



PASTOR CHARLES T. RUSSELL
1852-1916

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PREFACE

A would-be humourist once defined history as "the consolidation of doubtful legend into undisputed fact". This is perhaps hardly applicable to the present case; the author enjoys the advantage of having been closely connected with the events he relates insofar as the latter seventy years of the story are concerned, and for the earlier thirty-five, possession of records supplemented by notes of reminiscences related to him in bygone years by early stalwarts who have long since departed this earthly scene. So there emerges the history of a fellowship which conducted a remarkable Christian work during the early years of this century, survived the sad interlude which imperilled its future, and rose above the threat to continue its witness, albeit in lower key, into the present. This is the story, so far as the United Kingdom is concerned, of the "Harvest of the Age".

1

EARLY DAYS

THEY CAME off the boat at Southampton, that autumn day in 1881, two American evangelists, J. C. Sunderlin and J. J. Bender, commissioned by Pastor C. T. Russell to plant in Great Britain the message he was assiduously preaching in the United States. They set foot on these shores with the enthusiasm of men entering upon virgin territory. The States had known this evangel for two years past; it was as yet unknown in this country. The time had come to proclaim it.

This understanding of the Divine purpose, telling of a coming era of life, peace and security destined for the human race, was being proclaimed in the United States by the widespread free circulation of a fairly massive booklet entitled "Food for Thinking Christians" and a great deal of interest was being thereby generated. The old orthodox theology of gloom and doom was superseded in its pages by a conception of God and his attitude to mankind which stressed the inevitable supersession of the injustice, misery, disease and death inseparable from this world as it now is by an everlasting world of justice, happiness, health and life under the oversight of the Lord Jesus Christ, Man has made the world what it now is; God will remake it to the world of his wish, and all who elect to come into conformity with that wish will eventually come into this world and enjoy it for ever. All this leaves untouched the heavenly expectation of Christians who have lived their lives in expectation of union with Christ in the heavenly realm after this life. The conception was that of two worlds, a celestial and a terrestrial, in each of which those best fitted for either will find themselves at the end - and be perfectly satisfied, living each in their own environment yet in eternal communion with each other. That was the vision which inspired these two men as they

made their way to London.

Their mandate was to have some three hundred thousand copies of "Food for Thinking Christians" printed in London and have them distributed at church doors in some of Britain's principal cities. Unfortunately Sunderlin was taken rather seriously ill soon after arrival and had to return hurriedly to the States, leaving Bender to carry out the distribution by himself. This he did, starting out by having one hundred thousand distributed in London alone, by boys of the National Messenger Service - long since defunct - at church doors all over the Metropolis after Sunday evening service. He travelled north, personally distributing the book in the same fashion, in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Newcastle, Darlington, Huddersfield, Hull, Nottingham, Leeds, Carlisle and Manchester. He then returned to the States, leaving the seed to germinate.

The green shoots were not long in appearing. From all of the cities visited came enquiries for more information; some enquirers became readers of Pastor Russell's magazine, "Zion's Watch Tower". The bulk of the enquiries came from London, Glasgow, Nottingham and Manchester, for ever afterwards the principal centres of the new faith. The salient feature of this understanding was that the long-promised Second Advent, usually visualised as a fiery descent from the skies to execute judgment, was in fact already in progress as a winding up of the present social order in preparation for the setting up of a Divine government on earth which would effect world conversion and the elimination of evil with all its concomitants, oppression, disease, death. Such new order would afford a full and complete opportunity to all to amend their lives in accord with the principles of truth and equity, so that earthly affairs would be conducted along lines of justice and peace into all perpetuity. An increasing number of people caught the light of this bright vision; this "Food for Thinking Christians" found its way into towns far removed from the points of distribution, and quite soon an appreciable response was forthcoming.

So far there was no suggestion of organised meetings. Russell's intention and desire was to initiate an interdenominational interest among members of existing churches, not to form

a new sect. It was inevitable, however, that groups of people drawn together by interest in this new understanding of Scripture should wish to congregate for mutual discussion and progress. This was already happening in the States. Now, in June 1882, little more than six months after the distribution of the booklet in this country, a dozen people in Glasgow, chiefly menfolk, commenced to hold a regular meeting for the study and discussion of the Bible in this light. This was the first Bible Students' meeting in this country, so far as records and recollection can tell. Rather appropriately, perhaps, it was a humble beginning. The organiser and leader of this initial meeting was apparently a man in a lowly walk of life - his name is lost to history - and the meetings, as described by one who joined them a few years later, were held in a "tiny, dingy hall in a poor locality", which reminds one of Russell's own description of his entry into vital Christian faith when he "quite by accident, dropped into a dusty, dingy hall in Allegheny where I had heard that religious meetings were held, to see if the handful who met there had anything more sensible to offer than the creeds of the Churches". So be it; some of those in Glasgow who spearheaded the faith in such lowly circumstances were to witness, almost thirty years later, five thousand people packed into their city's largest hall, and hundreds turned away, to hear the message that had captivated their own hearts in these earlier years. As in the days when the Christian faith was young and the Apostles went out preaching, "so mightily grew the Word of God, and prevailed".

That, though, lay yet in the future. Of the first ten years or so of this little meeting three names only have survived, a Mrs Hodge and two men destined in later days to become well known in the growing fellowship. William Crawford and Robert Cormack were two of these pioneers, and Crawford at least had much to do with later events. At the moment, though, they studied and discussed quietly with that little group in that "tiny dingy hall in a poor locality".

During that same period events were happening elsewhere. Solitary individuals, in some cases two or three together, were in communication with Pastor Russell, asking questions and querying what they could do to make the message known in

their own areas. Apart from the continued free circulation of "Food for Thinking Christians" there was little else to feed the growing demand for more information; the real handbooks of the movement, Russell's six-volume series "Studies in the Scriptures", had yet to be written and published, and the wonder is that these interested enquirers held on so long on so little. But hold on they did; all over the country, to the tune of some three hundred individuals by 1885 who were assiduous readers of "Zion's Watch Tower"; in the light of this they made progress in what later became generally referred to as "Present Truth". (It has to be admitted that this term has also been used in the same sense by other Christian communities, before and since.) Already in two other areas, Nottinghamshire and London, individual Christians found others in their own localities following the same line of thought, and joined up to form little groups for study and discussion. In East Kirkby, a Nottinghamshire mining village, Thomas Smedley, the village chemist, round about 1890 put a notice in his shop window, "Bible Class held here" and immediately a group was formed; Smedley in after years performed yeoman service almost up to his death, travelling the country preaching the faith he had accepted. The Nottingham area has been an important centre of the Bible Students ever since.

At the same time activity was manifest in London. Since the first distribution of "Food" in 1881 there had been a number of interested individuals in touch with the Pastor and it was in the year 1883 that a study group to discuss these things was commenced in the North London home of a rather remarkable woman and her husband.

Elizabeth Horne was the type of person, who having acquired an exposition of the Divine Plan which resolved all her theological doubts and misgivings, must needs tell it out to others. Within a few years she, in common with others in her group, was conducting open-air meetings in Hyde Park – perhaps the very first of the "public meetings" which became so pronounced a feature of the fellowship in later years. It is recorded that this redoubtable lady preached in the Park for three hours at a stretch, to "attentive, respectful crowds of orderly, thoughtful looking people gathered to listen", to quote

the records. At a slightly later date, 1891, she organised the meetings for the first visit of Pastor Russell to this country, entertaining him at her home, from which she appears to have been as good an organiser as she was preacher. This Elizabeth Horne must have been quite a girl!

Like the sister group at Glasgow, this was apparently a small and inconspicuous company of earnest students - names that have survived are those of Samuel Bather with wife and daughter, John Brookes, Arthur Carey, but nothing very definite. As a company it grew in numbers until it was ultimately absorbed by the larger meetings which developed in London in later years. But, as with Glasgow, it lit the flame, in humble surroundings, which was destined to burn brighter and clearer in coming years, until eventually the London congregation was the largest Bible Students community in the world, with the largest church building in which to worship. The little Glasgow meeting continued in its quiet way for fifteen years before the enlargement associated with a well-known family name, the Edgars, came upon the scene. The London meetings continued for fourteen years before the work associated with another well-known family name, the Guards, had its rise, and in the meantime other London groups were started, Ealing in 1890, Stoke Newington 1891, Crouch End 1892, Lewisham 1894, Surbiton and Forest Gate 1896, and Kensington 1899. The growth of the Bible Student faith in what from the start has always been its two principal centres, London and Glasgow, commencing with the lowly and unnoticed, well illustrates the principle of the Divine operation: "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts".

All this was to change. The year 1891 saw a sudden acceleration of the witness. Pastor Russell made his first visit to these shores. It was a hurried visit. It would seem that this visit to Europe was more of a personal and sentimental one, for he spent most of his time in Ireland. (Although a third or fourth generation American, he was ultimately of Scotch-Irish descent.) Landing at Queenstown, he did visit various interested people in Cork, Dublin, Belfast, Londonderry and a few other places. His purpose in Ireland accomplished, he came to London, where he arranged with the North London group to

establish a London depot, for the storage and distribution of Bible Student literature, under the supervision of one of the North London elders, Thomas Hart. (By this time the first three volumes of "Studies in the Scriptures" had been published and were eliciting widespread interest.) He ministered at several meetings arranged in London by Elizabeth Horne, where a hundred and fifty gathered together, left for a brief visit to Glasgow to meet the interested there, thence to Liverpool for the same purpose, and so back to the States. Very few people knew he had been in the country at all. At Liverpool he met Charles Elam, an interested man who was minister of a small mission hall where a hundred and fifty gathered to hear him. Charles Elam became the founder of the Liverpool church of Bible Students whose history runs from this date, with a starting membership of forty. Already there had been meetings established at Manchester, Hucknall in Notts, and the Surrey village of Penshurst where the local stationmaster, one Pearson, had electrified the village with the message. 1891 saw Nottingham, Liverpool and Dublin come on the scene and by 1892 Bristol, Edinburgh, Sheffield, followed by Belfast in 1895 and by Birmingham, Leeds, Middlesbrough, Dundee, Dumfries; and by Sevenoaks and Chatham in Kent. (Kent, not having any big cities, was noteworthy for its proliferation of small groups. Most towns and a great many small villages possessed a local community from a very early date.) These groups were usually commenced by the zealous labours of some active individual such as Arthur Riley of Bristol, James Bright of Belfast, John Green of Sheffield, William Raynor and William Drinkwater of Nottingham, George Mullens of Sevenoaks, - names which lingered long among the national community.

With some forty regular meetings established and an increasing number of people all over the country becoming interested, it was deemed desirable that someone from the States should come to England and organise the work of proclamation of the message on a systematic basis. The man selected was one S. D. Rogers, who arrived at the end of 1893 to show the British brethren how to preach the Gospel. His assignment was to organise a system of colportearing, viz, the

going from door to door advocating and endeavouring to "place" the "Scripture Studies" volumes. Since there had been for quite a few years past a fair amount of this work going on, this became largely a matter of preaching to the converted. It soon began to become apparent, however, to the brethren of the London church, with whom he was billeted, that there was another side to S. D. Rogers. He began to advocate a plan whereby he himself should be supported financially by the brethren so that he could go from town to town as an itinerant preacher, being given free board and lodgings at each place, the necessary halls and facilities being provided at local brethren's expense. This proposition and attitude, so alien from the tenor and spirit of Pastor Russell's principles and practice, which relied entirely on unsolicited gifts for the support of his work, alarmed the London church. The outcome was that Elizabeth Horne communicated with the Pastor to say that the London church felt it necessary completely to reject S. D. Rogers and his ideas, and to ask for guidance. Eventually he returned to the States and so far as the UK was concerned the matter was closed.

During this period there was a considerable amount of "public witness" carried on, consisting not so much of public meetings but the patient distribution of tracts and pamphlets from door to door, and the provision of the book "The Divine Plan of the Ages", being Volume One of "Scripture Studies", to those who evinced sufficient interest. Men were thus brought into the ambit of the brethren who afterwards became doughty champions of the faith.

It was thus that in 1893 Frederick George Guard, an open-air evangelist and leader of a local evangelical choir, became possessed of a copy of the "Divine Plan of the Ages". Its contents gripped and persuaded him. He found that some of his acquaintances had also seen and read the book. A resident of Stratford, East London, he was ignorant of the established group in North London. He did the obvious thing; in collaboration with his friend William Thirkettle of Forest Gate he established, in 1896, a group in his own home in Stratford. This was the beginning of the later well-known Forest Gate Church. With an initial membership of 18, Thirkettle was

appointed to organise a massive programme of tract distribution and open-air preaching. In the next twenty years that congregation came to number more than four hundred. London was shaping up for the greater things yet to come. The Metropolis was seeing the beginning of a process which was to lead to class meetings scattered all over the city and its environs, and a work of evangelism which ultimately resulted in meetings crammed to capacity at the Royal Albert Hall, London's leading auditorium.

This infusion of new blood into the capital with the coming of Forest Gate in 1896 was paralleled by a similar development in Britain's second city, Glasgow. For some years a certain Mrs Hodge, a member of the original Glasgow group, had been trying to convert her own sister, Sarah Ferrie (known to later generations of the fellowship as "Aunt Sarah"). After reading the first three volumes of the "Scripture Studies" in 1897 Sarah Ferrie was convinced. Being a person of positive convictions and apparently limitless energy, she commenced a week-night meeting in her own business premises in 1898 and promptly proceeded to evangelise her customers and business contacts. An illustration of her unconventional methods was related many years later by an observer who was with a party of Scottish brethren in 1906 on the railway station seeing off an American visitor. As the train stood in the station Aunt Sarah approached the engine-driver, leaning out of his cab waiting for the starting signal, handed him some tracts, and bade him "drive very carefully, for one of the King's sons is on the train". The engine-drivers' immediate reaction is not recorded, but the longer term consequence was that he came into the Truth and was present at the big Glasgow convention two years later when Pastor Russell visited the city. One is tempted to surmise that this Sarah Ferrie was perhaps a Glasgow version of London's Elizabeth Horne!

William Crawford and Robert Cormack, of the existing Glasgow group, began to attend this meeting in addition to their own. By 1899 Dr John Edgar, senior surgeon at a leading Glasgow Hospital, had become a member. John's father and one of his sisters had espoused the faith something like ten years earlier; now, within a few years, five more of the Edgar family

embraced the Truth, and with them another couple, Alex Tait and wife, thereafter to be active workers with the Edgars. These, with Crawford and Cormack, constituted a formidable team which set the Glasgow church on its feet. Records are silent as to the history of the original group dating from 1882 but it is virtually certain that they merged with the Edgar effort and so all the brethren in the city presented a united front.

The year 1899 marked another circumstance which was to have a marked effect in later years. Jesse Hemery, of Eccles, near Manchester, paid his first visit to London in the interests of the expanding work. Brother Russell first met Jesse Hemery on his first visit to Britain in 1891. A young man of twenty-seven, he was in trade as a baker and confectioner in Eccles. He must have been among the earliest in this country to become interested, manifesting considerable zeal and enthusiasm for the cause, and spending considerable time in the north of the country to interview people becoming interested. He was in fact the decisive factor in the conversion of Sarah Ferrie of Glasgow, so setting in motion the sequence of events which brought the Edgar family into the faith, with the consequent implications for the future of the Glasgow church. Brother Russell had formed a high opinion of his capabilities and now had him visit London to assess the progress of matters there. Hemery made his visit - not a very long one - spending most of his time with Frederick Guard and the incipient Forest Gate church, by now numbering some seventy-five, where he conducted five or six meetings, followed by a quick run round London to look up various individuals known to be interested. He apparently did not know of, for he did not visit, the group associated with Elizabeth Horne, nor any of the other older established meetings in London. He returned north, not having achieved much, except to forge a link with Guard and his group; the visit would have had little significance were it not for the fact that Jesse Hemery later became Brother Russell's representative in London and so of nation-wide influence.

With the increasing number of regular meetings and something like fifteen hundred vitally interested people scattered over the country constantly writing to Brother Russell, the Pastor judged the time was ripe to centralise British

activities in Britain itself. In May 1900 he sent one of his co-labourers, E. C. Henninges and his wife, to England for the purpose of setting up an office and depot in London from which all future work in the UK should be conducted. (It should be explained that this work comprised the import, storage and distribution of the Pastor's publications, tracts, books, etc, and was not in any sense an effort to control or direct the organisation and individual work of the British groups. At all times each such group was completely independent, managing its own affairs and linked to the Pastor only through the medium of the common faith.) The office and depot was set up in Gipsy Lane, Forest Gate, London, and Henninges entered into friendly co-operation with the Forest Gate Church. Joint efforts resulted in the acquiring of a hall for their meetings in Woodgrange Road, Forest Gate. A system of wholesale tract distribution, public meetings, "pilgrim visits" (a capable brother visiting outlying incipient groups to encourage and instruct them) and "colporteur work", (involving calling house to house to interest occupiers in the "Divine Plan" book) was established, and Henninges travelled the length and breadth of the country suggesting and encouraging all who wished to have part in this organised outreach of instructed evangelism. The first few months' work, from June to November, resulted in three thousand copies of the "Divine Plan" and a quarter of a million booklets being distributed, 50,000 of the latter in London alone. Thirty-nine British towns so far untouched by the message now heard it for the first time. So far as London was concerned Forest Gate took a prominent part in what was going on and early in 1901 Brother Henninges was unanimously elected Pastor of the Forest Gate Church. That year, 1901, saw a one hundred per cent increase in the circulation of literature and general activity. A change in oversight, however, was imminent. In November of that year the Pastor recalled Henninges for briefing in a new sphere of activity in Germany and appointed Jesse Hemery to take his place.

Thus Jesse Hemery became manager of the British office of the Society, a position he retained for most of his life. He inherited the Gipsy Lane depot. He was also unanimously elected Pastor of the Forest Gate Church in succession to

Hennings. During the next twelve months the circulation of literature increased again, to nearly three-quarters of a million copies, and twenty thousand volumes of "Studies in the Scriptures". All of this involved quite laborious door-to-door work at a time when the number of active workers could not have exceeded fifteen hundred. In 1902 a representative of the Pastor, J. Hope Hay, coming to England on a business mission, spent some time travelling the country visiting some of the centres convenient to his commitments; he managed to consult with the existing groups in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow and the established groups in some other cities, reporting a definite upsurge of interest in Ireland, largely due to the efforts of James Bright of Belfast, responsible for starting the meeting there. C. H. Houston had achieved considerable progress at Edinburgh and a newcomer to the field was Dan Murray of Dundee; the group he founded there endured until 1965.

1902 was the end of the day of small beginnings. The following year was to see a fantastically rapid growth of the movement commencing with a visit of Brother Russell, his tour of the principal city centres where meetings existed, and well attended conventions in London and Glasgow. The next fifteen years was to witness what was afterward, and correctly, termed the work of harvest, the "Harvest of the Age". A fundamental aspect of Brother Russell's views was that the end of the present era, which he believed to be imminent, would be signalled by an unprecedented clarification of theological views regarding the purpose of God in creation, and a realisation of the time, manner and nature of the Second Advent clearer by far than that of the previous few centuries. He pointed out that the idea of a Harvest of the Age is implicit in the teachings of Jesus and that the gathering together of Christians of all denominations and of none to an understanding of these things, and a living faith that the Presence of the Lord was an accomplished fact, was in itself a harvest in this sense. The fact that the message was going forth world-wide and receiving enthusiastic acceptance from all quarters served to buttress his faith, and that of those, too, who accepted these views from him. The story of the next twenty years shows how well-founded was the general outline of that belief.

There were now about sixty regular group meetings existing in the UK, ranging in membership from fifteen to several hundreds, a total membership of active supporters approaching twenty-five hundred. Additional to these there were many interested attendants at the meetings who did not go so far as to join in the active work.

Early in 1903 the father of John Edgar died. He must have been one of the first in the United Kingdom to accept the message and throw in his lot with it. He saw the seed sown and he saw the promise of a rich harvest. It was left to his sons, John and Morton, and their sister Minna, to play their part in the stirring events that were to follow.



A. Pearson
Penshurst



W. Crawford
Glasgow



T. Smedley
East Kirkby



W. Thirkettle
Forest Gate



F. G. Guard
Forest Gate



J. Gentle
London

SOME OF THE EARLY PIONEERS - LATE 19TH CENT.



ONE OF THE EARLIEST VILLAGE GROUPS LATE 19TH CENT.
Penshurst, Surrey



Sheffield



Bristol

TWO OF THE EARLIEST CITY GROUPS LATE 19TH CENT.