



# Relative strangers

**Michela Wrong** has an unexpected family reunion in East Africa



*Michela Wrong worked as a foreign correspondent in Africa for Reuters and the BBC, and has written three books, the most recent being It's Our Turn To Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower. She will be a guest of the Open Book festival in Cape Town, 20-24 September.*

Gazing across the eiderdown of cloud over central Uganda, I clutched the seat in panic – small planes terrify me – and tried to focus on our itinerary. My colleague and I had only catered for one day's reporting in the northern town of Gulu, and there was a lot to do.

It was May 1996, and we were working on an investor's survey of Uganda. Raids by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebel group were marginalising the north of the country and we had belatedly realised any report which ignored the escalating crisis would be woefully incomplete. Hence this charter.

I mentally ticked off the items on our list: an interview with Betty Bigombe, State Minister for the North. A meeting with the army. A briefing from a charity caring for children who had escaped the LRA's clutches.

There was one more thing. But this could only count as a private indulgence. 'You know, my great-aunt is buried somewhere in Gulu,' I had told my colleague. 'Some day, when I have more time, I'd like to find her grave.'

Had she been born a century earlier, Margaret Wrong would have been a missionary. As it was, this earnest Canadian had dedicated her life to improving literacy in Africa. She had never married, travelled constantly and wrote with fluent ease; no wonder I felt a certain affinity. Taken ill on a 1948 trip out of south Sudan, she had been buried where she died. No one in the family had ever seen her grave.

The plane landed on Gulu's earth strip and we headed for Bigombe's headquarters. Bad news. The minister was out, and it was not clear when she would be back. We resigned ourselves to one of those dusty waiting-room experiences that haunt the journalist's career.

Then the door opened, and an elderly Ugandan gentleman in a priest's dog-collar walked in, carrying a file. As he chatted with the receptionist, my colleague nudged me.

'Wasn't your great-aunt a Protestant?'

'Yes, she must have been.'

'That man's a clergyman. Ask him.'

I shrugged. What a ridiculous notion. It was on a par with the 'You're from London, so you must know my cousin' line voiced by those who had no grasp of a city's vastness. 'Why on earth would he know?' I hissed.

My colleague ignored me. 'Excuse me!' The clergyman paused, hand on the doorknob. 'Would you happen to know the grave of Margaret Wrong? My British friend has come all this way just to see it.'

The clergyman never blinked. There was no 'Sorry?' No 'Who?' No 'What a strange name.' You would have thought this was a query he fielded once a week.

'Of course. You have transport? No? Well, I can give you a lift.'

Moments later we were in the back of his jeep, struggling to hide smiles of imbecilic delight at the surreal serendipity of it all.

Gideon Obama, the Bishop of Northern Uganda, drew up outside a modest bungalow, both office and home, then led us to a spot of emerald-green turf nearby. It was a very simple grave. 'Margaret Christian Wrong' read the flat tombstone, followed by the dates.

I felt strangely moved to have found her, this fearless spinster in whose footsteps I increasingly found myself treading, who had died so far from home.

And then I realised why it had all been so easy. Next to her in the jewel-green grass lay another grave, that of the bishop's son, killed during the horrors of Idi Amin's rule. No wonder the name Margaret Wrong had lodged in the bishop's memory. What was for me a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage must have been a daily ritual for him, full of abiding pain. Of course he knew the spot. ■