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Tom Jones

The Life

Written by Sean Smith

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TOM JONES
the life

BY **SEAN SMITH**

'I wish I was immortal
so I could bloody sing for ever'
Tom Jones, 2009

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PART ONE

TOMMY WOODWARD

1
THE SHOW-OFF

Even as a small boy, it was always about the voice. Tom calls it his 'God-given gift'. Freda Woodward believed her son was musical as a baby when she held him in her arms: 'As soon as music came on the radio, he would start to move like a jelly. And if you left him in his cot, he would make musical sounds at the top of his voice. I remember thinking, "What's eating this boy?"'

Tom's first memory of impressing his mother was when he was a blond, curly-haired five-year-old and she heard him singing the popular wartime novelty song 'Mairzy Doats'. She asked him to sing it again, and when he had finished, she told him, 'You've got a lovely voice.' That parental approval was all the encouragement Tom needed to believe that he would be a singer one day. 'I had this voice and the love of it. So any chance I could get, I wanted to get up and sing.'

Tommy Woodward liked an audience as a little lad. His first cousins, Jean and the twins Ada and Margaret, would come over to his parents' house on Laura Street for a concert. There would just be time to have a fight with Margaret, which Tommy usually started by trying to stick a spider down the back of her neck, before it was showtime. His doting mother Freda knew the

routine, because he used to pester her almost daily to announce him dramatically, in a proper show business fashion.

'I would be cleaning the lounge and there was a deep window-sill and Tom would get up there and pull the drapes over and he would say, "Mum, call me out now." And I would say, "Wait a minute now, because I'm busy." And he would say, "No, call me out now." So I would say, "Tommy Woodward, he will be out next" and he would jump out and start to sing. Well, I knew there was some talent there. He was never shy.'

Margaret remembers the concerts well. 'He would be up in auntie's window, pretending that he was on stage then. And we would all have to clap. He was always very talented, but none of us children were allowed to be shy.'

The Woodwards were originally from Cornwall, but moved to the small village of Treforest overlooking Pontypridd at the end of the nineteenth century, drawn by the prospect of finding work in the mines that were thriving at the time. Thousands of families poured in to transform the landscape of South Wales. Row upon row of small terraced houses were built for the 'immigrants' who created the mining communities for which the Valleys became famous. Tom's father, Thomas John Woodward senior, was the first of his family to be born in Wales.

It is a huge simplification to describe these areas as poor, deprived or underprivileged. Working down the mines was considered a good job and, more importantly, it provided a regular wage. Being a miner was exceptionally hard work, but Tom's dad was proud to follow in the footsteps of his father and two elder brothers. He earned his first wage at the age of fourteen, when he went down Cwm Colliery in Beddau, three miles across the mountain from Treforest.

For forty years, rain or shine, frost or snow, he would rise at 5.15 a.m., pull on his hobnail boots and go to work to shovel fourteen tons of coal. It was man's work – hard, physical and dangerous. A year after he began, the General Strike of 1926 saw proud mining families having to queue at soup kitchens because they had no money to put food on their tables. It was the worst of times.

Tom senior was a dapper man, polite and popular with the ladies. He met Freda Jones at a local dance in 1933, when she was eighteen and he was twenty-three. Theirs was a whirlwind courtship. She was much more sociable than her quieter suitor, but those who knew him well would often remark on his dry sense of humour. The vivacious and statuesque Freda was already pregnant when they married on 3 September of that year. Their first child, a daughter called Sheila, was born on 11 March 1934. She was a quiet child, taking after her father by being more of a listener than a talker.

A further six years had passed and the Second World War was raging before a much wished-for son was born on 7 June 1940. He was given the same name as his father, Thomas John Woodward. As many babies were then, Tommy was born at home, 57 Kingsland Terrace, Treforest. When Tom was one and a half, the family swapped houses with his father's widowed mother and moved into her larger house at 44 Laura Street.

Treforest was spared the worst of the German bombs, but the village didn't escape the warning sound of the sirens or the planes rumbling overhead. Mothers used to tell their children that it was thundering outside, before ushering them under the stairs or the kitchen table until the 'all clear' was sounded. If you looked out of the window, you could see the searchlights illuminating the night sky over Cardiff, twelve miles to the south.

The house in Laura Street had a cellar, so Tom's family would shelter under the steps leading down to the basement level. The village wasn't a specific target for the Luftwaffe, which was seeking to destroy the factories engaged in wartime production on the Treforest Trading Estate a few miles away. There was always the chance, however, that unused bombs would be jettisoned when the planes turned back for Germany, as the pilots needed to lighten their load so they would have enough fuel to make it home.

These were dangerous days. One older boy had his leg blown off by stepping on a mine that had ended up on the recreational area known as the White Tips, where schoolchildren played rugby and football. Nobody escaped the blackout, or the eerie sense created by the darkness when the street lamps went out at sunset.

Tom was too young to remember much of the rationing, the long shop queues or the nights lit only by the moon. The noise of it all stuck with him though: 'I can remember the searchlights and there were always guns going off. At the time I thought that's the way the world was.'

There were no supermarkets in the post-war days when rationing was still enforced. You could, however, get everything you needed for your family, without leaving Treforest, at the grocer's, Hale's the butcher's or Howells the baker's. All the housewives bought their groceries in a little shop and post office called Marney's in Wood Road.

Tom Marney, a bustling, popular figure, had run his store for as long as anyone could remember. The shop was a bit like the Valleys' equivalent of *Open All Hours*. It was the place to go to catch up with your neighbours, while the shopkeeper in his trusty brown overall leaned on the counter and amused every-

one with the latest gossip. He'd heard Freda telling a friend what a talented singer her little boy was, so he wanted to hear for himself.

He persuaded Freda that she should let the lad give everyone a song the next time they went in. Sure enough, the waiting queue was transfixed as Tom clambered on to a crate and burst into his then high-pitched vocal. According to local legend, Mr Marney told the small crowd that had gathered to put their hands in their pockets and 'give the boy a few coppers'. Despite Freda's protests, Tom's hands were filled with pennies, much to his delight. It was his first paying gig.

Tom was always encouraged to sing by his extended family in and around Pontypridd. He was by no means the only good singer among the Woodward and Jones clans, but he was the only one taking an interest in the popular songs on the radio. Others, like his Uncle George and Uncle Edwin, his father's brothers, had magnificent voices, but stuck to the more traditional hymns and ballads.

Uncle George gave Tom an early piece of advice, which he always followed. One Saturday, when everyone had gone back to Laura Street for a last drink and a sing-song, he told young Tommy, half asleep and wanting his bed, that he should always sell a song to people's faces. Never stare at the floor or the ceiling or close your eyes, because then you are trapping the song and keeping it prisoner. 'Let people see what you are singing about,' said George.

Tom had an edge, even as a youngster in short trousers. He didn't just sing a song; he performed it with verve and passion. In 1946, when Tommy was six, the Oscar-winning film *The Jolson Story* was released. The biopic, starring Larry Parks, told the life of the star who, from humble origins, became the most

famous entertainer in the world. Fortunately, it glossed over the singer's marital problems brought about by his inveterate womanising.

Tom was transfixed when he saw the film with his parents at the Cecil Cinema in Fothergill Street, Treforest. He recalled, 'I thought Al Jolson was great, because he was a great entertainer.' Back at the house in Laura Street, he would stand in front of a mirror and practise the famous Jolson gestures and hand movements, so he could impress his audience the next time he gave a performance in the lounge. He wanted to be like Jolson, because 'he's moving *and* singing.'

Performing in front of an audience for Tom was like swimming for other youngsters: after you have overcome an initial fear of the water, it becomes second nature. Tom wasn't overawed when Uncle Edwin stood him on a chair to sing to a crowded pub or when his mother showed him off at the weekly meetings of the Treforest Women's Guild, which met in a small hall at the top of Stow Hill, a short, lung-busting walk from home.

Little Tommy was, in fact, a big show-off. Looking back at his childhood self, Tom admitted, 'It was my strength. A lot of boys in school were great rugby players or football players. But I was lucky that I had this voice. It gave me confidence.' In that regard, Tom took after his vivacious mother. His cousin Margaret, who was very close to Tom growing up, used to tell him that he would always have another career if his voice ever gave out: 'He has my auntie's personality. She was a very natural woman and would be the life and soul of the party. Tom was the same. I told him he would make a marvellous stand-up comedian.'

The one member of clan Woodward who was a reluctant singer was his father. Tom recalled, 'My father was a shy man. But he could sing if he had had enough beer.' His mother had no

such inhibitions, however, and would happily burst into song. Unfortunately, she couldn't match her husband as a singer, although her son says she could just about hold a tune.

Tom's universe was very small when he was growing up. He usually says he hails from Pontypridd, but he is a Treforest boy through and through. Until he left school, his entire life was acted out within a few hundred yards of his home, and even then his first job was only a five-minute stroll away. His mother's sister, Auntie Lena, lived with her husband, Albert Jones, in adjoining Tower Street, so his first cousins were so close you could almost hear the kettle going on. His best friends, Brian Blackler and Dai Perry, were within shouting distance and he never had more than a ten-minute walk to school.

The boy was called Tommy at home and among family to avoid confusion with his father, but his school friends always knew him as Tom, or sometimes Woodsie. The local children would never have dreamed of referring to Tom senior as anything other than Mr Woodward. Proper respect for your elders was very important in this small, insulated mining community. One story in particular illustrates this. When both her children were of school age, Freda took a job in a local factory to bring in some much needed extra cash. One day she and her husband were queuing for the cinema when a boy shouted out to them, 'Hello, Freda.' Tom senior was enraged by the impertinence and wanted to know who he was. Freda said he was just a young lad who worked at the factory. Her husband was incandescent. 'You're not going to the factory any more,' he insisted. 'If they can't call you Mrs Woodward, then you don't work there!'

Freda never took another full-time job, but she was the woman local families called on when someone died. She would be asked to lay out the body, which involved dressing the

deceased so they looked their best for the funeral. It was a sign of the regard in which she was held that she was trusted with such a significant task.

Tom was decidedly spoiled and, perhaps because he was indulged, he was slightly on the chubby side. His sister was six years older, so he was very much the little one in the family. Coincidentally, his mother was the youngest sibling, eleven years younger than Lena, and the baby of her family too. The Woodwards were relatively better off than many in the area, because they were a household of only four. Both Tom's mother and father were one of six children, so there were lots of cousins living in Treforest. Lena and Albert alone had seven children.

As far as young Tom was concerned, it was entirely normal to grow up with such an extended family in close proximity. He loved it and has always stressed that family is of paramount importance to him. It would come as no surprise to those who knew him well that his immediate family would later live within five minutes of him in Los Angeles or that he made sure his cousins were always welcome there.

Tom enjoyed a traditional and idyllic childhood, despite the dismal landscape of an impoverished area. The house in Laura Street was an end of terrace and bigger than some of the others in the street. Freda liked the decoration to be bright and colourful – a cheerful place for her family. 'It was a beautiful home,' recalls Cousin Margaret. 'Auntie Freda was very house-proud but she would always give you a welcome.' Like so many housewives then, she would invariably have a pie or a tray of Welsh cakes baking in the oven of her kitchen on the lower ground floor and the smell would waft enticingly up the stairs.

A coal fire kept the house warm. Tom and the other boys in the neighbourhood used to enjoy helping when the coalman

came round with a delivery. He would lift up a round, steel plate in the pavement and tip the coal in. The boys would then push the coal down the hole, so it would land in the room on the bottom floor known as the coal house.

Visitors always came to the back door, which was never locked. The house had no bathroom, but hanging on a hook outside was the small tin bath that Freda would fetch down every night and put in the scullery across the hall, ready to fill with hot water so her husband could scrub himself clean of the coal dust and grime every evening.

On Tom's birth certificate, his father listed his occupation not as miner but as Assistant Colliery Repairer (below ground). The work was just as dirty, dark and forbidding as digging the seam. It was also hugely important, because it involved repairing the wooden joists that kept the tunnels from collapsing, preventing calamitous results.

The daily rituals in the Woodward home never changed and the roles that his mother and father had within the household had a profound effect on young Tom's outlook on life and the development of a set of values that many would see as old fashioned. His father worked hard to provide for his family, and his wife was equally diligent in making sure his house was spotless, his children were clean and tidy and he was cared for from the moment she could hear the click of the garden gate announcing he was back. Tom observed, 'Most of my values have been formed from that working-class environment. They were good people.'

Freda was always up first to light the fire, make breakfast, lay out Tom senior's work clothes and prepare his packed lunch ready for his journey over the mountain to the colliery. He usually walked with Brian Blackler's father, Cliff, and the many other miners from Treforest. While he spent the day with a pick-

axe in his hand, Freda would make sure the children were safely at school before beginning her daily tasks of shopping, baking and cleaning. She took particular care in polishing the horse brasses that were dotted about the best room and were her pride and joy.

At the end of a strenuous day, a miner needed his hot meal. Freda always had her husband's tea ready on the kitchen table for him to enjoy as soon as he had washed his hands. Tom and Sheila, hair brushed and tidy, were there to welcome their father home.

After he had eaten, he would take his bath. It was far too small for a grown man. Tom described his father's routine: 'He would have to kneel on the floor first of all and take his shirt off and wash his top half and when he had done that he would stand in the bath and wash his bottom half. And he would shout for my mother to come and scrub his back.' Freda would wash his back with a flannel, unless they'd had a tiff and she wasn't speaking to him, in which case she would send Tommy in to do it instead.

Sometimes Tom senior would pop out to the Wood Road Non-Political Club – known locally as 'the Wood Road' – for a beer with his friends, but on Saturdays he took Freda with him. It was a traditional working men's club that tended to be all male during the week and more family oriented at the weekend.

Mr and Mrs Woodward always made a handsome, smartly turned-out couple. Freda looked glamorous with her blonde hair styled immaculately, and favoured beads to accessorise her dress. Her husband would wear a three-piece suit with a brightly coloured shirt and tie and pristine suede shoes. His son always appreciated his sharp dress sense and sought to emulate him when he became older.

At the club, Freda and the other wives sat together and gossiped while the men drank their beer at the other end of the

room. Only one topic of conversation was banned – politics. That was why it was called the Non-Political Club. Sometimes there was singing. Freda's tour de force was her version of the old favourite 'Silver Dollar', which she performed with great verve and humour. She relished the memorable first line 'A man without a woman is like a ship without a sail'. Afterwards, they would usually finish the evening off at Lena and Albert's, because Tom's aunt had a piano, which she would play, making a late sing-song even jollier.

The piano was in much demand at Christmas time. Tom would join the other young children at his aunt's at teatime for a lucky dip. Aunt Lena would buy a lot of little gifts and wrap them in preparation. The children would then draw numbers out of a hat to see which present they received – it was Santa's lucky dip. As Margaret explained, 'The money wasn't there to be extravagant, but we never realised this, because our home was so nice. All of us would be there with the piano going. Tom said to me once that we never realised we were poor, because we were all together and it was absolutely lovely.'

Everyone in the village was in the same situation. Nobody had a car, but everything was so near that they walked everywhere. The children could easily get to the Cecil Cinema for a matinée. They had to pay just once and could stay all day – they could watch the feature as many times as they liked. Of course, if it were something the girls found scary, then Tom would make it his mission in life to race around or jump out and frighten them as much as possible on the way home. He could be a rascal, but he was never rough, especially with his younger cousins. 'We were very close, I've got to be honest,' said Margaret.

Sometimes they played on the White Tips, or in summer walked to Ponty Baths, as it was called, and swam and splashed

around in the enormous paddling pool that had been an attraction in Ynysangharad Park since the 1920s. Tom didn't spend all his time with the girls, however. Most afternoons, after tea, he joined his pals to muck about or kick a ball in the old quarry behind Stow Hill. These days, health and safety officers would have a fit at the sight of so many small boys in short trousers scaling the sides and scrambling around in the earth and stone.

Even better was when they were allowed, in the holidays, to go and play and camp on the Feathery, the spectacular mountain behind Treforest. In the late forties and early fifties, children had to find amusements that didn't revolve around television, computers and phones. Invariably, about ten of the younger boys from the Laura Street area would be together – all the usual suspects, including Tom, Brian, Dai and the Pitman brothers. The older boys would be on one side of the mountain, ignoring the youngsters. Brian recalls, 'It was good fun in those days … Great times! We never slept – never slept all night.'