

## **My Six Decades of Friendship with Malawi**

**Alison Cameron**



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Until my wedding in June 1957, racism was something I had never experienced nor understood. However, before our wedding Colin had, out of the blue, asked me if I would like to 'nurse black babies instead of white babies'. My reply was to have some significance for our future although at the time I had no idea why the question was asked. My reply to him was that it was a stupid question, 'they are all the same, there is no difference'. This reply was adequate for Colin, and he then told me that he had the opportunity of going to work in Blantyre, Malawi, (then called Nyasaland) and that we could get married before going out. If my reply to him had raised any doubts about the prospect of going abroad to work he would not have taken the matter further, and he would take employment with the Company he was ending his apprenticeship with as a solicitor.

We set out on the SS Braemar Castle from Southampton on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1957, and we became friendly with another two couples going out to South Africa, and also with an African student from Kenya who was returning home after completing his studies at St. Andrews University. On the ship together, with these friends, we had a very happy time until we reached Cape Town. The other two couples were from South Africa and went off sightseeing together in the city. Colin and I had decided that we wanted to do this, but that the African student would go with us. He told us that this was not a wise idea, and that he understood the separate action of the other two couples. Colin insisted that, despite the policy of apartheid, the three of us would go together. That idea we very soon found to be impracticable. For instance, we could not go into the same seats on a bus, we could not enter shops by the same door, and even the Post Office had two entries. The public seats on the side of the road were for whites only. Inevitably we got into trouble with the police, accepted the situation, and returned to the ship. The same situation existed in East London and Durban.

We both believed that this situation could not arise in a British territory and also that the newly formed Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland had as one of its principal policies that it would be based on Partnership among the races. That meant to us that all races would be regarded in the same way in normal living in the country. How wrong we were. There was rampant discrimination in all walks of life, especially in social contact. As far as Partnership was concerned, we found, for instance, that in education there were separate schools for Africans, separate schools for Europeans, separate schools for Asians and another set of schools for children of mixed race. Indeed, there was no Partnership at all, and the Southern Rhodesian leaders, who were white defined Partnership as similar to that of a rider and a horse. The result of this was that we made a conscious decision that we would do our own thing with regards to relationships and social contacts etc. At work Colin found the challenge of the legal system stimulating, but contact with fellow employees who were of a different race was expected to end as you finished work each day,

At the outset, on our first Sunday at the C.C.A.P church on the mission, the Scottish doctor asked if I could help him as one of his nurses had left. The hospital work was exclusively midwifery, which was my speciality, and all the women were Malawians. In this way I developed friendships with the women and staff, socially as well as at work. Colin realised that social contact among the races would not happen accidentally, and after enquiry he became a teacher of English at an African Night School on the mission and, most importantly, he

was working under an African Headmaster. So, from these early beginnings we developed our contacts and friendships with the different races including Asian and Coloureds. I made friends with a number of the wives of the Scottish Missionaries. The friendships that both of us made at this time have lasted ever since though sadly many of our friends have passed away. For example, a young Malawian, Grace Khumbi had just returned from a Domestic Science course in Bath. We became friendly and within a year we attended her wedding. The man she married, Willie Chokani, had just become the first Malawian Headmaster at a local school as he returned from his university training in India. The wife of Colin's Headmaster, Rose Chibambo, proved to be the leader of the Women's League, a section of the Nyasaland African Congress, and this widened my friendships with other Malawians. Another lady was Gertrude Rubadiri, who was the wife of one of Colin's friends, David.

In late 1958 with Dr Banda having returned to Malawi to lead the Congress, the political tension grew and by February of the following year law and order was breaking down. On 3<sup>rd</sup> March the Government declared a State of Emergency, and hundreds upon hundreds of Malawian men were detained without trial in Detention Centres and Prisons, both inside and outwith with the country in Southern Rhodesia. Some Malawian women were also arrested, and I found that I knew most of them, and they were my friends. Colin himself was a paid-up member of the Nyasaland African Congress and, as you will imagine, for some considerable time and during the State of Emergency the pair of us were ostracised by the white community. One incident is I think of interest. Gertrude Rubadiri and her young son, Kwame, were placed in a private dwelling house with no access to other people and it was surrounded by armed white soldiers from Rhodesia. It was near Kwame's birthday, and I had baked a cake for him. Without mentioning it to Colin, I went by car and took the cake to Gertrude, breaking through the ranks of the white soldiers who could not make up their mind to shoot a white woman or not. Gertrude, Kwame, and I had a little, but happy birthday party and it is an incident she never forgot. A few years later Colin and I were guests in her house in New York as she was, by that time, the wife of the Malawian Ambassador to the United Nations.

At this time Colin was defending Malawians in the Courts regarding incidents from the emergency. It was necessary that the British public knew when physical assaults were taking place in the Detention Centres by the guards, and he did this by phoning Barbara Castle M.P. to have questions asked in the House of Commons. As there were curfews at night enforced by armed men Colin managed to get messages through, as we had no phone, by taking with him at night a mission friend from Northern Malawi who was about to have a baby. On three or four occasions she had a 'false labour' and Colin had a letter permitting her to be taken to the hospital. Once they passed the roadblocks, they went to friendly houses to enable telephone calls to be made to Barbara Castle. Eventually the baby arrived and that was the end of that ploy. She was a brave girl to do this, and her husband was not amused when he joined her later from the north. Other Missionary wives also showed resource and courage, as when Jenny Macadam, at the time of Dr Banda's arrest, sewed some of his documents into her living room cushions, cushions which were sat on by the head of the local branch of MI5 when her house was being searched.

Eventually the Emergency ceased, and elections were held in 1961. Colin stood in the Election while I was in Scotland having our third child. He was successful in the Election and became a Minister in Dr Banda's Cabinet until after Independence in July 1964. The point of mentioning this is that when I returned to Malawi, as the wife of a Minister, the ostracising by the whites virtually disappeared, which we had a smile at. Sadly, after Independence many of the Ministers rebelled against Dr Banda and they had to leave the country. We had to leave then also as Colin had by that time returned to legal practice and was defending some of the rebels, which was not a healthy move in a Dictatorship. After we were deported, we had a thirty-year period when we were not able to return to Malawi, but both continued our friendship with people who had been exiled by going back, usually separately, to Zambia or Tanzania to keep our friendships alive. We also at that time also became Guardians to numerous Malawian children in various boarding schools in England and Scotland while their parents were in exile in Zambia or Tanzania.

In 1994 democracy returned to Malawi and my friends, the Malawian ladies of thirty years before, returned from exile to their homeland. Colin and I went back also and had a very happy and memorable reunion. For the next fifteen years, when Colin was appointed Hon. Consul for Malawi in Scotland, I was able to maintain an interest in supporting projects in Malawi, for instance being appointed Patron of the Mamie Martin Fund, a charity specialising in supporting girls in Northern Malawi by paying fees for their education. To recognise this, the Scottish Government gave me two instalments of £50,000 which was used for this purpose. In Northern Malawi there are a group known as the 'Alison Girls' who were its beneficiaries. In 1998 I was asked by the Church of Scotland Guild to represent them in Malawi for the Mvano's Fiftieth Anniversary, which I did. I still maintain a strong link with Malawi, but on a personal basis now.