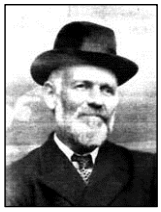
George W. Hunter 1861-1946

Apostle of Turkestan



He was born in Scotland. Sadly his mother died when he was still a small child. This affected his whole emotional life and perhaps it explains his difficulty in being a team player.

Not much is known about his early life, but it seems that he grew up in a believing household in Deeside not far from Aberdeen. We don't know anything about his education. Perhaps the story of his life shows him to be more of a practical person.

He didn't record any specific time when he put his faith in Jesus, but it is clear that as a teenager he was regarded as someone with clear Christian convictions. As a young man he fell in love with a lady called Jesse. It was a great blow to him when she died at the age of 22. She asked that the New Testament George had given her and the letters he had written her should be buried with her. When George stood at her graveside in the cemetery in Aberdeen he made up his mind to be a missionary pioneer. He made an offer of service to CIM (China Inland Mission), but he was not accepted. For some time he worked with the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). He applied to CIM a second time and in 1889 he was accepted and sailed for China.

On arrival in China he studied Chinese for two years in Anking – a city on the banks of the Yangtze River. He found communal living very difficult. At the end of language study he was sent to the newly opened Gansu Mission Station in Lanzhou the capital of Gansu – one of the farthest outposts of the mission. In the wisdom of God it was this posting that opened up to Hunter the road to the then unknown Turkestan.

In Gansu he found it hard to stick to the house rules set in place by the couple receiving new workers. Meal times were to be strictly observed. Hunter did his best to obey the rules but inwardly he raged. If he was having a great conversation with an interested Muslim in the marketplace he was expected to rush home to eat supper and listen to what he called 'chit chat'. He remarked, *"What are we in China for – to eat – to chat or to walk abroad and meet the people of the country?"*

Before long he was taking itinerant trips to and from the base and establishing temporary centres in places such as Hochow in South Gansu where Islam was strongest. He wrote, **"On one occasion while camping on the beautiful mountains near Dangar, I was surprised to hear the call to prayer from the village mosque and discover that many Muslims were living on the borders of Tibet. They understood enough of the language to do business with the Tibetans."**

CIM recommended all workers to adopt local dress, to grow the Qing pigtail and to adopt local customs, local food, eating with chopsticks etc.

The close of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th was a period of unrest throughout the Chinese Empire. The Manchu dynasty was nearing its close and the Muslim revolt was spreading in the North West. The Boxer Rebellion began in 1900. It was a violent wave of xenophobia lasting about a year and was also directed against Christian workers. About 186 Protestant missionaries and children died. Severe losses were suffered by both CIM and CMA. Many Chinese Christians were slaughtered by furious mobs.

So in 1900 CIM sent Hunter back to Scotland for the only home leave he ever had. It wasn't a happy time as he revisited Jesse's grave and suffered sad memories. On February 24, 1902 he was delighted to set sail for China on the S.S. König Albert. On arrival he went first to the base in Lanzhou. Once again he had trouble settling into the atmosphere of a crowded mission compound. He made a plan to set out for Xinjiang. As he started on his journey his diary records, **"This is one of my happiest days in China!"**

He was the first worker to trek across the Gobi Desert and in 1906 he settled in Urumqi the capital of Xinjiang. Hunter was now 45 years old. This was less than a year after the death of Hudson Taylor on June 5, 1905. By the time Hudson Taylor died, CIM had 849 workers all looking to God for direction and support.

Hunter was the first to translate portions of Scripture into Kazakh. He was deeply respected by all ethnic groups, local government officials, the British and Russian consuls and his fellow workers (from afar). He was willing to pioneer alone, but in 1914 he was joined by Percy Mather from Lancashire. Percy had come to faith at the age of 21. He offered himself to CIM in 1908. After spending two years at the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow he sailed for China in 1910.

He had read Hunter's reports and was enthusiastic about his ministry. He contacted Hunter and asked if he could join him. Hunter was hesitant at first and wrote him in no uncertain terms about the hardships of living in Urumqi. Eventually, convinced of Percy's sincerity, he began to believe God might be giving him a fellow labourer in the task and so it proved. They formed a close bond of partnership in the Gospel for almost 20 years. In May 1914 Percy wrote home, **"The more I see of him, the better I like him…. dear old man, I've taken him to my heart and feel as though I had two fathers now. It is a great privilege, joy and honour to be with him."**

Hunter introduced the younger man to the tribes of Central Asia. They itinerated widely covering thousands of miles by mule. They met Mongols, Tibetans, Turkis, Russians, Chantous, Hassas, Indians and Manchus. They were often away for months at a time pioneering in unmapped areas. They were far from the support of other workers. Their whole dependence was on God. Everywhere they went they sold Scripture portions and told the Good News about Jesus. Mather had brought to China his violin from his boyhood. He took this on their long journeys and was able to use it both in public and in private. His playing helped to draw crowds in the bazaars as they shared the Gospel.

They lived meagrely. Their diet was the same every day, porridge for breakfast, a small piece of steamed mutton and a bowl of rice for lunch and whatever remained for supper. Others described them as shabbily dressed. They preferred to spend money on the expensive paper they used in the winter months to reproduce Gospel portions in various Mongol dialects as well as Tibetan, Kazakh, Chinese, Manchu, Russian and Arabic.

On one of their trips a Mongol presented them with a Kalmuk boy who had caused trouble in his own tribe by his wilful ways. His name was Nimgir. Hunter won his loyalty with firmness and gentleness. He proved a valuable servant and companion and he came to confess Jesus as his Saviour.

On arrival in China Hunter had quickly realised the importance of getting to know the Muslims. He wrote, **"When I arrived in China I had practically no knowledge of their being a Muslim community. The first Muslim I met was on the long journey up the Han River between Hanchow and Hanchung"**.

Then, as now, Folk Islam dominated the lives of Muslims in Central Asia. Hunter grew to understand more and more what Paul meant when he wrote, ***"The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God"***. (2 Cor. 4:4)

Hunter constantly sought to learn about new roads and ways of reaching distant places. He walked or rode a donkey or horse. He took only essential travel equipment. He found great hospitality from Muslims but also strong resistance to the Gospel arising from religious fanaticism and ignorance rooted in deep superstition.

Urumqi was a kaleidoscope of races and cultures. It was a unique multilingual world. Although Hunter began his work among local Chinese, his vision quickly spread to all the people groups of Xinjiang. It was there that he spent most of the 50 years of his service.

Although Hunter was alone by choice in his early years in Xinjiang, he really appreciated fellowship with the Swedish Mission Covenant Church in Kashgar and nearby outposts. Their first workers had arrived there in 1894. The Swedish Mission had made Kashgar its headquarters and it is the only place in Xinjiang where a substantial number of Muslims put their faith in the Lord Jesus.

Hunter wasn't a brilliant linguist. Still he could make himself understood and share the Gospel in about nine of the languages spoken in the region. These included, Uyghur, Kazakh, Kalmyk, Mongolian, Qing, Tatar, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Russian and Chinese. Of course he had mastered Chinese long before arriving in Urumqi.

He translated 1 Samuel (1917) and the first 25 chapters of Genesis into Uyghur. Next followed Mark (1920) and Acts (1922). In 1925 he translated some Scriptures into Tartar and in 1927 he translated an existing Cyrillic Kazakh translation of John into Arabic. Some translators of the Swedish Mission were not too keen on Hunter's linguistic style. His aim was simply to be faithful to the original and to make it understandable to the majority of people. He had good help from local people to achieve this.

A new order was imposed on the country with the proclamation of the Republic of China on December 29, 1911. At the insistence of the British consul in Kashgar, George McCartney, Hunter reluctantly cut off his pigtail. Lady McCartney, the consul's wife, wrote in her book, **An English lady in Chinese Turkistan** (1985), **"Mr Hunter was dressed as a Chinese with his hair in a pigtail. My husband insisted on his cutting off this appendage and dressing as a European. Otherwise he might be mistaken for a Chinese and get murdered. He was a big, tall man so none of my husband's things would fit him. We sent to Mr Högberg for a suit of clothes and a hat as they were the same build and we turned Mr Hunter into what he really was – a splendid Scotsman."**

The Republican period was a time of great instability. There were endless riots and disorders. Xinjiang never regained the relative stability it had enjoyed during Yang's autocratic rule. Hunter continued to form as many friendships as he could and treated all people equally with love, kindness and respect. He always made it his priority to make Jesus known. He always refused to publicise numbers of those who had come to faith. In his early years only a few had turned to Christ. After Mather's arrival the number increased. Mather took responsibility for gathering the believers together and appointing/training those who could lead when he and Hunter were away. They were both aware of the political tensions and they wanted to make sure everything was in place for the national believers to grow in Christ and be fruitful in sowing the seed of the Gospel when foreigners had to leave.

In Urumqi Hunter had bought a small piece of land and when Mather joined him they decided to build two small houses side-by-side so that each could have a degree of privacy and be able to receive his own guests. This arrangement worked very well. Their furniture was made from Bible Society boxes that had been used to ship Scriptures. They had a vegetable oil light for reading in the evenings. Hunter pressed on with his translations and Mather worked on a Mongolian dictionary and in the last few years of his life a Manchurian grammar. He was fluent in Chinese and Mongolian and could communicate in Uyghur. He also had a good knowledge of Russian.

Mather wrote a description of Hunter's preparation and printing of the Kazakh Gospels, **"Mr Hunter has laboured heroically at the work. As you know he has been very weak and ill for some time, but he plods steadily away in spite of it all. He has a very good Turki mullah who takes an interest in translation work and has lived for some time among the Kazakhs. He comes for about three hours every morning and the two of them work together Mr Hunter being responsible for the meaning and the mullah for the grammatical construction. In the afternoon we go out on the street together preaching and bookselling. When we return in the evening Mr Hunter sets to work touching up the misprints and folding up the sheets and then spreads them out in order on a spare bedroom floor. When the printing is all finished we invite a Christian to come along and help us. One trims up the pages and other cuts the edges and the other bores and stitches. Truly it is a labour of love as far as Mr Hunter is concerned."**

Both Hunter and Mather believed that their task was to faithfully share the Gospel. The rest was up to God. As long as this had been done by lips and life, the issue was between the individual and God. They passionately believed that if they gave a solitary herdsman, who was probably illiterate, a tract in his own language, someone in his tribe would read it to him and he would hear of God's love. Their partnership greatly enriched them both. They became like father and son.

In 1931 CIM decided a new group of six workers should be sent to help Hunter and Mather. These were Emil Fischbacher, Raymond Joyce, George Fox-Holmes, William J. Drew, Aubrey Parsons and Otto Schoerner. Hunter had been in Shanghai for medical reasons and so was there to meet them and travel with them to Urumqi.

Mounting hostilities between Japan and China meant the route Hunter had taken to Urumqi was no longer possible. After considering all the possibilities they decided to cross Inner Mongolia and The Gobi Desert into Xinjiang by motor vehicle though this route was known to be perilous. They bought

two trucks, loaded them with the necessary fuel, oil, goods and spare parts. Three of the men could drive and two were capable mechanics. This was an adventure of faith! Hunter was now 71 years old. After a memorable journey they arrived in Urumqi on November 9, 1932. They were exhausted but safe. Mather had prepared his own house for the new group and he moved in with Hunter.

In January 1933 ethnic violence erupted again in Urumqi as Muslim forces attempted a coup d'état. Thousands were killed. Emil Fischbacher – the only medical doctor in the group – with Mather at his side, served the casualties of the siege of Urumqi. Both of them succumbed to typhus and they died within three days of each other. They were buried together in a piece of land outside the east gate given as a cemetery by the government in recognition of their great services. Hunter, with the help of Nimgir, built a wall which kept the wolves from prowling around the graves. In 1981, as the city of Urumqi had expanded, loving Chinese Christians moved their remains to a new cemetery.

Recalling those days 60 years later, Otto Schoerner wrote, **"It is difficult to describe those days. We still do not know or understand God's purpose in it all. I am sure some day we will know why".** Hunter desperately missed Mather, his companion of so many years, who had made everything interesting and gloriously worthwhile. Still he knew he must press on with the task God had given him. He focused on teaching and training the small group of believers according to Col. 1:28, ***"We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ"***.

An unexpected comfort came to Hunter in the form of a book called, **The Making of a Pioneer**. It was the life story of Mather written by Mildred Cable and Francesca French. Together with Evangeline French they had spent some time in Urumqi in 1926 preparing for their journey to England across Russia accompanied by Mather.

They were able to visit Urumqi on several other occasions and during these visits the three ladies had been watching and questioning Mather and Hunter about their work which had obviously made an indelible impression on them. They wrote, **"The missionary pioneer is heaven-ordained not man-appointed and blessed is the Society that recognises the divine ordination. In his quiet, unassuming way, Mather showed himself a pioneer in the bold work of re-thinking missions. He never wrote about it. He never attended conferences. He didn't even discourse on the subject. He merely did it!"**

The Soviet soldiers began to suspect that Hunter and the new workers were actually spies. They never knew when they would have to leave. This happened in 1938 when the workers were expelled from Xinjiang. The younger ones left but Hunter refused and stayed in Urumqi. An informer was appointed to keep watch on his house reporting every visitor. His letters were censored and all his movements monitored. Still Hunter was ready to suffer the loss of all things including his own life in his loyalty to his Master and his faithfulness to his commission. He carried on as best he could.

Spies were sent to record all his messages in the chapel. The believers were persuaded to report anything that could be used against Hunter. Since nothing could be found, the authorities forged evidence against him. In 1939 he was arrested, imprisoned and tortured for 13 months by the Soviet secret police. The constant pressure to confess his crimes as an Imperial spy broke his health but not his spirit. He only ever confessed, **"I am a servant of Jesus Christ"**. He was taken out to be executed 7 or 8 times. He wasn't allowed a Bible until the last few months. He recited all the Scripture he had memorised as well as many hymns. Sometimes he was able to share the Gospel with other prisoners in various languages. The constant interrogations almost brought him to mental collapse.

Hunter's arrest was a real blow to the small group of believers in Urumqi. For a while in prison Hunter shared a cell with a German Catholic priest he had not felt free to have fellowship with in earlier days in Urumqi. The authorities had been told about a secret room under Hunter's house. What they found there was just a store of Scriptures in many languages including Russian. These were confiscated and so providentially preserved.

In July 1941 a phone message was received in Lanzhou saying an old man named George Hunter, a British citizen, was arriving from Hami and his fare was to be paid on arrival. The missionaries eagerly waited for the flight. His first request was for a Bible since he had been deprived of all his belongings. They were delighted to give him one. They took him to a place of rest. Three days later it was his 80th birthday.

All who knew him in his long pilgrimage said he was always to be seen with his Bible. He took very seriously the exhortation in Col. 3:16, ***"Let the Word of God dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."***

He read his Bible in English, in Turki and in Chinese. He knew his God. Nothing shook his testimony, **"I am here to solemnly preach Christ crucified"**. He emerged from his hard ordeal triumphant but broken. He had come to know the power of God in a new way, but he had lost his nerve and on the few occasions he let himself speak about his imprisonment, he would drop his voice to a whisper and look round furtively as though he felt himself surrounded by enemies and spies – a post-traumatic effect of his ordeal.

Hunter was released from prison after 13 months but despite his earnest request to be allowed to revisit his old home in Urumqi, he was banished from Xinjiang and flown to Gansu. He was never again allowed to visit the home he and Mather had built together. The Christian community in Lanzhou welcomed him and would have been happy for him to stay in any of their homes, but he insisted on renting a small room near the church. He lived the simplest of lives, caring for himself and preparing for the hour when he might be able to return to Urumqi. He joined the community in Lanzhou for prayer and Bible reading but he wasn't interested in social interaction and spent his time selling books and talking with men in the bazaar.

Once again, in 1944, it seemed the Lord sent Hunter a special blessing in the form of a young Baptist worker named George Young. He was on a tour of the region and as soon as Hunter met him he found a comrade and George found a hero. They talked and prayed together and Hunter cherished the hope that when he returned to Xinjiang Young might go with him. It is easy to understand the spontaneous affection of Hunter for this man since he bore a strange likeness to Percy Mather not just in appearance but even in mannerisms. This couldn't fail to impress those who had known Mather in earlier years.

The attraction was mutual. When Hunter died his new friend who was privileged to share such a short time with him wrote, **"He rarely talked about the secret of his life of devoted service to Christ – his disciplined life of prayer. After each talk and before we retired for the night it was our custom to kneel together beside his bed and pray to our Heavenly Father. Such a holy experience is too sacred for words. The amazing humility and boldness of this man of God, his trust of faith in asking for things, the wide sweep of his intercession which included the whole world, his oneness with the Father's will and his single desire to seek first God's Kingdom – these aspects of his prayer life were a rebuke and an inspiration to me. He showed me more than he was aware – the man who keeps on right to the end is the man whose gaze is fixed on God, whose joy is in God's company and whose heart is pure in its devotion to the will of God."**

Of his first meeting with Hunter George Young wrote, **"The tall and slightly bent veteran with white hair and a beard gave me a gracious smile of welcome as we shook hands and he invited me to his room. It was a real bachelor's room with books scattered about on tables, chairs and bed as well as on dusty shelves against the wall. His desk was littered with Bibles in English, Chinese and other languages as well as papers with translations written thereon.**

He wore a long, shabby overcoat and an old tweed suit, but notice of outward things was soon lost in the fascination of the man himself. He was not a man who would attract the attention of men of the world. He did not impress by his efficiency or his ability. His personality was neither dramatic nor glamorous. He was not a 'good mixer', preferring to live apart from other missionaries, buying his food on the street and cooking it himself. Those accustomed to external judgements would dismiss him as an old crank and politely ignore him, but to the child of God with eyes to see, here was spiritual greatness of the highest order. There was something grand and inspiring about him. One look at his face and his bearing revealed the white purity and shining serenity of a man of God.

Cheerfulness and gentleness radiated from him as he spoke about his work. Gaiety sparkled from his eyes as he related some humorous incident. He was one who obviously enjoyed life, for to him to live was Christ and daily communion with his Lord kept him fresh and alert. His faculties were amazingly bright for a man of 83. He was vigorous in mind and good in memory as he related past adventures.

What an interesting talker he was and what varied interests he had in travel, geography, exploration and languages. Yet one dominant purpose shone through all his talk – <u>the will of God</u> which for him meant bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the needy people of Xinjiang. That was what impressed me – his single-mindedness."

Although he was well over 80 he spent his energy preparing for a possible return to Xinjiang – buying up the necessities and praying for an open door. He rented a simple room as close as he could to the border of Xinjiang in Zangye (then Kanchow). None of his painful sufferings – his imprisonment and the loss of his manuscripts, translations and precious books – deflected him from his set purpose. As long as he had strength, he determined to press on with the task he believed God had called him to. His only response to those who urged him to retire and settle down in Lanzhou was, **"I must go back!"**

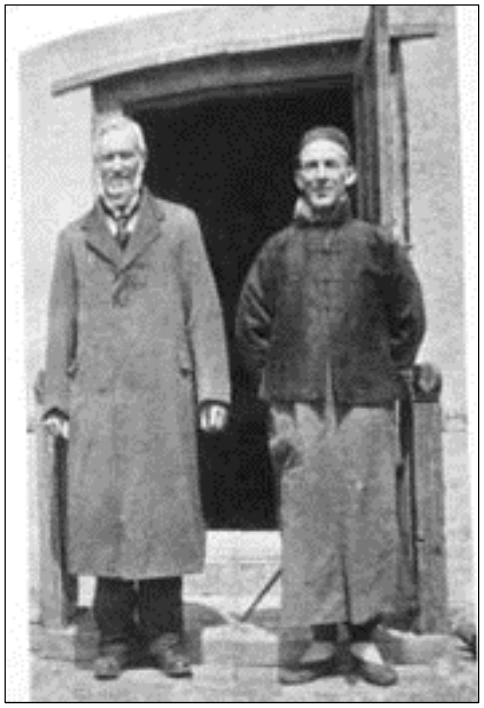
The group of Chinese believers in Kanchow showed real care for Hunter. He had hoped to leave for Urumqi, but on December 20, 1946 he left for the realms of eternal glory after 57 years of service. His body was laid to rest in the corner of the Christian compound. Man's decrees were allowed to close the door into Xinjiang to Christian workers but not to the winds of God's Spirit! They blow as they will and are not subject to the commands of human arrogance.

Did Hunter ever ask himself if his many long arduous journeys might have been in vain? He was someone who fed on the Word of God and that Word doesn't admit of failure except by reason of unfaithfulness.

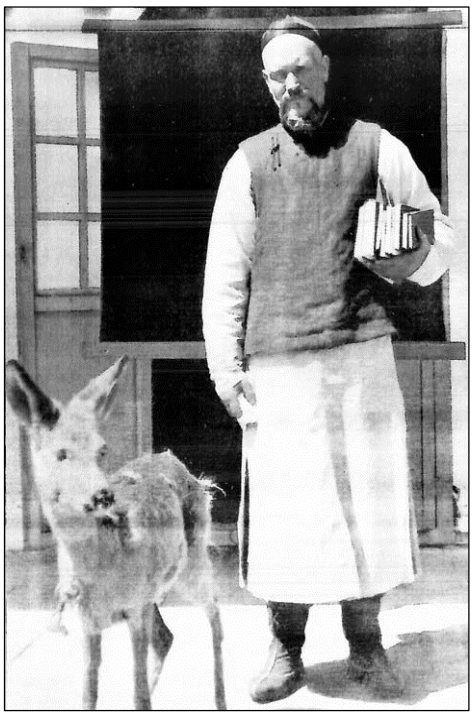
A handful of seed was committed to Hunter and he sowed it in such a way that in his most far-seeing moments he could declare, **"There shall be a handful of corn in the land …. The fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon …. The hand of the Lord has done it …. Blessed be the name of the Lord!"**

According to P.A. Varg in his study, **Missionaries, Chinese and Diplomats** (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958) there was no other period of Christian growth like the first two decades of the new century. In the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising (1900) and the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1912), Protestant converts in China rose from 95,943 in 1900 to 366,524 in 1920. So often spiritual breakthroughs have been recorded in the most chaotic and turbulent periods of history. Two examples are the bloody, abortive Communist take-over in Indonesia that sparked off Christian revivals and the outcome of the Iranian Islamic Revolution which led thousands of Muslims to Christ especially in the Iranian diaspora.

God can still create His divine order out of man-made confusion and rebellion. Hunter and Mather could echo Paul, ***"It has always been my ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ was not known."*** Rom. 15:20.



Hunter and Mather



Hunter and his donkey