

PETER WEBB – EULOGY FOR BARRIE McKELVEY

ARMIDALE – NSW – AUSTRALIA

Friday 15th March 2019

I am honoured to join you all today in celebrating Barrie's life and his many and varied accomplishments. The two of us shared a close friendship and very productive professional relationship spanning the best part of seven decades. It has been an incredible journey of discovery, research, teaching, travel, learning, and companionship. Let me recount a little of this journey.

We met on our first day at Victoria University of Wellington in 1955. We were both in the first year Geology and Zoology classes. The Geology class totalled just eight students and within a week we had bonded into a tight social group that lasted for years. We were all avid trampers and rock climbers, heading off regularly at weekends to the mountains and Wellington's rocky coastline. Yes, we did indulge in a lot of weekend partying as well.

In life, we all have but one chance to make a first impression on those around us. In Barrie's case this was spectacular, talented, but somewhat unnerving. On outings, the normally reserved Barrie would unleash two personal characteristics that marked him in my mind forever – an ability to devour Olympic size helpings of any food that ventured near him, and an ability to mimic all the fashionable catch-phrases of the day. From these un-provoked and masterful deliveries I assumed in these first weeks of meeting him, that Barrie must be planning a career on the stage and that his presence in science classes was merely to satisfy a university arts degree requirement. I was, fortunately, quite mistaken.

His accurate renditions of Spike Milligan's BBC Goon Show verbal antics spilled out of him without warning and were often accompanied by howls of self-inflicted joy. His endless repertoire of Milligan, Sellers and Secombe sayings were to be an entertaining feature of our early expeditions. The elders among you will recall the shows hit, <Ying Tong Iddle I Po>, a song he would sing in the middle of a blizzard, or while rousing everyone out of their sleeping bags, or while hanging from some dangerously precipitous cliff face. Barrie loved to launch into the Goon phrases such as, <You silly

twisted boy>, or Bluebottle's <You dirty, rotten swine, you! You have deaded me!>.

In early 1956 during our second year at University, the word **Antarctica** crept silently into our sub-consciousness and daily exchanges. One of our more advanced geology students (*Tony Gow*) was suddenly recruited into the US Operation Deep Freeze glaciology programme in Antarctica and that ignited much envy on our part. We visited the Russian Icebreaker <Ob> while in port and met the Soviet Antarctic scientists. (*Faculty John Bradley and Bob Clark included this visit and the earth science exchanges with the on-board Soviet scientists in our coursework*). Flocks of US military planes were passing over Wellington on their way to and from Antarctica. New Zealand was getting ready to participate in the Hillary-Fuchs Trans-Antarctic Expedition and the International Geophysical Year. Something quite interesting was going on around us. Barrie and I began discussing these exciting distractions more and more and a future partnership was obviously starting to gel.

When university reconvened in March 1957, Barrie and I/me, now at the ripe old age of nineteen and twenty years respectively, decided to tempt fate and take action. We presented ourselves at the Trans-Antarctic Expedition offices in Wellington (*a meeting with the energetic Arthur Helm*) as potential polar explorers. After a meeting that lasted all of five minutes, we were back outside in the sunlight and fresh air. We headed to the waterfront wharves, perched a while, ate lunch with the seagulls, and pondered over our recent humiliation.

As it happened, the US Embassy was nearby, so we decided to pop in, say hi and announce our availability for volunteer duties in the Antarctic programme of another country. The US military attache, a pleasant and jovial Colonel, greeted us with a cheery <come on in boys>. After briefly explaining our burning desire to follow in the footsteps of Scott, Shackleton and Byrd, he put a call through to Admiral George Dufek in Christchurch, and within a few minutes we were encouraged to make plans to join the US Antarctic Program. Wow! That was easy. Apparently, what we had done was considered almost an act of treason in New Zealand at the time. Word arrived with our mentor Professor Clark, that two of his students were breaking international protocol and should desist immediately. Bob Clark

did exactly the opposite. He declared war on bureaucracy in general and suggested we keep agitating and annoying people. The events of that day turned out to be a very smart move and we were eventually accepted, albeit somewhat reluctantly, into the New Zealand Antarctic expedition.

We discovered many things about life, bureaucrats and politics during the formative events of 1957. We also learned that having an academic and political mentor, in this case the amiable pipe-puffing Rottweiler-like Professor Bob Clark, was essential for success and progress when dealing with people of limited imagination. This was a lesson we both applied in later years when we came to guide the fortunes of our own students through the travails of life.

After much uncertainty during most of 1957 as to our future in polar exploration, we did manage to depart Wellington in December aboard the New Zealand naval ship HMNZS <Endeavour> bound for Antarctica. Ironically, we did meet up with the good Admiral Dufek in Antarctica during the 1957-58 season, developed a friendship, and let him introduce us to the merits of bourbon whiskey. (*This association and with the kindly intervention of Phil Smith led to us also becoming members of the US-IGY field programme later in the 1957-58 season*)

Barrie continued to distinguish himself in all he did and gave rise to myths and truths that are still repeated and embellished in the polar community today. It is not true, that on journey south on the <Endeavour>, he stood on the bow of the ship for hours, drooling at the sight of all the uneaten seals basking in the sun on the ice-floes we passed. It is true that when we arrived in McMurdo Sound, Endeavour's Captain Kirkwood invited Ed Hillary and Admiral Dufek on board for a meeting and drinks; and as the tallish Barrie advanced towards the guests to shake hands, he expertly wiped an entire set of light bulbs and fittings off the low ceiling! I still recall a blushing and bewildered McKelvey standing among the guests with his hair full of reflecting glass shards, bulb filaments and assorted electrical debris. O dear! I just couldn't compete with this level of drama.

We were invited to take meals at the US base on Ross Island and we just couldn't believe how many yards of food Americans could assemble on one table. This was Barrie's concept of what heaven might look like and gave rise to an expression he employed many times on later expeditions. As he

lay bloated and delirious after a fine tent meal he would mutter, <Oh, my, I'll will be so sorry when I have had enough to eat>.

By 1961 the kindergarten phase of what had been a great adventure came suddenly to an abrupt end. We actually graduated. We completed our MSc degrees and were now forced to contemplate the future. It was time for both of us to grow up and get on with it. We needed just one more burst of education. Barrie headed off to Australia, PhD studies and employment at University of New England; I moved to the New Zealand Geological Survey and doctoral studies at Utrecht in the Netherlands.

By 1973 I was in the United States and heading up a new Department of Geology at Northern Illinois University on the outskirts of Chicago. My main task was to elevate the department to doctoral level granting status. The faculty I had inherited needed an urgent jump start experience on how to excite and lift the sights of American geology majors and non-majors. Jan and Barrie came to Chicago on one of their overseas sabbaticals to assist get things cracking. Barrie taught historical geology, sedimentation and petrography to an appreciative student following, as well as providing research seminars. As many of you here can attest, Barrie was a superlative classroom teacher and could engage warmly one-on-one with students of any level. He taught from real experience. On hearing of Barrie's passing, a former student at Northern Illinois University commented, <I took my first introductory course in historical geology with Barrie, he was a fantastic person and instructor, and he helped set me on my eventual career path>. This student later became one of my prized MSc students, is now a full professor at a major university and is a leading marine geologist in the United States.

I can repeat the same history at The Ohio State University, where I was also charged with administering a department. Barrie and Jan once again came to my assistance during another sabbatical. His courses for my students are still fondly recalled.

During the 1970's and 1980's Barrie became an essential member in many of our US remote field and deep drilling programme expeditions in the Transantarctic Mountains and Ross Sea region. Most of my doctoral and masters students had an opportunity to spend time with him in the field. In the later years when Barrie worked with the Australian Antarctic

Programme, he generously included my former students in his field teams. We need to recall, then, that he contributed mightily to the polar programmes of three nations, New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

By all accounts Barrie was one of star lecturers on the Antarctic tourist cruise circuit. In later years this led him to become seriously immersed in classical and modern Antarctic historical book literature. Our frequent phone calls and email exchanges in recent years devoted a lot of time to discussing our readings of the burgeoning market in polar literature; and assigning, from our comfortable arm chairs, those authors who should receive a merit badge and those who should keep their day job.

My family have fond memories of interactions with the McKelvey family. During one of Barrie's visits to Ohio many years ago, my then very young son Aram mentioned his plan to ride his bike through the Australian outback coast to coast and asked Barrie for suggestions. Barrie muffled a chuckle and suggested that he take a very large hat and buy a bigger water bottle! A few days ago and some three decades later, the now adult Aram noted that, <I still laugh today at my naivete but value the fact that Barrie didn't say don't try it you nutty kid. He just said <try it but do prepare well>. No doubt Barrie was recalling our conversations with two of Douglas Mawson's scientists (*biologist Bob Falla and meteorologist Richie Simmers*) in 1957 and the advice they gave us when we were in the hatching phase of our Antarctic venture.

My wife Joan regarded Barrie as the ultimate gentleman and a person of impeccable manners, good taste and sense of consideration for others. I believe her underlying message was that if I was ever to try improving myself in any way, then Barrie provided an excellent model to emulate.

Daughter Amycla also knew Barrie well and after reading the many email messages that have flowed across the planet to us in the past week intimated <We have obviously lost a brilliant and dear friend>. I believe that Amycla really captured our innermost feelings at this very moment.

To Jan, Bridie and George - Best wishes and thank you for the opportunity to share these moments of reflection with you. Peter, Joan, Amycla and Aram Webb.