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Mike MacIntosh
Pastor of Horizon Christian Fellowship, San Diego, California, and founder of Horizon International Ministries.

Dan Wooding is one of the most articulate journalists writing today. Calling attention to the plight of the persecuted people of faith, his powerful and heartfelt words sensitize Americans afresh to the value of religious freedom and the horrors of intolerance. His journey from tabloid to truth promises to be a great read.

Dean Jones
Actor

From Tabloid to Truth

The inspiring autobiography of Christian journalist Dan Wooding and his worldwide search for truth

Dan Wooding

Theatron Books

From Tabloid to Truth

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Published by Theatron Books
An imprint of Theatron Media Group
Post Office Box 606
Hemet, CA 92546-0606
Visit us at: www.TheatronBooks.com

ISBN: 0-9747163-5-9

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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wooding, Dan.
From tabloid to truth : the inspiring autobiography of Christian journalist Dan Wooding and his worldwide search for truth / Dan Wooding.— [1st ed.].
p. cm.
ISBN: 0-9747163-5-9
1. Wooding, Dan. 2. Christian biography. 3. Journalists—Biography. 4. Journalists—Great Britain—Biography. 5. Children of missionaries—Biography. 6. Journalism, Religious. 7. Missions, British. I. Title.

BR1725.W66 F76 2004
270.8'2'092 B—-dc21

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Foreword, *ix*
Introduction, *xi*
1 A Trip Into Terror And Love, *1*
2 African Odyssey, *9*
3 All At Sea, *17*
4 Birmingham Blues, *23*
5 Your Dreams Can Come True, *29*
6 Canada Calling, *35*
7 Trouble In Toronto, *41*
8 The Prodigal Returns, *47*
9 Our Norma, *51*
10 Through Gates Of Splendor, *59*
11 Junkies Are People Too, *63*
12 Trouble Down On The Farm, *69*
13 It Is Written, *73*
14 I Have A Dream, *79*
15 I Had A Nightmare, *85*
16 Roadblock To Moscow, *93*
17 From Saigon With Love, *113*
18 A Tale Of Two Prisons, *121*
19 "Who And What Is Dan Wooding?" *131*
20 Uganda Holocaust, *141*
21 A New Life In The New World, *149*
22 Blurred Images And Lebonon, *157*
23 The Greater The Sorrow, The Closer To God, *165*
24 Saved From A "Highway To Hell," *173*
25 A Miracle In Moscow, *191*
26 The Bride Who Preached At Her Wedding, *197*
27 Tears In Heaven For Jeff, *201*
28 The Final Chapter (For Now...), *209*

2
African Odyssey

The shrilling of crickets, the eerie whistling of night birds and the distant howling of hyenas intruded into the still night air of the delivery ward of Vom Christian Hospital in Nigeria. It was just six days before Christmas, 1940. But there was little goodwill in a world convulsed in the mayhem of World War Two that had begun on Sunday, September 3, 1939, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced that the British Empire was at war with Germany.

As the former Austrian house painter, Adolf Schicklgruber, better known as Adolf Hitler, was trying to take over the world, I was struggling to get into it. After eight hours, I finally appeared, bawling and spluttering.

“You’ve got a boy, Anne,” said Dr. Percy Barnden, a British missionary doctor, as he snipped my umbilical cord and then slapped a mosquito that was probing his arm. My mother smiled gently as she looked down at her first child.

My father, Alf, was anxiously waiting in our mud-walled home in Izom, a remote bush village some 600 miles away, for news of the birth. A telephone call from the hospital, operated by the Sudan United Mission, to the British government outpost in Abuja, announced my birth. Then an African messenger walked thirty miles to Izom to see my father to tell him the good news. He arrived on Friday, December 20.

“You have a son,” beamed the exhausted courier to a background of bleating goats, barking dogs and shouting boys.

A cheer broke out among the many natives, that crowded into the small Wooding compound. They laughed, danced and clapped their hands. My father smiled, pride showing in his eyes. Now, he knew, would come the traditional naming ritual.

“We must call him “Dan Juma,” which means “Son of Friday,” said one of the natives, dressed only in a loincloth.

“Yes,” the others chorused. “He is to be Dan Juma.”

Much tongue clacking greeted the new name. The “resolution”

had been unanimously carried, and so my father decided not to tell them that I had, in fact, been born not on Friday, but Thursday. Talking drums quickly spread the news that “Dan Juma” had arrived.

My father packed a few belongings for the long trip to Vom, which included a twenty-four-hour truck journey to Minna and then a long rail journey to Vom, situated on the Jos Plateau. It was Christmas Eve when we met for the first time. I was a little mite, gurgling with joy, as I looked into the weather-beaten open face of a courageous little man from Liverpool who had obeyed God’s call to bring the gospel to a sweltering land where millions had still not heard of Jesus Christ. Tribe after tribe had been caught in the bonds of animism, witchcraft and ancestral worship, and millions had already turned to Islam.

After a few weeks of rest for my mother, who was also from Liverpool, the three of us returned to the dusty village of Izom, a cluster of mud huts crowned with grass roofs. Many Muslims lived in the community and one of them, an old chief, was soon to provide us with a meal ticket. As I lay in my cot in a temperature of 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, he swept into our hut, and welcomed us. As he grinned, he revealed a few orange-stained teeth that had survived his seventy-three years of life. My father got out a grass mat for him to squat on and then the chief addressed us.

“White woman,” he gestured grandly, “I have gifts for you and the little white god. But first I have a request.”

“Yes, chief,” she replied in her soft, Liverpool accent, as she anxiously eyed the bananas, eggs and the four live, struggling chickens his bearers were holding.

“You must bathe him for me.”

My mother knew this little favor would help replenish our dwindling food stocks. He was, for some reason, fascinated to see the “little white god” cleansed of all the clinging dust of Nigeria.

“You must also give me sweet tea with Carnation milk in it,” he added.

The tea was served, and Mahma, the houseboy, a strapping giant, one of my mother’s first converts to Christianity in the area, filled a bowl of water. Then my mother proceeded to pour a calabash of water over me, time and time again. His wrinkled face beamed with happiness as he watched me being bathed as the smoky fire cast dancing shadows across the room.

After it was over, he ordered one of his servants to "prepare the gifts." He handed them to Mahma, who was forced to chase after two of the chickens that had escaped the attentions of the chief's man. After grabbing both squawking creatures, he wrung their scraggy necks.

"Okay," said the headman to my father, "now I have given you a gift, you must give me one in return."

My father fished about in his short baggy trousers and finally found a British shilling and handed over the coin to the chief. With that the ceremony of "appeasing of the child god" was over. All parties bowed, the chief left as quickly as he had arrived, and our eardrums continued to buzz with mosquitoes.

Mahma became a crowning jewel to my parents. "The local witch doctor was so angry with his conversion that he poisoned his food saying that he had taken the 'white man's religion,'" said my mother. But after three attempts, Mahma did not die so the witch doctor concluded he must be a god, so he left him alone.

"Mahma not only became our cook, but also helped us in evangelism. He would travel with us and carry us across the streams and then go back for the bicycles. He was strong, well built and fearless," my mother said.

"Every Monday he would travel with us and help teach the natives about Jesus. Three boys became Christians under his ministry and built their own church building."

My parents were small in stature, around five feet nothing. Neither had the advantage of wealthy parents to send them to Bible college so they both had to work to earn their tuition. My father attended the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow and my mother attended Redcliffe Missionary Training College in London.

The Beatles were at least fifty years away from formation when my parents were born in Liverpool. Neither had known the other before Nigeria, though my father had attended his wife-to-be's farewell service in the Donaldson Street Gospel Hall, in the shadow of Liverpool Football Club's famous ground in Anfield, in 1937.

It had become a tradition for students who planned to go on to the mission field to attend farewell services around the city and

then go to Liverpool's Pier Head to wave off those who were leaving on the huge liners. My father was no exception and he waved Anne off as he had done many others.

She had gone to Nigeria with the intention of teaching the blind in Kano and to do medical work there. Their romance blossomed, however, when they later met at the Minna language school of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), and on September 5, 1939 they were married close to the northern walled city of Kano.

Before their marriage, my mother had pioneered a work among the 6,800 blind beggars in Kano, teaching them to read Braille and sharing the gospel with them.

But then, on their marriage, my parents began working at Izom in southern Nigeria among the Yamma section of the Gwara tribe. "These were pagan people, totally different from the Muslims of Kano," she later told me. My parents said that up until my birth, reaching the people had been tough, but the appearance of a white baby changed everything. They were accepted. I would be strapped on a little wooden chair on the front of my father's bicycle and we would bump down seemingly endless dusty trails through nine-foot high grass on either side, which concealed many dangers, from snakes to quiet, watching monkeys. My father would constantly ring the bike's bell to frighten off the wildlife and would be greeted in return by the racket of exotic birds.

He would arrive in a small dusty village of straw-roofed mud huts, and a babbling crowd of near naked people would appear. The sound of the noisy, giggling boys mingled with barking dogs and bleating goats. For those laboring in the fields, the word would quickly go round that "the white god is here," and all work would stop. My father would seize the opportunity to preach to the crowds in the Hausa language.

He also kept their attention by singing, and sometimes playing a 10-inch mouth organ (harmonica). He often carried a large wind-up phonograph strapped to his bicycle, and he would open it and play Hausa hymns on unwieldy 78 rpm records. The crowds would literally fight to put an ear close to the large horn to hear this "strange" music.

When my father was away, my mother would open the dispensary for the patients sitting under a large mango tree in front of our rectangular hut, and try to deal with the many medical prob-

lems of the area. Although she had only basic medical training, she was still expected to handle many difficult cases, and even at times was called to amputate gangrenous toes with kitchen scissors.

"As the crowds lined up for treatment, Mahma would preach to them," my mother explained. "He would tell them about the love of Jesus and would often lead them in the singing of choruses. Even after being treated, the people didn't want to leave. They enjoyed the time so much."

Nigeria was, at that time in 1941, still very much a British colony. But this was an area where not too many pith-helmeted civil servants and missionaries had previously ventured. It was a little too far from civilization for most to want to cope with.

But to my parents, it was heaven. My father, especially, had blossomed, as he had never done when he lived in the back-to-back terraced house in Liverpool's crumbling Toxteth district. In Izom he was "somebody." In fact, he became an unofficial judge and was regularly called upon to adjudicate difficult disputes between natives.

"I would sit under the mango tree with most of the village for company and listen to the arguments," he recalled. "Then I would ask the Lord to give me Solomon's wisdom in giving the right judgment or advice. They called me 'Mai hankuri,' which means 'the patient one.'"

As my father dispensed advice and justice, the crowds squatted silently in a semi-circle and I would gurgle contentedly in a swing-chair attached to the mango tree as Jumpa, my African playmate, pulled the rope to keep me moving to protect me from the snakes and mosquitoes. For my parents, the slithering snakes, monster rats, bitter-tasting quinine tablets, the tsetse flies constantly humming around their faces, the debilitating humidity, the hot air that clutched at them like a sauna, the inconvenience of having to constantly boil and filter the water, didn't affect their unquestioning belief that God had called them to this remote area of West Africa.

My mother, a small but outspoken woman made of tempered steel, would regularly do battle with the local witch doctors who dispensed their evil magic. She had no qualms in approaching them about practicing their juju medicine on her patients, something that was illegal under British colonial law. She had been

called in several times by natives to try and save the lives of people who had been nearly killed by the evil black magic of the witch doctors.

There were even occasions when my parents would be called to dig up newly-born babies, who had been buried alive by the superstitious natives because the mothers had died in childbirth. The witch doctors had told the people that the evil spirit of the infant had caused the death of the mother and so the baby had to die, too.

Mahma and Baba (another houseboy) would watch in horror from behind a clump of bushes as a burial took place. They would hear the high-pitched shrieking of mourners, and watch the stiff, white-wrapped body of the dead mother being lowered into a freshly dug hole. Then the crying baby, wrapped in a grass mat, was placed beside her, and the hole filled in.

"When all was clear, they would call us to dig up the suffocating child," said my mother. "If the mite was still alive, and most were, we would nurse them and then take them to the mission station at Diko which was run by fellow-missionary, Esther Anderson. There they had a large mission church and Christian women would foster the babies under the guidance of Esther. When they got older, they would be sent to a Christian orphanage and many became nurses and evangelists when they grew up."

She added: "Despite the difficulties, the peace we experienced at the time was indescribable."

Sadly, the happiness was soon to be broken. It began one night when Alf, my father, normally in bed by 8.30, had not arrived home by 9:30. My mother, by the meager light of a storm lamp, was painting scrolls containing Scripture verses and choruses in the Hausa language. Just a stone's throw away my mother could hear the ugly sounds of jackals and hyenas quarrelling. She began to worry. Then she heard a rustle outside, and Alf stumbled in.

"I don't feel…."

His words trailed off and he crashed head first onto the floor. He lay there, shaking, his face contorted in pain. My mother knelt down and took his temperature and discovered it was 103 degrees Fahrenheit. Instinctively she rushed to the dispensary for medicine.

In agony, he rolled from side to side, his pain-lined face streaming with sweat. His brown, curly hair, usually immaculately groomed, was lank and damp. He gazed up at his wife with unsee-

ing eyes. At first my mother recoiled in ill-concealed horror. But then she dragged him across the floor, lifted his pain-racked body onto the bed, and covered him with a mosquito net. She gave him medicine but he couldn't keep it down. He lay in the pale flickering half-light, breathing with difficulty.

What should she do? Her medical knowledge was minimal but it was eighty miles to the nearest hospital. Dropping to her knees in desperation, she cried in a voice barely audible, "Lord, I can't cope. Please help, please...."

Her face was frozen with tension. But suddenly her mind became clear and she took a stick and a storm lamp and ventured through the dangerous bush to the nearest village and called Ungalu, the houseboy, to fetch Mahma and ask him to travel to Abuja with a message for the District Commissioner.

Before Mahma left on his urgent mission, he came and prayed for my father. As he looked down at his pale face, Mahma cried out, "Lord, he that thou lovest is sick."

Mahma discovered that the bicycle he was to travel on had a puncture and my mother had to mend this before he could set off.

A truck was sent and my mother put a camp bed in the back of it, along with some folding chairs, a cot basket for me, and food for us all for the long journey to the hospital at Minna. Along the way, the truck was forced to stop at a broken bridge which had to be rebuilt before we could continue. But finally we made it.

So began the drama that resulted in my father's hospitalization. The doctor discovered that he had the usually lethal combination of malaria, liver disorder and dysentery. The staff at Minna Hospital worked hard to save his life, and after a week of treatment, he began to claw his way back to waking reality.

Soon he returned to us at Izom and was gradually eased back into his routine of making visits to local tribes people, leading Bible studies, and all the duties attached to mission work. For a few weeks he felt fine. Then the malaria returned. It was again followed by liver disorder and dysentery and Esther Anderson treated him at nearby Diko. The cruel tropics were exacting a terrible toll on him, but he struggled on, his emaciated features and yellow skin all pointing to the inevitable fact that Nigeria was no place for him.

My parents had served five years in Nigeria and the time had come for a year's rest, though no one could tell what awaited them in war-ravaged Britain.