

How a library book changed my life

David Christmas

In September 2000, when I was 63, my wife put a book in front of me from our local mobile library.

'Read this,' she said. 'What are we going to do?'

The book was *Baroness Cox – a voice for the voiceless*, by Andrew Boyd — a biography of Lady Caroline Cox, life peer, deputy speaker of the House of Lords in England and International President of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). After general information of her life it told of her travel and works among groups suffering extreme human rights abuses, beginning in Poland and continuing through Russia, Ngorno Karabakh, Burma and Sudan. By the time I had finished the book it had done its work.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, continuous bombardment of television programs and newspaper articles on the horrors of the Balkans war, the Ethiopian, Ruanda and similar situations, I had insulated myself from the appalling brutalities being perpetrated. Now I was

suddenly made aware and challenged in an unmistakable way.

I echoed my wife's question, 'What are we going to do?'

My first action was to write to the Baroness to see what a near-pensioner with not much money and no practical skills could do. Her reply was: 'If you are serious, meet me on the border of Burma and Thailand in three weeks time and we'll see.'

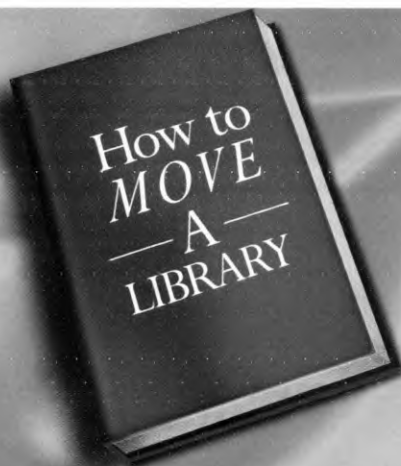
We met in Mae Hong Son where I visited the refugee camps filled with men, women and children who had fled from the brutality of the Burmese Government. I interviewed some to get their personal stories, the first being a 12-year-old boy who, six years before, had seen nine members of his family summarily executed while he hid with his then three-year-old sister in their bamboo hut. I have their photo before me now but I do not need it to remember the deep hopelessness in his eyes.

Since then I have met many of the 300 000 Karen, Karenni and Shan eth-

nic tribal people who are in the refugee camps and some of the 600 000 Internally Displaced People who are being systematically hunted through the jungles of their native Burma. I have heard their stories of torture, forced labour, murder, rape and pillage. Those stories we report to the United Nations, The International Labour Organisation, the Australian Government and many others in an effort to bring change to the situation.

The result of me reading the library book is that I am now the secretary of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (Australasia) and visit the refugee camps near Mae Sot and Mae Hong Son regularly with my wife. We gather information, and support in practical ways the refugees and internally displaced, those who are suffering while the world goes gaily on its way. This library book certainly changed our lives!

Christian Solidarity Worldwide: <http://www.csw.org.uk/>, cswoz@hotmail.com



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