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OBITUARY: K. M. A. BARNETT, O.B.E.

Three contributions to the memory of a remarkable man, Fellow of the RAS of Great Britain and Ireland (1949) and a founding member of the Hong Kong Branch: from James Hayes, Derek Davies, Solomon Bard.

Three weeks ago one of the most distinguished retired members of the Civil Service passed away in England. Mr. K. M. A. Barnett's death was noted in the *South China Morning Post* on 30 October 1987. A factual account of his services was provided, beginning with his posting here as a young Cadet Officer in 1932 and ending 37 years later with his retirement from Hong Kong, but with a further 10 years' service for the United Nations Organisation in Malawi and Bangladesh on duties connected with the census.

It is difficult to do justice to this exceptional man. Few friends of his own or a later generation could claim to have covered quite the same ground, or in the same way. For this reason, letters of appreciation have to come from several persons, and not from one pen alone. Dr. Bard's letter printed on 20 November is a case in point, (see pp. 8-10 below).

As a Hong Kong civil servant his greatest achievement was probably the 1961 Census, the first for nearly thirty years. He established the office (the present Census and Statistics Department) and was its guiding genius. The work suited him to a 'T', for he was able to bring to its organisation and subsequent reporting, all the knowledge, experience and intellectual qualities that make it a lasting and major landmark in the history of Hong Kong's post-war development. Each segment of the land and sea population, by origin and occupation, each type of dwelling place (and they were legion in those hard times), education, marriage and much else was covered in the 3 volume report, and he personally wrote the manuals for the field staff and supervisors. He conducted further investigatory work, including the 1966 By-census, before retirement in 1969.

My own association with Ken Barnett stemmed from our being colleagues in the Administrative Grade of the Civil Service, and from shared interests. He was District Commissioner, New Territories when I was posted to the District Office (South) in 1957, and

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served under him for the next nine months until he was replaced by the late (Sir) Ronald Holmes. It was my first posting after language study, and I was inexperienced and ignorant. Ken was formidable by reason of bulk and intellect, and I was instinctively wary of him. He was, too, one of those rather "larger than life" personalities around whom legends and stories had already accumulated. However, he turned out to be both kindly and helpful. More, he was informative; and for a new District Officer anxious to know more about his charges it was fortunate that he had written about local history, something that had attracted insufficient attention from the Civil Service, or anyone else for that matter. I probably saw more of him than the other DOs, because of our joint preoccupation with the Shek Pik Reservoir investigations and the fact that his town office was in the District Office (South) building on Gascoigne Road, Kowloon.

He used to come in once a week, on set days, and I remember once being indignant upon hearing his booming voice on another day. "Oh well" I thought resignedly, for I was still very new, "he'll come in shortly", and dismissed him from my mind. Some time later I heard his voice again, and realized it was a tape recording on which his secretary must have been working, a draft speech or something of the kind.

After he left the N.T., our association was mostly personal. Through joint interests, including membership of the Royal Hong Kong Defence Force, we met from time to time. The Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch, to which he lectured occasionally, was another shared interest. After he left Hong Kong on retirement we exchanged letters periodically. I also saw him on his visits to his family here, and particularly remember the last occasion (1986) when, together with the then District Officer, Yuen Long, we arranged a visit to the border area including the Mai Po marshes. We began with a picnic lunch at Island House which had been his home when he was District Commissioner, New Territories. This was a particularly happy and relaxed family occasion, with his grandchildren, on which I look back with great pleasure.

One always got a lot out of Ken. Our mutual interest in local people and their history led me to send him copies of any draft

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papers that I was preparing for publication or for some academic conference, in the hope that he would respond. He invariably did so. He had a wealth of information to draw upon, and his replies always provided insights and incisive comments. They were also full of humour. The eleven pages of closely-typed notes and comments on my book *The Rural Communities of Hong Kong* (1983 Oxford University Press, Hong Kong) was a particular joy, but this quality was evident in practically everything he wrote. For instance, he perplexed me one day early in my career by writing in a file, "DO South should kindly explain why the Clearwater Bay villages are full of children none of whom have ever been born" — a reference to non-compliance with the registration requirements of the Births and Deaths Ordinance.

I once sent one of his letters to Sir Ronald Holmes. He returned it with a note, "Thank you so much for letting me see this — most interesting and also, like all good writing, highly evocative. It is nice to know that Ken is still going so strong". This was written in late 1975.

I have two favourite anecdotes. One is his amusing account of a pre-war traffic accident case when he was Police Magistrate, Kowloon. Let him tell it himself. "I do not have anything polite to say to those who regard "Europeans" and "Asians" as separate species, like the witnesses in a case I heard 32 years ago almost to the day (1937) in which the ten passengers in a New Territories bus were described by one witness as "two other people, besides myself — and seven coolies" and by a second witness as "seven people and three GWAEZIRLOO (i.e. foreigners)." He added later "I am glad to see this perfectly true story immortalised. Alas, England is getting as bad."

The other story was told to me recently by Dr. Graham Johnson, of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. When he began the field work for his doctoral thesis on Tsuen Wan in the late 1960s he wanted information from the Census Office. He telephoned Mr. Barnett who said he was happy to meet him, but would like him to go to a sauna for the purpose. This surprised Graham but along he went, and his first meeting with Ken was in the nude, in the heat and steam. Thereafter, he said, they were able

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to go to supper and talk in less unusual surroundings.

I hope I have communicated the main characteristics of the man: his great knowledge and capabilities, his friendliness and helpfulness, and his delight in life from which more and more as he grew older, he derived his serenity, compassion and wit.

25th November, 1987 JAMES HAYES

I have remarked before on the propensity of the Hongkong bureaucracy to lose, deliberately or otherwise, the services of its best and brightest. One such was Kenneth Barnett who died suddenly in October while happily playing with his grandchildren. He was 76. He had joined the Hongkong civil service in 1933, fought the Japanese as a volunteer and spent the rest of the war in prison camp. He had left the Hongkong Government as commissioner of census and statistics at the age of 58. He was not the sort of man to take up a lucrative post locally where his years of public service could be profitably exploited by his new employers (as is the lamentable fashion these days); Barnett went to work for the United Nations as a demographer in Bangladesh and then Malawi.

Barnett had one of those impressive brains somewhere up in the upper echelons of IQs. He was master of written and spoken Chinese in many dialects, including some of the more obscure tongues, and of a dozen other languages — each of which he was apparently able to absorb within a few months. He was an expert calligrapher and an authority on Chinese history.

He was the sort of man who polished cryptic crosswords off in 10 minutes, played chess in his head, littered his letters with obscure Greek and Latin quotations (which he generously assumed any educated person could understand), was an amateur archaeologist and anthropologist of note, and wrote poetry (I have quoted a couple in these columns — most recently on 30 April, in which he likened the exoskeletons of Hongkong's buildings to a coral reef).

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Sadly he died on the day before he was due to collect copies of his book *The Long-Sighted People* from the printers (it is not due for publication until 15 February next year). I had naively assumed that the eponymous, presbyopic people of the title would be Chinese but, though they boast Sino-characteristics, they live in a remote future: "yuman" survivors of — or mutations from — a third global catastrophe rendered inevitable by the idiocies of the current edition of the anthropoid race, *Homo desipiens* (Stupid Man).

The book is addressed to his granddaughter, for whom the environmental message is doom-laden: "In your lifetime or that of your children, there will be nothing to eat but one another. From which predicament nuclear, chemical or bacterial warfare would come as a happy release . . . Just as the bacteria in my gut (and yours) without which we cannot digest our food, will all die when we die; but if they should perish first we cannot long outlive them; so humans will not long outlive those other species which form part of our, and one another's food chain, nor the wild forests & which we are busily destroying for ephemeral profit."

I find it difficult to work up great indignation about ecology and food chains, vaguely accepting a nature red in tooth and claw and natural selection. Nature is more resilient than the doomsters would have us believe.

But Barnett preferred the apocalyptic view. Perhaps his occasional sourness could be traced to a resentment that his (most happy) marriage to a Chinese had blocked his promotion. Anyway, he nursed an intense hatred of homosexuality and believed that AIDS was a divine (or Nature's) deserved punishment on societies which tolerated, even glamourised, deviants. Despite this, Barnett protests he is an optimist. But he tells his grandchild: "Some of your descendants (which means mine too) may be among the remnant [of the third catastrophe] but I bet they'll wish they had died with us. I'm *that* kind of optimist, you see."

As an author, Barnett had a lot of fun creating a *Clockwork Orange*-type lingo for his yumans, revealing a surprising element of anti-establishment thinking for a former Hongkong bureaucrat.

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He mentions an almost forgotten economic principle, labelled by a phrase taken from the French — "remembered as Lessifair: but this meant in practice not less lessleurfair but lessmwafair."

Very shortly before he died, he wrote, on 3 August, what must have been one of his last poems, in which the anti-establishment theme appears again. It is entitled Heaven on Earth and inspired by Psalm 137 (the one in which the exiled captives sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon):

This is the Law: thou shalt be either Green
Or Not-green. Which of these, thou wilt be told,
And it shall be so. Dare not be so bold
To choose another colour in between.
The Great and Good provide for young and old,
Female and male, as best to Them may seem;
Cradle to grave, in never-waking dream.
Thus shall Their Great-and-Goodness all enfold.
Oh no. It would upset the whole shebang
To let each individual choose his own
Affiliation. That would never do.
The Great and Good know what is Best for You.
And yet, and yet . . . some too there were who sang,
Captive in Zion, songs of Babylon.

On the same day he wrote that, he worked over a translation he had made of a Chinese poem 44 years ago. Perhaps an excerpt from his letter about it will best convey the quality of the man's mind:

"I am still not 100% content but that is the way with translations from Chinese poems. I don't know whether you have the collection of Tang and Sung poems, but if not I'll write this one out for you, and perhaps explain some of the difficulties, which beat even the great Kingsman Arthur Waley. He did not, I think, hit on the dodge of inverting, in his translations, the 3rd and 4th lines: the 3rd (non-rhyming) line of 絕 is why it is called a 絕: the word means "cut short" and in these 4-line (20 or 28-syllable) poems every word in the 3rd line has a specially broad scope, say palette-knifed, not pointille. And when the poem ends, one line later, the

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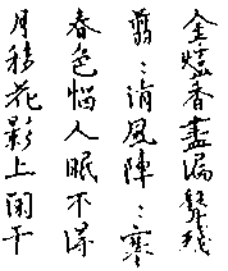
reader's thoughts must carry on . . . This poem is an example of the ferocious difficulty of putting across the idea in another language, while not losing the cameo effect.

Softly drips the clepsydra
Dim the incense glows
Keen keen, a blade of wind
Blows, rests, blows:

Along the wall, fantastic
Mooncast shadows creep
Spring torments torments me
Will not let me sleep.



I forget who it's by; I have mislaid my copy, only I have many of these poems by heart; in [wartime prison] camp there was plenty of time for learning Tang and Sung poems by heart."

I leave it to others to judge the quality of his translations and whether his verse was merely minor; instinctively, I find it comforting when those wielding power spend their spare hours writing poetry. But that is an illogical piece of sentimentality. Mao Zedong was a versifier. And a few weeks ago I interviewed President Ershad of Bangladesh. After telling me how well his country was progressing towards the restoration of full democracy (though admittedly the opposition and the press were, he felt, abusing their new freedoms), he presented me with another volume of his somewhat sentimental verse (REVIEW, 12 Nov.).

Almost as soon as he got back to Dhaka, the rage against his rule exploded against a man who wrote:

Peace, only peace — that is all we want.

DEREK DAVIES

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Some time ago you published an obituary of Mr. K. M. A. Barnett (*South China Morning Post*, October 30). News of his sudden death must have saddened deeply his many friends and admirers in Hongkong. I should be grateful if you would add the following notes as a personal tribute to this remarkable man.

His talent in so many fields never ceased to amaze me. This perhaps showed best in his brilliance as a linguist. Apart from his superb knowledge of the Chinese language, including several dialects, he was fluent in at least 20 other languages (I am not sure of the precise number) and even recently he was still adding new ones to his large repertoire. He used to say that after the first introduction to a new language it would take him a mere four to six weeks to gain a working knowledge.

Ken Barnett's impact on the study and research in Hongkong history was immense and inspired many to follow his lead. As a scholar of local history, he injected imagination and vision, adding a new and exciting dimension to the subject.

True, some of us among his followers did not always share his theories, perhaps because of our own shortcomings. He saw ancient Sung dynasty fortifications in the valleys of the New Territories, where we could see none; he discerned archaic Chinese writing in the patterns of Hongkong's ancient rock carvings, where we could see none. But who can be sure? The rock carvings are still a mystery and perhaps future researchers will prove Ken Barnett right.

For him the richness and the fascination of Hongkong heritage lay in the New Territories. He was a great walker and knew every square inch of his beloved New Territories. Little escaped his keen eyes. He discovered old disused fields, ancient stone walls and a stone circle on Lamma Island which is still a mystery and is possibly the earliest man-made stone structure in the territory. The list is long . . .

We first became friends before the war, as fellow-officers in the Volunteers. He was a gunner-officer, capable and resourceful, as with his other interests.

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During the hostilities, I believe he was the first to spot the Japanese crossing the Lei Ye Mun passage to land on Hongkong Island; unfortunately, his report of the landing went unheeded.

In the PoW camp he and I often played chess. He was a very good player, yet another one of his achievements. I recall those surprise roll calls which the Japanese always called at night; Ken and I contrived to stand next to each other and passed the time by playing mental chess. I could seldom get beyond eight or 10 moves, after which Ken would continue making moves for both of us.

It was in camp, later on, when he spoke up to the visiting Swiss Red Cross officials about a shortage of food and medicine, an act of great courage for which he was severely beaten by his captors.

After the war, when Hongkong had begun to recover from the ravages of occupation, a fresh spirit of idealism and cultural aspirations started to grow. Ken Barnett embraced the new mood with enthusiasm and dedication.

He became the moving spirit behind and the first chairman of, the newly-established Sino-British Club, whose noble object was to bring together Chinese and British people in a mutual spirit of tolerance and understanding. Alas, the idealism did not last long in our all-too-materialistic Hongkong. The Sino-British Club today is but a memory, but at least one of its seeds — the present Hongkong Philharmonic Orchestra — has thrived and grown to maturity.

I knew him less well in his capacity as a senior administrative officer in government service and have not touched on his achievements there, but perhaps one of his former colleagues might do this.

A big and jovial man, he was kind and considerate; a brilliant raconteur with a marvellous sense of humour. He visited Hongkong regularly to stay with his daughter and son-in-law, Sai Chan and David Roseveare, and renew old friendships.

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On these occasions he delighted us with stories of his experiences in Malawi and other countries where he worked after leaving Hongkong.

His death is a great loss not only to his family and many friends but also to Hongkong to which he gave so much and to the scholarship which he so enriched.

SOLOMON BARD

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