

This book is an invitation to 'grab a coffee, pull up a chair, and let me tell you about the God who has been my closest friend in life'. It has the 'wow' factor – not about the author and her exploits, but about the God who was always there, in the dark moments as well as the joyful moments ... It is a book about culture, about gospel communication, about dealing with change and, above all, about the adequacy of God in all of life. It is a book that will cause you to smile, to reflect, to be amazed, to be encouraged. And remember to grab some tissues when you pull up that chair.

Bruce Dipple

Former Australia/East Asia Director of SIM
Former Director of the School of Cross Cultural Mission, SMBC

Ruth has been an inspiration to many and a wonderful example, teacher and counsellor to her New Zealand colleagues. From her many years in Somalia and Ethiopia coupled with her qualifications as a psychologist, she has been invaluable in preparing and caring for new and returning missionaries in her ten years of annual visits to New Zealand. Her visits with her colleague Dr Kath Donovan, and peppered with her unique sense of humour, were always a welcome highlight for us.

Murray Dunn

Director of SIM New Zealand, 1986–96

Ruth pioneered the use of psychological assessment for missionaries in Australia, overcoming initial suspicion from the mission leaders with her professionalism, integrity, warmth, spiritual depth and wit. She, together with Kath, became a loved and highly respected team across Australia. Their model of assessment and debriefing was the gold standard and they became internationally recognised as world leaders in this field. Ruth was the inspiration for me to train as a psychologist. She was a tower of support and encouragement throughout my degree, and then generously mentored me in the art of psychological assessment. Today Ruth's influence continues as I pass on much of what I learnt from her to my students. I have rarely met someone who has such empathy and inclination to find something positive about even the most 'difficult' of people. Her friendship is one of my most treasured possessions.

Barbara Griffin

Associate Professor and Director of Organisational Psychology training
Macquarie University

Oetje: *Not only was Ruth a great teacher, she also possessed an enormous love for the Lord and for the Somali people. Besides learning the language, I gained deep insights into the Somali culture from Ruth. She taught me how to live among the Somali people and to be a witness for the gospel.*

Michael: *Ruth's down-to-earth wisdom, derived from her varied experiences, provided me much needed spiritual realism. Her emphasis on perseverance in the life-long marathon of sharing the good news with Somalis was particularly helpful.*

Over the past three decades, Oetje and I have been blessed by frequent letters and emails of encouragement from Ruth, sharing our frustrations, challenges and joys as we see the gospel of Jesus Christ advance among the Somali people.

Michael Madany

Coordinator, The New Life website and Project Consultant,
The Voice of New Life broadcast

Oetje Madany

Social Services, World Relief Seattle

This personal account resonates with passion for God and people. It bounces with life, with joy and humour, and Ruth shares sadness and pain as well. Like Ruth herself, the book is open, honest, joyful. It is a continuation of that great saga of God's mission which started in the Acts of the Apostles and continues as God works today through his Spirit. Read it and rejoice. Read it – and be warned. You might be called to write the next chapter.

Colin Reed

Former missionary in Africa
Former staff member, NSW Branch of the Church Missionary Society

We found through our many years of missionary service that debriefing was a necessary and helpful means of putting difficulties and successes into perspective when we returned for home assignment and at the end of our term of service. Ruth provided us with a safe and secure place to cry when we needed to express our hurts and affirmation when we needed encouragement. And she was there to rejoice with us in joys and successes. We felt listened to and cared for and we could trust her with our confidences.

Helen and Len Salisbury

SIM missionaries

WHEN THE
LIGHTS
GO OUT

Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia

RUTH MYORS



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Dedication

*I dedicate this book to my Somali co-workers
who remain among my closest
friends along with my siblings, and to the
memory of Kath who is now rejoicing
in the presence of the Lord.*

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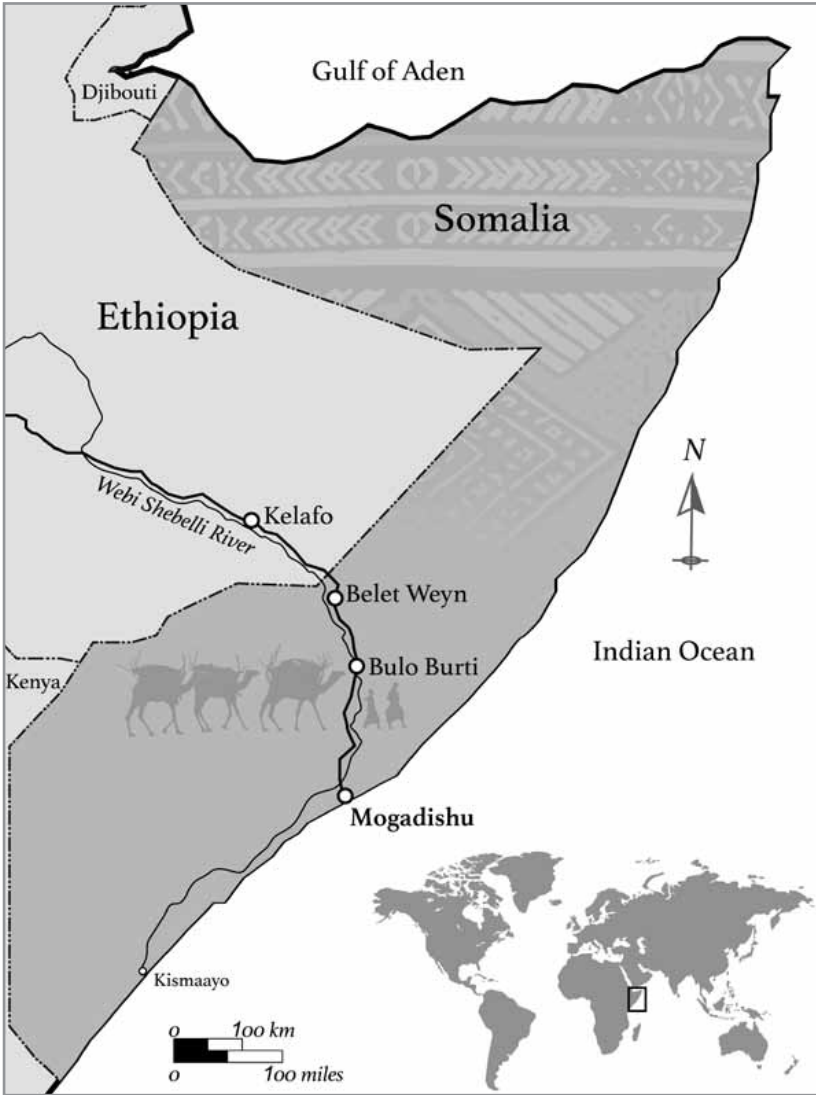
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Last but not least, thank you to my faithful friends like Sylvia Pickford, Yeoval, who at every meeting never failed to say ‘When will you finish that book?’

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Map of Somalia

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The doors to work in the Somali Republic opened for expatriate missionaries in 1954. By early 1973 they were closed again by the newly formed socialist government. We never dreamed the time would be so short. The cost was heavy but every day given to us there was a precious gift. What I have written about is a few short years unique in the history of a land currently racked by pain. Warren and Dorothy Modricker led the SIM¹ team. Because of their vision and passion, the only years that were open to ministry by foreign missions were grasped.

Did we use our time wisely? Only eternity will tell. The light has gone out for foreign missionaries to be there in person but also for the chance for suffering Somali people to live in peace and security. Currently for Christians, Somalia is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world, second only to North Korea.

INTRODUCTION

‘Quickly, quickly, get the lanterns lit. It’s nearly 10.00 pm.’ This was a nightly scramble in our hospital at Bullo Burti. Unless there was a major crisis, the generator that provided lights for houses and hospital would be turned off exactly at 10.00 pm. Deliveries of babies and all other routine care of patients had to be carried out by lamplight. Without our lamps, clean glass, adequate wicks and a supply of kerosene we were abandoned to the darkness.

Sometimes in life the road ahead seems to be shrouded in darkness. During my years among the Somalis and after, there were times when government decisions, coups, communist takeovers, natural disasters, sudden deaths and my own failings left me feeling I was groping blindly. Plans were disrupted and unexpected changes enforced. But God’s word says, ‘Even in darkness light dawns for the upright’ (Psalm 112:4) – not flickering, hurricane-lantern light but his light. Jesus, the Light of the World, promised that when we follow him we will never

1 Then known as Sudan Interior Mission.

walk in darkness but have the light of life (John 8:12). Remembering, in order to write a book after many years, has shown me how, even after the darkest periods, there is a light that shows the way ahead.

Miroslav Volf, the well-known author and theologian, has written graphically about his experiences under the communist government in his native Croatia. He describes the ability to make ‘painful memories a wellspring of healing rather than a source of deepening pain.’ He also says that the memories that make us are a patchwork quilt, the structure of which depends on the memories we feature, the ones we discard and what we choose as a background. ‘We are not shaped by memories; we ourselves *shape* the memories that shape us.’² It has been enriching for me to go back over the years. Remembering has been an emotional journey but also a time of healing.

I worked with a wonderful team in Somalia and the members still living are among my dearest friends. Each one would tell it differently, but this is my story. I have chosen what to include and what to leave out. What I have written is the truth as I see it.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say,
‘I am this dark world’s Light;
Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright.’
I looked to Jesus, and I found
In Him my Star, my Sun;
And in that Light of life I’ll walk
Till travelling days are done.’³*

2 Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory*, Eerdmans, 2006, p. 25.

3 Horatius Bonar (1808–1889).

GOODBYE

Early on 24 March 1977, we stood at the edge of the airstrip outside the village of Kelafo in the Ogaden Desert, waiting for the Missionary Aviation Fellowship single-engine Cessna to come and fly us away. The ground, usually so dry and dusty, was still cracked and wrinkled from the water that had flooded the area a year before. We hoped it was safe for the plane to land. Ethiopian soldiers surrounded us with rifles at the ready in case Somali freedom fighters were still in the area.

We, five adults and two children – Pat and John Warner with Michelle and Robyn, Christel Voll, Geoff Clerke and I – spoke very little as we waited. Gratitude that our lives had been spared conflicted with the awareness that we would not be returning. All of us except Geoff had invested years of our lives in this remote Somali village. They had been good years. We had made many friends and seen people grow in their knowledge of the Lord Jesus. But war had come and the locals had fled. No time for goodbyes. It was unlikely we would ever see any of them again.

Quietly through the trees appeared two middle-aged Somali men. Both had worked for us. One was Shafi'i. Through my years in Kelafo he had cleaned my house, washed my clothes, cooked meals and amused me with his homespun philosophies and spicy humour. Thought to be too outspoken by some, he and I had made a good team, with the occasional sparks flying. His companion was Duuro, the house worker for the Twidales, who were currently on holidays. Duuro was quiet, steady and solid. They had come to see us off.

As we talked, our means of transport landed. We said goodbye, climbed into the plane and, after an initial creaking and groaning of the aircraft along the uneven runway, we were airborne, swept away forever.

Goodbye, dear friends; goodbye Kelafo; goodbye hospital, school, houses. Goodbye scene of flood, war, gospel ministry, healing the sick, delivering the babies, weeping with those who wept and laughing with those who laughed. Goodbye to the place where smallpox was eradicated from the world, hopefully forever.

The pilot, aware that we were in a war zone, wasted no time. Our luggage was minimal. Just the clothes we had on, our passports and a few treasures rescued from our trashed houses.

When the Lights Go Out

As we rose into the air, I looked out the window at the rocky prominence where the year before Christel, Gwen Carter and I had sat for four days and nights while the floodwaters swirled around us. I saw the trees missionaries had planted around our houses and then we were gone over the desert to Addis Ababa.

For me it was the end of an era. The years of medical work in Somali villages were over. There had been isolation, medical emergencies without a doctor, answered prayers, cherished friendships and times of loneliness. A new life and new work lay ahead. I would be looked after. The heartbreak was for those we were leaving. Most of our Somali friends ended up in refugee camps in Somalia, uprooted from their homes and birthplace. We had done what we could. How we would have loved to be able to do more.



FAMILY SECRETS

‘You remember that fellow I told you about the other day?’ asked my visitor. He was a senior deacon from the local Baptist church and had come to spend time with me in my parents’ home. I was on leave from Somalia.

‘Yes, I know him,’ I replied.

‘Well, he was conceived out of wedlock and yet God has used him,’ the elderly deacon continued.

I can’t remember how I responded. I know I was astounded. I was conceived out of wedlock – so what? Paul said that as part of God’s family we have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. The circumstances of our birth, our family background, ongoing experiences and faith story are all individual. Surely the outcome depends on how we respond to the situations that confront us. I was always aware of a Heavenly Father looking out for me.

Years after the above conversation, and after I had permanently returned from Africa, the subject of my conception resurfaced. I was studying counselling as part of my training as a psychologist.

‘Beware of family secrets and make sure there are no skeletons in the cupboards. Get rid of them!’ said the teacher of one course. He added, ‘Secrets are the plaque that blocks the arteries of family communication.’ That was a totally new thought to me. My generation was given to secrets. A common mandate for us was: ‘This stays within the family.’ There were clear boundaries between topics that were for public information, those to be discussed in the family and those that were taboo.

I had known about the circumstances of my birth for over 30 years. My mother’s only sister, Jessie, had told me when she was angry over some family matter.

‘Did you know your mother was pregnant with you before she married your father?’ Jessie said.

I was then in my early 20s. Although the thought had entered my head, I had not allowed it to take root. Now I was thoroughly enlightened. Jessie told me how my mother, who had grown up in Albury, had been teaching in Molong where my father had been born and had always lived. His father had been mayor of the town and a leading businessman. His mother, the Lady Mayoress, was the founder of the local Country Women's Association. She was also an avid gardener and the maker of the wreaths for all the town funerals. Dad, who had left school early, was working as a postal clerk. Some of his siblings were still at the school where my mother taught.

My mother, Isobel (Belle) Simpson Williams, was the longed-for first daughter after four boys, followed by a little sister, Jessie. Her father was prominent in Albury as an alderman and president of the hospital board, as well as being an elder of the Presbyterian Church. He owned a business and could afford a maid to help his wife. Mum was school captain and went to university and teacher training. She was a few years older than Dad. Although there were many common factors between the two families, culturally and in communication styles there were obvious differences. I believe the maternal relatives felt they were on a higher plane. I know my father adored my mother and always appreciated her family, but I am not sure the opposite was true.

The teacher and the postal clerk fell in love, and in December 1933 I was conceived. It was not such a remarkable story, but it had always been a family secret. I continued to guard it for many years. I never told a soul until that counselling lecture in the 1980s. I shrank from telling my parents that I knew. But I thought about what we had learned in the lecture.

The desire to deepen our relationship and enrich communication kept needling me. So one evening I girded the loins of my mind and said to my mother, 'Can we have a chat?'

Her response sounded apprehensive. 'You're not thinking of going back to Africa are you?' she asked as she followed me to the back verandah. 'No, no, no,' I reassured her.

I began, 'I just want to tell you that I know you were pregnant with me before you married Dad. I have often thought about what you must have gone through to have me. I wondered what it must have been like to tell Nanna.'

I thought telling Nanna, my mother's mother, would have been the steepest, most painful peak to climb in the ordeal of premarital pregnancy in the early 1930s. I considered our maternal grandmother to be a proud, authoritative, slightly snobbish matriarch. She invariably dressed in black, and although she must have been in her 50s when I was born, she always seemed old. The single daughter, Jessie, stayed home and cared for both parents. I never saw our grandmother do anything more strenuous than sweep the front verandah and water the potted palm.

Most afternoons she held court in the lounge room. High tea would be served to a few select friends, with Jessie handing around the bone-china cups. Nanna officiated at the teapot. If we as children were visiting we would be called in to make an appearance. We would hear *sotto voce* comments from the guests such as 'What a big girl for her age!' or 'Nothing like her mother' in a disappointed tone before we were banished without a taste of the delicacies on the tray.

'You must have dreaded telling Nanna you were pregnant,' I said to Mum.

'Not at all,' Mum responded. 'She was wonderful! She came down from Albury and told us to meet her in Sydney, where she arranged the wedding. She took complete control.'

I drew a deep breath and then shared the second thought that had been weighing on my mind.

'But Mum, I ruined your life. You had to give up teaching to get married. You must have been so disappointed.'

'Oh Ruth,' she said, 'you were such a beautiful baby. When I wheeled you down the street, people stopped me so they could peep at you in your pram. We were so proud of you.'

My second misconception was shattered. I had felt guilty for years, thinking I had been born at the wrong time, imagining myself as the source of disappointed dreams, a veritable nuisance for my parents. I struggled to keep the tears back as I heard that I was welcomed with open arms and admired by all who saw me.

Then my mother related how Nanna again left Albury and arrived in Trundle, where they were then living, for the birth. I could not envisage the Nanna I knew packing a suitcase, boarding a train and travelling by night alone to the nearest railway station to Trundle to attend her daughter's confinement. But that's what she did. Mum told me I was

a difficult breech birth, born in the middle of a terrible storm. Nanna was there, a strengthening presence, taking control and making it all right.

Just as we reached the part about the breech birth my father appeared. Noticing that we were deep in conversation he began to move away. 'Don't go,' I urged. 'Come and sit down,' and I began to tell him what we had been discussing.

'Two of my older brothers got their girlfriends pregnant before they were married and I was so angry with them,' he responded. 'I thought the whole town would be talking about our family. I felt even worse when it was me and my girlfriend.' Then he talked more about the family dynamics. 'Before our Golden Wedding I asked our doctor for some counselling. Because we were going to have a party, I was frightened that when you realised the wedding date you would despise us.'

I repeated to him that I had known for 30 years and my only reaction was to feel sad about what my conception had cost them. As we continued talking, I was welcomed into a heart-piercing depth of sharing with both parents. It was just as I had been told. There was a rich reward for taking the step of courage to open a cupboard door and pull a skeleton out.

The next morning when I saw her, my mother said, 'You will never know what you did for us last night.' She told me that after I left, she and Dad continued to talk long into the night. My dealing with a taboo subject had a ripple effect for my parents. A door opened for them to return in memory to the precious, early days of their love for one another.

That's the beginning of my story. Firstborn of four.

Conceived in Molong: a village of about 2000 people, 300 kilometres west of Sydney, with a railway station, a museum and a wheat silo; the birthplace of my father and the former site of my paternal grandmother's magnificent, tiered rose garden.

Born in Trundle: a village of between 600 and 700 people, 421 kilometres west of Sydney, the centre of a wheat-growing area, famous for one of the widest main streets in the country, planned, I was told, so the bullock drays could turn.