Rescuing the Oldham Legend
by Theodore R. Doraisamy

The fields of missionary biography and academic appraisal would be lamentably incomplete without having a few select volumes-to-be on William Fitzjames Oldham, the human founder of Methodism in Singapore in 1885. His labour-intensive, miracle-crammed and debilitating four years yielded such extensive results that even within that limited period, the Methodist Mission in Singapore had world-wide acclaim. In 1935 the success story of the mission was celebrated in Singapore in a historical pageant written by Edna Dorman Lee, wife of the bishop-in-office Edwin F. Lee, who with her husband had been inspired as young people when they heard Oldham, the silver-tongued orator, speak. Nathalie T. Means wrote a popular account of the five decades, based on published and collected sources. The collection unfortunately fell victim to the ravages of the Pacific War. She shared with the writer the sole surviving letter about Oldham. Mrs. Means' *Malaysia Mosaic* has been mentioned widely. A benediction of the celebrations was the presence of the aged Bishop and Mrs. Oldham.

Imagination and hypothetical re-creation are the standby of a panegyrist, especially when facts are not readily available. Legend takes over from biography, sometimes blithely. Webster defines legend as:

> any story coming down from the past, especially one popularly taken as historical, though not verifiable.

Oldham has been doubtfully credited with a primordial vision of many a later-day project. This has been unnecessary. Oldham's direct influence extended at least till 1916 when he left the mission board in New York to become the general-superintend-bishop in South America, and his actual
assistance to the Singapore Mission was considerable. For two decades he was instrumental in sending men and money, and often the entire wherewithal for creative programmes. The publishing house, medical work and stream of teacher-missionaries are examples. These are in records preserved in the archives of the United Methodist Church and in printed reports.

It is not suggested that there should be any efforts at debunking Oldham. In recent years there has been such a tendency as, for example, the denigrating of the fame of Livingstone and Schweitzer; more recently, even of the Christ-like Francis of Assissi. The missionaries concerned came out of it not as plastic saints but as human beings raised to the n-th degree of excellence; however, in some respects they appear as children of their times and conditions. Oldham himself wrote the spiritual biography of his elder brother in mission, Bishop James M. Thoburn. *Thoburn, Called of God* was commissioned by Thoburn himself to illustrate the guidance of God. It speaks volumes for the spiritual discernment of the biographer, as well. It is a matter of concern, however, that Oldham finds no flaw in Thoburn. It constitutes a flaw in itself. Biblical biographies run the whole gamut of saintliness as well as sin, even in beloved characters like David. In speaking of missionary leaders of the past, a useful question is how far they were ahead of their times, and how far subject to the limitations of the social milieu.

What Oldham did for Thoburn some need to do for Oldham, though the availability of a protege or spiritual younger brother is well-nigh nil. The present writer might contemplate an initial work, but the task would need more members of the Methodist family in India, the Philippines, and South America to interpret adequately the man called "the international circuit-rider." Since most of the "Oldhamia" is in files, records, journals, reports, manuscripts, out-of-print and rare books and magazines, both Methodist and ecumenical, the search will be rewarding as well as of value to the Methodist and Christian heritage. The following may serve as a working chronology:
1854  (December 15) — born in Bangalore, India, of British parents; attended Madras Christian College; taught for some time and became a government surveyor.

1876  converted during William Taylor's campaign; married Marie Augusta Mulligan (September 13, 1876).

1879  entered Allegheny College; transferred to Boston University.

1883  graduated with a B.A. from Boston University; received on trial in Michigan Conference.

1884  returned to India; appointed to Singapore.

1885  Thoburn accompanied Oldham to Singapore and returned after conducting crusade.

1890  returned to the U.S. to recuperate; filled pulpits; became professor of missions; took U.S. citizenship; awarded doctorate by Allegheny College.

1900  attended General Conference as delegate; became assistant secretary of the Missionary Society.

1904-1912  missionary bishop of the Singapore-Philippines area.

1912-1916  accepted General Conference decision for him to go back to the mission board, giving up the episcopacy.

1916-1928  served as bishop of South America (now as general superintendent).

1935  visited Singapore for semi-centennial celebrations.

1937  passed away in Glendale, California.

One of Bishop Oldham's proteges — and Oldham was a fisher of men, teachers, missionaries, pastors and bishops — Bishop Brenton T. Badley, wrote Oldham, Beloved of Three Continents. Bishop Lee's tribute appeared in the Malaysia Message, journal of the Methodists in Singapore and Malaysia. Some obituaries are in the archives and some appeared in church papers.

Besides documented biographical presentations, there should be investigative studies as that of Guy Garrett's The Missionary Career of James Mills Thoburn. The present writer has been studying Oldham's missiology; and he has met a Yale
doctoral candidate at the library of the Commission on Archives and History working on a comparison of the motives of mission in the coming of Methodism to Malaysia and to the Philippines. It is hoped that by the centennial of the Singapore and Malaysia mission in February, 1985, Oldham will be known as well as he was once beloved.

Some indication of the sources has been given. Thoburn wrote widely, felicitously, and autobiographically. His journals are lodged in Alleghany College, Meadville, Pennsylvania, and available on microfilm; and a series of detailed biographical articles are found in the archives. Characteristically there appears to be no comparable autobiographic counterpart by Oldham. Oldham has a brief series of useful articles in 1917 in the *Christian Advocate* (New York) and he expresses his modest reluctance for the floodlight to be turned on him. To R. E. Diffendorfer, mission board secretary, whom he had taught at Ohio Wesleyan, Oldham wrote on April 18, 1935, in a letter made available by the Commission on Archives and History at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina:

Dear Dr. Diffendorfer,

Like a bolt out of a blue sky came your letter yesterday asking if I favor your writing my biography. In reply I would say there have been several friends who have written me in the same strain on the same subject. I know no man who is more eager minded to analyze [sic] and study the moods and the temper of the church.

There are, however, two phases of Methodism that I would ask should be considered without detriment and these two are the doctrine of Holiness and my relations to a few schools that made this doctrine a matter of the first importance. I would ask my biographer to remember that I have been for forty years a teacher of the "Higher Life" not offensively nor dogmatically, but I have permitted nothing to interfere with my whole hearted devotion. If you can arrange in your own mind whether you personally agree with me or not, I shall cheerfully consent to meet your wishes though I do not know where you will find the matter of either interest or value. I would thank you to let me know how far you can accept my reservations.

It is not known how far this matter was pursued. One point in the letter needs comment, i.e. Oldham's remarks about Holiness. In one of the articles of 1917 Oldham
describes how after a series of lectures on the Higher Life in Singapore he confessed his own inadequacy and how he at that time the bishop of the area, fell prostrate with prayerful tears; and then found his wife beside him and the whole class in a similar experience. It corresponds to the charismatic experience of today in which many cardinals, bishops, members of all denominations are involved. Apart from his conversion experience in Poona and the one in Singapore described in 1917, the present writer has come across another reference in which Oldham commends the Holy Spirit experience and cautions against excesses. One inquiry made of a ninety-year-old Indian minister in Malaysia whom the Oldhams had helped to educate, could only say: “Yes, he was full of the Holy Spirit.” That is eloquent if not descriptive.

A good bibliography should be possible as more scholars go to work. Leete in his *Methodist Bishops* has a fairly extensive list. It is hoped that some Methodist crusade scholarships can be directed to students who would work for some months with available materials of the United Methodist Church, Methodist and other American universities, and in the countries connected with Oldham. Some items in Leete’s compilations could not be traced in the time available to the writer; other items in Lake Junaluska were noted of cultural, historical, theological, philosophical, multi-religious and missional interest. Oldham’s claim can be confirmed as confessional when he says in his letter to Diffendorfer that he tried not to be “offensive or dogmatic.” He truly mediated between conflicting theologies, ideologies and personalities, and was in many ways a transitional man. Through all the scientific, intellectual and theological tension of the turn of the century, Oldham remained firm in his faith in the Triune God.

It is the writer’s plea that Oldham, with all the opportunities for exploration available, will be rescued not only from legendary with its implications of unverifiability but also from its twin brother, oblivion. The ultimate purpose of these efforts as of all missional endeavour will be to glorify God and participate in the *Missio Dei*. 