The Axe and the Tree

THE AXE AND THE TREE

How bloody persecution sowed the seeds
of new life in Zimbabwe

Stephen Griffiths

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To Tim and Rachel

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“Therefore every scribe (γραμματεύς –grammateus – writer) who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old”

Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew 13:52

THE DREAM

Chinokanganwa idemo, chitsiga hachikanganwe.[1]
(What forgets is the axe, the wood does not forget.)

Startled awake, I stare into the cone of mosquito netting over my head. I am disorientated. My heart thumps in my ears. The bright square of the curtained window helps me to regain my bearings in the darkness. I creep to the end of my bed and cautiously raise one corner of the curtain, absurdly careful not to move it too much and draw unwanted attention.

The huge African moon pours silver light over the familiar scene, so bright that one can read by it and even discern colours. Shadows are drawn razor sharp and jet black. Anything, anyone standing quietly in the shadows would be invisible. I stare out and then scoot back down under my sheet – all I need in the heat of the lowveld of north-eastern Rhodesia.

I have a secret nightmare. I confess it to no one, afraid that it might come true. One night I shall look out into the still moonlight and they will be there. Holding their weapons at half port, they march in a ragged skirmish line. My heart closes in fear and I cannot shout.

Suddenly we are out of the house, running desperately into the night. Bushes whip my face as I run. Roots and thorns tug at my legs, leaving bloody beaded stripes. I trip and fall, scraping my knees and making my hands raw. My father is alongside me, scooping me up and hissing at me to run again. We rush on, our fear growing as we hear the shouts of angry men behind us. The thudding of booted feet and the sound of bodies crashing through the brush come closer.

We turn a corner round an enormous rock and throw ourselves desperately up its side. We climb higher and higher and fling ourselves down on its flat top, spent. My father locks eyes with each of us in turn, warning us to silence with a fierce glance. I creep closer to the edge, almost paralysed with terror yet fascinated by the source of my fear.

The rock is pointed and I stare down as if from the bow of a ship riding the moon-silvered waves of elephant grass. Capped heads force their way through the grass and then, as they meet the rock, slide down each side of it and are lost in the dark ocean of the night behind us.

I awake, shivering in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

STREAM OF THE LION SPIRIT

It was a dry, clear day, the sun ablaze in a vault of blue. An ancient one-tonne Ford truck rattled a dusty trail down an escarpment road winding through the Ruwangwe mountain range in eastern Rhodesia. As the driver and his wife peered through the windscreen they saw below them a broad plain spreading across towards Portuguese East Africa, dotted with kopjes[1], hilly rocky outcrops. At the foot of the mountain range, the road petered out. Undeterred, husband and wife picked up heavy-bladed knives and began to cut their way through brush so thick that Native Commissioners patrolling the area a generation before had to dismount their horses and proceed on foot. Local Hwesa people appeared and helped them cut open a path through the undergrowth. They threaded their way among trees, inching their vehicle along until they came to a stop by a perennial stream flowing down from the mountains behind them: the Manjanja, or the “Stream of the Lion Spirit”. It was August 1951.

Cecil Brien, a tall, angular, austere man worked alongside Mary, his vivacious wife, to pitch a tent just a few metres from the river. It was to be their home for the following eighteen months.

Together they built a mud hut to serve as their kitchen and dining room. Long-drop toilets were dug a little way from the camp. They cooked on an open fire and went to bed with the sunset.

These elemental conditions didn't hold them back from their medical work. The truck bed was turned into a medical storeroom, extended with a framework of poles covered with a tarpaulin: a rudimentary dispensary. An ironing board was set up for their microscope: their laboratory. Cecil and Mary cleared a space under a spreading flat-topped mfuti tree. Beneath the feathered red spring leaves they shared their skills and the Word of God with those who came seeking medical help.

Their first operation was a hernia repair performed in the mud hut on their kitchen table. Mary Brien, a specialist anaesthetist, dropped ether onto a Schimmelbusch inhaler and held it to her patient's face. Surgeon Cecil Brien performed the operation while an assistant held a hurricane lamp and knocked away the insects attracted by the light. That first patient lived to tell the tale.

The rains came, sweeping across the dry, parched land, and the Manjanja turned from a stream to a raging torrent. No common rainy season, these were the heaviest downpours in living memory. Foodstuffs had been kept in a "food safe" submerged in the river, the only way to keep them a little fresh. But as the river rose, so their supplies were all swept away. Hurrying off to the Eastern Highlands town of Umtali to replenish their stock, the Briens returned to find "white ants" – termites – laying heavy red tunnels of clay over their stored clothes and surgical linen, busily eating their way into and destroying them.

It wasn't only the climate or the insects that made those early days difficult. Speculating over possible motives for the newcomers to live as they did, many local people were deeply suspicious of the Briens. Many believed that they were carrying out reconnaissance in the area before engaging in a major cattle-rustling operation. As cattle were the main measure of wealth

among the Hwesa, there was great concern, especially given the history of contact with the outside world.

* * *

The north-eastern area in which the Briens arrived was remote and inaccessible, lowlands lying beyond the edge of the central Southern Rhodesian high plateau. The two principal African powers of the mid-1800s, the Ndebele to the south and Gaza to the east, had left the area largely untouched.

The Portuguese artillery officer Joaquim Carlos Paiva de Andrada had attempted to expand Portuguese control west into the Ruwangwe Valley. He had been welcomed into the valley by the *mambo* or lord of the area, Chief Katerere, on 13 September 1885.[2] In their first meeting, Paiva de Andrada declared his government's desire to befriend the chief. Without apparent irony, Paiva de Andrada followed up his initial comments with a demonstration of the accuracy and speed of fire of his Winchester Express rifle, leaving Chief Katerere "very impressed" by the holes blown in several trees. Later that day, the Chief visited Paiva de Andrada's encampment to invite him to travel to a gold-panning area, fortuitously right on the edge of the Chief's sphere of influence. The young artillery officer unsuspectingly took the bait.

Nine days later, Paiva de Andrada was surprised to encounter a delegation of local elders accompanied by 100 armed men and a lion spirit medium.[3] Paiva de Andrada described the lion cult as mere superstition but regretfully recognized that "the chief did nothing without consulting the medium". The oracle had declared that Paiva de Andrada's mission was to cheat the people and ultimately to war against them. The elders ordered him to retrace his steps and never enter the area again, and reinforced their message with a night full of dancing and drumming. Before dawn the following day, a sleepless Paiva de Andrada was hastily

on his way, and his official recommendation to the Lisbon government was that the border of Portuguese East Africa be drawn to the east of the Ruwangwe Valley.

Nearly ten years later the Ruwangwe Valley was brought under the nominal political control of the British South Africa Company (BSAC). The BSAC came into being through colonial adventurer Cecil Rhodes' efforts to exploit the mineral wealth of Rhodesia. A Royal Charter was granted to the BSAC in 1889, similar to that of the British East India Company. Company representatives attempted to impose a hut tax of ten shillings from every household in the Valley each year, despite the absence of any services being provided. Other parts of Rhodesia saw the introduction of some infrastructure and services as part of the trappings of a colonial state. In contrast, the colonial government left the Ruwangwe area largely marginalized.

The hut tax forced a people who held their wealth in livestock to send their sons far away to enter the Company cash economy. If they could not pay, the Hwesa faced the confiscation of their precious cattle. This stirred deep emotions. Having successfully repelled one would-be exploiter, the Hwesa under Chief Katerere attempted to mobilize in revolt. This time, a force of thirty-two BSAC police marched into the area. A brief public demonstration of firepower with a Maxim gun left Chief Katerere[4] with nothing to say, except that he was quite willing to pay the government tax.[5]

That the arrival of the Briens was greeted with suspicion was unsurprising. Any protestation of friendship, any expressed motivation of love, any apparent disinterested concern for the welfare of the people was unlikely to gain a sympathetic hearing. But despite the seemingly isolated nature of the area, significant groundwork had been carried out before the Briens' arrival. There were not enough missionaries to account for the remarkable growth and expansion of Christianity in Africa.

Often, far more was going on than appeared in the popular and missionary-centred stories that were published in the countries that had sent them.

Cecil and Mary Brien had arrived in an area under the control of the Katerere chieftainship, which had been in place for around 200 years by that time.[6] Despite the fact that there was little penetration of the area by the apparatus of the state, many local people had ventured out into the wider world. The colonial government's hated hut tax had forced many young men into the cash economy to meet the obligations placed on their families. The tax had to be paid in Rhodesian currency, which had restricted the easier eastward trade into Portuguese East Africa, forcing the Hwesa west and south to find ways to earn money.

Harry Tsengerai and Mateu Marongedza were two young men from the area who had gone to work in the mines at Gatooma in central Rhodesia. Some of their fellow miners were Pentecostal Christians, members of the Apostolic Faith Mission, by that time a largely black African independent church movement spreading north from its roots in South Africa. The Apostolic Faith Mission kept evangelism at the centre of its priorities, strongly encouraging African enterprise and leadership while discouraging engagement with health and education, which Apostolic Faith Mission leaders saw as a diversion from the main task of soul winning.

Harry and Mateu had come to faith in Jesus Christ and left the mines to return home to Katerere in 1946, wanting to establish a church there. They saw ancestor veneration and spirit possession as entirely negative, at odds with the Holy Spirit of the God they had met while working underground in the mines. Critically, they did not seek to deny the existence of the spirit world but rather saw it in a new light. They wanted to see Pentecostal mission work begin in their home area, and they wanted to work alongside

missionaries in transforming both the religious world view and the quality of life of their people, incidentally subverting some Apostolic Faith Mission teaching. In the face of suspicion and fear of the Briens, these two young men argued that they should stay. As relatively wealthy, independent younger men, their status enabled them to challenge the old order of society and religion and to overcome. Harry and Mateu returned home to Katerere at just the right time to cut open the way for the Briens culturally and relationally, just as they had cut the brush back physically.

* * *

Cecil Brien was born in 1905 in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh in Ireland and trained as a pharmacist[7] before entering Queens University Medical School in Belfast. He was an intense, fiery man with a deep evangelical Christian faith. While a medical student in Belfast he spent time on the streets distributing tracts along with his best friend, a bus conductor. Qualifying as a doctor in 1934, he would earn himself a dressing-down from his senior colleagues in the Rhondda, in Wales, for his regular habit of preaching in the open air and so bringing disrepute on the medical profession.

While at Queens, Cecil Brien met Mary Campbell Chambers, a doctor's daughter from Dannhauser, Natal, in South Africa. Beautiful, intelligent, and strong-willed, Mary followed in her father's medical footsteps, and she became the only female junior doctor at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital. She was more than a match for the quick, intense, hard-driving Cecil. They married in 1936 and decided to study at the Bible College of Wales, where they were influenced by Rees Howells, the Principal.

Howells had come to faith during the Welsh revival of 1904–05. He was a man with a reputation for prayer and a gift for healing and had worked for many years at the South Africa General Mission's Rusitu Mission in Southern Rhodesia. Rusitu

Mission was the epicentre of rapid church growth between 1915 and 1920. This growth was partly driven by a remarkable episode during the post-First World War Spanish influenza pandemic. The death rate soared across the country, often bringing even basic services to a halt. Entire households lay sick or dying. Southern Rhodesia's medical director feared that entire peoples might be wiped out, and wrote, "People were numbed and staggered with the immensity of the disaster."[8] When Howells declared the Mission a place of safety, saying that no one on the Mission station would die, hundreds of people fled there for refuge, and none died.[9] Howells' reliance on prayer and his preference for seeking divine healing had a powerful influence on the young, medically trained Briens.

During his studies, Cecil was exercised as to what he should do: stay in Britain and serve as a doctor or go abroad as a medical missionary. He spent a weekend on retreat, during which he asked Howells what he should do. The strange advice he received was, "Go back and do what your senior partner tells you to do!"[10]

On the following Monday, his senior partner called him in to admonish him yet again, rather flippantly rebuking him, "Dr Brien, this business of your preaching in the streets of the town is most unbecoming to a man in the medical profession. You ought to be a missionary in Africa!"[11] Cecil was thunderstruck at the words of what he saw as divine guidance coming so promptly after the advice he had been given by the Principal – and he determined to take that advice. He had developed a keen interest in surgery, which led him back to the Albert and Edward Royal Infirmary in Wigan for surgical training. He wanted to prepare as thoroughly as possible for life abroad as a medical missionary.

World events took a dramatic turn, however, threatening Cecil's sense of destiny and purpose. Call-up papers arrived at the outbreak of the Second World War, but he refused to enlist. A socially and professionally disastrous decision in the atmosphere

of the time, he was brought before a Conscientious Objection Tribunal chaired by a judge. Cecil objected to being labelled as a "conchie". His refusal to enlist was not because he objected to warfare as a means of settling international disputes. Rather, he told the tribunal, "I have placed myself fully at the disposal of God. How then could I obey the orders of a commanding officer to go where God has not sent me?"[12]

The tribunal discharged him, giving him full exemption from military service. Reported in the local press, the judge chairman of the tribunal summed up, "I have never been so convinced of the sincerity of any man as I have of Cecil Brien. Dr Brien is free to go to serve his God."

Years later, Dr Brien commented wryly, "From that moment God trapped me. Many better, braver, Christian men than I went abroad to serve and die. I could do no less for God than they had done for their country."[13]

As it turned out, the Briens remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of the war, while Cecil continued to gain valuable experience as Residential Surgical Officer in the Albert and Edward Royal Infirmary. It was only in 1948 that the couple set sail on the converted hospital ship *Llandovery Castle*, taking seven weeks at sea and travelling through a romantic roll-call of Mediterranean and African ports: Gibraltar, Genoa, Suez, Port Sudan, Aden, Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Dar es Salaam. Finally they disembarked in Beira, a coastal town in Portuguese East Africa. Swung out of the hold of the ship were hospital beds, an operating table, and hundreds of surgical instruments that the Briens had collected.

The Briens began work in Southern Rhodesia's Zambezi Valley with the Evangelical Alliance Mission (EAM). They spent their first two years at a small hospital in the Mvuradona area, a rugged area of mountains and miombo woodland on the Zambezi escarpment.

Then an opportunity to pioneer a medical work in a new area came up, and the Briens seized it eagerly – for more than one reason. They were frustrated because of EAM rejection of Pentecostal practice, seeing this as the agency's refusal to take seriously both the power of God and the supernatural world view of the people they were trying to reach. The Briens had also been invited by Harry Tsengerai and Mateu Marongedza, who were determined to mediate with both the chief and Cecil and Mary Brien to ensure that the missionary work was born out of behaviour which was acceptable to the traditional authorities of the area. Through the hard, careful groundwork of these two young local Christians and the willingness of the Briens to listen to advice from nationals, the local people of influence in the Ruwangwe Valley felt that the Briens came into the area in a way that was respectful of local custom.

* * *

Inching forward month by month, the Briens slowly expanded from a tent and a mud hut to a two-roomed cottage and a two-ward hospital. Their early years were poverty stricken, as their missionary society was unable to pay them either salary or grants for buildings and equipment. The lack of finance would have frustrated many, but during their years at Bible College they had learned to do without what many would call essential. They had also learned to live from day to day, trusting God to answer their prayers.

Despite his fiery intensity, Cecil Brien was a shy, self-effacing man. He had been deeply impressed by a passage from the prophet Jeremiah: "Should you then seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them!"[14] He consequently felt constrained to shun any publicity but rather sought to glorify only God. In practice this meant that very few photographs were taken of Cecil and Mary or their early work. In spite of no income from

an established agency and of their deliberate principled refusal to appeal for funds or seek any kind of publicity,[15] they were able to survive and grow their work through unsolicited gifts from around the world. Both were entrepreneurial, ingenious, and willing to listen, qualities which, combined with their deep faith, served them well.

Cecil learned to mould and burn bricks, lay foundations, and put roofs on buildings, and taught others to do so too. Throughout the dry season while building was possible, he would rise at 5 a.m. in order to get the building work going before his first ward round, and then would work late into the night. He became a well-known figure among demolition teams and second-hand dealers in Salisbury (now Harare). The Umtali Municipality Building was demolished in 1962. Cecil and a colleague hovered at the site like a pair of vultures, waiting to seize hold of the discarded double entrance doors and load them onto the Mission truck. The doors were built into the church right next to the hospital and remain there still, solid and imposing, more than half a century after being discarded by the Municipality. Walking around the hospital with Cecil, visitors would often be told where every piece of asbestos sheeting, door, and window frame was salvaged from!

The hospital grew into a seventy-bed institution by the mid-1950s. The annual reports made impressive reading: 250 major operations performed, more than 600 babies delivered, around 4,000 sick people admitted, and 15,000 treated as outpatients. But that was not the only aspect of their work. Cecil opened thirteen primary schools throughout the area, becoming school manager of them all in addition to his medical work.

Although the Briens were careful to listen to local believers and acted in respectful ways towards the people of the area, that respect did not extend to traditional religious practices. Ancestor veneration, the practice of spirit possession, the use of charms or

fetishes,[16] the brewing of beer which was part of spirit worship ceremonies and consequent public drunkenness were all seen as being part of the entrapment and enslavery of Satan, to be confronted not compromised with.

Encounters with the spiritual powers seen to be at work in the area came through fervent preaching, the casting out of evil spirits through exorcism, periodic all-night prayer meetings, the public confession of sin, and the burning of objects related to spirit possession. A key factor in the Briens' approach was that they did not deny or downplay the spirit world of the Hwesa, as other more conservative missionaries had done.[17] They saw the Hwesa spirit world as real and the spirits as powerful, but knew they could be overcome by the greater power of the Holy Spirit. As Pentecostal Christians, the Briens and their colleagues were able to engage effectively with this world view, not to dismiss the world of the supernatural but to help transform it, not to replace it with Western rationalism but rather to embrace an authentic folk Christianity which took both the spirit world of rural Zimbabwe and the Holy Spirit seriously. The kind of Christianity I saw expressed in the rural areas of Rhodesia was a far cry from the serious, quiet, conservative Protestantism of urban European life.

The Briens, as highly trained health professionals, integrated their medical skills and their Pentecostal beliefs into a potent approach to healing and well-being. Each day, patients and relatives gathered together with the hospital staff to dance, sing, pray, and hear the Word expounded in the local language. The Briens thought nothing of combining medical techniques with fervent appeals to God. They wrote enthusiastically of such cases as a patient with severe peritonitis and kidney failure who was beyond their medical ability to heal, yet who made a full recovery when the only option was the laying-on of hands and prayer. Frequently, as patients recovered, they and their families would become Christians.

A less dramatic but very welcome service was the drawing of painful teeth. Decades later, as a young medical student, I travelled from village to village, working at clinics in the Katerere area. Many of the older folk, on realising who I was, would command my attention and then jerk back a lip to show an empty gap in a row of teeth and describe the relief that Cecil Brien had brought them! Many with hearing problems, lameness, or long-standing eye disease also found help. Echoes were seen in the singing and telling of the stories of Jesus each morning with what was happening in the wards of the hospital and the clinics across the area.

A dishevelled and fatigued man appeared at the hospital one day asking to see the doctor who was "like Jesus". The link between the stories and the healing was diffusing widely into the local community. The exhausted man had walked for four hours through the bush to seek an encounter with Cecil. He was a *n'anga*, a traditional healer. His wife had arrived at the hospital because of prolonged childbirth and had been close to death. Even though the child had died, the *n'anga* had been deeply moved by the care and expertise of the newcomers in saving his wife's life. He listened to what the Briens had to say about Jesus Christ. As a result, he turned away from his old practices and embraced this new way of life, walking those twenty-four kilometres to church every Sunday.

Unknown to the Briens, the site they chose for the Mission was close to a useful source of water, where local people would leave clay pots of beer in homage to a *mhondoro*, a royal ancestral or lion spirit. The spirit was known as Chikumbirike, and the spirit's medium lived just outside the Mission. But through the preaching and work of the Briens, the Tsengerai and Marongedza families, and other new believers in the area, first the medium's wife converted and refused to participate in the necessary ceremonies enabling her husband's possession. Then his two

daughters became followers of the new way. The stream where once the lion spirit was honoured became the place where vigorous baptismal services were held; the drumming, clapping, singing, ululating, and dancing in worship were now directed to the God of Israel. The medium still fell into trances, but the words that spilled from him were curses for those who had brought such change.[18]

* * *

Caring for both spirit and body of those they were serving, Cecil and Mary Brien also focused intentionally on the mind. Thomas Morgan Thomas, a Welshman and former miner turned missionary sent by the London Missionary Society, is credited with starting the very first school in Rhodesia in 1857 among the Ndebele people one hundred years earlier.[19] Radically for his day, Thomas Morgan Thomas wrote:

> *That [the Ndebele] will carry with him into the great Church of Christ some of the traits of his present character is very likely, and that those traits will have their place, use and glory, in the great family of regenerated men, seems also clear … Much has been said and written in order to prove the inferiority of the African as compared with the Asiatic and European, and to show the impossibility, as it were, of his ever distinguishing himself in anything that is truly great, sublime or original. This to me appears invalid and incorrect.*[20]

However, this missionary commitment to education was viewed with ambivalence or downright hostility. The colonial government of Southern Rhodesia invested little in education for black citizens. While education for white children was made

free and compulsory in 1935, education for the black population remained a privilege. The government spent twenty-one times as much on each white student as on each black student. Missionaries had been involved in education even before the colonial era, becoming responsible for more than 90 per cent of black education. But opportunities for black students remained limited. Even in the 1970s, just over 40 per cent of black school-aged children were in school.[21] Government concerns about "over-education" of the black population by missions led to the creation of the Department of Native Education to inspect mission schools and consequently to open a handful of government schools for black pupils.

A hundred years after the pioneering work of Thomas Morgan Thomas, the 1950s were a time of rapid educational development, and the Doctors Brien were not to be left behind. As good northern Irish Protestants, they were deeply concerned by the steps being taken by nearby Irish Catholic missions to expand their work into the area, with their rosaries and scapulars,[22] Latin liturgy and hymns, shrines, and statues. The roots of the differences between the work of neighbouring missions were partly theological but also reflected the political and socio-economic struggles and prejudices of Northern Ireland. Cecil Brien, on seeing a building that needed repainting or a thatched roof was that unkempt, would comment, "That looks very Catholic. We need to take steps to get that looking more Protestant!"

Although some aspects of the competition between Catholic and Protestant missionaries seem both comical and sub-Christian, this was during the time before the Second Vatican Council[23] which addressed relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world. Pope John Paul XXIII would call on the Council to "open the windows of the Catholic Church to let in fresh air".[24] The Council was to revise liturgy, allow translation of the liturgy into local languages, look to make the teaching of the

Catholic Church clear to a modern world, and prioritize efforts to improve Christian unity, seeking common ground on some issues with Protestant churches.

However, for the Briens and their Catholic neighbours, Vatican II still lay in the future. The sometimes unyielding struggle between the Elim Mission led by Cecil Brien and the neighbouring Catholic missions turned into a kind of educational "arms race". Both sought government permission to expand the area of their control, presenting themselves to the Native Commissioner in the best possible light and taking opportunities to do down their neighbours. Sadly, the Native Commissioner observed that "the prevailing spirit of relationships is quite unChristian". This spirit was to change as more missionaries who were not from Ireland, and therefore less partisan, arrived on the scene.

One result of the spiritual and physical needs of the area combined with the less savoury inter-church competition was an urgent desire to grow the Elim missionary team. The Briens issued an "SOS for Prayer" for new workers, especially teachers for their newly established schools. This call was taken up in the UK and published in the *Elim Evangel*, the magazine of the Elim Pentecostal Church movement.[25] Not satisfied, the Briens went back to the UK to look for new workers themselves, their only visit home in the first seventeen years of pioneer missionary work, such was their dedication. But it would prove to be life-changing for two young people.

PECULIAR PEOPLE AND PUBLICANS

Walking out to Gande village in the starlight, Brenda pushed her way through the maize plants which towered three metres into the air. An eerie whispering followed the little group of travellers as the spiral leaves of the maize twisted and turned in the light night air. As they tramped along the narrow track on the far side of the field, the tall elephant grass tickled their necks and faces. Reaching the Musarudzi, Brenda balanced on a tree which had been felled to straddle the river as a crude bridge. Holding her breath, she danced across the trunk and jumped to safety, climbed the sandy bank, and wended her way through fields of groundnuts and rice. She picked her way carefully along the path, eroded here and there by recent heavy rain or interrupted by columns of marching ants. She and her companions arrived in the village to find a fire burning and a low table ready for the hissing pressure lamp. A welcoming crowd had gathered, ready to sing along with the piano accordion and hear what Brenda had to say.

A few weeks later at Sangoma village it was a different story. From the darkness at the other end of the village, considerable noise emanated from a beer party. The small group of women

and children was joined by four drunken men who had heard the singing. Brenda was frightened when she saw them lurch out of the darkness, and wondered how many more would appear. Feeling very alone, she opened her Bible and read, "God is with us," and decided to continue. When she began to preach, to her guilty relief two of the drunks struggled to their feet and ambled off into the gloom. Another gazed at her with a disconcerting, fixed glare before slowly toppling forward to lie flat out and begin snoring. Stubbornly, Brenda pressed on, despite the remaining drunk adding ripe comment to everything she said. The wretched state of the drunks replaced her fear with pity.

Later, back in her home which nestled under the looming bulk of the Ruangwe escarpment, Brenda recounted her experiences to her colleague, and discovered she had escaped lightly. That same night her colleague Catherine Picken, while visiting a different village, had been repeatedly interrupted by the headman who had chosen to do a drunken, shouting, shuffling dance in the middle of the group. He had then pulled his belt out of his trousers and slashed wildly at all around him, causing the crowd to scatter and regroup, while he laughed and jeered. It all seemed a very long way from Essex!

* * *

Essex girl Brenda Hurrell was born in 1932, and grew up in a loving but unusual home. Her father, Bernard, was a warm, gentle man. Fastidious and precise, he worked as an articled clerk. During the Second World War he served with the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve on the ground staff in North Africa and had been mentioned in dispatches.[1] Bernard and Gladys had three children: an older brother, Brenda, and a younger sister. Bernard loved his children deeply in a quiet but affectionate way.

Brenda's mother, Gladys, was very different. Gladys had been born to a couple who belonged to the "Peculiar People", members

of a Pentecostal sect that originated in East Essex. They took their name from a letter of the Apostle Peter: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a *peculiar people*; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."[2]

While adhering to aspects of orthodox Christianity, the Peculiar People had a sometimes deserved reputation for eccentric beliefs and dangerous actions. Brenda's grandfather, Herbert Henry Carter, an elder of the Peculiars, once advised a young couple with a child who was desperately ill with diphtheria to seek divine healing. They took his advice and avoided seeking the God-given wisdom of a doctor. The child died. Justice Ridley, sitting at Chelmsford, sentenced the boy's father to serve a month in jail, and Herbert Henry Carter to two months in jail for the tragic results of his advice. Sadly, Brenda's grandfather Carter considered his sentence as persecution by the authorities, and on his release he was greeted with singing by his congregation.

Although she considered herself to be deeply committed to God, some of Gladys' beliefs were unhelpfully shaped by her family background. When she developed a small spot on the side of her face, she attempted to ignore it. As it slowly enlarged she reluctantly agreed to see a doctor. He diagnosed a "rodent ulcer", a basal cell carcinoma, which would have been easily cured with a relatively minor surgical procedure. But owing to her deep-seated aversion to medical care, and encouraged by the example of her father, she refused treatment.

Over the years, Gladys came to the fixed belief that God would heal her miraculously, as "a sign to the nations", although this might have been a subconscious attempt to rationalize her decision not to seek medical treatment. No one could shake her from her position even though the carcinoma continued to grow slowly and eat into the structures of the left side of her face.

Resolutely refusing help and risking her life, it seemed she was trying to compel God into vindicating her obstinacy.

Embarrassed by the unsightly tumour, Gladys hid the lesion under a bulky dressing with a scarf, even indoors. Eventually she had to stop attending church as the smell emanating from beneath her bandages was keeping others away. Finally, maggots were to be seen writhing in the depths of the enormous, stinking lesion on the side of Gladys' head. Not long after that she became mute and stopped eating.

Bernard outlined what happened next in a few stark sentences in a letter to Brenda who by then was already working in Rhodesia. He found his wife collapsed in her room, jerking uncontrollably. The doctor came, examined her, and called an ambulance. Pathetically, Bernard attempted to reassure Brenda and wrote, "She will now have the best treatment possible," but he couldn't resist adding that it was "a great pity she didn't have treatment early when they wanted to deal with it".

Within days of Gladys' admission to hospital, the tumour eroded into a blood vessel and she died of a torrential haemorrhage. Instead of a humble faith, awareness of human frailty, and the possibility of mistake yet a confidence in the greatness and goodness of God, she had placed her confidence in her own beliefs, seeing her stubbornness as a virtue. Her "faith", rather than demonstrating the greatness of God, had only served to belittle Him and make Him less.

Throughout her illness, Brenda had been grieved by her mother's hardness of heart, but she was able to recognize that her mother had confused wilful obstinacy with faithful obedience. Brenda might have inherited her mother's sense of commitment and willingness to stand for what she believed in, but this was tempered with her father's gentle reserve and reflective nature.

* * *

A few weeks before Easter 1956, tall, slim twenty-four-year-old Brenda, with her wavy hair stylishly cut, was leafing idly through her church magazine. Arrested by the bold word "Teachers" on one page, she scanned the urgent plea from the Briens in the *Elim Evangel* and then hastily turned the page. Brenda Hurrell might have been a trained secretary and primary school teacher, but she was working towards her dream of living and teaching in Canada. She definitely did not want to bury herself in some remote part of Africa so early in life! But the article lingered in her mind.

Brenda was a member of the first Elim Church established in England, in Leigh-on-Sea,[3] Essex. George Jeffreys had founded the Elim Movement in Northern Ireland, a British Pentecostal Church which had its roots in a remarkable wave of revivalist activity that took place between 1900 and 1910 in diverse locations around the world, among them Azusa Street in California,[4] Wonsan in Korea,[5] South Africa, and the Welsh valleys. Each Easter, the Elim Movement gathered in the Royal Albert Hall in London. Brenda heard that Cecil Brien was to speak at the evening service. Curious, she wondered what her reaction would be on hearing him call for teachers.

There were thousands at the event. During one of the breaks as she wandered in the teeming crowds, Brenda felt her arm gripped by a member of her church who excitedly drew her along to introduce her to a stranger. Brenda was alarmed to hear, "This is Dr Cecil Brien." Cecil had just asked if there were any teachers in the Leigh church as Brenda walked by. Sensing Brenda's reluctance to discuss service abroad, with uncharacteristic gentleness Cecil said, "I'm not going to ask you to come to Rhodesia. God will have to ask you because the work is hard."

She found his words disturbing. A man's words she could reject. But what if it was God who was speaking? Hearing Brien's passionate public call for help a few moments later, she found it

deeply provocative, but once again tried to shunt it to one side in her thinking. That night, as was her custom, she opened her Bible to read a chapter before going to bed. It was Acts 7, Stephen on trial for his life, reminding his religious leaders what God had said to Abraham centuries earlier. Brenda read, "Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you."

Struck by the words and in turmoil of mind, she wrote to mature Christian friends who replied in the words of Jesus:[6] "If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know," and reassured her of their prayers for her.

Seven weeks later, at the Whitsun Convention, Brenda was alarmed to see Cecil Brien ascend the platform to speak again of the role of teachers within the context of the spiritual needs of Rhodesia. In her diary Brenda recorded, "A deep sense of conviction such as I have not felt before came over me. I was facing a challenge that went deep in my soul." Wildly, she looked around for an exit so she could run out, afraid of the appeal for workers that she knew would be made at the end of the meeting. But she was trapped in the middle of a very long row, and she heard the speaker invite to stand those who felt that God was challenging them to missionary service, quietly adding the words of Jesus, "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it."[7] Reluctantly, unwillingly, amid great conflict of spirit, Brenda stood to ask God to have His way in her life.

Caught up in the melee at the end of the service as people streamed out into the darkness, Brenda found herself invited by a friend to supper. She accepted, only to find the Briens were at the supper too! As she asked questions and heard more about Rhodesia, Brenda felt peace stealing over her troubled mind.

After consulting with her minister, Brenda completed application forms and dropped them into the post box. It was

June 1956. As she stood, one hand resting on the post box, she felt a surge of relief. She had done what she could. The rest was out of her hands. A response came within a few days. Tearing it open, she read a most unexpected letter. It was not women that were wanted in Rhodesia but men. Her application had been rejected on the grounds of her gender. She thought, "I've done all I could. I have been obedient. I don't have to go." She turned, with a sense of reprieve, back to everyday life. At the back of her mind, though, there remained a niggling sense that somehow her life and Rhodesia would remain intertwined.

Fully engaged with her pupils, enjoying her music and art, and thinking through her plans for Canada, the months fled by. Then in October, out of the blue, a large envelope landed on the mat. Apologetically, the Missionary Secretary had written again. There had been a mistake. Her application was welcome after all. The need remained urgent. Would Miss Hurrell be willing to attend an interview? Ruefully, Brenda smiled, recognizing the guidance of God in the twist of events.

Trim, attractive, artistic in temperament with a passion for music, Brenda was not the usual picture of a missionary in 1950s churchgoers' minds. Indeed, she seemed to become something of a "poster girl" for the Elim Pentecostal Missionary Society. Just three months later, on 16 January 1957, at the age of twenty-four, Brenda sailed from England on the *Braemar Castle* to begin her service with the Elim Missionary Society She travelled up from Cape Town by train: three slow, hot days through South Africa, across the Kalahari Desert to her final destination – the tiny hamlet of Penhalonga in Eastern Rhodesia.

Elim Mission had two centres in the country. The first was in the remote, arid north-eastern lowlands of Katerere, largely beyond the reach of the colonial government, was where the Briens were based. The second was in Penhalonga, close to the border of Portuguese East Africa among the lush, rolling forests

of the Eastern Highlands, just a few kilometres from the urban centre of Umtali.

Upon her arrival on 10 February, Brenda sent her parents a telegram: "=Arrived Penhalonga Staying= Brenda"! Here Brenda began her teaching duties and started to learn the Shona language. She also learned to drive. Finding enough traffic to interact with for her driving test was a challenge. There were no traffic lights and only a single crossroads in the entire village!

Two years later, Brenda moved to join the Briens further north in Katerere.

* * *

Three years after Brenda had left her home, Peter Griffiths, a startlingly fresh-faced youth, left his parents in South Wales and sailed for Africa. Stanley Griffiths, Peter's father, grew up in a working-class Welsh-speaking family in South Wales. An intelligent and athletic boy, he passed the exam to go to Dynevor Grammar School,[8] However, his family were unable to afford further education and he was obliged to work instead. He joined the British Army and served in India with the Irish Guards. He was a fine soldier and played on the championship-winning regimental football team. On leaving the army, he laboured at the tin works.

Hannah Robbins, a "pretty slip of a thing", fell in love with Stanley at a works dance. They married on 3 March 1931. In due course, their first son Ken was born.

Life seemed carefree then, as Hannah recalled: a little two-roomed house, a tin bath hung outside for weekly use, her husband working hard but regular hours, and a young son to love. One clear day, Ken climbed up on a high wall, across the road from the house. While prancing along the top, as he had seen the older boys do, he slipped and fell heavily to the ground. Dragging himself to his feet, he weaved across the road, calling

for his father, and then never spoke again. He was rushed to hospital, where X-rays showed fractures of the skull. He died the following day, 8 April 1936, at the age of four.

Stanley and Hannah were broken by their loss. They couldn't even bear to go back to the house where they had been so happy. For a while they separated, each returning to live with their parents, buried in their grief and unable to comfort one another. Stanley developed a stomach ulcer, and the subsequent complications were to trouble him for the rest of his life. He never managed a day at the tin works again. Hannah displayed an amazing strength of character. During Stanley's long illness she worked for the Provident Company which loaned money to the poor. She tramped all over Plasmarl and Morriston to collect repayments and then pay in the collected cash in at the headquarters in Swansea.

Eventually, Stanley and Hannah were able to set up as publicans in the Imperial Hotel, working for themselves. Life began to change for the better. The work was interminable: cleaning the pub, doing the accounts, ordering in food and drink, and then night after night serving behind the bar. Stanley took it all very seriously. Hannah recovered her high spirits and was always ready for a bit of fun and a dance. On one memorable occasion she was out at a dance, "tripping the light fantastic" on a table top. Stanley burst in, shouting, 'Quick, Hannah, give us a hand. The Imperial's on fire.'

"Let it burn," cried Hannah, as the dance continued. The fire was eventually brought under control without Hannah's help!

Those nights of laughter, swirl, and colour were all too few as the threat of war grew.

Peter, Stanley and Hannah's second son, was born on 15 September 1937, shortly before the onset of the Second World War. Before long Swansea burned around him, the docks pounded by German bombers. Like many of his generation, it seemed like

an adventure, "war games" on a grand scale. Collecting shrapnel, aircraft recognition, and playing on bomb sites were part of everyday life. With his gang of grubby, skiving street urchins he swam in the yellow, polluted waters of the local canal, scrapped with kids from other streets, played football on rough ground, pinched tyres from a tyre yard to burn, and played endless tricks on the long-suffering residents of the area.

One day, Peter complained of a sore throat and began to run a fever. The days lost their structure, blurred, and melted into one long delirium. Several times he approached death, and his parents were distraught at the prospect of losing a second child. Eventually he was given penicillin, a precious drug in very short supply. His urine was collected and the penicillin extracted from it to be used again.

Weeks later Peter awoke to find himself in a hospital bed. As he convalesced he counted the cracks in the ceiling, imagining them into a map, into a picture, into anything that would relieve the endless tedium. He had survived rheumatic fever but remained in hospital for nearly a year because his heart had been badly damaged. Eventually he was discharged, pale-skinned, feeble, and skeletal. He had to repeat a whole year at school but did well in the eleven-plus exams, gaining a place at Bishop Gore Grammar School. The group of boys he befriended as a result of his delayed schooling was to change the direction of his life.

On leaving school, Peter worked as a chemist at the Steel Company of Wales. Analysing samples taken from the blast furnaces, he would tell the furnace-men what adjustments to make to produce the right quality of steel. Irrepressible and full of fun like his mother, he and the other chemists didn't take their jobs very seriously. They would play football in the laboratory round the workbenches, using large rubber bungs as balls. Often the analysis results were merely plucked from thin air and jotted on the official forms. Head Office, unsure of how their technical

staff seemed to have so much free time, kept increasing the workload.

Then Peter developed an inexplicable hunger for spiritual things. He plunged into attending a local Methodist church, which he described as "lifeless and as dry as dust". Accepting invitations to preach short sermons in the church, he simply repeated dogma about a Christ he didn't yet know personally.

At seventeen years old, Peter was engaged in a public debate with a group of older Christadelphians. Among the crowd that gathered to listen was Bill Sheehan, a young Irish house painter. Bill listened with amusement to Peter, who wasn't allowing a lack of knowledge to get in the way of his enthusiastic arguments! As the verbal clash ended, Bill introduced himself to Peter. Together they walked the couple of kilometres to Peter's home, talking all the way. A warm friendship sprang up, and over the next few months Bill took Peter, step by step, into a new understanding of the Christian faith. Peter eventually met with Jesus through Bill's friendship and explanation of the Bible (and Bill's secret, fervent prayer).

Peter's new-found faith immediately impacted his work at the Steel Company of Wales. Instead of making up the results, he began to do all the analyses carefully. He found that he didn't have the time to carry out properly all the work assigned to him, so he would stay late to complete it. Although the blast furnaces may have functioned better, his new desire to do a proper job led to criticism from his work colleagues, who were concerned that his approach would get them into trouble. In the very earliest days of his faith, Peter learned something about the total impact of the gospel on every area of life. He realized that following Jesus Christ might often mean conflict rather than comfort, opposition rather than affirmation.

His new friend Bill Sheehan was well acquainted with conflict. Orphaned before the age of two, Bill with his three

sisters had been brought up by his uncle and aunt in Swansea's Irish Catholic community. Working as a house painter, Bill was hired by Leslie Green, pastor of a Pentecostal church in Swansea. Leslie was a warm, godly man who struck up a friendship with Bill. He talked to him about Jesus, about sin and forgiveness and grace. Instead of an arid, nominal system of rules, Leslie appeared to have a faith that was liberating and meaningful. Bill was both alarmed and intrigued. Leslie invited him to go along to church.

One Sunday, trembling with fear, Bill slipped into the back of a Protestant church for the first time in his life. These were pre-Vatican II days when it was still a sin for a Catholic to attend any Protestant church. Bill listened to what Leslie had to say, asked questions, took away and read a Bible, and finally prayed, declaring his need for salvation and his desire to give Jesus his allegiance. His conversion brought him a sense of purpose and joy. Delighted with his new understanding and spiritual insight, he tried to share what he had found with his uncle and aunt, only to have a storm break around his head. They did not speak to him for six months.

Such hostility towards his new-found faith was not confined to his family. Some of his Catholic friends surrounded him in the street, jostling and spitting on him. Suddenly, one of them headbutted Bill, knocking him to the ground and breaking his nose. With blood streaming from his face, Bill's first stunned thought was his new gabardine coat. The pastor he sought help from said, 'Isn't it wonderful to suffer for Christ?' and Bill thought, 'Well, hopefully it will be your turn next…"

Finally, Bill's uncle came to his room and told him to get out. For all the cold silences and the physical abuse, Bill later said that the most difficult moment was when his sister came to him with tears in her eyes, put her arms around his neck, and urged him to give up his new ideas and return to the family faith. Bill stood

firm in his trust in Christ, despite the pain that he endured. In the face of such opposition, Bill's faith had matured quickly.

Thus began an extraordinary phase in the lives of both Peter and Bill. A group of young men who had been in Peter's class at school gathered round Bill in the local Elim Pentecostal church. Bill led them into a living faith, he prayed for them and with them, and he taught them to read and study the Bible for themselves. While enjoying energetic horseplay and merriment, with Bill's help they also put down deep roots into thoughtful biblical faith. In Peter's Bible, nearly every verse was highlighted in a different coloured pencil depending on theme or subject. It was worn, pored over, marked and annotated. Unafraid as Bill was to think and work through the implications of his faith, he taught these young men to do so too.

From this one man's example and words to a small Christian group in a small town in depressed South Wales came unexpected results. David Griffiths trained as an Anglican clergyman, going first to Japan and then to the Philippines as a missionary, working for decades with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Alan Mutter became an educationalist. Alan Crispin became a mathematician. Don Evans trained in philosophy and went on to become a professor of biomedical ethics, founding departments of bioethics at universities in Europe and New Zealand. Then there was Peter. What was to become of this young man who had recently come to faith and been discipled by Bill?

Peter met the Doctors Brien in 1956 while they were on that brief visit to Britain, their first furlough in seventeen years of pioneer missionary work. They were both passionate and persuasive about their work in north-eastern Rhodesia, and spoke of the need for more missionary teachers in their network of twenty-five very basic schools spread along the eastern border of Rhodesia. Peter corresponded with the Briens, and eventually left the Steel Company of Wales to train as a teacher in response

to the Briens' guidance on preparation for cross-cultural service. He found himself the lone man within a cohort of female trainee teachers – a situation he clearly enjoyed!

Peter earned his teaching certificate with distinction, but his practice with C-stream pupils in a 1959 boys' secondary modern School in inner-city Birmingham was a rude awakening. Once, in December 1959, when he punished a boy for lying, he found the boy waiting for him after school, so filled with rage that tears were running freely down his face. The furious student threatened to lash Peter with his studded belt, stab, and then strangle him. Internally terrified, my father told him that the really tough thing to do was to accept responsibility for doing wrong and take his deserved punishment like a man! A week later, much to my father's surprise, the boy approached him, admitted he had lost his temper, and apologized. Despite this encouragement, my father found the double pressure of his first year of teaching combined with the struggle for class control so stressful that he broke out in a rash. A few days later he wrote to Bill Sheehan that he was struggling to sleep and felt on the edge of "cracking up". But he understood his weakness as an opportunity to rely on God, telling Bill that because of his struggle with health, "so I had liberty in the pulpit".

Towards the end of 1959, Peter had an inner conviction that he should apply to work in Rhodesia. But he was very concerned for his mother, who had already lost one son. How would she cope with the loss of a second son to prolonged service abroad? Bill's history came to mind, confronted as he had been with the choice of either remaining faithful to God or falling in line with the wishes of his family. He wrote to Bill, not for advice but simply to request prayer, aware that Bill would know just how painful such a dilemma could be. Peter didn't know if he was taking the right step in seeking missionary work but added, "I am determined to follow Him withersoever He leadeth." Taking the words of Jesus at face value, "I am the light of the world. Whoever

follows me will not walk in darkness,"[9] he told Bill he would take the plunge of applying, trusting that God would make clear the way forward, whatever that might be.

He completed his application to the Elim Mission Society on 6 January 1960. Specifically asked if he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit, the key "second experience" of Pentecostalism, he answered with admirable candour that he had not. He went on to tell the Mission Society that he was applying not because of a supernatural experience of being called by God but rather because he had "a desire to do God's perfect will, see the tremendous need, have the academic qualifications necessary, am young and healthy, and I believe I have a God-given vision of a lost world that needs the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have committed my way to the Lord and I believe that if it is not His will that I should go He will bar the way."

Peter then discovered that Margaret, a young woman from his home town of Swansea, had also offered herself for short-term service in Rhodesia. Peter was greatly concerned that Margaret would be out there before him, as if she was "waiting for him". His alarm was reinforced when an article appeared on 23 March in a local newspaper, the *Swansea Voice*. "Didn't like the bit that said I was going out to meet Margaret," he wrote to Bill, asking for his help to kill any rumours of romantic entanglement.

Just a month before leaving for Rhodesia, on 8 March 1960, he took a trip into London, exclaiming, "I actually took part in an Anglican Communion service at Oak Hill – it was according to the prayer book but quite good. I went to All Souls and heard John Stott preach on Amos – he was very good. It was strange to hear a man dressed in a red cassock and surplice preach evangelical truths." He also enjoyed hearing Martin Lloyd-Jones preach at Westminster in the evening. Alongside some lofty reflections on Lloyd-Jones' sermon, Peter added that he "gave the slipper" to nine boys he caught smoking in the toilets.

Peter expected that it would be about a year before he might leave. Wrestling with doubt and wondering if he had made a mistake and was about to permanently shipwreck his life, he was comforted by reading through Genesis, being reminded that even when Abram made mistakes, God acted in sovereign power to bring Abram back to the "straight and narrow". He had vigorously underlined the word "sovereign" in his Bible!

Despite his responses, the Mission Society responded with alacrity. Within eight weeks, Peter had been interviewed and medically screened, his references had been taken up, an opening on the Rhodesia field had been confirmed, he had been vaccinated against smallpox, and his passage out to Cape Town by ship had been booked for April 1960, one month later. All this despite the fact that he didn't even own a passport!

* * *

January 1960 had seen British Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, visit the West African nation of Ghana. Black nationalists there were among the first to campaign for independence from Britain even before the Second World War. Led by Kwame Nkrumah, the British colony of the Gold Coast became the independent nation of Ghana, the first to achieve independence, in 1957. There was an air of excitement and optimism which Macmillan reflected in his famous speech that he delivered first in Accra:

> *The wind of change is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.*

This subtle declaration of a British determination to provide independence for its African colonies went unremarked upon

until Macmillan repeated his speech in Cape Town on 3 February 1960 before Hendrik Verwoerd, the President of the Republic of South Africa. He added that the South African policy of apartheid under development at the time made "it impossible for us [to support South Africa] without being false to our own deep convictions about the political destinies of free men to which in our own territories we are trying to give effect".

Visibly shocked during Macmillan's speech, Verwoerd rapidly collected his thoughts and responded vigorously that he would protect and seek justice for white people in Africa, many of whom had no other home. Critically, Verwoerd stated that South Africa was grounded in what he saw as Christian values and so would take a strong stance against Communism, thus unhappily conflating black aspirations for independence with Cold War politics.[10] The following month, on 21 March, South African police killed sixty-nine unarmed citizens in Sharpeville who were protesting draconian pass laws which restricted and controlled the movements of black South Africans in their own country. The news of what became known as the "Sharpeville Massacre" flashed around the world.

While preparing to travel out to Rhodesia as soon as he could, Peter reflected on the headline stories featuring African issues. He wrote to Bill Sheehan on 30 March, just two weeks before sailing, "There seems to be big trouble starting up in Africa. Perhaps if I don't get in now all the doors will close in the near future." Rather than the negative news daunting Peter, it seemed to spur him on.

A reporter and a photographer from the *The Herald of Wales* arrived at the Griffiths' door. Twenty-two-year-old Peter was photographed standing on Mumbles Rocks in Swansea and looking dramatically out to sea. "A young missionary off to Africa" was the front-page headline. Although Hannah and Stanley had worked hard and "kept a clean pub", there is a hint

in a yellowed newspaper clipping of the opprobrium and social pressure that the publican felt in chapel-going South Wales all those years ago. Stanley was reported as saying, "This just goes to show that, despite what people say, publicans can raise their children just as well as anyone else." Privately, Stanley had warned Peter that his new-found enthusiasm for the Christian faith was just a phase, that he mustn't allow it to get the better of him or he would develop "religious mania". Stanley had mistaken passion for insanity. Peter was not mad, but rather passionate for the Lord of Life and the Word of God, and that passion was to carry him and sustain him through extraordinary times. It was not Peter who changed but, many years later, Stanley.

Peter Griffiths was commissioned for cross-cultural service in the packed Elim Church, Swansea, on 10 April 1960. Despite his extreme youth, as he spoke in the service it was reported that people sensed an authority and wisdom beyond his years. Four days later, on 14 April 1960, the *Edinburgh Castle* sailed from Southampton with Peter on board. Hannah wasn't there. She could not bear to see Peter off. Having buried Ken and then seen Peter almost die, his marvellous recovery from a life-threatening illness was a gift she didn't want to lose. After his departure she mourned as if she had lost a second son. As far as Hannah was concerned, Rhodesia was beyond the end of the world, and the six-year first term of service Peter had signed up for was an eternity.

THE RIVER CUTS NEW CHANNELS

Much to Hannah Griffiths' surprise and relief, light blue aerogrammes bearing exotic stamps, postmarked with names of places she had never heard of, began to drop through the letter box. Peter had made the long sea voyage safely and was enjoying a much-needed rest after the hectic months leading to his departure. The 2,500 kilometre train journey from Cape Town through the parched expanse of the Karoo then into Botswana across the Kalahari Desert before finally entering Rhodesia was uneventful. Peter arrived on May Day 1960: "It was a real thrill to round the last bend and to see Umtali nestling among the majestic mountains of Rhodesia's Eastern Highlands. As I gazed at the place to which God has called me I was overwhelmed with joy."

Peter had enclosed a photo of himself, taken in his humble thatched cottage in Penhalonga. Clearly visible on the table in front of him was a bottle of tomato sauce, an essential addition to almost every meal he had eaten in Wales. Hannah was glad to think of her boy having at least one of the comforts of home even in far-off Rhodesia.

Hannah had lost her first son to death. The loss of her second

son not to death but to long-term service overseas seemed to be a key moment in Hannah's own spiritual journey. Peter wrote to the mission board just two months after his arrival in Rhodesia, "Since I have come here, my mother Hannah has given her life to the Lord … The Lord is certainly no man's debtor. We have given each other up for a time but He has seen that we will be together for eternity."

Peter plunged wholeheartedly into his new life as a schoolteacher in the Elim Mission station just outside the village of Penhalonga. Many of the "children" he was teaching were older than he was. In contrast to his battles with British pupils in inner-city Birmingham, he was deeply impressed with the passionate, almost fanatical approach to learning that the young black people of Rhodesia displayed. Education was seen as a key to unlock a prosperous future as well as a passport out of the drudgery and boredom of subsistence farming, just as it had been a way out of the Welsh coalmines a generation before.

On top of his teaching commitments, Peter gave himself to the demanding discipline of language learning that every cross-cultural worker knows well. He found it humiliating and frustrating to be reduced linguistically to being a child again. Not to be discouraged for long, however, he persuaded one of the local teachers, Agnes Mudhudli, to translate for him, so that at least he could begin to preach while his Shona skills were being honed. To his relief, he discovered that Margaret (the young woman from Swansea who appeared to have set her sights on him) was working up in Katerere while he was much further south on the mission station in Penhalonga.

Most of the students at Elim Primary School came from a very poor background. To earn money for his fees, one of the students, Dannie, agreed to help Peter with his housework. Like many young black students in Rhodesia at the time, Dannie had experienced many interruptions in his education, so even

though he was at primary school there was little difference in age between the two young men, and they became fast friends. Dannie delighted in correcting Peter's stumbling attempts at speaking Shona, and provided answers to his innumerable questions.

Peter was a lover of practical jokes, but he could go too far, especially before he understood enough about the new culture that surrounded him. Dannie told Peter about *mitupo*, or totems, which linked a Shona clan together through creatures that they were then forbidden even to touch, and certainly never to kill or eat. Dannie told Peter that his totem animal was the freshwater crab. Peter received a tiny tin of freshwater crabmeat from home, and he held the tin in his hand, concealing the label, and skewered a chunk of the meat. He offered it to Dannie, who took it cautiously into his mouth and then chewed it with increasing enthusiasm. The two young men enjoyed the tin of meat together. Only when it was finished did Peter turn the tin around to reveal a picture of a crab on the label. Dannie's eyes widened with shock and horror. He pleaded with Peter to keep their shared meal a secret.

Despite Peter's crass cultural insensitivity, Dannie grew close to him. Just how close became clear when, having previously told Dannie of his heart damage, Peter suddenly grasped at his chest and feigned a collapse while he and Dannie were talking. With a yell, Dannie sprinted out of the house, which was situated at the top of a long hill, and raced down the slope. Pleased with the reaction he had provoked, Peter sauntered out onto his veranda, calling Dannie's name and waving cheerfully. Dannie stopped and turned around. To his immediate shame, Peter saw tears running freely down Dannie's cheeks, who shouted reproachfully, "Don't do that again! Don't ever do that again!"

Gregarious and outgoing, Peter enjoyed the warm relationships he was developing. Life was full and very demanding. But

returning to his cottage in which he camped in bachelor style was sometimes very lonely.

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A year after his arrival in Rhodesia, on 1 July 1961, Peter was asked to help with a transport challenge. Nurse Olive Garbutt was to collect her car from Umtali and needed a lift there from Katerere. Brenda was to take Olive from Katerere to a halfway point at Juliasdale, a tiny hamlet in the Eastern Highlands, and then turn back. As the only driver on the team in Penhalonga, Peter was to meet the two women in Juliasdale and drive Olive on to Umtali. Brenda rose at 3.30 a.m. to start the long drive with Olive, only to find that Margaret was waiting by the Land Rover too, anxious to join in the adventure.

Outside the agreed meeting point, the modest emporium of Juliasdale Store, Margaret captured the moment of their rendezvous with her camera. Under the clear, blue winter sky, pine trees and blooming yellow wattle lining the road's edge, Peter stood with one foot up on the bumper of his Ford truck, confident, smiling, and with his bush hat pushed far back on his head. Behind him, demure and pretty in a striking striped swing dress, fashionable flats on her feet, Brenda leaned casually against the front of her Land Rover, arms by her sides. Grinning widely while balancing on the back bumper of the truck was Boniface,[1] one of Brenda's students who had agreed to keep her company on the long, dusty drive back to Katerere.

Unknowingly, Margaret also captured the moment that ended any chance she might have had of winning Peter's heart. It was a twist of irony that it was Margaret's camera that snapped the scene. Her hope of seeing Peter and delight that she was to be in his company, even if only for a few snatched moments, was soon clouded by the chemistry that sparked and crackled between the two drivers as they stood by the dusty road, untroubled by the

occasional vehicle that raced by, stirring clouds of acrid, choking dust.

Peter and Brenda chatted with growing enthusiasm. Although Brenda had three years more experience than Peter, they had much in common: they were both far from home, living on the remote eastern border of Rhodesia, among a people and in a culture not their own, coping with a monotonous diet, and facing similar struggles of language learning and loneliness. But the rugged beauty of the landscapes, a satisfaction in testing their ability to thrive in simple, even spartan conditions, an enjoyment in forging new friendships across cultural divides, and, above all, a sense of fulfilling a divine purpose, brought more than adequate compensation for their hardships.

Summarizing her feelings about the life she had chosen to lead at the end of that conversation, Brenda quoted a line to Peter from John Buchan's 1941 novel *Sick Heart River*, in which the dying central character confronts the questions of the meaning of life in the Canadian wilderness. Finding it a situation that resonated with her own, she quoted, "It's a great life, if you don't weaken!" She was finding her life of obedient faith demanding, but rewarding.

Hidden away in an old sea trunk, wrapped in fragile, crumbling tissue paper and tied with a dusty length of pink ribbon, Brenda kept the letters that Peter wrote to her during their secret courtship, sparked by that short meeting under the yellow wattle trees at the side of a mountain track in the Eastern Highlands. As two young, single missionaries working in different locations separated by hours of driving on dirt roads with very little free time and few excuses to see each other, letters became a channel through which their feelings, fears, hopes, and dreams were poured.

Feeling somewhat in awe of Brenda's command of English that she had demonstrated at their meeting, Peter warned her

not to expect too much of his writing, claiming he always needed a dictionary beside him and was the "world's worst speller". But, encouraged by a rapid response from Brenda, just a few days later, on 24 May, he daringly scribbled, "Please don't feel obliged to answer my letters as I don't want to take up too much of your time. Just write every day!"

As members of close-knit teams where little could be concealed, neither Peter nor Brenda wanted to endure the inevitable pressure that would potentially crush even the slightest evidence of budding feelings for one another. Both wanted space to allow the relationship to take its course. Right from the start, they were both desperately concerned that their highly respected but austere and demanding senior missionaries, Cecil and Mary Brien, would hear of their nascent friendship and either forbid it or want it formalized. With the high view of authority that they both shared, neither Peter nor Brenda would want to disobey those they saw as their divinely appointed leaders. Yet neither wanted to stop writing. So by mutual consent they went to great lengths to mask the frequency of their correspondence.

Envelopes were alternately handwritten and typed, as Mary Brien sorted all the mail that arrived at Elim Mission in Katerere and would be quick to recognize handwriting and spot any patterns in a flow of correspondence. Missives were posted from off the mission when opportunities arose, to add variety to the postmarks. To avoid any familiarity with a particular style of stationery, different colours, types, and sizes of envelopes were used. When possible, letters were hand delivered by colleagues travelling between the mission stations. By offering to provide minor services to all their colleagues they justified writing and receiving letters purporting to watch repairs, developing photos and the like. For a period they successfully managed an "exam paper exchange", where they claimed to be swapping experiences and expertise on developing sets of examinations for their pupils.