



William
Shellabear

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Prepared Jointly by TRAC Board of Archives &
TRAC Board of Christian Education

In every humane and stable society we justly celebrate the lives of men and women who have laid the foundations for the lives we lead today. Methodists in Singapore rightly honour the memory of many Methodist men and women who gave much in terms of service and duty not only to the church, but also to the nation. They played many roles, and are reknown for their accomplishments. Some, like James Thoburn and William Oldham, were great strategists. Neither man played a long or extensive role in the everyday management of the Methodist Church in Singapore, but they set it on an illustrious course. Others, like Sophia Blackmore, were associated with specific institutions to which they gave their lives through decades of faithful service. In the case of many Asian church leaders, long known and admired but less studied, there is much for us to learn. It will be an accomplishment of the Methodist Church in Singapore if serious study is undertaken on the important roles that men like Goh Hood Keng, Lau Seng Chong, Samuel Abraham, and many others assumed in promoting the growth and development of Methodism in Singapore.

There are also leaders who have been largely forgotten, but yet their lives have made a significant impact on Methodism in Singapore. William Shellabear was the first Presiding Elder when the Singapore Mission was formed into a Mission Conference. He was the founder of the Methodist Publishing House, now known as MPH. In over 20 years of literary work he succeeded in translating the Bible into Malay, and began to publish it as well as hundreds of other tracts and books. He founded the Methodist church and school in

Melaka, and during that time he was also the District Superintendent for both Singapore and the Federated Malay States. After 30 years in Singapore and Malaysia he moved to the U.S. to teach full time as professor of Islamic Studies at the Kennedy School of Mission. He also continued in his work on translations. His works on the Malay language and Islamic religious texts are being used by scholars to this day. Such scholastic accomplishments deserve acknowledgement and recognition but unfortunately they are hardly remembered by present-day Singaporean Methodists.

William Girdlestone Shellabear was born in 1862 in England. In 1896 he arrived in Singapore as an officer in the Royal Engineers, helping in the design and building of the harbour defenses around what is now Sentosa Island. In Singapore he met William Oldham, and soon become active in the work of the new Methodist Mission. By the time he took his leave in 1889 he was committed to leaving his military career to become a Methodist missionary assigned to Singapore. He returned to Singapore in 1892 with his new bride, Fanny Kealy Shellabear, and immediately established the Methodist Mission Press. Its first works were Malay and Chinese Bibles and tracts, many translated by Shellabear himself. Soon it also began publishing scholarly works and school textbooks for the Methodist Schools. Within a decade it had expanded into the business of book binding and publishing for markets as far afield as Burma, Taiwan, and Indonesia, and was aptly renamed the Methodist Publishing House. Yet despite this growth the 1890s' was a period of grief

and lament for Shellabear. His young wife had died of tuberculosis before the end of their fourth year of marriage, and just after the birth of their son. Besides, he found much burden in having to shoulder the responsibility of leading the mission at a time when growth was punctuated by financial crisis and cultural conflict. The Anglo-Chinese School, though large in entity, was ever on the verge of financial collapse, and in 1896 its policies in regard to non-Christian students came under attack in the press from leading members of the Singapore Chinese community. Shellabear was able to lead the school (whose principal had returned to the U.S.) through these troubled times, but found little joy in such work.

Thus it was with some relief that from 1902 to 1909 Shellabear was able to move to Melaka, with a new bride (Emma Ferris) to concentrate on literary work. Shellabear's years in Melaka did not alleviate his administrative duties. Without much delay, he formed a church and school, whilst his wife set up a girls' school. By 1904 he had moved the Methodist Pastor Training School to Melaka and had charge of it as well, while acting as District Superintendent for all the Methodists south of the Malay Peninsular including Singapore. In carrying on his work in translation he also continued to be the chief editor of the MPH. Ostensibly, he found that being out of Singapore had freed him from the distressing conflicts of church politics. Also, it had provided him the opportunity of delving deeply into his study of the Malay language. Before he left Melaka, he succeeded in publishing a translation of the Pilgrims Progress in Baba Malay, as well as several scholarly editions of classical

Malay literary texts. His crowning achievement was the publication of the Malay New Testament, a work which remained in print up to 1972.

Upon the satisfactory establishment of the Melaka school and church and the eventual completion of translating the Bible into the Malay language, Shellabear had hoped to return to Singapore to begin a mission among Malay speakers. However, he was called instead to Sitiawan. The orphanage and mission rubber plantation were suffering from a lack of firm leadership, and from 1909 to 1912 Shellabear lived the life of a planter and school master, while being District Superintendent of the central Malaysian states and translating the Old Testament into Malay. The latter work was completed in 1912, and subsequently published in the following year during which Shellabear returned to be with his family in the United States.

Shellabear came back once again to Singapore in 1912, to be followed later by his wife. In his last years in Singapore, from 1912 to 1918, Shellabear had enjoyed much success in those endeavors which meant most to him. Malay medium schools for girls were established and soon became the largest of the type in Malaysia. He published a Baba Malay Bible to serve the growing community of local Christians. And he was able, with the help of Bible Society Colleagues, to eventually establish lasting contacts among Malay boys in villages around Singapore town. In recognition for his work of scholarship he was elected president of the Singapore Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. It began publishing some

of his most significant scholarly works in their journal. Yet he found himself increasingly estranged from the Methodist Mission strategy.

Shellabear alerted by warning for nearly a decade that the Methodist church was too involved in accumulating profits through the institutions rather than concentrating on personal evangelism in the vernacular languages. The MPH had become Southeast Asia's largest publishing house. But only a tiny fraction of its work was religious in nature. Shellabear found that as a translator he was often asked to do secular advertisements rather than Christian tracts. Non-profit religious publications were often delayed to meet demands on deadlines for secular work. The mission rubber plantations had, except during the tenure of Shellabear's management, been losing much money, and consequently they were forced into bankruptcy. The "Mission to trees" as one missionary sarcastically called them, lost hundreds of thousands of dollars that might have otherwise been put to good use for missions work. And the English medium schools, which were outstandingly successful as educational institutions for Singapore's growing middle class, were less interested in the work of Shellabear than the vernacular schools for the poor. Shellabear felt that the work he and his wife did in establishing Malay girls' schools, teaching in the Baba congregation, and reaching out to Malay boys in the villages, were neglected and unappreciated by contrast. The conflicts came to a head when Shellabear discovered that after 1916 he would be required to give most of his time to the MPH, doing essentially secular editing and translation. A bitter conflict with the head of MPH, who was also the District Superintendent, led to a physical breakdown.

Shortly thereafter the same man closed the training school for Asian pastors which Shellabear had founded, insisting that future pastors ought to be trained in English. By 1918 it was clear that Shellabear was physically incapacitated and not able to work in the tropical conditions. Spiritually he was at odds with a Methodist mission that is dedicated primarily to its English language schools and is financially dependent on its secularized publishing house.

Fortunately for Shellabear, his philosophy of mission and his own scholarly skills were appreciated in the United States. By 1919 he was lecturing part-time in the Kennedy School of Missions. In 1921 he began teaching full time. He would continue until his retirement in 1934 due to ill health. In Singapore his work was continued in part by his daughters, Fanny and Margaret, who worked for the Women Foreign Missionary Society. On his part Shellabear continued to translate Christian works for publication in Southeast Asia. In the 1920's he worked on a new set of evangelistic tracts, culminating in two full length books with the story of the Bible in Malay verse. In Singapore and Malaysia these were printed and distributed only in Jawi text. As a result they are little known today. In their own time they were sold by the thousands. In Sumatra they were published in romanized text, and were in use up to the 1950's. In the 1930's, after a brief setback because of stroke, Shellabear wrote and published commentaries on the New Testament in Malay. Only with the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent occupation of Singapore did he lose contact with the Methodist Church in Southeast Asia. By the end of the war his health deteriorated and he could not continue active work as a translator. His last

works was a series of translations of the Quran from Arabic to Malay, to be used as a training tool for Christian evangelists in Indonesia. He died in 1948, having lived to see the end of the war, and his own children returning to carry on the work which he began some 50 years earlier.

I n Singapore there are those who remember fondly the Shellabear name. His initials, WGS, are found repeatedly on hymns in the Malay hymnal. In Melaka the Shellabear Hall still stands, a tribute to his second wife and her work among the Malay girls of that town. But he was not an institution builder. Instead the names most often found on plaques and monuments play lesser significant roles. His dedication to the Malays and Babas, especially in their welfare, and his knowledge of their literature and culture, were never shared widely among Methodists in his time, nor after. His commitment to vernacular ministries found little sympathy among Christians who maintained that English was the future of Singaporean Methodism. This in itself is sufficient in explaining why the memory of him faded so quickly, despite the prestige of the positions he once held. Still, his life is intriguing. He was deeply committed to the Christian gospel, and he remained steadfast in his loyalty until the end of his life, and even when they were not shared by his peers. As we try to understand better our heritage, and what it means to have a commitment on the cultural and religious integrity in a modern society, the life of a man dedicated to both becomes an attractive object of study. Shellabear represents in many ways the road which Singaporean Methodism chose not to travel. But that road may yet hold many lessons for us today, not least because we may one day cross it, and we may wish to examine the way in which it leads, before we carry on.