

Forty Years with the B.M.S.

A REQUEST from one editor to another has the character of a royal command, even when compliance with it necessitates overcoming a reluctance to write in the first person. For I have been asked to relate something about my forty years at B.M.S. headquarters.

I cannot remember a time when I was not interested in missionary enterprise. I grew up in a home where the *Missionary Herald* appeared regularly. It was given away in those days and my father received a copy as a deacon of the church. It was far different from the magazine we knew up to the outbreak of the last war. Tradition says that once a month Alfred Henry Baynes, then B.M.S. General Secretary, took a sheaf of missionaries' letters from his desk and sent them to the printers with the request, "Do the best you can with these," and left details of selection, order and lay-out to them. The result may not have been satisfactory from an editor's point of view, but I, at any rate, felt as I read those lengthy letters beginning "My dear Mr. Baynes," and ending "Yours affectionately," that I was being admitted to the day by day experiences and intimacies of the Congo and China pioneers, and thus the flame of missionary ardour was fed. Missionary stories told once a month in Sunday School by our elderly minister and the monthly missionary prayer meeting also helped to feed the fire, as did the missionary activities of the Christian Endeavour Society.

At the age of seventeen I succeeded my father as church missionary secretary and joined two bodies which helped to shape my future. The first was the Young People's Missionary Association (founded in 1848 as the Young Men's Missionary Association and changed to the London Baptist Monthly Missionary Conference in 1914). This organisation introduced me to the Mission House and to my first piece of service as its organist. The other, the Young Christians' Missionary Union (later the Young People's Missionary Movement) which originated at Spurgeon's Tabernacle, brought me into touch with one of the master influences of my life—Ernest J. Wigney.

Wigney was a pale-faced, black-whiskered assistant bank manager in Fleet Street, whose frail body housed a flaming spirit. In the late nineties he organised and led the young people of Spurgeon's Tabernacle until they were supporting a dozen

missionaries. He drew other churches into the union and set their youth, myself included, to service. He rented an office on the top floor of the bank building as a centre for his missionary activities, installed a clerk to further them, and refused promotion in his profession in order that he might continue to be close at hand. He importuned conservative secretaries at denominational headquarters to form young people's departments so that the future of the enterprise might be safeguarded, and with success at length. He was in the true Carey succession in that he lived for the Kingdom of God and toiled in the bank to pay the expenses.

One day in 1907 Wigney told me across the bank counter that the B.M.S. General Committee led by the new, young and energetic General Secretary, C. E. Wilson, was looking for a young man to serve in its projected Young People's Department and that my name had been recommended for consideration. Personal interviews followed with Wilson and with a small sub-committee, of which F. G. Benskin, then chairman of the Young People's Committee, was a member, and my appointment was confirmed at the April Committee Meeting. I entered the Mission House as a member of the staff on May 20th.

A benevolent watchdog in the person of old John Farrow occupied a porter's box in the entrance hall of the Furnival Street premises. He had retired from a post as coachman and had come to the Mission House for what it was expected would be a short term. Instead he remained for something like thirty years. In those days men could serve if they so wished to a ripe old age. Today we retire at sixty-five. I walked past John's box that first morning, up the main staircase towards my room on the top floor with all the assurance of twenty-two, to be brought back to earth by John's challenge, "Here! Where are you going?" We were all under John's authority in those days.

The Mission House of 1907 was vastly different from the Mission House of today. The sombre building with its gloomy portico and spacious staircases, retained much of the atmosphere of the Victorian era. True, the breeze brought in by C. E. Wilson was beginning to have its effect. But silk hats and frock coats were worn even by some of the juniors. Men formed at least seventy-five per cent of the staff. Now the proportions are reversed. Typewriters were still something of an innovation and a press was used to copy letters in some offices. Internal telephones consisted of speaking tubes. There were no Carey Press, Lectures and Exhibitions Department, or Young People's Department, with their satellites.

I found a preliminary three-point programme had been laid down for the Y.P.D. 1. To foster the formation of study circles.

2. To secure support from C.E. Societies for the maintenance of the Congo Mission steamer, *Endeavour*. 3. To form branches of the Praying and Working Band (afterwards the League of Ropeholders). The first appealed to me strongly, for I had led study circles at Wigney's bidding, without specialised training, on the principle that as swimming is learnt through being in the water, so leadership is achieved through practical experience. It also led me to another directing influence.

It happened that other missionary societies had also appointed men to develop their young people's work about this time. Some of their number, who had previously become friends and colleagues through the Student Volunteer Missionary Union, saw that they could work more effectively together than in isolation. So it came about that my early engagements included a conference at which I represented the B.M.S. The other members included J. H. Oldham (U.F.C.S.), with much experience already behind him; G. T. Manley (C.M.S.), Cambridge senior wrangler and ex-missionary in India; Tissington Tatlow (S.V.M.U.); Malcolm Spencer (L.M.S.) and a few besides. That conference ultimately resulted in the body long familiar as the United Council for Missionary Education (Edinburgh House Press), launched without official sanction or financial capital, with the object of providing first-class graded missionary literature and other educational material for all sections "from the nursery to the pulpit." Its success has been remarkable. Many of its books have become classics. It pioneered in church and missionary co-operation and prepared the way for Edinburgh 1910 and all that followed from that. Its publications, used by churches and missionary societies of many complexions, have played their part in promoting greater knowledge, deeper understanding and closer unity. I pay my tribute to the men I have mentioned, with their academic, cultural and religious attainments, who welcomed me, an ex-articled clerk many years their junior, into their circle and established a friendship that still exists. Most of them have long since passed to other spheres of service or have retired, so that I happen to be the only original member still on the Council.

Study circles grew like a snowball in the years up to the first world war. Their method was novel and appealing. Each member possessed a textbook, a chapter of which was read each week in preparation for guided discussion at the following meeting. The advocates of the method were zealous crusaders. They were certain that its effectiveness as a means of spreading knowledge and shaping well-grounded convictions would remove once and for all any apathy and lethargy in the churches towards missionary enterprise and provide men and means for the realisation of the current slogan, "The evangelisation of the world in

this generation!" Each circle member was urged to draw others in by forming and leading circles, and "Are you adding or multiplying?" became one of our numerous slogans. We even foresaw the day when public services and preaching would give place to the whole Church meeting in study circles! Such are the enthusiasms of youth! It is doubtful whether this method would succeed in these shallower picture-minded days. Like other ventures of the Young People's Department, it appealed to a particular time and situation.

To recount in any detail other doings of the Young People's Department through the years might prove tedious to the reader, but some milestones are worthy of notice. The first Summer School at Folkestone in 1910 with F. B. Meyer, J. C. Carlile, J. R. Wood, J. R. M. Stephens and other leaders in silk hats and frock coats; the formation of The Twenty Thousand; the conferences for members of the teaching profession; the terminal squashes for students in Furnival Street; the development of missionary education and support in Sunday Schools and Young People's Societies; the great Annual Rallies for children and young people in Spurgeon's Tabernacle; and much else. Nor should a reference to the revolt of the Young People's Committee in the 1920's, led by Hugh Martin, another close friend and counsellor, be omitted, when its members protested to the powers that were that I was being taken away to other duties to the detriment of its work. Let it suffice to say that I continued the oversight of the Young People's Department until 1932 when Ernest Payne succeeded me to begin his ever-growing and increasingly valuable service to the Society at headquarters. For the rest, the title of Assistant Home Secretary was conferred in 1927 when B. Grey Griffith became Home Secretary, and that of Editor in 1940 when I followed Ernest Payne and the official drastic paper cuts were made—cuts which still continue to operate.

I have served with four Home Secretaries. John Brown Myers was in the closing stages of his thirty-three years tenure of office when I joined the staff. The relation between his successor, W. Y. Fullerton and myself, approximated to that of father and son. His strength lay in other directions than that of administration. Committees irked him and more than once I have heard him say after a sitting, "Now we can get on with our work," or, "If you and I don't know how to do our jobs, those men can't tell us the way." Which was somewhat hard on devoted committee members. Fullerton was big in every way—body, mind and spirit. His personality was a tower of strength to the B.M.S. especially during the theological troubles of the early twenties. People in all parts said, "As long as Fullerton is at the centre there can't be much amiss with the B.M.S." and they maintained

their loyalty in consequence. He allowed his juniors a free hand. He might not agree with their suggestions or plans, but he would say, "If you think there is anything in them, go ahead and I'll support you." And he kept his word. When in 1917 the Baptist Laymen's Missionary Movement (now the Baptist Men's Movement) was formed and its promoters were looking for a secretary, Fullerton made it possible for me to accept the position saying, "You take it. It is your big opportunity." Sharing the platform with him on many occasions, I have known him to be below his usual form, and I could only conclude that this was deliberate so that the younger man might have his chance.

Fullerton's appointment involved radical changes at headquarters. C. E. Wilson, like his predecessor A. H. Baynes, held office as General Secretary, with responsibility for home and foreign administration. The Committee decided in 1912 that there should be two secretaries of equal status, the one Foreign and the other Home, but that these divisions should not be watertight. Wilson and Fullerton were well matched. They had previously shared an exacting deputation visit to China in 1907-8, and a bond of mutual affection and esteem enabled them to run easily together. In many ways they were complementary. The one revelled and excelled in administrative work, the other was happiest in pulpit and on platform. The one was a master of detail, the other was apt to leave this to others. The one led in the ever-increasing co-operative activities of Edinburgh House, the other was not attracted by them. Both were great-hearted servants of God and of the work committed to them. Each trusted the other with the result that they were true yoke fellows. Wilson was pre-eminent in his support of Summer Schools and other youth enterprises and has been loved by my children since their earliest years.

Far-reaching changes were effected in this period. In 1914 the first steps were taken towards the unification of administration and appeal, when the independent Baptist Zenana Mission became the B.M.S. Women's Missionary Association. The goal in co-ordination was reached in 1925 when all the Auxiliaries—Women's, Medical and Bible Translation—were merged with the main body with a single administration at home and abroad, one missionary staff, one Treasury and one appeal. In these and other major movements, Fullerton was in his element and proved his worth as a tactful and able negotiator. The Society's administration is still the subject of enquiry and action, which is as it should be in a living concern.

In this period, too, the Arthington Fund of over £450,000 became available. The terms on which it was bequeathed involved the appointment of special committees and the setting up of special machinery, plans for spending the money on wise and productive

lines, the carrying out of those plans and preparations for the time when the Fund would be exhausted.

Grey Griffith was and is a good companion and a first-rate talker. We juniors usually took our afternoon cup of tea with him, and would draw him out on some real or fancied difficulty about a text or subject, knowing well that we should receive a lengthy and valuable enlightenment that would serve us in good stead on some future occasion. Among his contributions to the Society, his action which resulted in the transformation of the Annual Members' Meeting from an attendance of less than a hundred individuals to the present representative gathering approaching a thousand should be mentioned. Of J. B. Middlebrook and his able and courageous leadership and administration much could be said. Its evidence is continually before us and we thank God for him as we do for his predecessors. The bond of affection for him grows with the years.

Other comrades of the way include W. E. Cule, editor for thirty years and a great encourager, inspirer of my first attempts at writing and with a flair for giving commonplace efforts the touch of inspiration; and J. R. M. Stephens, whose funeral I attended two days before drafting this article, who showed how vision and attention to detail should be combined in organizing things on a big scale.

The four decades have had their periods of gravity and stress when the road was difficult and obscure. They have also been marked by joy and gaiety. I remember the mirth of younger members of the staff when I perpetrated this in a publication. "Our readers will regret to hear of the serious illness of the Rev. J. R. M. Stephens. During his absence the work will be carried on by Mr. Hemmens and the staff. Our readers will pray for Mr. Stephens' speedy recovery."

Men and women in administrative posts are birds of passage. They miss the inspiration of intimate church fellowship and the joys of settled family life. Their work would be impossible apart from the loving understanding and care of the ladies who have elected to share their lives, and I pay my tribute to the partner of the way who has nobly borne an undue share of responsibility in the home and to whom is due the fact that our children walk in the way we would have them go. On the other hand, visitation of hundreds of churches and periods in hundreds of homes, have resulted in an enrichment of spiritual resources and in the formation of friendships whose value can never be duly estimated.

Forty years have brought vast changes in all aspects of denominational life. Throughout the first two decades the B.M.S. could depend upon a group of wealthy supporters to come to its aid in times of emergency and need. Large deficits were sub-

stantially reduced and occasionally cleared in a matter of hours by a few individual gifts. Those days have gone. The rank and file of the churches is less numerous. Yet the B.M.S. is in a far stronger position today than it was in 1907. Its hold on the churches is firmer and more broadly based. Declining church and Sunday School membership has coincided with an increased missionary staff and an expanding income, which means that practically every church has a core of members whose loyalty to our mission abroad, and to our work at home for that matter, stands any strain and responds to every call. This is the ground on which we rest our hopes as we face a future in which, it is abundantly clear, the work of God throughout the world must make increasing demands and heavier claims upon us all.

H. L. HEMMENS.