Nils Fredrik Hoijer 1857-1925

Pioneer in the Russian Empire and beyond



After 45 years as a worker in Russia Siberia, Nils Fredrik Hoijer died on November 20, 1925. At a conference the following year it was said of him, **"Of Hoijer and his life is work many volumes could be written. Many have criticised him – a great man, a hero has passed away. He always had daring plans and they were all for the most neglected to whom no one else would go. He denied himself everything for the sake of mission. If he received encouragement and help, he was glad. If not, he went ahead regardless."**

In many ways he was a century ahead of his time. Some of his ideas would probably still seem too daring both for workers and for home boards. Hoijer had a national vision, but he also valued each person. He would enter a culture and live at the same level as the people.

Always the optimist he tried to make himself redundant as quickly as possible so he could press on elsewhere according to a carefully drawn up mission strategy. Through his actions and his pioneering attitude he showed how important it is for missions to continually reach the most neglected.

He saw that through Russia was an open way to the peoples of Asia. He hoped Scandinavia's Christians would step in and support the Russian Evangelical Churches in their endeavour to reach out. Many have criticised him. Of course he had his shortcomings, but today almost everyone agrees on one thing: **his strategy to build mission bases along the line from the Balkans to China was right.** The work in Kashgar in East Turkistan bore much fruit. Then, as today, Central Asia played an important role in mission to 'neighbours'.

Another passion of Hoijer's was involving Christian groups and denominations in joint activities. Nothing caused him more pain than division. In 1912, together with the Committee for Evangelical Mission in Russia, he took the initiative to begin discussions to coordinate all Swedish evangelical activities for Russia. As only two organisations showed interest the idea never became a reality. Eighteen years later a committee was created to coordinate mission work in Central Asia and the Western Urals. In 1993 this committee consisted of 12 denominations and groups.

His Early Life

Nils Fredrik Hoijer was born in 1857 in Värmland, Sweden. As a young boy he believed in God and often saw his prayers answered. His grandfather spoke to him often of spiritual things and this was a great influence in his life. His father died when he was a year old. As he grew up he helped his stepfather with the sheep on the farm. One day a cart came up the road. The driver stopped and called the boy to him. **"God bless you my boy"**, he said. He gave him a booklet saying, **"Read this and live according to its instructions and you will be blessed"**. The name of this man was Jansson, a preacher from Kvistbro. Many years later they both preached on the same occasion and Nils Fredrik told of that first meeting and how eagerly he had been to read that tract.

As a teenager Nils Fredrik lived with his uncle, the vicar of Ölme. He loved the outdoor life, especially horse-riding, and was often seen bareback without even bothering to put a halter on the horse. These riding skills would stand him in great stead later.

It was time to learn a trade so he went to horticultural school in Karlstad. Sadly he exchanged his faith in God for a careless life of pleasure. His obvious leadership qualities meant he carried his classmates along with him. He did attend Christian meetings but mainly to criticise and argue.

One day they were waiting for the preacher who was unable to come. Never one to sit idle and miss an opportunity, Nils Fredrik picked up a book by Moody. He stepped to the front and said that he was



Chinese evangelists crossing the Taklimakan c. 1940

going to read from it. As he opened the book he remembered that you were supposed to open in prayer. Feeling unable to do this he asked someone else to pray. He then read the message and led the prayer time that followed. He accepted the words of the message for himself and decided that he wanted to begin a new life. His friends wanted to stay with him so instead of careless pleasure their times together were spent in prayer and Bible study. These times were led by a boy who had been saved through his own preaching!

In September 1887 Nils Fredrik arrived in Kristinehamn to begin his studies at the Mission School. Forty young men were his classmates during three intensive terms. Besides classroom studies and the chores there was preaching practice. Students and teachers gathered. All knew the chosen text in advance but not who would be called on to preach! As the person of the day was announced and stood up to preach, teachers marked him/her for poise, intonation, expression, vocabulary etc. They were being prepared for their future responsibilities. In the evenings those wanting to go out as 'workers' did practical training as tailors, carpenters, printers etc.

It was time for his first Mission Assignment. In 1880 Nils Fredrik arrived in Kronstadt the little island on the inlet to St Petersburg. In one hand he had a suitcase with all his belongings and in the other a case filled with Christian literature. He was 23 years old. His assignment was to teach God's Word to Scandinavian sailors.

He had hoped for help from the consul to publicise his meetings and find a venue etc. The consul was very uncooperative having just been in trouble with the authorities because of a Norwegian 'worker' who had been expelled! Nils Fredrik was very discouraged. The one place he had relied on for help had treated him badly. He vowed never again to ask a consul for help. If God had sent him, He would never forsake him. He would rely on God alone. He would go through the doors that God opened and stay until the Russians expelled him.

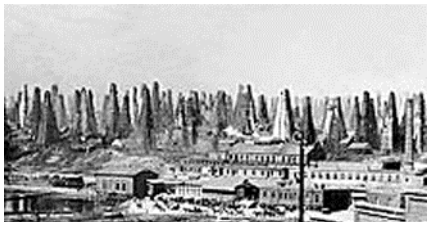
He spent time praying that God would send someone to encourage him, then he went to the harbour with his books. A Norwegian captain approached him and on learning of his mission invited him to hold meetings on his ship. The work developed and grew and many sailors believed in Jesus. It could hardly escape the notice of consul!

One day when Nils Fredrik was going out to the ship the consul was waiting to go with him. He wanted to hear him preach. As he preached he saw the consul was weeping. Clearly God's Word had touched his heart. A few days later he offered to find a venue for the meetings on land. Nils Fredrik pointed out that it was against the law to hold Protestant meetings. The consul responded, **"Is not God is greater than the Russians?"**

Nils Fredrik wanted to build bridges to the Russian police. He discovered a large garden set aside for police officers and their families. One day the gate was open so he went in. When a police officer asked him who he was he said, **"I am a gardener"**. Once again he was thankful for the training he had unknowingly received in his youth. He began to garden for free in the 'police garden'. He wrote home, **"They gave me a key so I could visit the garden whenever I chose. Even the official gardener was put at my disposal to work in the garden."** So he worked in the garden each day and also took the opportunity to learn Russian. Some Russian police came to his meetings and after discussion with the secret police, decided he was doing no harm and could continue unless a complaint came from St Petersburg.

During his year and a half in Kronstadt, Nils Fredrik experienced opposition from both the Lutherans and the Orthodox. Still he saw God at work. He wrote, **"God crowned the work with success. I will never forget the first time I experienced the great joy of celebrating communion in the midst of these newly saved souls. We were gathered around a large table in a room next to our meeting hall. Their devotion to God and**

His things was sincere and deep. We had a wonderful sense of the Lord's presence. As for myself, I felt that nothing could shake my faith in Him or cause the fire in Kronstadt to go out".



Nobel Brothers oil wells in Baku – end 19th century

In 1881 it was decided that Nils Fredrik would make a move to St. Petersburg. It was hard to find a place to meet. Eventually he found a room on the 3rd floor of a building just above a social club so it wouldn't attract the attention of the police to those coming and going. Opposition from the Orthodox priests continued but numbers attending the meetings had grown to about 60. The German church was given permission to hold meetings and they invited Nils Fredrik to preach in their hall. New believers were witnessing enthusiastically and so the authorities cracked down and forbade all meetings. This happens in 1883 while Nils Fredrik was in the Caucasus where he had been sent to check out the possibility of expanding the work.

In 1882 Nils Fredrik went to Baku with L.A. Lydell to see about the work among the 300 Swedes employed by the Nobel industrial plant there. The work was established and over the years it grew to include Armenians, Persians, Bashkiris and even Russians.

In 1883 Nils Fredrik was allowed to return to Sweden to marry Anna Matilda Dahlman. They had met at the Mission School but the mission had a rule that workers must be in the field 3 years before they could marry. Nils Fredrik and Anna returned to St Petersburg. The work grew despite problems with the authorities and the Orthodox Church. It was led by Nils Fredrik and by 1884 there were 140 members.

In 1885 the church had local leadership. Nils Fredrik was being pursued by the authorities and he knew it was time to move on. He and his wife left on a train bound for Odessa. They eventually reached Batumi. The railway to Tbilisi wound its way up the valley of the Pisum River. Mountains surrounded them on every side. This city was the very heart of the Caucasus. It was a centre for many nationalities and people groups. It was extremely strategic for anyone wanting to reach the nations with the Gospel.

On March 4, 1885 Abraham Amirchanjans who had got to know Nils Fredrik in the 'secret' meetings in St Petersburg met him and Anna in Tbilisi. He proved a great support to them. He found them a flat and an Armenian language teacher. Abraham had dedicated much time to translating the Bible into the Armenian dialect spoken near Ararat. The average Armenian could not read the Armenian Bible. The new translation was published in Istanbul in 1883.

In the 1830s there had been a revival in this area in which Abraham's father, Mirsa Faruch, had played a leading part. Persecution had followed and all but the Russian church were forbidden to conduct work there. Foreign workers were expelled.

Now fifty years later the workers were back. Nils Fredrik was commissioned by the mission to make a trip into the Caucasus to look into the possibility of beginning work there. He went from place to place as far as the Persian border. He found many evangelical believers and encouraged them in their faith. Both Georgians and Armenians were considered Christian. Azerbaijanis, Turks, and Chechens were Muslim. Tartars, Ossetins, Lezgins and many other peoples lived side-by-side. There were also Russians as the Caucasus were part of the Russian Empire.

In Tbilisi they had meetings openly with Nils Fredrik preaching and Abraham translating. They had many interesting discussions. But Nils Fredrik felt restless. He longed to go to Schemacha a town in the mountains south west of Tbilisi. He had heard of an Evangelical Fellowship there started by workers from the Basel Mission. The legendary Sarkis Hambarzumoff lived there. Nils Fredrik was very keen to meet him.

Early one morning they arrived in the small town. They met a young Muslim dressed in flowing white clothes and asked him if he knew where Sarkis lived. His response was, "**Of course everyone knows**". He took them to the house. An old man tall and with white hair and a long white beard opened the gate. He had known they would come. A broad smile came across his face. He stretched out his arms



Old church in Tbilisi

placed his hands on Nils Fredrik's head and praised God, **"Now I can die in peace when I see that God has not forgotten my people"** cried the old Armenian.



Anna Matilda Hoijer

He invited them to live with him and immediately offered to teach them both Armenian. They spent much time in prayer and hard work. Soon they could speak Armenian quite well. Nils Fredrik was also able to preach in German with Sarkis interpreting for him. There was already a group of old men gathering. Nils Fredrik was touched when he learned that these men had come to know the Lord forty years earlier when they had first heard Sarkis preaching.

In Schemacha Nils Fredrik and his co-worker, Lamuel, walked up and down between the houses shouting, **"Bring us your pigs' bristle!"** He did want to buy pigs' bristle, but that wasn't his first priority! He realised that if the authorities knew he had come to preach there would be no time for the people to gather before the police broke them up. Sometimes Lamuel would go up the street shouting, **"God's breath for sale!"** In Armenian the word for 'Bible' and the word for 'God's breath' is the same.

The Armenian believers were eager to preach the word and had begun going to the surrounding villages two by two. Nils Fredrik wrote, **"It does seem strange to be a worker down here where one can, in any given moment, be arrested, thrown in jail and deported. But it is comforting to know that this cannot happen without God's permission."**

Nils Fredrik was always flexible and creative when it came to communicating with people. In a new place he would gladly talk about farming or beekeeping. He could tell them where there were ploughs that needed only two oxen to pull them instead of ten like those used by the Armenian farmers. He tried to prove to them the advantages of wooden beehives or hives of hay and sticks rather than the clay hives they were using. When people asked him where he had learned these things they usually ended in deep conversations concerning the Bible. His training as a gardener and his childhood experiences in the countryside came in very useful. Even so he commented, **"I would rather break new ground and plant in the fields of men's hearts."**

Nils Fredrik and Anna became more and more daring in their work. They held discussion meetings in their home and started a small Sunday school. She had learned Armenian quite easily and during the first year she could already share her faith in the new language. They were considering different ways of reaching the homes. Perhaps teaching practical subjects would be a good way. Anna didn't think her skills were good enough to teach others, so they made contact with a woman in Baku and Anna went to learn more from her. She stayed there for two months and when she returned she went to the director of the school offering to teach handicrafts without pay. She was hired immediately and began to teach.

With Schemacha as a starting point Nils Fredrik continued his tours farther and farther afield. Wherever he went he looked for the believers. He always wanted to visit them, even if only for a day, in order to encourage them.

In Schemacha he got to know Patvakan Taranjans a young man from a very wealthy home. He was very eager to visit Sweden. His father agreed with this as he thought there would be enterprising men in Sweden and he wanted someone to come to the Caucasus to start a profitable industry. Nils Fredrik recommended the trade school in Kristinehamn and Patvankan began his long journey.

Nils Fredrik wrote to the friends of the mission, **"You who previously sent workers to Armenia, it is now your opportunity to engage in mission in your own town by leading Patvankan to Christ."** This Challenge was taken seriously and during his stay in Sweden Patvankan did indeed come to know Christ.

He also got to know a Swedish brother who returned with him to the Caucasus to open a tannery. In the years to follow Patvankan became one of Nils Fredrik's most faithful co-workers.


Kashgari girls

The work continued in the midst of much persecution. Arrests and deportations were common. On several occasions Nils Fredrik became involved in helping people flee quoting the Scripture, ***"If they persecute you in one town flee to another."*** (Mt. 10:23) This brought him into disagreement with the mission leaders. During Nils Fredrik's time in the Caucasus two words went hand-in-hand: **persecution** and **vision**. Those back home felt he adjusted to change far too quickly and was far too bold. But he was driven by the vision to press on and not be hindered by a closed door. He wanted to strengthen his brothers and sisters and so make himself redundant so he could forge new paths that others could follow.

He was thrilled when on January 2, 1888 the first Armenian 'worker' was ordained and sent out by the young mission society in Schemacha. The year before six churches had founded an organisation called **The Evangelical Armenian Mission Society.** Later it was changed to **The Evangelical Oriental Society**. The elderly Sarkis Hambarzumoff was elected chairman. Patvankan was the treasurer and secretary. Keeping accounts and minutes was very dangerous. At one point Nils Fredrik kept these in one of his beehives. He later joked. **"Had the police found them they would at least have been well and truly stung!"**

The vision was to establish mission bases like a string of pearls outside Russia's borders from Europe all the way round to China. These could serve as a refuge for workers who, for short periods, could not continue their activity in the country as well as for local believers under threat of deportation or persecution. He didn't want to take everyone to Sweden. At these bases Nils Fredrik would establish schools for preachers to guarantee the development of trained pastors in the churches. He saw the need for such bases in Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Persia, Bukhara and East Turkistan. In this way a door would be opened for the Gospel into Asia, China and India. As he poured over a map of Transcaucasia, Khiva, Bukhara and Turkistan, Nils Fredrik thought to himself, **"There should be workers in each of these places. There are so many Muslims living there and hardly any Christian teachers."** He asked God for direction for the future of the work.

In December 1891 he made a trip to Kashgar. Travelling with him were Johannes Avetaranjans, a Persian brother Mnatsakan – the representative of the British and Foreign Bible Society – and a Russian brother – Aruscharjans. They travelled through Persia just south of the Caspian Sea and through Transcaucasia to Bukhara. From there they covered the 950 miles by train between Usum-Ada and Samarkand.

The governor of Samarkand was friendly and welcomed them to stay as long as they wished but confirmed that they would need permission to travel over the border to China. Now that they were so close they didn't want to give up without attempting to cross into China. They would probably never get another chance. They continued their journey until they reached Ulugqat – China's border post. Their passports were checked but the guards didn't seem to understand them very well and let them enter China. A few days later they arrived in Kashgar.

[It is interesting to note that Johannes (John) was the Christian name given to Mehmed Shukri, the son of a Mullah from Ezerum in Turkey.]

Nils Fredrik and his party were summoned by the Russian Consul. He listened while Nils Fredrik explained in detail his thoughts and visions. He then showed him a book in which was a treaty drawn up between China and Russia dated 1 June, 1858. It made specific mention of the Christian faith:

"The Chinese government admits that the Christian teaching leads people to maintain order and unity and hereby binds itself not only to refrain from persecuting its followers for doing the duties their Christian faith requires, but also declares them equal with members of other faiths in the Empire. We count Christian missionaries as good people who do not seek their own interests and the Chinese government allows those missionaries who carry the recommendation of the Russian consuls or other foreign powers to spread Christianity among its subjects and shall not deny them entrance to any permitted place in the Empire."



Church in Kashgar 1930s

On February 8, 1892 leaving Johannes behind to prepare for new workers who would join him before long, Nils Fredrik and his party began their long journey home. On his arrival he discovered that his wife had given birth to a son fourteen days earlier. Nils Fredrik suffered long periods away from his family. For him the urgency of the work always came first.

In 1896 four 'workers' from Sweden joined him and the base was established. In 1897 they began a satellite work at Yarkant 140 miles south-east of Kashgar. Opposition was severe from the beginning. Local Muslims refused to allow them to rent any residence. They had to live in a garden area. After a number of riots, the Chinese and Muslims together incited riots at Easter 1889. Still they pressed on and saw dozens of Muslims give their lives to Christ. As we often note, opposition seemed to increase receptivity. At one point the 'worker' and some BMB's (believers from a Muslim background) were severely beaten and dragged through the streets, but quitting was never an option.

Slowly local people were won over by their godly lives and their sacrificial service. By 1926, 28,000 people had received treatment at the various medical centres that had been established throughout the region. The 'workers' provided food in famines and clothing for the poor. They ran orphanages and established ten schools. The Bible was translated into Uyghur. Large amounts of literature were distributed – much to Mullahs and Islamic clerics. One report says, "**During the years 1919-1939 the adult communicant members of the Christian Church of the country grew to number over 200 almost everyone coming from Islam and if their children be included, the Christian community has about 500 members.**"

The work started in such a small way by Nils Fredrik and his colleagues grew to become one of the most successful works among Muslims even though in 1938 all the workers were driven out.

In 1894 and the first reports began to circulate about the massacre of Armenians in Turkey. By 1897 as many as 300,000 Armenians had either been slaughtered or died of starvation and disease. A Swedish worker wrote from Tbilisi, "**That something like this is allowed to happen with no opposition at the end of the 19th century is telling of our 'enlightened' time.**" History would show that there would be no intervention and the same barbarisms would be repeated ten years later.

In May 1897 Nils Fredrik travelled to Persia with a German pastor, Fischer, and his wife to organise emergency aid work with money from Germany. He wrote, "**The whole region is full of Armenian women and children who have fled here from Turkey. They are homeless, penniless and dressed in rags. Our first action was to rent three smaller houses in which the most impoverished were allowed to live. Then Mr Fischer organised for the women and children an industrial enterprise which consisted in manufacturing long shirts of the red material. Those who worked were given 20 öre a day plus a lunch of bread, cheese and water. The shirts were given away to those who were in greatest need. Outside our door all day long hungry, exhausted people stood in line. We gave bread to some, others received grain …..**"

The new century started with unrest and uncertainty. The pioneers had followed unbeaten tracks. Their constant question was: **Are there the right conditions in this country for breaking ground and establishing a work?**

Due to some irregularities in the Swedish warehouse in Tbilisi, a problem with embezzlement came to light. This caused Nils Fredrik great distress. He did his best to rectify the matter and tried to repay the debt. He had been travelling a great deal and so been unaware of the situation. Now it was too late to rectify matters. He returned to Sweden to explain matters to the mission. Some wanted to stand with him. Others felt he had developed a far too independent itinerant ministry. He was dismissed from the mission at their conference in 1901. He had always believed that when men shut a door, God opens another one. He was to prove this true the following year.

Brother Ivanov was one of Nils Fredrik's closest friends in Kiev. They had often spoken together of their goals and dreams. There was a great interest in the church in Kiev in unity among all believers



Uyghur man

as well as a common goal in mission work. At a conference in 1902 the Evangelical Missions Committee of Kiev was formed. Nils Fredrik was present at the conference and was the only foreigner to be elected to the Mission Committee. He was given special responsibility to contact believers in Europe and America and bring them into a relationship with the Russian churches.

The concept of sister churches had been born. Nils Fredrik read their letter of recommendation over and over again, **"We ask all Christians to receive Hoijer as our brother in Christ, to assist him in whatever way you can in his work of unifying all Christian churches in Russia to form an Evangelical Free Church and to make it possible for him to work to this end and to invite him to participate in all foreign Christian societies."** He had been sent as a missionary to Russia. Now he was the Russian Evangelical Church's envoy to Russia!

Nils Fredrik wondered how he was to realise the Kiev Committee's goals. He asked God to open a new door. As he preached in Säffle in 1903 his meeting was attended by Pastor C.W. Gillen who had long had an interest in God's work in Russia. He invited Nils Fredrik to his home to talk more about this vision. Gillen decided to meet together with some of his friends in Stockholm. They included wholesalers, a foundry owner and other business people. They formed an association and called Nils Frederick as their 'worker'. He was expected to continue the organisational work already begun in Russia and to try to generate interest and gain support for Russian mission in Sweden and in other countries. This was in accordance with the responsibilities he had been given the year before by the Kiev Committee.

Everywhere he went Nils Fredrik always urged people to acknowledge their responsibility for Russia, **"We shouldn't just send a bunch of evangelists, we should also support Russians. They are the ones who should give the Gospel to the Russians so that a strong and faith-filled Evangelical Russian Church can be established."**

He began to make contacts in England and the United States where he found the work more difficult than he had anticipated. Finally after three years hard work he began to see some results. In order to concentrate on the work in America he submitted his resignation to the Evangelical Missions in Russia from December 1, 1915.

In 1918 Nils Frederick was able to organise the first major conference in America concerning evangelism in Russia. About 4000 people came to the Moody Tabernacle in Chicago. At last Nils Fredrik received support for his growing vision and dream to reach Russia via the Bering Strait and Siberia. His message was simple, **"Along the Pacific Rim in India, China, Japan and Korea the Gospel of Christ is preached. Only Siberia remains. The Lord is now calling us to enter through this open door."**

This was the final challenge for the fiery 63-year-old from Värmland. After an unsuccessful attempt in 1920, he arrived on the Russian side of the Bering Strait the following year. After the revolution of 1917 Russia had been closed to Europe. Now Nils Fredrik was trying the back door. His goal was to find, **"Outside of civilisation's borders, an open door to the Russian Empire's outlying lands"**.

He bought a schooner called the 'New York'. It had a lot wrong with it but it was all he could afford. It ran aground several times and they were forced to spend the winter of 1922-23 on the island of Little Diomedes. Immediately Nils Fredrik began to learn the Eskimo language. He wrote in his diary, **"Missionaries have been called from among rather artificial preachers from the modern schools of our day and sent to the heathen to teach them English without their languages being learned by the missionaries. So few of these languages have been set in writing and few have been given the Holy Scriptures in their own languages. People have tried to bring the heathen a kind of American Christianity in a language that is incapable of reaching the depths of their souls."**

No one on the island could read or write. Nils Frederick was able to develop an alphabet for them using Latin letters with Russian and Armenian additions he wrote, **"The 7th of January was a great day. It was the first Sunday that in our worship service we could use a text written in Eskimo. It was a triumph in its own way."** He certainly put into practice his new motto:

"Do something with what you have. Ask God to help you with the rest."

After several unsuccessful attempts to begin the work in Siberia, an exhausted Nils Frederick took some time in Sweden with his family to recover. He returned to Alaska in 1924. He found an old coastal boat which he remodelled and named 'Ariel'. In May 1925 he sailed for the Domedras. He felt he could wait no longer. He saw in his mind that Siberia was closing and he was growing older and weaker. Sadly the boat hit an undercurrent and veered to the side before running aground. A fire started on board. A passing coastal boat was able to rescue two passengers. One tried to swim and was drowned. The rest, including Nils Fredrik, were rescued two days later. Exhausted and chilled he was taken to the Swedish Hospital in Seattle. There he closed his eyes and went home to God.

During his lifetime Nils Fredrik always had a unique ability to see the value in every person even if they had a modest exterior. He also had a gift in adapting to different cultures. He was an incurable optimist. He only ever saw opportunities while others saw obstacles. He inspired Christians to ground-breaking mission to push forward their frontiers to the most neglected – the unreached peoples – who had never had a chance to hear. He forged a path that many others after him have walked. In Russia, he saw a door to other countries in Asia and dreamed of the day when the entire Russian Empire would be reached with the Gospel. He devoted all his energy to give the Gospel to Russia's hungry millions.

Several times he was deported. He was persecuted but he never gave up. He rejected words like "dangerous", "closed" or "impossible". Nothing could curb his God-given ambition to reach across Russia with the Gospel. When others complained about a lack of resources Nils Fredrik always replied. **"Do something with what you have. Ask God to help you with the rest."** He was a key person in shining the Light of the Gospel into some of the most spiritually dark places on earth.



Nils Fredrik with the Eskimoes



Tibilisi Cathedral 1900