

# *Mightier than the Waves*



*The Cockerhams' Story*

"Mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty!"

*Psalm 93, 4 (RSV)*

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**The Cockerhams' Story**

**Geoff Roberts**

**Line drawings by Anne Cockerham**

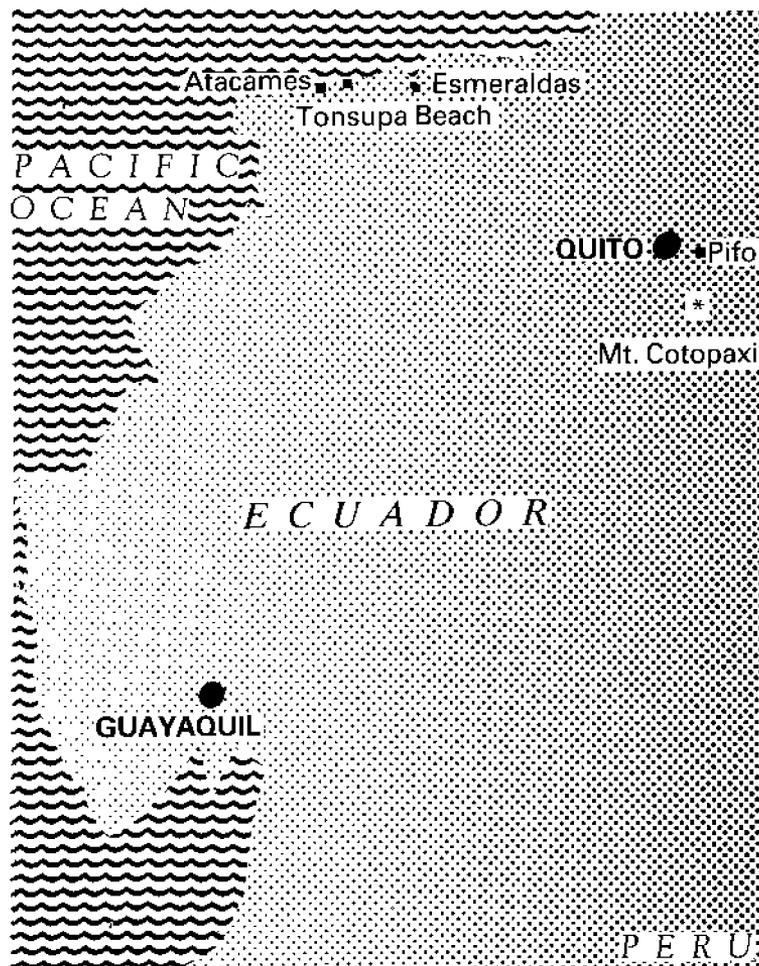
To DAVID and JOHN,  
the next generation  
of the Cockerhams

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Work in Local Radio*

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First published 1981

# Foreword

*by Anne Cockerham*



When the unbelievable happened and I became a widow, the **W**loss was very severe. Robert was a wonderful man and conscientiously filled the demanding roles of head of household, husband and father.

Robert had come close to death several times in the course of his work and I knew he was not afraid to die. Because he had become a new person in Jesus Christ, there was no doubt that Robert was now in the presence of his Lord, and we were happy in that certainty.

However, though we could rejoice with Robert that he was with the Lord, we still had to face life without him. There has been, and continues to be, enormous grief. God never said that His servants would avoid pain. Rather, He promised that we would suffer, but that He would be with us during the hard times. I have found this to be true, and the grief is precious because of His closeness and because of what He is teaching me through the pain.

Practically, we faced all sorts of problems because of the loss of Robert. Over the years of knowing God we had learnt to rely on His word, the Bible, and to trust Him to provide all we needed. But our needs had never been so gigantic as those we had now – would God be able to supply?

In the Bible, the Lord told me that He would be a husband to the widow, a father to the fatherless. I could see no reservations, so we decided to take the promise literally and to take any and all problems to Him. As we saw the Lord answer in one area, it made us more bold to turn over another area to Him. Widowhood has become a great adventure as I have tried to find the limit to how much the Lord would do for us all. He is completely faithful to

His promise, and so far we have found no limit!

We are back in Ecuador now, still part of the Mission family. Robert's aim in life was that God would use him to introduce people to the message of salvation. My desire is the same, and so I am very thankful that the Lord has allowed us to return. I pray that, through the story of God's dealings in the life of Robert Cockerham, you will come to know more of the Lord who made his life so exciting, fulfilling and worthwhile.



Waves from the Boys

# Author's Preface



“Very risky,” was the gist of a literary agent’s comments about publishing this book. I had telephoned him hoping to be reassured before committing myself to its preparation.

“What’s he called? Robert what? . . . I’ve never heard of him. Did he do anything worth writing about?”

“He worked for a missionary radio station,” I replied.

“Ah, so he was a well-known broadcaster!”

“No, a transmitting engineer.” While saying this, I pictured his eyebrows curling into recumbent S-shapes.

“Oh, then he fell victim to political events – captured by terrorists, tortured – that kind of thing?”

“He died while serving abroad; but it was a pure accident,” I explained.

The pause was ominous. “Look, Mr Roberts, missionaries have fatal accidents almost every day. Now, if you had suggested writing about a Christian entertainer . . .”

We went on to another topic. Whilst respecting his commercial judgement, I was not persuaded that the Cockerhams’ story should be allowed to be forgotten by the church at large. I believe the lessons it contains cry out to be communicated.

Those who had been closest to Robert Cockerham not only shared this view; they were also ready to talk and supply the information I needed. I thank them for enduring the pain this inevitably involved, and welcome the indications that my book will play a modest part in the healing process.

For those readers who were not privileged to know him personally, there is the prospect of being introduced, in these pages, to a Christian radio engineer of great stature and promise.

I am sure Robert would want the glory to belong to One mightier than him, mightier than the waves which engulfed him.

*Geoff Roberts  
Shipley, November 1981*

The author is a lecturer in business and communication studies

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Readers in the United Kingdom who wish to send donations to the fund, care of The World Radio Missionary Fellowship, should use this address: 63a Main Street, Bingley, West Yorkshire, BD16 2HZ.

Copies of this book may be obtained from Mrs D. Scott,  
51 Nab Wood Crescent, Shipley, West Yorkshire

# The Longest Day

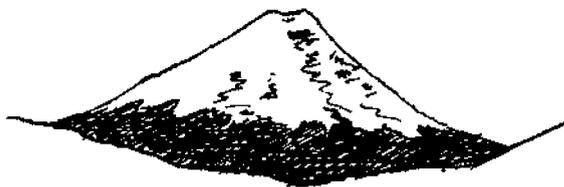
While most of the world's press was predicting Prince Charles's engagement, a young English couple took an unpredictable break. When setting off with their two sons at dawn on a fine Tuesday in February, 1981, Robert and Anne Cockerham had no idea that their own names would soon be in the headlines.

If the 200-mile route to the coast had begun at their former home in Shipley, West Yorkshire, the driving conditions would have been much easier. But they were living in the alpine north-west of South America, in the country of Ecuador. Robert was the operations engineer of a radio transmitting station at Pifo, high up in the Andes mountains. The fifth member of the family group, joking and laughing with his grandsons David and John, was Anne's father, Ervin Scott, who had flown from England for a five-week visit.

Robert was fortunate in having a cheerful extrovert as his wife, but on this occasion she was uneasy and anxious. Only days before leaving, they had heard on their own radio station about an incursion of Peruvian troops at the disputed border in the south. A state of emergency had been declared and they anticipated difficulties on the way.

Anne knew that Robert was tired by overwork, correcting faults in the transmitters which were interfering with Army communications. Yet another cause for concern lay in the nature of the route to the Pacific coast. Much of it was along unfenced, stony, single-track roads, snaking past awesome cliffs. Chasms which had swallowed up many luckless vehicles gaped below. Not surprisingly, Anne kept quiet while her husband concentrated on driving the holiday van.





When it was safe to glance upwards, Robert could see snow-capped peaks, collared with clouds and reflecting the golden rays of the dawn. Rising above the others was the volcanic Cotopaxi, Ecuador's second-highest mountain. No-one knew this sunrise was the last that the driver would ever see.

As the village of Pifo, with its extensive array of radio masts, receded behind them, the holiday party noticed other travellers. A few Indians in ponchos were riding slowly on horseback through the sparse vegetation. Some vehicles were heading, like theirs was, for Quito, the capital city. But at 5.30 a.m. there was not enough traffic to rattle the windows of its Spanish Colonial-style buildings.

Quito has an unusual shape: fifteen miles long but only one mile wide, it stands in a high basin. Robert gripped the steering-wheel as the paved route through its modern outskirts led into a twisting, climbing road. Unforgettable sights of the "Avenue of Volcanoes" came into view. Although few of these were active, it was necessary to look out for rock debris on the roadway.

Farther on, while descending 12,000 feet in only fifty miles' driving, the travellers imagined they were surveying the distant countryside from an aircraft. Robert imitated a captain giving flight reports to his passengers. No comment did justice to the temperature, humidity and pressure, however; these were rising rapidly. The boys took off their ponchos; the adults, their pullovers or cardigans.

An early lunch was eaten near Santo Domingo, a town frequented by Colorado Indians who paint their hair red with a natural dye. Land that had once supported a dense evergreen rain-forest could be seen bearing crops. Rice, banana and citrus fruit



farms were fringed by cacti and tall trees. Roadside stalls displayed melons, pineapples, coconuts and huge stalks of green bananas for sale. The road to the coast became level and straight.

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Beginning to relax. Anne thought about the course of events which had made the short holiday both essential and possible.

Now in their second period of service with a Christian radio mission\*, the couple were closely involved with the Ecuadorians in Pifo, the expanding village church and their station's spiritual concerns. Two growing sons, aged three and five, naturally expected more time with their devoted parents. All of these demands had to fit in with Robert's on-call and administrative duties and Anne's hospitality and office work for the mission.

Although a break had been planned several times, it was prevented by pressure of work until after Grandad Scott arrived. He agreed eagerly to join the family holiday and looked forward to baby-sitting when required. Leave and the mission's Toyota van were booked from Tuesday to Saturday – long enough in the tropical heat.

As yet, however, they had nowhere to stay. If all else had failed, the five would have eaten and slept in the roomy vehicle. As things turned out, this was unnecessary. Just two days before departure, they were thrilled to hear from a colleague that his neighbour had a seaside cottage available for loan. They accepted the offer.



\* Radio HCJB, part of the World Radio Missionary Fellowship

Tonsupa Beach sounds like the name of a high-class international resort. In reality, it lacks the size and facilities required for inclusion in tourists' maps. A cluster of cottages without mains water and power, fifty yards from the ocean across firm sand. Palms and coconut trees, rows of sweetcorn and colourful plants and flowers. Just the place for an undisturbed holiday.

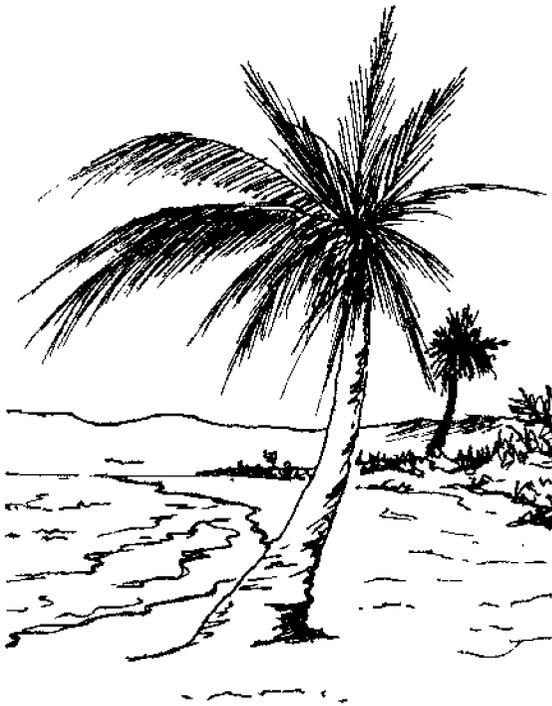
As soon as Anne learnt that was where the family would be staying, she put together all the things they would need: plastic containers of boiled water, frozen for transportation; all the food and fruit drinks required; sheets, a first-aid kit, clothing and toys for the beach.

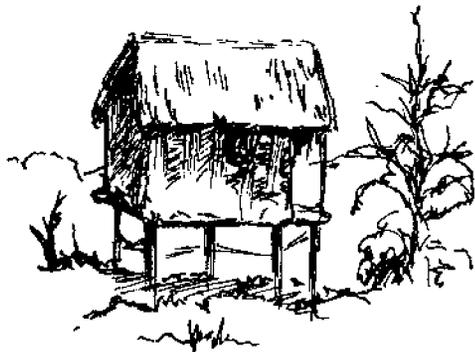
Ervin loaded his camera, anticipating the scenic delights to come. Robert carefully checked over the van, but missed something that his father-in-law chanced to notice later: two slits in the front offside tyre. No great stretch of imagination is needed to think what might have happened. After this had been attended to, the remaining steps were to pray afresh for the whole venture and have a good night's sleep.

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The boys had seen an ocean before, when flying to England with their parents. But the Atlantic looked grey and flat from that angle. Now they had a better viewpoint: a bench seat in a van approaching its destination. The shimmering, blue Pacific was beckoning, enticing them. Anne was pleased she had packed her sketching pad. The whole family was in lively spirits.

First, however, they had to pass the state-owned oil refineries which were being guarded against possible attack. To their relief, the soldiers allowed them to drive on without stopping.





Turning into the coast road at the port of Esmeraldas, they began to look out for Tonsupa Beach. (Signposts are rare in Ecuador). A typical dwelling there consists of one room, supported on short stilts. The sides are made of split bamboo and the roof of banana leaves. On sighting a group of these, it was easy to pick out the corrugated roof and wooden sides of the five-roomed bungalow which would be theirs for the next five days.

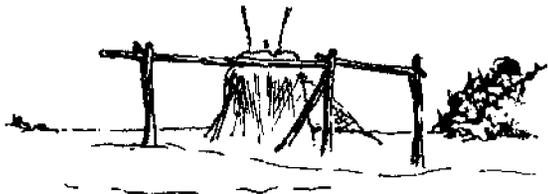
It was 12.30 p.m. and extremely hot and sticky. The travellers contented themselves with fruit drinks, obtained a key from the caretaker and off-loaded the luggage. The beach was deserted.

Forgetting Noel Coward's oft-quoted musical warning, the English "went out in the midday sun" to seek refuge in the water. All except Robert; he had a headache and preferred to sleep it off in the bungalow, stretched out on the double-bed.

The bathers enjoyed themselves for nearly an hour, until they felt their necks and shoulders burning and decided to get dressed. In order not to disturb the exhausted driver, they went for a long walk.

While the boys scampered about, Anne and Ervin took in the view. Pelicans were flying close to the waves. Lightweight fishing boats carved out of balsa were drawn up on the beach, their nets drying on rough pole frames stuck in the sand. No fishermen were to be seen: perhaps they had found somewhere to avoid the excessive heat.

Knowing the coast road was a mile or so inland, the four strolled there and found a café open. After Cokes all round and a respite from the unremitting sun, they plodded back to the bungalow. Its double-skin roof gave welcome shade.



Robert woke up, refreshed by his long sleep – conveniently, for it was tea-time. Anne boiled a kettle on the gas-stove and made tea and sandwiches; afterwards, they washed the dishes in the ocean.

Robert said he was ready for a swim. Anne accompanied him, whilst Ervin was content to stay with the boys and take photographs on the beach.

The tide seemed to be on the turn. High waves were building up in quick succession. At first the couple swam together, splashing each other and enjoying the freedom from cares for which they had waited so long. Then Robert left his wife's side as he was drawn into deeper, rougher water.

Water which had strong currents . . .

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Anne takes up the story:

*The images of his drowning come so clearly, photographed on to my mind forever.*

*That last time in the water. The anticipation of an evening alone, while Grandad took care of the boys. How we should have loved it: a walk along the shore, hand-in-hand; relaxation, fun, and the relief of being away from Pifo for a while. And our love for each other.*

*Then the feel of that wave – the sudden panic – I can't manage in this, Lord – help me get to the shore! Robert is struggling and shouting for help. Oh God, let me get to a boat and call some help. But I can't move against these waves. I'm going under again and I'm so tired . . .*

Feeling sand under her feet at last, she cried out over the roar of the ocean and waved to her father. He thought the shouts and

screams were sounds of play. David laughed and waved back to his mother.

When Ervin began to realise what was happening, he dashed into the powerful swell and shouted to Robert that he should try to float. But Robert disappeared and his would-be rescuer was thrown back on to the shore.

Not far away, a terror-stricken wife was also deposited on the sand. Distraught, she ran, stumbling, to the bungalow. No-one was there, but some workmen were standing on the flat roof of another property. She screeched frantically, "¡Ayúdenme, por favor, ayúdenme!" (Help me, please help me!) This only produced curiosity.

*I can see people on the shore, but not Robert. The sea has taken him. Señor, get a boat out! My husband – swimming – has disappeared. Yes, I know he must be dead, but won't you please row out to him? I'll pay you anything you like!*

The man to whom Anne spoke declined to help. She and her father ran desperately to a boat, but they felt as though they were pushing lead, not balsa, and could not launch it.

*Boys, Daddy has drowned. Come here, and let's pray. Thank you, Lord, for Robert and his life. And thank you for his death. Thank you that he loved you and you saved him, so that now he is with you. Please help us and take care of us . . .*

Anne opened her tearful eyes and saw the unfeeling spectators who had gathered round. Then something else caught her attention:

*He's there – at the water's edge, a hundred yards away! Surely he can't be alive? He looks so white, lying there; sand on his body, sand in his beautiful hair.*



Father and daughter hurried along the beach. Ervin expelled water from Robert's lungs, massaged his chest and tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. All were to no avail. Anne knelt beside the body and breathed into the still lips. She took a limp hand, trying to feel the pulse: nothing. No-one would take over the massaging from her father, so she tried it herself. It was futile.

Some of the men stepped forward, lifted the body by the arms and legs and began walking up the beach. Anne, carrying John and holding David's hand, brought up the rear of this macabre, forlorn procession. They laid the body on tufts of grass near the bungalow and placed towels over it. The onlookers, now a crowd, stared with ghoulish curiosity.

Finding some courage, Anne asked a man to take her to the nearest town, Atacames. He said he needed the permission of his employer, a woman who lived near-by. But the woman was in the crowd and followed Anne into the holiday van. She wasted the little English she could speak on describing other drownings that had happened locally and pressing for the lurid details of the latest one.

Atacames proved a difficult place to stir into action. No long-distance telephone calls could be made because the lines were faulty. Trailing round the central square, Anne winkled out two policemen and a young doctor. The latter was concerned and sympathetic. They all climbed into the van for the return journey.

At Tonsupa Beach the inevitable questioning had to be faced. Although one of the policemen took full statements, he explained that the necessary papers could not be completed until the offices reopened the next morning. Robert's body, he declared, would



have to stay in the house overnight; washed, clothed and, according to custom, encircled by candles.

A second, more helpful woman took Anne aside. "Whatever you do, don't leave it till morning. Pay the policemen and get the papers, for tomorrow the doctor will be gone and you'll have great trouble."

*Doctor, could you possibly do it all now? Could I please get away, back to my friends in Quito, with all the papers I need?*

*He is willing, and so are the police. We move the body into the house and put it on the double-bed. The crowd follows, scaring the boys with fuss and superstitions. John sees the body, senses their feelings and screams for his daddy. I have to take him with me when I return to Atacames, leaving David with Grandad.*

*On the way, we pass for the third time a cemetery with this notice over the gate: "From here, the righteous enter glory, but the wicked go to eternal damnation." I think of where the body might be buried. In Pifo? In that depressing, hopeless little churchyard where, on the "Day of the Dead" (All Souls' Day), people eat meals on the graves and set places for their dead relations?*

*I am grateful when one of the policemen offers to drive us all to Quito, where Radio HCJB's headquarters staff will attend to our needs. While the doctor does the paperwork, I wait with John in the medical centre.*

*Now the tears start to flow. John pats my cheek and cuddles me. "Betta, Mummy?" he asks.*

*Back amid the lengthening shadows at the beach, it fell to Anne*



and her father to reload the luggage with the caretaker's help. Also, Robert's body had to be prepared for the journey. Anne thought about washing off the sand and dressing it, but decided not to risk damaging the skin. Instead, she hugged and kissed him for the last time, stroked his sand-filled hair and said goodbye. Not a dead body any more, she supposed, but once again her husband asleep on the bed.

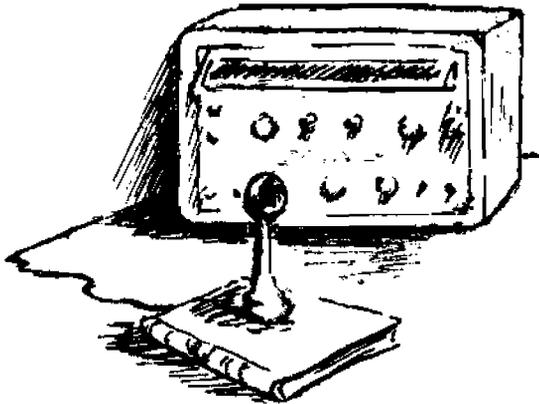
The men who had carried him before came in and asked what they could use to support the body. She suggested a deck-chair, but when they put it up in the sitting position she thought she would have hysterics. The chair, made flat again, was placed in the rear of the van with a sleeping-bag and a folded cardigan on top. The body, wrapped in a sheet but otherwise exactly as it had come from the beach, was laid carefully in position.

The passengers got in and spaced themselves out. Anne, having no immediate concerns, began to worry about the future – taking difficult decisions – being a widow . . .

David looked up at his sorrowful mother and said, perceptively, "Daddy's lucky – he's gone to have tea with Jesus!"

Because the policeman was driving fast and knew the road well, the journey took only six hours. Whenever Ervin asked him to stop and make a telephone call, he refused. In fact, sketchy news of the tragedy was already on its way.

The flashing lights of an oncoming car dazzled their bleary eyes. It was a signal from Don Spragg, HCJB's Director of Engineering. Having heard the dreadful news in an amateur radio message from Esmeraldas, he had come with colleagues to meet them. Still travelling at top speed, the van covered a great distance before



Don could turn round and catch up with it. Its pursuers were relieved to discover Ervin was not at the controls, since they had thought he must be beside himself to drive in that manner.

Already the lights of the capital were in sight, twinkling in the cold air. Soon afterwards, the bereaved were comforted in fellowship with the Christian community and reassured of God's love and protection. One of the hardest things for them to believe was that it had all happened within twenty-four hours.

But, for Robert, a new day had already begun. A day which would never end.



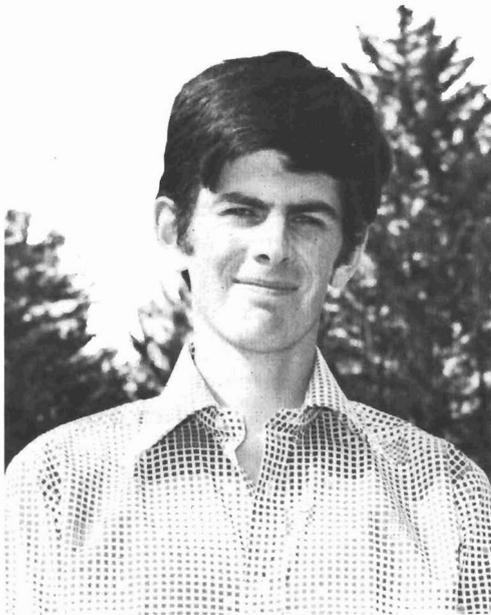
# Robertpsalm

Today you were swept under the sea  
And only your lifeless frame came back again.  
The word just came  
As merrily we rowed along  
With only life in view  
Until tonight.

No details yet.  
Just a brief telephone message  
And a desperate hope that someone's wrong.  
In a moment  
All our wives became widows  
And all our children became orphans,  
And sleep scoffs  
As a million moving pictures tell us  
How it must have been.

Lean, tall, gentle Robert,  
Is that vigorous youthful face really over there tonight  
Being given a royal welcome by His Majesty?  
Is Anne really staring at a half-empty bed . . .  
Or trying to explain to the boys about eternity?

Lift her up, Father.  
We're too far away tonight,  
But You're there.  
Please hold her in Your mighty arms  
And don't let her go until she and they are safely with You, too.



A mystery it's always been  
Why choicest fruit is often plucked still green,  
And why it takes a mighty wave of shock  
To drive us from our boats,  
Where merrily we rowed along  
With only life in view,  
Into a glimpse of the glorious urgent now,  
And into a determination to redeem that now  
Before our wave falls heavy too.

A moment to weep . . .  
Then out to the battle again.  
A world's to be won,  
And other waves are crashing down  
On swimmers less prepared for doom.

Thank you, Robert.  
We could not rescue you from death,  
So you rescued us from sloth.  
Oh, may today's sting not fade  
Until the Spirit's work is done in us  
And through us in His glorious plan  
And our glorious task.

David Cliffe  
10th February, 1981 (used by permission of the poet)

# Beginnings

God controls the heredity and circumstances of His people. This assertion should not surprise students of the Bible and biographies of Christians. The young Jeremiah learnt that God had known and ordained him even before he was conceived in the womb. Countless other examples, documented or not, point to sovereign intervention in the lives of unconverted people who, after turning to Christ, were able to recognise ways in which they had already been prepared for service.

In his book, "New Wineskins"\* , Howard A. Snyder writes:

*It is not too much to say that God in His foreknowledge has given to each individual at birth those talents which He later wills to awaken and ignite. A spiritual gift is often a God-given ability that has caught fire.*

It is rewarding to discover this principle at work in Robert Cockerham's life, centering on his conversion at the age of twenty-one.

We can trace his technical aptitude and perhaps a glimmering of interest in radio to a grandfather who had built sets ever since the "cat's whisker" era. No less significant were the qualities of leadership attributable to his father, John, an industrial manager. Radio and telephony featured in his mother Eileen's occupations.

When the family – parents, brother and younger sister, Margaret – was living in a compact semi-detached house in Heaton, a suburb of Bradford, John Cockerham used to give lifts in his car to a neighbour, Maurice Shaw, who worked at the same factory as he did. One day, eight-year-old Robert was also a passenger. As they drew up to the Shaws' house, he noticed a tall aerial in the

\*Inter-Varsity Press, Illinois, U.S.A., 1975

garden and asked Maurice what its purpose was. Being told that it was for short-wave reception meant little to the boy, who knew nothing more of radio than its ability to produce sounds at the turn of a switch.

It meant much more when Maurice Shaw invited him to see the powerful installation and listen to radio amateurs' transmissions. During one of Robert's occasional visits, they picked up a message from a British scientific team working at the South Pole (it being International Geophysical Year). This was confirmed later on a card which they obtained from the operator. In the midst of their excitement was one regret: they could not transmit a reply. Robert asked how this might be possible. No doubt disappointed, he learnt that fourteen was the minimum age for holding a transmitting licence.

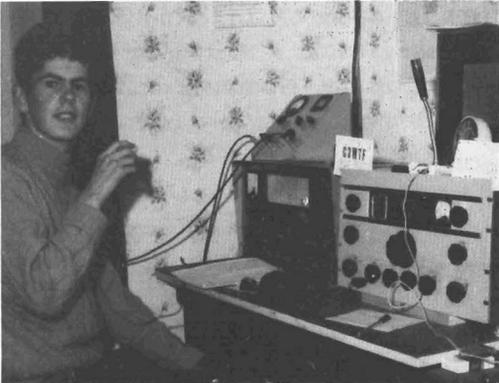
Five years later, Maurice's son Anthony joined a Scout troop; at a parents' evening, the scoutmaster mentioned the boy's interest in working for the Radio Badge. It was unfortunate, he added, that no local Scout leader was qualified to test him. Would Mr Shaw consider teaching a group of boys to the required standard? He agreed gladly, but never dreamt that this would lead to him replacing the existing scoutmaster after six weeks and running the troop for fourteen years!

On hearing about this instruction in radio, the District Commissioner asked for the other troops in the city to be notified of subsequent courses. The only member recruited in this way was Robert Cockerham. He built his first receiver (a one-valve set) and a short-wave converter for a domestic radio. Soon afterwards, he was tested and awarded the badge.

Amateur radio is one of those hobbies for which a youngster needs fairly indulgent parents and suitable premises. Robert had the former, plus a sister who could always be persuaded to do boring jobs like washing-up. But the latter, a garage in which he put his first equipment with wires trailing over the concrete floor, was unsafe and inconvenient. Later on, he moved base to a garden shed and erected a 30ft. aerial mast.

The family liked doing things together, such as camping in Wales or Scotland, or, with radio apparatus loaded in the boot of their car, driving to the countryside. In those days – the early 60s – most amateur radio equipment was assembled from Government-surplus items which were auctioned in remote locations. Job-lots bought by dealers were usually resold in back-street shops. If you mention the name “Monty’s” to an older Bradfordian enthusiast, he will probably recall a shop in the city centre where Monty Passingham, a scrap-dealer, displayed for sale all kinds of radio apparatus which he had dug up from a downtown dump. Items which were offered at ridiculously cheap prices because of their inferior metal content often proved valuable to his more discerning customers. Mere twiddlers were discouraged by huge suspended signs which ordered: “LOOK WITH YOUR EYES AND NOT WITH YOUR HANDS”.

One of Monty’s regular customers was Graham Firth, a telephone engineer in his twenties. Although he had not been a Scout (“I couldn’t tie a knot to save my life”), he was a member of the Bradford Amateur Radio Society. Graham remembers his friend Maurice Shaw inviting him, on behalf of the troop, to take part in a “Jamboree-on-the-Air”. This world-wide event had taken place



G3WTF operating

annually since 1958, but it was five years later when the first Scouts in Bradford joined in. Troops without licensed members invited qualified amateurs for a whole weekend of round-the-clock communication. On one such occasion, the Bradford boys' enthusiasm reached new heights with the logging of over 200 contacts across the world.

Radio jamborees were held in marquees or school halls; in those days, prizes were awarded to members who exchanged messages over the longest distances. Robert came to appreciate the power of radio in a painful way, too. While clearing up after a 48-hour session, he was asked to carry a transmitter back to Graham's house. Although disconnected, its electrolytic condenser was still highly charged. Robert put his hands underneath, threw it up in the air and let out a loud yell. Needless to say, the transmitter was badly damaged; but Graham – to his credit – declined to accept compensation and, indeed, no longer recalls the incident.

As soon as he could, Robert enrolled for a course leading to the City and Guilds Radio Amateur's Certificate and practised for the Post Office test in Morse with his mother and Graham. After satisfying the requirements for a licence at the age of seventeen, he transmitted the call sign G3WTF to a world with over a quarter-of-a-million operators. It gained entrance to countries which he had learnt about at school but never visited. When he did go abroad, Robert continued the hobby in an alcove of the work-room at Pifo and, as opportunities arose, visited some of the friends he had made through this medium.

Ever since he was small, he had enjoyed experimenting and pulling things to pieces in order to find how to reconstruct them.



Maurice, Anthony and Graham  
at a "Jamboree-on-the-Air"

It was a desire to communicate over greater distances which took Graham and Robert to a farm in Wharfedale. There, at the home of Barrie Procter, who also worked in telecommunications, the three enthusiasts rigged up extremely long aerals in the fields. They tried out different designs in order to obtain maximum efficiency, and with a 540ft. horizontal V-shaped aerial made contact with some rather surprised radio-hams in America. But the sheep tolerated high poles and guy-ropes less than Barrie's parents did, and brought down the shaky constructions – if the weather did not beat them to it.

At school, physics, geography and history were Robert's favourite subjects, and he had an aptitude for English. Leaving with "O" levels at seventeen, he began a three-year apprenticeship in the Telecommunications division of the Post Office. Although very interested in telephony, he saw it as a step towards work on micro-wave equipment which was being developed at that time. Describing his experience years later in a letter supporting his application to HCJB, he wrote:

*During these years I was able to learn about the different sections . . . and gain practical experience both in assisting responsible officers and by attending courses. Afterwards, I became a "technician" and concentrated on transmission lines and radio work. Finally, when I was fully qualified and a job became vacant, I was promoted to "technical officer". In my present work, I am jointly responsible, with two others, for the maintenance of a micro-wave radio station. I have learnt to drive a snow-tractor for emergency duties.*



Robert, Barrie and Graham

(One of the technical officers at the micro-wave station was Barrie Procter).

There was a possibility of radio governing Robert's entire thinking, but he did not let that happen. Photography and dancing were his other main interests until, at a Hallowe'en dance, he met Anne Scott, a petite shorthand-typist. She was seventeen, Robert nineteen. They arranged dates and also went to the radio club together. Knowing nothing about amateur radio, she was much happier brewing tea for the members – one in particular.

As the months passed, the relationship deepened into love. Anne, a three-year-old Christian, was reading books about persecuted believers in Russia. Concluding that it would be wrong to marry Robert unless he too followed Christ, she decided to pray for him and offer a tentative witness. Although he had attended the Sunday school at which his father was superintendent, his church membership had not survived the move from Shipley to Bradford. To be confronted with the Gospel was a novel experience. Anne found an opportunity to give this testimony:

*My Christian upbringing and Sunday school attendance led me to assume I was already a Christian. I started going to a church youth club at fourteen, but most of its sound teaching repelled me. I was particularly annoyed by the requirement to be "born again".*

*Then, one evening, a friend and I told each other ghost stories as we walked home from the youth club. We became terrified and felt evil was very close. As soon as I arrived home, I got out a Bible and prayed for deliverance. My fingers seemed guided to turn to John 14 and point to verses which I thought had been*

*written specially for me. I promised God that, in return for forgiveness and His Spirit, I would live a good life from the next day on. Although it was not clear at the time, that was how I became a Christian.*

Robert listened intently and responded with a desire to know Jesus for himself. Anne advised him to talk to the minister of her church (St Peter's, Shipley). Not long afterwards, Robert found salvation. Anne regards the date of his conversion, 4th March, 1971, as even more significant than their wedding date two years later. But she has no complaints or regrets about the seven years of very happy marriage which they shared.

His first experience of the Lord's commissioning came when a vacancy arose in the Sunday school. Neither the minister nor the Climbers' group leader could think of a suitable replacement for teaching the seven-year-old boys. One evening, the leader went to a home group which Robert also attended. When he entered the room it came to her immediately that he was the one whom God had chosen. Although he soon shared her certainty, he did not find the task easy. Anything that required speaking in public made him tense and nervous.

The way being clear for them to marry, the newly-engaged couple planned a conventional future for themselves: saving for and buying a house, preparing for the wedding and, in the course of time, raising a family and ultimately drawing a Post Office pension. It did not occur to them that the Lord might have planned differently.

One of the attractions of church meetings is free admission. The couple were glad of this as they grew in the faith and shared

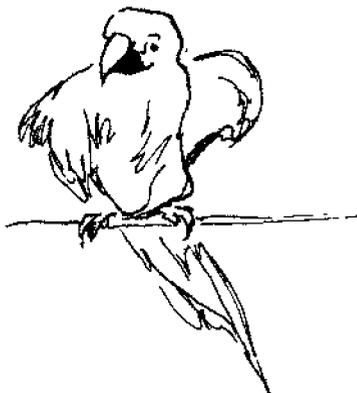
fellowship. Having borrowed on mortgage for their semi-detached house in Wrose, Shipley, they were decorating and re-wiring it themselves. Anne admires her late husband's economical attitude, smiling as she recalls his first present to her after the marriage: a set of electric plugs! As time passed, he came to realise that flowers produced a warmer response.

During the first year of married life, Robert and Anne went to all the church activities they could, including the monthly meetings of the missionary prayer group. At one of these, the members discussed their feelings of remoteness from the missionaries. Despite earnest efforts by the overseas workers and their societies, the group found difficulty in supporting people whom they did not know personally.

The answer to this was to be found in the Bible. Studying afresh the Acts of the Apostles, they read about congregations praying for the Holy Spirit to show them whom to send out to spread the Gospel. Nobody in the church could remember this happening in the whole of its seventy years' existence.

The first move was to ask the minister to extend the usual allocation of one Missionary Sunday per year to a week of concentrated teaching. In that way, the congregation would be left in no doubt about the importance of mission. A programme was arranged, speakers were invited, films obtained and displays mounted. Above all, prayer was offered for the people whom God was seeking for full-time service. No particular field of mission was to be emphasised. In John Wesley's parlance, the world was their parish.

As "Mission-in-Depth Week" approached it became evident,



however, that God intended both South America and Christian broadcasting should be prominent. The main speaker was Canon Harry Sutton, then of the South American Missionary Society. Some of the other speakers had distinct connections with Ecuador: George Poole as Director of Public Relations for WRMF\*, and the Rev. Howard Bracewell as a broadcaster who sent tapes to Quito for transmission to the Eskimos among whom he had been working. With a Chilean family as guests and the music and food of their continent, a fly on the wall would have deduced that the world comprised South America!

The congregation's reaction was enthusiastic, justifying all the effort made. Robert and Anne played supporting roles, praying for others to respond. They had assumed that missionary recruits must be university graduates, highly qualified in professional fields. Several young people in their church had this kind of potential. The couple thought their "type" was just not required. Indeed, Robert was quiet and reticent; his wife was communicative but unassuming.

George Poole stated that people from quite ordinary backgrounds could work overseas for God. He explained – to the Cockerhams' surprise – that Christian radio stations import trained engineers on the same basis as other missionaries.

Robert listened avidly to what was said about the role of radio in God's scheme for the world. Having heard Radio HCJB programmes on short-wave, he knew radio had the power to cross national frontiers and reach round the globe with the Gospel. He had learnt that God used broadcasters to transform listeners' lives.

\*World Radio Missionary Fellowship

Now he must accept that a qualified transmitting engineer such as himself might also be called to work in this medium.

When the special week was over, the couple sought guidance through prayer and Bible study. Robert had never been abroad and Anne had only visited Germany on holiday. Yet an extraordinary desire for foreign travel came over them. The answer the prayer group longed for was coming from all directions: sermons, Bible readings, missionary magazines and tapes, conversations. *"Serve Me overseas in Christian radio work."*

In the ensuing months and years, when faced with problems and doubts, the Cockerhams would often praise and thank their Lord for this decisive call.



## Quito or Quit?

George Poole and his wife Margrett stayed in West Yorkshire long enough to set up a full-time British office for the Mission. This meant that they were available for consultation and to support the couple's preliminary applications to WRMF.

The postman began to deliver large envelopes bearing a Florida postmark to Robert and Anne's house. These contained literature and forms from the international headquarters in Miami.

The booklets made fascinating reading, especially for Robert, who could appreciate the technical as well as the spiritual aspect. He was amazed that this impressive world-wide organisation started transmitting to only nineteen excited listeners from a tin-roofed, mud-walled sheep shed on Christmas Day, 1931.

Although "experts" advised its co-founder Clarence Jones that the worst location for a radio transmitter was high up in the Andes, he proved that Quito was the best place of all. Being virtually on the Equator, it was as far as possible from the disturbing influence of the magnetic poles. Also, any radio mast erected there would be at least 10,000 feet above sea-level.

But it was not just a technical accomplishment. Quito was the seat of government. Clarence Jones shared with Reuben Larson and others the vision for a highly-competent, politically- and culturally-responsible service. Only the best of programming would satisfy these godly perfectionists.

The new station gained the support and participation of traditional missionaries who were already working in Ecuador, and of many non-Christians from the President downwards who realised its potential for developing the country. As the world's first successful Christian station, HCJB ("Heralding Christ Jesus'

Blessings”) set an enviable standard for over seventy such enterprises across the globe.

Here, too, was an example of complete reliance on God which would help Anne and Robert through their difficult times. Dr Jones and his colleagues experienced severe financial and family crises, dreadful accidents and even revolutions. But they emerged from all of these witnessing to the love and power of God.

By the time the Cockerhams read about Radio HCJB, it had grown almost astronomically. The first day’s broadcasting amounted to two half-hour programmes in Spanish and English. Output had been expanded to twenty-four hours a day, in over thirty languages or dialects. The transmitting power had risen from a mere 250 watts to a combined wattage of half-a-million. Robert and Anne looked forward eagerly to the day when they would join over 200 missionaries and 250 nationals who work in its many activities, which include two public hospitals with mobile clinics. They continued reading:

*We come from nineteen countries and form an international community . . . doctors, nurses, communicators, engineers, audio specialists, computer programmers, accountants, photographers, secretaries . . . We are redeemed sinners, called by God to share the blessings of His Son with the world . . . Our family is worldwide and you are a part of our HCJB family as you pray with us and for us.*

It was time to put the brochures on one side and tackle the forms. As well as the main booklets with forty-six wide-ranging questions, there was a twenty-page technical supplement for Robert to complete. This presented a problem because, as an

employee of the Post Office, he had undertaken not to reveal details of its operations. Although he understood all the questions, he could only answer them briefly. When the completed supplement arrived in Miami, it gave the impression that Robert did not have much to say for himself. Was he just a glorified postman? they wondered. (In fairness, he was the first truly English engineer that WRMF had ever recruited). This misunderstanding was sorted out through correspondence, and when he began work in Quito any remaining doubts about his full competence were quickly dispelled.

The living-room lights were kept on later still after the next large envelope arrived. It brought psychological tests, designed to analyse their temperaments. Not being familiar with multi-choice questions, Anne and Robert pondered over their selection of answers. Like one of Charlie Brown's little friends, they felt like asking, "Do you want us to write what we think, or what we think you want us to write?" In spite of this dilemma, their overall assessments were satisfactory.

It is one thing to be convinced about the call of God; it is quite another to communicate this to a missionary society and one's local church. Frustration can strike at the applicant during the necessarily long process of interviewing and assessment, especially if he or she has given up a job to attend a Bible college.

The author did not choose the title of this chapter lightly. It really was, at one stage, a case of "Quito or quit?" but the Cockerhams' total commitment to God and His call saw them through. Their child-like faith deeply impressed Malcolm Goodman, the U.K. Director of WRMF, and his wife, Audrey, who counselled

and prayed for them throughout this bewildering time.

Anne was in hospital awaiting the birth of their first child when the instruction for the next stage came from Miami: "Enrol for a one-year course at a Bible college". They chose Capernwray International Bible School in Lancashire. So it was a family of three which arrived there in September, 1975; David was eight weeks old. A tiny baby could easily wreck a college course if he had a mind to, but even at that age he seemed to respond to his parents' prayers. When they remembered to commit the day to the Lord, the lectures proceeded undisturbed, with the baby sleeping in a carry-cot at the back of the classroom. When they forgot to pray about it, he cried. The lesson was obvious!

Having let their furnished house to a university professor, the couple scaled down their domestic dimensions to one room. Other dimensions were opening up, however, in inter-personal relationships. Anne and Robert's experience of these had been limited to one nationality (with a distinct Yorkshire flavour) and one style of churchmanship (evangelical but traditional Anglican). It was a cultural surprise for them to encounter fellow-students of other nationalities and denominations, four-fifths of whom were from North America. Quite a few of the Cockerhams' corners were exposed to view and had to be rubbed off. But they saw the advantage of this in view of their intention to work alongside Radio HCJB's international personnel.

Three weeks before Robert's twenty-sixth birthday, in February, 1976, a cable from Miami was delivered to the British office. Malcolm Goodman lost no time in telephoning its wonderful news to the family at Capernwray:

ROBERT COCKERHAM ACCEPTED FOR QUITO – PLEASE NOTIFY HIM – LETTER FOLLOWS – THIS OF COURSE INCLUDES ANNE AND THE FAMILY

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A letter from the two missionaries was read out to the St Peter's, Shipley, prayer group:

*We have a good deal to thank the Lord for: the marvellous Bible teaching we are receiving at Capernwray, the way David has fitted in so well and been kept free from illness . . .*

*We should appreciate prayer for our deputation work. We find this an awesome prospect . . . Please also pray that we shall have the faith to trust the Lord for our support, which must be raised before we can go. We realise this is the final test that we are in His will.*

WRMF expects its candidates to make spiritual as well as monetary “contracts” with their sending congregations. Robert and Anne received whole-hearted welcomes at some deputation meetings but sensed hostility at others. Not being gifted speakers, they went away from the latter with a sense of failure. This confirmed the diagnosis which the Rev. Howard Bracewell had made on returning to England from the Arctic: that some church members who claimed to be active Christians were not interested in hearing about mission. If this holds true in the 1980s, it is pertinent to ask if such people are missionaries in their own situations.

Support was so slow coming in that the Cockerhams began to doubt whether it would reach the required total. But they never lacked any needs. When the bank balance approached zero, they

found — as Anne puts it — the vegetables in the garden came up just in time to save them having to buy some. At a late stage it was agreed by all concerned that they should go abroad only eighty per cent financed. Anticipating the final acceptance, Robert and Anne sold the house, bought a smaller one and packed their portable possessions in five large oil-drums for shipment to Ecuador. A farewell service and an early Christmas party preceded the tearful partings they had fully expected. When the plane to Heathrow took off from Leeds-Bradford Airport, Robert and David's feet left British soil for the first time.



# Good Reception



Robert in his Spanish conversation class

The three travellers went in a different direction from that of their oil-drums. Miami, the first destination, afforded three restful weeks of sunbathing and looking round the head office and its surrounding area. In January, 1977, came another flight which took them to Costa Rica for eight months' tuition in Spanish. Anne and Robert studied with other missionary recruits while David was being looked after by a maid. A fellow-student, Bev Reeves, remarks:

*I had three classes with Robert and, oh, how smart he was and quick to learn! Yet so humble,*

*and embarrassed sometimes when he did so well (we were doing so badly).*

During this time, however, Robert was "itching" to start technical work for the Mission and already corresponding with a future senior colleague. Unlike Capernwray, where he had done spare-time repair work, the language school did not furnish such relaxation. The couple were also itching literally; in their awful apartment, scores of ants made for any crumbs which were dropped. The only antennas Robert saw for eight months belonged to three-inch-long cockroaches which invaded the food cupboards.

Even when the course entered its last week, there was no prospect of an early flight to Quito. News came from England that John Cockerham had been taken to hospital for a cancer operation. A month's leave was granted and the young family flew home. Fortunately, Robert's father survived for sixteen months and was a rejoicing Christian when he died. Anne and Robert had been very homesick during their stay in Costa Rica and – as they found out later from fellow-workers – were not expected to resume service. Once they were home, however, England did not hold the same attraction and Ecuador was, without doubt, the right country to settle in.

By September, another John Cockerham was about to enter the world. Anne was six months pregnant when they all flew to Quito and experienced at first

hand the warm welcome and family atmosphere of the Mission. Robert got down to work immediately at Pifo. Within five weeks he was put on to emergency call duty, in readiness for any kind of transmitter fault. At the end of a further six months, a senior colleague sent him this memorandum:

*I appreciate very much your contribution to the work here. Not only do you bring to the Engineering Department an area of expertise that has not been available before, but your enthusiasm for the work and your whole attitude has been outstanding – something which, unfortunately, is all too rare with missionaries newly-arrived on the field . . .*

This is part of Robert's reply:

*Thank you for your kindness in putting on record your appreciation of my work here. It is a privilege to work and live here . . . We thank the Lord that, having called us to work at HCJB, he led us through all the difficulties and brought us to Pifo, where I find that the job is exactly tailored to suit the skills God had me trained in, even before I became a Christian.*

The author is reminded of an explanation of gifts of the Holy Spirit in David R. Mains' book, "Full Circle"\*:

\*Word Inc., Waco, Texas, 1971

*In those areas where I have natural abilities . . . the difference between their being talents or gifts of the Holy Spirit is found in my attitude. If I recognise the talent as from God, and in prayer and continual dedication commit it to Him to be used in ministry in a special way, it becomes a gift of the Holy Spirit with supernatural expression. The proof of this is seen in the gradual way God increases the gift for His service.*

Robert's gift did increase, as a performance review in 1980 showed:

*He is an outstanding trouble-shooter. He can isolate and fix problems in equipment very rapidly. This has saved valuable air-time many times. He is very knowledgeable in the area of micro-wave systems and definitely HCJB's strongest engineer in this area . . . a team player with no undue aspiration to be boss.*

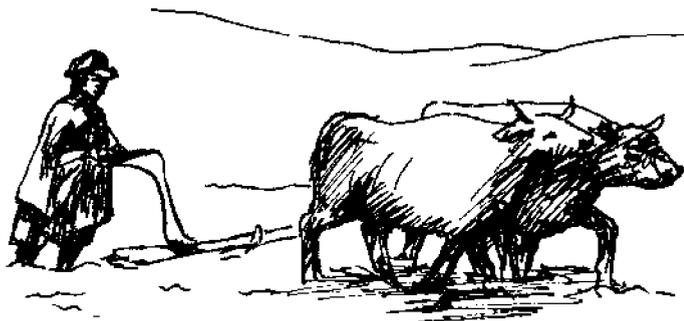
In case anyone should form the impression that he was perfect, the review continues:

*NEEDS IMPROVEMENT – Robert's handwriting is sometimes hardly legible. He needs a good secretary to type his notes!*

Since he enjoyed the work so much, he never begrudged the extra effort demanded by emergencies or special projects. Peter Hubert, the head of the station's German department, took a constructive interest in the transmission of his own broadcasts and

occasionally telephoned Robert to report on the quality of reception. (To be fair, it should be mentioned that Peter's tuning was sometimes inaccurate!) One night he rang up to say that a strange crackling sound was affecting his recorded broadcast and ask if there was a fault in the transmitter. Robert dashed across the compound and was just in time to put out a fire which, had it spread, would have been disastrous.

Two emergencies of a different kind occurred after some site vehicles had been damaged maliciously and two uniformed guards had been appointed to patrol with dogs at hourly intervals. The system worked well for a few nights but then deteriorated. The first emergency happened in the middle of the night after the guards had been drinking heavily. One was sitting helplessly on the control room floor; the other was chasing the operator's wife round the units. When the missionaries who answered the operator's distress call tried to expel the drunks, the latter fought each other with bottles in their hands. Fortunately, they were separated without injury or damage; even so, the incident called in question the security arrangements. The second emergency put an end to the system. A few nights later, the local sheriff telephoned the station to report that two new guards had gone to the village blind drunk and shot some cockerels. Seeing people approaching, one had torn off his uniform and run away in his underpants. No doubt he quickly cooled



off in the cell – which is where the missionaries found the offenders.

A happier note was struck by the completion of a new transmitter for local radio broadcasting to the Quechua-speaking population. Pifo's engineers constructed it in their spare time from parts brought to them by the Quechuas, and were thrilled by the enthusiastic and grateful response to the transmissions. Robert also played an important part in the "Operation Leap" project\* and designed several improvements to the station's equipment.

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\*this included a 500kW transmitter and a steerable antenna

Home, for the Cockerhams, was a comfortable little detached house on the compound. The first few weeks of John's life were spent in hospital, however. Anne's first admission was a false alarm, but on the second occasion the baby came very quickly. Because he had grey skin and was convulsing, it was thought that his brain might be damaged. As Anne left the hospital to stay with friends near-by, she wondered if the baby would be alive when she returned. Her concern was shared by the rest of the HCJB "family", whose prayers were answered with a complete recovery.

On Sundays, the four worshipped at Quito's English-speaking church, where there was a crèche. Unrobed elders led the international congregation in spirited singing to the accompaniment of a grand piano, guitars and other South American instruments. The applause which followed did not detract from the worshipful atmosphere. The congregation also participated during the sermon by looking up the many Biblical references.

An active social life may seem unattainable on a remote site, but the missionary families arranged entertainments and relaxations, mostly with the children's interests in mind. Seasonal festivals and birthdays were duly celebrated and school plays produced by the resident teachers. One of the festivals was the annual Quito Day on December 6th,

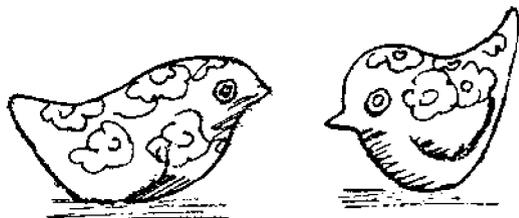


in which the Mission staff took part, shouting "Viva Quito!", singing the national song and performing in concerts.

When parties of overseas visitors came to the transmitter compound, they were given meals by the missionary wives. Anne soon found that the six-piece set of crockery and cutlery she had brought to Ecuador was insufficient. Robert used his skill as a handyman in making an extending table.

One of the tourist attractions to which Anne and Robert took the boys was Otavalo, an unspoilt Indian village to the north of the capital. In its open-air market they bought locally-made goods such as rugs, ponchos, embroidered blouses and articles of wood or

leather. Some of these were in rich shades of scarlet, blue and gold, the national colours. The couple took some of these purchases with them when they went on furlough, in order to illustrate their talks. On the same excursion they saw an unusual lake which exemplified a spiritual principle. A river flowed through its clear, still water without mixing with it. This aptly illustrated Romans 12, 2, by showing Christians that, whilst living in the world, they must not conform to its values.



Readers should regard the foregoing as a token selection from the many aspects of missionary life in Ecuador. So much more happened in the three years the Cockerhams spent there that to include it all in this book might stretch its credibility. Robert's phenomenal skill and energy were fully effective because he entrusted his imperfect humanity daily to the Lord. In Anne's words, he was not a "cornflakes packet dad". He was quick to apologise whenever he thought he had let down or upset anyone, even in a

minor way. Remarkably, he managed to keep a balance between the claims on his time – whether or not he thought they were legitimate – and made sure that he rested regularly.

"Furlough" as defined in dictionaries is slightly inappropriate for describing the family's seven-month period away from Ecuador in 1979-80. Before going into detail, it is necessary to understand the couple's attitude to this compulsory break from overseas service. Although all four welcomed the reunions with relatives and friends in England, Robert, and to a lesser extent Anne, were in turmoil about the deprivation work. Robert wrote a prayer on a blank page in his Bible:

*Lord, I covenant with you: I will go through with this furlough with all its misery and mystery – or system. You, Lord, use it as a ministry. Make this a productive time in my life and in the lives of those I contact. I will assume everything that happens is either for my growth or their growth, and always for your glory. I will rejoice always, because I trust in you. Amen.*

God blessed many church meetings in answer to this prayer, and confirmed through Anne and Robert His promise to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12, 9 RSV).

After two months had passed, Robert acted upon

instructions he had received from the then President of WRMF, Dr Abe Van Der Puy, and flew to Italy on the first of two short visits to Christian broadcasters who had problems with their installations. Regarding this as an opportunity to assist with spreading the Gospel, Radio HCJB had already released Harry and May Yeoman to do some preparatory work in Turin.

Since 1978, when the state's monopoly was ended in the courts, radio broadcasting has been possible for anyone with at least £2,000 to spend. Hundreds of stations have been set up. Italian believers were eager to use this means of evangelising, with ample justification. For instance, two American missionaries who had been in Italy for twenty years found that more people became Christians during their first two years of broadcasting than did so through their previous ministry.

Robert's first visit was a whirl of work and travel which lasted three weeks. It took in Turin and Trieste, 300 miles apart in the north, and Foggia, 400 miles to the south. Aeroplanes, cars and trains were used in a bold attempt to correct the faults and deficiencies at six stations. Harry and May accompanied him on most of the journeys and watched him at work:

*On the evening of Friday, 8th February, 1980, we were at Casselle Airport, Turin, in time for Robert's arrival from England. Yes, there he was: smiling, and waving with one arm while half-*

*carrying, half-dragging a large suitcase with the other. We were glad that he was waved through Customs without having to open the case, which was crammed with parts, tools and test gear. They would have regarded him as an unusual tourist! The next day he began assembling our studio equipment, and on the Sunday morning, went with us to a small evangelical church. He was able to catch some of the joy of the gathering as one after another expressed to the Lord, in Italian, their praise and worship.*

The three left immediately after the service and drove northwards to Lake Lugano, near the Swiss border. In the historic little town of Marchirolo was Radio Uomini Nuovi, one of the first FM stations to go on-air two years before. Since then the manager had been seeking an AM transmitter; he had recently borrowed one which was very inefficient. Something better was required for reaching the potential listeners in Italian-speaking Switzerland.

Admiring the grandeur of the Italian Alps, Robert remarked that Anne would love to see and sketch the views. But little time could be spared for looking at the scenery. After working through to late evening for ten days, with the help of Bob Hinton, a WRMF candidate, Robert could report only partial success when the time came to leave for Turin. This overnight stop preceded the long drive to Trieste, near the

Yugoslavian border. The cold wind which is typical of that city blew mercilessly while the small team erected an antenna tower on high ground. Together with a new, more powerful transmitter, it greatly extended Radio Insieme's reception area.

When this station's problems had been solved, the travellers headed westwards to another at Pordenone; then south-eastwards, by way of Venice, to Ravenna, where they met the two American missionaries mentioned earlier. Radio Ravenna Evangelica was notable for its daily output of live programmes and continuity. Although Robert's schedule was tight, it allowed for two hours' sightseeing in Venice. Impressed by the architecture, he kept saying, "I wish Anne could see this." Harry Yeoman complimented him on his smart new overcoat; Robert smiled shyly and said it was an early birthday present. He remembered to buy a gift for Anne – a book on Italian artists.

Next came a long train journey down the east coast to Foggia. When he had completed the work at Radio Logos, it was time for Robert to return to Turin over 400 miles away. During his brief stay in that city he worked through a varied shopping list: a toy Fiat car for John and David, and some parts and a microphone for the Yeomans' new studio. Robert told Harry that he and Anne wanted to make the last-mentioned purchase a gift to the work of HCJB in Italy. Harry

commented later:

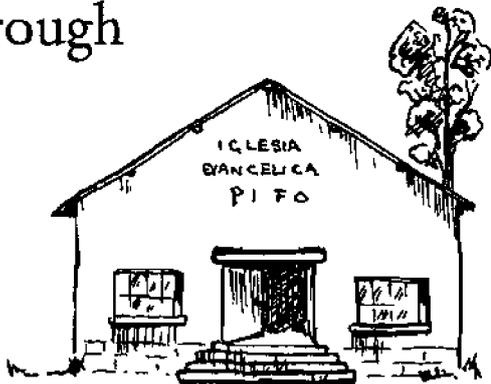
*Now the microphone has been installed in the new studio . . . every time an Italian Christian sits down to record before it, we are reminded that decisions Robert made continue to have an impact in this country. On March 1st we saw him off from Turin. Our Italian friends wanted him to stay. In just a short time he had gained their respect, friendship and affection.*

HCJB's "whizz-kid" wrote his report to Dr Van Der Puy and concluded it thus:

*I hope this will give you an idea as to the possibilities of Christian broadcasting in Italy. At present it is an open door and, if the licensing laws will permit it in the future, the whole of Europe could be reached from there with much greater effect.*

Anne did accompany her husband four weeks later on the second visit, which was partly a holiday. Each carried a heavy suitcase through the airports. Since one of these contained a small transmitter for Radio Uomini Nuovi, Anne was looking forward to exploring and sketching Marchirolo and its surrounding area. She had caught some of her husband's enthusiasm for the country and was speculating about the possibility of a period of service there. All too soon, their ten-day visit came to an end.

# Breakthrough



Come — in your imagination — with Anne and the boys to a Sunday-morning service in the little village church at Pifo. It is fifty minutes' drive from where they now live, but from the transmitter compound it is only a mile away, along a dusty track. The village is a collection of mud-walled houses and farm buildings. Dogs and farm animals wander about its narrow streets. One building stands out from the rest, because of the words on its faded yellow front: "Iglesia Evangelica Pifo".

The largest room inside Pifo Evangelical Church has cream-painted walls and a wooden floor. Its only furniture is a piano, a preacher's rostrum and some benches. If you arrive on time for the service, do not expect to meet the elders or congregation yet; the

adults are in another room, studying the Bible together. Punctuality is not a national habit, but children and adults eventually assemble in roughly equal numbers, rising to 120 on special occasions. Some have a two-hour walk or a horseback ride to church. Many do not have shoes. In contrast, a rich Christian woman who owns a candle factory drives up in her red Mercedes and, accompanied by a maid, takes an unassuming place among the worshippers. The missionaries' children sit with the Ecuadorians', who are distinguishable by their brown faces, black hair and rosy cheeks.

As a visitor, you will be welcomed by the leader and asked to stand up while the rest of the congregation gives you a long wave. Their broad smiles melt away any shyness or embarrassment. Even the village dogs contribute to the informality by wandering in and out during the service.

Leader and people read alternate verses of the Bible; then an elder leads in prayer. You may not understand Spanish, but you can share the joy with which the lively hymns and action-choruses are sung to Latin-American music. The children having dispersed to their classes, a young preacher from Quito gives a simple sermon for half-an-hour or longer. Ecuadorians enjoy listening to good speakers, although they prefer them not to emulate a former president who took six hours to deliver his inaugural address.

From time to time, baptism services are held for converts. Because the village's five thousand inhabitants soon use up the water supply, the services are held at a warm pond near the transmitters.

Attendances usually increase at Christmas-time, not just for the religious reason but also because presents are exchanged. The Christians make sure that the poorest families benefit most from gifts of clothing and food. Blanca, the factory owner mentioned earlier, fills the boot of her car with decorative candles and sweets for the children.

The church has not always been so well attended. It has had peaks and troughs of activity throughout its thirty years' existence. During 1980 the average attendance fell to twelve and it was on the verge of closure.

Anne and Robert's return from furlough coincided with that of three other missionary families to the transmitting station. The latter were also keen to evangelise the local population and pleased to hear Robert say that he felt the time had come to worship in Pifo. The long journeys to and from church in Quito were too tiring on top of his work-load. In all, five couples teamed up in this venture. The wives applied their talents to the children's work and the husbands took turns with leading the services. They all looked forward to a revival but felt there was some kind of barrier to this.

The second approach to this challenge was to have a greater concern for the nationals who worked for Radio HCJB. Robert had more opportunities to show this when he was deputed to handle their personnel matters and the payment of wages. Many warmed to him because his shy, quiet manner resembled theirs. They listened attentively when Señor Roberto spoke about Christ. If one fell ill he would borrow a station car to take him or her to hospital.

On the day before Christmas Eve, 1980, one of the workers, the father of two little girls, asked Robert to take his sick wife to hospital. On the way to Quito, however, she died. Had she been treated for tuberculosis earlier, instead of being fobbed-off with a tonic by a local quack, she might have lived. Both men were understandably shocked; but Robert was struck by the realisation that she was not a Christian. Perhaps, he reflected, the villagers had not seen a clear witness in the radio missionaries' lives.

Subsequent developments were described in a letter which Robert wrote to Malcolm Goodman. This is an extract:

*The Pifo church is doing well. Little by little, new believers are being added to the congregation. Pray for the Ecuadorian workers; we now have a short time of Bible-reading and prayer with them each day. Praise God for Teresa, the cook at*

*Papallacta\**, who became a Christian last Saturday. She is now busy telling all the men that they need Christ in their lives, too. Praise God for the many opportunities to share the Gospel, both locally and around the world. There may not be many days left when we can.

A prayer group and a telephone "prayer-chain" which the wives had started were also mentioned in the letter. Urgent requests for prayer would be passed over the internal telephones in a systematic way. The womenfolk prayed for a revival while following the themes of chapters in "What Happens When Women Pray" by Evelyn Christenson.† As preparation for leading one of the sessions, Anne read the chapter entitled "God never makes a mistake". It reminded her that the Lord calls His people to suffer in order to learn His lessons. Suffering could mean the loss of something – or someone – considered to be important in one's life. It could be health, a job, finances, schooling – or a loved one . . .

At the end of this chapter there is a prayer for the reader to think about. It is only to be used if he or she really believes what it says: "Father, I want only your will in this thing that is most important in the whole world to me". The reader is asked to thank

\*Radio HCJB's hydro-electric power station

†Victor Books, Scripture Press Publications, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois, 1975

God, however He chooses to answer, knowing it is according to His perfect will.

Anne studied this in early-January, 1981, and was taken aback by the example quoted of a woman who prayed like this on a Wednesday and lost her husband in an accident on the following Saturday. Anne shared with her friends the worries she had about Robert having a fatal accident while working far above ground or among high voltages. It took her some time to think it all through, but she ended up by praying as invited in the book and re-dedicating her life to God.

About a month later, when the time for the wives' Monday-afternoon meeting was approaching, Anne thought she would be too busy preparing for the seaside holiday to be able to attend it. Then she met another member, who reminded her that it was her turn to lead on the subject "God never makes a mistake". Apprehensively, she went to the meeting.

In my first chapter, I gave three reasons for Anne's uncasiness on that hair-raising journey. Now I have identified the fourth.

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## Not the Last Word

Readers may find it surprising, at this late stage in the biography, to be introduced to another close friend of the Cockerhams. John Seymour began working in Radio HCJB's English Language Service in mid-January 1981. He had not seen Robert and Anne since their first meeting at the Keswick Convention in 1976. Letters had passed between them, however, and they had learnt quite a lot about each other. It was, therefore, a joyful reunion which took place when the couple walked into John's office at Quito. He was pleased to be invited to stay with them at Pifo for the following weekend.

On the Saturday morning, all three sat on the Cockerhams' doorstep and talked about the past four-and-a-half years. The friendship deepened. In the afternoon, together with the other families, they swam in the pool and enjoyed further conversation.

One week later, Robert was in charge of preparations for the inauguration of the 500kW transmitter by the President of Ecuador. John noticed his patience and humility:

*Robert was extremely busy. While I was trying to get one sentence out to him, three people came with questions and problems. This kind of thing went on all day – "Where shall I go now?" –*

*"Where can I find that?" If I'd been in his situation I'd have blown my top. At the end of the day, while I was trying to finish some painting, Robert came over, picked up a brush and did it with me – even though he still had problems of his own. No job was too low or dirty for him to tackle. What a privilege to call someone like that your friend!*

*Robert was gentle and Christlike. When he entered a room, it was almost as if Jesus had done so. He did not need to say anything; his abandonment to God rubbed off like the scent of a rose.*

Only three days later, tragedy separated the two friends. The news reached John just after ten o'clock in the evening, when he was at the home of his colleagues, Richard and Diane Lemon. Diane was in bed with influenza. The telephone rang downstairs. When Richard returned and walked past John into the bedroom, it was obvious from the expression on his face that something was badly wrong. John and Diane waited until Richard was able to pass on the devastating message: "Robert Cockerham has drowned near Atacames."

Later, as conflicting reports came in, confusion arose over who, in fact, had drowned. Finally, the original message was confirmed and numbed shock stunted all speech. Reality took a long time to return. It all seemed like a bad dream.

A funeral arranged for the second day after a death

would be considered early in Britain but late in Ecuador. Early on the Thursday morning of that traumatic week, John's office telephone rang. It was the assistant pastor of the English-speaking church, relaying Anne's request for John to go there before eleven o'clock and choose the Bible readings for the funeral service. As he walked into the empty church he was faced with stark, unavoidable reality. A large, metallic-grey coffin was already in position. Over it stood a lifesize, head-and-shoulders portrait of Robert.

The time came for John to read. It proved to be the most difficult thing he had ever had to do. Anne and the boys were sitting at the front of the familiar congregation. Yet Anne was relaxed – even radiant. The whole service had a positive message.

*At some point while struggling in the sea, Robert reached out and felt a hand – the hand of Jesus. When he could not breathe he found a breath, and it was immortality. He lives today in the presence of Jesus Christ, in the fellowship of all the saints, basking in the love of God – and we rejoice!*

Dr Van Der Puy spoke these words during his address and made two appeals to the congregation. The first was to the Christians who had the wrong priorities in life and, in God's judgement, were slothful. The second appeal, in the words of 2 Corinthians 5, 20-21, was to the non-Christians:

*We beseech you, on behalf of Christ, be recon-*

*ciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* (RSV)

In God's reckoning, no-one's death is untimely. Lovingly, He used the loss of Robert, severe though it was, to accomplish purposes for the missionaries, the nationals and even people overseas who would otherwise have continued as they were. Some of those who attended the funeral, or the memorial service which was held in Pifo, look back thankfully to an occasion when they were either converted or led into full commitment. One of these was an Ecuadorian who had worked for HCJB for over twenty years and had not hitherto found Christ. Another national, a senior employee at the transmitter site, became an inspiring leader of the Pifo church soon after he was converted at the memorial service. The barrier to revival which the missionaries had prayed about came down.

Waves of grief kept coming towards Anne. A high one struck her in the middle of the night when, wide awake, she was reliving the tragic events of a few days before. Turning to Psalm 93, she came across the verse which provides the title for this book:

*Mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty!*

She was so overjoyed to find this verse that she dashed into her father's bedroom to read it to him. As the days passed she confirmed afresh that the Bible

is a precious store of reassurances and promises. One matter was not in doubt, however. Anne was still a missionary in her own right. This was stressed by Malcolm Goodman in his address at St Peter's Church, Shipley:

*As we think about what has happened, what a good thing it is that dear Anne knew without a doubt that God had called her.*

(She is now working for the station's English Language Service in Quito, which answers annually between 18,000 and 19,000 letters received from listeners).

The penultimate words of this book come from Billy Strachan, Principal of Capernwray Bible School:

*In a recent letter, Anne summed up the opinion of all of us here about Rob. "I know Rob is where he wanted to be more than anywhere else."*

*From "day one" at Capernwray, Rob was evidently committed to Christ, for all that Christ was committed to be and do in him. Yes, he was not without a very evident personal humanity, but he had concluded, "God is right. It is nothing and has nothing, so I may as well let Him live through what is left, rather than be over-occupied in wasting time training it for Him."*

*So he got on relentlessly and selflessly working at his fatherhood, his studies, plus every interruption of electrical repairs everyone from staff to*

*students threw in his way. He did it and left God with the consequences. Indeed, he lived as one whose strength was as his days. It was good to watch him tackle his Monday mornings. Yes, very human; but in God's words – not ours – "a Saint" in the making from image to image. He deserved to beat us Home.*

*Oh, for more British Christians like Rob! What an impact there would be in our School and in the world. We were privileged to know him here below as he passed by. Rob, we did learn a lot from you – thanks.*

The last word of this biography should not be that of its author. It rightly belongs to the reader, who may have formed already a response to its challenge.



Waves played an important part in the life of Robert Cockerham, a Christian missionary. Radio waves featured in his work for Radio HCJB in Ecuador and elsewhere. Waves were also instrumental in his death by drowning at the age of 30.

Geoff Roberts, a friend and supporter of Robert and his wife, Anne, in their home church, has written this biography as a tribute to the couple and a timely message for today's church.