

**THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY METHODIST MISSION
TO THE MALAYS: FAITHFUL MISSION AT THE
COMPLEX BOUNDARY OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY,
ETHNIC RIVALRY, AND POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS**

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If any single value dominated the American Methodist mission in Southeast Asia, and British Malaya in particular, it was pragmatism. Beginning in the 1880s, Bishops William Oldham and James Thoburn were determined to expand the impact of mission and its work as rapidly as possible. They had limited financial support from American Methodists but a growing number of enthusiastic and available American volunteers for missions. So finding a way to finance a mission that could make use of available missionaries became the question that dominated their mission strategy. The pragmatic solutions they found became ingrained in the mission for over a century and would deeply impact the ways in which Methodists approached the different ethnic groups on the Malay Peninsula and Borneo.

The solution pioneered by Oldham and continued by Thoburn focused on urban Chinese populations. They were capable of funding English language mission schools, readily sent their children to these schools, allowed the Christian indoctrination that was part of the school curriculum, and were relatively willing converts to Christianity. As a result, the Methodist mission quickly focused on addressing the Chinese population with both its educational and evangelistic efforts. And in return the Chinese provided most of the mission's funding and its converts.¹

By comparison the indigenous Malays of the peninsula and Singapore were primarily rural, relatively impoverished, culturally conservative, and resistant to Christianity. As a result, efforts to reach the indigenous Malay Muslim population were idiosyncratic and sporadic. Indeed, they were effectively limited to the work of a single family for over 65 years. The result would have complex political and social repercussions that echo down to this day.

While a full history would be more nuanced, the Methodist Mission to the urban Chinese focused on westernization and empowering emerging economic elites. The ministry to the rural Malays focused on preservation of indigenous culture and ultimately the empowerment of indigenous nation-

¹ For accounts of the mission by Oldham and Thoburn, see William F. Oldham, *India, Malaysia, and the Philippines: A Practical Study in Missions* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1914); and James M. Thoburn, *India and Malaysia* (Cincinnati: New York: Cranston & Curtis; Hunt & Eaton, 1892).

alism.² If we review briefly the origins and growth of the Chinese Mission in Singapore and Malaya as opposed to the Malay Mission in the same period, the one quickly outstrips the other.

The Chinese Mission

The Chinese Mission began with the founding of Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore by Bishop Oldham, financed almost entirely by local Chinese wealth. Its name indicated respectively the language of instruction and ethnicity of the students. By the early twentieth century, the British colonial government was making available revenue from its opium farms for building and maintaining new schools, and the Methodists, as well as Catholics and others quickly realized the potential for rapidly expanding their mission outreach. Using British funds and American volunteer teachers, Christian missions could rapidly move to new areas and have rapid access to populations anxious for their children to be educated.³

By the beginning of World War II, Methodists and Catholics were running extensive English language school systems, including schools for girls, from Singapore to Penang. These schools were invariably located in the cities and large towns where Chinese populations predominated. Only after the mid-1960s, when the government took control of their enrollment, did mission schools begin to admit significant numbers of Malays. As a result, the Methodist schools were instrumental in creating the English language elite that would govern independent Malaysia after 1956, and Singapore after it split from Malaysia in 1965.

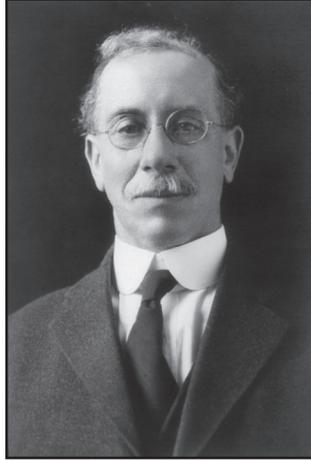
When it came to mission among Chinese speaking migrants who did not have and would not learn English, the Methodist mission relied almost entirely on Chinese pastors and evangelists from its more established mission in China. This again allowed for rapid growth, but it insulated English speaking Western missionaries from an immersion in Chinese culture.

The Start of the Malay Mission

The Malay Mission began when a young British naval captain, William Shellabear, took command of a company of Malays in his work surveying for Singapore's harbor defenses. He was quickly enamored with their lan-

² *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, eds. Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxborough, (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1992) offers a broader historical perspective. Roland Chia, *The People Called Methodist: The Heritage, Life and Mission of the Methodist Church in Singapore* (Singapore: Methodist Church of Singapore, 2003) offers a more contemporary account of the mission as a whole, but excludes work in the Malay Peninsula or among the Malay Muslims there. David W. Scott, *Mission as Globalization: Methodists in Turn-of-the-20th-Century Southeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016) is the most comprehensive account of the Methodist Mission widely available in US libraries.

³ Theodore Doraisamy, *Oldham Called of God* (Singapore: MBR, 1979) gives a deeper history of the early mission and the development of the Methodist schools. See also Ho Seng Ong, *Methodist Schools in Malaysia: Their Record and History* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Board of Education, Malaya Annual Conference, 1964).



William Girdlestone Shellabear (1862–1948). Photo from the Mission Biographical Files at GCAH, Madison, New Jersey.

guage and customs, and within a year was translating Christian hymns into Malay for them to sing as they rowed. His first hymn was “Out on the Ocean Sailing.” We do not know what his sailors made of these songs, but his hymn translations remain in use today by Malay speaking Christians.⁴

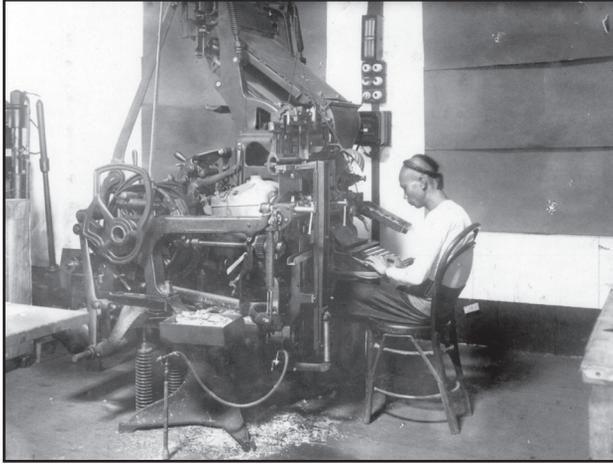
The young soldier fell under the influence of Oldham and soon made a decision to resign his commission and become a missionary for the American Methodists. Not that Oldham’s goal was serving the Malays. The bishop’s plan for expanding schools would require a mission press to produce texts, and Shellabear’s training as an engineer suggested he would be capable of learning to build and run one.

The building of the press would occupy the great bulk of Shellabear’s time for nearly twenty years. It would become the Methodist Mission Press, then Methodist Publishing House, and was eventually sold to private corporate interests and renamed the Malaya Publishing House. It remains a major publisher and bookseller.⁵ For the first half of the twentieth century it was the largest publishing company in Southeast Asia, turning out an ever-growing supply of textbooks for not only English language mission schools, but all of those schools being managed directly by the colonial government.

While the press was primarily a tool for the extension of western culture, Shellabear quickly used it as a means of preserving Malay culture. His personal studies of Malay literature brought him into the company of Malay and British scholars who collected manuscripts of classic Malay literary works. Shellabear soon began publishing scholarly editions of these Malay clas-

⁴ The primary printed source for information on William Shellabear and his family is Robert Hunt, *William Shellabear, A Biography* (Kuala Lumpur: U Malaysia P, 1996).

⁵ The company still acknowledges its missionary roots. See “About MPH ONLINE,” MPH Online, <https://www.mphonline.com/en/about>.



Press operator at the Methodist Publishing House in Singapore. Photo from the Mission Photo Albums at GCAH, Madison, New Jersey.

sics, some of which remain in print today.⁶ More importantly, he published them not only in the traditional Arabic script, but also the emerging romanized Malay that would become the norm for rising generations of educated Malays.

Toward a Deeper Engagement with Islam

By the early 1900s, Shellabear was convinced that his mission to the Malays demanded a higher quality translation of the Bible than the idiosyncratic efforts of earlier Malayan missionaries, or the dialectically different Indonesian translations.⁷ Although confident in his grasp of the Malay idiom, Shellabear decided his work could be better done in Melaka, a center of classical Malay culture. There he could both reach out to the Malays and find the linguistic expertise to guide his work as a translator. He and his family moved there in 1903 and lived there for more than a decade.

The subsequent developments in Shellabear's approach to the Malays did not take place in a vacuum. His immersion in a non-Western culture was not shared by the majority of missionaries, who from the beginning arrived primarily to serve the English language schools in rapidly westernizing urban centers. Nor was his interest in Malay culture shared by other missionaries. Sometimes it was barely tolerated, its only value being the production of publishable works that could be sold for a profit by the press.

But larger changes in the culture of Western Christian missions also had an impact on Shellabear. Two were critical. First, the world tours of John

⁶ For instance, his translation of *Serajah Malayu, or the Malay Annals* was frequently reprinted for eighty years after it first appeared, not just by the Methodist Publishing House, but eventually by Oxford University Press and others.

⁷ Shellabear began publishing individual books of the Bible in Malay on behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society, starting in 1901 with Mark.

Mott gave Shellabear and others in relatively isolated Malaya a grasp of the world-wide nature of their mission. They could see themselves engaged in something much larger than their immediate concerns.

Even more important was the movement, culminating in the Edinburgh Mission Conference of 1910, toward a reevaluation of local cultures, languages, and religions. That conference marked a sea-change in attitudes toward non-Christian religions. By declaring that non-Christian religions might be a “preparation for the gospel” the study of these religions was both encouraged and validated.

For Shellabear personally this led to an expansion beyond his linguistic studies of Malay and his ethnographic interests. He began a more serious study of Islam. After 1912, with his Bible translation complete, Shellabear used an opportunity to travel from Malaya to the U.S. Along the way he studied Arabic in Egypt, Islam under Snouk Hurgronje in Leiden, and ultimately came to the Kennedy School of Missions in Hartford where he studied Islam under Duncan Black MacDonald. In the 1930s he would briefly become a professor of Islamic studies at the same school.

As a result of these changes in attitude toward Islam, Shellabear increasingly focused his work on the Malays as Muslims. He still retained a keen interest in evangelizing the Malays,⁸ but while both missionaries and colonial officers dismissed their religious commitment as shallow, Shellabear approached it from an attitude of increasing respect. In Melaka he had developed a long friendship with Guru Sulaiman, a religious teacher and mystic. The result was the publications of two of Sulaiman’s works on Islamic mysticism and Malay proverbs.⁹ Shellabear regarded these as essential to both understand the language and religious beliefs of the Malays. Malays would value them as an essential contribution to preserving their culture.

The Next Generation

By 1915, Shellabear was forced to leave Malaya for health reasons. However, his work in Melaka was soon carried on by his daughter Fanny, as well as her husband Robert Blasdell, who also studied under Duncan Black MacDonald.¹⁰ While Shellabear was pursuing his deeper study of Islam and eventually settling in at the Kennedy School, Fanny and Robert returned to Melaka where they led the first Methodist schools to actively recruit Malay children in the 1920s and 1930s. Shellabear would continue his translation work to support the Blasdells, including the New Testament in the indige-

⁸ See, for instance, his tract *Islam’s Challenge to Methodism* (New York: Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1919).

⁹ William G. Shellabear and Sulaiman Muhammad bin Nur, eds., *Kitab Kiliran Budi (The Book of Wisdom: A Collection of Malay Proverbs)* (Singapore: Methodist Publishing House, 1909); and William G. Shellabear and Sulaiman Muhammad bin Nur, eds., *Hikayat Sri Rama (The Life of Sri Rama)*, *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, nos. 70–71.

¹⁰ Blasdell’s 1930 dissertation at the Kennedy School of Missions was entitled “A descriptive catalogue of Mohammedan literature now published in the Malay language with an estimate of the religious values of such literature for the Malay people.”

nous Malay form of a *syair*, or epic poem.¹¹

It was their combined knowledge of and respect for Malay culture and Islam that would allow the Blasdells to credibly relate to the Malay community in Melaka. And only the trust the Malays had in the Shellabear family allowed them to entrust their children to their care in the Methodist boarding schools. One of their early students remarked that only in a Christian school was he exposed to prayers five times a day, for which the school always took a short break. Notably he also attended Sunday school, but not Christian worship.

We may judge the success of the Blasdell's efforts to relate to the Malay community by the fact that nearly thirty years after leaving Malaysia, their obituaries in the Malaysian Press were published by the Malay Muslim graduates of their schools.

Such respect for missionaries was rarely sustained after World War II and the era of independence. Missionaries were, after all, closely associated with colonialism in all its aspects. What made the Blasdells unique, in an admittedly unique post-colonial context, was that after the War they began to identify with the nationalist aspirations of the Malays. In a work published just before independence, Robert Blasdell imagines three women, one Chinese, one Indian, and one Malay considering their future after high school.¹²

The Indian woman plans to train as a teacher and the Chinese as a nurse. However, the Malay woman plans to study law so that she will be prepared to step into the political leadership that rightly belongs to her and to her people. A short twenty years after the first Malay woman got a high school education in Fanny Shellabear Blasdell's girl's school, the Blasdells were imaging their graduates serving in Parliament.

The Shellabear Legacy

In my title I have suggested that the boundaries within a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaya were complex. At the time of independence in 1957 the Chinese population, strongly abetted by Methodist and Catholic Mission education programs, had almost total control of the economy. The ethnic Indian population was politically marginal, having only a small urban elite created to manage the colonial government and the majority working at near subsistence wages in rural areas.

The Malays were in an odd position. Their sultans were the nominal rulers of their individual territories and had valuable land holdings. The British encouraged the education of a Malay elite, but the numbers of students were tiny compared to the Chinese in the Christian schools. The urban Malay populations were small, and their rural populations poorly educated. Yet at independence they were a political majority with long building aspirations of

¹¹ See William G. Shellabear, *Sha'ir nabii (Verses on the Loving Prophet)*, 5 vols. (Singapore: Methodist Mission, 1931–1933); and William G. Shellabear, *Sha'ir kerajaan Allah (Verses on the Kingdom of God)*, 5 vols. (Singapore: Methodist Mission, 1933–1934).

¹² The tract is entitled *Sebiji Benih*, but it is not extant outside of archives.

restoring the political dominance they lost over the colonial era.

In this situation, created over a period of a century by colonial policy, the Methodist Mission chose to place its bets with the Chinese and Indians, toward whom it directed 90% of its missionaries and funding. With the exception of the work of the Shellabears, Blasdells, and a handful of local Chinese who spoke a dialect of Malay, Methodists gave little or no attention to the Malay Muslims. The mission judged work among them to be unproductive in terms of either converts or indigenous support for an expansive and expensive mission effort. Indeed, by the end of the 1950s when the Blasdells returned to the U.S., the Methodist Mission burned all the remaining Malay language religious publications in its possession and the mission to the Malays officially ended.

The ostensible reason for destroying all these materials was that evangelism of Malays was banned under the new Malaysian constitution. This was not the case, but it meant that the Methodists would ignore ministry in the national language of the new country until they were forced to begin using it in their schools by the ministry of education.

Yet we should not underestimate the legacy of the Shellabear family. I was able to do my Ph.D. at the University of Malaya, under a Muslim supervisor, because of the respect of modern Malay scholars have for the work of Shellabear in studying and preserving Malay literature. In a country with a strong Islamicizing movement, my 1994 biography of Shellabear, which in no way hid his intentions to convert the Malays, was published by the University of Malaya press and was sold in local book stores.¹³

There is another side as well. The literature Shellabear and later the Shellabear-Blasdells produced to introduce Malays to Christianity was not all destroyed. Although not in print it is in rather constant, quiet, circulation. Copies preserved in different libraries in the U.S. are being reproduced and circulated as well. As Christian literature for Malays it remains relevant for those quietly seeking to know Jesus as the Christ.

And Shellabear's work, as well as mine on the history of the use of the word "Allah" for God in translation,¹⁴ has in the last few years been cited in a case before the Malaysian Supreme Court involving the rights of Christians to full use of the Malay language. It is the only time I have been deposed as a historian and linguist.

It is 100 years since Shellabear left Malaya for the last time but he and his work are far from forgotten in the community that he sought to serve. Although the work of the Shellabear-Blasdells was not central to the mission, it played an important role in perceptions of Methodism in the larger

¹³ Hunt, *William Shellabear*.

¹⁴ Robert Hunt, "Soal yang Berganti-Ganti dalam Penerjemahan Kitab Suci ke dalam Bahasa Melayu pada Abad ke-19 dan 20" (Changing Issues in the Translation of the Bible in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries), and "William Shellabear dan Alkitab Terjemahannya" (William Shellabear and the Translation of the Bible into Malay), in *Sadur: Sejarah Terjemahan di Indonesia dan Malaysia* (History of Translation in Indonesia and Malaysia) ed. Henri Chamberbert-Loir (Jakarta: KPG [Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia], 2009), 513–526 and 1057–1065.

Malaysian society.

The world of missional pragmatism was important. The work of extending an education to Chinese across the Malay Peninsula, in Singapore, and Sarawak was transformative in positive ways that are still being felt. Yet in a world of missional pragmatism there is a value to remaining faithful to the cultural integrity of people being culturally marginalized, respecting their religious beliefs and heritage, and honoring their aspirations for freedom and self-determination.

My wife is an avid gardener. And we have our conflicts, because invariably some strange shoot will come up in her garden, or even in our yard. Before I can eliminate the intruder, she says, "Let's see what it is." And so these presumed weeds get cultivated and after a time we have ten square feet of an unknown gourd or dubious leafy green. The plant will eventually prove to be squash, or pumpkin, or some kind of Asian spinach. You just don't know until it is full grown, and that takes time. Robert Blasdell's last book about the three young women, which I mentioned earlier, was titled *Sebiji Benih*, "*The Seed*." Indeed.