

## 20. A Post-War World – not everyone goes farming!

1. This is still only the sections dealing with Barkly and James's life. THERE IS A LOT MORE TO WRITE ABOUT OTHERS.

### No Easy Walk – Barkly Molteno and Ethel Robertson

The years following the end of the War led to whole new chapters in the lives of almost all the members of the family who had been caught up in the cataclysm. Whiston Bristow left the Royal Flying Corps and became a consulting engineer in England and abroad. His brother, Frank, left the Army and returned to the British East African Police in Kenya where another of the brothers, Eddie, now joined him.

A large number of others had served in the Royal Navy. Tommy Thomas left it, married Brenda Molteno, settled at the Cape and became a fruit farmer in Elgin. Paul Batley also left and found his vocation as a Roman Catholic monk. Fred Molteno was discharged as a naval stoker, returned to St Peter Port in the Channel Islands and resumed his life there. Vincent Molteno took early retirement and settled in London. And Barkly Molteno for the first two years after the War worked in London at the Admiralty in charge of the Auxiliary Patrol Section, but then took advantage of the Navy's inevitable downsizing to take voluntary retirement in early 1921.<sup>1</sup>

### Retirement

Having a more settled life had always been something Barkly had longed for. He had finally married during the War and now had a family of his own – his wife Ethel, his grown-up stepson Paul Batley, adopted son Malcolm, and little Viola, Barkly and Ethel's daughter who had been born in 1917. He was reasonably well off, having been promoted to Rear-Admiral on retirement, and Vice-Admiral on the retired list five years later. Although only 49, he decided not to look for any kind of paid employment following his 36 years in the Navy. Instead he thought of putting his energy into various voluntary roles like the British Legion, the Boy Scouts (he knew and liked their founder, Sir Robert Baden-Powell), and possibly getting on the Urban District Council and the Bench as a magistrate.<sup>2</sup> One thing he did do a few years later, and enjoyed, was teaching geography to a dozen little girls, among them Viola and her best friend Jean Crum, who were at a tiny informal school run by Jean's mother who was the Anglican vicar's wife in Farnham.<sup>3</sup> Doing these kinds of things was made easier by the fact that Percy and Bessie Molteno had set up a trust fund for him as a personal tribute to his war service and Percy had also put him on the board of a sisal production company in East Africa.

---

<sup>1</sup> *London Gazette*, passim.

<sup>2</sup> Barkly Molteno to Dr Murray, 25 Oct. 1922.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Jean Crum, 26 Nov. 2001.

Barkly said the additional income would make all the difference between being hard up and comfortably off.<sup>4</sup>

## Marriage

Quite why Barkly got married to Ethel Robertson in late 1915 is not clear. He had known her family slightly ever since her sister, Hilda (called 'Hoohoo' in the family), had married his nephew, Dr Kenah Murray, in 1904. Their father, Herbert Mainwaring Robertson, was a successful City stockbroker and the girls and their brother grew up in what was a very well-off family. In 1890 Mr Robertson had bought Boyle Farm at Thames Ditton.<sup>5</sup> The large Victorian house looked across its lawns to the River and Hampton Court Palace on the opposite bank. The grounds included an orchard and outbuildings for the carriage and horses. London's suburbs were still several miles distant, and the beautiful Surrey countryside lay all around. By the time Barkly and Ethel married, the Robertsons had moved to an even grander home at Alice Holt<sup>6</sup> near Farnham.

Barkly's relatives had never taken to Ethel who was very different from her sister. Back in 1907, for example, Kenah's sister, May, had written to her fiancé, Dr Freddie Parker: 'It struck me so much yesterday in meeting Ethel Swanston again that she was frightfully wrapped up in dress and all that sort of thing.... I would not say so to anyone else... but I see such a difference between her and Hilda.... Mrs Swanston strikes me as a person who would be absolutely no good away from her own environment and without money.'<sup>7</sup> And when eight years later, her Uncle Barkly suddenly married Ethel without letting the family know of their relationship, there were considerable misgivings, especially on his elder sister Caroline's part. Barkly had not told her of his intentions. She was, of course, already Hilda's mother in law and now, out of the blue, had become Ethel's sister in law.

Wallace Molteno, always the brother Barkly felt closest to, wrote to Caroline explaining that, while Barkly had in fact taken him into his confidence some time before, he also did not welcome the prospect of the marriage. But he concluded that Barkly and Ethel were absolutely determined and that opposing their marrying would do no good 'and might cause estrangement [between him and Barkly], the idea of which after all these years of friendship and confidence I could not bear.' He also told Caroline that he 'knew you are inclined to be hard on the woman', but 'no one regrets more than she does what has happened in the past' – and he urged Caroline to write kindly to Ethel and 'welcome her into our family circle.'<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The trust was set up just before the War ended with £4,000, a seriously substantial sum in those days. Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 15 Sept. 1918.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Thompson's unpublished account of the Robertson family.

<sup>6</sup> The house and grounds at Alice Holt are now a Forestry Commission Research Centre.

<sup>7</sup> May Murray to Dr Freddie Parker, 8 Jun. 1907.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace Molteno to Caroline Murray, 6 Sept. 1915.

Caroline was unbending for a reason, as we will see, but two months later her son, Lenox, felt compelled to write rather firmly to her from East Africa, making clear there was no point in 'saying unkind things.... After all, if they are fond of one another, that is what matters most. Her former husband, they say, was a brute; if so, why blame her?' And he went on to say that Percy and Bessie Molteno's daughter, Margaret, was most indignant that certain members of the family were acting 'unkindly, to say the least.'<sup>9</sup>

Ethel was already 41 when she and Barkly wed. She had been married twice before. Her first husband, Arthur Batley, an Army officer, was nearly 20 years older than her and had died the year after their son, Paul, was born in 1897. A very different account, however, of what had happened was related by Jean Crum, Viola Molteno's closest and lifelong friend. Viola told her that Batley had turned out to be a bigamist and that Ethel had separated from him as a result of their marriage being declared null and void.<sup>10</sup> Ethel's second husband was James Christian Swantson. They had married in 1901 and their son, Malcolm, was born in 1903.<sup>11</sup> But it turned out that Swantson was also 'a bad lot' (in Jean's words) and unfaithful to her. This triggered Ethel going through the – at that time – difficult and humiliating process of getting divorced.<sup>12</sup> No wonder a family friend of the Robertsons, Cosmo Laing, the Archbishop of York, said she was more sinned against than sinner.

When Barkly and Ethel began their relationship, there is no doubt that they were very fond of each other. Just after they got married, he told Wallace how he had just spent a lovely few days of shore leave at Alice Holt 'with my darling Ethel who grows sweeter and more beautiful and delightful at every meeting. It has been just a few days of heaven on earth.... She is quite perfect. So sweet and loving and so capable. And bright and full of keenness and fun.' And 'Malcolm is the most delightful little fellow I have ever met. His courtly gallantry to his mother puts me to shame.... I have adopted him.'<sup>13</sup> A year and a half later, in May 1917, things were still going well. Barkly told his beloved sister Betty Molteno, who had recently returned from South Africa and was living at 48 Tavistock Square in Central London, how Ethel and he... 'are so beautifully in love with each other, and so completely in tune and sympathy.... No one could ever have received more perfect love than Ethel has given me.'<sup>14</sup>

For Ethel's part, she wrote to Caroline: 'How I adored your splendid and wonderful brother.' She had apparently long wanted to 'fall on my knees and tell you....And whether I ever was able to be his

---

<sup>9</sup> Lenox Murray to Caroline Murray (nee Molteno), 15 Nov. 1915.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Jean Wright (nee Crum), 26 Nov. 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Information from Patricia Greenway's files.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm's Molteno's second wife, Vivien, thought that Swantson contracted syphilis which triggered the separation.

<sup>13</sup> Barkly Molteno to Wallace Molteno, 20 Sept. 1915.

<sup>14</sup> Barkly Molteno to Betty Molteno, 8 May 1917.

wife, or only able to be his friend, all my life was dedicated to serve him. For years I have been his closest friend and he has been happy and content because we could only what we could.<sup>15</sup>

Ethel only told Caroline this once she and Barkly were married, and there does seem to be some exaggeration in what she said. The wedding had had to be very rushed. Ethel explained: 'A wire on the Tuesday to ask if I could marry on Friday!' The War, of course, meant that Barkly had to be on board his ship up in Scapa Flow in Scotland because the Fleet had always to be ready to put to sea at a moment's notice. Indeed a couple of years later, young Malcolm was spending his school holidays on the battleship Barkly commanded, the *King George V*, when suddenly the signal to set sail was received. There was no time to put Malcolm ashore and he found himself on board the Fleet for several days hunting German ships.<sup>16</sup>

### **Barkly and Ethel's sons – Paul and Malcolm**

Barkly took to both of Ethel's sons, and they accepted him 'with the utmost warmth and pleasure'. Malcolm was twelve when his mother married again. Barkly regarded him as 'altogether a most lovable character' and 'exceptionally clever and affectionate and delightful'. He had formally adopted him at once, presumably at Ethel's urging, and so Malcolm became a Molteno. Two years later, aged fourteen, he was sent to the Royal Naval College, Osborne, on the Isle of Wight to become a naval cadet, but hated it. Ethel was disappointed but Barkly felt it was right to take him away from the College and abandon the idea of a naval career. 'He will be a writer and a scholar. He expresses himself marvellously well both on paper and in conversation and is full of ideas.'<sup>17</sup>

Ethel's other son, Paul Batley, was already a Sub-Lieutenant in the Royal Navy at the time of Ethel and Barkly's marriage, and, although only eighteen, had been in the thick of the Navy's evacuation of wounded soldiers under fire from Gallipoli during the Dardanelles campaign. Barkly thought highly of him, although his mother had a rather different view, describing him as: 'a very fearless strong character. Most difficult to bring up and train.'<sup>18</sup> Here was a clue to understanding Ethel. She had always been intensely bossy towards her mother and sister, Hilda, and was much the same with her sons.

Ethel was terribly pleased to be married to Barkly. And hugely proud of the way in which he had commanded his ship during the Battle of Jutland. She had rushed to join him as he and his men arrived at Victoria Station a few days later: 'It was grand to stand by his side and hear him address the men. All heroes every one. All splendid and wonderful.' She was also prone, however, to overstate the role she played. She wrote at once to Caroline how Barkly 'seemed only able to do things if I was by his side'. And how the men 'cheered him so, and they cheered me too, for they were glad I

---

<sup>15</sup> Ethel Molteno to Caroline Murray, 27 Sept.1915.

<sup>16</sup> Years later, Malcolm Molteno made a tape recording of his experiences on board.

<sup>17</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 27 Apr. 1918.

<sup>18</sup> Ethel Molteno to Caroline Murray, 3 Feb. 1917.

had got to him so soon'. And on his first night back, 'the only thing he called out in his sleep was "Thank God for having saved me and bringing me my darling Ethel so quickly"'.<sup>19</sup>

The house where they eventually settled after the War was Gold Hill. It was situated just outside the little town of Farnham, and only a few miles from Ethel's parents at Alice Holt. The house had been designed by the famous English architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens, and stood high on a hill commanding magnificent views of the Surrey countryside. Its garden included a grass tennis court and one of the lawns Ethel decided to call The Quarterdeck. Tall trees were all around. On one occasion Viola climbed one and tied a gold-threaded ribbon to a high branch. In the next generation her niece, Jan Molteno, on being told the story, climbed the same tree, found the ribbon and cut off a snippet as a keepsake.

### **Choosing Roman Catholicism – early ructions**

After the War, Ethel became very stressed by the decisions each of her sons made. Paul resigned from the Royal Navy in early 1919. Instead of taking up a job in his wealthy uncle's industrial works in Leeds, he decided to carry through on a vow he had made on the sand flats at Gallipoli in 1915. He had been taking part in the Royal Navy's attempts to evacuate wounded British and Australian soldiers pinned down on the beaches. Turkish troops on the heights above were raining down a withering fire. On one occasion every single sailor in Paul's party had been wounded except him. The horror of the slaughter, and his coming through it unscathed despite, prompted him to vow, if God spared him, he would devote the rest of his life to His service. Now that the War was at an end, he decided to go to Downside College and train as a Benedictine monk; this meant leaving the Church of England and becoming a Roman Catholic. Ethel, who was a conventional Anglican, was very unhappy with his decision although she did eventually declare herself 'ready to accept what Paul decides'.

Barkly's brother, Percy, also did not like Paul's decision. He favoured 'keeping out of the Roman Catholic influence if possible'; this despite the strong Catholic identity his Molteno forebears had retained for two or three generations after settling in England. Barkly was of the same mind as Percy – 'all my reason and all my instinct is that religion of that sort is an ... unwholesome superstition'. But he didn't argue against Paul's vocation because he knew him to be 'very strong-willed and self-reliant and given to acting entirely on his own judgement.'<sup>20</sup> As it was, Paul took his vows in 1922 and his final vows three years afterwards.

But the issue arose again and only a couple of months after Paul had thrown up his naval career. Malcolm, now sixteen, was going through Confirmation at Rugby, the Anglican public school he had been sent to after withdrawing from the Royal Naval College, Osborne. But he also had denominational doubts. This caused a new crisis for his mother. He was 'not at all satisfied about which is the right and true Church' and, happening to have a godfather who was the Anglican Archbishop of York, he 'put many "posers" to him'! Cosmo Laing, despite being an Archbishop, did not succeed in convincing young Malcolm. Inspired by his brother Paul's example, Malcolm became

---

<sup>19</sup> Ethel Molteno to Caroline Murray, 17 Jul. 1916.

<sup>20</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray. 21 Mar. 1919.

‘desperately keen to become a Roman Catholic and devote his life to the Church also.’ Barkly felt he couldn’t give any useful advice ‘as I cannot believe that which the Churches teach myself’, meaning the divinity of Christ, which ‘I simply cannot accept’. But Ethel, who was ‘a strong upholder of all forms and ceremonies and church discipline and rules’ came out ‘fighting all she can, seeing everybody, and writing to anyone she can hear of, to influence Malcolm away from Rome’<sup>21</sup> -- this despite now being ‘resigned as to Paul, more or less’.

Barkly counselled her to respect the ideas and feelings of others as to religion. But ‘she has the Middle Ages feeling that those who don’t see as she does should be coerced, and she hates actively all “dissenters” and “schism shops”, and says my tolerance is only slackness and laziness.’ But her efforts to dissuade Malcolm were in vain. He became, for a time at least, a devout Catholic and begged Barkly, in the face of his mother’s refusal, to go to High Mass at Farnborough Abbey which had been built by the Empress Eugenie during her exile from France in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Barkly went out of loyalty to his adopted son and commented ‘they certainly have the most beautiful service and music I ever heard.’ It is interesting to note what brought Malcolm’s commitment to the Catholic Church to an end. When he married, the Church put him under great pressure to convert his wife, Thelma. But he was sure this would ‘smash the love between them’ and refused.<sup>22</sup>

### **Barkly’s family at the Cape – the great divide**

It was around this time that a serious issue arose between Ethel and Barkly. He had always wanted to settle at the Cape eventually in order to be close to his brothers and sisters and their families, and in particular to Wallace at Nelspoort, whom he had missed so greatly during his long years in the Navy. What’s more, Ethel’s sister, Hilda, had long been based at the Cape with her husband Kenah Murray.

Barkly accepted that Ethel would not countenance a similar move.<sup>23</sup> But he still wanted them at least to pay a long visit to the Cape. This feeling was strengthened as a result of a very happy trip across Europe that Percy took him and two of their young nieces from the Cape, Kathleen Murray and Carol Molteno, on in the summer of 1925. Ethel refused point-blank to join them, and then accused Barkly of wanting to abandon her and Viola.<sup>24</sup> Malcolm, who was now an undergraduate at Balliol College, Oxford, urged her that it was right and proper for Barkly to go. So began an unhappy and never resolved disagreement.

Barkly tried to explain the situation to his sister, Caroline. Ethel had always resented South Africa for taking her sister, who was everything to her, away. She had very few real friends and leant on Barkly tremendously. She was also jealous of his strong affection for his family. ‘She simply can’t help it,’ he said. For his part, he still desperately wanted to be present at Caroline and Dr Murray’s diamond wedding anniversary, where the whole Molteno and Murray clan was planning to assemble in early

---

<sup>21</sup> Letters from Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 7 Jun. 1919, Oct. 1919, and 6 Jan. 1920.

<sup>22</sup> Ethel Molteno to Iona Murray, c, 1957.

<sup>23</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 17 Oct. 1917.

<sup>24</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 2 Nov. 1925.

1926. But 'balancing the calls of inclination and duty', and feeling 'one's first duty is to wife and children', he sadly decided against going 'for now'.

A year later he finally decided he simply must make a visit to the Cape even if Ethel would not accompany him. Percy, with his unending generosity, paid for his ticket, and a luxurious cabin, on a Union-Castle liner. When he arrived in October, it was already summer, and he had a wonderful time. He saw everybody in the family and stayed with many of them. He walked up Table Mountain with a cousin, Willie Bisset, and was pleased not to feel in the least bit stiff the following morning. While basing himself at Kenah and Hilda's in Kenilworth, he also went to stay with Caroline and Dr Murray, and their daughter Kathleen who was running their farm at Elgin. He saw Tommy Thomas, ex-R.N., and was very impressed by the superb orchards with their 14,000 trees that he had planted on the farm, also in Elgin, which he and his wife, Brenda, had taken over from her parents, Frank and Ella Molteno. He went up by train to Nelspoort in the Karoo and stayed with his beloved brother Wallace and his family. He spent time with Tom Anderson, and his daughter Effie and her husband Elliot Stanford and their children, at Quarterdeck in Kalk Bay. The trip became a joyous celebration of his huge family. 'I don't seem to have lost the threads of life out here at all, in spite of having had so few visits and such short ones. Everyone in the family has been so kind and given me such a delightful welcome – and so have the new generation, Wallace's children, Brenda's, Nesta's, and Kenah's.'<sup>25</sup> All have treated me as if they'd always known and loved me.'<sup>26</sup>

He even got drawn into trying to sort out one or two difficulties in the family. While staying with his sister-in-law, Lucy Molteno (her husband, Charlie, had died two years earlier following an operation that went wrong), he observed her grown up children: 'Virginia seems to be a very nice girl and has a sense of duty which Lucy, John and Peter lack altogether as far as I can gather from other members of the family.'<sup>27</sup> He saw that Lucy was in a very difficult position in relation to her eldest son, John, 'spoilt as he has been', but at least she 'does not allow John to browbeat her'. He had returned after abandoning his agriculture (CHECK) degree at Cambridge and spending some months in North Africa, and had a job in the Standard Bank. Barkly spoke to the General Manager who told that John 'had no aptitude for that sort of work... and he would be called upon to resign.'<sup>28</sup> John, on Barkly telling him this, was 'very crestfallen over the Bank not wanting him'. Barkly told him 'to be very polite and grateful to all the Standard Bank officials', but perhaps more to the point, asked his brother, Ted Molteno, to take him on 'as a fruit packer on purely business lines' at his and Harry's farm in Elgin so that he learn the job of farming. Ted did this, but within a few weeks had to sack his nephew as a result of his stirring up trouble among the other fruit-packers!<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Wallace and Lil Molteno on the Karoo; Brenda Molteno and Tommy Thomas at Elgin; Nesta Molteno and John Syme in Cape Town; and Kenah and Hilda Murray also in Cape Town.

<sup>26</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 30 Mar. 1927.

<sup>27</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 20 Dec. 1926.

<sup>28</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 17 Jan. 1927.

<sup>29</sup> BarklyMolteno to Percy Molteno, 9 Mar. 1927.

Barkly spoke to John again, pointing out that 'he is the man of the family and that it was his duty to help support his mother and sisters, and not live on them and be a drain'. But his young nephew didn't seem keen to do *any* work, and instead wanted to go off to Argentina or Brazil or German South West Africa, or anywhere that he might live 'a wild and undisciplined life'. James Molteno, another of John's uncles, felt he should go into the Defence Force or South African Police. Barkly also begged Lucy not to give him any money to spend, while letting him, of course, still have food and a bed.

Happily, as things turned out, the next time Barkly saw John it was nearly 20 years later and he formed a wholly different impression of him. The Second World War was nearing its end. John had joined up at the beginning of the War, fought in Ethiopia, and been awarded the Military Cross for exceptional bravery. The two of them lunched at Barkly's club in London – John 'in uniform. So very smart and goodlooking, and I very much enjoyed our time together.'<sup>30</sup>

All during Barkly's long visit to the Cape in 1926, Ethel expressed her anger at his being away. Barkly told Percy how 'Ethel has made a terrible mountain of difficulty about my coming out and her letters have all been full of complaints about me. I have tried my best to reason with her, but without success. Finally, I sent her through Paul [Paul Batley, his stepson] a letter he had sent me analysing her conduct and its causes and advising me not to continue always giving way to Ethel.... the result [was] that she has not written to me since receiving it.'<sup>31</sup> And 'she has got it fixed in my mind that I do not love her and that I am unkind to her.'

For two or three months Ethel didn't write at all. Then suddenly several cables came in quick succession: 'Implore return'. But Barkly was determined now to continue his trip and, as intended, visit Kenya before returning to England in late July. He wanted to look into the affairs of the sisal corporation there that he and Percy had an interest in. He now believed that Ethel was suffering from 'having her will thwarted in my coming out here at all, and then extending my time by two months'. He wrote to Malcolm, his adopted son who was now grown up, explaining that his mother 'didn't want me back so much to show how she loves me, but mainly to be able to upbraid me.' Hilda agreed and was 'most kind and helpful to me all through, but she hasn't much influence over Ethel. Ethel has always dominated Hilda and her parents'.<sup>32</sup> Malcolm reassured him that his mother was generally happy, though she was having periods of depression. Paul also wrote Barkly with a long letter of sympathy.

It was now six months since Barkly had arrived at the Cape. Percy felt the underlying difficulty was perhaps to do with 'time of life', Ethel now being in her early 50s. Barkly was sceptical and felt it was more a question of personality. He decided to carry on with his trip and 'keep apart without any

---

<sup>30</sup> Barkly Molteno to May Murray Parker, 6 Feb. 1945.

<sup>31</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 26 Jan. 1927.

<sup>32</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 16 Mar. 1927.



definite quarrel'. 'When I get back, I shall say that I shall not come to see her unless she promises to forgive me and not to continue to go on over again and again her grievances against me.'<sup>33</sup>

Wallace, who always inclined to pessimism, remained very worried. 'I feel very strongly that for him to continue to live with Ethel has become impossible and that the only hope for him is to separate from her and come and live out here.'<sup>34</sup> Separation is Barkly's 'only chance of having any peace and happiness. If he returns to his old life, I have grave fears of his losing his balance or of a tragedy'. He and Lil offered him a home with them if he found life with Ethel intolerable.

Barkly did go on to Kenya. He saw the Victoria Falls on the way, and revelled in all the game that he had not seen since his original posting to East Africa as a very young naval officer in 1893. In Nairobi he found three letters from Ethel waiting for him. As before, they were miserably unhappy and one long complaint against him and how unkind he had been.

In the meantime, Paul Batley, feeling that things had reached 'such a state of gravity', consulted a fellow priest 'with experience in these things'. The advice was uncompromising and coincided with what Paul had thought should be done when the crisis had first erupted over a year before. 'The proper course is to check Mother's will,' he told Barkly. 'Humouring has conspicuously failed; it is therefore unlikely to do better now since it has been tried, shall we say, for about 40 years.' 'We are obliged to try what alone remains even with small hope.' The priest had had no hesitation in telling him: 'her happiness can only be attained by a submission of her will'. Her reaction to this, Paul felt, would be 'the initial irritation that must inevitably show itself when a will, for long unrestrained, is first curbed or crossed'. 'Subsequent crossings may produce storms and great pain to her', but each one with less intensity until 'pliability of will and self-discipline, that lie beneath what we commonly know as unselfishness, will result.'<sup>35</sup> Barkly found this advice entirely contrary to his natural inclinations. 'When she is pleading and tearful and miserable... it is terribly hard for me to withstand her.' And he continued to believe: 'Make no mistake. Ethel does love me utterly. It is only that she is utterly self-willed and doesn't know it, and has been always given into.'

### **The rift continues**

It would be relief to be able to report that things got much better on Barkly's return to England. And in writing this I am mindful of Barkly's very sensible comment that 'No one can know quite how things appear between husband and wife.' But, equally, one cannot be facilely optimistic, given

---

<sup>33</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 30 Mar. 1927.

<sup>34</sup> Wallace Molteno to Percy Molteno, 13 Apr. 1927.

<sup>35</sup> This is all told by Barkly in a long letter to Percy Molteno, quoting from Paul Batley's advice, despatched from the Mutaiga Club in Nairobi, 1 May 1927.

what happened several years later in 1935 when Ethel and Barkly did eventually go out to the Cape together, and taking Viola who was now a teenager with them. Ethel still could not control her jealousy – or perhaps insecurity is a better way of describing it – over Barkly’s affection for his family at the Cape. Things got so bad that they cut the trip short and Barkly had to write to Caroline and thank her and her daughter, Kathleen, for having put up with Ethel’s jealousy and rudeness. He wrote sadly: ‘It really is a case that I must either give up my family relations altogether or live apart from Ethel. You see she has never had any experience of friendly family relationships with any of her parents’ relations, even with her own brother and sister she cannot get on happily, and doesn’t ever see her grandchildren. So we have to remember that the feelings I have for my family are entirely outside any experience of hers.’<sup>36</sup>

By this time, Wallace was no longer alive, but Kathleen now offered him a home at Elgin if he should need it. ‘I was very nearly accepting it last week, but I must act quietly and in cold blood and not when I’m feeling violently,’ he responded to Kathleen entirely frankly. After all, he had reached an age (he was now in his 60s) when there was no other sensible way to behave. He was most comforted by her generous offer. ‘However, as I told your mother, I feel my duty lies here. We all have our crosses to bear and mine is not beyond my bearing if only I can keep my temper. Alas, I still do lose it at times. And then put myself hopelessly in the wrong.’<sup>37</sup> Certainly Viola and her friend Jean Crum remembered how they heard the most awful arguments raging between her parents.<sup>38</sup> Barkly also told Kathleen, however, that he felt lucky he had never been afflicted by ‘that awful scourge of jealousy’ and ‘because I don’t suffer from it, I must not be unduly harsh to others who are. There is no way of preventing Ethel being jealous of everyone who has any of my affection or attention.’<sup>39</sup>

The same old discord broke out again the following year. Caroline was now in her 80s and Barkly – this time without Ethel – joined Percy and went out to see her and the family. But once again, he cut short his visit and returned to England on his own, leaving Percy still at the Cape. What decided him this time was that Viola had become very anxious about her mother being actually ill and felt she could not cope alone. On the voyage back, Barkly wrote to Caroline thanking her and Percy ‘and all the dear ones at the Cape [who] have been sweeter and kinder than ever to me, and you’ve hidden your disappointment at my sudden departure.’<sup>40</sup> He knew ‘how utterly inconsiderate of you Ethel is, and always has been’, but begged her: ‘Do continue to bear with Ethel; she cannot help feeling jealous.’ And he tried to reassure her on his own account: ‘Really she and I and Viola get on very happily, and there must be difficulties in everybody’s life.’

---

<sup>36</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 18 Dec. 1935.

<sup>37</sup> Barkly Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 16 Dec. 1935.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Wright (nee Crum)’s recollections, 26 Nov. 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Barkly Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 12 Dec. 1935.

<sup>40</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 27 Jun. 1936.

In his sadness on the voyage back, he pulled out and ‘read over again all the letters of my sweet friend that I’d copied out and kept, for I promised always to burn all but the last letter that I had from her.’ And he recalled how Caroline had cautioned him all those years ago: ‘Never allow anything to happen of which your conscience tells you is the least bit wrong’. And ‘very good advice I felt it.’ And he explained how he had shown his friend both Caroline and Betty’s letters to him after he had first told them of their relationship. Betty had rejoiced in ‘your beautiful friend’ and written that ‘love is the root of life’, while Caroline had expressed her ‘many doubts and qualms’. ‘How they love you! Your two sisters,’ Barkly’s ‘sweet friend’ had exclaimed.

### **A modus vivendi**

Barkly had decided not to separate from Ethel at the time of the first crisis in 1927 and they continued to live at Gold Hill for the rest of their lives. Perhaps his years in the Navy had taught him that, often in life, one has to grit one’s teeth and just hang on in there. Certainly his nobility of character prompted him to feel compassion. And eventually towards the end of his life, he was able to tell Kathleen: ‘In these latter days Ethel has got over her aversion to everything in connection with South Africa, and has even become friends with Margaret.’<sup>41</sup>

What the quality of their life together was, one cannot know. His daughter, Viola, was a great joy to him. There was a delightful moment when she was about nine years old and her mother had to be away for a few days. Viola still had a nanny who looked after her and made arrangements for her to go off and play each afternoon with her little friends. But Viola chose instead to spend the four days with no one but her father, and was utterly happy all the time. He revelled in the rare pleasure of her uninterrupted company. He found her an intelligent, keen and charming little companion, and was amazed at her interest for one so young in history and geography – both subjects he felt able easily to talk about.

He also continued to like his stepson, Malcolm, very much. He had a most charming personality and a better brain and better power of expressing his ideas than anyone else Barkly had met – which is quite something when one thinks of Barkly’s hugely able and articulate brother, Percy. Barkly felt that he and Malcolm were completely in tune. In 1927 at the height of Barkly and Ethel’s tensions, Malcolm got engaged to Thelma Henderson. She was the daughter of an old friend of his, Admiral Henderson. Ethel was delighted, possibly at the prospect of another Admiral in the family! ‘She is the one girl she hoped Malcolm would fall in love with,’ Barkly wrote, ‘in fact, she suggested it.’ He himself was more cautious because he felt Malcolm should not marry until he was earning, ‘but I am quite over-ruled.’<sup>42</sup> They married and had children, and this became another source of joy. They would bring Jan and Brian to visit at Gold Hill. Barkly could hardly believe their affection: ‘It is amazing how both of them love Ethel and myself. I’ve never had such warm-hearted demonstrative love before.’ They are ready to do anything in their little powers to please us.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> This is Percy and Bessie Molteno’s daughter, Margaret who is now Margaret Murray. Barkly Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 28 Nov. 1947.

<sup>42</sup> Barkly Molteno to Percy Molteno, 12 Sep. 1927

<sup>43</sup> Barkly Molteno to May Murray-Parker, 4 May 1939 and 8 Aug. 1940.

But still the echoes of sadness can be heard down the years. Writing to Caroline about how lovely it must be to live in the beautiful and peaceful surroundings of the farm at Elgin, he nevertheless went on to say: 'however delightful one's environment, happiness comes only from within. No life but has its grave difficulties and sorrows and drawbacks.... Of course, the one thing that does matter is to be in sympathy with those one lives with.'<sup>44</sup> And years later, referring to life with Ethel at Gold Hill: 'living as we do with no real friends, only acquaintances'.<sup>45</sup> To the very end, Ethel remained threatened by any closeness her husband might have with anyone else. Only a year before he died in 1952, Barkly told Kathleen, to whom he had long felt very close: 'I think you realize how very jealous Ethel is of anyone seeing me without her being present.'<sup>46</sup>

Another source of sorrow was his feeling that Ethel dominated Viola and alienated her from him as she grew up, 'her mother's influence being the only one she has.' 'Her mother only shows her an example of getting what she wants always. Viola is completely devoted to and solely influenced by her. For the last two years my influence, probably due to my own fault, has steadily declined and is now quite negligible. However my philosophy is to go on trying and to do one's best, however ineffective that effort may be.'<sup>47</sup>

It was not all bleak. Barkly and Ethel would on occasion have some of his fellow admirals to dinner; and, increasingly deaf, they would bellow happily at each other. Barkly also kept fit all his life. He loved long cycle rides through the countryside. He played a lot of golf, including with Percy, and won lots of cups and trophies. He meticulously mowed the lawns at Gold Hill. And he remained a superb shot. As late as the Second World War Ethel would on occasion spot a bird or squirrel in the garden. 'Barkly' she would shout in a stentorian voice. 'Pigeon.' And Barkly would spring awake from his doze, whip up the gun next to him, and shoot the offending prey which the Pekinese would then faithfully retrieve.

His voluntary activities continued. He always took great pains to see ex-servicemen living in the vicinity, often taking little Viola and Jean with him on his visits. While Gold Hill never became a 'home from home' for Moltenos and Murrays visiting from the Cape, relatives did visit and some delightful incidents were remembered. A couple of his nephews pitched up on one occasion and Barkly was being a bit fierce. 'Barkly', said Ethel sharply, 'Don't bark at the nephews like that. You're not on your quarterdeck now!' <sup>48</sup> And when his niece, Effie Stanford, brought her daughters to visit, the girls were very struck by Aunt Ethel's huge purple hat and referring always to her husband as 'the Admiral'.<sup>49</sup> Barkly always had a remarkable capacity to invite affection and loyalty. Jean Crum's

---

<sup>44</sup> Barkly Molteno to Caroline Murray, 6 Jun. 1920.

<sup>45</sup> Barkly Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 16 Dec. 1935.

<sup>46</sup> Barkly Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 22 May 1951.

<sup>47</sup> Barkly Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 31 Dec. 1935.

<sup>48</sup> Recounted by Patricia Berridge, Vincent Molteno's daughter.

<sup>49</sup> Effie Stanford was Maria Anderson (nee Molteno)'s daughter. This is her daughter, Cynthia Payne (nee Stanford)'s recollection..

mother thought the world of him. Malcolm and Thelma's children, Jan and Brian, loved him dearly. Rob Macmillan, Viola's son, hugely admired his grandfather and remembered being taken by him as a little boy to Dartmouth and dining with an admiral on board the battleship which was about to take King George VI and his wife to South Africa on their Royal Tour in 1947.

Ethel was not a wise woman in how she handled people, as her sister Hilda told Barkly. She was conventional and seemed mesmerised by status. Even towards the end of her life, she still could not reconcile herself to the paths her sons had chosen – one becoming a monk; the other switching from one line of training to another before becoming a teacher. 'To think,' she lamented, 'Malcolm might have been a Captain by now and Paul an Admiral. How I do wish it had been.... Well, I did all I could for them; they spoilt their chances.'<sup>50</sup> She was also quick to rush to judgement and condemn any behaviour that did not conform with the way she had been brought up in Edwardian times. 'The girls of the present day do not please me. I liked the reserve of my day.'<sup>51</sup> And she gossiped about Jervis and Islay Molteno's daughters: 'How ghastly the Glen Lyon girls have been.... I have never heard of girls of our sort behaving thus.'<sup>52</sup>

The best informed memories of Ethel come from Jean Crum who often stayed at Gold Hill with Viola. Ethel was extremely artistic and passed on her drawing skills to Viola. She was also strikingly beautiful, but vain (she wore a wig in later years). And too often she was unwise. She damaged her relationships, as we have seen, with both her sons and Barkly. And she believed that girls of her class should not be seriously educated. Viola seems not even to have got a school-leaving certificate and did not go to university, in stark contrast to her friend, Jean, who studied Chemistry and got a D.Phil. at Oxford. [REPETITION IN THIS PARAGRAPH OF EARLIER MATERIAL??]

Why tell this story of Barkly and Ethel? Theirs was a marriage born of two people's loneliness – Ethel with two failed marriages behind her and Barkly with a love affair that could never be consummated. Neither of them really knew what the other was like before they married. And afterwards, insecurity and stubbornness erected a wall that could never be torn down.

## **James Molteno – Serious illness and premature retirement**

### **Stricken by a stroke, 1916**

---

<sup>50</sup> Ethel Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 9 Jan. 1952.

<sup>51</sup> Ethel Molteno to Iona Murray, c. 1957.

<sup>52</sup> Ethel Molteno to Kathleen Murray, 7 Sep. 1949.

James lost his parliamentary seat in the 1915 elections and this put an abrupt end to his role as first Speaker of the South African Parliament. It was a huge shock and early in 1916 he had a stroke. Betty, who was at the Cape at the time, immediately took care of him. But Wallace felt she was too intense to be his sole company during his convalescence and came down to Cape Town and took him off to the farm at Kamferskraal. Betty was hurt at Wallace not suggesting she go too and carry on looking after James; and she returned to England shortly afterwards. By March James could walk a bit and his speech had become less slurred. But he tired easily and his eyesight remained a problem, so Wallace read to him constantly. He didn't care for novels or light reading, but remained, as one might expect, very interested in politics and the course of the War in particular. He wanted the British papers, in particular *Reynolds Illustrated News* and the *Contemporary Review*, and his mind remained clear and his memory excellent.<sup>53</sup> But despite continuing to improve, he showed no signs of wanting to return to Cape Town. By late October Wallace got impatient and felt he was quite better enough to get back to doing some work.<sup>54</sup>

But there had been another problem and that was alcohol. In June Wallace told Percy that: 'So far he has not shown the slightest craving.'<sup>55</sup> And three months later, writing to Betty: 'With regard to drink, if he sincerely wishes to have done with it, he has now been away from it for a considerable time, and well knowing the danger to him, it should not present the same temptation as by this time all trace of it should be out of his system.'<sup>56</sup> Parliamentarians are often susceptible to drinking too much. It has to do with endless hanging around waiting for the division bells to summon them for a vote, sittings frequently going on late into the night, and the boredom of seldom getting an opportunity actually to speak in the House. In James's case, his unhappiness at the failure of his family life may have been another factor. After his stroke, however, he never drank again. His niece, Carol Williamson (nee Molteno), is quite clear on this point. She came to know him well because, not having his own children around him, he found great solace in his elder brother Charlie's family. As early as 1906 when Carol was only five years old, James had handed over to them the Welsh pony, Lady Bang, and cart, side-saddle and harness which he had imported from England for his own children. And after Clare's departure, he spent much of his free time at weekends with Charlie and Lucy's family. 'He was devoted to children and wanted always to have a child sitting on his knee or close to him.'<sup>57</sup>

## Retirement and Political Memoirs

---

<sup>53</sup> Wallace Molteno to Betty Molteno, 18 Mar. 1916.

<sup>54</sup> Wallace Molteno to Betty Molteno, 23 Oct. 1916.

<sup>55</sup> Wallace Molteno to Percy Molteno, 14 Jun. 1916.

<sup>56</sup> Wallace Molteno to Betty Molteno, 23 Oct. 1916.

<sup>57</sup> Carol Williamson (nee Molteno)'s Recollections. These can be read on-line at <https://www.moltenofamily.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Carol-Williamson-Reminiscences-pdf.pdf>

Following his recovery from the stroke, he must have realized that South Africa's greatly changed political landscape, in particular the predominance of Afrikaner-run political parties that was now entrenched, meant a return to a political career was impossible. Despite being only 51, however, he did not look for some new way of earning a living, let alone returning to the Bar where in any case he had only practised sporadically. Instead he retired on his Speaker's pension and lived quietly, much of the time in a cottage in Elgin where five of his brothers<sup>58</sup> and his sister Caroline and Dr Murray all had farms. In his later years, various members of the family clubbed together to give him a pension to supplement his meagre resources.

He loved living in the Elgin valley surrounded by its mountains and found it conducive to writing his political reminiscences.<sup>59</sup> 'I am an early riser, breakfast at eight, a walk through the oak avenue past the apple orchard and on to the summit of the hill crowned by forest. It is an inspiration, clears the mind and aids the memory.'<sup>60</sup> The first volume dealt with his political life before and during the Boer War and the second carried on the story after 1902 up to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Publication was arranged by his brother Percy. Both books sadly lacked serious or insightful analysis of the country's deep divisions and the wave of racially discriminatory laws and policies that engulfed the South African people after the formation of the Union.<sup>61</sup> For example, he mentioned that Dr Abdurahman, J. Tengo Jabavu and W. P. Schreiner led a delegation to London in 1909 while the legal basis of the Union was being finalised by the British Parliament. They desperately tried to convince British MPs that the Cape's non-racial franchise should be the basis for political participation across the whole country. But James refrained from any analysis of how significant for South Africa's future trajectory was the refusal of the Liberal Government to insist that the South African politicians, now dominated by Boer War generals Botha and Smuts, accept this constitutional provision. Sadly, albeit of course of far lesser significance, James also included frustratingly little personal information in either volume. Not only did he not acknowledge Percy getting the books published, but he did not thank him for the advice he had given him or his work trying to edit the first volume. James also made no reference to Clare and only a couple to his two elder children, Clarissa and Vincent, who were the ones he knew. Nor did he mention the important roles his brothers, Percy and Charlie, and sisters, Betty and Caroline, had played alongside him in opposing Britain's war against the Boer Republics.

[PUT IN A BIT MORE ABOUT THE REVIEWS OF THESE 2 BOOKS HERE.]

---

<sup>58</sup> His half-brothers, Ted, Harry and Clifford Molteno; Frank and Ella Molteno; and Victor and Mildred Molteno.

<sup>59</sup> James Tennant Molteno, *The Dominion of Afrikanerdom: Recollections Pleasant and Otherwise*, London, Methuen, 1923 and *Further South African Recollections*, London, Methuen, 1926. Both books are available online.

<sup>60</sup> James Molteno, *The Dominion of Afrikanerdom*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> James Molteno, *Further South African Recollections*, op. cit., p. 196.