

BARRIE RUSSELL JONES (1921-2009)

Although he was 67 and had been officially retired for a year when he and his wife Pauline came to Buttes Steps in 1988, Professor Barrie Jones had no intention of sitting at the cottage with his feet up enjoying the magical view across the Weald. Instead he turned the timber chalet in his garden into a study, and continued with the work he'd pioneered into the prevention and cure of blindness in developing countries, which had earned him worldwide admiration and numerous honours and awards.

Quietly spoken, but with a glint in his eye, sharp intellect and a delicious sense of humour, Barrie once said that he had a 'fire in the belly to do something' for people in the poorer regions of the world who were not getting the treatment they needed. That fire in the belly continued to burn, and as a result thousands of people were given sight when otherwise they would be blind. Today countless people can see quite clearly the faces of their children, their friends, their loved ones, and the wonders of the world around them, when otherwise all would be darkness. That was one of Barrie's priceless gifts. He was a man with a mission.

Barrie Russell Jones was born on 4 January 1921 at Silverstream near Wellington, New Zealand, and read physics and chemistry at Victoria University College, before going on to Otago University, Dunedin, to study botany and medicine.

Like so many of his fellow Kiwis he developed an early passion for the outdoors, and with numerous opportunities for wild-country adventures virtually on his doorstep, he put a lot of energy and enthusiasm into tramping (NZ for hiking) and skiing expeditions among the local mountains. And it was when she joined the Victoria University Tramping Club in 1939, that Barrie met Pauline Monkman, a fellow student who had emigrated from Yorkshire as a child.

During his final year of medical studies, Barrie spent three months working in a hospital for the mentally handicapped at Hokitika on the West Coast of South Island, during which he arranged to meet Pauline who was on a cycling trip, and together they headed for Franz Joseph Glacier where they became engaged. Later that year (1946) he learned that he'd passed his exams, and rather than wait until the following May to get married as originally intended, two days before Christmas they exchanged their vows at Knox Church in Upper Hutt where Barrie had worshipped as a child. Thus began a partnership that lasted for 62 years, producing three sons and a daughter, a lifetime of hard work, adventure, and the rewards of love and respect in equal measure. As Pauline later explained: 'Barrie and I always knew that the most important thing was to

tackle everything together as much as possible, and learned to keep readjusting our lives as we went along in order to bring this about.'

Whilst serving as a house surgeon at Wellington Hospital, Barrie presented a talk on the subject of ophthalmomyiasis which so impressed Professor Rowland Wilson that he was invited to join Wilson's department in Dunedin to further his experience. It was there that he developed an interest in ocular microbiology, public health and epidemiology, and an appreciation of the importance of international solutions to solve international problems. As a result Barrie's was to become 'one of the most impressive and influential careers in modern ophthalmology.'

In 1951 Barrie Jones uprooted his wife and two young children and sailed for London aboard the *Rangitoto* to concentrate his postgraduate studies at the Institute of Ophthalmology based in Moorfields Eye Hospital. Four years later he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and in 1957 was made a senior lecturer at the Institute and an honorary consultant at Moorfields. In 1963 he was appointed the first Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology at the recently founded Institute of Ophthalmology; a post he held for 17 years.

It is said that Barrie was an inspired innovator who changed the direction of ophthalmic practice at the hospital. He developed new surgical procedures, conducted in-depth laboratory research and became a leading authority on many aspects of trachoma – a contagious bacterial infection of the eye which at the time was responsible for blindness in six million people around the world. He was also passionate in his teaching, and was well-known for coining such phrases as 'ocular promiscuity' to describe the indiscriminate mixing of ocular secretions which spread trachoma between members of a family, and the unforgettable 'ocular condom' which was a hat with a mesh around it to prevent flies from reaching the wearer's eyes, resulting from one of his memorable field trips abroad.

It was when working at the Institute for Ophthalmology that Barrie was asked by Sir Stewart Duke Elder to go to Persia (Iran) to further his research on trachoma which affected large sections of the population. Barrie had a great respect for scientific method and a reputation for designing experiments that were both elegant and dramatic, and in Persia he was able to test his theory that the many flies found there could spread chlamydia - the agent of trachoma. As an experiment he gathered a group of people in a hut in a remote village, where he gave half of the group a mosquito mesh hood to put over their heads to prevent flies getting to them. He then put a drop of fluorescein into the eye of one member of the group without hoods, and when he returned half an hour later, Barrie darkened the room to discover the eyes of all those without a hood

were fluorescing in the darkness. Clearly the flies had spread the fluorescein from eye to eye, thus proving in a dramatic way that flies could indeed spread the chlamydia.

With Pauline as his assistant, he made a number of field trips to Persia between 1965 and 1977, leading to what Pauline later described as some of the happiest years of their lives. In 1979 they travelled to Southern Sudan where another devastating eye disease known as onchocerciasis (river blindness) needed Barrie's attention.

Being a man of compassion and with a strong moral compass, Barrie Jones became increasingly frustrated by what he saw during his field trips as the stark disparity between the expectations and demands for curative services enjoyed in industrialised countries, and the unmet needs of the majority of the world's population. As a result he relinquished the chair of clinical ophthalmology in 1981 in order to establish a new department of preventive ophthalmology and the creation of the International Centre for Eye Health, working in close collaboration with the World Health Organisation, Sightsavers International, and the British Council for the Prevention of Blindness (BCPB).

The stated purpose of the International Centre was to 'provide research and leadership training for the attack of *avoidable blindness* – that is, blindness that can *either* be prevented, or cured through the delivery of surgery to neglected communities.'

Four years later Barrie was awarded a CBE in recognition of his work throughout the world, and in 1987 received the King Faisal International Prize in Medicine for his contribution to the prevention of blindness. The monetary award that went with this prize enabled him to fund his work and research into river blindness in South Africa, and to undertake a major clinical trial in Nigeria, despite his having officially retired the previous year.

Throughout their fifty years in England, Barrie and Pauline lived within easy reach of London. At first they had a home in South Norwood before renting a bungalow surrounded by fields in Sanderstead, where Barrie took advantage of an abundance of wild fruit to experiment with wine making. They then bought a house in Purley where they lived for the next 34 years until Pauline discovered Buttles Steps Cottage when out walking with a friend. 'I was so carried away with it' she wrote, 'that I took Barrie on the same walk, never for one moment thinking that one day we would be the owners of such a treasure. It was an ancient Cromwellian Cottage ... looking out over the Weald of Kent, said to have been built in 1643.'

In 1988 the little thatched cottage became their final home in England. While many of their friends thought them crazy to turn their backs on a happy family home with six bedrooms, and move into such a tiny dwelling with only one and a half, to Barrie and Pauline it was a lost paradise.

Paradise or not, Barrie's work took precedence over everything. Throughout his distinguished career he published hundreds of research papers, authored or co-authored numerous books, and on his retirement the British Journal of Ophthalmology dedicated an entire issue in honour of his work. Single-minded, he would become so immersed in his latest problem that he'd forget all else. At Heathrow he was well-known for arriving without his ticket for a flight, but on one occasion, after being assured that another ticket could be printed for him, he had to confess that he couldn't remember where he was supposed to be going!

In retirement Barrie Jones received the Gonin Medal from the International Council of Ophthalmology, and the Global Achievement Award of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. And in August 2001, he and Pauline finally returned to the New Zealand they'd left half a century earlier, where most of their family had by now settled. Eight years later, the man with the fire in his belly to do something for people in the poorer regions of the world, slipped gently away, leaving behind not only a loving family and his wife of 62 years, but the priceless gift of sight for thousands of unknown men, women and children.

What a gift!

Barrie Russell Jones was indeed, a man with a mission.

Kev Reynolds – with grateful thanks to Pauline and Graham Jones.
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