

# BRIAN BISHOP

by OSCAR WOLLHEIM

Among the saddest people at the Requiem Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral for Brian Bishop must have been Catholic Bishop Adams of Oudtshoorn from whose house Brian, Molly Blackburn and their party had just left on that fateful journey which was to end in their deaths and injuries to his wife, Di, and Molly's sister.

What an extraordinary person Brian Bishop was! He was essentially a simple and practical man with an inbuilt sense of right and wrong, utterly fearless and quick-witted and with the saving grace of a fine sense of humour. With very little by way of an academic background or learning, he nevertheless through prolific reading and study became soon aware of the real problems facing our country and he determined to tackle them in his own way.

His way was essentially pragmatic. He worked hard at his business which involved computers and made himself financially independent well before the age of 50. He then sold his business and went into the field with Di, Molly and the Black Sash women, using the Institute of Race Relations, the Civil Rights League and any other body he could find to get down to the grassroots of the growing black/white confrontation. He made extensive use of the press by his clear and concise letters to make the public as aware as he, to correct misconceptions and to correct wrong facts.

Whenever there was confrontation between security forces and local people, invariably there came a phone call to him or Di and within minutes they would be off to the scene wherever it was to ensure that the authorities did not exceed their powers, to protest loudly when they did and to gather affidavits after the fracas was over. This they did in rain or shine, near or far, day or night. Harassment or detention did not deter them and they often succeeded in making the police back down or curb their zeal.

They were among the first to arrive with Molly Blackburn when trouble came to Cradock to encourage CRADORA, the local residents' association, in their opposition to the firing of their beloved teacher, Mr. Goniwe; and when his body was later found in a cane-field, Brian at once offered, later backed by the Civil Rights League, a reward of R1 000

for information leading to the arrest of the guilty person.

Again with the backing of the League he initiated another offer of R1 000 for information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Mtimkulu who had disappeared without trace after allegations that he had been detained. They were the first to get to Uitenhage to take affidavits even before the massacre took place and Molly could later be of great help to Mr. Justice Kannemeyer at the subsequent inquiry. They appeared at Oudtshoorn, Worcester, Paarl, Crossroads, Khayelitsha, anywhere where trouble broke out to pour oil on the waters and to establish the facts. Often they faced personal danger in these forays when Casspirs, Hippos and armoured cars fired birdshot and teargas while the locals responded with stones.

Afterwards one or both would appear at a meeting of the Institute, the League, the Dependants Conference or the Sash and would recite in calm and measured tones what had actually happened. Often Brian's accounts of confrontations with the police were hilarious especially when he could abash them by pointing out that they were infringing their own orders or acting in a manner condemned by Justice Kannemeyer in his Report, about which even some of the officers had not yet heard! The full story of their involvement will never be known for much of it was done quietly and never disclosed.

He was a unique sort of man to whom I did not take at the beginning for I thought that he was too unconventional, too pragmatic to get mixed up in the complications of the South African situation. But he worked his way into my heart and those of thousands by his quiet courage, his sensible approach, his directness and transparent honesty.

His loss, that much the greater for the simultaneous loss of Molly Blackburn, is a severe blow to all of us who are opposed to the present oppressive system, whatever the colour of our skins or our religious convictions — especially in the Cape. To the oppressed their passing is almost a mortal blow and Di's task, when she recovers from her injuries, will be that much more testing for she will no longer have Brian's strong arm and quick wit to back her own brand of courage and determination. □