in Chichewa, which she sustained for the rest of her life; her deep and enduring friendships, not only with Africans, but with colleague families including the Baxters, Camerons, Rosses, McAdams, Tevendales; and her courageous activism. Back in Scotland, Anne helped establish and was for fourteen years coordinator of the Scottish Malawi Network, and with Andrew Ross helped lay the Foundations of the Scottish Malawi Partnership. As Jack once said, 'if we are the Malawi Mafia then Anne is the Mafia Godmother'. How she revelled in that ascription!

But what does a[n allegedly] communist minister's wife worth watching do in 1966, following exile from Malawi back to Scotland? Church life in small town Kirkcudbright where 'it's aye been done this way' must have been an enormous culture shock after the excitement and political turmoil of being caught up at the centre of momentous events. But Anne was soon finding new scope for her militant soul, in the unlikely environment of the

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Woman's Guild. In conventional style, she became President of her local branch (though warning bells should have rung when she changed the recipe for egg sandwiches), and worked her way up the greasy pole until Catherine was able to enjoy calling her mother a National Vice [President]. The Women's Movement was stirring, and Anne enjoyed reading the Guardian women's page, but 1975 UN International Women's Year propelled her into full campaigning mode, inspired by her friend, Woman's Guild National President Maidie Hart, who initiated a Scottish IWY committee. The World Council of Churches was also investigating 'Sexism in the 70s' and she collated the responses from Guild branches. They laid bare some alarming attitudes to women's involvement in church and society, and for the National Vice this coincided with an awakening to the radical new insights of feminist theology. Anne's formation and engagement as a passionate Christian feminist was shaped around three key beliefs: that prevailing patterns of relations between women and men in church and society are deeply distorted; that women and men are equally created in the image of God; and that inclusive language is not a matter of political correctness but a missionary imperative. I met Anne in 1983 when we were both delegates at the WCC Assembly in Vancouver, just after the Hepburns had moved to Braco in Perthshire. She was generous in her friendship and encouragement as we shared that uplifting experience of the world gathered for worship and action in a wonderfully colourful and open tent, and I was impressed by her refreshingly bold and unapologetic witness to her ecumenical feminist vision: that the WHOLE world needs to hear the Gospel; The world needs to hear the WHOLE gospel; The world will hear it more readily from a WHOLE church.

Anne's commitment to sharing that vision was unwavering – from 1980 she was at the heart of the ecumenical Women Sharing Group; during the WCC Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988 -98, in the Decade Core Group, involved in the Liverpool Launch and helping to plan the final celebration weekend at Durham Cathedral. As Scottish co-coordinator of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women; as chair of the Scottish Convention of Women, which flourished as a broad alliance for women's organisations, issues and concerns, and a framework for common action, in the lead up to devolution. She so valued her feminist friendships with Kath Davies, Yvonne Strachan, Lesley Sutherland and others. And in recent years, in memory of her great feminist sister-in-arms, she initiated and led the organisation of the Maidie Hart Memorial Lectures.

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In the 1980s, as National President of the Church of Scotland Woman's Guild, she challenged members to act for justice, initiating an anti-apartheid boycott of South African produce. She spoke for many and outraged many others in Scotland when, inspired by the words of hymnwriter Brian Wren, she prayed to 'God our Mother' at the 1982 Women's Guild Annual Meeting. A study group was set up to consider the theological implications of the concept of God's Motherhood, becoming the focus for extraordinary hostility, misconceptions and rudeness, but also support and gratitude from all over the world. She believed that the resulting stooshie laid bare a deep strain of misogyny, but, though never one to shy away from provocation, Anne's prayer was seeking to create 'Room to Grow' (the Guild theme for that year), and undoubtedly was a catalyst for longer term change. Always open to transformative ways of thinking, she led from the front in her commitment to gender justice, building links and making common cause with the broader women's movement in Scotland and across the world. Anne represented the Church of Scotland on a wide range of committees, commissions and ecumenical bodies. She was a great supporter of Scottish Churches House and all it stood for, and in her very active retirement, organised the Thursday lunchtime meeting of that powerhouse collective known as the Ecumenical Friends. She loved travel to many places including America, Germany, Assisi, and returning to her beloved Malawi; she enjoyed celebrations and visiting family – Catherine in her Scottish parishes, Margaret and Roger in Cheshire, Kenneth and Hong-Yoke in London. Her wide interests encompassed literature, politics, offering warm hospitality, keeping in touch with her expanding circle of friends with her annual Christmas letter, and so much more.

In recent days many people have shared their memories and love of Anne – for her humour, her insight, her prophetic leadership, her solidarity with those who struggle against racism, her speaking out for LGBT rights, her open heart and inspiration.

Anne Hepburn was a complex woman: opinionated, stubborn, often quick to take umbrage at any who dared to challenge her views; certainly not always the easiest person to have as a mother. But she was proud of her children, and it was so hard for her to lose Catherine in 2014. How glad she was to see, within weeks of her own death, the publication of book of Catherine's prayers which she had prepared as a labour of love.

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How to sum up a long and well-lived life? Anne the troublemaker – who said at the age of 4 'I was bad and I meant to be bad'; Anne the godmother, who encouraged us to name and honour the Motherhood of God; Anne the feminist who celebrated our foremothers with her Supper Party for Scottish Women of Faith (a travelling 'installation' inspired by Judy Chicago's feminist artwork, The Dinner Party) and her lifelong enacting of the Scottish suffrage motto 'A Gude Cause Maks a Strong Arm'; Anne who welcomed strangers and made them her friends. I turn to her beloved daughter Catherine, who summed up her mother's life and legacy in these powerful and poetic words (at the time of Anne's 80th birthday):

'Respect the terrifying energy of a woman of God. Hear the ring of the hammer on the anvil and feel the warmth of the leaping flame: both heart and hearth of home and hospitality, and the refining fire that reshapes the world to God's will and purpose of justice, peace and life in its fullness. For Anne's place in our lives, for her contribution to the fullness of so many lives, let us give thanks and glory to God.'