

A year's housekeeping in Pietermaritzburg

by Stephen Coan

When Lady Mary Anne Barker arrived in Pietermaritzburg in late October 1875 she brought with her a considerable reputation as a journalist, novelist, editor and diarist. She had come to the Natal capital from England to join her husband, Frederick Napier Broome, who had taken up the post of Natal colonial secretary in March.¹

Early years

Natal certainly wasn't Lady Barker's first taste of colonial life: in 1831 she was born at Spanish Town in Jamaica to parents Susan and Walter Stewart, the latter acting colonial secretary.² In 1835, aged four she was sent to Ireland and then England for her education, living there in the care of relatives. She returned to Jamaica in 1847. Unscathed by two earthquakes as well as cholera and smallpox epidemics, in 1852 she married Captain George Robert Barker of the Royal Artillery (RA) and almost immediately suffered a near-fatal bout of malaria. Her health restored, the couple left Jamaica when Barker was posted to RA headquarters at Woolwich in London, where their first child, Jack, was born in 1853. Barker's service during the Crimean War earned him a colonelcy and in 1857 (leaving behind a pregnant wife who subsequently gave birth to their second son, George) he left for India, where his role in the relief of Lucknow during the Indian Rebellion gained him a knighthood; thus Anne Barker

became Lady Barker. In 1860, leaving her two children in England, she went to join her husband who she found in shocking ill-health. He died of hepatitis in 1861. Of their eight years of marriage, they had spent only three together.

Lady Barker returned to England and in 1865, via family connections, met Frederick Napier Broome then on a visit to England from New Zealand where he ran a sheep station. Tall, dark and good looking, Broome was described by the poet Robert Browning as 'one of the handsomest men I ever saw'.³ Anne and Fredrick fell for each other and, despite his being eleven years younger, when he proposed she accepted. However, she retained her title; not out of snobbery as some claimed, but because it was a requirement of her continuing to receive the military pension to which she was entitled as the widow of Sir George Barker.

Her sons Jack and George happily settled with relatives, the couple went to live and work at the Steventon Station near Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island. Barker gave birth in March 1866 but shortly afterwards the baby (a boy, christened Frederick) succumbed to infant diarrhoea. In 1869 they returned to England where another son, Guy, was born in 1870, and where Barker's experiences in New Zealand would furnish the material for her first book, written at the suggestion of publisher Alexander Macmillan (he had published her husband's poetry)



Lady Mary Anne Barker, London, c.1874 (reproduced in Betty Gilderdale, The Seven Lives of Lady Barker, courtesy Ann Duff).



Frederick Broome, London, c.1874

that she 'might think of writing down a feminine point of view of their time in New Zealand.'⁴ Consequently she worked up her diaries and letters from New Zealand to relatives into *Station Life in New Zealand*. Published in 1870 it became an instant bestseller.

Barker then embarked on a series of children's stories published as *Stories About*, featuring tales from Jamaica, India and New Zealand. The books' success persuaded her to embark on a literary career. So had her husband, becoming a book reviewer and subsequently special correspondent for *The Times*. He also proved an innovative secretary of the St Paul's Completion Committee and, thanks to her husband's connection with this committee, Barker was invited in 1872 to become the founding editor of a Church of England magazine, *Evening Hours*. It targeted a female audience and dealing with literary and social issues, to which she also contributed articles on domestic matters, cooking and how to organise a dinner party, as well as crusading features on child rearing and the rights of servants, always willing 'to be outspoken whenever she saw injustice.'⁵

Barker also wrote another children's book, *Holiday Stories for Boys and Girls*, and a further collection of New Zealand reminiscences, *Station Amusements in New Zealand*, both published in 1873; followed the next year by *Sybil's Book*, an English response to Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Women* and Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did*. All three titles were highly successful and well reviewed.⁶

When Broome was offered the post in Natal, Barker was seven months pregnant with her fifth child and busy on her twelfth book. 'It required a good deal of courage to again suddenly and violently alter our mode of life, especially as only a few hours could be allowed for decision.'⁷ According to Betty Gilderdale, Barker's biographer, her husband's appointment came as a bombshell. As she was now a well-established writer, pragmatic considerations won the day: 'A career in the Colonial Service would offer them the chance of adventure as well as a secure income.'⁸

Lady Anne Barker in Natal

Broome sailed for Natal while Barker remained in London where, after giving birth to another son, Louis, in April 1875, she stood down as editor of *Evening Hours* in September and, accompanied by a nanny for five-year-old Guy and the seven-month-old Louis, plus a French cook and a butler, she sailed for Natal aboard the *Edinburgh Castle* and arrived in Cape Town in mid-October 1875.

Prior to her departure she arranged to send her 'Letters from Africa' to *Evening Hours*, which were subsequently published in book form as *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*. The title is an accurate one as matters domestic predominate, recorded in a humorous, often ironic tone; though admittedly with paternalistic racial overtones unacceptable today. Nevertheless, *A Year's Housekeeping in Africa* furnishes a fascinating and intimate window into colonial life in the Natal capital of the period.

Barker is not above self-criticism: 'it is exceedingly absurd the way I dilate incessantly upon three topics: roads (I promise faithfully not to say a word about them this time), weather (I have had my grumble at that, and feel all the better for it), and servants.'⁹ For Barker, roads are either exceedingly dusty or rain-soaked and muddy, non-existent or impassable. Her commentary on the weather and its infinite varieties is such that her record of it, in these times of climate change 150 years later, would likely be of interest to meteorologists. Of servants, black and white, there are frequent diversions and digressions as to their merits and shortcomings. But other, more public events, feature in her letters as well, including the turning of the first sod of the railway from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, a 'tea and witches' party and a visit to Edendale.

In December 1875 excitement was growing in Natal as the first day of the coming new year would mark the turning of the first sod of the Natal Government Railways link from Durban to Pietermaritzburg. Describing the event, Barker cautioned her readers that it was

all very well for you conceited dwellers in the Old and New Worlds to laugh at us for making such a fuss about a projected hundred miles of railway – you whose countries are made into dissected maps by the magic iron lines but for poor us, who have to drag every pound of sugar and reel of sewing cotton over some sixty miles of vile road between [Durban] and Maritzburg, such a line, if it be ever finished, will be a boon and a blessing indeed.¹⁰

New Year's Day 1876 was, according to the *Natal Mercury*, the 'gayest, brightest and most joyful day Natal ever witnessed.'¹¹ To suit the occasion Broome 'got himself into his gold-laced coat'. Meanwhile Lady Barker had donned her 'best gown' horrified

to find how much a smart bonnet (the first time I have needed to wear one since I left England) sets off and brings out the shades of tan in a sun-browned face; and for a moment I too entertain the idea of retreating once more to the protecting depths of my old shady hat. But a strong conviction of the duty one owes to a 'first sod', and the consoling reflection that, after all,

everybody will be equally brown (a fallacy, by the way: the D'Urban beauties looked very blanched by this hot summer weather), supported me, and I followed F[rederick] and his cocked hat into the waiting carriage.¹²

Barker and her husband rode in the mayor's carriage together with Durban's mayor Benjamin Greenacre, Sir Henry Bulwer, lieutenant-governor of Natal, his military aide-de-camp Captain William Cox, and his secretary nineteen-year-old Henry Rider Haggard who, a decade later, would gain worldwide fame as the author of *King Solomon's Mines*.¹³

Their carriage took up its position in the rear of a half-mile procession which at the strike of noon moved off to the sound of bands playing and crowds cheering. At its head rode 28 mounted troopers of Pietermaritzburg's volunteer regiment the Natal Carbineers; 'a plucky little handful of light horse clad in blue and silver, who have marched, at their own charges, all the way down from Maritzburg to help keep the ground this fine New Year's Day.' These were followed by 35 troopers of the Victoria Mounted Rifles preceding a 'strong body of Kafir police, trudging along through the dust with odd shuffling gait, bended knees, bare legs, bodies leaning forward, and keeping step and time by means of a queer sort of barbaric hum and grunt.'¹⁴

After the police came the fife and drum band of the Royal Durban Rifles, hundreds of school children, members of the Ancient Order of Forests, Independent Order of Oddfellows, Independent Order of Templars, a brass band, artillery, town councillors, heads of department, magistrates, consuls, Government Railways engineer staff, members of the legislative and executive councils and finally the mayor's carriage. The procession came in sight of the spot where the sod was to be turned: a grand triumphal arch bearing the words 'God Save the Queen' beneath which the first sod lay 'looking very faded and depressed, with a little sunburned grass growing feebly on it, but still a genuine sod and no mistake'; beside it a spade and a wheelbarrow.¹⁵

According to Barker every

white person on the ground was well clad, well fed, and apparently well-to-do. The 'lower orders' were represented by a bright fringe of coolies and Kafirs, sleek, grinning and as fat as ortolans, especially the babies. Most of the Kafirs were dressed in snow-white knickerbockers and shirts bordered by gay bands of colour, with fillets of scarlet ribbon tied round their heads, while as for the coolies, they shone out like a shifting bed of tulips, so bright were the women's 'chuddahs' and the men's jackets.¹⁶

Public enthusiasm 'rose to its height when to the sound of a vigorous band ... a perfect Liliputian mob of toddling children came on the ground ... all in their cleanest white frocks and prettiest hats: they clung to each other and to their garlands and staves of flowers.' The scene reminded Barker of a May-Day fete: 'Not that any English May Day of my acquaintance could produce such a lavish profusion of roses and buds and blossoms of every hue and tint, to say nothing of such a sun and sky.'¹⁷

The children sang 'God Save the Queen':

Cheers from white throats; gruff, loud shouts all together of 'Bayete!' (the royal salute) and 'Inkosi!' (chieftain) from black throats; yells, expressive of excitement and general good-fellowship, from throats of all colours. Then a moment's solemn pause, a hushed silence, bared heads, and the loud, clear tones of a very old pastor in the land were heard imploring the blessing of Almighty God on this our undertaking.¹⁸ Again the sweet childish trebles rose into the sunshine in a chanted Amen, and then there were salutes from cannon, *feu-de-joie* from carbines, and more shoutings, and all the cocked hats were to be seen bowing; and then one more tremendous burst of cheering told that the sod was cut and turned and trundled, and finally pitched out of the new barrow back again upon the dusty soil all in the most artistic and satisfactory fashion.¹⁹

Ceremony concluded

we elders betook ourselves to the grateful shade and coolness of the flower-decked new market-hall, open to-day for the first time, and turned by flags and ferns and lavish wealth of what in England are costliest hothouse flowers into a charming banqueting hall ... Nothing could be more creditable to a young colony than the way everything was arranged, for the difficulties in one's culinary path in Natal are hardly to be appreciated by English housekeepers.²⁰

Barker was 'much amused at the substantial and homely character' of the menu which included a 'favourite specimen of the confectioner's art ... a sort of solid brick of plum pudding, with, for legend, "The First Sod" tastefully picked out in white almonds on its dark surface.'²¹

On Easter Sunday, 16 April 1876 young Haggard was writing to his mother and at a loss for words: 'I saw a curious sight the other day, a witch dance. I cannot attempt to describe it, it is a weird sort of thing.' To remedy his inadequacy Haggard recommended his mother buy a copy of *Evening Hours* the month after she received his letter in which she would find 'a very good description' written by Lady Barker.²² The 'witch dance' was hosted by Barker at her home

on Mountain Rise, a ridge to the north of Pietermaritzburg enjoying a splendid view across the city to the Edendale valley beyond. Apart from its red-tiled roof, Lady Barker disliked the red-brick single-storey house: 'it is so squat and square'.²³ Rented from the city's chief baker, she christened it Cottage Loaf.²⁴

Barker's invitation cards bore the legend 'Tea and Witches' and on Wednesday afternoon 29 March guests began assembling in the garden and on the veranda of Cottage Loaf. Tea was at 5.00 pm. As well as the invited guests, others turned up simply to satisfy their curiosity, the objects of which had arrived at 2.00 pm 'escorted by nearly the whole black population of Maritzburg' shouting and singing outside the garden fence. There were five 'witches' who, as Lady Barker was at pains to point out, were not witches at all, but witch finders or witch-doctors, which she rendered in Zulu as *abangoma* or *izinyanga* (in current orthography, *isangomas* and *inyangas*), the former diviners, the latter herbalists. The presence of the five women, named as Nozinyanga, Nozilwane, Nomarusu, Umgiteni and Umanonjazzla, aroused 'a strong undercurrent of interest and excitement beneath the light laughter and frolic of our summer-afternoon tea-party'.²⁵

Barker informed her English readers that the 'terrible interest attaching to these women' related to their role in Zulu society where, as she explained, it was 'the custom whenever anything went wrong, either politically or socially ... to attribute the shortcomings to witch-agency.' The next step was

to seek out and destroy the witch or witches; and for this purpose a great meeting would be summoned by order of the king, and under his superintendence, a large ring, some four or five deep, of natives would sit trembling and in fear of their lives on the ground. In the centre of these danced the witch-finders or witch-doctors; and as they gradu-



Cottage Loaf, Lady Barker and Frederick Broome's residence in Pietermaritzburg (a drawing by Harold Bailey, reproduced in Betty Gilderdale, The Seven Lives of Lady Barker and credited to the Natal Witness, 31 March 1976)

ally lashed themselves up to a frantic state of frenzy – bordering, in fact, on demoniacal possession – they lightly switched with their quagga [zebra] tail one or other of the quivering spectators. No sooner had the fatal brush passed over the victim than he was dragged away and butchered on the spot; and not only he, but all the live things in his hut – wives and children, dogs and cats – not a stick left standing or a living creature breathing. Sometimes a whole kraal was exterminated in this fashion; and it need not be told what a method it became of gratifying private revenge and paying off old scores.²⁶



'Witch doctors' (frontispiece to Lady Barker, A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa, which references a 'tea and witch' dance held at her home in Pietermaritzburg)

Morbid expectations aside, there was another reason for the palpable frisson among those present. In colonial Natal the perceived excesses of Zulu culture had been suppressed; Natal Africans were forbidden to consult 'witch-doctors' and consequently Barker's tea party was breaking the law, something that made her husband, a senior colonial official, distinctly uneasy; feelings he made known to his wife by

observing from time to time that my proceedings were at once illegal and improper, adding that he was surprised at me. Can you imagine anyone more trying? And yet I knew quite well all the time that he was just as anxious to see these people as we were, only he persisted in being semi-official and disagreeable. Never mind, I triumphed over him afterward, when it all went off so well.²⁷

Five o'clock, the appointed hour for refreshments, brought with it 'a regiment of riders, thirsting for tea and clamorous to see the witches, wanting their fortunes told, their lost trinkets found, and Heaven knows what besides.'²⁸ Among them was the Natal Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, and the chief interpreter for the Natal government, Frederick Fynney, who was to act as master of ceremonies. While tea was served Fynney went off to fetch the 'witch finders' who appeared 'in full official dress, walking along in a measured, stately step, keeping time and tune to the chanting of a body-guard of girls and women ... They made an excellent stage-entrance grove, composed, erect of carriage and dauntless of mien.' Walking past the veranda, they raised their right hands 'with the low cry of "Inkosi!" in salutation'.²⁹ The guests took up their position 'at one side of the little semi-circular lawn, where the dance-crescent was already formed, supplying ourselves the place of the supposed ring of spectators and victims.'³⁰

Proceedings were 'opened by a small, lithe woman with a wonderfully pathetic, wistful face ... who in her day must doubtless have brushed away many a man's life with the quagga's tail she brandished so harmlessly.'³¹ This 'terrible little sorceress' was Nozilwane, 'who frightened more than one of us more thoroughly than we should like to acknowledge, peering up in our faces, as she hung about the group of guests, with a weird and wistful glance which was both uncanny and uncomfortable.' Nozilwane wore lynx skins 'folded over and over from waist to knee' and her upper body was covered 'by strings of wild beasts' teeth and fangs, skeins of brilliantly hued yarn, beads, strips of snake skin and fringes of Angora goat fleece.' Lynx tails 'hung

down like lappets on each side of her face, which was overshadowed, almost hidden, by the profusion of sakabula feathers in which small bladders were interspersed, and skewers and pins fashioned out of tusks.' Nozilwane moved with

a creeping, cat-like gesture, bent double, as if she were seeking out a trail. Every movement of her undulating body kept time to the beat of the girls' hands and the low, crooning chant. Presently, she affected to find the clew she sought, and sprang aloft with a series of wild pirouettes, shaking her spears and brandishing her little shield in a frenzied fashion.³²

The other women 'joined in hunting out a phantom foe, and triumphed over his discovery in turn, but being older than Nozilwane, were soon breathless and exhausted, and glad to be led away by some of the attendant women to be anointed and to drink water.'³³

The 'chanting and hand beating never ceased, the babies dozed placidly behind their mothers' backs, and we all began to think fondly of a second cup of tea.' The sun was setting behind the hills to the west of Pietermaritzburg and 'the audience looked about for some means of ending the affair. "Let us test their powers of finding things. I have lost a silver pipe stem, which I value much," whispered one of the party.' Though not identified by Barker it is possible this was Haggard. 'So the five wise women were bidden to discover what was lost, and where it was to be found.' Nomaruso stepped forth sporting 'a magnificent snake skin, studded besides in a regular pattern with brass-headed nails, which floated like a streamer down her back' and a 'magnificent kilt of leopard skins decorated with red rosettes'.³⁴

She spoke in her own rapid, broken utterance, in her own language: 'Is this real? is it a test? is it but a show? do the white chiefs want to laugh at our pretensions? ... Is anything really lost? is it not hidden? No, it is lost. Is it lost by a black person? No, a white person has lost it. Is it lost by the great white chief? (meaning their own King of Hearts, their native minister [Shepstone]). No, it is lost by an ordinary white man. Let me see what it is that is lost. Is it money? No. Is it a weighty thing? No, it can be always carried about: it is not heavy. All people like to carry it, especially the white inkosi. It is made of the same metal as money.'³⁵

At which point Nomaruso ran out of ideas and Nozilwane stepped into the breach: "'His pipe ... A thing which has come off his pipe;" and so it is ... A grunt and a murmur of admiration goes round.'³⁶

The short African twilight drawing on 'the black people were anxious to get back to their homes' and the

‘the crowd of spectators ... melted away like magic, streaming down the green hillsides by many a different track.’³⁷ Lady Barker and her guests remained sitting on the veranda enjoying ‘the last lovely gleams of daylight and chatting over the strange, weird scene ... and we all fell to talking of the custom when it was in all its savage force.’³⁸ The ceremonies witnessed by Haggard in the garden of Cottage Loaf on a balmy autumn afternoon would find their way into *King Solomon's Mines*.

Not long after the tea party Barker along with a small party on horseback ‘took a long ride to Edendale, a Mission Station some half-dozen miles away.’ She describes a sylvan scene:

Across many a little tributary of the Umsendusi [Msunduzi], by many a still green valley and round many a rocky hill-shoulder, our road lay; a road which for me was most pleasantly beguiled by stories of Natal as it used to be five and twenty years ago, when lions came down to drink at these streams; when these very plains were thickly studded with buck, eland, buffalo, and big game.³⁹

In 1875 there is ‘nothing more to be seen but rolling hill-slopes bare of bush or shrub, until the eye is caught by the trees around the settlement we are on our way to visit ... nestling up against the high, rising ground, with patches of mealies spread in a green fan around and following the course of the winding river in tall green rustling brakes like sugar-cane.’⁴⁰ After crossing a stream, the party

turned up a sort of avenue which led to the main street of the settlement, then there was life and movement enough and to spare. Forth upon the calm air rang the merry voices of children, of women carrying on laughing dialogues across the street, and of men's deeper toned, but quite as fluent, jabber. And here are the speakers themselves greeting us as we leave the shade of the trees and come out upon the wide street rising up before us towards the mountain slope which ends its vista. Sitting at the doors of their houses are tidy, comfortable-looking men and women, the former busy plaiting, with deft and rapid movements of their lithe fingers, neat baskets and mats of reeds and rushes; the latter either eating mealies, shelling them, or crushing them for market. Everywhere are mealies and children ... No grass-thatched huts are here, but thoroughly nice respectable little houses of adobe brick, nearly all of the same simple pattern, with vermilion or yellow ochre doors, and all half-covered with creepers.⁴¹

Edendale was a Wesleyan mission station and Barker felt it incumbent

to bear testimony, not only in this instance and in this colony, to the enormous amount of real, tangible,

common-sense good accomplished among the black races all over the world by Wesleyan, Methodist, and Baptist missions and missionaries. I am a staunch Churchwoman myself, and yield to no one in pure love and reverence for my own form of worship; but I do not see why that should hinder me from acknowledging facts which I have noticed all my life.⁴²

There were ‘over a hundred houses in the village (it is called George Town, after Sir George Grey),⁴³ and into some of these houses I went by special and eager invitation of the owners. You have no idea how clean and comfortable they were, nor what a good notion of decoration the civilised Kafir has.’ The interior walls

were the gayest I ever beheld. Originally white-washed, they had been absolutely covered with brilliant designs in vermilion, cobalt, and yellow ochre, most correctly and symmetrically drawn in geometrical figures. A many-coloured star within a circle was a favourite pattern. The effect was as dazzling as though a kaleidoscope had been suddenly flung against a wall and its gay shapes fixed on it.⁴⁴

Barker walked among

the fertile fields with their rich and abundant crops standing ready for the sickle, or looked down into the sheltered nooks where luxuriant gardens of vegetables flourished, it was difficult to believe that ever since the first blade of grass or corn was put in until now, those fields and gardens had never known any artificial dressing or manuring of any kind or sort. For more than twenty years the soil has yielded abundantly without an hour's rest or manuring, or any further cultivation than a very light plough could give. The advantages of irrigation, so shamefully overlooked elsewhere, were here abundantly recognised, and every few yards brought one to a diminutive channel made by a hoe in a few minutes, bearing from the hill above a bright trickle down to the gardens and houses ... The Edendale people already look forward to the days when they shall have outgrown their present limits, and have purchased two very large farms a hundred miles farther in the interior, to which several of the original settlers of the parent mission have migrated and so formed a fresh example of thrift and industry and a fresh nucleus of civilisation in another wild part.⁴⁵

Barker was particularly impressed by the girls' school and its curriculum:

just think what a boon it would be if the most intelligent and promising among the girls could be drafted from this school, say at twelve years old, into a training school where they could be taught to sew and to wash, and other homely accomplishments. There is no place in the colony where one can turn for a good female servant, and yet here are all these nice sharp little girls only wanting the opportunity of learning to grow up into

capital servants and good future wives, above merely picking mealies or hoeing the ground.⁴⁶

The above may be undeniably patronising but it duplicates social action and reforms aimed at the lower classes in England and elsewhere at the time. It should also be noted Barker was not unaware of racial prejudice in Natal: 'When one first arrives one is told, as a frightful piece of intelligence, that there are 300,000 Kafirs in Natal and only 17,000 whites. The next remark is that immigration is the cure for all the evils of the country, and that we want more white people.' She vehemently disagreed:

it seems to me that is just what we don't want, - at least white people of what are called the lower classes. Of course, every colony is the better for the introduction of skilled labour and intelligence of every kind, no matter how impecunious it may be. But the first thing a white person of any class at all does here, is to set up Kafirs under him, whom he knocks about as much as he dares, complaining all the time of their ignorance and stupidity. Everybody turns at once into a master and an independent gentleman with black servants under him.⁴⁷

In Barker's opinion this situation would be remedied

if we were only to import a small number of teachers and trained artisans of the highest procurable degree of efficiency, we could establish training schools in connection with the missions which are scattered all over the country and which have been doing an immense amount of good silently all these years. In this way we might gradually use up the material we have all ready to our hand in these swarming black people; and it appears to me as if it would be more likely to succeed than bringing shiploads of ignorant, idle whites into the colony.

She believed Natal would 'never be an attractive country to European immigrants' and that if it was not to be 'crowded out of the list of progressive English colonies by its black population, we must devise some scheme for bringing them into the great brotherhood of civilisation.' Barker concluded the account of her Edendale visit with a plea for support: 'I want some of you rich people to encourage the Edendale settlers by helping them with their existing schools, and, if possible, setting up training schools where boys could be taught carpentering and other trades, and the girls housewifery; and I want the same idea taken up, and enlarged, and gradually carried out on a grand scale all over the country.'⁴⁸

In June, Barker was involved with the bazaar held to raise funds for the Natal Literary Society 'which has been in existence some little time, struggling to form

the nucleus of a Public Library and Reading room, giving lectures, and so forth, to provide some sort of elevating and refining influence for the more thoughtful townspeople.' The bazaar was a great success and

after paying all expenses, 2,000 guineas stand at the Bank to the credit of the Society. I must say I was astonished at the financial result, and very delighted, too, for it is an excellent undertaking, and one in which I feel the warmest interest, but this sum, large as it is for our slender resources, will only barely build a place suitable for a library and reading-room, and to form the nucleus of a museum. We want gifts of books, and maps, and prints, and nice things of all kinds; and I hope some day it may occur to some one to help us in this way.⁴⁹

'Such an expedition as we have just made!' exclaims Barker at the beginning of her final letter written on 15 September 1876.⁵⁰ Since her arrival in Pietermaritzburg she had been lamenting 'the utter treelessness of Natal' and longed to 'see something more than a small plantation of blue gums, infantine oaks and baby firs, making a dot here and there amid the eternal undulation of low hills around.'⁵¹ Voicing this complaint she would be regaled with stories of the Seven-Mile Bush, the figure being an indicator of its length along the south-facing hills above the Mkhomazi valley. Now Barker was finally going there along with husband Frederick guided by a Mr C.⁵²

It proved an arduous but worthwhile journey: at the top of the ridge

up which we climbed after crossing Eland's River a perfectly new and enchanting landscape opened out before us, and it gained in majesty and beauty with every succeeding mile of our journey. Ah! how can I make you see it in all its grandeur of form and glory of colour? The ground is broken up abruptly in magnificent masses, cliffs, terraces, and rocky crags. The hills expand into abrupt mountain ranges, serrated in bold relief against the loveliest sky blazing with coming sunset splendours. Every cleft or *kloof*, as it is called here, is filled with fragments of the giant forest which until quite lately must have clothed these rugged mountain sides.⁵³

The barking of dogs welcomed their arrival at the farmhouse where they would stay overnight. After a day's hard riding Barker was happy to be

on my feet at last in such a pretty sitting-room. Pictures, books, papers, all sorts of comforts and conveniences, and – sight of joy – a tea-table all ready even to the teapot, which had been brought in when the dogs announced us. It is always a marvel to me, arriving at night at these out-of-the-way places which seem the very Ultima Thule of the habitable globe, how the

furniture, the glass and china, the pictures and ornaments and books get there ... One fancies if one lived here it must needs be a Robinson Crusoe existence, instead of which it was all as comfortable as possible, and if one did not remember the distance and the road and the country, one might be in England.⁵⁴

Before going to the Seven-Mile Bush, Barker and her husband felt obliged

to go and look at the great saw-mill down by the Umkomanzi [Mkhomazi], where all these giant trees are divided and subdivided, cut into lengths of twenty feet, sawn into planks half a dozen at a time, and otherwise changed from forest kings to plain humdrum piles and posts and slabs for bridges, roof-trees, walls, and what not.⁵⁵

Then on to the

bush, the grass of the downs over which we walked had all the elasticity of tread of turf to our feet, but they ended abruptly in a sort of terrace under which ran a noisy, chattering brooklet in a vast hurry to reach the Umkomanzi over yonder. It is easy to scramble down among the tangle of ferns and reeds and across the boulders which this long dry winter has left bare and to strike one of the bushmen's paths without difficulty, and get into the heart of the forest before we allow ourselves to sit down and look around us. How wonderfully poetical and beautiful it all is! The tall, stately trees around us with their smooth, magnificent boles shooting up straight as a willow wand for sixty feet and more before putting forth their crown of leafy branches, the more diminutive undergrowth of gracefulest shrubs and plummy tufts of fern and lovely wild flowers, violets, clematis, wood anemones, and hepaticas showing here and there a modest gleam of colour. But indeed the very mosses and lichens at our feet are a week's study, and so are the details of the delicate green tracery creeping close to the ground. The trees, the actual great forest-trees, are our delight, however, and we never weary of calling to each other to come and 'look at this one'.⁵⁶

As they relaxed into their surroundings Barker reflected that it was 'half sad, half amusing to see how in an hour or so we too begin to look upon everything as timber, to call the most splendid trees "blocks" (the woodman's word), and to speculate and give opinions as to the best way of "felling" the beautiful stems.'⁵⁷

In the first decade of the twentieth century, looking back over her life, Barker would rank the Seven-Mile Bush as one of the three 'most distinct memories of beautiful scenes' that she had seen in her life, the first two being the Himalayas and the Niagara Falls, the third

that long, lonely morning in the magnificent forest in the heart of Natal, the recollection of which dwarfs all other trees to insignificance. The growth not only

of giant timber but of exquisite under-growth of ferns and delicate foliage was indeed superb. Of flowers there were none, because the sun could not enter those cathedral glades except at the very edge and outskirts where the big trees had been felled.⁵⁸

Return to England and last years

Unmentioned in Barker's letters published in *Evening Hours* was the fact she was in extremely poor health: suffering from dysentery, presumably from drinking the water, and consequent weakness and depression. Her doctor recommended she return to England to recover her health. Earlier, in August, she had written to Alexander Macmillan proposing her letters to *Evening Hours* be published in book form as a companion to *Station Life in New Zealand*, adding that they would need editing as she had never seen proofs prior to publication in magazine form. Macmillan sent her the proofs and having corrected them she returned them to Macmillan saying she would bring any later letters to England herself 'for I am coming home please god, by the mail [ship] ... Repeated attacks of dysentery have nearly killed me and the doctors say it is my one chance to get home at once before the hot weather.'⁵⁹

Barker arrived back in England, settled Guy and Louis with relatives and went to Mauritius where her husband was now acting governor as well as colonial secretary. In 1879 after the invasion of Zululand and the British defeat at Isandlwana in January 1879 a call went out for reinforcements from Britain as well as colonies closer to hand, including Mauritius. Broome judged the situation 'sufficiently desperate to justify sending almost the entire Mauritian Army to the aid of the colonists.' Barker organised a fund to buy medical supplies for the relief of the sick and wounded. She would later describe the Anglo-Zulu War as one 'which many people think was both cruel and unnecessary and which never need have happened at all.'⁶⁰

Barker's time in Mauritius was 'sadly marred by ill-health, which finally drove me home in 1881' where she remained until her husband was appointed governor of Western Australia in 1882. In 1884 Broome was knighted and thereafter Barker edited and wrote as Lady Broome. When Broome's tenure ended in 1890, he was transferred to Barbados to serve as acting governor and in July 1891 appointed governor of Trinidad. 'Our time there was drawing to a close in 1896 ... when, like a bolt out of the blue, came an illness full of suffering which speedily put an end to a career of great promise.'⁶¹ The disease was diabetes and led to blood

poisoning. They returned to London where Broome died in November 1896, eight days after his 54th birthday.

Lady Broome subsequently led a retired life, travelling once to the United States to visit a sister. She died of heart disease in 1911 at the age of 80 and was buried alongside her husband in Highgate cemetery. Seven years earlier she had published a final volume of reminiscence, *Colonial Memories*. A reviewer in *The Press*, the daily newspaper published in Christchurch, New Zealand drew attention to

Her bright style, playful humour, and vivid descriptions, for a story never lost anything in the telling, combined to give her books a wide popularity ... Her life has been rich in varied experiences. She is a keen observer, not only of mankind but of nature generally ... and we get an insight into a kindly, sympathetic, clever personality.⁶²

- Some portions of this article appear in slightly different form in Stephen Coan, *The Buried Man: A Life of Rider Haggard* (London: Hurst, 2025). Lady Anne Barker's *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa* was published in London by Macmillan in 1877. The content was drawn from her letters written for publication in the magazine *Evening Hours* which, as mentioned above, she proofed and edited prior to their publication in book form. In 1877 the book was also published in the United States under the title *Life in South Africa* by Lippincott of Philadelphia. This edition was reprinted in facsimile by Negro Universities Press, New York, in 1969. The text of the American edition was taken from the letters as published in *Evening Hours*; in other words, it was not proofed by Barker. This is clear as there are minor editorial amendments and, more importantly, material cut by Barker from the English edition. The American edition was probably pirated as there were no copyright agreements between Britain and the United States at the time. This could also account for it being an unattractive volume with text printed in two columns per page and minus the nine illustrations and several other decorative elements present in the English edition. In the above article I have in the main used quotations from *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa* as well as some from *Life in South Africa*. Both texts are duly referenced in the notes.

NOTES

- 1 Frederick Broome was appointed colonial secretary of Natal after Sir Garnet Wolseley's appointment as an interim governor following the recall of Benjamin Pine due to the controversy sparked by the brutal suppression of the Langalibalele rebellion and the subsequent rigged trial of the Hlubi *inkosi*.
- 2 The post of colonial secretary was a sinecure. Consequently, appointee Charles Greville (1794–1865) never took up the post and his duties were performed by the acting secretary. Greville gained posthumous fame for his diaries published in 1874.
- 3 Quoted in Betty Gilderdale, *The Seven Lives of Lady Barker* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, new ed., 2009): 100 (first published in Auckland by David Bateman, 1996).
- 4 *ibid*: 157.
- 5 *ibid*: 192. These articles formed the basis for her book *Houses and Housekeeping* (1876). In 1873 she was chosen to be an adviser to the International Exhibition of 1873 which had a cookery section. The following year she was invited to be the first superintendent of the National School of Cookery set up by the Victorian visionary Sir Henry Cole, inventor of the Christmas card.
- 6 Lady Barker's books on New Zealand, where she remains a well-known figure, are an important part of the country's historiography.
- 7 Lady Broome, *Colonial Memories* (London: Smith, Elder, 1904): xvii.
- 8 Gilderdale, *The Seven Lives of Lady Barker*: 198.
- 9 Lady Barker, *Life in South Africa* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1877): 68.
- 10 Lady Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1877): 80.
- 11 Quoted in Bruno Martin and Michael Cottrell (eds), *The Natal Old Main Line from Durban to Pietermaritzburg* (Montclair: KwaZulu-Natal Railway History Society, 2015): appendix 1: 177.
- 12 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 88.
- 13 Haggard came to Natal in 1875 as an intern on the staff of Lieutenant-Governor Sir Henry Bulwer who took over the reins from the interim Special Commissioner Sir Garnet Wolseley.
- 14 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 89.
- 15 *ibid*.
- 16 *ibid*: 90.
- 17 *ibid*.
- 18 William Henry Cynric Lloyd (1802–1881), appointed archdeacon of Durban from 1869. Jemima Charlotte Lloyd (1837–1909) married philologist and librarian Wilhelm Bleek. He worked with his wife's sister Lucy Lloyd (1834–1914) to create the Bleek and Lloyd Archive of *!xam* and *!kun* texts.
- 19 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 91.
- 20 *ibid*: 92.
- 21 *ibid*.
- 22 H. Rider Haggard to his mother, Ella Haggard, Easter Sunday, 16 April 1876 (Cheyne Collection).
- 23 Barker, *Life in South Africa*: 24.
- 24 Cottage Loaf later became Cowan House Preparatory School, but with the implementation of the Group Areas Act in the 1960s the pupils were relocated as the area was designated Indian. The house was demolished in 1976. On its site today stands the Arthur Blaxall School for the Deaf and Blind.
- 25 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 178.
- 26 *ibid*: 177–178.
- 27 *ibid*: 171–172.
- 28 *ibid*: 172.
- 29 *ibid*.
- 30 *ibid*: 174.
- 31 *ibid*: 177.
- 32 *ibid*: 179–180. Sakabula feathers are the long floppy tail feathers from the male Longtailed Widow in breeding plumage. The Zulu name for the bird is iSakabuli, corrupted variously as saccaboola, saccabula and sakabula.
- 33 *ibid*: 180.
- 34 *ibid*: 181.
- 35 *ibid*: 183.

- 36 *ibid*: 184. Did the pipe stem belong to Haggard? In his autobiography Haggard recalls the 'witch dance' at Cottage Loaf and says 'I remember that the doctress soon discovered an article I thought was gone forever' (*The Days of My Life, Volume 1* (London: Longmans, 1926): 57).
- 37 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 185–186.
- 38 *ibid*: 187.
- 39 *ibid*: 193.
- 40 *ibid*: 194.
- 41 *ibid*: 195–196.
- 42 *ibid*: 196.
- 43 Sir George Grey (1812–1898), governor of Cape Colony 1854–1861.
- 44 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 202–203.
- 45 *ibid*: 199–202.
- 46 *ibid*: 206–207.
- 47 *ibid*: 207.
- 48 *ibid*: 209.
- 49 *ibid*: 224. 'Founded in Pietermaritzburg in 1851, the Natal Society has served the scientific and literary interests of the community of KwaZulu-Natal ... for more than 160 years. It founded a museum (now a leading national institution) and the largest privately owned library system in the country (now run by Msunduzi Municipality). The society's leading members also played an instrumental role in the establishment of a university, the country's largest agricultural society show, a philharmonic society and a dramatic arts society. Today the Natal Society Foundation Trust continues the original aims of the society: "the general encouragement of habits of study, investigation and research" by publishing *Natalia* and providing funding to support scholarship, research and publications' (adapted from <https://natalia.org.za/>, accessed 28 July 2025).
- 50 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 315.
- 51 *ibid*: 316.
- 52 I have not been able to identify Mr C. It is possible he is Benjamin Harrington (1827–1902). The Seven-Mile Bush was on the property named Deepdale owned by Harrington; see Shelagh O'Byrne Spencer, *British Settlers in Natal: A Biographical Register, Volume 8* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016): 91. The dominant species in the Seven-Mile Bush was the soft-wooded *Podocarpaceae*, or yellowwood.
- 53 Barker, *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*: 319–320.
- 54 *ibid*: 323–324.
- 55 *ibid*: 326. In the original letter published in *Evening Hours* a longer account is given of this visit to the mill with details about the 'two white men employed about this mill ... at once repellent and interesting'. Barker cut this section (possibly libellous?) from *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa*, but it appears in *Life in South Africa*: 132.
- 56 *ibid*: 326–327.
- 57 *ibid*: 327.
- 58 Barker, *Colonial Memories*: 78.
- 59 Quoted in Gilderdale, *The Seven Lives of Lady Barker*: 240.
- 60 Quoted in *ibid*: 253.
- 61 Barker, *Colonial Memories*: xxi.
- 62 Quoted in Gilderdale, *The Seven Lives of Lady Barker*: 16.