

The North American Dimension in the United Aborigines Mission - E.J. Telfer's 1939/40 Tour

It was just as the first suspicion of the approaching dawn of a new day began to creep over the eastern horizon that I ventured out on the the deck of the Matson liner, "Mariposa." This was the morning of the 20th day of February 1939, and we had crossed the Pacific in 18 days, including two Thursdays in one week. On the southward voyage to Australia, the passengers go to bed on Saturday night and wake up the following morning to find that it is Monday. The ship's purser told me in confidence that on one such occasion there were six preachers on board, and they were running all over the ship looking for Sunday.

By eight o'clock we were alongside the wharf at the port of Los Angeles, and, after formalities with Customs and Immigration officials, I was allowed to land. As I trod for the first time on the mainland of the North American continent, I felt I had begun a new chapter in my life. God had had wonderfully provided for my passage to the New World, and I had come to tell to the American Christian public the story of the need of our Australian Aborigines. Where should I begin?¹

The decision to undertake such a journey had begun on September 8, 1938 when the President of the United Aborigines Mission read a letter from E J Telfer in which he informed the council that Dr Oswald Smith of Peoples Church, Toronto had offered to arrange a tour of North America.² The Council decided to delay any decision until it had taken the mind of the State Councils as to how the project could be financed.³ It was suggested that each state should contribute £20 towards expenses, that Telfer should sell his car and that for the remainder of the finance the mission should look to the generosity of people Telfer should encounter on his journey. This last point fitted in with the council's concept of a faith mission.

This venture was an international dimension of UAM with North American churches providing finance and man and woman power during the mid-twentieth century. At the forefront of this support was the influence of the missionary statesman, Oswald J Smith, the pastor of Peoples Church, Toronto. In 1938 Smith had visited Australia and on his return encouraged Peoples Church to become involved in the work among the Aborigines. Subsequently, in 1939-1940 E J Telfer toured North America on behalf of the Mission, visiting many of the centres of North American fundamentalism and enlisting support for the Mission. In this paper I want to look at some of the highlights of the tour and the consequences for the UAM.

¹ *The United Aborigines' Messenger*, August 1, 1941, p. 3.

² Federal Council Minutes Sept. 8, 1938

³ *Ibid.*, Sept. 15, 1938

E J Telfer

E J Telfer served the Mission in many capacities over a number of years. He was a pioneer missionary, from 1901, and historian of the mission from its foundation in 1893 until 1933.⁴ Telfer was a graduate of Angas College in South Australia where he was well groomed for the missionary work he would be engaged in. The College itself was run on faith lines with an emphasis on the spiritual and practical rather than academic. One author has commented on the course: "The whole Scriptures (as the groundwork of all effort), Scofield's Bible Course, Expository Lectures, History of Missions, Scripture Introduction, English grammar, facts of the Bible, Nursing Class, Voice Culture, Sunday-school Lessons Preparation, Shorthand and Homiletics" formed the core of the curriculum.⁵

In the early years of the mission he was one of the pioneers, establishing many of the mission stations. He was especially commissioned in April 1906 to establish new works and travelled up and down the coast of NSW on a bicycle holding meetings in various churches. Whenever possible he used a motorised bicycle which was able to carry his equipment, E.g. magic lanterns etc. From 1908 he was based in Western Australia establishing new works throughout the state and again most of the journeys took place on a bicycle.

The Australian Aborigines Mission, amalgamated with the Melbourne-based Gospel Mission to the Aborigines in 1929 and became the UAM. A.E. Gerard recounts:

The Council very early became convinced that there were too many small societies and individuals, without much backing or control, doing a very disconnected work among the Aborigines. We still believe we must unite to make the impact and speak with authority necessary to bring results in the political sphere. An effort towards unity was made, and on 31st May, 1928, we asked the NSW and WA Councils how they viewed an endeavour to obtain closer co-operation, if not union, between at least some of the mission societies, particularly the Gospel Mission to the Aborigines known as the GMA, Mr LW Long's mission known as the AIM and our parent society, the AAM.⁶

Dr JJ Kitchen and CH Nash of MBI and HP Smith of Keswick Book Depot and WL Wright were enlisted to bring about unity between the two organisations. The headquarters were transferred from Sydney to Melbourne and the magazine of the newly formed mission became the *United Aborigines' Messenger*.

North America

⁴ *Amongst Australian Aborigines*, Sydney, 1939.

⁵ W.L. Morton, *Drifting Wreckage: A Story of Rescue in Two Parts*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1913, p. 290

⁶A.E. Gerard, *History of the UAM*, p. 5

Let me share with you a few of the high points of Telfer's visit and some of the people he encountered. On February 20 1939 Telfer disembarked in Los Angeles and was met by Max Zimmerman, a member of the Church of the Open Door. The Los Angeles part of the trip was arranged by Dr Louis Talbot, the pastor of Zimmerman's church. Louis Thomson Talbot was himself a native of Australia, having been raised near Sydney and a graduate of Newington College. He went on to study at Moody Bible Institute and McCormick Seminary. He served in a number of congregational and Presbyterian churches in North America before becoming the pastor of Philpott Tabernacle in Hamilton, Ontario in 1929 and finally pastor of the Open Door from 1932-1948 and President of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles from 1932 to 1952. In 1953 he became chancellor of Biola College and Talbot Seminary was named in his honour. With such a west coast host Telfer was allowed entry into the most important fundamentalist churches in Los Angeles.⁷ He met up with a number of Australians through Talbot, including having Robert Harkness, the musician for Dr R Torrey, Charles Alexander and later Wilbur Chapman, as his accompanist at his first missionary meeting.

From Los Angeles Telfer journeyed north, through San Francisco and Portland, to Vancouver. On the way he met such prominent fundamentalists as Dr A.C. Gaebelein, Charles Fuller and Lettie Cowman. Gaebelein was a consulting editor of the *Scofield Bible* (1939) and one of the most militant fundamentalists in the inter-war period. Charles Fuller was a radio evangelist and co-founder of Fuller Seminary. Mrs Charles E Cowman or Lettie Burd Cowman (1870-1960) was the wife of Charles Elmer (1864-1924). Together they had been missionaries to Japan and founders of OMS International but she is perhaps best known for *Streams in the Desert* (1925).

Travelling across Canada Telfer visited the Prairie Bible Institute (PBI) in Three Hills, Alberta where he addressed the annual Missionary Convention.⁸ He observed:

It is a constant wonder to me how this great Bible School can be maintained with such splendid efficiency in this isolated (I had almost written desolate) region. It is far removed from any city or large town, and consequently many of the conveniences and comforts so easily obtained in our larger centres of civilisation are not available. It may be that this is, in part, the reason why the students trained here are preferred by some prominent missionary societies, for the young men and women are certainly not pampered by needless luxuries; and the conditions under which they are trained are somewhat similar to those under which they will need to labour in the foreign field.

⁷ E.J. Telfer, "What Happened in America", *The United Aborigines' Messenger*, August 1, 1941, p. 3.

⁸ John G Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 71-88.

Dr Maxwell had arranged for his secretary to give me every opportunity to make known to the Faculty and to the students the work amongst our Australian aborigines. On the Sunday night I was privileged to conduct the evening service in the church auditorium of the Institute, and gave the assembled congregation a missionary address, emphasising the power of the Gospel of Christ to uplift and transform men of every tribe and colour; and illustrating this truth by stories of what God had wrought in the lives of some of the Australian aborigines. This service was broadcast over the radio network of north-western America, and must have been heard by some thousands of people both in Canada and the United States. Some weeks later I had quite a number of letters from those who heard the message, asking for more information concerning the work amongst the aborigines.⁹

Telfer was encouraged wherever he took meetings of the widespread interest in the mission and opportunities like PBI were to lead to great advantage for the UAM. His visit to PBI was to prove especially fruitful.

From PBI Telfer travelled eastward, visiting churches and colleges as he zig-zagged across Canada and the USA. The names read like a Baedekers guide Prairie fundamentalism on both sides of the border - Calgary, Medicine Hat, Moose Jaw, Regina, Winnipeg to Minneapolis-St Paul. In Minneapolis-St Paul he preached in First Baptist Church where the minister was the Rev. William Bell Riley, the founder of Northwestern Evangelical Seminary. Riley was deeply involved in the modernist-fundamentalist debates and specialised in defending the Bible against theories of evolution. Telfer was greatly impressed with him and wrote that

This good brother is one of the fundamentalists who chose to fight the battle for Truth within the ranks of the denomination, and, as a champion for the great doctrines of the Bible, he has few equals. I well remember him on one occasion in the Auditorium at the Bible School in Binghamton, New York State, during the Summer heat, at an afternoon meeting, divesting himself of both coat and waist-coat, and concluding his vigorous address in blue shirtsleeves.¹⁰

From Minneapolis Telfer journeyed on to Chicago and that great bastion of fundamentalism, the Moody Bible Institute. Here he addressed over 1000 students, faculty and other employees on a number of occasions as well as various churches throughout the city, including Swedish Baptists, Norwegian Methodists, German Baptists, and Italian Evangelicals. He was also delighted to have the opportunity to address a number of other ethnic groups including, Chinese, Negroes and Indians. One of the highlights of his trip to Chicago was meeting Harry Ironside, the Pastor of Moody Memorial Church, with whom he developed a warm friendship.

⁹ *The United Aborigines' Messenger*, Nov. 1, 1942 p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, March 2, 1942, p. 6.

The next port of call was Detroit which saw him speaking in the Central Church of the "Christian Missionary Alliance", where the pastor was E B Fitch, a former associate of A B Simpson. Leaving the USA behind him once again, Telfer wound his way north through London, Ontario to Toronto where he renewed his connection with his sponsor, Oswald J Smith. Peoples Church was to do much to promote the work of the UAM and to support missionaries in the field. Telfer was amazed at the commitment of the people noting that the church supported one hundred and fifty missionaries and native teachers but did not appear to be wealthy. He observed:

The members are folks from the ordinary walks of life, many of them toiling hard for a livelihood, but they are actuated by a great missionary ideal and passion, and their main objective throughout the year seems to be to save and sacrifice more and more in order to send out still more representatives with the message of Calvary to the multitudes still dwelling in heathen darkness.¹¹

The source of this commitment Telfer believed was the leadership of Smith who had as his motto, "I have seen the Vision, and for self cannot live; life is less than worthless till my all I give." The Australian missionary renewed his acquaintance with Edwin Orr, the Associate Evangelist Pastor at Peoples' Church, who he had first met in Australia at a Christian Endeavour Conference. Telfer also spoke in the High Park Baptist Church in West Toronto, the Dovercourt Road Baptist Church and the United Church in Bloor Street West. Of the latter he noted:

It should be explained that the United Church of Canada is the result of a union of Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational Churches. There were some individual churches that stood out of this union, mainly Presbyterian, and these, on the whole, represent "the old-time religion." There are some outstanding men of God ministering to these groups, and it was a joy to have fellowship with them in the Gospel, and to have the privilege of telling in their churches the story of the work amongst Australian aborigines. We have also made contact with several ministers of the United Church who were powerful preachers of the Word of God.¹²

Telfer's welcome in Toronto was such that he described it as a beautiful "City of Churches".

The Convention movement also played a prominent role in Telfer's deputation work as he visited the Canadian Keswick Convention at the Muskoka Lakes in Northern Ontario and many of the American conventions. Through the Muskoka Convention Telfer came to know Roland Victor Bingham the founder of the conference and publisher of the *Evangelical Christian and Missionary Witness*. From Canada, Telfer once again moved South, to Philadelphia where he visited Eastern Baptist Seminary and a number of churches. In New

¹¹ *Ibid.*, June 1, 1942, pp. 4-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, June 1, 1942, p. 5.

York and again Washington he met Harry Rimmer, the well-known Presbyterian and Biblical Scientist apologist.

This travelogue could continue for some time let me draw it to a close by just making some observations on Telfer's encounters with native Americans in his travels back across south-central USA towards the West coast. Telfer observed early on his trip that "One fears that in many cases the attitude of the white race to the Red Indians was the same as that of some of the early settlers in Australia to the Aborigines. It was extermination instead of evangelisation."¹³ He took every opportunity to engage American natives in conversation and to witness to them believing that his experience with the aboriginals helped in contact with their American cousins. Some were hardened he believed because of the approach of the whites. One Arizonian Indian recounted how he was the only member of his tribe left. Telfer lamented that this too had been the treatment dished out to many Australian natives. In other places he had more positive experiences. For instance, meeting an old Apache Indian who believed in the "old gospel about the Lord Jesus Christ".

The "Fruits" of the Deputation¹⁴

Originally there were some reservations on the part of the UAM council as to the usefulness of such a trip as Telfer undertook. However, these were soon dispelled as the UAM began to experience some monetary and manpower returns. Peoples Church, Toronto decided to support two missionaries in the UAM and chose Mr and Mrs Tom Street who were stationed at Derby in Western Australia to the tune of £12 per month. A lady in Philadelphia sent \$300 for the work in the Kimberleys. The Church of the Open Door also sent funding and candidates were forthcoming from PBI.

On the July 10, 1941 the Council considered the applications of two Canadians, Albert and Alta Sopher of Prairie Bible Institute. They came with recommendations from Dr Maxwell and Oswald Smith. How had their applications come about? Albert and Alta had met in Bethel Baptist Church in Orillia, Ontario, the town made famous by Stephen Leacock's, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*.¹⁵ Both attended Prairie Bible Institute as individuals in 1938 but within a term they were engaged and married the following year.

As Telfer visited PBI during a term break Albert never met him but it was as a result of the Australian's visit that the Sophers became UAM missionaries. As a result of Telfer's address at Prairie the following term one of the lecturers, Miss Dorothy Miller, challenged her class to consider service with UAM. Alta reports that Miller turned her eyes upon Albert and asked if he would go. Albert immediately nodded and said yes. Prior to this the Sophers were

¹³ *Ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1943, p. 4.

¹⁴ Much of this section is based upon an interview with Alta Sopher on July 27, 1995.

¹⁵ S Leacock, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Toronto, 1970. Originally published in 1931. Leacock disguised Orillia with name Mariposa which was the name of the ship on which Telfer travelled to North America.

interested in work among the "pygmies" in Africa. However, they had been knocked back by various African missions because of inadequate education. Albert was given a copy of Telfer's *Amongst Australian Aborigines* to read. After reading the book he wrote to Telfer before informing his wife of the decision. Meanwhile, a lady in the Bethel Baptist congregation in Orillia gave Alta a copy of Telfer's book to read. Alta commented that "God was obviously working in both of their lives."

Through Telfer, Oswald Smith supported the Canadian candidates and spoke in Bethel Baptist Church in order to raise support. Smith also called Maxwell at PBI and challenged him to support the work. Finally Peoples Church promised £12 per month. Albert was subsequently ordained by the Church of the Open Door at PBI.¹⁶ The Sophers arrived in Australia shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbour and went on to serve in the Bombaderry Childrens' Homes, Woodenbong, the Warburton Ranges and finally Mt Margaret. Throughout their ministry with UAM and then later with the Aboriginal Ministry established by Telfer, from 1948, they were supported by Peoples Church. Unlike other Australian missionaries with UAM the Sophers were able to keep food on their table. There were also regular clothing parcels from Bethel Baptist and Peoples Church which meant that they never had to buy clothes. Alta has commented that they were, "Much better supported than the other workers." And she has speculated how the missionaries survived since they appeared to have so very little.

Other outcomes of the Telfer visitation to North America included the establishment of UAM representatives in North America, like the Rev. A Graham in Baltimore.¹⁷ On the January 21, 1943 the Rev. J.H. Bird, late of Los Angeles, forwarded an interesting account to the Council of the work which he and Mrs. Bird had been able to commence amongst the Aboriginal folk in connection with their church at Toowoomba, Queensland. They had first become interested in the Native people through hearing Rev. Telfer when they were in Los Angeles.

The connection with PBI continued to be of importance. A contemporary UAM missionary to the Telfer's, Edward Nash has written in a letter to the author that

A visit from two American in December 1946 was a challenge. Neil Macauley was a pilot in the US army and fought in the war. He was doing a survey for the newly formed MAF. The other was Jackie Burrows who was doing a survey on behalf of the Prairie Bible Institute in Canada. Its purpose was to see if that Institute could support the founding of Bible Schools for indigenous people. We took these two from Mt Margaret to Warbos. At 8 to 10 miles an hour we had plenty of time to talk. In my brief encounter of Bible College I was beginning to see the import of Bible teaching. The mission did not take up the challenge until

¹⁶ At the same time another candidate for the UAM, Miss Alice Baker from Tasmania, was undertaking a correspondence course from the Bible Institute of Los Angeles which was a ministry of the Church of the Open Door. This relationship with the Church of the Open Door is one which needs to be further investigated.

¹⁷ Federal Council Minutes, Sept 11, 1941.

years later... Language was one of the barriers and native missionaries were missing.¹⁸

Conclusion

George Marsden has defined "fundamentalism" in America as militantly antimodernist evangelical Protestantism.¹⁹ Fundamentalism grew to a peak in the USA during the 1920s and centred upon two basic areas: an attack upon modernism in mainline denominations, led by former Princetonians like J Gresham Machen; and, the teaching of evolution in public schools. By the mid-1920s a series of institutions began to be established outside of the traditional denominations. It was some of these institutions that EJ Telfer would visit as a deputationist of the UAM.

As we have seen the story unfold on September 8, 1938 the President of the UAM Council read a letter from E.J. Telfer who was at that time involved in deputation work in NSW in which he informed the council that Dr Oswald Smith, of Peoples Church Toronto, had offered to arrange a tour of North America.²⁰ The paper has looked at this important tour and particularly Telfer's views of American fundamentalism with regard to their support of missions. As Andrew Walls has written, in recent years:

The missionary movement is one of the turning points of church history; the whole shape of the Christian faith in the world has been transformed by it. America's contribution to it has been incalculable. But the history of the missionary movement has never been at the center of Christian historical scholarship; like the practice of missions, it has been in the sphere of the enthusiasts, not of the main tradition.²¹

There is an international aspect to missions seen especially in this deputation work. The response of Australian denominations to aboriginal work in this period was poor and the enthusiasm of North American Christians was encouraging for UAM.

UAM would often go where other missions refused to get involved because the costs in human or monetary terms appeared to be too high or the obstacles impossible to be overcome. Overseas rather than home missions always appeared more attractive to Australian called to missionary service. As A.E. Gerard noted of Annie Lock, one of the pioneering women missionaries of the Mission: "Had Miss Lock done the same work in China or another foreign country, she would have been hailed as a wonderful missionary. because she tends poor benighted aborigines her work was ignored."²² The work of overseas missions also proved attractive to North American Christians and the plight of Aborigines could be placed on the

¹⁸ Letter from Edward Nash to the author dated October 22, 1995.

¹⁹ G Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 1980; *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 1987.

²⁰ Federal Council Minutes Sept. 8, 1938

²¹ J A Carpenter and W R Shenk, eds., *Earthen Vessels*, Grand Rapids, 1990.

²² Quoted in V.E. Turner, *The 'Good Fella Missus'* UAM printed by Hunkin, Ellis & King, Adelaide, 1938. p. 3.

same level as missions to Africa, India or the South Pacific. Unfortunately, often in Australia the Aboriginal was seen as a problem merely to be eliminated. The North American churches came to the aid of the Australian mission at a time when financial support and man-power was in short supply, during the Second World War. The support of churches such as Peoples Church, Toronto, were both an encouragement and a challenge to the Australian Christian community.s.;

This paper has attempted to illustrate another important connection in the trans-Pacific evangelical connection earlier this century that will add to our total picture of the development of evangelicalism around the world.