Anthony Norris Groves 1795-1853

Pioneer in Iraq and India





In 1829, aged 34, Anthony Norris Groves arrived in Baghdad with his wife, Mary, and two boys. They had trekked more than 2000 miles over desert, rocks and mountains to bring the Good News of Jesus to 'the city of a hundred mosques'. Norris went to Baghdad because he believed God had sent him. Some of the earliest missionary societies had already been working in the region for more than 30 years. Their progress had sometimes been hindered by their use of western organisations and systems. Norris was determined to leave behind the clutter of British Christianity. He took his Bible and a determination to teach its truth wherever he went. He had no Mission Board or experienced mentors in language and culture. He didn't even have an Arabic Bible! What he did have was complete trust in the promises of God and a love for everyone he met whatever their background.

He was born on February 1, 1795 in the village of Newton Valance in the south of England. He was the only boy in a family of six children. He was always known as Norris. His father owned a prosperous salt refining business. He was a generous man but he didn't always choose his business ventures wisely. The family had many financial ups and downs. His father's firm determination that money was to be used and not accumulated made a deep and lasting impression on young Norris.

Aged 11, he went to secondary school in Fulham 6 miles west of London. He lived with his aunt and uncle – the Thompsons. His uncle was a prosperous dentist with a practice in Hanover Square. On leaving school Norris studied chemistry with a firm in London and then began his training as a dentist under the guidance of his uncle. His apprenticeship finished when he was 18 and he set up his own dental practice in Plymouth. During his years with the Thompsons Norris had fallen in love with his cousin Mary. Her mother was in favour of their friendship, but her father vehemently opposed it. His main objection was that they were first cousins and he also felt Norris' prospects were not good enough to care for Mary in the way to which she was accustomed. For three years Mary and Norris had no communication as he had agreed this with her father. At this point Mary's sister died and all of a sudden her father withdrew his objections to the marriage. Norris and Mary married in 1816. He was just 21. He moved his practice to Exeter where he thought there were better prospects for his career.

During the years of separation from Mary, Norris had met a number of evangelical Christians. Slowly their influence drew him to personal faith in Christ. Still there was so much uncertainty in his life at this time that it was hard for him to fully accept the truth of what Jesus had done for him. He was so sad about the situation with Mary that he despaired of human happiness and resolved to offer himself to CMS for missionary work. His problem was that he thought more of what he could do for God than of what God had done for him.

Norris came to a settled faith through his friendship with Bessie and Charlotte Paget. They showed him God's truth in the Bible. Finally he came into the joy of full salvation in Christ. Mary wasn't happy about his evangelical friends and his new-found faith. By now they had two sons and a daughter. She wasn't willing to consider the idea of missions.

The family was doing well financially and Norris suggested to Mary that they should put aside $^{1}/_{10}$ of their income to be given away. She was quite willing to agree to this. Her life had been very sheltered up to this point. Now she took on the task of distributing the money. She visited the poorer parts of town. She was exposed to much squalor and vice. In the end this was what led her to a deep commitment to Christ and to sharing His love with others.

The Paget sisters and others prayed for Mary. She still thought she must make herself a good Christian by serving Christ. Later she recalled, **"It was not till the Holy Spirit was pleased to reveal the love of My Heavenly Father in Christ ... that I really had peace or confidence or strength."**

Norris was thrilled at the change in Mary. By 1825 she was united with him in a willingness to consider missions. In July 1825 the CMS secretary came to talk with them. It was agreed that Norris should train for ordination in the Anglican Church. He continued his dental practice while a part-time student at Trinity College, Dublin.

In March 1827, CMS approached Norris and Mary as to whether they would consider going to Persia. The travelling evangelist, James Wolff, had challenged CMS about the last unreached area of the Middle East through Turkey, Syria, and Persia where he felt the Christian Scriptures would be received and read with interest if only someone could be found to distribute them.

Norris and Mary needed to pray much about this. Meanwhile he continued his ordination studies. Over the next months, through a series of events, both Norris and Mary came to understand that ordination wasn't God's plan for Norris. He approached CMS as to whether they would send him as a layman. They agreed to do so, but warned that he would not be able to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This was unacceptable to Norris. He searched the Scriptures and found that no ordination was needed to preach the Gospel. He said, **"To me it was the removal of a mountain!"**

Now determined to respond to the challenge of Persia, Norris and Mary explained their plans to Mary's family. Her father was firmly opposed. Not only did he threaten to cut her off without a penny, but he also spoke of £1000 he had loaned to Norris' father which must be repaid. They were very distressed. They had given away so much that they did not have £1000.

Immediately they set about saving all they could. They made the first repayment of £100 in April 1827. Then Mary's father died quite unexpectedly. On her return to the family home she found he had included her in his will and had also cancelled the £1000 debt, including the return of the £100 already paid. The way was clear for them to go to Persia. In 1828 they sold their house and gave the dental practice to a young relative. They moved in with the Paget sisters in Exeter. Their daughter Mary was five years old. She was a good bright child, but her health wasn't good. They wondered how they could take her overseas, but as they were pondering whether to delay, she died. Norris wrote, **"The Lord decided this also. He ripened her as the first ripe fruit and took her to wait in the hope of a better resurrection."**

Little Mary's death highlighted eternal realities. More and more they saw it as a precious and glorious thing to forsake all for Jesus. Persia definitely appealed to the romantic in Norris as a heroic choice, but was it the Lord's choice? Mary had a quiet and determined faith that it was so and faith in God was all that they would need.

Norris wasn't a great writer, but he felt compelled to write down and share what God had been teaching him. The result was a small 28-page pamphlet entitled **Christian Devotedness**. Many thought his views extreme and impractical. He wrote a preface to address these criticisms for the second edition in 1929.

It was evident to all that Norris acted as well as spoke. He sold his house, gave away his dental practice and was moving towards Persia. He was always in his element sharing the vision of the unreached parts of the earth with groups of believers wherever he could. Still he was keenly aware of bearing spiritual treasure in 'jars of clay'. It wasn't the prospect of man doing something for God. It was the expectation of what God would do through the simplest of men.

Many expressed an interest in joining the Groves, but later they drew back. Mary wrote, **"God has been good in enabling us to feel that, in the end, we shall have those He Himself has chosen for us"**. There were many details yet to be decided. In which of the countless cities of the Middle East should they set up their base – perhaps Bushehr on the Eastern Gulf or Basra right at the head of the Gulf. Both were easily accessible by sea. What about the Persian highlands? How could they decide?

As their departure drew near Norris was invited to meet a wealthy lady. She was an Armenian from Persia. She wanted to ask if she and her servants could travel with his party to join her husband, Major Robert Taylor, who had just been appointed British Resident in Baghdad. Norris

took this as from the Lord and agreed. Mrs Taylor and her party would link up with them in St Petersburg.

Their party was made up of Norris and Mary with their boys Henry and Frank (11 and 9), Norris' sister Lydia, Mr Bathie (a young Scotsman recruited in Ireland), a lady named Charlotte Taylor (no relation to Major Taylor) and John Kitto. John had become an adopted member of the Groves family in 1824, aged 20, when Norris had given him an apprenticeship in his dental practice making artificial teeth from animal tusks. He was profoundly deaf as the result of an accident in his teens. Coming from a very poor family he had spent a number of years in the workhouse. He loved books and devoured information on any and all topics. He had tried to read the Bible and study religious topics but felt it to be only theoretical. It was when he came to live with the Groves family that he saw the love of God in action and came to understand God's love for him. He soon shared with Norris and Mary his deep desire to take the Gospel to those who had never yet had a chance to hear.

Through a 'chance' meeting with a wealthy Christian – Mr. Puget – who owned an ocean-going yacht, the party had free passage to St. Petersburg. They sailed from Gravesend on June 12, 1829 on the Osprey with Mr Puget and Norris' friend Mr Parnell. Bessie Paget travelled all the way from Devon to wave them off. Norris wrote, **"The hand of the Lord is strong upon us all in enabling us to hope in His mercy and believe in His promises. May the Lord in His great mercy keep among us a spirit of love and brotherly union. This is a very earnest prayer of mine."**

Having ridden out a storm between Denmark and Sweden, they stopped briefly at Copenhagen for repairs and so through the Baltic to St. Petersburg. Lydia had not been well on the voyage and it was decided she should return home. They met up with Mrs Taylor and her four servants to continue their journey overland. Moscow was their first destination. The believers they had shared with in St. Petersburg supplied all their needs for the onward journey.

On arrival in Astrakhan at the northern end of the Caspian Sea they recorded that they were very little fatigued and in better health than when they set out. So far a courier from St. Petersburg had been their guide.

In Astrakhan the Glen family hosted them. William Glen was hard at work translating the Bible into Farsi. He had reached Ezekiel. They stayed with the Glens a week and Norris and Mary were blessed by their loving fellowship and the stimulation of discussing together the task the Lord had set before them.

South of Astrakhan was a sandy desert. They joined a caravan with an Armenian merchant and a military escort. In the wooded gorges of the Caucasus Mountains the threat from bandits was very real. Their progress was slow. Their carriages were not robust enough with problems with brakes and wheels. After 13 days and nights with no change of clothes, they arrived at Teflis, which they described as **"a very disagreeable place"**. They sold the carriages and bought German wagons. These were much tougher, but with no springs at all.

Norris was still struggling in his mind over the matter of their final destination. In the next town they would reach – Shushi – he hoped to find friends who could help with language learning. Should they stay there for a while? If so, he would need to escort Mrs Taylor's party to her husband in Basra.

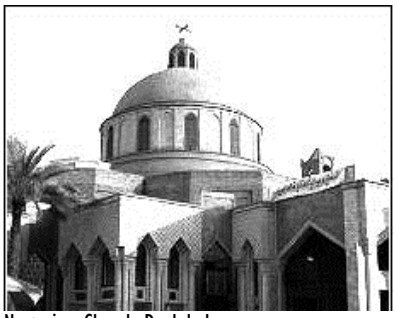
Shushi was a small town perched on a hill. German and Swiss workers from the Basel Mission had made their home there. Norris and his party were blessed by their fellowship. They too had seen the importance of laying aside everything to take God's message of love to those who had so far had no chance to hear it. Norris began to pray that God would call one of their group to join his team. When he shared with them his prayer, he discovered God had laid the same burden on their hearts. They decided to send a young man named Karl Gottlieb Pfander. He was eight years younger than Norris. His wife had died in Shushi a year after their marriage so he was now a widower. He spoke Arabic, Armenian, Farsi and the Tartar dialect of Turkish! Karl and Norris had much to talk about as they continued their journey. A messenger brought news that Major Taylor was now in Baghdad and so that became their destination.

As they travelled on horseback through the mountains of Georgia and Armenia to Tabriz they took six boxes of Bibles, New Testaments and other Scriptures from Shushi. The ladies were exhausted riding side saddle! Their horses were stolen twice. At last they crossed into Persian territory. Norris' journal records that they, **"Had a little evening service together and offered up a hymn of praise where perhaps it had never been heard before"**.

It took seven more days over almost impassable roads before they finally arrived in Tabriz. Here Charlotte Taylor left to marry Mr. Nesbitt of the East India Company. This caused a discussion about the wisdom of taking young single ladies on such a venture, as they were prone to strike up friendships with the many eligible bachelors in the British diplomatic or commercial posts.

A few days later Norris' party joined up with another mixed party of travellers and the caravan moved on through the mountains of Kurdistan. Torrential rain, awful roads, robbers and fierce dogs were the least of their problems. The caravan comprised both Sunni and Shiite groups. Many serious disputes broke out between them. Daggers were drawn and the situation might have escalated had not Karl stepped in to calm them down. This was a dramatic introduction to the racial and religious complexities of the East.

Continuing their journey they met an army detachment and one of the officers was English. He was amazed to find them unarmed. He urged them to go back saying the country was unstable and he would not even feel safe accompanied by two battalions of soldiers. Norris records, **"We told him our confidence was from a higher power than such weapons"**. They continued on their journey, **"In firm reliance on the Lord and therefore with perfect happiness"**. Ahead of them were armed partisans of two brothers fighting for the title of 'Pasha (Provincial Governor) of Suleimaniya'.


Nestorian Church Baghdad

They were able to give the New Testament and other books **to Nestorian Christians. They learned from the priest that** they held a daily service, but read Scripture in a language not understood. There was just one more mountain pass between them and Baghdad. There were many bandits and many in the caravan were robbed, but Norris' party came through unscathed. A month after leaving Tabriz they arrived at the gates of Baghdad on December 6, 1829 six months after sailing from Gravesend.

Major Taylor met the party 20 miles from Baghdad and took them to his home. He was delighted to see his wife and know she had survived the journey so well. He had prepared a house adjacent to his for Norris' party and had provided an Arabic teacher for them. Norris recorded, **"God has put into our hands all we could desire at this point of our mission"**. He planned to make Baghdad a base for outreach to the area as well as for longer treks into the mountains of Persia and Kurdistan.

Their first priority must be language. Which should they learn? Colloquial Arabic was spoken by more than 80% of the population as either a first or second language. Norris and the boys would concentrate on this. For work with women and children Mary would learn Armenian. Karl was moving well ahead with his Arabic with the help of the mullah at the local mosque.

Norris wanted to understand the beliefs of the various Christian sects. The first Eastern sects he met were Armenians and Arabic-speaking Roman Catholics. He saw they were strongly attached to their traditions by racial and family ties, but had little understanding of the Gospel or of a personal relationship with God. He was also surprised to discover that most of the Arab Muslim tribes were Shi'a rather than Sunni. He heard of the Druze who had split off from orthodox Islam and the Yazidis who were said to worship the devil. Norris suggested a project to John Kitto. Could he compile a handbook for future workers describing all the sects, cults and religions of the Middle East?

Norris' group met every Sunday for fellowship, prayer and the Breaking of Bread. They devoted Friday evenings to fasting and prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As the first wave of

culture shock receded, they began to discuss how to introduce the reality of a Living Saviour to the various religious groups. They believed it was important to talk directly about Christ with Muslims and at the same time, "**To awaken the apostate Eastern churches from their slumbers**". If only they came to know Christ, these churches would be invaluable in sharing the Gospel with the Muslims.

One guest to pass through Baghdad was Dr. Montefiore en route to Bombay. He told Norris how he had opened a free clinic for the poor in India. Norris wondered if that might be possible in Baghdad. He was a dentist, but his early training had given him a wide knowledge of medical matters. Would this be a way of winning the trust of the people and introducing them to the Saviour? He decided to restrict himself to ophthalmics as eye disease was a particular problem in the hot dry climate. Neighbours began to come to the house.

Norris removed a number of cataracts and people who had been blind for many years could see again. Many stayed to talk with Karl about spiritual things. One Muslim who believed in Jesus dared not make his new faith public. He hoped to go to India one day where he would be able to change his religion. Norris wrote, "**There is one value in medical practice which I never so fully felt before; that it affords to Muslims an unsuspected excuse for coming to us**".

After two months in Baghdad, the idea came up of opening a school. This wasn't part of their original vision, but he had seen very successful schools run by Christians in St. Petersburg and Shushi. Was this God's plan? He was surrounded by thousands who claimed to be Christians but had never been able to read the Scriptures in their own language. If they could understand the Scriptures, perhaps they would be evangelists among their own people. This vision took root.

A month later they opened a school in the Armenian quarter. The first day 43 boys came and 2 girls. Two weeks later there were 58 boys and 9 girls. An Armenian priest was hired as temporary schoolmaster. Norris and Karl thought long and hard about the curriculum as well as about the method of teaching. Chanting had been the method in the Armenian schools and they had only learned archaic Armenian that wasn't understood by either pupils or teacher.

Some people were asking for English lessons. They thought this would be a route to entry into the commercial and political sphere of British influence in the East. Could English be used as a medium for the Gospel? Norris thought this might be so, "**For people will bear opposition to their own views more easily in another language than their own and thus the truth may slide gently in**".

It was decided to start by teaching the children to read colloquial Arabic. Norris would also prepare English lessons. Would the authorities allow the school to continue? They made this a constant matter of urgent prayer. They were delighted to receive a package containing copies of the Sermon on the Mount in the colloquial Armenian of Shushi. They decided all pupils would learn a verse a day. Many came to the school for religious discussions. They believed God was indeed using it in His plan.

The Groves family was doing well. Mary was expecting a baby in October. She and Norris were more devoted to each other than ever. He was proud of how she was able to create a home and raise a family in such challenging circumstances.

As things were going so well in the school with very little opposition, they considered expanding to include those from Muslim families. They would need a second schoolmaster who spoke Arabic. They ran into a dead end as no Muslim teacher would consent to his pupils reading Christian Scriptures. Two months later, after much prayer, they found an open-minded Muslim teacher. Norris wrote, "**Our new mullah has expressed surprise at the contents of the New Testament and wonders how Muslims can speak against it as they do**". The two schoolmasters met each Sunday to read the Bible together. It was 'the blind leading the blind' but the Holy Spirit could enlighten them both!

Norris felt society was entering a period of crucial change both politically and commercially. He wrote, "**I feel the Lord is preparing great changes in the heart of this nation. However, we are in the Lord's hands and He will bring to pass what concerns His own honour and we will wait and see. A much**

greater opening has taken place since we came here than we could have hoped for and much more will yet again open to us than we can now foresee".

On leaving England Norris' goal had been to blaze a trail for others to follow. He prayed that workers would itinerate from the Baghdad base throughout the whole region. He prepared careful notes about the possibility of Christian work in each place and in each religious faction. They began to get requests to start schools in a number of different places.

The Groves family continued to grow. Mary safely delivered a baby girl on the 10th of October 1830. After nine months in Baghdad improving his Arabic, Karl wanted to spend some time in the mountains of Persia to perfect his Farsi. Originally Norris had hoped to go with him, but with his responsibilities for his family and the work in Baghdad this was impossible. As he faced the prospect of Karl moving on Norris was discouraged that no more workers had come to join them. It was at this point he received the welcome news that a group was on its way to join them coming through France and by the Mediterranean route to the coast of Syria, then overland to Aleppo and finally by boat down the Euphrates to Baghdad. In this group was his friend John Parnell and also Edward Cronin whose wife had died just before their departure. Cronin's elderly mother and infant daughter were with them as well as his sister Nancy who was engaged to John Parnell. Frank Newman was with them as well as an Irish schoolmaster called Hamilton who was a friend of Parnell.

Months went by with no letters from home and no news of the travelling party. Cholera and the plague had broken out in Tabriz to the north and all feared it was only a matter of time till it reached Baghdad. Clashes continued between the Ottoman regime in Constantinople and the Pasha of Baghdad. By March of 1830 the fighting had escalated. Major Taylor offered the Groves household safety in the residency with its thick walls and armed guards. Groves was grateful but didn't accept the offer. He would not have it known that his faith lay in armed men. He believed it was safe to trust in God alone.

By March 1831 the plague had reached Baghdad. Visiting from home to home Norris saw it for himself. It was mainly confined to the Muslim and Jewish quarters of the city where around 500 a day were being buried. They had to close the schools and one of their greatest problems was getting enough water. Water carriers usually brought this house-to-house. As the plague victims grew they stopped their trade. In the first two weeks after the plague reached Baghdad around 75,000 people died. Major Taylor and the British residency evacuated en route to the mountains of Kurdistan. After much prayer of careful consideration the Groves family declined their invitation to join them believing God would have them stay in Baghdad.

These twin troubles of war and plague served to focus their minds on the possible coming of the Lord. Mary especially thought about much about the coming of the Lord. Norris wrote later, **"This spread a gilded halo around every trial. Often she would say to me, 'I never enjoyed so much spiritual peace as since I have been in Baghdad – such an unvarying sense of nearness to Christ and assurance of His love and care'."**

Norris commented, **"The old, heavy, faithless flesh would seek its quiet shelter and retreat under the lofty elms at Exeter, but the Lord never allows the spirit for one moment to desire otherwise than to wait and see the salvation of our God who will, for His own name's sake, do wonderfully for us that our hearts may rejoice in Him."**

Word came from the Taylors that they hadn't been able to get to Kurdistan as the road had been cut off. They now planned to go by boat down the Tigris to the relative safety of Basra. Again they invited the Groves family to go with them. Again Norris prayed and weighed the options. They were not able to go out and about in evangelism in Baghdad. Perhaps they should leave. Again Norris came to the conclusion that the place of danger was exactly where they should be as a testimony to the church and the world. He wrote, **"We feel we owe it to our Lord's love to be careful for nothing – neither to run nor make haste as others, but to stand still and see the salvation of our God"**.

By now about 1500 a day were dying of plague in Baghdad. Their neighbour's son died. The population of Baghdad was around 80,000 and about half had fled. Early in May 1831 Mary fell ill. It was soon evident that she had succumbed to the plague. Norris cared for her day and night and struggled to leave the matter in God's hands. Seven days since they had first seen the symptoms Mary died peacefully. Norris was also sick. After months of weakness he recovered. Their baby girl was sick and he was plunged into grief once again with her death in August.

In May 1833 Norris left Baghdad en route to India. He had long wanted to make an exploratory trip. For the next 14 months he travelled in India visiting many places to see the work of the Lord. By 1834 things were not so good in Baghdad. Should Norris go back and try to encourage the team? Should they join him in India? As he prayed about these things it seemed to him that the time was right to go to England and recruit.

In July 1834 he sailed. They sighted England on Christmas Eve and a week later came ashore in Scotland. Norris looked forward to visiting the little churches he had left, but was apprehensive of his welcome. Disagreements of different sorts had arisen and divided some of the brethren. He wrote, **"A thousand times my heart has said, 'What awaits thee?' and the answer is always: cast the burden of the future on the Lord"**.


East Indiaman built 1797

He set about recruiting. He visited Germany and Switzerland with his brother-in-law George Mueller. In April 1835 he remarried. He had met Harriet Baynes during his preparation to go to Baghdad. In 1833, two years after Mary's death, he had written tentatively to her with a proposal of marriage. She had refused. Now he approached her again and she accepted. In March 1836, with his new wife and a team of workers, he set sail for India on the East Indiaman, the Perfect. By now Harriet was pregnant. Three months later, in July 1836, they came ashore in Madras. They were delighted to be reunited with the whole Baghdad team and especially with Henry and Frank who were now 15 and 17. In August baby Edward was born.

Norris was now 41. His plan was to set up a dental practice capable of supporting the group financially. One of the Swiss girls would earn a little teaching French and the rest of the team would concentrate on language learning. In December 1837 another son, young Norris, was born to the Groves family and in 1850 they welcomed a daughter – Agnes. Towards the end of 1851, while in Madras, Norris was taken ill. This was his first serious illness since arriving in India in 1833. By the summer of 1852 he was getting increasingly weak. He left India for England together with Frank's young wife who was also in ill health. Harriet stayed to look after the school in Madras.

Their steamer sailed from Madras on the 14th of August 1852 and docked in Southampton six weeks later. On February 1, 1853 Norris celebrated his 53rd birthday. As much as his health allowed, he continued to go from place to place encouraging God's people and sharing the vision of India. By April he was feeling a little better. He sent Harriet money for a passage to England. He longed to see her again but was willing to leave this longing in the hands of God.

He moved to stay with the Muellers in Bristol. It was in their home that he died from stomach cancer on May 20th 1853. Harriet, Agnes, aged 3, and their adopted daughter Mary Leslie reached England three months later and only then did they learn of his death.

Anthony Norris Groves was a pioneer in both Iraq and India. He did things that had never been done before. He was a visionary and a motivator. His strength was in stimulating others rather than organising them. He needed to be a member of a team with colleagues who were capable of transforming his vision into a programme of action. The little tract that he published in 1825, **Christian Devotedness**, continued to influence many down through the decades.