



# A LIFE CHANGING BOOK

SAVED FROM THE DUMP  
AND FIRE, THE BIOGRAPHY  
OF A PIONEER MISSIONARY  
TOOK DAVE DEVER ALL THE  
WAY TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC  
ISLAND OF TANNA.

**Morley Lessard**

**I**n 1987, Dave Dever was hauling a box of books to the local dump for someone when several of the books—which looked be very old—caught his eye.

Dever, who attends the Evangelical Covenant Church in Balfour, British Columbia, remembers thinking, “Should I throw these away or keep them?” The box teetered on the tailgate of Dever’s truck, and after thinking about it for a moment, he decided to take the books home. He put the books in his basement, and promptly forgot about them.

The following winter, Dever rediscovered the box of books and threw them into the fireplace for fuel.

“He threw the whole box into the fire,” says his wife, Abby, “and I said ‘No, save them, these are old,’ and began to pull them out.”

What the Devers found would change their lives. Among the books was a two-volume autobiography of Scottish-born missionary John Paton, who with his wife, Mary Ann, sailed to Port Resolution on the South Pacific island of Tanna in 1858 (now part of the nation of Vanuatu.) A few months later Mary Ann died of malaria. A few weeks after that, their infant son was buried beside her. Paton, though in constant danger from cannibals, stayed alone sharing the gospel. The story of Paton’s life and ministry was compiled by his brother James from Paton’s letters and papers. The books were first published in 1889.

Dave Dever began to read some of the books and found the story of John Paton fascinating and deeply challenging. “It was amazing that

Paton decided to stay on that island, living in such danger, without his family," he says.

Over the years, Dever reread Paton's story several times and dreamt that one day he would retrace Paton's footsteps. In June 2001, that dream came true.

"Abby and I were celebrating our twentieth wedding anniversary," Dever says, "and instead of going to Hawaii we changed our plans at the last minute and went to Vanuatu."

The nation of Vanuatu, a group of eighty islands located 1,900 kilometers northeast of Australia, just below the Solomon Islands.

It is a culturally diverse, peaceful, mainly Christian nation with more than 190,000 people. About 100 different dialects and languages are spoken, the dominant being Bislama, a kind of pidgin English.

## "There are about 35,000 people on Tanna. I took 705 Bibles, which just scratched the surface."

chief of Port Resolution. Chief Narua told the Devers he knew where the graves were. They followed Narua along with Philemon, their guide and interpreter.

"We never would have found the graves on our own," Dever says. "[They] were at the end of an overgrown, unmarked trail. It felt very surreal and sobering as we stood reverently over the graves."

As they stood beside the simple cement marker for Paton's son, and the more ornate one for his wife, Dever said a prayer of thanksgiving for the life of John Paton, and a blessing for the chief. On the way back, Dever started telling Chief Narua a story from John Paton's autobiography. He told him

there were too many men with drawn swords standing guard around your hut." Paton concluded that the "men with swords" must have been angels.

Chief Narua asked Dever if the book told the names of the chiefs there that night. "Miaki, Nowar... that was as far as I got," says Dever. "The chief's eyes went wide as he dropped to the



Dave Dever during the Bible distribution on Tanna

ground." Philemon explained to the Devers that Narua was the great-great-grandson of Nowar. He was delighted to learn from the book that John Paton thought very highly of Nowar, calling him his "best and trusted friend."

Dever told the chief that he would come back in two years and bring Paton's book. Philemon said, "He will be dead by then, send it to me and I will read it to him." When Dever returned home, he sent the book.

While in Port Vila, Dever purchased a Bislama Bible, which was published in 1998 after almost thirty years work by the Bible Society of the South Pacific. The Bible Society has distributed about 13,000 copies of this translation, but very few people on Tanna have Bibles because they cannot afford them.

After returning home, the Devers began thinking of ways to get Bibles to

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A local man carries a box of Bibles past a marker for the Jon Frum cargo cult.

The Devers landed in the capital city of Port Vila, and continued on to Port Resolution, with hopes of finding the graves of Paton's wife and son. But nobody seemed to know the location of the graves.

"They pointed one grave out, but I knew the date was wrong, it couldn't be the one," Dever says. Then, while doing some exploring, the Devers met a man name Narua, who said he was

how a hurricane had destroyed many banana crops. The natives had blamed John Paton's God for the disaster and said that he must die that night. The chiefs marched around Paton's hut all night while he was inside praying. When morning came, they all left and Paton's life was spared.

Some time later Paton asked them, "Why didn't you kill me that night?" One of them replied, "We could not,



Tanna. As they were walking one day, Abby found a quarter on the ground, which became the start of the “Bibles for Vanuatu Fund.”

During the winter and spring of 2002, that first twenty-five cents grew to a total of over \$7,600. In their home church, Sunday school produced week-



**Dave Dever with Chief Isaac Wan of the Jon Frum cult**

ly skits, puppets, and bottle drives, keeping the interest at a high level by advertising how many more Bibles could be bought with each week’s funds.

Members of the local community also gave to the fund, as did interested friends of the Devers and other churches. All the funds raised went to purchase Bibles—the Devers paid their own travel expenses. (One family at the church contributed an additional \$500 to help defray travel costs.)

Last September, it was time for Dave Dever to go back to Tanna, with 705 Bislama Bibles from the Bible Society of the South Pacific at a reduced price. The Bibles had been ordered by another church, which was not able to pay for them says Solo Duru of the Bible Society.

“By the grace of God,” Duru says, “David Dever came in bought and distributed a large number of them to Tanna.”

The Bibles arrived on September, and Dave distributed them with the help of local pastors. In one village, Dever gave the first one to a man who could not walk upright but had crawled from the jungle to get his free book. All nine prisoners in a local jail, along with the police, warden, and the guards received their own Bibles.

Barnabas Tausi, a local pastor, described the Bible distribution as a “historic event” on the island. In a letter sent to Dever in late 2002 he wrote, “The history will be unforgettable. People in every church receive the word of God free, with tears, not expecting this could happen. People came running [and] got the word of God [you]brought to us.”

While he was in Port Resolution, Dever learned that Narua had died just a month earlier. “So I sought out Philemon to ask if he had read the chief the Paton book that I’d sent,” Dever says. “He said that he’d given Narua the book and Narua’s son Werry read it to him. Werry told me that his father gave his heart to the Lord after hearing the Paton story.”



**Chief Narua and Dave Dever during his first visit to Tanna**

Before becoming a Christian, Chief Narua was a member of the Jon Frum cargo cult. This group is one of several that started in the South Pacific after World War II. Their religious practices include building landing strips and models of the planes that brought goods from the Western world for soldiers serving in the South Pacific.

“It is believed that one day their hero, Jon Frum, will return with cargo for them,” says Dever. “There are approximately 5,000 cult members centered around the live volcano on Tanna.”

A local pastor offered to take Dever to visit Sulphur Bay, home of the Jon

Frum cargo cult. There he met Chief Isaac Wan, the group’s leader. “[He] graciously greeted us, inviting us back to his village,” says Dever. “We were invited right into his home to the astonishment of everyone and he promptly gave me a gift.”

Dever had brought along a gift-wrapped Bislama Bible, which he had hoped to give to Narua. After Wan gave Dever a gift, Dever in return offered the Bible to Wan. The two had a long conversation through an interpreter and became friends.



**The grave site of John Paton’s family**

After returning home, Dever started making plans to bring more Bibles to Tanna, and to raise funds for a new church building in Port Resolution. The only previous church there was destroyed during a hurricane in 1910 and was never rebuilt.

“There is still a great need in Vanuatu for Bibles,” he says. “There are about 35,000 people on Tanna. I took 705 Bibles, which just scratched the surface.”

Dever says that he keeps a quote from William Carey, a Bible translator and one of the first missionaries to India in mind as he works on the Bibles for Vanuatu project.

“Attempt great things for God,” Carey said. “Expect great things from God.”

“I also like John Wesley’s quote,” says Dever. “Make all the money you can, save all you can, so that you can give all you can.” □

*Dave and Abby Dever are planning another trip to Vanuatu in November 2003. For more information, contact them at Box 33, Crawford Bay, British Columbia, Canada V0B 1E0 or by email at [devers@telus.net](mailto:devers@telus.net)*