

Robert Morrison, Bible Translator of China, 1782-1834

By C. P. Hallihan

• INTRODUCTION

Media coverage of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing brought China to the forefront of our attention. Many Christian people in England would almost intuitively think of James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) or Gladys Aylward (1902–1970) among early Protestant workers in China; in Wales, Griffith John (1831–1912) is remembered, and in Scotland, William Chalmers Burns (1815–1868) is honoured in connection with the 1839 revival at M'Cheyne's church as well as for his work in Canton and other Chinese cities. From North America went, amongst many others, William Jones Boone (1811–1864), Harlan Page Beach (1854–1933) and Charlotte Moon (1840–1912). Most memorable of all in connection with the Olympics is the Sabbath-keeping Olympic champion Eric Henry Liddell, born to Scottish missionary parents in Tientsin in 1902. He died in 1945, having worked in China for twenty years. God certainly moved His chosen servants into that vast land from the late 18th century on, and today the Chinese

church—although not always visible or acceptable to the 'principalities' and 'powers' (Romans 8.38)—is estimated to number in the tens of millions.

The first of His servants in this noble commission was Robert Morrison. Morrison had prayed that 'God would station him in that part of the field where the difficulties are the greatest, and to all human appearances the most insurmountable'.¹ God sent him to China. He entered China at a time when missionary endeavour was highly restricted—allowed in only a couple of cities and with the government threatening death to anyone teaching the Chinese language to foreigners. Morrison learned the language and taught others, and when not allowed to give the spoken Gospel endeavoured to produce literature and Scriptures for the people there. He did not, however, go to China with false expectations; when asked by a shipping agent shortly before his arrival in China, 'Do you really expect you can make an impression on the great Chinese empire?', Morrison answered, 'No Sir, I expect God will!'²



During his years in China, Morrison would be able to claim few initial converts but laid the foundations for subsequent Bible, educational and medical work that would have a significant and enduring impact on the culture and history of the nation. His impact is honoured today not only by Christians but by governments as well. On the bicentenary of his arrival in China, a conference was held in Washington, DC, in which Morrison was hailed as ‘a bridge between cultures’. A report on the conference said:

In particular today, at a time when China is assuming ever greater importance in international relations, the beginnings of modern diplomatic and commercial contacts between China and the western world become visible in Morrison’s work for the East India Company and as ambassadorial interpreter... His long-term influence is, however, most intensely felt in his translations.³

Before looking in a little more detail at Robert Morrison and his work, a very broad-brush background sketch of China would be of use.

• CHINA BACKGROUND

History

This may seem a little tedious—but it helps a great deal to appreciate that the China of Protestant missionary labour was aware of itself as a cultured civilization, long-rooted, proud, huge and self-sufficient, needing nothing that came from outside. To them we were (are?) the uncivilised, unstable, ignorant and insignificant barbarians!

China has the world’s oldest continuous civilization, a recorded history of about four thousand years. The era of the Shang dynasty approximated to the Biblical time from Abraham to David, and the Chou dynasties from David to the Maccabees. After that came the Han eras, up to the start of the 3rd century AD, when the administrative/bureaucratic model of government was perfected—a model which would be copied by every successive dynasty.

The sheer size of China and its population demands a functioning bureaucracy, the more so when you realise that many of these successive dynasties began as forces of occupation or rebellion. The Han Dynasty ran from about 200 BC to AD 200, and its descendants are still the most numerous ethnic group in China. Empress Wu,⁴ the only woman to be ‘Emperor’, lived during the Tang dynasty, 618–907, when China ruled Siberia, Korea and Vietnam, as well as controlling the ‘Silk Road’ through Afghanistan. The Song Dynasties were from 960 to 1279, an era of advance in technology, culture, economics and agriculture; there were new strains of rice as well as the printing press. Then came the Mongols, 1279–1368, with the Yuan Dynasty and Khublai Khan. Next was the Ming (‘brilliant’) Dynasty, 1368–1644, lampooned as fatter, lazier, crazier and nastier than most. In this era the Chinese Admiral Zheng-He sailed with three hundred ships to New Zealand and within reach of Africa.⁵ This was never followed up, its significance unrealised.



The Chinese world-view was becoming ingrown, and ‘political ideology’ led to false interpretation of events. The Ming

joined up all the bits and pieces of the Great Wall to be what we see today,⁶ moved the capital to Beijing, built the Forbidden City, and gave Macau to the Portuguese. From 1644 to 1911 the Manchus took over China as the Qing Dynasty. As 'incomers' they were extremely conservative and inflexible in maintaining 'Chinese' norms. Just when the Western world was attempting contact and trade, the Qing had no concept of independent equal nations; there was China and then there was the rest. A community of nations was beyond their conception, and to sympathise at all with Western ideas was to threaten national security and even cease to be Chinese. This was the cultural China into which Robert Morrison and his associate William Milne came.

Philosophy and Religion

Insofar as such things can be dated, we can trace Taoism and Confucianism to c. 500 BC. The 'fathers' of these philosophies were contemporaries, both seeking a way of returning Chinese society to an older concept of harmonic life but opposed in their vision of the way.

Confucius is a Latinised form of *K'ung Futzu*, or Grand master Kung. In the modern West, Confucius would be called a humanist, believing in an inherent goodness of the individual to provide the basis for virtue and seemly conduct. Solutions are to be sought and found in individual humanity itself, not in anything supernatural or religious. To do this, Confucius sought a modified Ritual-Music Culture.⁷ In this culture, previous philosophers had laid the responsibility of promoting social harmony on the rulers. Confucius, however, believed

that the individual man must seek this harmony via reconciliation: each man to himself, and thus to each other. 'Heaven' is a kind of pervasive moral force, not a place or destiny. You can thus see how the simplest preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is utter irrationality to the Confucian.

Lao Tzu, author (probably) of the *Tao Te Ching (The Way and the Virtue)*, thought that the Ritual-Music Culture itself was the problem, and therefore that Confucius' attempt to reclaim it was compounding the error. He saw the answer to social instability in the *Tao*, the *Way*, and in the principle of *wu-wei*, acceptance and passivity, 'purposeful inactivity', with the less external imposition the better. The *yin-yang* symbol is the hallmark of Taoism: active passivity and dualism. The opening words of the *Tao Te Ching* still appeal to the 'religious' mind: 'The Way that can be told is not the eternal Way' and 'The name that can be named is not the eternal name'.⁸ To come, preaching with authority that Name that is above every name, the WAY, the truth and the life (John 14.6), was to challenge the very fabric of the Taoist view of the world. When Buddhism came to China in the 6th century AD it was in the form of Ch'an Buddhism, much given to meditation on the 'vast emptiness' within. Taoism interacted with this, becoming a forerunner of Zen Buddhism, much favoured subsequently in Japan.⁹

When we look at early 'Christian' impact we have the usual difficulty of authenticity of sources. Both Thomas and Bartholomew (of New Testament fame) were there, we are told. With more



certainly we can say that the Nestorians (and the Manichees), heading ever eastward after their condemnation at Ephesus in 431, came to China in the 7th century, and there were Nestorian churches in China until the Mongol times.¹⁰ Overlapping this, in 1294 John of Montecorvino, a Franciscan monk, was sent to China. Within a short time he had baptised six thousand Chinese, established his churches in several cities, and had the New Testament and Psalms translated into the Mongolian dialect of the court. By 1368 there may have been as many as one hundred thousand Roman Catholics in China.

From then until the arrival of the Jesuits at the end of the 16th century, no record exists of any professedly Christian churches in China. The Jesuits entered China in 1582 from a base in the Portuguese colony of Macau. First assuming a religious role, like Buddhist monks, and then becoming more like Confucian scholars, Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit colleagues identified with the Chinese elite. They prepared maps, practised astronomy, constructed and repaired clocks that they gave to the emperor, and wrote treatises on Christianity accommodating to the Confucian world-view. By the beginning of the 18th century the Roman Catholic Church in China numbered two hundred thousand. Jesuits were mostly very flexible about the Chinese culture. They viewed ancestral rites as civil deference, not religious worship, described Confucius in semi-sacred terms as holy, and used indigenous terms for God. The controversies arising from this 'accommodation of rites' led to the disbanding of the Jesuits

worldwide at that time.

This then is the 'religious' China that the Protestant missionaries came to, meeting hostility from all indigenous authorities, from the Portuguese, and from the Roman Catholics.

• **ROBERT MORRISON 1782–1834**

Early Life and Callings • 1782–1804

Robert Morrison, the son of James Morrison, a Scottish farm labourer, and Hannah Nicholson, an English woman, both active members of the presbyterian Church of Scotland, was born in Bullers Green, near Morpeth, Northumberland, on 5 January 1782, the youngest of eight children. The family soon moved to Newcastle¹¹ where his father found work in the shoe trade which better enabled him to support his growing family. As the children of firmly convinced Christians, Morrison and his siblings were raised learning the Bible and the Westminster Shorter Catechism, so much so that at the age of twelve he could recite flawlessly from memory the entirety of Psalm 119.

At fourteen Morrison was apprenticed to his father's business as a boot-tree maker, working twelve to fourteen hours a day. Notwithstanding the privileges of his home and his busy occupation, to his parents' dismay he fell into poor company and abandoned his Christian upbringing—albeit only for a couple of years. Whilst he may have appeared to have finished with his parents' God, his parents' God had not finished with him. Remembering this time, in 1803 Morrison said,

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Timeline of Robert Morrison

- 1760–1820 George III King of England
- 1779 The Iron Bridge across the River Severn in Shropshire completed
- 1781 Henry Martyn born
- 1782 Robert born 5 January**
- 1783 John Ryland baptised William Carey in the River Nene
- 1787 William Carey ordained to the gospel ministry
- 1789–1797 George Washington President of the USA
- 1789–1799 The French Revolution
- 1791 John Wesley died
- 1794 Orthodox missionaries arrive in Alaska
- 1795 London Missionary Society founded
- 1797 Formation of English Baptist Home Mission Society
- 1798 Robert converted**
William Willis Moseley burdened for China
- 1799 Religious Tract Society begun
Church Missionary Society founded
- 1800 The White House, Washington, DC, completed
- 1801 Robert began studies in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and theology**
Moseley published A Memoir on the Importance and Practicability of Translating and Printing the Holy Scriptures in the Chinese Language
- 1803 Robert entered Hoxton Academy**
- 1804 Hannah Morrison (Robert's mother) died**
British and Foreign Bible Society founded
- 1805 Battle of Trafalgar
- 1807 Robert ordained, sailed for China via New York**
- 1809 Robert married Mary Morton Began working for the East India Company**
James Madison President of the USA
- 1810 American Missionary Society

- 1811 The Morrisons' first child, James, born and died**
- 1812 The Morrisons' second child, Rebecca, born**
Grammar book sent for printing
Adoniram and Ann Judson sailed for India on the Caravan
- 1813 William and Rachel Milne arrive in Macau**
Chinese New Testament completed
Edict against printing Christian books issued by Chinese government
- 1814 The Morrisons' son, John, was born**
First Chinese convert baptised
Chinese grammar book arrived
Mary returned to England from China
- 1815 Battle of Waterloo
- 1817 Robert travelled to Beijing**
Robert made Doctor of Divinity
- 1818 The Morrison-Milne Bible completed**
Founding of Ultra Ganges Mission
Founding of the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca
- 1819 Rachel Milne died
- 1820–1830 George IV King of England
- 1821 Morrison's Dictionary published**
Mary Morrison died
- 1822 William Milne died
- 1824 Robert's visit to England**
Married Eliza Armstrong
- 1825 Stockton and Darlington Railway, England, opened
- 1826 The Morrisons return to China**
- 1830–1837 William IV King of England
- 1831 Trinitarian Bible Society founded
- 1832 Eliza Morrison returned to England**
- 1834 **Robert Morrison died**
Prohibition of slavery in British Empire

It was about five years ago that I was much awakened to a sense of sin... and I was brought to a serious concern about my soul. I felt the dread of eternal condemnation. The fear of death compassed me about and I was led nightly to cry to God that he would pardon my sin, that he would grant me an interest in the Saviour, and that he would renew me in the spirit of my mind. Sin became a burden. It was then that I experienced a change of life, and, I trust, a change of heart, too. I broke off from my former careless company, and gave myself to reading, meditation and prayer. It pleased God to reveal his Son in me, and at that time I experienced much of the 'kindness of youth and the love of espousals' [see Jeremiah 2.2]. And though the first flash of affection wore off, I trust my love to and knowledge of the Saviour have increased.¹²

In young Morrison's renewed faith he seldom failed to find time for reading and meditation. He would frequently bring his Bible and Christian books—such as he could obtain—to work and read whenever possible,¹³ all too familiar with the tug of the world on a young man's life. Soon he felt the pull to Christian work and wanted to become a missionary, but it was a desire opposed by his parents. While submitting to his parents' will, when opportunity came in 1801 for further education he began studies in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, theology and shorthand from the Rev. W. Laidler, a Presbyterian minister in Newcastle. He attended meetings on the Lord's Day, and followed the Lord's teaching by visiting the sick with the 'Friendless Poor and Sick Society' and

instructing poor children, as well as bearing witness of his faith in Christ to unsaved friends and family. Finally, in January 1803 he entered George Col-lison's Hoxton Academy in London to train as a Congregationalist minister. Despite his studies, Morrison continued to visit the poor and sick, and found opportunities to preach in villages and churches around London.

Morrison had been born in the declining years of the Great Awakening, but in those years many of the men who had been so greatly used in that revival still worked to encourage missionary work, and numerous foreign mission agencies were formed (including the London Missionary Society in 1795), giving rise to publications such as *The Evangelical Magazine* and *The Missionary Magazine*. Older figures such as Charles Simeon and John Newton laboured hard to present the call to missionary work and Morrison again felt the call to service in distant lands. His parents continued to oppose this calling—Morrison's mother most strongly—and in obedience he promised that he would not leave England while she lived. He was therefore present to care for her in her last illness, and just before her death in 1804 joyfully received her blessing on the work to which God had called him.

Missionary Preparation • 1804–07

Following his mother's death, Morrison had joined the London Missionary Society, with his mind leaning alternately to Africa or China. He offered himself for missionary service and after one interview was accepted at once and sent to David Bogue's Academy in Gosport near Portsmouth for further training.



In the late 18th century, William Willis Moseley of Northamptonshire was strongly burdened for the spiritual needs of China and in 1801 published a tract urging 'the establishment of a society for translating the Holy Scriptures into the languages of the populous oriental nations'.¹⁴ Visiting the British Museum he found a manuscript of most of the Chinese New Testament translated by early Roman Catholic missionaries and immediately printed a further tract entitled *A Memoir on the Importance and Practicability of Translating and Printing the Holy Scriptures in the Chinese Language*,¹⁵ copies of which were sent to all Anglican bishops and to mission agencies in hopes of bringing this great land to the forefront of their endeavours.

The majority of replies that Moseley had received were negative, but one copy of the tract found fertile ground. At the Academy, Dr. Bogue read the tract and replied to Moseley that if he were a younger man he would have 'devoted the rest of my days to the propagation of the gospel in China'. Instead, he searched for suitable young men to send and found Robert Morrison. Morrison was thus turned from the idea of Africa and settled on China as his mission field, writing to a friend, 'I wish I could persuade you to accompany me. Take into account the 350 million souls in China who have not the means of knowing Jesus Christ as Saviour...'.¹⁶

Morrison studied medicine at St. Bartholomew's Hospital and astronomy at the Greenwich Observatory, while diligently pursuing the study of the Chinese language, which he was learning from a student, Yong Sam-tak from

Canton City, with whom he shared lodgings. As well as learning the language from Sam-tak, Morrison also learned something of Chinese culture: when he absentmindedly burned a piece of paper with Chinese characters on it, Sam-tak stormed out—the burning of the Chinese characters had sparked a superstitious rage. The young foreigner returned several days later and from then on Morrison wrote his characters on a piece of tin that could be wiped clean. They continued to work together, using as the basis of their studies an early Jesuit Chinese translation of the Gospels, *Evangelia Quatuor Sinice*, and a handwritten Latin-Chinese dictionary. Morrison made considerable progress in both learning an extremely difficult language and in crossing the cultural divide: in due course, Yong Sam-tak even joined him in family worship.

The goal of the directors of the mission was that Morrison should master ordinary Chinese speech and thus be able to compile a dictionary for the benefit of future missionaries, as well as making a start on a translation of the Scriptures. But this couldn't be done with Morrison learning Chinese from one man in England. To do this it was necessary to get onto Chinese soil—which would not be easy to do without upsetting the Chinese authorities. Foreigners were not allowed to converse with the local people except for purposes of trade, and the missionaries would not be going to China for commerce. Even if they had been, every foreigner was strictly interrogated

on arrival as to his business and if he had no reasonable answer—or if his answer was not what the Chinese officials would accept—he was nor-



mally bundled unceremoniously onto the next ship and sent away. Morrison was fully aware of these dangers; yet, in July 1806, he travelled to visit his family and bid them farewell, and after preaching thirteen times in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow returned to London.

Early missionary endeavour • 1807–09

Robert Morrison was formally ordained to the work in London on 8 January 1807, and on 31 January he sailed for China. His first hurdle was travel: the only ship heading for China belonged to the East India Company, and the East India Company had a policy of not carrying missionaries. Thus an initial voyage of nearly three months took him first, providentially as it turned out, to New York, where he spent nearly a month and was able to secure the interest and influence of the United States consul who would provide a promise of protection for him with the American Consul at Guangzhou (Canton). Another voyage, and Morrison finally reached his goal on 4 September 1807.

The first move of a Western newcomer to the Far East was to present letters of introduction—such as those Morrison received during his respite in New York—to leading Englishmen and Americans. In Guangzhou Robert Morrison was kindly received by his countrymen and the Americans, but their stories of the obstacles in the way of missionary work were disheartening. Not only were the Chinese people forbidden by the government to have dealings with Westerners—often on penalty of death—but Roman Catholic missionaries at Macau, protected by the Portuguese,

were hostile to Protestant missionaries and would stir up the people against them.

True to the stories, on his arrival in Macau he was stripped and interviewed, and on 7 September expelled by the Roman Catholic authorities. From there he went to the Thirteen Factories (or *hongs*: the ‘foreigners’ quarters’, which Chinese citizens often referred to as ‘barbarian houses’¹⁷) outside Guangzhou, where the chief of the American sector offered him a room in his house. Soon after, Morrison gained lodging in the American Supercargoes of Messrs Milnor and Bull and was often thought to be American—a benefit since the Chinese seemed not to dislike and suspect Americans quite as strongly as they did the English. He had to take care, however, in case anyone suspected that he was trying to learn Chinese, and he could not leave his books in the open in case it should be supposed that he was attempting to master the language. Surprisingly, some Chinese Roman Catholics offered to teach him such Mandarin Chinese as they could, but Mandarin was not the language of the common man. In the best tradition of Tyndale, Morrison’s aim was not to translate the Scriptures into the tongue of a comparatively small, highly educated and wealthy class, but to lay a solid, broad foundation for future mission work in the common tongue.

In an attempt to reach the general populace, Morrison at first attempted to conform closely to Chinese manners. He tried to live on Chinese food, even becoming adept with chopsticks; he grew his nails and pigtail long, wore



a Chinese frock and thick Chinese shoes. Soon he came to realise that this was a mistake. The unaccustomed Chinese food made him ill, and the dress—at a time when he found it best to be inconspicuous—only made him stand out more amongst the native people. Rather than avoiding attention, he was attracting it. In due course, Morrison resumed Western deportment.

Morrison often found it best to hide himself from the Chinese authorities, and spent many hours cloistered alone in his room working on his dictionary (which in time would run to six volumes) and Bible translation, depending upon Chinese servants and assistants to help with daily needs and, surreptitiously, the Chinese language. He was not allowed to preach, and could only speak of his faith behind closed and locked doors. He spoke to his servants and assistants of the true faith, but rather than heed his testimony many of them cheated him, demanding extortionate sums for all service and provision. Expenses, even without the unscrupulous acts of his associates, were high. Morrison tried living in a single room in order to lower his expenses, but found the lack of fresh air and exercise wore upon his body. He was surrounded by an idolatrous city full of hostile people. The utter loneliness oppressed him, and his prospects for relief were non-existent.

Life in China was always overshadowed by Britain's political troubles. Then problems in Guangzhou came to a head: Britain was at war with France, and a British naval squadron had blockaded Macau to prevent the French from striking at English trade. This was fiercely

resented by the Chinese authorities at Guangzhou and reprisals were threatened against the English community, who fled to Macau with Morrison and his precious luggage of manuscripts and books in tow. The political difficulty finally passed, but it left the Chinese even more intensely suspicious of foreigners thereafter.

A Family, a Job and a Colleague • 1809–13

Morrison had managed to master both Mandarin and Cantonese during his stay in Guangzhou, but was now uncomfortably housed at Macau, paying an exorbitant price for a miserable top-floor room. He had not been there long before the roof fell in, and in repairing it his landlord raised his rent by a third, effectively forcing him out into the streets. Morrison had been unwell when he arrived in Macau, and his health continued to suffer greatly. Nevertheless he laboured at his Chinese dictionary and his translation work, in his private prayers pouring out his soul to God in broken Chinese, the better to master the native tongue. In his zeal, he paid three Chinese boys to have tea in his room and converse with him as a way to help both them and his own language skills, but shortly had to abandon the idea. About it Morrison wrote: 'A-Sam, a lad, showed some levity and disposition to laugh... The novelty of seeing a Fan-kwei—"foreign devil"—sitting down to address them in their own language, perhaps in broken Chinese, on new and strange topics to them, appears at first very odd, and boys are disposed to levity...'¹⁸



In his distress of spirit he thought of leaving China for Penang, Malaya, where there

would be fewer barriers to missionary activity. But in the kindly grace of our sovereign God, he met the Morton family, newly arrived in Macau. This meeting persuaded him to stay, and in the providence of God he married the Morton's daughter, Mary, on 20 February 1809.

In grudging respect for his perseverance and growing ability, on the very day of their marriage Morrison was offered the post of Chinese secretary and translator to the British Factory by the East India Company, at a salary of £500 per annum. Although highly irregular for a missionary to be in paid employment of this sort, Morrison was concerned about the heavy financial burden he was placing on the London Missionary Society and accepted the position. The post supplied what he most needed: security, and legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities. In addition, rather than hindering the work of the mission, it furthered it because the daily work of Company translation strongly developed his familiarity with the language. In addition, he could now go about more freely and interact more openly and fluently with the Chinese people. It was also beneficial in that his mastery of the Chinese tongue was noted by the Company as valuable for their own affairs, placing him on a very stable footing with his employer.

Morrison had, however, been forced to leave Mary in Macau and return to Guangzhou alone, since foreign women were not allowed to reside there. The seaways between Macau and Guangzhou were full of pirates, and both Morrison and Mary spent many anxious days as he travelled between the cities. These perils, as well as the

loneliness, much affected Mary, and her health suffered. English and American residents treated them kindly, but cared little for their Gospel work—their main reason for being there. Their first child, James, was born on 5 March 1811, and died on the same day.¹⁹ The Chinese opposed the burial and Mary was too ill to attend, so Morrison buried his first child on a lonely mountainside.

Nevertheless, the next year saw the birth of another child—a daughter—and a Chinese grammar book which was sent to Bengal for printing. The book brought many anxious thoughts: he heard no more of it for another three long years. Morrison wasn't inactive during those years, working on tracts and a catechism, as well as on the book of Acts (the printing of which he paid himself, at an exorbitant cost). He also translated the Gospel of Luke and had it printed, only to have the Roman Catholic bishop at Macau order it to be burned as heresy.

Despite the problems, the mission sent out more missionaries—William and Rachel Milne—to join Morrison. They arrived in Macau on 4 July 1813, only to be expelled a few days later by the Roman Catholic authorities working with the government.

Worse was yet to come for the missionaries. By this time copies of Morrison's work had come into the hands of the Chinese authorities, who saw the material as an attempt to undermine Chinese religion and custom. Thus, they issued a

formal edict making the publication and printing of Christian books in Chinese a capital offence. Morrison forwarded a translation of this proclama-



tion to England, but rather than abandoning his work, he carried it forward, stating that 'We will scrupulously obey Governments as far as their decrees do not oppose what is required by the Almighty; I will be careful not to invite the notice of Government.'²⁰

The Milnes settled in Guangzhou, and began the arduous task of learning Chinese, which William claimed required 'bodies of iron, lungs of brass, heads of oak, hands of spring steel, eyes of eagles, hearts of apostles, memories of angels, and lives of Methuselah.'²¹

Shortly thereafter the Morrises followed them to Guangzhou, and both families waited for the government's next move.

First Bible and First Believer • 1814–17

Despite the problems that surrounded Morrison and his colleagues, by the end of 1813 the whole of the New Testament translation was completed and printed. The translator readily conceded its defects, but claimed that it was a translation of the New Testament into the genuine colloquial speech of the Chinese, and would be understandable to the common man.

The missionaries now sought to ensure the widest distribution of the printed copies of the Scriptures. Several parts of the Malay Peninsula were under British protection, and this seemed a promising field for a mission station with a printing press within reach of the Chinese coast. Chinese missionaries could be trained, who could then return to their homeland with the Gospel and literature

and not excite the suspicion that Europeans would.

Milne travelled around surveying the country, distributing tracts and Testaments as opportunity arose. He visited the island of Banca and then went to Batavia, the principal town in Java, where the Governor welcomed him and sent him at government expense through the interior settlements of Java. From there Milne made his way to Malacca, receiving equal kindness from the authorities, returning to Guangzhou in the autumn of 1814. In reviewing the situation, the missionaries felt that Malacca—situated between India and China with means of transport to almost any part of China and the adjoining archipelago—had the best advantage for the furtherance of the work. Thus, Milne settled at Malacca.

In that same year, on 14 May—seven years after his arrival—Morrison baptised the first Protestant convert, Tsae A-Ko. Morrison acknowledged the imperfection of the man's knowledge, but he relied on the familiar words, 'If thou believest with all thine heart' (Acts 8.37). Morrison recorded: 'At a spring of water issuing from the foot of a lofty hill by the sea-side, away from human observation, I baptized him in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... May he be the first fruits of a great harvest.'²² The native Chinese Church was begun.

More good news came that year. One was the birth of a son; the other the long-awaited arrival of the grammar book—attractively printed, good quality and highly approved by all. Morrison's massive Chinese diction-



ary was still being produced, but even at this early date the East India Company undertook the cost of its printing and spent £10,000 on the work, having brought from England their own printer and printing press.

The British and Foreign Bible Society also helped the fledgling China mission by providing two grants of £500 each towards the cost of printing the New Testament, and a director of the East India Company bequeathed to Morrison \$1,000 for the propagation of the Christian religion, which Morrison devoted to printing a pocket edition of the New Testament. An earlier edition had been awkwardly large—indeed, in due course the whole Bible in 1823 would extend to twenty-one volumes. As this New Testament was a book that was likely to be seized and destroyed by hostile authorities, size could be a problem; but a pocket Testament could be carried about without difficulty, slipped into pockets or hidden in the folds of robes. Thus a small edition was printed and many Chinese departed from Guangzhou into the interior with copies of this invaluable little book.

Mary Morrison was diagnosed as incurably ill and ordered to England. She sailed with their two children, leaving Morrison to toil in solitude for the next six years. During this period Morrison was officially dismissed from the employment of the East India Company because of his Christian publishing work—a dismissal which was not implemented by the local officers. Instead, in 1817 he was sent by the Company to accompany Lord Amherst's embassy as interpreter in their presenta-

tions to the Emperor at Beijing. Morrison's own awareness of China was much enlarged by this, the journey taking him through many cities and country districts, introducing him to new aspects of Chinese life and character. The experience was invaluable, serving not only to revive his health, but also to stimulate his missionary zeal—through all that vast tract of country and innumerable population, there was not one solitary Protestant missionary station. Also in 1817 he was made a Doctor of Divinity by Glasgow University and published *A view of China, for philological purposes: containing a sketch of Chinese chronology, geography, government, religion & customs, designed for the use of persons who study the Chinese language.*

A dispensary, a college, and a great loss • 1817–22

Robert Morrison was not only a pioneer in spreading the Christian Gospel in China. As he had been in his younger days, he was profoundly stirred by the misery, the poverty, and the unnecessary suffering of the poor, and particularly noticed that the Chinese poor often spent all their livelihoods on drugs and herbs that were absolutely useless. He therefore established a dispensary which was headed by an intelligent and skilful Chinese practitioner, where native diseases could be treated more humanely and effectively than was usual in China, and introduced the use of vaccinations. This practitioner had learned the main principles of European treatment, even receiving great help from Morrison's friend Dr. Livingstone, and did much to alleviate the sufferings of the poorer Chinese.

Morrison and Milne translated



the Old Testament together and the press was kept steadily at work. Tracts of various kinds were issued and Morrison wrote a little book called *A Tour round the World*, hoping to acquaint his Chinese readers with the customs and ideas of European nations and the benefits of Christianity. He also wrote home, explaining that the Chinese language was spoken by some one-third of the world's population and urging the friends of China to take up this tongue—surely some could be found who would be willing to follow the call of God to make known the Christian faith to the many lands where Chinese is spoken, or to help those who did.

One way that the missionaries themselves could further this cause was by the establishment of schools in which others could study the languages. Following Milne's survey of suitable locations, the original Anglo-Chinese College was located in the British Straits Settlements of Malacca, Malaysia. It was also Morrison's hope that the Malacca college would prepare the way for the quiet and peaceful dissemination of Christian thought in China. Morrison and Milne also established a school for Chinese and Malay children in 1818.²³ This was the extreme eastern outpost of Protestant missions in Asia, and Morrison assumed the name 'Ultra Ganges' mission.

Others took on board the work. The London Missionary Society gave the ground, and the Governor of Malacca and many residents subscribed. Morrison himself gave £1,000 out of his small property to establish the college with Milne as president. The building was erected and opened, printing presses

set up, and students enrolled. While no student was compelled to declare himself a Christian or to attend Christian worship, it was hoped that the strong Christian influence would lead many of the students who had come for a literary education to become teachers of Christianity.

A settlement, under British protection, was now well established in the midst of those islands which were inhabited by a large Malay and Chinese population, and reinforcements from the London Missionary Society were sent out from England. These new missionaries spent a period at the college in Malacca and were then sent on to various centres: Penang, Java, Singapore, Amboyna—wherever they could find a footing and establish relations with the people. In this way many new stations of the Ultra Ganges Mission sprang to life. A magazine, *The Gleaner*, was published to keep the various stations in touch with one another and to share information of progress and problems in the different areas. The printing presses poured forth pamphlets, tracts, catechisms and translations of Gospels in Malay and Chinese; and, in order to overcome the obstacle of illiteracy, schools were founded for the teaching of the children. However, reports from Ultra Ganges, which did not greatly vary from year to year, showed that the work was hard and seemingly unproductive. The people listened but often did not respond, and converts were few.

Mary Morrison returned to China, only to die in 1821. In 1822 William Milne died, Rachel Milne having died three years earlier. Morrison was



left to reflect that he alone of the first four Protestant missionaries to China remained, and he wrote a retrospective of those first fifteen years of missionary endeavour. China was as impervious as ever to European and Christian influence but the amount of solid Christian literary work accomplished was immense. The lonely Morrison visited Singapore in January 1823 and met Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Lieutenant-Governor, who was very keen to establish a college in Singapore along the lines of the college at Malacca, and even thought to merge the Malacca and Singapore colleges into a single 'Singapore Institution'.

A Return to England and Final days in China • 1823–34

Morrison journeyed on, from Malacca and Singapore and then to England in 1824, where he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society. He brought a large library of Chinese books to England for donation, but neither of the two main English universities was willing to accept them. His books remained in storage at the London Missionary Society for the next ten years, before finally being accepted by University College London. Morrison anonymously published *China: a dialogue, for the use of schools: being ten conversations between a father and his two children concerning the history and present state of that country*, wrote the *Memoirs of the Rev. William Milne* and began The Language Institution in Bartlett's Buildings, Holborn, London, to train missionaries. He presented his Chinese Bible to King George IV, and taught Chinese to classes of gentlemen and ladies, stirring up interest and sympathy on behalf of China. In these classes was Mary Ann Aldersey

(1797–1868) who learned Chinese and went to Batavia and then to Ningpo, the first Christian and the first single European woman to do so.

In November 1824 Morrison married Eliza Armstrong, with whom he had five more children. The new Mrs. Morrison and the children of his first marriage returned with him to China in 1826. At Singapore there were fresh trials: little progress had been made with Raffles' College (the institute subsequently collapsed, to Morrison's distress), and the new Governor had shown very little interest in encouraging the work during Morrison's absence. Robert and his family went on to Macau and then to Guangzhou, where Morrison again found that mission property had been neglected in his absence.

Changes in the East India Company now brought the Morrises into connection with new officials, some of whom had no respect for, or comprehension of, the calling of the missionaries. They were inclined to assume a high hand until Morrison's threat to resign provoked interest from higher authorities and secured more respectful treatment. Relations between the English traders and the Chinese officials were daily becoming more strained, and Morrison strongly disapproved of the attitudes revealed in the correspondence which he had to translate. Political turmoil would soon break down what restraint there was between China and England.

There were grave faults on both sides; the officiousness and tyranny of the mandarins were hard to bear, but on the British interest rested the more grievous accountability of forcing a



trade in opium on the Chinese people. Mission and Christianity were long the recipients of prejudice because of this woeful hostility.

Morrison had left in the Chinese work a native teacher, Liang Fa, one of Milne's converts, to carry on the work among the people. This man endured much for his faith, and was entirely consistent and earnest during the long period of Morrison's absence. Other native Christians were baptised, and the little church grew. It was also well known that many believed in secret, but did not dare risk persecution and ostracism by making a public confession. In 1832 Mrs Morrison returned to England, and in that year Morrison reported that

There is now in Canton a state of society, in respect of Chinese, totally different from what I found in 1807. Chinese scholars, missionary students, English presses and Chinese Scriptures, with public worship of God, have all grown up since that period. I have served my generation, and the Lord knows when I must fall asleep.²⁴

In 1833 the Roman Catholics again moved against Morrison and the mission work, bringing about the suppression of his presses and publications, and with it his best and most profitable means of spreading the Gospel of Christ. The Chinese helpers set themselves loyally and quietly to circulate such publications as were already printed. At the same time the East India Company lost its monopoly in China, and with it Morrison lost his employment—and his financial stability. Later he was appointed government translator under Lord Napier,

but only held the position a few days.

In June 1834, with Eliza and their children in England, Morrison prepared what was to be his last sermon. He was ill and lonely, but chose as his text 'In my Father's house are many mansions' (John 14.2). Regardless of the trials on earth, the joy of the eternal Home would 'consist in the society formed there; the family of God, from all ages and out of all nations.'²⁵

On 1 August 1834—the same year that William Carey died in India²⁶—the pioneer Protestant missionary to China died in his son's arms at his home, Number 6 in the Danish Hong. He was fifty-two. The next day his remains were removed to Macau, and on 5 August buried in the Protestant Cemetery there, beside those of his first wife and child. He left a family of six surviving children, two by his first wife and four by his second. His only daughter married Benjamin Hobson, a medical missionary, in 1847.

Epitaph

S. Wells Williams, the Protestant missionary who would go on to become one of the West's greatest Chinese scholars, upon Morrison's death said:

The dawn of China's regeneration was breaking as his eyes closed on the scene of his labours... His name, like that of Carey, Marshman, Judson, and Martyn, belongs to the heroic age of missions... His work was the work of a wise master-builder, and future generations in the Church of God in China will ever find reason to bless Him for the labour and example of Robert Morrison.²⁷



Sacred to the memory of Robert Morrison DD.,
The first protestant missionary to China,
Where after a service of twenty-seven years,
cheerfully spent in extending the kingdom of the blessed Redeemer
during which period he compiled and published
a dictionary of the Chinese language,
founded the Anglo Chinese College at Malacca
and for several years laboured alone on a Chinese version of
The Holy Scriptures,
which he was spared to see complete and widely circulated
among those for whom it was destined,
he sweetly slept in Jesus.
He was born at Morpeth in Northumberland
January 5th 1782
Was sent to China by the London Missionary Society in 1807
Was for twenty five years Chinese translator in the employ of
The East India Company
and died in Canton August 1st 1834.
Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth
Yea saith the Spirit
that they may rest from their labours,
and their works do follow them²⁸

The inscription on Robert Morrison's grave reads (see above):

Published Work

There are over thirty works published by Morrison other than the Scriptures, amazing in the light of the troubled nature of his years in China. These works ranged from 'The Lord's prayer in Chinese characters' as published in the *Evangelical Magazine*, to his massive *Dictionary of the Chinese language*. For the serious student he wrote *A view of China for philological purposes: containing a sketch of Chinese chronology, geography, government, religion & customs, designed for the use of persons who study the Chinese language*, alongside of which was *A grammar of the English Language: for the use of the Anglo-Chinese Col-*

lege. From his English furlough came *The knowledge of Christ supremely excellent: the means and the duty of diffusing it among all nations: being a discourse delivered before the London Missionary Society in Surrey Chapel May 11, 1825*. In Chinese he issued *A summary of the doctrine of divine redemption, An annotated catechism on the teachings of Jesus*, and several more, including a translation of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

In 1835 the *Funeral discourse*, which had been delivered before the London Missionary Society at the Poultry Chapel, was issued, and steadily for over one

hundred and fifty years there have been biographies and studies of Robert Morrison. Marshall Broomhall's 1924 *Robert Morrison, a master builder*



was published in English and in 2002 was translated into Chinese (*Chuan jiao wei ren ma-li-xun*) by Jian You-wen. (This interest in the great missionary to China is good to record, particularly as, when friends have asked me what was to be the subject of this article and I replied 'Robert Morrison of China', the usual response has been, 'Hmm, never heard of him'.)

• INTERIM AFTERWORD

In a further part of this article, the Chinese language and the Chinese Bible will be explored further, and brought down to our own times. Before leaving the more intimate connection with Robert Morrison I must share my renewed amazement at the spiritual commitment and fortitude of the missionary pioneers. Browsing again through the work of Carey and Judson (and a few other early favourites), I am overwhelmed by their patient, prayerful, costly enduring of such tribulation, affected deeply by the stirring endurance and sufferings of the wives and children, and amongst them all the sense that at all costs, the Scriptures, enduring and powerful, testifying of Christ, able to make wise unto salvation, must be translated into the common tongue for others to build with.

Brethren, let us give thanks for these continuing apostolic acts, for the Scriptures, and above all for the Gospel of Light and Life in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only deliverance from the darkness of sin, ignorance and unbelief. ●

Endnotes

1. Sherwood Eddy, *Pathfinders of the World Missionary Crusade* (NY: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), page 34.
2. Natalie Lai, 'Robert Morrison: Pioneer of Pioneers', *OMF International Prayer Point*, 29/08/2007, www.omf.org/omf/australia/news/robert_morrison_pioneer_of_pioneers#.
3. 'A bridge between cultures: commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of Robert Morrison's arrival in China—Report on the Conference in Washington, March 2007', *The Centre for the Study of Christianity in China—Oxford*, www.cscic.com/A-bridge-between-cultures-commemorating-the-two-hundredth-anniversary-of-Robert-Morrison-s-arrival-in-China-Report-on-the-Conference-in-Washington-March-2007.
4. A thoroughly nasty woman: vicious, ruthless, content to murder her own son to gain a point.
5. Gavin Menzies's book *1421: The Year China Discovered the World* is a fascinating account, with far-reaching suggestions.
6. They really were turning inward.
7. The Ritual-Music Culture taught that there are strict rituals related to the **proper** way of doing things, from serving tea to greeting superiors. 'Music' referred to the harmonious society that ensued from proper ritual.
8. I came across this classic sample of Taoist thought: A man dreamt that he was a butterfly; when he awoke he lost himself in the thought that he might be a butterfly dreaming that he was a man.
9. A useful guide to these religions can be found in *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions* edited by Dean C. Halverson (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Bethany House Publishers [my copy 2003]). It is designed as an aid to evangelism and witness to those of other religions.
10. Nestorianism teaches that Jesus had distinct human and divine natures, as opposed to normal Biblical doctrine which teaches that the human and divine natures are united in

the person of Christ. Manichaeism taught that there is no omnipotent force for good, but that there are two forces, Good (Light) and Evil (Darkness), neither of which is stronger than the other and which are in constant conflict, often within the souls of men. Thus, knowledge is the key to salvation.

11. There are suggestions that Morrison was a childhood friend of George Stephenson, who invented the steam locomotive.

12. Tony Lambert, ed., 'The Power of Prayer', GCM – July/Aug 2007 www.omf.org/omf/us/resources__1/newsletters/global_chinese_ministries/gcm_newsletter_2007/gcm_july_aug_2007.

13. In the pattern of Carey, and surely by persuasion of the same Tutor.

14. W. W. Moseley, *The Origin of the First Protestant Mission to China, and History of the Events Which Induced the Attempt, and Succeeded in the Establishment of a Translation of the Holy Scriptures into the Chinese Language* (London, England: Simpkin and Marshall, 1842), p. 9.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

16. Lambert, 'Power'.

17. 'Thirteen Factories', *Wikipedia*, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirteen_Factories. In 1835 one of these factories became the home of and housed the medical practice of missionary Peter Parker.

18. Andrew Gosling, 'Religion and rebellion in China: the London Missionary Society collection', *National Library of Australia Staff Paper*, www.nla.gov.au/asian/pub/aglms1.html.

19. In time there would be more children born to Robert and Mary: Rebecca Morrison (July 1812), and John Robert Morrison (April 1814).

20. 'Robert Morrison: Pioneer missionary to China', *Congregational Federation* www.congregational.org.uk/content.aspx?id=3947

21. 'William Milne (missionary)', *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Milne_\(missionary\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Milne_(missionary)).

22. 'Robert Morrison (missionary)' *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Morrison_\(missionary\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Morrison_(missionary)).

23. The school, named Anglo-Chinese College, later called Ying Wa College, was moved to Hong Kong around 1843 after the territory became a British possession. It exists today (?) in Hong Kong as a secondary school for boys.

24. Eliza A. Morrison, *Memoirs of the life and labours of Robert Morrison*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1839), 1.410.

25. 'Robert Morrison (missionary)', *Wikipedia*.

26. Carey was featured in *Quarterly Record* no. 554. Henry Martyn (*Quarterly Record* nos. 562 and 563), born in 1781, whose first inclination to service had been towards China, had died at Tokat, Turkey, in 1812. Adoniram Judson, born in 1788 (*Quarterly Record* nos. 570 and 571) laboured on for Burma (Myanmar) and died at sea in 1850.

27. Eddy, pp. 35–36.

28. 'Robert Morrison (missionary)', *Wikipedia*.

"I know that the labours of God's servants in the gloom of the dungeon have often illuminated succeeding ages, and I am cheered with the hope that my labours in my present confinement will be of some service to the millions of China."

(Robert Morrison in a letter to the London Missionary Society, quoted in A. M. Chirgwin, *They translated the Bible* [London, England: NSSU, 1964], p. 41)