LOOKING BACKWARD

Reminiscences of ten years in the Black Sash

Worm's-eye view of the beginning of the Black Sash

TEN YEARS AGO our ordered, childish lives were brutally disrupted, and have never since recovered that equanimity supposed to be essential for the rearing of stable personalities.

The first we heard of the Senate Act crisis was Mama shouting over the roar of the bath water at Dad, peaceably operating his electric razor in the morning sun. The poor man never knew what hit him, and has never since had a chance to find out. From then on, the house was in constant confusion.

The morning newspaper arrived with the early tea, and was followed by a thump as Dad was woken with "Do you know what THEY have done now?" Hordes of women descended upon us at all hours, trampling over the occasional toddler who had unwittingly wandered into the hall, and necessitating numerous pots of tea, a constant emptying of ashtrays and vast movements of chairs from every room, so that everyone else in the household spent their days lying flat on their beds, or standing bolt upright. Conversation at meal times developed into monologues from "the old lady" as she bolted her food, punctuated by occasional violent arguments caused by some unwary remark, such as, "My shirt has lost a button". Sports cars roared up to the door at all hours and disgorged peculiar young men with beards and corduroy trousers. We suspected that our father felt a sneaking relief that they asked for Mama and not for any of us! The house filled up with Hansards, erudite tomes on political theory, yards of black material and large sheets of white poster board.

The result of all this activity is well-known, but one more esoteric outcome is expressed in a recent remark by one brother to me: "Isn't it extraordinary how Mum has matured in the last few years?"

A little Sinclair.

On the twelfth day of the eleventh month of the year nineteen fifty-five ... 

SHE stood motionless, her shoulders squared and her pretty head slightly bowed. She was a fragile-looking creature, and the night-long stand — one hour on, one hour off — had reduced her body to a tooth-aching fatigue.

At 9 o'clock the previous evening, when one hundred members of the Natal Coastal Region had assembled on the steps of the Durban Post Office to stand vigil through the night in protest against the passing of the Senate Act, she had felt pride in being one of their number.

During the small hours, the line of vigil had shortened, but now, under the early morning sunshine, it was full strength again.

As she endured the last watch, she was asking herself "Is this really worth while?"

She remembered the thoughtless laughing crowds who had spilled out of the cinemas and theatres the previous evening and walked, sightless, past the vigilling women. Even while taking herself to task for self-righteousness, she was angered that this particular hour of the country's history should witness so blatantly that happy South African attitude, "I'm all right, Jack!"

She found herself wondering if these people who could not be bothered with the fight, or who failed to see the necessity for it, were worth fighting for.

After all, the battle was not only for those Coloured voters who had been removed from the common roll. It was, in essence, a fight to preserve the integrity of the Constitution: to enable the country to hold its head up among the nations: to enable its individual citizens to live with their conscience ... .

Some of the crowd had slowed their pace sufficiently to read the posters, but most of them, figuratively speaking, passed by on the other side of the road. A few had stilled their chatter and, hopefully, she had interpreted this as a mark of respect.

She remembered how heartened she had been by the young man who had given them the V. sign and commented "Jolly good show, girls!" and by the old tramp, who had raised a battered hat to them.

But these had been the minority. She remembered the shrill-voiced female who had commented to her companion, "Silly fools!" and the scruffy youngsters who had taunted the women, to the shrill amusement of their girl friends.

It was just plain crazy to try to save people from themselves — and such people ... .

And as she stood there, aching from top to toe and praying for the clock to strike, a passing car honked out that almost forgotten wartime rhythm "Da-Da-Da Daa."

The Beethoven notes were taken up by another driver coming from the opposite direction and, in that instant, every motorist within ear-shot had joined in the cacophony.

The post office clock struck nine. As the women took off their sashes and moved down the post...
office steps, the notes of Churchill's resistance signal followed them. Her heart swelled and, in that moment she knew that the Black Sash, and she with them, would be in this battle till the end.


The "Book" Demonstration

SATURDAY, November 12, 1955 was a great day for the Black Sash. It was the first Demonstration to be held right through the country wherever we had formed a Branch and was the culmination of a week of organization and preparation, after the Senate had been dissolved on November 4th.

In Johannesburg, 50,000 pamphlets with a piece of crepe attached to each one, calling on all sympathizers to join in the Protest March, were distributed in the streets on the Friday afternoon.

The "Book" had been made as light as possible and painted gold and the wide Sash was placed across it — the sash was new for this occasion but was used again for many other demonstrations. Sixteen women were chosen to carry the Book. I was in one of the two teams of eight. We changed teams several times during the 45-minute walk from Joubert Park to the City Hall. At the end of the march the Book was placed on a bier on the City Hall steps and four women mounted vigil during Ruth Foley's speech and continued till 5.30 that evening.

I am sure that the wonderful publicity given us in the local papers, and the fact that the demonstration was televised and shown in England, made the occasion one of the highlights of the Black Sash movement.

M. Tertia Pybus, Manzini, Swaziland.
(Formerly of Johannesburg)

Goodwill

WE WERE WARNED by a well-disposed Nationalist that our reception would not be friendly. We were most agreeably surprised, although there were certainly some very unpleasant incidents. At one town our meeting was almost disrupted by a young man who could only be described as a fanatic. Our women were constantly called "kafferboeties", and shocking insinuations were made against them; they were spat on, their toes were trodden on, their pamphlets rudely rejected; and there were, of course, the youths who thought it funny to parade around draped in toilet paper, or to race their motorcycles past our meeting places, drowning the voices of the speakers. The incident that hurt and saddened us most was when a group of young
children assembled at a bridge as we left one of the towns and hurled insults at us, shouting "Kafferboeties!" as we passed. Ironically, there were both White and Black children in the group.

But these were isolated incidents. In the main, we were received with traditional South African courtesy even from the people whose views differed most widely from our own. In one town, an old gentleman, an avowed Nationalist, who could not speak English but understood it, carried on a lengthy conversation with one of our members whose Afrikaans is imperfect. The conversation was conducted amicably in English on the one side and Afrikaans on the other, and the two parted great friends. At one of our most successful meetings a member of the audience defended the Government's policies, but concluded by thanking us sincerely for the fair hearing we had given him, and our clear and reasoned answers to his questions.

We held our first open-air meeting in the teeth of a howling gale, but our hearts were gladdened by the fact that 200 people turned out to hear us in spite of the weather. We approached one town in the wake of a hailstorm, driving through 5 inches of hail, and wherever we went we seemed to bring the rain, but the kindness and encouragement we received made up for everything.

(From a report on the Western Transvaal Goodwill Convoy, Sept. 1956).

Soweto

At a recent meeting of our Saturday Club in Johannesburg, somebody asked how the group of African townships known as Soweto got its name.

"It was coined from the initial letters of South Western Townships," explained one of our members.

"Oh, no!" said one of the African members. "It can't mean that! We've been moved about so often that it must mean 'So whe' to now?"  
Jeanette Carlson, Johannesburg.

A non-active member

During the early part of this year, we received membership subscriptions from our members all over the Region.

One letter arrived from a very staunch supporter, Mrs. Arthur Parkes, who said that she sent her money with pleasure, but was very sorry that owing to her age (92) she regretted not being more active in the Sash.

Some time later, I read in the local newspaper that Mrs. Parkes had been sitting at tea with some friends, when, looking out of the window, she saw a large kudu in her garden eating her favourite roses. She excused herself, fetched a rifle, and shot the kudu!

Diana Davis, Port Elizabeth.

The Minister raised his hat

Another incident that stands out in my memory, among the many recollections of ten years in the Black Sash, is the occasion when we staged a mass demonstration in the small Reef town of Kempton Park. There were so many of us that we lined both sides of the street, and the Minister we were "haunting" was obliged to walk between our ranks, escorted by the Mayor.

As he approached us, the Mayor took off his hat. The Minister hesitated a moment, and then politely followed suit.

Rosalie Driver, Johannesburg.
STINK BOMBS — AND A BOUQUET — FOR THE BLACK SASH
During this mass demonstration in Johannesburg to protest against the removal of Indian families under the Group Areas Act, in June 1963, a White youth threw two stink bombs in front of the women and later on an Indian handed up a bouquet, "in appreciation".

THE BLACK SASH ASKS THIS FOR SOUTH AFRICA: JUSTICE, FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY
The Kei Road Branch

OTHERS have told, here and elsewhere, much better than I can, what the Black Sash has meant to them over the last ten years. I shall confine my reminiscence to a very potted biography of a small country branch, with which, during its existence, I was closely associated.

Having been one of the more than 100,000 who signed the petitions against the Senate Bill in May-June 1955, and then having done no more about it, my real introduction to the Black Sash came in January 1956. Then living in Johannesburg, I was at the last minute approached by a friend, who, knowing where my sympathies lay, asked me to complete the necessary four to go to Springs for an hour's vigil which was to form part of a nation-wide demonstration (if I remember rightly, to mark the opening of Parliament). I was lent a sash and a badge. I spent an hour standing, and thinking — and, I must admit, watching a conveniently placed clock. Never had an hour passed more slowly, but I must have thought to some purpose, as after the vigil was over and we were safely home I paid the sub., paid for a badge, signed a card, and that was that! I was a fully-fledged Black Sash member, not a "pretender" helping out.

Through domestic circumstances shortly afterwards I found myself back at my "home town", the village and farming community of Kei Road in the King William's Town district. I was the only Black Sash member in the community, but about a year later Daphne Curry, the indefatigable Border Regional Chairman, addressed a meeting at Kei Road and raised sufficient enthusiasm for us to start a Branch, of which I found myself secretary, and later Chair/Secretary and general dogsbody combined.

The Branch was never in a position to do much active work, but some of us helped out with vigils at Stutterheim, and we did have our moments, at least one of which caused a stir in the ranks of the Sash! This incident will be remembered by delegates to the 1961 National Conference in East London. A week or so before this was to take place I had to contact Daphne Curry with the electrifying news that the local police sergeant had approached my mother, Mrs. Johnston, wanting to find out the names of Kei Road Sash members who would be attending the Conference. When she refused to give any names apart from hers and mine, and inquired why he wanted them, he said he'd been asked to find out, just to make things easier, but "never mind, they can find out in East London at the Conference." This news, of course, was immediately passed on by Daphne, and we all spent the Conference in almost hourly expectation of the arrival of the Special Branch. It turned out to be not quite a false alarm, as they did eventually "contact" the Conference, requesting copies of minutes, but after an interview the one gentleman concerned went off quite happily with a copy of the Conference's Press statement!

During its five years of existence, Kei Road Branch, I think, served a valuable purpose in making a small group of women, and in some cases their husbands, too, (even if only for the sake of argument!) become politically conscious and think a little further than their noses. It possibly even had the same effect on some of our critics, again for argument's sake! We organized several public meetings and had surprisingly good attendances all things considered, highlights being visits from Mrs. Spottiswoode and Mrs. Stott, and, in the early days, a talk on the Constitution and the rape of same, by the Hon. C. M. van Coller, former Speaker.

The Branch finally had to disband due to falling off in membership, caused by discouragement.

OBITUARY

DR. KILLIE CAMPBELL

WITH DEEP SORROW, we record the death of Dr. Killie Campbell, a member of our Natal Coastal Region, who died on the 27th September, 1965.

Killie was a famous person as an historian and collector of Africana but although she had so many varied interests and was sought after by people all over the world, one of the things closest to her heart was the Black Sash. Killie was a foundation member and always generous to an extreme. Only a month before her death she had sent us a very timely donation. In the earlier days Killie's beautiful house was always thrown open to Regional meetings and all our Annual General meetings were held there until a few years ago. We all have happy memories of her hospitality. Killie also worked very hard indeed for the Black Sash. In December, 1961, for instance, at the time of our petition concerning the political slant of the S.A.B.C., Killie and her sister, Mrs. G. Hepburn, and one other friend, collected over 600 signatures.

Although for some time she lay so ill, Killie never lost interest in the activities of the Sash and insisted on being kept up to date.

We all loved Killie and shall miss her sadly.
possibly fear, and lack of constructive work, inevitable in a small community, and the reluctance to take office of the members who remained. I am glad to say a good percentage of those who either remained as country members of East London, or resigned completely, continued to subscribe to the magazine.

I had left the district to take up employment in Grahamstown, but I look back almost nostalgically on those five years of "political awareness" and work as secretary of a small country Branch. The real end, for me, of "my" Branch, came when I found it necessary through circumstances to create a large bonfire and dispose of the mass of paper — minutes, reports, letters, etc., — which had been accumulated. But needless to say, I remain a members of the Black Sash, however inactive!

Gillian Litchfield, Grahamstown.
(Formerly Kei Road)

Keeping Vigil

IT was in the early days of Dr. Killie Campbell's first heart attack, and we were holding a demonstration in the City Gardens on that particular day.

One of those who were attending to Killie softly opened the door of her bedroom, and got the fright of her life, for Killie lay flat on her back, and quite rigid, with her arms at her sides. Then the devoted and alarmed friend moved closer to the bed, and saw that stretched from right to left across Killie's breast lay her black sash. For the whole hour that we stood in the City Gardens, Killie lay motionless beneath her sash, in her bedroom over two miles away — but with us in spirit.

Doris Wallace, Durban