

# **John Innocent, Pioneer MNC Missionary A Grinder to China**

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## *Synopsis*

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3. Setting up in Tientsin with help from Protestant Missionary, finding a house with room adapted as a Church. Joined by his wife and later William Hall and his wife
4. Slow progress, mission techniques, tracts and the open door
5. The elderly 'dreamer' from Shantung. An awakening of the Spirit in that remote Province. 'Send us Preachers'
6. Whilst on furlough, massacre in Tientsin, Protection provided for the foreign community under siege
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10. The Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Martyrdom and destruction of so much. The steadfast faith of many who survived. The work continues and grows

## **John Innocent 1829 – 1904**

On a work visit to Sheffield I decided to look for a ground level car park rather than a multi storey and found a large area where terraced housing had been demolished. All that was left was a low street sign which read Scotland Street, and a boarded up Church at the summit of the hill. That name stayed in my memory. As I picked my way through the rubble up to the Church I saw above the door the words, Methodist New Connexion.

The 1902 Minutes of the MNC Conference showed that there was indeed a Scotland Street Church, the lead Church of the Sheffield North Circuit and a healthy Society.

My interest was further kindled when I came across a pristine copy of a folded leaflet produced for the opening of a New Connexion Chapel in my home circuit Nottingham North. The preacher for the opening services was a minister unknown to me, the Rev John Innocent a missionary to North China.

Having an interest in the Far East mission work of the MNC I bought a copy of a rare book entitled 'Our Mission in North China' and was surprised to learn that John had been brought up at Scotland Street. The book fired my interest but it was a brief account and I needed to know more so I started research in the Mission House archives now held in the Special Collections library at SOAS, part of London University where there was a copy of a biography written by Rev Dr Candlin, also a Chinese missionary and a colleague of John who joined him on the field in 1891.

John was born in October 1829. He was educated at Allen St School where his education had been minimal. His grandfather John was a cutler and shopkeeper, and earnest Methodist, class leader and other duties. His Grandmother took special pride that her first class ticket came from the hand of Alexander Kilham. Their eldest son William entered the ministry in 1827. It appears that John's parents had a looser attachment. As a boy John attended Scotland Street Church. At 16 he became a member in 1845.

Leaving school at 15 he was working as a grinder in his father's workshop. This was not a healthy occupation with the problems of dust and sharp pieces of steel flying off. Average life expectancy for a grinder in the middle years of the century was as low as 28 years. John had a thirst for learning and when 16 he attended night school to study Latin, English Grammar, Elocution and Composition. He comments "I became a serious student but my time was limited as my employment lasted from seven in the morning till eight at night. Returning home I was then off to school until 9.30. The morning was the time when I did most of my study before going to work. My Latin lesson was written on a scrap of paper and I would snatch intervals from work for a glance at the paper and imprint that on my mind. All done by stealth as my employer father was severe in requiring attention to work and to orders".

Rev Caughey, an Irish American Wesleyan was preaching at Scotland Street and causing great excitement so John went to hear him. He was a fiery preacher. He made a challenge for commitment and along with others John went forward. It was on returning home that John decided to make a lifetime commitment. The resident minister was a good preacher who also impressed the young John. His conversion further stimulated his need to study.

Difficulties followed as the youths with whom he worked heard of his decision and taunted him including some from his own family but John was patient and soon he was respected for his stance.

John read religious books, taught in the School and went out preaching. On the first occasion he broke down even though he had memorised what he was going to say. His second attempt was a complete failure.

John's grandparents were his spiritual parents. He spent time in their home. On Sunday

evenings he went to their Church, the lead Church in the MNC South Circuit. Visiting ministers would come to their house one of whom was Rev John Addyman from Canada who excited his interest by speaking to him of the toils and hardships of missionary service.

In 1847 he was preaching regularly. There was no college for MNC ministerial candidates in those days. Three years later when he was 21 he was sent to Stockport for three months as a temporary supply for his friend Rev William Hall who had fallen ill, and the next year to Burslem. The following year he was accepted as a probationer and went to North Shields. The Churches in that district were distinguished by their religious fervour and Methodist tradition was strong. The congregation there were very particular about visiting and were sermon tasters!

That year proved to be eventful as it was there that he met a young lady, one of the members. Miss Tate was 20 years old tall dark and handsome with a dignity of manner which filled John with a sense of awe. But he evidently overcame his shyness and succeeded in winning her affections. It proved to be a year of happy love and bright ambition. Jane became an ideal helpmate having qualities and gifts which proved to be of inestimable value in future years.

The 1854 Conference sent him to Bilston where he was seriously ill and off work for three months. To assist with his recovery Conference, with wisdom, sent him the next year to Jersey. The fresh air proved beneficial.

On 23.4.56 John married Miss Tate at North Shields. Rev William Innocent, his uncle conducted the service.

The following year found him in Truro and thence to Halifax North an MNC stronghold, a compliment to him and the appointment appears to have met with satisfaction and attracted the notice of the Mission Committee. They felt he was a suitable candidate for special work.

There was a most encouraging 1859 Conference report which showed an extra 3000 members representing a 12.5% increase on the previous total of 25,000. Finances were flourishing too. The mission in Canada was doing well. Conference wanted to pursue a new mission strategy. They felt that China was a most eligible field and resolved that two married missionaries should be sent as soon as possible. Enthusiasm was present.

So John Innocent and William Nelthorpe Hall were chosen as ideal. Both were home grown timber from Scotland Street and educated at the same school.

The valedictory service in Leeds was a powerful occasion. Large numbers escorted them to the station to see them off to London where they embarked at Gravesend on a clipper type ship, "The Heroes of Alma" captained by Thomas Silk.

The journey proved to be a grim and appalling experience. In those days a passage to China could take six months. No Suez Canal or Trans Siberian Railway then.

There were seven missionaries on board accompanied by wives and children. Two MNC, four LMS and one BMS, plus one merchant. Cabin accommodation was basic. A bunk was

provided. The rest of the furniture and bedding had to be brought on board by the passengers. Washing facilities comprised a bath to sit in on deck in the early morning and have the ship's hose pipe turned on. John said "Healthy if not comfortable". The food was spartan and included ship's biscuit.

On sailing out into the open sea headwinds blew to impede progress and one night there was a fierce storm. Two other vessels in the vicinity sank. No one survived. Alma's sails were torn to shreds. Sea sickness prevailed and the intrepid group of passengers suffered greatly. The intention had been to have family prayers each night in the saloon and a service each Sunday. All they could manage on the first Sunday was a prayer meeting. Eight members of the crew mutinied protesting that Captain Silk had chosen to sail on a Friday and there were too many Jonahs on board. True to Methodist tradition there were two conversions amongst the crew. One was the Carpenter and the other the Cook. No mention is made of any improvement in the food.

They put into Deal to offload the mutineers, take on a more respectable crew and to carry out repair of the storm damage. After a full fortnight they landed at Portsmouth and took on fresh supplies.

John's young son George was very ill on the voyage and reluctantly Jane and John decided to send him to his Uncle's home for recovery. What a sacrifice! Not knowing when or whether they would see him again. Sadly too Mrs Hall decided to return home with her child who was also seriously ill.

Some five months later on the 22 March they finally caught sight of the coast of China and took on board a pilot. Tragedy nearly struck as they narrowly escaped running on to rocks. They disembarked at Wusung and were welcomed by LMS missionaries in Shanghai who warned them of a local war that had broken out not far from the city and that it was unsafe to leave their present haven. A new treaty had been drawn up to permit freedom of trade and Christianity was to be permitted. However the treaty was repudiated and Shanghai was under martial law. One advantage of having to remain in Shanghai was that they formed friendships with the other missionaries already there.

Whilst in the city John saw the British & Foreign Bible Society printing scriptures in Chinese. There was a large cylindrical printing press turned by a buffalo, rolling off sheets of Chinese characters. The sheets were then folded, arranged and stitched into paper covered books for circulation. The production of one million testaments had been funded and was proceeding. However this large order could not be circulated at the time because of the disturbed state of the country. Stocks had piled up and printing had to be suspended for a year until peace was restored.

During his many years in China John did much to forward the work of the Bible Society. He found suitable people to act as colporteurs. In his first tentative efforts in Tientsin and on his many preaching and tours of exploration he relied on the distribution of the Scriptures as a vital aid. A colporteur was employed in every Circuit and this practice continued.

John had hoped to set up a base at Suchow on the coast. He visited it with two fellow

missionaries in late June 1860. Sadly earlier that month it had been sacked by rebels and left in ruin so it was unsuitable. After returning John went down with Asiatic Cholera, generally a fatal disease. For several months he was ill before recovery.

John decided that Tientsin was the right base for mission. The name means 'the place of the heavenly fords'. His colleague William Hall was not satisfied with this decision and stayed behind when John ventured there in April 1861. The city is close to the port which served the capital city of Peking some eighty miles away. It had a large import export trade and was a great market for skins, camels' hair and pigs' bristles. It could be described as the Birmingham of China with a population of about one million. Later John said that the choice of this city was a happy one. His belief was that they had been providentially led to its selection. He was met by Rev Henry Blodgett, an American Congregational missionary, who kindly allowed him to share quarters until he found rooms for himself. Apart from soldiers the number of foreign residents in Tientsin was the British Consul, and eight others.

John found and rented a native house which served as a chapel, a bungalow and a manse! He was delighted when Jane Innocent arrived in Tientsin in May 1861.

### *John's Character*

Edmond Cousins the Consul of Tientsin said John was a winning gentleman, without guile. He thought that his disposition was of the kind that would appeal to the Chinese and that he was well respected by those with whom he came into contact. Rev Pike, an American missionary said that he was a most influential and impressive personality with his large intellectual head, benevolent features and long flowing beard which immediately attracted attention.

Jane was a 'Mother of Israel' to everybody. She was always at the call of those in trouble, a teacher, housekeeper, nurse and things in general.

With help from Blodgett over many months John learned enough Mandarin Chinese to be able to give his first address. One old man was visibly moved and that same evening he preached to a few English including soldiers on 'Enoch walked with God'.

It was two years before he had complete mastery of the language. He went out walking carrying tracts and Scriptures to break virgin soil and engaged in conversation whenever the opportunity presented itself. The Chinese enjoyed talking and particularly so if a stranger can speak their language. They listened but there was little response. Slowly the work bore fruit.

He also gave attention to the young and encouraged a number of boys of 10-12 years of age to attend. He secured a teacher on the understanding that the NT was to be studied part of the day as well as native books. Each morning he was present for Scripture reading and teaching hymns.

The street behind the house was a public road and a door opened onto that road. He realised that with the door open people would see what was happening in the room and be encouraged to come in. He arranged preaching one day and the gathering was larger than expected.

In November 1861 the first Chinese person to become a member was their first Christian worker.

He was delighted when William Hall joined him in September 1861. After five months it was a joy to be together again.

John soon recognised the need for a Protestant Church in the city. In this respect he was ecumenical in his vision. This Church was called Union Church and probably the first Protestant building in north China. An appeal was made to the foreign community and a total of £420 was raised from various sources including the British Consul, the merchant community and visiting shipping. The church had a bell tower and a Gothic style porch. It was opened on 14 August 1864 to the delight of John. To have a building after just over three years was an achievement. To clear the debt remaining of £150 an appeal was made to the UK. Later in 1886 a new site was purchased and a much larger Church created with double the number of seats.

In 1862 Jane started a school for girls in Tientsin. There were two girls at the outset, one a six year old rescued from Suchow soon after it had been destroyed by rebels. She was the child of a mandarin whose parents had been murdered. Jane worked hard to support work amongst women and girls, not only in teaching. This was courageous on her part as women were restricted in so many ways, foot binding was prevalent and infanticide of female babies was sometimes practised. Jane was a keen student of the language and John said that she had a better knowledge than himself. News of her activities encouraged ladies in England to raise money and provide articles for sale in China to help Jane to carry on with her work. Boxes of made up items were eagerly awaited.

John's first five years in Tientsin saw him zealous in mission. An early riser at daybreak. A necessary study of the language and a number of mission tours were undertaken. He was a considerable correspondent. Preaching to foreign soldiers in English, preaching to his members and others in the several Chinese chapels. Preaching and talking on the streets, distributing books. House building and chapel building meant a very busy life. He knew all his members and scholars by their full Chinese name, a real feat of memory. He rejoiced in the spiritual growth of his flock. In 1866 there were four chapels, two day schools, boys' boarding schools, girls' boarding school and small blind school. It was a well organised Church in one of China's great cities, a credit to the wisdom and organising talent of John and Jane.

#### *Wonderful work in Laou Ling, Shantung in 1867*

One day an elderly stranger sat in church, travel stained and stooping. His manner attracted attention and people wanted to know where he was from. It was a village in Shantung, a remote province. He was the head man in his village and had travelled for four days by mule cart to Tientsin in search of truth. This was because of a dream whilst sick. Dreams were of significance to the Chinese. He was elderly and wanted spiritual guidance. He said that in his dream he had seen a beautiful palace. The gatekeeper had told him that only the pure could enter. This upset him but he was comforted when told he should return home where he would be taught by religious scholars how he could achieve his wish. Two local Catholic priests had recently arrived in his province so he asked for their doctrine which gave him confidence. However he found that the character of these friends did not match up with their teaching. As a considerate man he felt

they did not have a full understanding of their own theology because they were so far removed from their own mentors in Tientsin.

So he decided to travel there where he felt he would receive full guidance. Tientsin was 140 miles distant on rough tracks. Misdirected on his arrival he was sent to the small Methodist Church where he listened with wonder to the spiritual truths expounded. Hall was the preacher that day. He rejoiced in what he had heard and the missionaries were happy to supply him with books to help him. After several days he returned home with books and tracts saying he would come back. True to his word weeks later he appeared asking for a teacher to speak to his neighbours offering accommodation and a room for preaching. The books had all been shared with his friends. So a native Christian was sent for two weeks to assess the situation.

The news of this man's arrival spread and the house was crowded with people who came to welcome him and ask for guidance. Some attended each day for devotions and on Sunday a large number. Their kindness and hospitality was great. On his departure food was heaped in his cart for his journey and he was begged to return for regular instruction. He was given a letter asking for help and an offer to provide a suitable home for a worker. So two Bible colporteurs were sent for a month.

The village had a population of about 2000 people; some 260 families. It occupied a middle position amongst some 30 villages all in walking distance and was also close to several larger places no more than 12 – 36 miles distant. This area had never before been visited by a Protestant missionary. When William Hall went he was the first person to be seen in European dress. It was the work in Shantung province which went from strength to strength.

The development of the Tientsin Church was slow for the first years and membership grew to just 24 by 1866. Of that number ten became preachers and five went into full time ministry. By 1880 there were 82 members in Tientsin and 820 in Shantung Province. The following year numbers ran into four figures, 1091 with 228 probationers.

Not surprisingly there were difficulties in reaching the Chinese with the message. The tendency was to regard the foreigners with suspicion and as possible devils. Had these foreigners some ulterior motive for being there? In Shantung Province Confucianism was practised for that was where Confucius had lived.

Three years after the arrival in the city Mrs Hall died, to the sorrow of all.

John's daughter Annie offered for missionary service to the delight of her parents and her appointment was welcomed in China. She was to be Principal of the Girl's Training Institution in Tientsin. Tragically she was taken ill in Germany with consumption and she died on her return to England to be with her brother George. For five years her parents had not seen her. Her death eventually forwarded the work, as a fund of £500 was raised for the erection of the school with dormitories, opened in 1889 as the Annie Innocent Memorial School.

There was a tremendous role for women in the mission field. Conditions were such that a male missionary could never be used for certain work. It must be borne in mind that most fathers

considered it a waste of money to educate their daughters. Many were indeed happy to accept a placid lifestyle of subservience. What could the mission do to enlighten the gloom? Two ladies were appointed to work with women and girls and that flourished particularly in Shantung circuits. Also two fine Chinese Christian women did sterling work. Mrs Hu, wife of the first native pastor and a Mrs Ling of Chu Chia carried the work with energy and devotion so much so that the district around was conspicuous for the number of its Christian women. Mrs Hu was baptised in 1866 and she continued working until her death. In other parts the work with women continued through the efforts of missionaries wives although later three single young ladies were sent out by the Women's Auxillary of the MNC.

Mrs Hu was the first women convert in Tientsin. An indomitable woman who worked tirelessly. Through her devotion she kept Pastor Hu well supported in Shantung. She was fearless and sought to comfort those members in fear of their lives when danger stalked, and in famine living on coarse food to give bread to the needy. She died in her 98<sup>th</sup> year, having given a half century of tremendous work.

On deputation both John and William Hall were kept well employed and continued with the need to encourage giving. One method was to ask Christian Endeavour Societies to assist with the cost of the Chinese in ministry. For example the CE at Parliament Street Church in Nottingham supported Mr Sheng, a capable and able pastor and the Hucknall Sunday School and CE supported a young leader and teacher Cheng Yuan Hsiang. So individual Churches were given a personal interest in the developing Church.

#### *John's Furlough in 1869 – 1871*

John had been seriously ill and the journey home was beneficial as it provided much needed relaxation and rest prior to undertaking many deputations as well as attendance at the Sheffield Conference in 1870. His speech at the Annual Meeting was a review of ten years work and an appreciation of Hu, Wang and Chang, all three of exceptional quality. Every one of the five men sent out to China were from Sheffield. He visited Newcastle, Sunderland, Hartlepool, Manchester, Liverpool and 25 other places including Jersey and Guernsey. At Salem Church in Manchester he spoke for one and a half hours! In advocating mission work he was practical, gave sound information supported by his personal experience. He was not prone to exaggeration.

It was during his first furlough that news came through of the terrible massacre at Tientsin during 1870. He wrote a letter to the Mission Secretary to say that in his view the restrictions on mission activity would only be temporary and he was prepared and eager to return in April 1871. And go he did, saying that his personal safety was dependant on his conduct and bearing. He had a clear and steady mind and was not easily provoked. The massacre occurred at the time when there was increased hostility to foreigners and threats were rife. Property was being destroyed and Europeans killed, mainly French Catholics. Native Christians also suffered. This was a severe test of faith and many of them remained true to their calling.

Some years before the Catholics had decided to build a Church and Convent on land which they did not own. Such an illegal act rankled the local Chinese and spelled disaster for the Sisters in the Convent as they were attacked and killed by the mob and the Church destroyed.



William Hall only enjoyed one furlough, in 1873. On his return three years later a terrible famine broke out. To relieve distress and need the missionaries worked tirelessly and the strain on William almost certainly contributed to his death in 1878.

John was regarded as the father of the mission and was possibly the first Protestant missionary to work in Tientsin. In everything he exercised consideration and sympathy. He saw the development of churches and schools, helped establish a hospital and dispensary. The breaking of fresh ground was important to him. In all this it is said that he was a caring husband and father. The loss of a daughter and then later a son, both appointed as missionaries, the former just as she had completed her preparations for the work and his son after a brilliant career of eight years in China, were grievous trials which he endured bravely. It was in 1892 that Rev George Innocent died at sea on returning to China. A memorial fund was set up and it paid for a George Innocent memorial school at Wu Ting Fu.

John returned from China in the spring of 1897. The conference was in Sheffield and when it met he was elected as President unanimously. His Chinese ministerial colleagues were very proud on hearing the news. It was gratifying for them to know that they were an integral part of the connexion. Also 1897 was the centenary year of the Connexion so his election was an added privilege. At 68 years of age he was still an impressive figure with his straw coloured beard.

He was recognised as a man of one purpose in life, that purpose was mission through and through. His life was one of dogged perseverance.

John chose to live in Nottingham at 24 Dryden Street. The Mission Secretary also lived in the city and was the Superintendent of Parliament Street Circuit. John found a good circle of friends. His decision to live in Nottingham was because it was fairly central and therefore convenient for deputation work with two mainline stations soon to be operational and in walking distance. The Circuit Church was also close at hand. But his heart was in China and in fact he had been appointed as Principal of the Tientsin Training Institution in 1899. He was looking forward to his return but his Doctor intervened stating that his health was such that the climate in China could prove fatal. John did not take this as final and spoke to Dr Marshall who was on furlough at the time and knew John's medical history. The two Doctors conferred and John had to accept their joint decision. So in 1900 he became supernumerary and given a permanent place on the Mission Committee. He had spent 45 years as a minister 38 years of which were as a Chinese missionary. But he was not one to rest and he was frequently on deputation work at anniversaries. His experience and knowledge were invaluable.

It was in early February 1902 that John conducted the opening services in Broomhill Road Church, Bulwell, the school chapel having been dedicated the previous day by Rev Dr Candlin, the missionary to China who fortunately wrote the biography of John, a work which John never could undertake because of the calls on his time. That now rare work helped to stimulate my interest in John's life. Later I learned that none of John's journals nor any of his copious correspondence has survived.

In early 1904 John caught pneumonia whilst at home in Nottingham. Again two Doctors conferred and he and his wife stayed by invitation with Dr Stenhouse in Arnold beyond the

outskirts of the city and away from any city pollution. The change benefited him. He was then advised to go to Bedford to be with his daughter in law, thence to Brighton but the journey there was too much for the invalid.

With some improvement to his health he took mission services at Forest Hill in mid November 1904. It was foggy weather after which he had a bad night and died on 28 November in the presence of his family and friend Rev Scowby a well loved and effective minister of my own church. The hymn, 'For all the Saints' was sung. John's last words were "Glory, China for Christ".

Jane Innocent said of her husband in 1910, when unveiling a bronze tablet in his memory at Scotland Street Church, "Always faithful, always ready. No matter how difficult or dangerous the path he went on in the assurance Lo I am with you".

In 1900 there were three MNC circuits in North China with a total membership of 2641 members and 1334 probationers, nearly 4000 in all. Then the Boxer Rebellion in that year resulted in disaster. All foreign missionaries were driven from their stations, members scattered, their homes destroyed, crops ruined and 110 members massacred. After this turmoil in 1903 numbers were counted again and there was a heavy loss of some 1200 in total. The danger of professing the Christian faith was such that it was surprising that the losses were not heavier.

But the loss was temporary. The increase for the following two years was 600. The total Christian fellowship in 1906 was 4372 and the number of circuits had grown to five. Prior to the Boxer Rebellion there were two hospitals, now plans were afoot for one more. Rebuilding of the destroyed mission buildings resulted in more modern and larger premises in the main areas of work. The local Christians out of their own meagre resources had been able to fund 150 preaching places out of a total of 218 churches.

Stretching from Tientsin there was now an unbroken chain of chapels for 314 miles. This could involve travelling the route of the chain by Chinese cart for 14 days and sleeping each night in one of them. There was a native staff of 165 people and just 11 missionaries. Much effective work had been done and tribute must be given to the quality of the members of the fledgling church.

In 1910 the journey by sea to North China took little more than a month. The Trans Siberian Railway reduced the travel time to just over a fortnight.

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