

Ion Keith Falconer 1856-1887

Pioneer in Southern Arabia

Friend of the Bedouin



The Hon Ion Keith Falconer was the third son of the Eighth Earl and the Countess of Kintore, Scotland. He was born in Edinburgh on July 5, 1856. He came from a famous warrior family. The first mention of the family was the great heroism of a Keith in a battle against the Danes under Malcolm II in 1010. The leader of the Keiths was appointed the hereditary Great Marshall of Scotland. They built a great castle at Dunnottar in 1380. A later Keith helped start Aberdeen University and built Keith Hall at Inverurie near Aberdeen.

Ion was the third child of four sons and three daughters. Although the blood of noblemen flowed in his veins, it wasn't as great a gift as the gift of his parents, for they loved the Lord Jesus. The Earl of Kintore was an elder in the Free Church of Scotland. Both Ion's parents were deeply spiritual people. Their home in the Hall was noted for its beauty and shone with the love of Christ. The family had their sorrows. Two of Ion's brothers died – one when Ion was 17 and the other when he was 21.

As a child it seemed that the grace of God rested on Ion. It was perhaps to his mother that he owed his sunny disposition. He was bright and didn't have to be amused by others. He was passionately fond of reading. He was only 5 when he began to read the Bible aloud to other children on Sunday afternoons. When he was 7, unknown to his parents, he began to visit people in cottage homes around the Hall and read the Bible to them. The cottagers were amazed at his ability to explain the meaning of the passages he read to them. Ion could never recall a time when he didn't love the Lord Jesus and he became a wholehearted disciple at the dawn of his life.

He started formal education aged 9 with a tutor. Aged 11 he went to a boarding school in Cheam, south west London. Two years later he won a scholarship to the famous public school Harrow. In September 1869 he went to Harrow and stayed until he was 17. His focus was initially on Latin and Greek in which he excelled. But at 16 he switched to mathematics and modern languages – German and French. He left school at 17 having won prizes in mathematics and in German.

Ion didn't excel at the sports played at school. He wasn't a serious student and just tended to study what interested him. He taught himself shorthand. He had a keen interest in the study of Scripture and a simple restful yet thoughtful faith with an eager desire to serve others. At the time his ambition was to be a Free Church Minister.

He had what we would call a 'gap year' before going to Cambridge University. He kept up his study of mathematics, took singing lessons, learned the new sport of cycling and led open-air meetings with Sankey's hymns. He also visited the sick in a parish between London and Cambridge. In October 1874, he went to Cambridge and was a member of Trinity College. He stayed in Cambridge for the next 10 years. In his first year he just studied mathematics. He got a First and won a prize but he also got bored with it! So he switched to theology and from the very first he loved Hebrew and the other Semitic languages – Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic. He won several prizes as the outstanding Cambridge scholar in these disciplines.

By now Ion was 6'3" tall with an athlete's body. There was a rare kindness in his voice and a warmth in his smile that put all sorts of people at their ease. One aspect of his time in Cambridge was his cycling ability. Cycling was a new sport in the 1870s. His record times have now been broken and his distance exploits surpassed, but for two years he was the fastest cyclist in Britain and probably in the world.



He had great staying power, winning against all competitors both in sprints and in long-distance races –against both amateurs and professionals.

Ion was a founder member of the Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union (CICCU). D.L. Moody had visited Cambridge the previous year. After a meeting of Christian undergraduates in the Guildhall, attended by 250 people, CICCU was birthed in March 1877. Sixteen men were chosen as leaders. Ion was one of these. He represented Trinity College.

Ion was also very involved in the Barnwell Mission. Barnwell was the slum area of Cambridge. People were rough and the houses were very overcrowded. Barnwell was similar to the slums of East London. In May 1875, in a hired hall, Ion took part in meetings for these folk. In July 1878, together with others, Ion bought the Theatre Royal in Cambridge as a permanent base for the Barnwell Mission. Ion often helped out at the mission and occasionally spoke.

He was also involved in East London – the Tower Hamlets Mission. His great delight was in what was then termed ‘personal work’ – one-to-one dealing with people. But he did help raise funds to build a 5000 seater hall that was filled with these slum dwellers Sunday after Sunday until the First World War.

In February 1880 Ion settled down to serious Arabic study. He travelled to Germany and stayed several months to work with Semitic scholars there. He was back in Cambridge in 1881 and in April 1881 he met ‘Chinese Gordon’ who died in Khartoum in October 1884. Gordon wrote to him, **“I wish I could put you into something that would give you the work you need with secular and religious work, running side-by-side.”** – a tentmaking advocate in the 19th century!

More and more his thoughts turned to the Arab World and its spiritual need. In June 1881 he wrote, **“It is overwhelming to think of the vastness of the harvest field when compared with the indolence, indifference and unwillingness on the part of most so-called Christians to become, even in a moderate degree, labourers in the same. I take the rebuke to myself.”**

Ion’s classical Arabic was very good by now, but he wanted to build up his knowledge of colloquial Arabic. He went to Assiut in Upper Egypt (200 miles south of Cairo) and stayed with a Scottish missionary, Dr John Hogg. He loved the deserts. He wrote: **“The colouring at sunrise and sunset is beautiful – like apricots and peaches”**. But he hated the slums. He wrote: **“The town is truly and unspeakably disgusting”**. He had to curtail his two years in Egypt because he got severely sick. On returning to the UK to build up his strength he proposed to cycle from Land’s End to John O’Groats (the southernmost tip of the UK to the northernmost tip). Ion rode the 994 miles in 12 days – the first person ever to do so.

In October 1883 he was appointed a Fellow of Clare College and became Assistant Professor of Semitic languages. He taught Hebrew and Arabic and published various translations of Arabic and Syriac manuscripts. These published works gained him much prestige as an oriental scholar.

Ion was still active in the Barnwell Mission and other Christian ministry. In March 1884 he married Gwendolen Bevan and they made their home in Cambridge. Two of his great friends in Cambridge were J. E. Kynaston Studd and his younger brother C.T. Studd. In the autumn of 1884 “The Cambridge Seven” began to form. There was tremendous excitement in the student world, not only in Cambridge but also in the whole of Britain when it became known that C.T. Studd, Stanley Smith, D.E. Hoste, William Cassels, Montague Beauchamp and the Polhill-Turner brothers were going to China with the China Inland Mission.

Hudson Taylor came to Cambridge and had some remarkable meetings. Each one of the seven told why they were going to China. Ion was deeply stirred by C.T. Studd's offer to go to China for he knew Studd



Aden Crater

had a brilliant future in England – an ample fortune, he had played cricket for England in test matches against Australia and he had high academic honours. Studd's answer was, ***“How could I spend the best hours of my life in working for myself and for the honour and pleasures of this world, while thousands and thousands of souls are perishing every day without having heard of the Lord Jesus Christ?”***

In February 1885, the month the Cambridge Seven sailed to China, God spoke to Ion about the vast needs of the Arabian Peninsula and directed him to start in Aden.

There are few more gaunt and sun-scorched places in the world than Aden. It is a barren peninsula of black volcanic rock at the southern tip of Arabia. There is a long, low sandy Isthmus to the mainland of Arabia. The top of the crater is about 1700 ft. high. There is almost no rainfall, but Aden forms a very good harbour. In Ion's day there was a small British population made up of the military and people involved in shipping.

Aden was of strategic importance because it was almost equidistant from Suez and Bombay and was a major coal-fuelling station for all shipping. Aden itself had been British, militarily, since 1839. The territory was only a few miles inland and “the rock” itself. The rest of Arabia was nominally under the control of the Ottoman Empire. But actually various tribal leaders ruled it. By the late 1890s Aden was a considerable trading place with many different sorts of people. Arabians from all over Arabia came and went with their long camel trains making their way into the interior. There were many Somalis and there was also a large Jewish population who had moved down from Yemen.

Aden was much in Ion's thoughts as the result of an article he read in a magazine called “The Christian”. Major General Haig wrote the article. Haig had had a long career in the British Army and he had never lost an opportunity of seeking to spread of the Gospel. In 1881 he had returned from the army and travelled to Persia (as it was known then), Arabia and the Near East with a view to mobilising people to go to these countries. Ion met Haig and as a result, he and his wife felt God wanted them to go to Aden and ‘spy out the land’ as to the prospect of seeing if Aden was a door to Arabia.

There was a chaplain in Aden to serve the British military and visiting sailors. There was also a Catholic presence, but no attempt was being made to reach any local people.

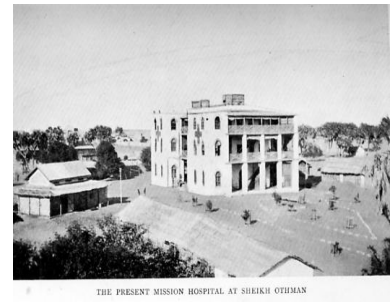
Ion and Gwendolen were sent out to Aden by the Free Church of Scotland. They went at their own expense. They left on October 7, 1885. On their arrival, they made their home in Crater City. It was only accessible on land by a long tunnel cut through the rock. The dense population of the city was Arab and all were Muslim. Ion and Gwendolen's house was up the side of the crater near where the tunnel came through, so the whole town was spread beneath them.

They soon got into a routine. Ion wrote: ***“I begin the day by giving my wife an Arabic lesson. Then I read Arabic all morning. About 4 p.m. I go down to the town and speak to the people, coming home about 7.30-8 in the evening. I always carry Gospels with me.”***

It soon became known that he was a scholar of classical Arabic. Many learned men came to talk to him. They were willing to hear a more detailed explanation of the Gospel. Often in the garden near the great stone tanks and sometimes in his house, he could talk freely with them.

In February 1886 Ion made a journey by camel into the interior to Lahej. He had been warned to be extremely cautious. But because of his knowledge of Arabic, he was greeted warmly everywhere and was able to distribute Gospels without any interference. One man in the interior had previously got a Gospel in Aden and now he pleaded for a whole Bible, which he got!

Ion and Gwendolen saw a strategy for long-term work. They planned to move from Aden to Sheikh Othman 10 miles away. It was a town of about 7000 people. Here there were springs and vegetation and the climate was cooler than Aden. It was just inside British territory. They planned to start a school, a hospital and a vocational training school! The reason was that all local schools were 'madrassas' and children needed much wider skills. They also needed medical help. There was a great need for skilled employees.



THE PRESENT MISSION HOSPITAL AT SHEIKH OTHMAN

They bought a piece of land in Sheikh Othman ~ 170 m x 170 m in late February. On March 6 they left Aden to go back to Britain to recruit personnel. They arrived six weeks later. In May Ion was asked to speak to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. The General Assembly had appointed a new Moderator – Alexander Somerville. He was a very godly man and a great friend of Murray McCheyne.

Before Ion spoke, Alexander gave an impassioned speech on world evangelisation: ***“The privilege and opportunity granted to us today, if neglected, shall never, never, never return! The nations of the world seen standing with outstretched arms and wistful looks are calling to us, ‘Come over and help us’. Could we only see them and hear their plaintive cries, our hearts would be profoundly moved. For my own part, these soft voices of the nations, though in one sense unspeakably sad, have an intonation sweet and powerful as a choir of angels, for in them I hear the voice of Jesus himself”.***

The Moderator introduced Ion as, ***“Perhaps the most distinguished young British oriental scholar alive”.*** He went on to say that he had consecrated himself, his means and his talents – with his brilliant command of Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic – to the task of winning Arab Muslims for Christ.

Ion told the General Assembly, how he planned to set up a school, to promote the wide distribution of the Scriptures and to start up a hospital. He said he was ready to meet the full expenses of erecting the buildings that he would then give to the Free Church of Scotland Mission. He would also provide support for a surgeon for seven years!

In August Ion recruited Dr. Stewart Corwen. Ion and other recruits and potential recruits went roaming over the moors around the Tweed. About this time one of the group later wrote of Ion, ***“Ever his talk was of the Arabs ... to whose utter neglect by the Church of Christ he had awoken not long before.”***

To Ion’s surprise that first summer he was offered the post of Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University after the previous Professor resigned. This was the crown of his academic career! Ion found out that his duties would be very light. He was required to give one lecture each year! Having prayed much about this opportunity, he accepted the job. Ion loved Arabic and he revelled alike in its language and its literature. It always held a wonderful attraction for him and he found a growing delight in its richness. But his acceptance of this prestigious post was secondary to his calling to the Arabs of Arabia. He resolved to give his first lecture before he returned to Aden. He chose the subject, “The Pilgrimage to Mecca”.

On November 9 he returned to Cambridge for the last time and gave three long lectures on successive afternoons. They were widely applauded and many commented on the promise of the future. It was a busy time and during the summer and autumn Ion had many speaking engagements. He spoke about the challenge of Islam and of Arabs. One listener said, ***“It was so unmistakably spoken from the depth of his heart, so touching in the way self was set aside, so strong and emphatic in its statement of the needs of the case and the means of meeting them. As the law is to the Jews, so Islam is to the Arabs – a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ”.*** Interestingly this is a view being revived today.

It was during his last message in Edinburgh that he said what has now become a much-quoted statement: ***“While vast continents are shrouded in almost utter (spiritual) darkness and hundreds of millions suffer the horrors of heathenism or of Islam, the burden of proof lies on you to show that the circumstances in which God has placed you were meant by Him to keep you out of the foreign mission field”.***



Ian and Gwendolen's home in Sheikh Othman

On November 18, 1886, Ian and Gwendolen left for Aden. They went via Cairo where Gwendolen stayed with friends until Ian could find a house they could live in. Then Ian went down the Red Sea where his ship stopped in Jeddah for a while. He arrived in Aden on December 8, 1886. Dr Corwen and Dr. F.J. Harper had also arrived in Aden. After a while Dr. Harper moved up into Yemen but the Turkish authorities expelled him after a few weeks. Dr. Corwen opened the clinic in Sheikh Othman and had about 300 patients in the first six weeks.

Ian was eager to get into the interior so Dr. Corwen and Ian began to take camel-back tours to Bir Achmad and other oases. They made friends with the local Bedouin with the help of medical treatment and the distribution of Gospels – i.e. they were understood to be religious people rather than agents of the British government. Ian's kindness won its way to the hearts of these Bedouin and he was always welcome as the Englishman ***“who spoke Arabic like a book”***! His skill in classical Arabic was not enough and he rapidly acquired what he called 'Bedawi'. He also learned to speak fairly good Somali.

Ian and Gwendolen lived in a temporary little hut in Sheikh Othman (1.6 m x 2.6 m). Gwendolen said it was, ***“A roof on four pillars with walls of lattice”***. They made some partitions for a bedroom and a study. They also made a little veranda. It was in a walled patch of land belonging to an Indian merchant. On the same land they built another hut with mud walls for the patients. While they lived in their hut, a stone bungalow was being built on the land they had purchased.

In mid-February on one of the camel trips Ian developed a very high fever. After three days he began to recover. After three weeks there were no signs of fever but he was far from well. In the following weeks he had repeated fever attacks. On April 4 he wrote to a friend, ***“I am still weak and not fit for much I have had five attacks in eight weeks”***. By May he had had eight attacks. He was carried in a bed and watched the new bungalow go up.

He was regularly receiving quinine since doctors thought it was malaria. On May 6 the final attack came. His brightness impressed all his visitors – especially the Bedouin. He told them that he wasn't afraid to die, but he prayed that God would spare him from pain.

On May 10 he was very weak. He fell asleep about 9.30 in the evening. Gwendolen and Dr. Corwen prayed for him. A nurse watched him during the night until 4.00 am when she lay down as he and was breathing regularly. Gwendolen came to the bed just before 6 am and found Ian dead. Dr. Corwen wrote, ***“His whole attitude and expression indicated a sudden and painless end as if it had taken place during sleep, there being no indication of his trying to move or speak”***.

He died on May 10, 1887 just 6 months after he had sailed from England and 10 days before his 31st birthday. On the evening of May 11 he was buried in the bleak and desolate cemetery situated just beyond the crater – a wild and lonely site in a hollow among the gaunt hills and within the sound of waves lapping on the rocks.

He was dead but his life still spoke! Two brothers from Scotland immediately left to take his place. The 'Scottish Mission' maintained a school and hospital in Sheikh Othman until these were nationalised by the Communist South Yemen government in the early 1970s.

Samuel and Peter Zwemer were stirred by Ion's example and went on to found the Arabian Mission in Basra. Ion died at the same age as Henry Martyn.

"Except a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it will bring forth much fruit." (Jn. 12:24)

The Death of Valiant-for-Truth in Pilgrim's Progress

" 'My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought His battles Who now will be my rewarder' So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."