



The 200th Birthday of The Bible Society 1807-2007

On the Edge of a Third Century

In 1807, Ireland was one country and leading churchmen in Belfast were quick to follow in the footsteps of those who, a year earlier, had started Bible ministry in Dublin. As elsewhere, the Belfast initiative was led by individuals who were challenged by the scarcity of Scripture. These were times of poverty and illiteracy. Bibles were in limited supply and expensive.

This had been the experience in England just a few years earlier. The story of Mary Jones, which falls gently on our ears today, was shocking in its time. The realisation that a 16 year old Welsh-speaking girl had to overcome every obstacle to obtain a Bible, had stirred the beginnings of the first Bible Society (the British and Foreign Bible Society) in London in 1804. Since then, a chain reaction has resulted in the formation of 145 sister Bible Societies and offices which today minister in 200 countries and constitute the largest Bible translation and distribution organisation in the world.

In this Bi-Centenary year, it is fascinating to reflect on the first steps taken in Northern Ireland to make the Bible more easily available. This article includes extracts from a new book by Rev Dudley Levistone Cooney entitled **Sharing the Word – A History of the Bible Society in Ireland** (published by Columba Press in hardback). Copies may be ordered from Bible House – Cost £16.25 (plus £2.00 p/p).



Beginnings in Belfast

The Society's history in Northern Ireland evolved from small beginnings. **"In 1807 and 1808 Belfast was only on the eve of the enormous growth that it was to experience in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its population was only 20,000, but leading men of the town were busily promoting schemes for the higher education of the people, and laying the foundations for the future prosperity of what would rapidly grow into a city. In 1814 the Belfast Branch was still only one of sixteen branches of the Hibernian Bible Society organised in the counties of Antrim and Down, the others being at Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Banbridge, Carrickfergus, Downpatrick, Dromore, Hillsborough, Larne, Lisburn, Newry, Saintfield, and Upper Ards organised in 1812 and Glenarm and Kells in 1814. However as the city grew in importance the branch grew in influence, and became the Auxiliary through which all of the work in the two counties was managed" 1**

The early Minutes recording the Society's work make frequent mention of Mr Mayne's shop in Donegall Square East where Scriptures were stored until required, and to the activities of the colporteurs who sold them in Belfast and the country districts. The support of the Society in Dublin was crucial to the work in Belfast, for example in the offer to pay the salary of a colporteur there. **"The salary was agreed at fifteen shillings per week (75 pence) with a further two shillings and sixpence (12.5 pence) for expenses.....The Auxiliary invested twelve shillings and sixpence (62.5 pence) in a bag which the colporteur could use to carry his stock, and advertised for a suitable person. One Alexander Agnew was appointed.**

In 1899 the Auxiliary proposed to appoint an Organising Secretary who would be paid for his services." 2 The work in Belfast was by now being structured on a more professional basis with a first office base being established at 1 Glengall Place, moving in 1903 to the first floor of 5 Clarence Place.

Bi-Centenary Year
The Bible Society
200

Committee of Belfast
Auxiliary, 1933



Changing Times

During the twentieth century a number of key events impacted on the Auxiliary in Belfast:

- **October, 1906** – The Hibernian Bible Society centenary was celebrated - Grosvenor Hall, Belfast.
- **October 1908 (!)** – The Centenary of the Belfast Auxiliary was celebrated in the Presbyterian Assembly Hall, preceded by a Reception given by the Lord Mayor of Belfast. A Centenary Fund was launched in the form of a 'Gold and Silver Collection' – a reference to golden guineas, sovereigns and half sovereigns.
- **1909** – The Belfast Auxiliary was given full responsibility for all of Counties Antrim and Down. "Counties Armagh and Derry" followed in 1928, with Tyrone and Fermanagh added in 1930.
- **1914** – On the outbreak of war, 10,000 copies of John's Gospel were ordered at a cost of £31 for distribution to Ulster Volunteers at the camps at Clandeboye, Ballykinlar and Donard Lodge. A total of 54,746 Scriptures were distributed to the Forces. Similar strategies were employed during 1939-45.
- **1923** - Although responsible for only two counties, the Belfast Auxiliary committee comprised 59 members, of whom 29 were clergy. Of the 30 lay members, 11 were women. That year, the Society moved to rooms on the top floor of number 7 (later numbered as 27) Howard Street.
- **1928** - The Auxiliary obtained agreement from Dublin to a change of name. They became known, somewhat awkwardly, as the "British and Foreign Bible Society, represented by the Hibernian Bible Society (Belfast Auxiliary)". The Auxiliary also moved to ground floor premises at 7 Bedford Street under a signboard proclaiming "The Bible House".



A New Home

Soon after, the Auxiliary returned to its former site, purchasing and refurbishing number 27 Howard Street at a total cost of £5,061. £3,500 of this sum came from a £5,000 legacy from the Adams family of Rathfriland – Its huge sum in those days and equivalent to around £250,000 today. The balance of the legacy was used to finance Bible distribution work elsewhere. In recognition of this bequest,

the new building was known as the 'D and J Adams Memorial Bible House'.

"The opening ceremony was held on Tuesday 14 November 1933 at 3.00pm. Robert Clyde JP presided and the Rev Dr John Ritson, former Secretary of the BFBS gave the address. Miss Mary Adams opened the House. The Rt Rev Dr William Corkey, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland dedicated the building, and the Rev R. Lee Cole, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland led prayers."³

This association with the Howard Street site has continued to this day.



Bible House, 1933

During both wars the Auxiliary distributed Scriptures to Service personnel and a New Testament was offered to each child caught up in the evacuation from Belfast during World War 2. In 1942 the Organising Secretary, James Hazley, died at the young age of 40 years. His successor, the late James McDonald, was to serve the Society right up to 1975 and, in his 90s, he recalled many evenings spent in church halls sharing the challenges and opportunities of the Society's work, supported by his lantern projector and glass slides - the latest technology at the time.

During his time with the Society a remarkable project was initiated from Belfast. **"In 1972 the Auxiliary initiated a plan for the distribution of copies of St Luke's Gospel to every household in Northern Ireland. At the suggestion of Cardinal Conway this was extended to the whole country, and was a notable example of co-operation between the Belfast and Dublin committees and the churches in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. 400,000 copies were distributed in Northern Ireland."** 4

This co-operation between the Irish Societies remained strong and for eight years Rev Dr Charles Presho, Executive Director in Belfast, undertook deputation work throughout Ireland. In 1985 the Belfast Auxiliary re-styled itself as the **Bible Society in Northern Ireland** and, two years later, became a full member of the worldwide **United Bible Societies**. After long support from Dublin, London and later, in the 1990s, from Edinburgh, Bible ministry in Belfast was growing up.

Dr Presho was succeeded by a Baptist pastor, Mervyn Morgan and in 1992 by a Presbyterian minister,

Rev David Campbell. It was during these latter years that the Society demolished and re-built the deteriorating Howard Street property. The Opening ceremony was performed by Lady Mayhew, wife of the Secretary of State on 22 February 1994.

By now the main objective of the work in Belfast was to encourage the Churches and their members to support the United Bible Societies' extensive international programme of Bible translation and distribution. A database of supporters was developed in 1993, and the Word at Work magazine and special campaigns were circulated to raise funds for selected Bible projects. The concern to place Scripture in the hands of the poor abroad, which had been evident 150 years previously, was now a priority. BSNI was now a prominent Grant-making Society, supporting the programmes of Bible Societies in other countries who were unable to generate sufficient funds locally.



**Bible House Opening, 22 February 1994.
Professor Burrows (Chair) and Lady Mayhew**

Bringing the story up to date

The current General Secretary, John Doherty, was appointed in May 2000 at a time of rapid change in many respects:

- The Word at Work magazine (previously designed in Scotland) grew in circulation and became a wholly local production.
- The Society's website was developed and a fortnightly E-mail Prayer Circle, incorporating photographs of those to be prayed for, was introduced.
- The staff team increased by 50% in 2002 - from two to three!
- Increased income from fundraising enabled a substantial increase in grants to Bible projects abroad. In 2007 this programme was projected to exceed one third of a million pounds and to provide Bibles in more than 30 countries.
- The Society took a leading role in the promotion of non-print strategies using solar-powered digital Scripture players and the Jesus Film to reach illiterate audiences with the Gospel.
- Continuing the Society's age-old commitment to Scripture projects at home, major support has been given since September 2000 to the Baptist Youth Department's schools storytelling project, **The Amazing Journey**. Over 100,000 Scriptures have been distributed.



Handwritten Bible Launch, May 2006

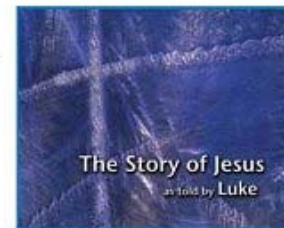
Bringing the story up to date continued_____

- Other partnerships have been forged with, among others, **Scripture Union** (distributing 130,000 copies of Luke the Book to schools in 1999), with **Wycliffe Bible Translators** (joint funding of New Testament translations), with **Every Home Crusade** (printing Gospels of John in Kiswahili for Kenya) and with **FireFighters for Christ** to provide a specially designed New Testament for Fire Service staff.
- Increasingly, partnerships are now being created for people here to supply Bibles to churches and mission personnel that they wish to support abroad through their national Bible Society. Similarly, individuals are personally funding specific Bible projects abroad that they have chosen. Donors are being brought into closer contact than ever before with those who are being impacted by Scripture as a result of their gifts.
- The relationship with the National Bible Society of Ireland in Dublin has never been closer through the joint publication of Bible Sunday worship resources and News releases, joint Bible exhibitions, the printing of Scripture Portions and shared fundraising campaigns.
- The **Handwritten Bible** project was taken forward simultaneously in Belfast and Dublin in 2006 – 07 and, in N. Ireland, involved 10,500 people of all ages in making a complete copy of the Bible as an encouragement to engage with the Bible text.
- Bible House in Belfast has continued to be a focus for Scripture distribution but in contrast to 1807, the Bibles and Testaments on sale cover 50 different languages, to help churches and individuals to reach out to the strangers who have come to live among us.

Some things remain as important as in the earliest times. Staff continue to speak on behalf of the Society at Sunday worship, midweek meetings, school Assemblies and special events. A Laptop may have replaced glass slides as the means of presenting the work, but face-to-face contact is still felt to be the best way to promote the Society's work, and challenge Christians with the responsibility to share the Bible text with those who have none. Unlike the past, when there was an expectation that a 'Deputation Secretary' would be an ordained Anglican, today staff are now welcomed into a wide range of worship situations and the Society receives gifts and other support from eight different denominations, plus local independent worship centres.



Fire Fighters For Christ,
New Testament



Luke's Gospel printed for
Handwritten Bible Participants



Children's New Testament, distributed
through the Amazing Journey Project

Looking to the Future!_____

This work began with the co-operation of clergy and laity and so it has continued to this day, both within the Board's membership and in the daily work. The Society's ability to work across denominational boundaries has placed it in a unique position to promote the Bible among Christians here and as a resource for them to use for evangelism worldwide.

The challenge today is to communicate those opportunities across our local Christian community so that people can look outward and see the needs of others. The ambition of those pioneers, who came together in 1807 to promote access to the Bible, is still

being realised. It is through partnership that the Bible Society in Northern Ireland still seeks to live out their ideals in God's service.

References:

- 1 Dudley Levistone Cooney, *Sharing the Word* (Dublin, 2006) pp 129-30
- 2 *ibid*, p 133
- 3 *ibid*, p 140
- 4 *ibid*, p 151

