

WILLIAM C BURNS



SCOTLAND: CROSS of St. ANDREW



ENGLAND: CROSS of ST. GEORGE



SINGAPORE



MALAYSIA

GRANDFATHER
of
BIBLE-PRESBYTERIANS

by

Timothy Tow

WILLIAM C BURNS

1815 - 1868

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of
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INTRODUCTION

My maternal great grandfather, Tan Khai-Lin, also known as Tan Su-Chuan, was born in 1838 into the family of a Manchu mandarin in the prefectural city of Chaon-chow-foo. He lost his father at an early age, and grew up under the tutelage of his widowed mother. A good student, he became a lover of books and calligraphy. He was a model of a filial son with a gentle disposition.

In 1859 when he was 21 years of age, he came from the inland capital to Swatow (Santou) the coastal city to look for a job. As he passed by the Mission Hall at Seng Peng Street where Rev George Smith the missionary was preaching, he was gripped by the Word. Seeing how gladly such an intelligent and cultured young man had drunk in the Gospel, the missionary invited him to stay. After several days of further inquiry into the Truth, Tan returned to his hometown. When he declared to his mother the joy of his newfound faith, she became deeply distressed. However, Su-Chuan prevailed upon her with the Truth. Thus, he was permitted to make the trip to Swatow again. Having been fully catechised he was baptised the same year, the first convert of the English Presbyterian Mission. (His mother followed suit after three years.)

Attached to the Mission Hall at this time was a clinic. When the clinic was shifted out some years later, the premises were converted into a school for the training of preachers. This training school began with an enrolment of four students. Tan Su-Chuan who all these years had understudied the missionaries tutored the students. He was elected elder and appointed to the pulpit of the First Church in Swatow. He served also several other churches such as were in the Kit-Yang — Poo-Sua circuit.



*Rev Tan Khai-lin
(Su-Chuan)
the author's Great grandfather
1838 - 1893*

In 1881 he took the first examination prescribed for pastors, and was ordained the next year. Immediately, he was made superintending minister to four churches centering around Iam-Tsau, birthplace of my grandfather and father.

Converts Began to Emigrate to Singapore

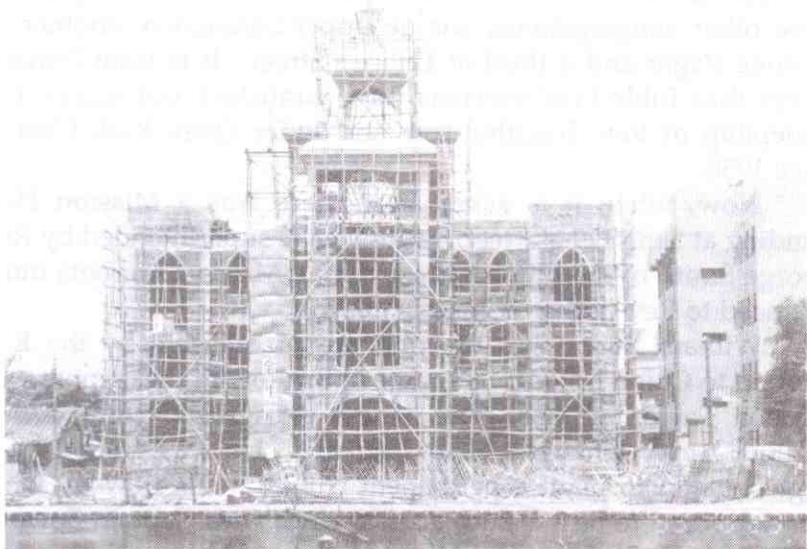
It was in 1881 the same year my great grandpa sat for his ordination examinations that the English Presbyterian Mission diverted the Rev John A B Cook, after one year's language study in Swatow, to Singapore. For a goodly number of the Mission's converts in Swatow had migrated south to Singapore and the Malay States for a better livelihood. One of the earliest migrants was Elder Heng Chiang Mong (1856-1931), father of Elder Heng Mui Kiah and grandfather of Dr Andrew Heng and Rev Philip Heng. But they were like sheep without a shepherd. In 1881 the E.P. Mission, under Rev Cook's supervision, organised the first Chinese Presbyterian Church at Bukit Timah which continues to this day as Glory Presbyterian Church. In 1883 he organised three other congregations, one at Upper Serangoon, another at Tanjong Pagar and a third at Prinsep Street. It is from Prinsep Street that Bible-Presbyterians have branched out under the leadership of Rev Timothy Tow and Elder Quek Kiok Chiang since 1950.

Now, when it is asked how there was a Mission Hall standing at Seng Peng Street, Swatow 1859 superintended by Rev George Smith of the English Presbyterian Mission, its roots must be traced to Rev William Chalmers Burns.

William Burns was the first missionary sent by the E.P. Mission to China in 1847. He came to Swatow in the company of Hudson Taylor in 1856, after having evangelised Hong Kong, Canton, Amoy, Shanghai, and Nanking. He was guided by a Higher Hand to plant a permanent church in Swatow by what was supposed to be a chance acquaintance with Captain Bowers, of the ship Geelong. (The story of Burns, Hudson Taylor and Captain Bowers will be told in a later chapter.)



The Old Iam-Tsau Church, 1984



The New Iam-Tsau Church rebuilt with overseas funds, 1993

*Our Fathers sat in prisons dark
Amidst South China's plain,
Till one from England did embark;
Bearing the Light from Heaven.*

*The vessel whom the Lord had sent:
His name was William Burns.
To Hongkong Island first he went
In eighteen forty-seven.*

*From thence sped he forth to Canton,
But God soon turned his step
To Amoy where he found a town
That gladly sought his help.*

*'Twas in Amoy he did settle,
That God's Word might go forth.
From thence again he went to battle,
Farther, yet farther north.*

*To Shanghai, and on to Nanking:
He scanned her from the bow.
But meanwhile God was planning
To bring him to Swatow!*

*The Captain of a British ship
Offered to take him south,
And so in eighteen fifty-six
On Swatow soil he ploughed.*

'Twas on this trip to our city,
That Hudson Taylor came
With Burns in the same ministry,
And they were not ashamed.

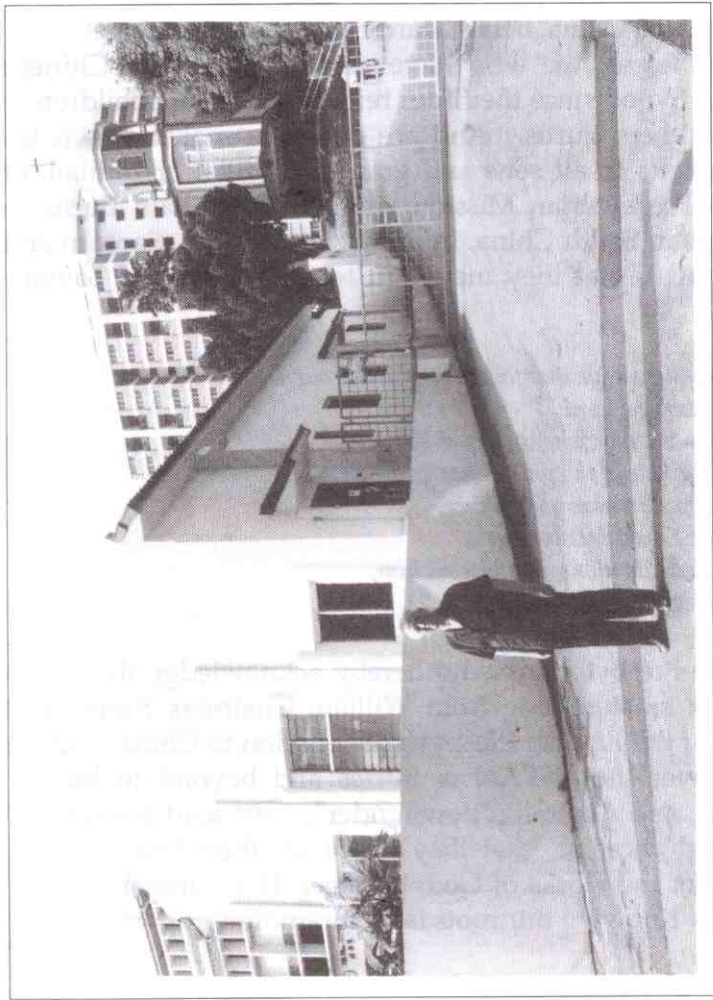
As the gospel grew and flourished
In Swatow and Amoy,
From these havens our sires cherished
Sailed southwards ships ahoy!

Our Fathers came to Singapore
And Malay States beyond.
A church soon sprang on this new shore
By eighteen eighty-one.

Among the first congregations
Was one at "Bamboo Tree",
Founded by the E.P. Mission
In eighteen eighty-three.

There stood before on Prinsep Street
An old, grey, little church.
'Twas here from the nineteen fifties
That we have grown so quick...





First Chinese Presbyterian Church, Bukit Timah, 1881
newly rebuilt with author on foreground.

In the background is Glory Presbyterian Church.
Author's grandfather was once pastor of the "ancient" Church.

Today the name of William Chalmers Burns and his mighty works is forgotten by our mother church and by the once powerful English Presbyterian Mission now under the deadly haze of liberalism and ecumenism. Nor is the pure Gospel he preached, sounding so loud and clear to his generation both in Great Britain and China, being heard in this tumultuous age.

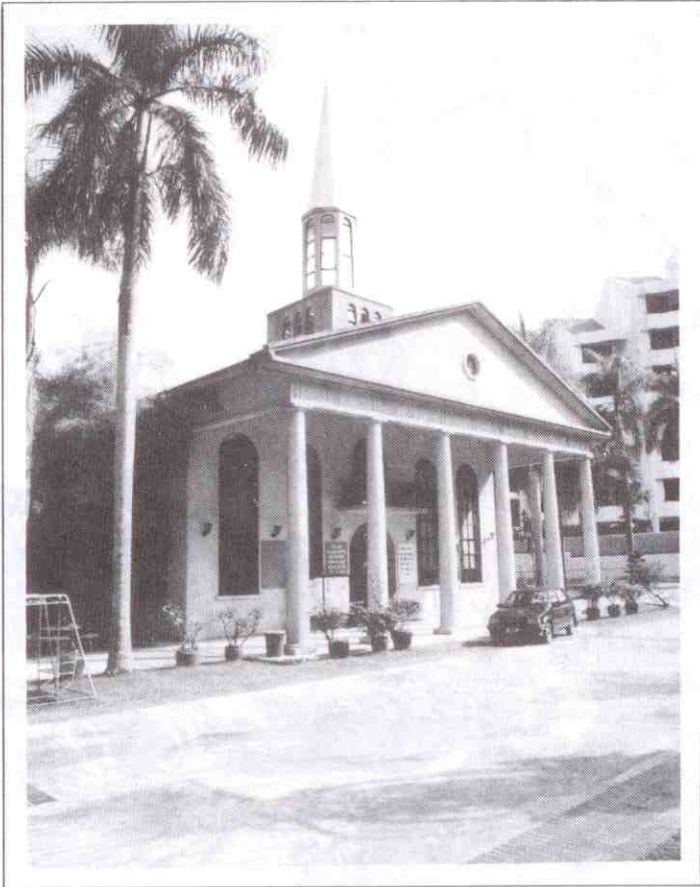
Nevertheless, we who have seceded from the Chinese Presbyterian Synod since the fifties remain filial grandchildren to William Chalmers Burns. And we desire to make known his glorious exploits to all sons and grandsons, filial or unfilial, of the English Presbyterian Mission which sent William Burns to our ancestors in South China, in particular Swatow (Santou) and Amoy (Xiamen), that they may turn to their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

*"Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness,
ye that seek the Lord:
look unto the rock whence ye are hewn,
and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.
Look unto Abraham your father,
and unto Sarah that bare you:
for I called him alone, and blessed him,
and increased him" (Isaiah 51:1,2).*

Today, Bible-Presbyterians who hereby acknowledge the origin of their faith as stemming from William Chalmers Burns, first missionary of the English Presbyterian Mission to China, and are spread all over the ASEAN countries and beyond to Burma, India, Africa, and Australia "downunder", must read the story of their spiritual ancestor "that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments" (Psalm 78:7). Knowing our roots is of paramount importance ...

*"And might not be as their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation;
a generation that set not their heart aright,
and whose spirit was not steadfast with God
... And forgat his works, and his wonders
that he had shewed them". (Psalm 78:8,11)*

William Burns should not only move us in this Laodicean age to first-love fervency in the Lord's service, but also strengthen our stand against the unbelief and apostasy of the end-times inasmuch as he had stood on the side of the Separatists of his time against the old decaying Church, as you will discover. So read on!



Life Bible Presbyterian Church,
mother of B-P Churches
in Singapore and Malaysia,
that are now spread around the world.