

‘Riveting, powerful, disturbing, even overwhelming stories of the grace of God, and of costly love for Christ.’

Lindsay Brown, *Former General Secretary, IFES; and former International Director, Lausanne Movement*

‘These are stories the world needs to hear and Christians need to know. Don Cormack knew and loved and served so many of these brothers and sisters, who loved Jesus more than life itself. With depth and compassion he brings us their voices first-hand, tracing the beautiful fruit borne out of the killing fields.’

Mark Ellis, *CEO, Keswick Ministries*

‘There is a kind of suffering so heinous, it is beyond telling. Yet when Christ’s redemptive grace floods the scene, that same suffering takes on an exalted glow of glory. It’s what I experienced in reading these powerful stories. Be blessed as you read them, letting them whet your appetite for the larger classic work from which they are drawn.’

Joni Eareckson Tada, *Joni and Friends International Disability Center*

‘Convicting, inspiring and sobering. These stories pierced my soul. Let your heart, spirit and mind be moved as you read of those who did not count the cost of what it means to follow Jesus.’

Sarah Breuel, *Director of Revive Europe; Member, Lausanne Movement Board*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Cormack served with OMF International in Malaysia, Taiwan, Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore from 1972-1996.

After being forced to flee from Cambodia in 1975, he worked in Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai/Cambodian border. He also taught at the Discipleship Training Centre and ministered to heroin addicts in Singapore, before returning to Cambodia in 1992, following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. He was ordained by the Bishop of Singapore to begin the Church of Christ our Peace, in Phnom Penh.

Don married Margaret Lockhart at Chefoo School in 1979. They have three adult daughters. After returning to the UK, he completed his award-winning book: *Killing Fields, Living Fields*, now in its eighth edition, which chronicles the Cambodian church from its beginnings in the 1920s to the present day.

TEN STORIES
FROM THE
KILLING FIELDS

Don Cormack



In partnership with OMF International

AUTHOR'S DEDICATION

I dedicate this small book to a great cloud of witnesses, to the thousands of Cambodian Christians who perished in Pol Pot's killing fields between 1975 and 1979. Many were young people and students. They lie in unmarked mass graves all across the land.

Let us be mindful, too, of legions of others across the world, including children, who, even now, are being persecuted and killed in the most brutal ways imaginable — faithful unto death.

The world is not worthy of them. They will receive the crown of righteousness.

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Author's note: The word Khmer is virtually synonymous with Cambodian, since 96% of Cambodians are ethnic Khmers, as opposed to Chinese, or other minorities.

FOREWORD

You are about to read some remarkable stories. They will stay with you. I'm sure of that.

Don Cormack's *Killing Fields, Living Fields*, from which these excerpts are taken, traces the journey of the Cambodian church from its early beginnings among a few Battambang rice farmers in the 1920s, through to the present day. We hope these vignettes may make you want to read more.

Don Cormack is uniquely qualified to tell Cambodia's story. He was one of the last missionaries to leave Phnom Penh when it fell to the Khmer Rouge in 1975, and one of the first to return afterwards. In between, he spent time in the sprawling refugee camps which sprang up along the Thai/Cambodian border. Don learned the Cambodian language, and his pastoral approach won the trust of those he met. Some were deeply traumatized, and could tell him their stories only a little at a time, over weeks or months.

These cameos convey something of Cambodia's tragic history between 1975 & 1979, when little news was coming out of the country. In that small southeast Asian nation, through darkness, and bloodshed, and fear, and sheer evil, we trace the hand of God. There has been unimaginable cruelty in many other parts

of the world, and one wonders how similar the experiences of Christians have been in these places.

***BEING A
CHRISTIAN MADE
YOU A PARIAH***

It took 1900 years for the gospel to reach the Khmer people. When David Ellison, an American missionary, first gave a copy of Luke's gospel to some simple Cambodian rice farmers in 1923, they were riveted. The truth took hold of their hearts. In such a deeply Buddhist culture, Christian believers were shunned, despised and vulnerable. They were sometimes imprisoned, and always blamed when there was sickness or crop-failure in a village. Being a Christian made you a pariah.

Fifty years later, shortly before Pol Pot came to power, the Holy Spirit began to move in new ways. While threatening clouds were gathering over Cambodia in 1973, Major Taing Chhirc was following news closely from Edinburgh. After service in Lon Nol's army, he was now in Scotland studying engineering. Meanwhile, back in Cambodia, a spiritual awakening had begun, and many were turning to Christ. Chhirc, perceptive and courageous, saw the need for these new Christians to be nurtured in their faith. He sensed God's clear call to him from Luke 9:23-24 to return to Cambodia despite the huge dangers. There might, he knew, be little time.

In July 1973, he alerted the UK's Keswick Convention to pray. 'You have had the Gospel for centuries,' he

said from the platform. 'Why did you never come and tell us?' His words were unforgettable. Then, leaving his wife and young daughter in safety in Scotland, he flew back to Cambodia alone. He travelled via Singapore to visit the OMF International Headquarters. There he urged Michael Griffiths, OMF General Director, and his senior team, to send help.

The mission was at full stretch. Was it right to commit more resources to a new endeavour? Who would go? Just a few months earlier, two women leprosy nurses in South Thailand had been kidnapped and murdered. Was it irresponsible to place missionaries in mortal danger? These were not easy decisions. It was eventually agreed that only unmarried missionaries should be sent, so no children would be orphaned. It was further agreed that no-one should be *required* to go; there would be a call for volunteers.

Don Cormack was in Taiwan at the time, studying Chinese. He was one of five OMF volunteers to enter Cambodia. Joining the others in Phnom Penh in October 1974, he had only a few months before the whole team had to leave again. The country fell to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. Major Chhirc was martyred soon afterwards.¹

1. It was Chhirc, together with Son Sonne, another significant leader who would also die that year, who travelled to Switzerland in July 1974, to represent the Cambodian church at the historic Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization.

‘SHARING IN CHRIST’S SUFFERINGS’

Cambodian Christians learned more of what it means to share in Christ’s sufferings than most of us will ever know. And they had a deeper grasp of Christ in them, ‘the hope of glory’. They were more than conquerors; and nothing could separate them from the love of God. The story of their church, which, some fifty years after its founding, faced its own Neronian persecution, is a powerful modern-day commentary on the great New Testament themes of suffering and glory.

In the Preface to *Killing Fields, Living Fields*, Don sets out four reasons for writing the book. Listen to the second:

‘If Cambodian Christians today are aware of the faithfulness, the endurance, and the martyrdom of their spiritual mothers and fathers, I trust this will help keep them from playing fast and loose with the precious and eternal gospel which they have received intact; and which they are now called upon to live out, and pass on to others amid many of the same kinds of testing.’

The Reformation martyrs gave their lives for Christians in the West to receive that precious and eternal gospel ‘intact’. But today’s western church reflects a casual disregard both for doctrine and for biblical ethics — and we all too easily play fast and loose with the truth we have received. Is this another

God-given opportunity to
take stock of ourselves?
Will we recognize it?
Cambodia's church history
has given us an eloquent,
costly, and persuasive

***WE ALL TOO
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AND LOOSE WITH
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HAVE RECEIVED***

apologetic for 'guarding the gospel'. And this is not only for the church in the West, for surely it applies to the body of Christ right around the world.

Killing Fields, Living Fields is modern history, biography, missiology, church history, political analysis, and good English literature. It is the story of a church first planted in the early twentieth century, growing amid all the cross-currents of south-east Asian politics and economics. It is also a story of God's providence. Parts are harrowing to read, and you may read much of it, as I did, with tears. These excerpts from it show that the transcendent presence of the living God is never withdrawn.

The most insistent question of the human heart in every age and culture is surely this: 'Where is God in suffering?' I believe the story of the Cambodian church shows the true answer to that question, and the only answer worth hearing for the troubled soul or the searching mind. It is simply this. 'God is *right there*, closer than the breath we breathe.

We read in Isaiah that in all the Israelites' affliction, God, too was afflicted; and in Peter's pastoral epistle

that ‘the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you, and make you strong, firm and steadfast.’ Our God, Emmanuel, is with us. He *himself* will tend to us. What an intimate picture of God, and how clearly we see it shown in these stories. He brings comfort, and heals the broken-hearted; more, he brings hope, and will, we are promised, ‘wipe away every tear from their eyes’.²

COMRADE DUCH

In May 1999, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* carried an article on a man called Kaing Guek Eav, more commonly known as Comrade Duch.³ His shocking story was then picked up by newspapers around the world. Duch was the Khmer Rouge ‘Grand Inquisitor’ and chief executioner, responsible for the torture and deaths of many thousands of Cambodians. He had his headquarters in the Tuol Sleng death camp S21, a former Phnom Penh secondary school. Here he painstakingly recorded all the ‘confessions’ made by his victims, and the cruel tortures inflicted on them. Following the Vietnamese invasion, and the flight of the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh in January 1979, he had lain low in the refugee camps, and then in the countryside along the Thai-Cambodian border. When discovered by the journalists, he was working as a maths teacher, his former profession up to the time

2. Isaiah 63:9; 1 Peter 5:10; Isaiah 7:14; Psalm 147:3; Revelation 21:4

3. *pron.* Doik

he joined the Khmer Rouge in 1967. Aware that any public statement could lay him open to arrest and trial, he was now meeting with high profile journalists. What he said was unexpected and stunning. He had become a Christian!

Duch told the reporters that in 1993 he had begun to examine world religions. 'I wanted to know everything about Islam, Buddhism and Christianity,' he said.

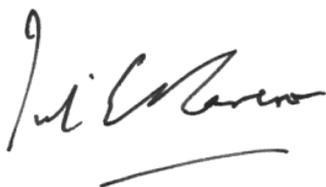
'After my experience in life, I decided I must give my spirit to God.' From the New Testament Duch learned

***'MY BIOGRAPHY IS
SOMETHING LIKE
PAUL'S'***

of the Apostle Paul, who described himself as 'the chief of sinners', and he reflected, 'My biography is something like Paul's.'

Duch's wife had been murdered by a bandit in 1995. Incognito, he was being supported by a fellow Cambodian who was working with an American Christian organization. In January 1996 Duch was baptized in the Battambang River. After the article was published in 1999 (See *Far Eastern Economic Review* 6 May and 13 May), he was arrested and placed in solitary confinement for eleven years, until his eventual trial in 2010 for crimes against humanity. He was sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 2020. Duch would have loved hearing of the Khmer Rouge soldier in Story 9. He is another whom the Lord's 'everlasting arms' enfolded; living proof of God's unconditional mercy and grace.

God is there, longing to forgive all those who are penitent, even men like Comrade Duch, who have committed the worst imaginable genocide. What a gospel!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julia E M Cameron', with a horizontal line underneath.

Julia E M Cameron

Foreword to the First Edition

Updated February 2024

*Julia Cameron led communications and publishing endeavours for three global missions. She lives in Oxford where she now runs Dictum Press, a small independent publishing initiative, and is Honorary Director of Publishing for EFAC**

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