

A conversation with Catriona Baker

To commemorate ITF's 90th Anniversary, Catriona Baker, the wife of our founder, Dr Richard St Barbe Baker, talks to us about her life with Richard and her hopes for ITF in the future.



Catriona Baker at Mount Cook Station with some of the Mount Cook Station forest in the background

What is your background? Where did you grow up and what did you do after leaving school?

Sadly I am the last surviving member of the Burnett family of Mount Cook Station. For those of your readers who are familiar with New Zealand or who may have visited the Mackenzie District of the South Island, Mount Cook Station is located on the opposite side of Lake Pukaki from Mount Cook Village, one of the most popular and beautiful tourist destinations in New Zealand.

Mount Cook Station has been an incredibly beautiful place to live with its stunning views of Mount Cook and the Southern Alps and my

heart remains there even though I have relocated down country. Despite modern forms of travel and technology, it is still an isolated spot which can frequently experience extreme weather conditions and it was because of that isolation that Mount Cook Station was the last of the Mackenzie runs to be taken up in 1864.

Mount Cook Station was taken up by my Scottish grandparents, Andrew and Catherine Burnett in May 1864 and the property has remained in our family's ownership since then. Andrew and Catherine Burnett were from Strathnaver in Sutherlandshire and they arrived in New Zealand on the 'Royal Stuart' in late 1861.

When Andrew and Catherine first arrived at Mount Cook Station 150 years ago, there were no trees or in fact much vegetation of any kind, as the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Maori, had burnt everything during their hunting expeditions for the giant bird, the Moa. My grandparents had to scour the banks of the Tasman River for firewood to cook on and heat their modest cob cottage until they were able to plant some trees and harvest their own firewood.

Tree-planting has always been an important part of Mount Cook Station life and from the time my father, Thomas David Burnett, took over Mount Cook Station from his father in 1903 he oversaw the planting of well over 600,000 trees comprising Douglas Fir, Pines, Larch and a number of deciduous trees including Poplar, Alder, Beech, Oak and Birch. My father was also Member of Parliament for the Temuka electorate from 1919 until 1941 and environmental issues were extremely important to him. He was highly respected and much loved by his constituents. When my father passed away in 1941, my brother Donald and I took over Mount Cook Station and tree planting has continued to be an important part of Station life up to the present day.

My brother Donald and I ran alpine Saxon Merino sheep on Mount Cook Station and the

extreme weather conditions combined with traditional sheep farming techniques enabled us to grow ultra-fine Merino wool which was acknowledged by the Italian textile company Loro Piana SpA as the finest Merino wool in New Zealand in 1997 and 1998 and the finest Merino wool in the world in 1999.

I grew up on Mount Cook Station but my education took place in Timaru, the main population centre for the region, and where the Burnett family had a town house called 'Big Ben'. When I left Craighead School for Girls in Timaru, I returned to Mount Cook Station to help my mother, Agnes Ellen Burnett with the keeping of the large homestead and caring for the family, shepherds and farm workers employed on the Station. I also wanted to learn about sheep farming and my father encouraged this. I had my own sheep dog which I trained and used when I joined the rest of the team for mustering.

I was also introduced to the wider world from an early age when I accompanied my parents to Wellington so my father could participate in sittings of the New Zealand House of Representatives. I am sure this is the reason I have always had a strong interest in politics!

I have also had a life-long love of horses, gardening, reading and history.

How did you meet Richard and what was he doing at that time of his life?

I first met Richard in Dunedin in 1953, when I accompanied my mother to a function in Richard's honour at Mr Philip Barling's beautiful property, 'Glenfalloch'. Richard returned again for a second visit several years later and we attended another gathering at 'Glenfalloch' when the Dunedin Branch of the Men of the Trees was formed. Richard presented us both with Men of the Trees badges on that occasion.



Catriona and Richard Baker on their wedding day

In 1958 I travelled through Europe with my aunt and then over to England where we took the opportunity to call on Richard's good friends Douglas and Eileen Thompson who lived near Winchester. It transpired that they had rescued Richard following a bizarre accident near his home at West End, Southampton, when he had been poisoned after coming into contact with weed-killing spray. The Thompson's took him to their home near Winchester to recover and by chance I met Richard there again and that was very nice indeed.

Richard and I married on 7 October 1959 at the Church built by my father in South Canterbury, New Zealand, known as St David's Pioneer Memorial Church. This was a "tree wedding" where our guests brought their choice of tree written on a card and the trees were then delivered and planted at a later date.

Could you describe what life was like married to Richard? Did you accompany him on any of his travels around the world?

Richard made his home at Mount Cook Station and it became the Overseas Headquarters for Men of the Trees and the

Sahara Reclamation Project. Richard continued to travel extensively both overseas and in New Zealand, where he was in demand as a speaker. He soon got into the routine of spending two summers - one in the northern hemisphere and the other one in New Zealand. Richard only ever spent one winter in New Zealand and that was when he worked on 'Famous Trees of Bible Lands' which is one of my favourites from his collection of over 30 books.

He would work from his "den" a small building near the Mount Cook homestead which had wonderful views of the Southern Alps across the valley. Life was extremely busy and I assisted Richard as much as I was able to. I helped him with his correspondence and he often used me as a "sounding board" when he wrote.

Richard used to return to Mount Cook Station in October, quite tired after his overseas travel and he was able to relax and recharge his batteries. He loved to work in the vegetable garden and was a keen compost maker. He set up a very good watering system and loved to potter in the glasshouse which I had given him as a birthday gift. The grape he planted at Mount Cook Station still produces delicious fruit to this day.

He also loved to lie in his long chair with the sun on his limbs but he was soon on his way again to undertake lectures and catch up with his friends in the northern hemisphere. He was truly a world citizen.

A number of Richard's friends used to visit us at Mount Cook Station and I particularly remember his good friend Martin Rudy Haase and family visiting from Maine on several occasions. They were always very happy times as Rudy was also a great conservationist and he shared Richard's environmental vision.

Because of my commitments with the running of Mount Cook Station I was unable to join Richard on many of his trips. However, I did attend the first Redwoods Reunion with him at Mill Creek, California, in September 1960.



Richard Baker and his daughter Angela at Lake Tekapo Cottage

Of all the people Richard met, who were the ones who had the biggest impact on him and why?

This is a difficult question as Richard knew so many people who had an impact on him. However, I would say Senior Chief Josiah Njonjo, Shoghi Effendi and Sir John Chancellor were very important to Richard, and Richard writes about these great men in Part II of my book 'The Man of the Trees and Other Dedicated Environmental Guardians'. From Richard's own words in the book it is very clear to see just how highly he regarded these individuals.



Josiah Njonjo & Richard St Barbe Baker

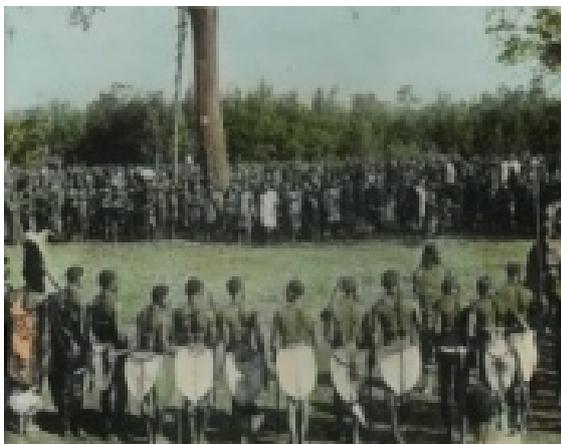
There are many wonderful quotes from Richard; what is your favourite?

Richard's quotes were wonderful and he had so many. My personal favourite dates back to his interview with Edward Goldsmith in 1979. The message is definitely more urgent today and I had it printed on the back cover of my book.

"We forget that we owe our existence to the presence of Trees. As far as forest cover goes, we have never been in such a vulnerable position as we are today. The only answer is to plant more Trees – to Plant Trees for Our Lives."

Is there an instance in Richard's life which you think best captures his character and spirit?

Once again this is a difficult one because he achieved so many amazing things. In the early days there was the Dance of the Trees on 22 July 1922 at Muguga in Kenya when 3,000 young warriors assembled and the first 50 members of the Watu wa Miti (Men of the Trees) were recruited. On that day each member made a solemn promise to do one good deed each day, plant ten trees, seedlings or seeds each year and take care of Trees everywhere.



Dance of the trees

His work on the Save the Redwoods campaign was also incredibly important as were his Sahara reclamation expeditions. He would be greatly encouraged to know that efforts are continuing in the Sahara and The Great Green Wall project currently under way would delight him.

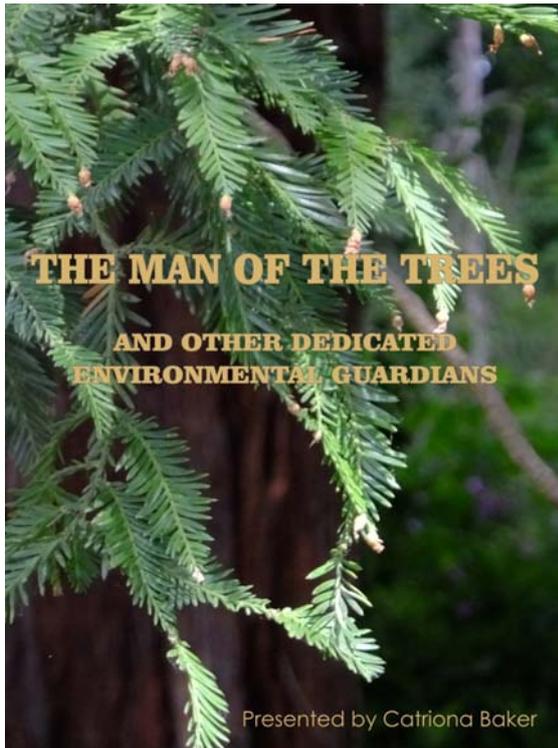
Even in the latter part of his life, Richard's spirit never wavered and I helped him plan his 'Dominion Ride' for charity in 1962/63 when he rode on horseback from the tip of New Zealand's North Island to the bottom of the South Island. He was aged 74 at the time.

What do you consider to be Richard's greatest legacy?

Obviously the on-going work of the International Tree Foundation (formerly The Men of the Trees) is a wonderful legacy. The organisation's successful planting of 800,000 trees in 2013 and its management of eighteen projects around the world, working in ten African countries would make him incredibly proud. I know he would be encouraging members to get behind the ITF's 90th anniversary project to plant one million trees this year and to involve as many others in this project as well.

Richard's books are another wonderful legacy and I would encourage your members to read any that they can get their hands on. 'Green Glory' is essential reading as is 'Sahara Conquest' which was named Book of the Year - Millennium Guild of New York M. R. Freshel Award in 1966 for the book most likely to advance the cause of humanitarianism

Richard's other great legacy is undoubtedly the inspiration he gave others to become involved in environmental issues, particularly relating to the planting and protection of trees. I know Richard would be immensely proud that his grand daughter Ann Marie Barnes in Sydney, Australia has taken up his cause and he would be delighted at the work Scott Poynton continues to do with The Forest Trust, as well as Barrie Oldfield's work with Men of the Trees in Western Australia.



“The Man of the Trees” book is a tremendous achievement? What inspired you to write the book?

At age 93, I retired down country due to my health. It was always my intention to write a book when I retired and my first book ‘The Story of James Mackenzie, of the Mackenzie Country New Zealand’ was well received when it was published in 2013. James Mackenzie is a New Zealand folk hero and the Mackenzie District, where I have lived all my life is named after him.

I had always wanted to write a book about Richard and the success of the first book gave me the confidence to write ‘The Man of the Trees and Other Dedicated Environmental Guardians’, which is a far more comprehensive book.

The Richard St. Barbe Baker Collection held at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada was an invaluable resource for the book and librarian Patrick Hayes was a wonderful help.

My work on the book was made more difficult because of my failing eye sight, but thanks to the help of Janine Sundberg, my trustee, we

managed to do it and the new book has created quite a lot of interest.

What are your memories of the Men of the Trees or ITF and did you get involved in any way?

As mentioned earlier, I joined the Men of the Trees, Dunedin Branch, in the mid 1950’s along with my mother, and then of course a few years later the headquarters of the Men of the Trees was based at our home, Mount Cook Station from the time Richard and I married in 1959 until his passing in 1982. I have many memories of the Men of the Trees organisation, from important correspondence, the preparation of the seasonal ‘Trees’ Journal, the beautiful Tree Lovers’ calendar which was published annually, hearing about Richard’s travels when he returned home each October, and of course meeting Richard’s Men of the Trees friends when they visited us at Mount Cook Station.

Following Richard’s death I am sad to say I lost contact with the organisation and it was wonderful to re-connect following Andy Egan’s email earlier this year. It has been a very enjoyable experience to work on the special edition of ‘The Man of the Trees and Other Dedicated Environmental Guardians’ which we are currently having printed to mark the 90th Anniversary of Men of the Trees/ITF.



90 years on from the foundation of Men of the Trees, and with deforestation continuing apace, how do you see the current situation?

I am extremely worried about the state of Mother Earth and dedicated my book to Her.

For example, at Mount Cook Station climate change has been reflected in our weather patterns and temperatures. Temperatures are noticeably warmer than they used to be and we certainly do not get the hard winters and heavy snow falls we used to.

There was a time when Mount Cook Station land ran right up to the Tasman Glacier, New Zealand's largest glacier. The Tasman Glacier is retreating at a frightening pace as a result of global warming and there is no doubt that things are very dire for the whole planet.

However, I still have faith that the extraordinary people around the world who are dedicating their lives to saving the planet by halting deforestation, will bring about the change that will save the planet.

I have always admired the work His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales does for the environment and also have great admiration for the 'environmental guardians' who contributed to Part III of my book. Thankfully every country has their own environmental guardians and the wider population must get behind these people and support their efforts.

What message do you have for supporters of ITF and our readers?

Please keep going with your efforts. Involve your family and friends and their friends as well; bring as many other people on board with the ITF as you possibly can. Keep planting trees and remember to protect and care for the trees you already have.

It would be wonderful if the ITF's aim to plant one million trees this year could become its annual goal.

In closing I would like to quote Richard when he addressed the meeting on 11 February 1929 which was held to discuss the formation of an association for the promotion of forestry in Palestine - which subsequently became the Men of the Trees:

"The object of the Men of the Trees is to develop a tree sense in every citizen of the world and to encourage all to plant, protect and love their native trees; for forestry is among the oldest and most honourable of all peaceful arts of men and in its practice is unselfish and constructive work."



Richard St Barbe Baker planting a Kauri tree with children in New Zealand

Thank you to Janine Sundberg for recording Catriona Baker's words, New Zealand, August 2014