

Anne and Bill Barbour

An obituary

published in the Daily Express, 4th January 2010

Outside his family and the small Ulster town in which he lived the name of Bill Barbour is almost unknown. Yet he was a truly wonderful man, the kind of selfless figure on whom civilised society depends. In whatever role he performed during his long, rich life he always acted with decency, insight, compassion and humour, whether it be as a Second World War code- breaker, a classics teacher, a campaigner against Irish sectarianism, a devoted husband to his wife Anne or a loving father to his four children.

I was lucky enough to be one of Bill Barbour's pupils during the seventies when I went to school in Enniskillen in the west of Ulster. Though it is 30 years since I left I can still see him now, his eyes with amusement behind his spectacles, a benign smile on his lips. He was one of those rare teachers who possessed such a natural, easy authority that he automatically commanded respect without having to raise his voice.

His enthusiasm for cricket kindled my own passion for the game, while he demonstrated characteristic tolerance of my attempts to master Latin grammar or Etruscan history.

A gentle man, he possessed a deep moral strength. Nothing demonstrated that quality more clearly than the heroic but tragic nature of his passing shortly before Christmas. Bill's wife Anne, to whom he had been married for more than 60 years, had long suffered from Alzheimer's disease.

IN recent months her condition had significantly worsened. Her moments of rational behaviour were becoming shorter. Even her ability to dress herself was disappearing. Bill's family suspect that at some stage after the initial diagnosis for Alzheimer's he and Anne made a pact that if the disease reached a point where her dignity was being lost then he would bring her life to an end.

The moment for decision seems to have arrived towards the end of last year. One evening he went upstairs to their bedroom where Anne was sleeping. With all the agonised tenderness he could muster he suffocated her. Then he walked out of the front door into the bitter, wintry darkness, travelling the short distance to a lake. He waded into the black, freezing depths and drowned himself. Within their house he had left a note, part of which read: "Dementia is too degrading an illness to be suffered unnecessarily. We lived too long."

Bill Barbour's end may have been heart-rending but in his actions during that final, terrible evening he displayed those qualities which had characterised his life. His all- consuming love for Anne meant that he could not imagine any existence without her.

They had met as code-breakers during the Second World, he employed by the Foreign Office and British Army intelligence, she by the famous centre at Bletchley Park, where the German enigma signals were cracked. ever since their marriage in 1948 they had been inseparable. For a time Anne worked as a secretary at the same school and shared his love of cricket. even in old age they could be seen bicycling round Enniskillen together.

it took tremendous courage for an 89-year-old man to do what Bill Barbour did, not just wading alone into an icy lake but also ending the life of someone whom he still loved so deeply. His was the ultimate act of noble devotion and self- sacrifice but Bill was always a man of bravery. During the Ulster troubles he did not flinch in the face of crude intimidation from thugs as he propounded the message of reconciliation at public meetings. Tellingly the

Royal British Legion in Enniskillen named its sheltered housing unit Barbour Court in honour of his work for local ex-servicemen.

His innate dignity was also on display at the end, never lapsing into self-pity or giving his children the slightest hint of the fate that awaited him. His son Dr James Barbour spoke in a BBC interview of the family's "sorrow for the loneliness he must have felt carrying this commitment within him".

The tragedy of Bill and Anne Barbour highlights the increasingly destructive burden of Alzheimer's disease in our society. As our population ages this problem is bound to become worse. If the misery is to be alleviated in the coming years we will have to be prepared to pay more for care and medical research.

Some might also argue that the Barbours' case adds weight to the campaign to legalise so-called "assisted suicide". It could be claimed that in such a changed legal climate Bill would not have had to endure the trauma of taking his wife's life and then his own, since the whole business could be performed clinically by the state.

But I do not see that. Decisions about life and death are an essential part of the human condition. They should not be handed over to the bureaucracy of government, with officials deciding when the end should arrive.

Driven by the highest motives Bill Barbour did not need permission from the state to act as he did. All his life he exhibited a powerful sense of responsibility to others: in wartime service, in educating the young, in caring for his ex-comrades.

The responsibility he shouldered at the end was another aspect of his devotion to his wife. It was right that they remained in charge of their own destiny.

In our selfish, amoral world, where patriotism is derided, family breakdown is endemic and fidelity seen as outdated, Bill and Anne Barbour should be an inspiration. In their happiness and even in their final tribulations, they showed the true meaning of love.

Leo McKinstry

Web address:

<http://www.dailyexpress.co.uk/posts/view/149607/I-mourn-the-death-of-this-couple-and-applaud-their-lives->