Roger Craig Cumberland 1894 -1938

Martyr and Messenger to the Kurds in Northern Iraq



Roger was born to Julian and Clara Cumberland in La Verne, Los Angeles, California on 16 November 1894. He was the youngest of six children. Little is recorded of his early life. He attended the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois – one of the eleven theological schools of the Presbyterian Church. In his final year he applied to join the Board of Foreign Missions.

He wanted to go to Afghanistan but they had no work there at that time. So in 1923 he was assigned to Dohuk, Iraq. He sailed on board the **S.S. City of Harvard** on February 16, 1923 together with others who were also joining the Mission in that area. Their first stop was Port Said in Egypt on March 5. They reached Bombay by March 21 and on April 8 they arrived in Basra.

They were met by Dr. Van Ess. They stayed the night either in his house or at the Boys School where there were about 140 boys. The next day they took the train to Baghdad. It took 24 hours to complete the 360 miles.

In Baghdad Roger stayed in the home of Robi Pera Mirza, a refugee from Urumia and the leader of 5000 Assyrians who had fled there from the Turks. Roger described him as, **"One of the finest men I have ever met. He has the confidence of the community in a marvellous way here where confidence is an exceptional thing. He preaches on Sundays and very literally "shepherds" the flock through the week."**

A few days later Roger left with Ed Wright for Mosul arriving on April 14. In June and July Roger and Ed made an extensive trip on horseback into the villages of Kurdistan. They visited many different communities including the Yezidi and the Chaldean Catholics. These villages were at an altitude between 1,500 and 12,000 feet. They found the whole trip a very rewarding experience.

In August they had a visit from Mr Owens, the American consul, Roger records, **"We liked him immensely. He is a southerner, grew up on a farm, is as clean and fine as can be and is an earnest Christian. If all America's diplomatic representatives were like him, we would have little to worry about in foreign relations."**

During the winter of 1923 Roger was in Semail studying Kurdish. He hoped to be fluent by the next spring. In a letter home he wrote, **"I am doing well now in my language study. I ought to be able to talk fluently by next spring. I have a mud hut of 10 x 14' a little higher than my head. I have a bed, a chair and a table as well as a good lamp and plenty of books."**

In April 1925 Roger went to Baghdad with the other workers from Mosul to meet with the four workers in Baghdad for a two-day conference of workers from many different agencies in that part of the world under the leadership of Samuel Zwemer.

Three American denominations decided to work together to strengthen the work in their area. The hope was that other mission groups would join them later. The three who joined to form **The United Mission in Mesopotamia** were: the Presbyterian Church in the USA, the Reformed Church in America and the Reformed Church in the U.S. (Union of Presbyterian, North, the Dutch Reformed and the German Reformed Churches).

The autumn of 1925 saw Roger back in Mosul after taking a trip to Persia as a delegate to the annual meetings of the **West Persia Mission**. A severe bout of malaria had hindered him on his return journey but now he was back in Mosul. High on the agenda was the matter of how to take the work forward in Sinjar. Both the Christian community and Ismail Beg, a chief of the Yezidis, had been urging the need to establish a school in their community.



Ismail Beg

Roger decided to make a visit to check out the situation. He was disappointed to find that the Christian community was more interested in getting something for nothing than in any real progress in education and religion. There was already a government school doing a credible work. So he reported that he did not favour setting up a mission school at that time in Sinjar.

However Roger's relationship with Ismail Beg did bring some encouragement. Here is what he wrote, **"The one bright spot on that landscape at present is Ismail Beg. He is a member of the Royal House of the Yezidis (uncle of the chief) and as such he might be expected to be among the conservatives who oppose any change that would curtail the hereditary power of the rulers. On the contrary, he is one of the most forward-looking men in the whole country. Although illiteracy is a tenet of the Yezidi religion, imposed on all except a certain family and the others oppose education and Ismail Beg cannot himself read or write, he is an ardent champion of learning. His oldest son, Abdul Kerim was formerly in our school here in Mosul and is now finishing his course in Baghdad.**

More remarkable is the case of his 8 year-old daughter, Lucia. While on his annual visit to Sheikh Adi – the most sacred shrine of the Yezidis – he arranged for Mrs McDowell to adopt Lucy temporarily and bring her up as a member of the mission household. Think of it! A Yezidi girl being educated! This is the first girl of her people to be educated and should be a most attractive sample to the Yezidis. I am sure Ismail Beg will be pleased, but I'm not so sure of her mother who, although one of the most enlightened Yezidi women, is still suspicious of foreign customs. We are earnestly hoping and praying that Ismail Beg's desire may be turned away from temporal power to the things that are unseen and eternal so that he may seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness ... At any rate we are grateful for one man in this benighted race who is looking for something better."

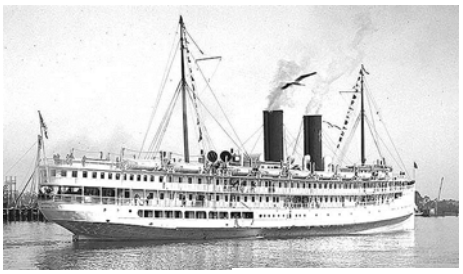
In April 1926 Roger wrote to his mother that he had become engaged to Harriet Gunn the daughter of workers in the Philippines. They hoped to marry the following year. He continued to study Kurdish and to visit many villages especially seeking out the local evangelists to be an encouragement to them and to learn from them.

In a letter home he wrote about how hard it was to describe to his prayer partners the work he was engaged in. He wrote as follows, **"Do not imagine, my friends, that you can get in adequate idea of 'missionarying' from what I write. There is no substitute for experience. I am sorry that most of you will never have the chance to learn it that way for it is a great life. Yet the essence of it is simply doing the will of God – each one bearing true and faithful witness to the truth as it is in Christ Jesus whatever the place and the circumstances. The impression we get of America from this distance persuades me that the witness is needed there quite as much as here. Try it! It is a great life, the only kind of life that is fit to be eternal."**

Describing the year 1926, Roger wrote, **"The old year has gone. In many ways it has been a good year for Mosul station. The regular work of church and school and evangelism has been carried on. The Protestant church is a good deal of a disappointment to us. The tendency of the members to let the missionaries do it is very strong and we have not yet succeeded in overcoming it. The Girls' School, including a kindergarten for both boys and girls, has been a notable success in spite of a good many handicaps and perplexities. Our helpers in the outfield, mostly in Kurdish and Yezidi villages, have been faithful and diligent in their work though statistical results do not loom very large."**

Two important events occurred in Roger's life during the year 1926. His mother died in May and he became a landholder in Kurdistan with a plot of about 1000 acres. It was very significant to him that the foundation of his new home on this plot was laid before his mother's death and the dissolution of his old home. He had great hopes that he and Harriet may be able to get married in 1927 during his first furlough.

In April 1927 King Faisal visited Mosul for the formal opening of the drilling operations that were to bring much material prosperity to the country. Most foreign workers were from California. Roger was delighted that he was able to shake hands with the king.



S.S. City of Harvard

At the end of September 1927 Roger sailed for Manila on board the **S.S. Suma Maru**. The date planned for the wedding of Roger and Harriet was October 14.

In December 1927 Roger wrote from Dohuk, **"I came up here more than a week ago. This is a Kurdish village or rather a town since it has a bazaar and is one of the principal gateways to Kurdistan. I'm working on the language and getting in touch with the people. There is a community of about 400 Assyrian refugees here. Last Sunday I was asked to preach at their church, called the Nestorian church. I asked for a passage of Scripture to be read in Syriac and in the whole community, including two priests, there was not a Bible to be found! As you might guess, such a "Christian" community is no help to missionary work among Kurds."**

After a very busy furlough in America Roger and Harriet started their return journey sailing on the **S.S. Minnesota** on August 18. Their first port of call was London. They hoped to see at least a little of Britain before continuing on to sail from Naples on the **S.S. Brasile** on September 18 briefly visiting Istanbul and Pireaus and arriving in Beirut September 26. The journey from Beirut to Mosul by car would then take three or four days.

Roger wrote home in November 1929, **"From our house top in Mosul in the winter we can clearly see the snow-capped mountains to the north. That is typical of our situation. We have, of necessity, spent most of our time in Mosul, but our eyes and plans are ever towards Kurdistan.**

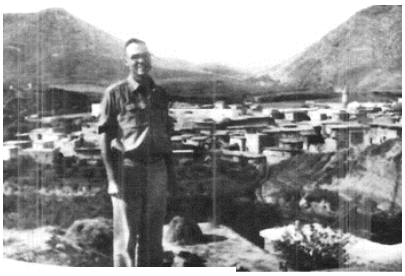
Probably the most significant single event of the year has been our acquisition this last summer of a long coveted building site in the town of Dohuk 50 miles north of Mosul. When the winter rains are over we expect to begin building some sort of shelter. Whether it is to be a mudbrick hut or a black tent or something else remains to be seen but we are both most eager to be settled there."

In December 1929 Roger and Harriet had the sad experience of a complicated delivery and the death of their first baby – David – after just a week. In 1931 a second pregnancy ended in an induced termination at about seven months. A tiny baby girl was born who only lived for two hours.

In a letter home in June 1932 Harriet wrote, **"During these last months I think I've learned more about Kurdish women and their lives and mental processes that in all the time I'd been out here before. They come calling on me in such flocks that I can't keep up with them despite days of returning calls and it's a delight to realise now and then that acquaintances are growing into friendships. I must confess that as a missionary I feel <u>more</u> of a beginner rather than <u>less</u> as time goes on and I get deeper into it. I'm also discouraged about language. The more Kurdish I know the more hampered I feel by the limitations of my knowledge and of the language itself in expressing spiritual things. But these difficulties throw one back for heartening on the personal friendliness that is so readily offered and which must be the basis for a spiritual contribution to be given and received. This renews the conviction that in the last analysis it is demonstration of the experience of Christ on which we must rely more than on talk about it."**

Roger wrote home in the same letter about how the depression was affecting Iraq. Since the people were used to simple living they were managing quite well except for one group. **"But there is one group of Iraqis on the verge of starvation: the Bedouin tribes. There is neither grass nor water this year in their regions. The government has granted them permission to bring their camels to the more favoured parts of the country to the dismay of the settled Arabs and Kurds and Assyrians and Yezidis. But so far the arrangement has been accomplished peaceably."**

Commenting on the political situation he says, **"I'm not able to discover any sound basis at present for an independent Iraq. I think there are not to be found enough men of ability and integrity to perform the**



Roger in Dohuk

functions of government. The desert Arabs have no love for central authority and the Kurds of the mountains less than that. Then there is the ever present Assyrian problem. This nominally Christian group still consider themselves refugees and call on the world to rescue them.

In all this confusion we have been leading a rather quiet life. There is never time for all we want to do. Our primitive living conditions require more of our time for chores around the house than we like to spend.

A major accomplishment that took a good deal of my time and a lot of money but is worth it all is the bringing of a water supply. Now instead of donkey loads from the nearby stream or the more distant spring, a constant and pure supply comes by pipe from a spring on the mountainside nearly a mile away and the surplus supplies the neighbourhood.

Yesterday we got a real thrill; the title deed to our place here in Dohuk was delivered. Just recently I've been spending some time making a court for the Dohuk Tennis Club of which the local governor and I are the chief promoters. I count both the water supply and the tennis court as real contributions to the life of the community but they are not exactly what I came here for! The work shows less tangible results than these other things! Yet I think that real progress can be reported in the attitude of the community in general. I see a real decrease of prejudice and openness of mind towards us and our message that may be, by God's good grace, the harbinger of a living Christian church in Kurdistan."

In July 1932 Roger and Harriet had an on-Field break in Lebanon. They were looking forward to the arrival of Harriet's family in early August en route back to the Far East. They planned to go together back to Dohuk for a short time before her family had to continue their journey in October.

A furlough in America was planned to begin in November 1934. A third pregnancy resulted in the safe delivery of a little girl, Wendy, during this time in America.

They arrived back in Baghdad in February 1935. The mission conference took place in Baghdad and then they spent some time gathering shopping and structural materials that they needed in Dohuk. Roger went ahead to complete work on the house. This took about six weeks and he then returned to Baghdad to collect Harriet and Wendy.

Back in Dohuk Roger comments, **"The general situation here has not greatly changed. Last year there was unrest among the Yezidis of Sinjar and just now we are having the annual uprising of the Arab tribes along the Euphrates. The Assyrians are still with us though some have been moved to Syria."**

Roger and Harriet were expecting another baby in the autumn of 1937. Because of previous pregnancy complications Roger decided that Harriet and Wendy should go to Beirut in June to be under expert medical supervision. He planned to join them in October. Their daughter, Janet, was safely delivered without any complications and the family returned to spend Christmas in Dohuk.

May 1938 saw Roger in Beirut for a meeting of the Near East Christian Council executive committee. Harriet and the children stayed in the girls' hostel in Mosul while he was away. Roger and Harriet had been experiencing some problems with their mail from Iraq. Some seemed to be lost and they realised it was being censored.

They were experiencing some difficulties in Dohuk and Roger took the opportunity to write home about them while he was in Beirut. **"We are quite perplexed as to the basis of the difficulty. I think it goes no deeper than last year when a teacher in the government school at Dohuk declared himself a Christian. I wrote a letter to the governor at Mosul expressing the hope that the law providing religious liberty would function in his case. He replied with considerable heat saying he did not need my help in administering the law. It was certainly a tactical error on my part. I ought to have known better. I probably learned something that time but it may be too late to be useful. The law was flagrantly violated. The man**



Cumberland home in Dohuk where Roger died

was beaten nearly to death and his wife and son and property taken away. My interfering in the case certainly did no good and may have done some harm.

Since that time, probably at the behest of that governor who has now been transferred away from Mosul, word has been sent around the community that we are to be boycotted. Our house is watched and people that come to us are hauled up by the police and threatened. A few still come. How long the government will continue this I don't know, but my present intention is to sit it out.

So far as we know, we will spend the summer in Dohuk . If things open up (as hardly seems probable) I shall do some touring in the villages. As matters stand, I naturally cannot go to the people any more than they can come to me; it would not be fair to them to get them in trouble."

Roger died June 12, 1938 just a month after writing from Beirut about the situation in Dohuk. This is Harriet's account (abbreviated) of what happened, **"On Sunday morning June 12 Roger held service in the large room upstairs while I did the nursery downstairs. Around 11 o'clock while I was still occupied downstairs I heard one of the family that looked after our outside door tell Roger that the son of Muste of Besifki (a village about an hour away from Dohuk) had come to call on him. I heard Roger go up to join them in the 'kochki'.**

On finishing my chores I went to the living room where Wendy was playing and sat down to read the paper. It was nearly dinnertime and I was wondering when the callers would leave so that Roger could come down. All of a sudden there was a succession of sharp noises. I rushed to the door to see what was happening and was conscious of one man dashing down and opening the outside door while another rushed after him shooting at Musa's door as he went. Musa's wife ran out shrieking Musa is killed. I realised that if Roger was all right he would have come down. I could hardly steady my legs to climb the stairs. There was nobody in the kochki except Roger stretched on the floor. Somehow he had managed with his own hands to lay his broken leg more or less straight along the other one. Musa's 16-year-old son had already gone for the doctor. As soon I spoke to him Roger said that it was no use that he was done for. He told me to send a telegram to our nearest colleague, Jeff Glasser, in Kirkuk as well as to our mission in Mosul asking if the Armenian woman doctor there in whom we had great confidence could come up. The local doctor arrived quickly and did what he could then rushed off to phone the Mosul hospital for an ambulance and the surgeon.

During this waiting time Roger was able to give me a clear and careful account of what happened. The two men, who we hadn't known before except that he was familiar with the location of the village and the name of its Agha, the father of the principal caller, had chatted pleasantly and drunk a cold ceremonial drink. Roger said he had been aware that they hadn't yet got to the point of their visit but it never occurred to him that it might be dangerous or anything more than perhaps an attempt to stick him for a loan.

Finally one of them asked him about some of the mission books – Scripture portions that he always had on hand for sale. He went to the bookcase to open it and while his back was turned this son of Muste fired. The bullet entered his abdomen from the left side. Five shots were fired but only two or three hit him. As soon as he turned around the man shot him in the leg and then ran off shooting at Musa who had come to the door to see what the noise was about. Musa's wound was in the shoulder fairly high and the doctor told us it was quite superficial.

The police were on the scene before the doctor got there and in a short while Roger had made a clear sworn statement before the local judge himself. I was able to make arrangements for the RAF emergency air ambulance to come. While we waited Roger was in terrible pain. He didn't want me to stir from his side as he was sure the end might be at any moment."

Harriet accompanied Roger in the air ambulance. It was decided that a flight to Baghdad was not feasible so they went to the hospital in Mosul. He was on the operating table for about an hour but despite every effort Roger died at about 10 o'clock that night.



Roger and Harriet

Before Roger's visit to Beirut in May 1938 he and Harriet had discussed what would be best to do in case either of them should be left suddenly alone. Since settling affairs in Iraq would take some time Roger felt that if Harriet should be left it would be best if she could try to find a teaching post in Beirut.

During the hours immediately following the shooting Roger was very convinced that he would not live and spent time giving Harriet many details of where things were and what needed to be done. This was a great help in the weeks that followed.

Dr. Potter, secretary of the United Mission in Mesopotamia, writes of receiving a letter from Roger written in Beirut just a few weeks before his death. He told of some of the difficulties confronting them and added, "**The promises of God are to those who endure and I'd like to try it. I do not think there is much danger to me personally and less to my family, but even if there were, that would be no reason for leaving. Ever since the world began people have been called cowards if they did not risk everything for tribe and nation and today how many thousands are daily in danger just as a simple matter of duty without any heroics about it. The church might make more progress if it would get the same attitude.**"

It had initially been thought that Musa's wound was not serious. It later became evident that it involved his lung and he did not survive the ambulance journey but died just before reaching Mosul.

A funeral service was held early on Monday morning to avoid creating any excitement and both bodies were laid to rest in the mission cemetery. Harriet was asked if she had any idea about the motive for the crime. All the friends involved agreed that it was an outburst of religious fanaticism. These men were completely unknown to Roger and he had no connection with their village. There may have been some connection between these sad events and a very successful campaign the last week in May in which many Bibles and portions were sold in villages and in Dohuk itself.

Roger was not personally involved in this since he hadn't been allowed to make evangelistic trips to the villages in these months of unrest. But due to the response to the work in Dohuk, Mr Glessner held a large meeting with lantern slides in the Cumberland house and the audience seemed very appreciative. On the Friday before June 12 the mullahs had gathered a number of the books that people had purchased and had staged a public burning of them.

We don't know what connection the two visitors had to Roger as there had been no distribution or sale in their village. Perhaps some of them had been in Dohuk or had come into contact with the Scripture portions in another village. But it is evident that four men came to Dohuk on that Sunday deliberately to do what they did. Two of them stayed at a distance in the market and the other two came to the house. Roger himself had no illusions as to their intentions. He said, "**They came to get me and they got me**".

It would seem that this was just another in the long line of martyrdoms that often come to those who go into the hard places to witness by word and by life to the love of God in Christ.



There was no thought of bitterness in Harriet's mind. When Mr Glessner expressed regrets that the book distribution might have been a contributory factor, she asked why there should be regret even if that was the case since that is what they were there for.

The following article appeared in the Mission Report for the year 1938:

Roger C. Cumberland – Martyr

One of the tragic events of the year was the cold-blooded shooting of the Rev. Roger C. Cumberland in his own home at Dohuk, in northern Iraq. Mr. Cumberland was a Presbyterian, but as a member of the United Mission in Mesopotamia, he was also one of our own. Few more stirring stories of missionary heroism have been written than the simple tale of this young man who, in the face of open opposition and secret threats, elected to remain at his exposed post. The following words from an unpublished article from his pen give a picture of the man and strike that note of faith and optimism which is so much needed today:

"I don't resent being under suspicion; the right to suspect me has been bought and paid for in instalments over a thousand years. Governments and commercial firms don't hesitate to go about their business here; it is much more right and necessary that someone representing Christianity take the initiative in opening the way of understanding and friendship. Looked at as an equation, the situation seemed hopeless; all the goodwill in the world can hardly balance, in quantity, the centuries of hostility and the continuing conflict. Even if it were hopeless, I should prefer to throw my weight on the side of goodwill. But quality counts as well as quantity. Believing that good will is at the heart of the universe, I am confident of ultimate success."

Christianity in Iraq dates back to the apostolic era. Iraq contains some of the oldest organised churches in the world. Iraqi Christians were pioneers in spreading the Gospel to China, India, Persia and Arabia.

In the modern era there have been Presbyterian, Congregational and Reformed personnel in Iraq since the early 1800s. They eventually partnered to form the United Mission to Iraq in 1925.

The first hundred years of mission activity in Iraq (1840-1940) involved many hardships including primitive living conditions, inadequate medical care, searing heat, persecution as well as suspicion and hostility. A number of workers died and some of their children died. Iraqis who chose to follow Jesus as 'Protestants' faced persecution and even martyrdom, but still the body of Christ in Iraq proclaimed the good news through worship, medicine, service and education.

In 1841 eight workers from the Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions went to Mosul. Within five years five of the eight had died due to the poor health conditions and the mission work was temporarily halted.

More workers went between 1850 and 1858 but there was much opposition to foreigners and much persecution of 'evangelical' Iraqi believers. In 1860 the Eastern Syria Mission was absorbed into the Eastern Turkey Mission.

Another effort began in 1890 focusing on northern Iraq – Mosul and Kurdistan. Twelve Americans went but eight years later all personnel were withdrawn. Two children had died and the adults had all had serious illnesses. Other denominations – including some from Europe – had a number of mission efforts but by 1925 it was clear that more work was needed. The United Mission to Iraq was set up by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the UCC (United Church of Christ). The Reformed Church of America continued its work in southern Iraq that had begun in 1889.

The United Mission to Iraq started with 11 workers. They started three schools – a boys school and a girls school in Baghdad and also a girls school in Mosul. By 1929 they had 19 workers. The years 1933 to 1941 were difficult years. Not much is documented about the work after the death of Roger Cumberland who was martyred in 1938.