

Reminiscences of Eric BYRD by Andrew and Heather TRACEY

Our dear friend, cheerful to the end! We owe him a lot. Apart from his painting and illustrations for my father's books it was through him that I met his cousin Alan Byrd, who became the chief sponsor of the new building for ILAM (International Library of African Music) on the Rhodes University campus. It looks as if I'll have to write you a long letter, with as many facts as we (Heather and I) can remember. It was here, with us, that he died – was the year about 1985? We have several of his works, mostly portraits and flowers. I see you have my father's books *The Lion on the Path* and *Lalela*..... Heather has found one photograph of Eric at our house, with his older brother Kenneth who had just come from Canada to visit him.

To start at the beginning: Before we knew him he had illustrated two of my father's books. We first knew him when he came to visit my father on our farm, Saronde, in Krugersdorp during the period 1969 to 1978. He gave us a picture of nasturtiums and did portraits of two of our children. In between visits to South Africa he visited my mother, Ursula Tracey, in England in 1974, and painted a portrait of her that we have.

Then he came to visit us at least five times at our home in Grahamstown after we moved here in 1978. Each time we took the chance to add to our collection of his paintings. He used to migrate from Canada to South Africa with the seasons. While here he would travel to the Technical College Art School in Durban where he had long taught, and then from friend to friend, painting all the way and earning his keep and his air fares that way. He often came to us after staying with a farmer living at Golden Valley ... We once picked him up from there. While at Golden Valley he had painted a delicious picture of a pumpkin and flower that we have

While here he continued painting pictures, some of which we have, including in 1980 a portrait of Ken Beard, Heather's father, who was living his last years with us, and others which he travelled on with to his next port of call. I thought of him as an example of the best way to grow old, with an alert, independent mind, full of comments and cheerfulness, and actively engaged in his art. Once his older brother came to visit him from Canada, and got stuck in Port Elizabeth at the railway station. We had to help him out. He was too old to travel, but insisted on coming nevertheless. This was rather like Eric himself – his doctor friend in Johannesburg had told him, don't fly out here again, you're not fit enough! But of course he came anyway.

Then he died here with us. He was very weak by that time, and shortly we took him to the local Settlers Hospital where he passed away peacefully after a couple of days. I felt touched that he felt secure enough with us to die in our care. We packed up his few things and sent them to his family in Canada, disposing of most of his clothes

As regards Alan Byrd, he came to Grahamstown for Eric's memorial service, held at St. Bartholomew's Church, where I met him and we got talking about my father's and my work with African music. Out of the blue he said he might be able to help us and invited me to visit him in Durban, which I did as soon as possible. It turned out that Alan was wealthy in real estate in Durban, and had founded the private Harmony Trust to be devoted to various causes, especially I think for development and education of Africans. He asked for an estimate of the cost of the new building for ILAM which I was working towards, and gave Rhodes University R500'000 which began to make the whole project possible. Other donors then contributed lesser amounts, and the building was built in 1990 and opened in 1991. So all round ILAM owes the Byrds a great deal!

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