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FAITH ON THE FRONTIERS

An important subject demands excellence in his biographer and Oldham has certainly found that in Keith Clements in this exciting biography which is a delight to read. Part of the satisfaction is that everything is so well contexted, and written around which helps with both explanation and the evaluation of significance. Not surprisingly, therefore, the roots of ecumenical activity in late nineteenth-century evangelicalism in general, and student missionary volunteering in particular, are made abundantly clear. Clearly Oldham's stay at Halle, after three years' theological study at New College, Edinburgh, stimulated him to develop a larger vision. Under the tutelage of Gustav Warneck, the father of the study of missiology, he learnt to think systematically and scientifically about the study of missions: the enthusiastic volunteer discovered an academic rigour that was to underpin all his future mission and ecumenical strategy-forming and action. Early sympathy with, and support of, indigenous leadership in the Indian church enabled him to see the shape of future developments earlier than others.

The accidents of his involvement in the organization of the World Missionary Conference in 1910 make fascinating reading. Indeed the chapters on Edinburgh, 1910, provide a fine study of this seminal moment in ecumenical history, drawing attention to how the planning was enticed out of the hands of a body of elderly Scottish divines into the hands of a more dynamic, internationally referenced group, and how hazardous was the preparation, demanding much sensitive diplomacy to balance Anglo-Catholic concern not to confront the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church whilst not entirely stifling North American concern to see Latin America as a potential mission field. Organizationally, the conference was supremely well served by Oldham as secretary, implementing the vision of J.R. Mott with his concern that the conference should be backed up by well-prepared documentation. Oldham was, therefore, the natural choice as secretary of the Continuation Committee which was established under Mott's chairmanship, with Sir George Macalpine representing British Baptists. To his secretaryship Oldham swiftly added the Editorship of the newly launched *International Review of Missions*, a vital tool in implementing the Edinburgh vision.

All was soon to be challenged by the outbreak of the First World War, creating a situation that required much tact and diplomacy of Secretary Oldham, handling with consummate skill such topics as the banning of German missionary activity, for which he had developed a great respect, in the British Empire. After the War Oldham was able to use his contacts in the Foreign Office successfully to secure the exemption of mission property in the Versailles Treaty from appropriations to pay Germany's war debts, as also in wider debate to secure the freedom of missionary activity. Clements traces with meticulous care how all this impacted on the work of the Continuation Committee, whose work became more and more difficult. Out of such difficulties a more robust International Missionary Council was born in 1921, though unfortunately theological controversy led conservative bodies like the China Inland Mission to withdraw at this stage from ecumenical partnership. As yet former German missionaries were not able to return to their mission fields: this required priority action from the Conference of Missionary Societies in Britain and Ireland, who appointed Oldham joint secretary of a committee on relations with governments. This agenda, together with issues such as religious freedom, Christian education, and abuses such as the opium traffic or forced labour, meant that mission executives had increasingly to engage with government. Oldham's most substantial book, his finely analysed *Christianity and the Race Problem*, was published in 1924, and in the following year there appeared his shortest, but nonetheless influential *Devotional Diary*, which was to be reprinted time and again for the next twenty-five years. With the missionary societies, discussions were initiated, first in India and then in China, concerning the fostering of local leadership, indigenous churches, and a national Christian council, seeking to distance the concept of mission from imperial intentions at a time of emerging nationalism.

In modern jargon, Oldham, sometimes called 'Friend of Africa', would be said

to be an expert net-worker. He patiently established relationships with all interested in Africa, her problems and her development: government ministers, civil servants, academics, colonial governors, scientists no less than trust secretaries, mission executives and church leaders. In particular, his friendship with Lord Lugard opened many a door of opportunity. His memorandum, 'Education in Africa' was instrumental in the establishment of a Permanent Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa under the chairmanship of W.G.A. Ormsby-Gore, Under Secretary of State at the Colonial Office. Oldham himself served on the Royal Commission on 'Closer Union in East Africa', under the chairmanship of Sir Edward Hilton Young, which involved Oldham's absence from the Jerusalem IMC Conference. The closeness of Oldham, still General Secretary of the International Missionary Council, to opinion-formers and policy implementers at the Colonial Office is a marked feature of the narrative.

Clements' narrative is a 'warts and all' presentation, and thus there is an illuminating discussion of differences between Oldham and Mott, both in the area of holistic mission, with the need to stand 'unequivocally for justice and brotherhood in international and inter-racial relations', and the methodologies required for pursuing the work of the IMC, of which Oldham remained secretary until 1938, in a rapidly changing context – seen for example in the rise of neo-orthodoxy in theology and the inception of the church struggle in Germany, with its baleful impact on German overseas missions, itself demanding more international co-operation. The new world demanded a new dynamic rather than a reliance on old personalist ways of doing things. Oldham's energies were increasingly devoted to following up his Africa Agenda and the European implications of Life and Work, at a time when there was increasing co-operation between a number of Geneva-based ecumenical organisations. At the same time he was busily involved preparing, in a massively critical context, for the Oxford Life and Work Conference on 'Church, Community and State'. All this is shown to have been part of the pre-history to the founding of the World Council of Churches, the decision on which was taken in 1938, with Oldham once more undertaking much of the staff work. There was also an internal frontier within national life in Britain and Oldham was equally alert to see that this was well-populated by men of faith, properly informed by research and analysis, networking into the world of influence.

If requested for an authoritative introduction to the witness of the church in the first half of the twentieth century, I should be inclined to recommend this book, first because of the extent of Oldham's involvement with so many themes and, secondly, because of the careful way in which Clements helps the reader to understand the significance of the story he has to tell.

Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J H Oldham*, 515pp, pb, T and T Clark, 1999, £24.95.