

# A lifetime distilled into a novel

By Colin Blakely

Tom Stacey has had a remarkable life. And those years of experience are distilled in his new novel, *A Dark and Stormy Night*.

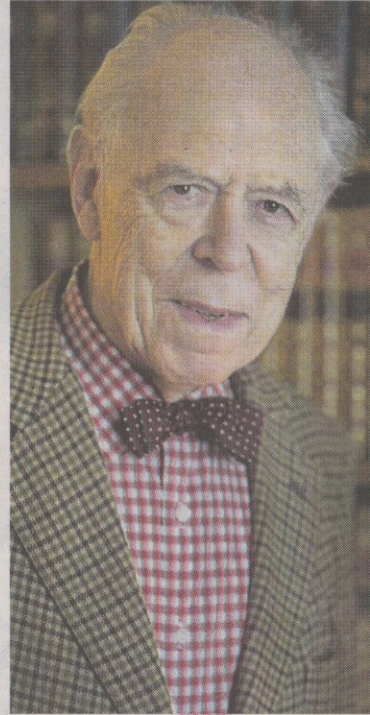
The former Scots Guard, who has reported from over 120 countries around the world in his journalistic career, has produced a profound novel that explores the nature of faith in the modern world.

The premise is that the main character, Simon Chance, is a one-time missionary and former bishop who has moved back to the academic world. We find him visiting a houseparty in the south of France but ends up getting lost in the wild forest.

Of course, the idea of a bishop who left his post to go back to academia is reminiscent of one of the people who have commended this new book: Rowan Williams. The former Archbishop of Canterbury says of it: "I was deeply engaged by the narrative ... and its style of calm expansiveness."

Stacey's book is a wide, expansive treatise on mission. He has long been involved in African life himself and as far back as 1954, in Uganda, he co-founded the Bakonzo Life History Research Society, which was to emerge as the vehicle of a recognised Kingdom of Rwenzururu 55 years later.

And in 1968 he jointly led the first water-borne expedition descending the upper reaches of the Blue Nile from its source. "I learned a huge amount



about Africa, but I live with the backgrounds of people in 1954 when I was only 24 but underneath that I was a father to children and married to a wonderful woman."

But all these years later he confesses: "Not a week goes by without being engaged with them. They're in a lot of trouble at the moment from an autocracy in Uganda, which is unbearable. I'm dealing with two levels: one is the converted Bantu Christians who are the great majority of sub-Saharan Africans.

"People can say the white man has come and imposed the faith, but it's completely not true.

"Although I personally have seen in 1954 Conrad's African

Christianity creeping up the mountains to the upper dwellings at 8,000-foot on the ruins or mountains where they've never heard of the faith.

"The point about that is my wish to emphasise through the medium of my main character and through his wife — who's not with him at that point — who is the non-believer?

"She insists: 'Heavens alive, Simon, these people already know what you're trying to tell them — they don't need your puppet Jesus on a stick. And he knew that too.

"But he knows they were really already there in a way, and what that presents to us, I mean if they're going to be sophisticated, if they're getting to be a part of the world, it is indeed they need Christianity."

These experiences, and his close involvement with life there, give the mission stories a deep realism. But most of all, he wants to share the importance of the faith he is committed to.

He says: "In this book I say something like the solvent of faith is love through the experience of wonder. We can all fall in love but it can be a rare and amazing thing. It is also part of the great idea that triggered me to write this book."

He draws on many personal experiences in the book, telling me that he had enjoyed a similar house party to that described in the book, but even the challenges facing Chance's wife are similar to his own.

In the book Simon has recently lost his wife Marigold,

violinist and composer, after her prolonged descent into dementia. This allows the author to closely explore questions of grief. But although the former bishop and his wife were united in love, and their love of music, she did not share his faith. However, it is when she is diagnosed with dementia that the story takes on a deeper significance. Again, he writes from his own experience.

"My lovely wife [they married in 1952] has not left us but she has come through a nightmare period, which I obviously witnessed in an incredibly shared intense way. I talk about it like being in an underground cave, but in my story I want to make him explore the way to find his grief."

His own wife has suffered from Alzheimer's for the last 14 years. "She was a formidable sculptor and in a sense she's like my violinist Marigold in the book. This was the centre of her life and she clearly works from an inner voice. She was actually not a churchgoer, but I think Simon needs a repository for his own disbelief.

"We want to oscillate in and out of despair — we've got to allow ourselves not to be frightened of doubt: we've got to have an area of disbelief. We've got to have an ability to say the Christian faith and our acts of worship will be important in my life but are a conflation."

But before Marigold there was Evie, with whom the main character had a brief affair long before his ordination. She is one of the guests at the

houseparty but how will he relate to her and he parliamentary spouse?

He explains more about the role of the houseparty's hostess, Clare, in the story.

"The figure of Clare is rather important: she is the foil to his faith and needs him to explain it all."

And almost as prominent as the religious elements of the novel is the role of music. And that is deliberate.

"I believe music is bound up with the Christian idea in our Western culture. You put on Radio 3 any morning and the Christian content is there. We can't escape it."

Stacey affirms his own deep faith, wishing that he could attend church worship 'every day'. However, he adds: "I am pretty much against the facile representation of God having a little plan for each of us and being under pressure to save souls, ticking the boxes.

"I'm really quite strongly and actively against that." He recounts a recent lecture by a bishop (whom he doesn't name) who was 'talking way below our heads and that was very unsatisfactory.'

And one of the things he finds personally unsatisfactory is the interpretation of the Fall. "It's a fall from innocence, that's all. The idea of the act of love being something contrary to the creative intention is to my sense destructive. The good Lord knew what he was doing!"

*A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT* by Tom Stacey is published by Medina Publishing