

Early Years

Although he was popularly known as the ‘Flying Scot,’ Eric had in fact been born in China.

He had come into the world in the city of Tientsin in North China on 16th January, 1902. Naturally he didn’t know much about that. Which was probably just as well, given that these were days of great social and political upheaval in China. He was the second son of Christian missionary parents. His father had been appointed as missionary by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1898 to Mongolia, an area north of China bordering on Russia. The following year, Eric’s father had married Eric’s mother in Shanghai. But things were tough for Christian missionaries at that time.

A month after Eric’s parents’ wedding there was an uprising among a society known as the ‘Boxers’. These were very patriotic Chinese who wished to maintain the distinctly Chinese traditions and lifestyle. They were part of the Imperial Army of the Empress-Dowager Tzu-Hsi and late in 1899 she started what became a slogan for the Boxers:

‘Kill the foreigners, kill the foreigners, kill them before breakfast.’

This was frightening for foreigners, needless to say. The aim of the Government, aided by Boxer forces, was to wipe out all trace of the Christian religion from the land. Christianity was seen as particularly threatening to the Chinese culture. The Boxers were ruthless, cruelly killing men, women and children. They were fanatical about ancient Chinese culture and martial arts, which is why they were commonly known as ‘the society of harmonious fists!’ Many Protestant missionaries were killed in the period of the Boxers’ activities from November 1899 to September 1901.

At the time of the Boxer Rebellion, James and Mary Liddell were at Ch’aoYang in Manchuria, North China. They were staying with LMS doctor, Tom Cochrane, a Scotsman from Greenock, and his wife, Grace, with their three children. James took on the Church-based side of the work there. When stories filtered through early in 1900 of atrocities committed by the Boxers nearby, they realised that they would have to flee for their lives.

‘Look,’ said Tom, ‘you all must get away from here. Go to the railhead with James. It’s sixty miles away. You’ll be able to get to safety from there. James can return to the mission and we’ll get away somehow.’

So James took Grace Cochrane and her three young children, with his wife, Mary, and set off for the nearest railhead. They faced considerable dangers on their way, but they reached their destination safely enough.

Meantime, in view of the dangerous situation he faced, Tom Cochrane decided to make a dash for the railhead in the hope of reaching his family. He dressed in Chinese clothes and went on horseback, facing terrible danger. Eventually he met up with them.

‘Tom, I wasn’t going to move till you came.’ Grace Cochrane had refused to go on in the hope that her husband would join them.

The group of Christian missionaries were thankful to the Lord for being kept safe thus far and they duly boarded the next train for Shanghai and relative safety.

It wasn’t long before Mary gave birth to their first child, a son whom they named Robert Victor. That was in August 1900 at the London Missionary Society compound in Shanghai.

A few months later, however, the intrepid James and Mary returned to the north, to be settled in Tientsin. From there, James took a trip into Mongolia to see what had happened to the Chinese Christians there. He toured the area for four months or so, accompanied by 200 soldiers!

Sixteen months after Robert came into the world, Eric was born at Tientsin. He was baptised Eric Henry Liddell. Originally, his parents intended him to be called Henry Eric.

On the way to the baptism someone said:

‘What is his name?’

‘Henry Eric,’ said the young child’s father.

‘Maybe ‘Eric Henry’ would be better, don’t you think? After all, think of how the initials would run together!’

Eric Henry it became.

A daughter was born into the family circle late in 1903. She was named Janet Lillian, though she was always known as Jenny. She was also born in Tientsin. By that time, the family was settled about 180 miles to the south west of Tientsin in a place called Siaochang. This was on the great plane of North China, a plane with thousands of villages – ‘As close to one another as currents in a rich cake,’ was how someone put it.

The plain contained millions of people. But that’s where James and Mary were to serve the Lord, and that’s where Eric and his older brother spent the first few years of their life.

Unlike their sister, Jenny, the boys would be left in Britain for their education after the Liddells’ first home leave in 1907–08 (this leave is usually called a ‘furlough’). Every seven years or so missionaries had an extended break at ‘home’ – usually a year. This was the ‘home leave’.

Apart from visits home to Britain with her parents, Jenny remained on in China until she finally came back with them in 1929, when her father retired from missionary service. The same was true of the fourth child of the Liddell home, Ernest Blair, who was born in Peking (Beijing) in December 1912.

Rob and Eric first went back to Britain with their parents and Jenny, in 1907. They did have some memories of the early days in China. Eric didn't remember much of it. He vaguely remembered the mission compound at Siaochang to where his father had been posted when work in Mongolia did not open up. Eric's sister later described the set-up:

'The LMS station in Siaochang consisted then of four large houses in a row. They had verandas on two sides, both upstairs and down. Behind the houses were the Church, a Boys' School and a Girls' School. These were surrounded by a high wall built of mud, with a large gate closed at night.'

Eric remembered the freedom of the compound, playing games with Rob and the Chinese children. It was very hot and dusty in the summer. He remembered chasing round the dining room, the kittens that had been brought from Tientsin. The first phrase he had learned in Chinese was 'Hsiao mao pao la' ('Little cat has run away'). And he had to wear a wadded Chinese coat and a big wide-brimmed hat to keep off the sun. The boys had a Chinese *amah* who cared for them while their mother cared for the patients in the hospital.

The Mission Societies had a retreat on the Po Hai coast at Pei-tai-ho. Eric loved it, as did the other children, playing so much in the sea and on the sandy beaches. He also remembered the quiet Sundays, the Church services and family worship times. These

made a distinct impression that was to remain with him for his whole life. Christ was the centre of the home. He remembered during the hymn singing times how he had always requested the 'Ninety and Nine,' but always cried when it came to the sad bit, about the sheep that was lost and alone on the mountains. Above all, it was the lovely Christian atmosphere of the home from his earliest days that Eric most warmly remembered. Perhaps he knew nothing else and took it for granted. But it all flooded back when he later came to commit himself personally to the Lord some years later.