

Lawrie Adam, son of a coal miner, born into the deprivations of a country at war, showed the talent of a performer and the drive to succeed professionally in the grueling world of entertainment. Twenty-five years later, his life took an unexpected turn when he was, amazingly, called to priesthood.

FROM STAGE TO PULPIT

by Rev'd Lawrie Adam

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FROM

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TO

PULPIT

AN

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY REV'D

LAWRIE ADAM



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ISBN: 978-1-63492-976-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

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Introduction

CURTAIN UP!

“Okay people; get into a line two by two please. In a few minutes we will enter the ark!” The chattering stopped. A hush fell on the waiting nervous men about to be ordained as Church of England Deacons in the huge Blackburn Cathedral.

A woman pushed past the queue saying in an urgent tone, “Is there a Lawrie Adam here please?”

What now? “Yes that’s me,” I said. She paused and thrust into my arms a large bouquet of flowers.

“These are for you, sir!”

I heard a few sniggers as I glanced at the gift card.

‘Best wishes Lawrie from your pal Colin Crompton. P.S. Couldn’t for the life of me think of what else to give you.’

Colin, a well-known television star, had worked with me at many venues. This was a reminder that my 25-year show business career was ending. That part of my life was changing forever.

“Okay lads, green light, let’s go.” Handing the flowers to someone to look after, I started the sedate walk into the body of the cathedral to the uplifting singing of the hymn ‘Crown Him with Many Crowns’.

How did a Scottish coal miner’s son from Lochgelly Fife come to be here?

It is an intriguing story. Let me take you back to the beginning of my adventure.

‘Do what you enjoy doing. You will become good at it and eventually people will want to pay you to do it.’

Celebrating the New Year was a much bigger event than Christmas in Scotland. In those days, everyone visiting received a warm welcome and a drink or two. Anyone who played an instrument, or could sing or tell a humorous story, was called upon to do so. The first person through the door was the ‘First Foot’. Superstition had it, that if the person was male, tall and dark and came bearing a lump of coal then you were assured of good luck throughout the year.

A Boxer I Will Be

Dana Andrews played a boxer in a film and that influenced me to want to be one. Uncle Bob had been a Bantamweight Amateur Champion, so I asked him to help. He talked it over with mum and dad and agreed to take me to a boxing trainer he knew with a good reputation.

Dad said, “Well it won’t do any harm I suppose if he learns how to defend himself.”

Mum was petrified at the thought saying, “What if he gets a broken nose or something?”

After a year of lessons, Uncle Bob reckoned I was light on my feet, a quick thinker, always willing to attack and good enough to take part in an amateur fight in Glasgow. Uncle Bob and dad accompanied me.

There were two doors in a small room with about five chairs. One door was an entrance/exit door to a

passageway the other led to the boxing ring in the main hall. I was not very warm dressed in just a pair of shorts and a white singlet vest. Uncle Bob bandaged my hands and told me to keep moving around 'shadow boxing' like the two lads in the room.

All at once, the hall door opened and one of the lads was called through to the sound of a round of cheers followed by the bell for the start of the bout.

In a very short time, two men burst into the room carrying the lad on an old door. Blood was pouring from his nose.

Another lad was called in...same procedure. Once again, the door burst open and back HE came carried on the door!

"Lawrence Adam?" It was my turn! He left the door ajar and I could see the brightly lit ring where a rough looking, well built, wee Glasgow lad bounced around the ring punching the air. That did it! I grabbed my clothes and shouted over my shoulder, "Sorry Uncle Bob I'm aff hame noo," and bolted!

To my mother's relief that was the end of my boxing career. On the plus side, it did teach me confidence. I was never afraid of a confrontation again. I knew I could handle myself should the occasion ever arise, and it nearly did as when I worked in some very dodgy places in the company of some very dodgy people (even some London professional gangsters)!

Adam, if the required goods are packaged then please remember to open the package before displaying to the customer. When you do display the goods, make sure you do this with a certain panache. Do not just lay them on the counter before the awaiting purchaser but display them to their best advantage.” With that, he swept away.

I glimpsed George in the background sniggering. With a shake of his head, he turned and walked away. It was an angry walk introducing me to the human ingredient of jealousy. I met this many times in my life. Thank goodness, I can place hand over heart and say I have never experienced this destructive emotion. I have admired many people and their talent but have never begrudged them their gifts.

May looked me up and down and was not over friendly. I noticed a sign hanging over the counter, which I could hardly pronounce.

“What is ‘Lingerie’?” I asked her

She gave a snort and said, “Och, jist underwear but dearer!”

The shop door opened and in walked two very large rotund Nuns in traditional black habits. For a minute, I thought it was an eclipse! They walked towards me stopping directly in front of me. I decided it was time to go into the ‘panther routine’.

Smiling broadly, I swayed on the balls of my feet, lightly rested the tips of my fingers on the counter, arms spread apart, then said, “Good morning ladies, how may I help you?”

They did not look pleased to see me. The larger one of the two (bearing in mind they were both quite enormous) cleared her throat and muttered in an Irish brogue,

“No offence sone, bot could we please have a lady to serve ozz?”

“I am quite capable I assure you, what is it you require?” I replied,

There was a longish silence then she said, “We want combinations.”

I thought for a moment then jocularly replied, “Combinations? That’s a motorbike and side-car isn’t it?”

The only sound breaking the silence was a sort of muffled, choking noise, coming from May who was by this time bending down out of sight apparently tidying the contents of a counter drawer and seemed to have a handkerchief rammed in her mouth.

“Please excuse me a moment,” I said to the nuns.

I remembered Mr. Given’s advice not to just walk away so I swept away to the side, still displaying a big smile. However, as I swept away my trouser flies caught on the shop counter brass knobs and ripped all the buttons open displaying white baggy drawers and contents! I grabbed a large book with ‘On Approbation’ stamped upon it and clutching it to my draughty crotch headed for Miss Allen for advice. I nearly fell over a helpless hysterical red-faced May lying on the floor. I walked right passed Miss Allen’s desk into the back passage and very quickly buttoned up my flies. Squaring up my little shoulders, I

mustered as much confidence as I could and marched back to Miss Allen.

She looked up from the piles of invoices covering her desk, adjusted her pink rimmed glasses on her nose and asked, “Well Mr. Adam, what is it? I am really very busy you know.”

“Very sorry to bother you Miss Allen but you did say you would be on hand to offer any advice if needed. I have two nuns up there and they want combinations?”

She bent backwards and glimpsed the two nuns waiting at the far end of the store looking at her with pleading eyes. She gave a slight smile, but then again, it could have been flatulence, and replied with a nod in the direction of the shelves behind me, “On that shelf there, Mr. Adam. First you will have to ask them what size they require.”

“Oh!” I said. “Right thank you.”

I then committed a cardinal sin and shouted up to the other end of the store,

“What size do you require ladies, small, medium large, extra-large or extra-extra- large?”

In that instant, the whole store seemed to go quiet.

Looking very cross, Miss Allen said, “Mr. Adam, do not shout at customers, approach them and quietly ask them what size.”

Immediately, I did as requested. Their faces were by this time beetroot red.

They glared at me and muttered, “Extra-extra-large, if you please.”

I hurried away back to the shelves, took a package marked in their size and recalled Mr. Given's instructions about displaying the goods to the customer with a flourishing panache. As I walked, I undid the package. Upon reaching the counter, I threw the goods up in the air with a large theatrical flourish. The huge billowing shape seemed to take an age to float then gently come to rest on the counter.

"Good grief, you could go camping in these!" I said.

I was aware of poor May getting on her hands and knees and crawling away. The nuns just grabbed the combinations rolled them up and stuffed them into their shopping bag, "Tank you very moch sone, here's the roit money, good mornin'." With that they were off.

I put the cash into the wooden cup, clicked it into the receptacle on the overhead wire, pulled the chain and it went flying off at 100 miles an hour towards the grumpy faced little cashier who immediately beckoned me to come to her desk.

I climbed the few steps to the cashier's box and opened the gate-like door to enter. The cashier glared at me - a twentyish aged woman, very primly dressed in a blouse buttoned to the neck, with a rather severe hairstyle for someone so young.

"You are not allowed to enter here. Get out! "

"Certainly," I said, "Very sorry."

She continued, "I know you are new here but surely you must have been told to make out a counter slip in duplicate. Place the top copy in the cup with

all too soon. It felt like I was only on there for just a few short minutes.”

“You’re going to love this business Lawrence, and I think this business will have a lot to offer you. I warn you though it is not all going to be roses. It is a very hard game in fact. Sadly, theatres like this are in decline and work is getting harder to find all the time.”

John was correct regarding the removal of the greasepaint. What a messy business. As I emerged from the stage door with my face still stinging from the effects of the Cremine make-up removal-cream I had another surprise waiting for me.

Three young girls ran towards me with small books and pens in their hands saying, “Can we have your autograph please Lawrence and have you any photographs?” I did not know what to say, this was a completely new experience for me, and one I certainly did not expect, that anyone should want a picture of me, or an autograph!

John was behind me and as we walked away, he said, “Ha ha, that surprised you eh? You will have to get some of what we call ‘throw away pictures’ done Lawrence for the fans. I’ll give you an address: they are not too expensive, and well worthwhile to get your name about.

I was staying at my Aunty Nellie and Uncle Eck’s prefab. Mum and Dad travelled over on Saturday with Bill in the band bus. I do not know how Auntie Nellie found the space for us all to stay, but relatives all managed to perform these amazing feats in those

days. No one seemed to mind at all where he or she slept. I cannot remember ever hearing any complaints such as 'types of food not being acceptable' or 'beds being too small' or 'too hard' etc. Everyone just mucked in.

Front row seats were booked for Auntie Nellie, her family, Bill, Dad and Mum. I had arranged for a big box of chocolates to be given to my mother after she was seated. I remembered her tale to me relating to this very theatre, when as a child with her siblings, enviously watching little rich children eating delicious chocolates. My mother, and her raggedly dressed urchin brothers and sister, could only afford the very cheapest seats upstairs, but this time they were right in the front in the dearest seats in the stalls.

I was pleased that my act went very well. The manager came backstage to congratulate me and said that he was sure he would hear of me again. I said goodbye to John McIvor and thanked him for his invaluable advice. Sadly, I never worked with John every again. This was something I became used to in the future.

We stayed the night in Dundee, bade farewell the following morning and made our way back home. As we embarked from the ferry, I glanced up at the huge poster advertising last week's show at the Dundee Palace. There was my name! What a moment.

Sixteen

The Carl Levis Show

“Why don’t you audition for the famous ‘Carol Levis Discovery Show’?” said the customer I was serving. “They are auditioning in Edinburgh this week.” I thought about it and decided, why not?

Bill offered to drive me to the auditions. At that time, the ‘Carol Levis Discovery Show’ was the equivalent of the 21st century ‘TV show called ‘Britain’s got Talent’. The auditions were held in the Empire Theatre Edinburgh. The stalls were packed with folk who amazingly fell into two categories. Accordionists playing Scottish jigs and reels and Highland dancers festooned in medals bouncing up and down upon their chests doing Highland flings or the sword dance. I studied the four judges seated at a long table on the stage. They looked weary and fed up with what was on offer. I also noted, when they called out names from their lists, they were English.

I said to myself, “Well now, to English ears one jig or reel must seem pretty much like the next. If I am to grab their attention I will need to play something different.”

Bill nudged me and said, “What are you going to play?”

“My Florence,” I replied.

“But you don’t know it yet, I’ve listened to you practising. You only know about half of the piece, you’ll look an idiot!” He exclaimed.

My name was called out. I stood up and muttered to Bill, "Here goes an idiot." I walked up onto the stage, put on my accordion and saw a look of utter dismay cross all the judges faces. I knew what they were thinking, "Oh! No! Not another Scottish accordionist!"

"Hullo Lawrence, and what are you going to play for us?" one of the men called out. "I'd like to play an Italian classical piece called 'My Florence'," I replied.

"Did you say a classical piece?" They said in amazement.

"Yes, that's correct."

"Please do carry on," another gentleman said.

I thought, 'Well, here goes, perhaps they might stop me before I reach the end of the bit I know. If not, I might pretend to faint, or something.' I glanced at my brother, seated hunch up in the stalls, with his hand up to his mouth and his eyes open wide. He looked more nervous than I felt.

The start of this piece of music was magnificent, big block chords, fast finger rippling-cadenzas, followed by a gentle waltz tempo, and then a sudden change into a brilliant staccato passage. The trouble was I only knew it up to the end of the staccato passage, after that...well!

Just at the precise moment of pending disaster, one of the judges shouted, "Lovely Lawrence, come over to the table for a moment, please." I stopped playing (with great relief) walked over to their table.

"Thank you, Lawrence, for an excellent audition. We've decided to offer you a place in the show. It will

mention the poor producer, it would be great relief. It could have gone horribly wrong. TV was live in those days. What you saw was what you got.

When I arrived home, there were big hugs and my mum said, “Lawrence, what were yi’ thinking about son wi that blindfold and things? Whit a thing to pull, I thought I was goin’ tae hae a hert attack.”

Bill chimed in, “Aye, she put her hands up to her mooth and wailed, ‘Oh! Ma Goad!’.” He carried on laughing as he said, “An dad just froze, stopped puffin’ on his pipe wi his eyes oot like organ stops! It really was a great stunt though.”

There followed a very good press notice in the ‘People’s Journal’ saying “He could well rival established Scottish stars.” A small paragraph appeared in the Lochgelly Times.

Not one member of the Co-op staff mentioned anything about the TV show. However, many customers who came in were full of praise saying that I had put Lochgelly on the map.

The Telephone Call

The big event however, was when Mr. Lister came bounding into the Gent’s department, walked up to me, stared at me for a few minutes, then barked,

“Mr. Adam, I am sick and fed up of you getting telephone calls at work. I have told you this before and this is the very last time I am telling you. There is a gentleman on the phone in MY office and he is most insistent that he speaks with you. Please be brief.”

With that, he marched off in the direction of his office. I followed him in. I did think he might have given me the courtesy of some privacy, but no, he thumped himself down on his chair and started fiddling about with some papers.

“Hello, Lawrence Adam here.”

“Ah! Hullo Lawrence. I am Andy Stewart’s manager.” Everyone in Scotland knew of Andy Stewart. He had a record in the UK Top music charts called ‘A Scottish Soldier’. DJ Terry Wogan played it on his radio show.

“Andy Stewart?” I said. Mr. Lister looked up, then down again.

“Yes, my name is Mr. John Worth. Andy is appearing at the Inverness Empire Theatre this week. Well, he popped out at the interval to the bar next-door. There is a TV set above the bar and he said he saw you on it. He was most impressed and asked me to phone you to ask if you would consider turning professional and joining his show which is about to go on tour.”

“Turn professional?” I noticed a podgy little pink hand open a desk drawer, picking up my Employment Cards, and just hover there.

“How much would I be paid?” I asked.

“Well as you are new to show business, we would be prepared to pay you £15 per week.”

“What would my hours be, please?” I said.

“Your hours?” he said laughing, “Well, you would be on the stage twice. Once in the first half for about

five minutes, then again in the second half for about seven minutes, twelve minutes in all.”

“You’re going to pay me £15 per week for 12 minutes work a day?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s quite correct.” I noted the little podgy hand now withdrawing the cards and placing them on the desk. Mr. Worth continued,

“The tour will be at a different venue each night for four weeks, with the possibility of extras.”

“Mr. Worth, you are on, when and where do I start?”

“Excellent,” he exclaimed, “Andy will be pleased. You will start at the Empire Theatre Inverness and then we move off the following day. You are required to start on Monday of next week!”

“Monday next week? I don’t know if that would be all right with my boss.” I glanced down and Mr. Lister gave a large definite nod of approval.

“Yes, Mr. Worth that will be fine I’ll see you in Inverness on Monday.”

He said, “No, no, please arrive on Sunday, come to the theatre and I’ll have accommodation fixed up for you and you can meet the rest of the artistes in the show.”

Mr. Lister said, “Well, Mr. Adam, looks like you will be leaving us very shortly then?” I nodded. He said, “£15 a week for twelve minutes a day. That is immoral. Why that’s more than I get!”

“Yes, and it’s certainly a huge pay-rise for me, from £5 per week for about nine hours a day, six and a half days a week,” I replied.

talented at composing some of his own songs. I persuaded him to appear in one of my shows in Southport at the Floral Hall, where I put in a one-night show each week. He went down very well indeed and appreciated the fee

BBC Play

In addition to studying and writing essays, I was fortunate in gaining a useful contact in Manchester who ran her own television artiste's agency. She was able to pass on to me various television bits for myself and for other artistes on my booking list.

Wendy and I appeared in a BBC Henrik Ibsen play, a film about the Bronte Sisters and a film called Bill (short Love Amongst the Artistes. When for Willemina) the agent, saw Wendy walking down a long staircase in a yellow crinoline dress she clutched my arm and said, "Who the hell is that?"

I replied, "That Bill, is my wife, Wendy."

"Well, she is gorgeous. I'm going to do a lot for her."

"No, you won't I'm afraid, she says this is her last time, as she gets bored out of her tree with television!"

"Oh! What a pity."

We did do another programme together when we played judges in a detective series called Inspector Crib. In a Victorian walking race scene (when a murder took place) I was required to walk arm in arm with the leading lady, who was dressed in a bright

canary yellow dress, large hat and parasol. The crowds lined up alongside the racetrack.

As part of the action, I unhooked a heavy chain, about six feet long, threw it aside and with a flowery gesture, allowed the actress to pass across the track into a tent situated in the middle of the course.

The first time I did it, the director screamed, "Cut, Cut! For God's sake man, really throw the bloody chain, do not just lay it down. Now, Action!"

I did as he requested. Unfortunately, it struck one of the actors between the legs and he slowly sank to his knees holding his crotch with his eyes crossed.

The actress doubled up laughing as the director shouted "Oh! Cut! Cut! Bloody cut!" And so, the whole thing had to be filmed again. Mind you, I did notice a smile flickering across the director's face.

The essays came thick and fast. Quickly, I became knee deep in books. John Fawcett taught me how to pluck the information from a book without having to read it cover to cover.

The weekends were hard work but made interesting by John White's clever Sunday Spectaculars. Usually, I was hauled into that one way or another and each one was a learning curve.

He grabbed me one Sunday evening and said, "Lawrie, you are taking evensong tonight."

I replied in astonishment, "What? I've never done that in my life."

"Well you start tonight"

"I haven't got a cassock."

“Really? Charles!” he shouted to a very tall thin student, “Lend Lawrie your cassock and cincture.”

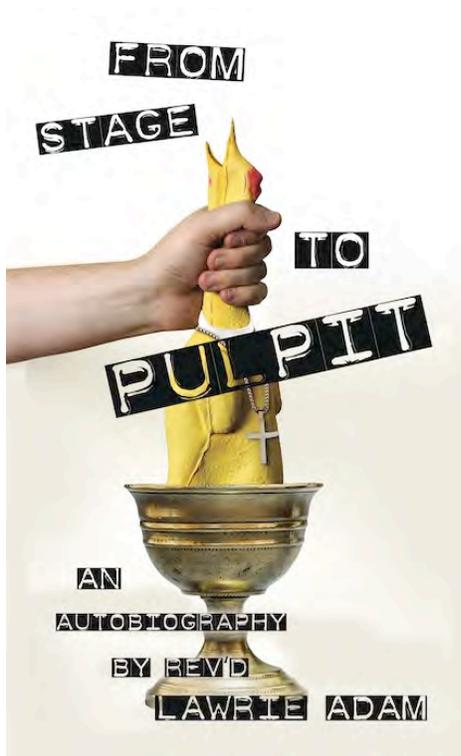
He did, but it was far too long for me. I felt like Dopey from the seven Dwarfs. He wrapped the cincture round my waist. This is a black cummerbund with two tails hanging down. It was a bit on the loose side to say the least.

John said, “Right, there is the book, on you go.”

I walked through the college chapel doors heading for a lectern on top of three steps. It was quite a long walk. Students were kneeling on either side of me as I traversed the aisle. One of them, who was to become a lifelong friend, Dick Swindle, had his hands over his face. I noted he was shaking as I drew nearer to him then he pitched forward as if worshipping Allah! I thought he was crying.

As I walked, I felt something slowly slipping down over my waist. ‘That damn cincture’ I thought.

I reached the first step, but as I raised my foot, it caught somehow in my cassock. I raised the second foot and realised I was in fact now walking up the inside of my cassock. As I walked, the front of the cassock went down, taking me with it until I had to grab the lectern throwing all the papers and books on the floor in the process. I sorted myself out, turned around and the whole chapel was in bedlam. My friend Dick was prostrate on the floor in hysterics. The remainder of the students were rolling about with laughter. I looked at John White and the Principal. They just glared at me and slowly shook their heads. I carried on.



Lawrie Adam, son of a coal miner, born into the deprivations of a country at war, showed the talent of a performer and the drive to succeed professionally in the grueling world of entertainment. Twenty-five years later, his life took an unexpected turn when he was, amazingly, called to priesthood.

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