

by C. P. Hallihan

Part I

 Prologue

Researching material for the *Quarterly Record* and related projects on India, William Carey, Armenia, Afghanistan, the Persian Language, the Ottoman Empire, repeatedly brought one famous name to view – Henry Martyn. He has been beloved of the Lord’s people for nearly

200 years because of the frank record of his spiritual experience and emotions in Diaries and Letters, second only to those of David Brainerd in spiritual impact and fruitfulness. Martyn also challenges us, alongside Brainerd and M’Cheyne, by the sheer volume of work so devotedly and sacrificially accomplished in a poignantly short life. There are abundant sources of biographical material, from the work of John Sargent, Martyn’s contemporary and friend, to the more recent offering by J. R. C. Martyn.¹ *A Quarterly Record*

article cannot cover all this ground, only give a setting for the work of yet another outstanding Bible translator. Perhaps the most succinct summary is in the words of a Victorian footnote:

Henry Martyn, after taking, in 1801, the highest honours the University of Cambridge could bestow, entered the Church, and became Chaplain to the Hon. East India Company. He distinguished himself by his rapid acquirement of the Sanscrit, translated the Common Prayer into the Hindostanee, and performed Divine Service publicly in that language. From India he went to Persia, and whilst there translated the Psalms and New Testament into the Persian tongue. His powers of memory were said to be of the most extraordinary kind. He died of a decline brought on, as was thought, by his zeal and exertions to promote the cause to which he had devoted his life.²

 Cornwall to Cambridge

When Henry Martyn was born in Truro, Cornwall, 1781, John Wesley and John Newton were still alive, and the legacy of Samuel Walker’s mighty ministry as curate of Truro was still a power in Cornwall. John Martyn, Henry’s father, had been an enthusiastic member of Walker’s congregation, and on Walker’s death became associated with the Methodists. It is possible that young

Timeline

- 1759 Charles Simeon born
- 1760-1820 George III King of England
- 1761 William Carey born
- 1776 American Independence
- 1781 **Henry Martyn born**
- 1789 French Revolution began
- 1791 John Wesley died
- 1792-1815 Napoleonic Wars
- 1792 (Particular) Baptist Mission Society
- 1792 Simeon at Trinity Church, Cambs.
- 1793 Carey in India
- 1795 London Missionary Society
- 1796 Jenner’s first Vaccination
- 1797 **Henry Martyn at Cambridge**
- 1799 Church Missionary Society
- 1800 Cowper died. Regency begins.
- 1801 Union of Britain and Ireland
- 1804 British & Foreign Bible Society formed
- 1805 Nelson at Trafalgar
- 1806 **Henry Martyn in Calcutta, India**
- 1807 John Newton died
- 1809 **Henry Martyn in Cawnpore, India**
- 1810 American Missionary Society
- 1811 **Henry Martyn in Shiraz, Persia**
- 1812 Spencer Perceval assassinated
- 1813 **Henry Martyn died, in Turkey**
- 1814 Hindoostanee Common Prayer published
- 1815 Persian NT published
- 1819 Hindoostanee NT published
- 1825 Persian Psalms published
- 1831 Trinitarian Bible Society formed
- 1834 William Carey died
- 1836 Charles Simeon died



Truro, birthplace of Henry Martyn

Henry heard John Wesley preach. From his father, and famously from his younger sister, Henry was much reminded of the necessity of the Gospel and the solemnities of the world to come. His seemingly effortless proficiency in academic matters meant that he went up to St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1797. After one 'false start' he quickly attained first place, carrying all before him.

Outwardly moral, but unconverted, he later looked upon this as a time of misery, when he was mastered by ambition and worldly desires. In 1800 John Martyn died. The realities of his father's religion,

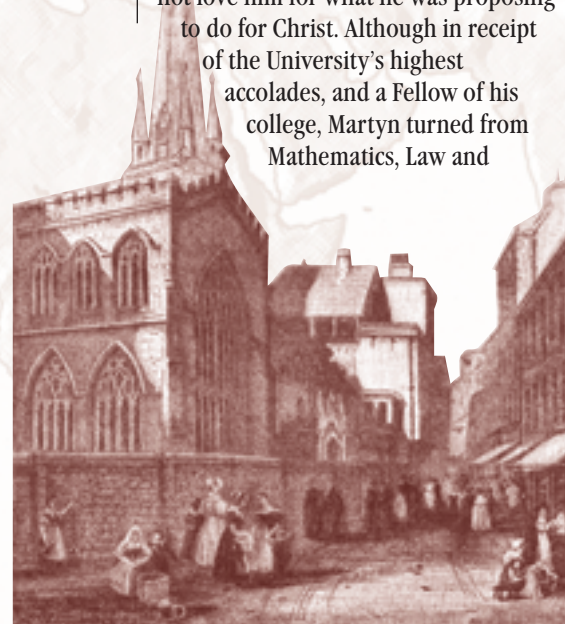
reinforced through his sister's faithful testimony and urgings to read the Bible, at last began to weigh with our scholar. "I began to attend more diligently to the words of our Saviour in the New Testament, and to devour them with delight."³ Brought to recognize the mercy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Henry Martyn was made a new creature. From this time on all that brilliance of mind, driving nervous energy and industry, tender vulnerability and loyalty, were rendered unreservedly to Christ. "The work is real," he recorded, "the whole current of my desires is altered, I am walking quite another way."

His perception of the Scriptures became deeper and richer, and on vacation in Cornwall at this time he records, "For want of other books, I was obliged to read my Bible almost exclusively, and from this I derived great spirituality of mind compared with what I had known before". Though scorned by many for his 'methodistical' and 'puritanical' associations, Henry Martyn appears to have had a childlike delight in the wholeness of his Father's World: "Since I have known God in a saving manner, painting, poetry and music" have had charms unknown to me before".

In amongst this redeemed realisation of the God of all the Earth was a love of language and languages which bore rich fruit. Already at this time proficient in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, he now devoured Hindustani (Urdu), Bengali, Persian and Arabic, among others! When natural gifts are subsumed under the rule

of Grace, what amazing things are wrought by our great God! Henry Martyn is a man being prepared of God to make the definitive rendering of the Scriptures in two great languages.

At this same time Martyn became associated with Charles Simeon, the celebrated evangelical Vicar of Trinity Church, Cambridge. Through the ministry, fellowship and friendship of this much used servant of God, Henry Martyn became numbered amongst the 'Simeonites' and formed friendships in the Gospel that would endure throughout his travels and labours. He also was introduced to members of the 'Clapham Sect', including William Wilberforce, and John Newton, who gently reminded him that Satan would not love him for what he was proposing to do for Christ. Although in receipt of the University's highest accolades, and a Fellow of his college, Martyn turned from Mathematics, Law and



Trinity Church, Cambridge



St. John's College, Cambridge

Classics, and entered the ministry of the Church of England, serving as Simeon's curate, or assistant.

To India

Charles Simeon was mightily concerned with the new bright dawn of Missionary endeavour, and communicated this burden to many of the Simeonites, none more so than his new curate.⁵ At the same time Henry Martyn fell under the spiritual power of the diaries of David Brainerd. Brainerd had died at the age of 29, Martyn was to die aged 31. Both lived intensely, wrought mightily, and esteemed themselves little. Both left in their recorded soul's exercise a testimony that has moved Christians to devoted Gospel service from their days to the present time.

First concerns for Martyn were towards China, but various combined workings of Providence and family necessities brought him to be appointed a

chaplain to the East India Company,⁶ where he should primarily minister to the European community. Martyn's vision extended far beyond that. The journey to India was harrowing, and yet holy, in many ways. As to personal loss and severance, he recorded, "It is an awful, an arduous thing to root out every affection for earthly things, so as to live only for another world". Those affections included his love for Lydia Grenfell, whom he had longed to wed, and probably still did to the end of his life.

A ship's rigging



He now had to endure the vagaries of a sea journey, in the year of Trafalgar, from Portsmouth to Falmouth, to Cork, to Madeira, to Azores, to San Salvador, to Cape Town, to Calcutta. This journey of nine months took almost twice the usual time. Generally the company on the ship was ungodly, and painful to the Cambridge don, now become a Servant of Christ. However, the occasion for Gospel ministry, much good works and exploring of the linguistic opportunities among the ship's company was soundly grasped. Recovering from early seasickness compounded by love sickness, he busied himself with intense language study, his cabin being full of the necessary books. Somehow he also found time to be an active chaplain, tutor, sick visitor, preventer of fights, ever vigilant evangelist and counsellor to crew and passengers alike. In Madeira he honed his French pronunciation by reading sermons in that tongue to a critical audience. In San Salvador he became acquainted with a Portuguese university graduate, and mingled his study of Hindustani with Portuguese, determinedly trying it out on his host's family and servants.

Being taken by his new friend to visit Carmelite and Franciscan monasteries, Henry took opportunity to discuss the doctrines of purgatory, papal supremacy and transubstantiation, in Latin and Portuguese, with the friars. Coming next to Cape Town he somehow became involved in the Battle of Blaauberg as a stretcher-bearer in the most horrid



Map representing Henry Martyn's voyage to India

conditions, climbed Table Mountain, and met one of his own heroes of Cambridge days, Dr. Vanderkamp. He asked this pioneer worker amongst the African people, had he ever regretted his calling? "I would not exchange my work for a kingdom", was the smiling answer of this gospel Elijah to the nervous Elisha about to take up a similar work. Arriving in India at last, in May 1806, he recorded the definitive cry of his soul, "Now let me burn out for God!"

 *In India*

For five months Henry Martyn stayed in the vicinity of Serampore; indeed, his first European connection in India was breakfast with William Carey! The

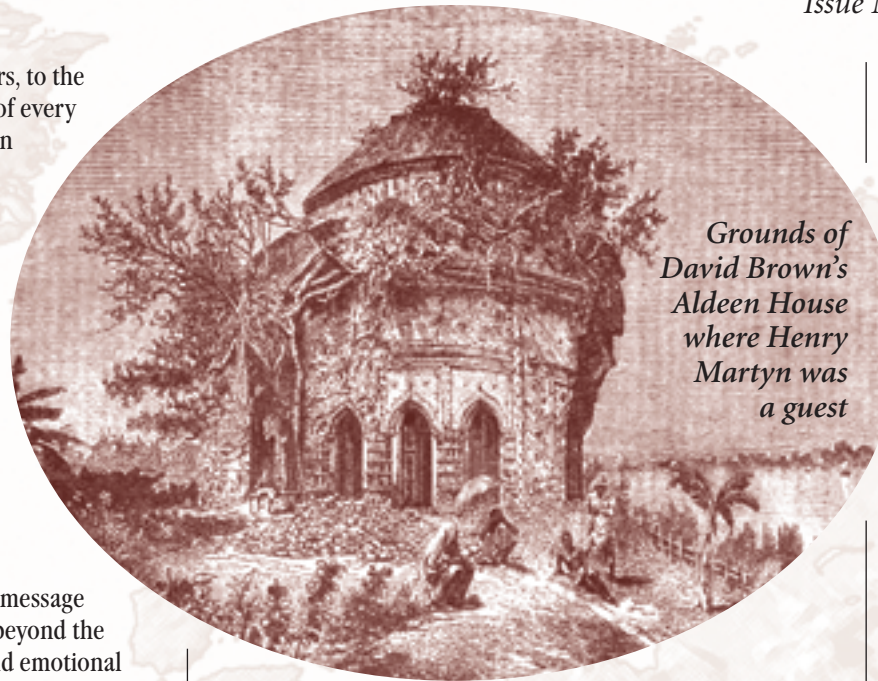
Establishment expectations of the new chaplain were that he would administer conventional morality, carefully graded to suit the social standing of expatriate congregations. His blunt sermons, making application of the Gospel necessity to all without distinction, ruffled many fine feathers. Furthermore, he associated freely with 'natives' of every caste, tribe or tongue, ever striving to communicate in their languages, apparently expecting that the Gospel would bear fruit amongst such poor ones!

The Serampore Baptists delighted in Martyn, so that Carey, Marshman and Ward became lifelong friends and helpers. The more perceptive of the Company clergy⁷ and officials also

recognised Martyn for what he truly was, giving him leave to move inland to an Indian equivalent of ‘regions beyond’, in Dinapore and then Cawnpore. Throughout his time in India Henry Martyn was deeply affected and affronted by the demonic, demeaning, destructive, despairing nature and consequences of the common practices of ‘religion’, Hindu and Muslim, that he found. Yet this fastidious, introspective Cambridge Fellow sought out every kind, in every condition, speaking of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. To the British Military and Government Officers and their ladies, to the common soldiery and their

mixed race camp followers, to the helpless, sick and needy of every ethnic community, Martyn had but one message – repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of the camp followers, by the way, were of Portuguese extraction, and because of his stay at San Salvador, he was able to speak some spiritual words in their own language.

He communicated his message not only to the limit but beyond the bounds of his physical and emotional capacity, sustained only by his utterly realistic spiritual communion with his Saviour. “Oh have pity on my wretched state and revive thy work, increase my faith. Thou art the resurrection and the life – let me rest upon this Scripture”, he records in the diaries, and again, “I find that my wisdom is folly, and my care useless, so that I try to live from day to day, happy in His love and care”. He would preach, in any of two or three languages, in the heat and dust over and over again, until his ordinary speaking voice was but a husky whisper, but still find power to preach again and to dispute and discuss with those who thronged his living quarters. As well as keeping open house for every needy or curious person, Martyn started schools for local children, using newly translated portions of the Parables in Hindustani or Arabic as his texts, and he visited hospitals, reading



Grounds of David Brown's Aldeen House where Henry Martyn was a guest

of Bible Translation. To David Brown he wrote, “Without the work of translation I should fear my presence in India were useless”. In another *Quarterly Record* we will hope to continue with Henry Martyn – Bible Translator, and see how that led him to Persia, and the final journey to Turkey.



Endnotes

¹ A bibliography would be large – ‘Henry Martyn’ in almost any Internet search engine would lead you to most available material. Failing that, the Henry Martyn Library in Cambridge can be approached.

² John Booth, ed., *Metrical Epitaphs, Ancient and Modern*. London: Bickers and Son, 1868, pp. 121-2. In addition, how many men of God have been accorded a poem by J. G. Whittier, or a poetic epitaph, as the following by Lord Macaulay?

*‘HERE Martyn lies. In manhood’s early bloom
The Christian hero in a pagan tomb.
Religion, sorrowing o’er her favourite son,
Points to the glorious trophies he has won.
Eternal trophies! Not with carnage red,
Nor stained with tears by hapless captives shed,
But trophies of the cross! For that dear name,
Through every form of danger, death, and shame,
Onward he journeyed to a happier shore,
Where danger, death, and shame assault no more.’*

³ Full reference to quotations of Martyn’s words would be labyrinthine. All are given in good faith as purporting to be from Martyn’s own *Diaries and Letters*, mostly through John Sargent’s work, though often taken from tertiary sources.

⁴ Later in India he was able to lead worship with powerful singing, and to teach and learn new tunes by ‘warblings’ on his flute.

⁵ Several ‘Simeonites’ who preceded or followed Martyn in India were refreshment and encouragement to him.

⁶ As chaplain he would have an income from which to support his now dependent sisters.

⁷ Especially David Brown, another Simeonite, who was a chaplain in Calcutta, and a prodigious linguist and Bible translator himself.

Pilgrim’s Progress to patients. Under the sovereign shaping of Him whom we style the Potter, Henry Martyn learned in all of this that “the power of gentleness is irresistible and also that these men are not fools. Clearness of reasoning is not confined to Europe”. Some English families of Christian conviction and sympathy, notably the Sherwoods, nurtured and encouraged him, afforded him great joy in the company of their children, and comforted his enduring distress in the absence of his longed-for Lydia. The nurturing became all out nursing at times, as his labours horribly exacerbated the consumptive problem inherited from his mother.

In all that we have recorded we have not actually addressed Martyn’s most consuming labour! That lay in the realm

Indian ‘holy man’, city of Patna

