Theodore Leighton Pennell 1867-1912

Pioneer in the North West Frontier Province of British India (now Pakistan)



He came from an illustrious family tracing their descent to Cornwall before the Norman conquest of 1066. They later moved to Devon. His father, John Wilson Croker Pennell, studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, London. He worked for some years in Rio de Janeiro where he had a large plantation and a medical practice. In 1866 he married his first cousin, Elizabeth Fanny Jordan. They had two children. Theodore – born in Clifton, Bristol in 1867 – and his sister Evangeline who died in infancy. After marriage the family settled in England. They made just one visit together back to South America. Theodore's father died when he was just nine years old. Fanny made it her aim to inspire her boy to dedicate his talents to the service of others.

There was a strong bond between Theodore and his mother. She decided to enrol him as a day pupil at Eastbourne College and they moved to Eastbourne. In 1884 he gained a place at University College, London. He graduated with an honours BSc in 1886. This was an excellent base for his medical studies. In October 1890 he passed his MRCS and LRCP and in November he passed his MD with honours, later also passing his FRCS. Since he was under 25 he wasn't allowed to use the letters after his name until the following year. His mother took an interest in all his studies and was a great encouragement to him.

In 1890 he wrote to CMS to offer his services. He left it to them to decide where he should go. When his mother knew they were sending him to India she decided to go with him. Writing years later his wife comments, **"He had a wonderful power of acquiring knowledge without any apparent effort and could grasp the details of the most intricate problems while others were endeavouring to deal with the outline."**

He ran boys clubs in 'Working Lads' Institutes' in London in his college days as well as later in India. Perhaps his success in sharing the Gospel with these boys was due to his habit of praying for each of those he came in contact with on a different day of the week. He believed it was important to write to these boys and he set aside certain hours (starting at 5 am!) for this task. He didn't want them to see 'religion' as something dull! He organised many excursions and activities. These experiences were good preparation for activities with Pathan boys in later years.

Theodore and his mother had a farewell meeting at Exeter Hall. In his allotted 4 minutes he made a plea for medical missions calling them, **"The picture language of the church militant"**. The day before leaving to India he and his mother began to study Urdu. He wrote to 43 boys and sent each one a present.

The voyage to India was uneventful. They arrived in Karachi on November 15, 1892. From there they went to the existing Medical Mission of CMS in Dera Ismail Khan. This was to be their first station.

Pathans consider themselves descendants of the tribe of Benjamin. Solomon had a son named Afghana who they claim as their direct ancestor. Many of their customs indicate a Semitic origin. See Gen. 49:27 ***"Benjamin is a ravenous wolf. In the morning he devours the prey and at night he divides the plunder."***

Pathans were all Muslims and the mullahs had a great influence inciting them to violence towards unbelievers. The following extract from a speech of Theodore soon after arriving in the NWFP strikes us with its similarity to today: " **'There is no God but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God.' Such is the cry that electrifies 250 million of the inhabitants of this globe. Such is the cry that thrills them so that they are ready to go forward and to fight for their religion and consider it a short road to paradise to kill Christians and Hindus and unbelievers. It is that cry which, at the present, is echoing and re-echoing through the hills and mountain passes of the North West Frontier of India. It is that cry which the mullahs of Afghanistan are now carrying to mountain hamlets and towns in Afghanistan in order to raise the people of that country to come forward and fight. That is a cry which has the power of joining together the members of Islam throughout the world and preparing them for conflict with all who are not ready to accept their religion."**



A group of patients

Theodore soon saw his work was severely limited due to lack of a clinic. He planned to set up dispensaries as close as possible to the borders of Afghanistan.

Early in January 1893 he visited Tank. CMS couldn't decide if his permanent base should be Bannu, Tank or Dera. He found the uncertainty frustrating! He wrote in his diary in March 1893, **"Sometimes the greatest trials are a prelude to the best work if met in His strength. We must not regard difficulties except as something to be overcome. A difficulty overcome leaves a man stronger not weaker and it may be just because we have a great work here that we get all of these difficulties."**

He worked hard at learning Pushtu as well as Urdu and passed his exams within 8 months of being in the country. By September 1893 it was decided that Theodore would settle in Bannu – 20 miles from the border of Afghanistan. He later founded a Christian hospital in Bannu with a generous gift from his mother.

He arrived there in October 1893. Before long he was treating as many as 220 patients a day. His fame as a physician and surgeon spread far and wide and people flocked to Bannu from Afghanistan. In one year in Bannu 84,000 individuals were treated. There were 1,655 inpatients. 3000 operations were performed. All this with only 4 qualified medical men (2 British and 2 Indian) and one qualified medical woman.

He not only had to plan and set up the medical work, but he also had to care for the mission school and do evangelism into the surrounding villages. He was thrilled that in some of the villages it was the very first time that the Gospel had ever been preached. He often incurred the wrath of the mullahs who tried to stone him when he preached. He knew that he must win them by a gentle spirit. He never carried a weapon of any kind. His aim was to understand the people and be trusted by them.

In 1895 he opened a mission boarding school. Sports were an important part of the curriculum as he knew they would strengthen the physical frames of the students. In all his endeavours his mother was an indispensable support to him. They both supported themselves as well as much of the mission work from their own funds.

In January 1894 he began a tour with the first young man who had come to faith – Jahan Khan. Over the months they made many trips to different areas taking medicine and the Gospel. When the mullahs didn't want them to preach, they responded that the Bible instructed them to heal the sick **and** preach the Gospel. They weren't willing to treat patients without also sharing the message of God's love.

In 1897 Theodore visited Lahore where he bought a printing press for Bannu. He then started Bannu's first newspaper.

He was convinced that adopting local dress (several depending where he was visiting) gave him acceptance in the community. For the same reason he grew a beard. He gained many leaders from the different Muslim communities as his friends.

Whenever he went on a medical/evangelistic tour he liked to take one or two local believers with him. He wrote, **"We say diamond cuts diamond and so I have found that it requires a Pathan believer to cope with a Pathan bazaar audience. It is seldom wise to attempt to answer objections in the bazaar. I ask the objector to name a place and a time and then I will be pleased to explain any difficulties to him. To my mind much more good can be done with the bazaar audience by patient exposition of the spirituality of Christianity rather than by a demonstration, however brilliant, of the faults of Islam or Hinduism."**

By 1897 Theodore was holding regular discipleship classes at Bannu as well as continuing his medical work. Summing up 1896 he wrote, **"This year has been marked by severe and continued opposition from without and by strife within"**.

In October 1897 there was fever in Bannu. Two or three people succumbed in every household. Many of the British troops who had come to Bannu en route to Waziristan died and are buried in Bannu. Theodore's mother fell ill but happily recovered.


A group of students

In February 1898 the school only went as far as "middle" standard. Now it was raised to the status of high school. As a result of his mother's generosity a new building was erected. This increased Theodore's workload, but he felt it was worthwhile as it kept the boys under his influence for longer.

He started a debating society that continued uninterrupted until his death. His mother always made it a point to attend. The boys remember how she used to direct their crude views and help them express themselves. The first debate was on the topic, **'Should female education be encouraged'**? Those in favour of encouraging it won!

Theodore had trouble with the Christians in the mission compound. The quarrels among themselves made it very difficult to recommend Christianity to the outside world. He spent much time with the offenders persuading them to return to peace and righteousness. He had a strict rule from which he never deviated. He insisted that anyone against whom an accusation was brought should be present while this was done. This helped to promote peace and show that he always dealt justly.

In October 1898 Theodore passed his higher standard exam in Persian and began studying Arabic to be able to read the Quran.

Theodore and his mother always made Christmas into a great time of celebration. Throughout their lives many co-workers and students in the school remembered the great times in the Pennell household at Christmas.

In 1898 Theodore went to visit Sir Mackworth Young, Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab and Lahore, to ask if he might pay a visit to Kabul. He was advised to write directly to the Amir. His request was refused, but he never gave up hope of someday gaining entrance to Afghanistan.

He writes, **"As is doubtless known to many, Afghanistan is one of those fortunately now few countries where the herald of the Gospel has found his entrance barred. It is a sad fact that, as far as is known to me, the Gospel has never been publicly proclaimed within its borders."!**

He goes on to mention the visit of the traveller James Wolfe who visited Kabul and preached in the Armenian Church. Also in 1893 a local pastor from Peshawar visited for a few days and ministered to a few Armenian Christians that they found there. Since then the Armenian Church has been destroyed. Armenian Christians can stay as long as they remain quiet and there is no public worship.

In Theodore's diary of January 1899 there is a note about an 'Anjumen' (brotherhood) he thought of starting. This gives us an understanding of the 'keynote' to his life.

"Plan of Anjumen – common property, common table, worship - serving God in serving others. Seeking daily opportunities of service. Worshipping together at eventide."

In 1899 his mother gave a description of a typical day in Bannu:

6.30	breakfast followed by morning service
7.30-9.00	work on the wards
9.00-12.00	dispensary to treat outpatients as well as share the Gospel with them
12.00-1.00	anyone wanting private interviews
1.00-4.00	teaching in the school seeking to fill the boys minds with Biblical truth
5.00	evening service
after tea	visiting the wards and talking with patients
8.00-9.00	medical teaching programmes for hospital assistants – anatomy and other subjects



She writes, **"We have only 30 beds in the hospital. … Had we larger wards and a greater number of inpatients, how could the doctor find time for spiritual work among those who are sick, which work is, as I understand, the whole raison d'être of medical missions? Though others can preach and talk of religion in the wards, no one can do so with the same acceptance as the doctor. As a rule the people *'hear him gladly'."*** (Mark 12:37)

Theodore was always determined Sunday would be a happy day. A roaring fire would welcome all to the Bannu Mission House. They would listen to songs on the gramophone in Punjabi, Pushtu and Persian. Sheets would be given out and they would sing in English, Urdu, Punjabi and Pushtu. Very few were Christians but everyone enjoyed the singing!

The census of 1901 showed only 26 Christians living in the Bannu Mission Compound. In 1910 the number was nearly 100.

In 1904 Theodore travelled through the Punjab by bicycle mixing with the local people. He had one Afghan companion. They dressed as sadhus and were often penniless. He was amazed at the bungalows of the missionaries! They looked more like forts than houses. They separated them from the local people. They sat waiting for enquirers to come to them rather than going out to sit with the people.

By 1908 Theodore's health was failing. He agreed to take his first furlough in 16 years. Bannu wasn't a popular location and no one was found to replace him. While in England he wrote, **"I have been rather eclectic in my methods, unkind people would say eccentric and the Society, unable to bring me into line, have more or less left Bannu to me to experiment on and absolved themselves with the feeling that, 'After all, Pennell's ways were unorthodox and Frontier Afghans were a wild lot and not attractive subjects for those working on more conventional lines.' So I and my Afghans have been left to ourselves. One result of this has been that the work has depended more than it should on my presence and during the summer conditions have become** *'nagufta bih'* **and I get harrowing letters imploring me to hasten my return to Bannu."**

Just before leaving for England in the spring of 1908 Theodore went to Thal on the Afghan frontier. After consulting with the various tribal leaders, a site was chosen for his new hospital. This was later changed to a slightly larger piece of land the same area.

On March 15, 1908 Theodore left for England. He had to say, "Goodbye" to his mother. They had hardly been separated throughout his whole life. She had not wanted to go to England with him. She was in her 70s and she wanted to die among the people and in the country for which she and her son had given up everything. Somehow she had a feeling that she wouldn't live to see Theodore's return.

He left England to return to Bannu September 8. Between April 23 and September 8 he had delivered 109 addresses! In June Theodore's mother had a flare-up of her rheumatoid arthritis. She was sent up to the hills to recover. However the 75 mile journey was too much for her and she died on June 8. Theodore was quite heartbroken that he was not able to care for her through this last illness. But he faithfully continued on with his programme. In spare moments he took time to brush up on his medical and surgical knowledge at University College Hospital and Moorfields Ophthalmic Hospital.

His personal magnetism and keen enthusiasm gained many friends for missions in general and Bannu Mission in particular. His wide sympathies and untrammelled interests, his intense love for the people and his wonderful gift of imparting his own enthusiasms and aims, made him an advocate whom it was impossible to resist. In India, Christianity was not encouraged and very few officials took any interest in missions. But those who met Theodore found their indifference changed to keen interest.

On June 17, 1908 Theodore became engaged by cablegram to a fellow doctor, Alice Maude Sorabji, who was in Srinagar, Kashmir. She had qualified as a doctor at the London School of Medicine in 1905. She had then returned to India and worked at the Zenana Hospital in Bahawalpur where

Theodore first met her in 1906. She was from a small Zoroastrian community and her father, Sorabji Kharsedji, was one of the first from that community to put his faith in Jesus.

In August 1908 Theodore had knee surgery with spinal anaesthesia. He was always keen to try anything new so that he could use it later in Bannu.

He sailed from Tilbury on the SS China on September 11 and Alice met him in Bombay. They went to Poona and then spent the week before their wedding in Nasik with Alice's mother – a saintly woman who became like a second mother to Theodore. They were married in the cathedral at Allahabad on October 17, 1908. After a week's honeymoon, they returned to Bannu where much work awaited them. In November they made a visit to Thal (34 miles from Bannu). As 1909 progressed so did the building work at Thal. The new hospital was opened at the end of March.

In October 1909 the Bannu Medical Society was inaugurated with Theodore as President. There were 8 doctors in Bannu – 3 in the mission and 5 in the military or civil service as well as some Indian assistant surgeons.

Theodore fell seriously ill in November 1909. For some hours he hung between life and death. Gradually strength returned, but it took several weeks for his temperature to return to normal. In January 1910 the Pennells left for furlough. A doctor (Kate Knowles) and a nurse (Miss Fagg) had come from England to work with Dr. Barnett during their absence. Sadly both of them developed typhoid.

On May 6 Theodore spoke at the Medical Mission meeting in the Queens Hall. Here is an extract from his speech: "**Medical missions are the laboratories of practical missionary effort. … We need something more than the mere verbal setting forth of the Gospel message to non-Christian nations. We need the practical exposition of it which is given by medical missions. India is surfeited with doctrine and dogma and turns away from the preacher to her own philosophies and speculations, but when brought face-to-face with a practical expression of the Christ life, she is captivated; she is entranced. It is just because the lives of Englishmen in India have so often not been exemplary of the Christian life that Christianity has not made vastly greater progress in India then it has. Every Englishman who goes to India is either himself a missionary or an actual obstacle to the acceptance of Christianity by the people of that country. He cannot be neutral for his life is open to all and daily watched by thousands. The influence of medical missions penetrates where the missionary cannot go.**

Afghanistan is a closed land not only to the missionary but to all Europeans. Yet the influence of medical missions has penetrated through and through. I suppose there are few, if any, villages in east and south Afghanistan that have not sent patients to Frontier hospitals. These patients have heard the Gospel preached in our outpatient departments. Many of them have stayed in our inpatient wards week after week receiving the ministrations of Christians, watching our lives and gauging the reality of what we profess. Then they have gone back to their homes and related their experiences on many a winter's evening or summer noon in a far-off village while old men and young warriors gather round to listen to all that they have seen and heard across the Frontier. Often a Testament or other book, carefully secreted from prying eyes, is smuggled back to their homes and studied in private and passed on in secret to some friend, and thus the people have become familiar with the Gospel story."

In June 1910 the following notice appeared in the papers:

"The medical profession was well represented in the last list of birthday honours. It was especially gratifying to us to notice the name of Dr. T. L. Pennell who received the gold medal of the Kaiser-i-Hind conferred on those who have rendered conspicuous philanthropic service in India."

[In 1903 Theodore had been awarded the Kaiser-i-Hind silver medal from the Indian government for medical services.]

Theodore decided he would take a complete x-ray outfit to Bannu. He spent many days choosing the apparatus and becoming familiar with its working. Theodore and Alice left for Germany on August 25 at the start of their return journey to Bombay. They sailed on the '**Africa'** on September 3, landing on September 19. They visited Alice's mother at Nasik. She died a few weeks later.

Their return to Bannu was joyous. A number of urgent medical matters awaited them. Once these were taking care of Theodore went as a delegate to The Lucknow Conference (Jan. 23-28, 1911) chaired by Samuel Zwemer.

Many shared about the alarming inroads of Islam into Africa and elsewhere. Theodore enthusiastically recommended sending Punjabi and Afghan believers to these places. Pathans had been a means of spreading Islam, why not Christianity? He believed there would be a new infusion of life in the church in India if it took on the responsibility of sharing the Gospel.

Back in Bannu he challenged the local believers. One man responded. He was a former Bannu schoolboy who had been one of the first to respond to the Gospel. He went to Mombasa. He was the fourth Pathan to move out in mission since Theodore had been at Bannu. The first Pathan to move out in mission was Jahan Khan – the first to respond to the Gospel and Theodore's companion on many mission tours. He went to Bahrain.

Theodore wanted to make every believing Afghan an ambassador for Christ. Islam had spread through traders, why not the Gospel? It was significant that among the hospital inpatients who spent several weeks on the wards, there were often wounded tribesmen from opposing tribes! Barriers were broken down as they came to see each other as fellow sufferers and listened together to the message of God's love for them.

Early in February a Marwat Mullah, Azam Khan, came to Bannu to ask about Jesus. In reading the Quran he saw that it spoke of Him as the Spirit of God while Muhammad was only referred to as the prophet. He felt he must learn more about Jesus. He eagerly devoured the New Testament. He cross-checked what he read in Persian and Urdu translations and came to Theodore with many questions. He eagerly accepted the truth. He wanted to preach in the bazaar along with Theodore.

A great burden on Theodore's heart was more evangelists who knew Pushtu and Arabic as well as a school to train Afghan believers as evangelists.

The medical work in Bannu was very heavy with 15 to 25 operations each day. On top of this there was the work of the school and the work in the city and villages. Theodore set up the x-ray equipment he had brought. He was also constantly involved in evangelism and teaching new believers as well as enquirers.

A new school building opened on May 13, 1911 in memory of Theodore's parents and Alice's parents. It was funded partly with his own money as well as a government grant.

On March 16 Dr Barnett was struck down with a severe case of septic poisoning. This was probably as a result of operating on a very sick patient. Theodore operated on him on March 17. His pain was greatly relieved but he died on March 20. Sadly Theodore succumbed to the same septic poisoning and on March 23, 1912 he died.

Perhaps his mother's influence was behind the compassion Theodore felt towards Afghan women. He saw clearly that the elevation of women is essential for the regeneration of a nation. At the time of his death he was planning to establish a hospital for them. CMS had granted permission and building had started March 6, 1912.

Alice stayed on in Bannu after Theodore's death. She remained there until after the end of the 3rd Afghan War in 1919. By 1925 she had returned to England and she died in Findon, Sussex March 3, 1951.

[Material for this article is mainly taken from: Pennell on the Afghan Frontier written by his wife, Alice M. Pennell in 1923.]