The Legacy of Robert Arthington

Brian Stanley

Most, if not all, of those who have figured in the International Bulletin's series "Missionary Legacies" have been either distinguished missionaries or influential mission theologians or strategists. The subject of this article never left his native shores in Victorian England, never wrote a book, was never on the board of any missionary society, and can only with some question be regarded as an original missions thinker. Yet it is arguable that he did more than any other person to facilitate the growth of British Protestant missions in the first thirty years of the twentieth century.

Robert Arthington achieved this extraordinary degree of posthumous influence through his legacy in the literal and financial sense. The story of "Arthington's million" is one of the most intriguing and revealing chapters in the narrative of how the rapid Protestant missionary expansion of the early twentieth century was financed. In contrast to the formative influence exerted by the philanthropy of the Rockefeller Foundation on American Protestant missionary policy in the same period, Arthington's story suggests that under certain circumstances big money may possess relatively limited power to shape corporate policy. Being thinly spread, vested in an ambiguously phrased bequest, and administered by trustees who had the established interests of the missionary societies at heart, Arthington's million pounds proved less of a subversive or innovative element than he himself probably hoped and intended.

Commitment to Central Africa

Robert Arthington was born in Leeds on May 20, 1823, the only son of Robert and Maria Arthington, who were leading figures in the Leeds meeting of the Society of Friends. In 1848 Arthington followed the example of his mother and two of his three sisters in leaving the Society of Friends and eventually found his spiritual home at South Parade Baptist Church in Leeds. Robert Arthington, Sr., owned a brewery but had abandoned his business after adopting strict temperance principles in 1846. Nevertheless, on his death in 1864, he left a fortune of £200,000 to his son. Robert junior never set up his own business, but a combination of prudent investment, notably in British and American railways, and a notoriously parsimonious lifestyle augmented his fortune to an extent of which he himself was unaware until the final months of his life.
His wealth accumulated despite a series of large donations to missionary work. The most frequent recipient of his largesse was the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS). Arthington’s preference for the BMS and, to a lesser degree, the London Missionary Society (LMS), as recipients of his philanthropy had little to do with ecclesiological principle. It simply reflected general approval of these societies’ emphasis on evangelistic expansion. As a premillennialist, he believed that the priority in missionary strategy was to disseminate the Gospel as widely and rapidly as possible in order to hasten the return of Christ. Thus the BMS Congo Mission originated in 1877 with a donation of £1,000 from Arthington and owed its subsequent eastward expansion almost entirely to his munificence. George Grenfell’s river steamer, the *Peace*, was purchased and maintained by means of an initial donation of £4,000 received from Arthington in 1880, supplemented by a further gift of £1,000 in 1882. The money was given on condition that the BMS should advance up the Congo (Zaire) River with the ultimate goal of meeting a possible extension of the LMS Tanganyika Mission (whose foundation was also financed by Arthington) at a point west of Lake Albert. An additional £2,000 in 1884 enabled the BMS to proceed with the plan of constructing a chain of mission stations along the Congo as far as Kisangani.

In April 1892 Arthington offered the society a further £10,000 in the hope of inducing the BMS to extend its mission northeastward into the Upper Nile region. The offer was eventually accepted, and the funds were used to finance George Grenfell’s last explorations, in the Aruwimi River basin. It seems probable that Arthington’s vision of forming a chain of mission stations to constitute “a line of Gospel light across the ‘dark continent’” was borrowed from the Church Missionary Society (CMS) pioneer Johann Krapf, who was a regular correspondent of Arthington. Indeed, when in 1875 the CMS was enabled by an anonymous donation of £5,000 to make its own contribution to the fulfillment of Krapf’s dream by launching its Uganda Mission, it was publicly, and very possibly correctly, reported that Arthington was the donor.[1] Arthington was also strongly influenced by David Livingstone’s vision for the Christian penetration of the central African interior. The fact that
Livingstone's vision took flesh in the three decades after his death in 1873 owed much to Arthington's generosity.

**Allocation of the Legacy**

The significance for the Christian history of central Africa of Robert Arthington's philanthropy exercised during his lifetime is thus considerable. However, it is outweighed by the importance of the legacy left on his death on October 9, 1900. Arthington's last will and testament, dated June 9, 1900, appointed as his executors and trustees John Edmund Whiting, John Town, Alfred Henry Baynes, and Samuel Southall. Whiting, a Quaker carpet manufacturer in Leeds, was responsible for persuading Arthington, "not without some difficulty, . . . that his nearest relatives might reasonably hope for some share in his bequests."[2] One-tenth of the residuary estate accordingly went to Arthington's first cousins, or, if they were deceased, to their children. Town, head of Joseph Town and Sons, paper manufacturers, was a leading figure in South Parade Baptist Church. Baynes had been general secretary of the BMS since 1878 and was the principal architect of the Congo Mission, largely financed by Arthington. Baynes retired from the BMS in 1906 but continued as an Arthington trustee until his death in 1914. Sharing Arthington's overriding enthusiasm for Africa, he used his influence as a trustee to promote the evangelization of central Africa as a priority in the allocation of the bequest, although in this respect he was only moderately successful. Southall was a Leeds tea merchant and a Quaker of decidedly evangelical views. On the invitation of these four trustees, a fifth trustee was added in the person of Dr. Ralph Wardlaw Thompson, foreign secretary of the LMS since 1881 and one of the most powerful figures in British Protestant missions. Arthington's will had been poorly drafted, and it proved necessary to apply to the High Court of Chancery for a scheme of administration of the estate. A plan was approved in 1905, after which a proportion of the bequest became available for use, but (owing to outstanding claims from relatives) another five years passed before the final distribution of the estate could be effected. By that date its value had grown to £1,273,849. The will bequeathed the nine-tenths of the estate remaining (after the needs of his cousins and various other bequests had been met) to the BMS and the LMS in a ratio of 5 to 4.[3] It specified that each society's share was to be administered by a committee, whose members were to apply both capital and interest "in their uncontrolled discretion for the purpose of spreading the knowledge of God's word among the heathen (excluding Mohammedan populations)." The exclusion of Islamic populations received no justification in the will other than the bald statement, "I desire that Mohammedans everywhere should be left to the various Bible agencies." The High Court of Chancery had ruled that the reference to
"uncontrolled discretion" was not to be interpreted as meaning that the entire nine-ninths were to be given to the BMS and LMS for their sole and absolute use.[4] As a result, the 1905 plan of administration placed £130,000 in a fund designated for "new missionary efforts not strictly connected" with either the BMS and the LMS. The BMS and the LMS were left with five-ninths and four-ninths of the residue, totaling £466,926 and £373,541 respectively.[5]

The will expressed a preference that the bequest should be used to give every language group vernacular copies of the Gospels of Luke and John and the Acts of the Apostles. This wish reflected Arthington's belief that, although the number of those in any one locality who would believe might be small, missionaries could safely limit themselves to the translation of these portions of the New Testament and then move on, trusting the Holy Spirit to do the rest. Although this preference was reflected in the priority given to pioneering Bible translation work in the statement of conditions applicable to the third fund (the one independent of the work of BMS and LMS), relatively little of the million pounds was devoted to such activity.[6] The explanation lies not in any lack of enthusiasm on the part of the societies for the principle of Bible translation but rather in the caution that, in differing measure, they displayed about accepting new commitments that would entail major long-term financial consequences.

The 1905 plan specified that the entire bequest was to be spent within a period of twenty-five years. The societies soon found it necessary to correct publicly the misapprehension that the legacy would make possible the realization of the wildest dreams of missionary expansion. The BMS warned its supporters that, since all the money was to be employed for the initiation of new work, the bequest in no way relieved pressure on its general funds. The LMS, however, decided it would be short-sighted to employ the money for initiating wholly new ventures.[7] The LMS, guided by Ralph Wardlaw Thompson, made an early policy decision to use to the full the freedom allowed by the terms of the trust to interpret new work as meaning "the definite extension of existing work."

There is extant in the BMS archives a memorandum drafted by Thompson in 1905 setting out the principles that he wanted the LMS to observe in utilizing
its share of the bequest.\[8\] The memorandum acknowledges that, to be true to Arthington's wishes, pioneer evangelistic work must have an important place in the application of the fund. The central emphasis of the document, however, is on "the Great Eastern Missions of the Society," which already claimed nearly two-thirds of all LMS personnel and, in Thompson's opinion, demanded "very serious attention." The India and China fields required more missionaries; better provision for the training of native workers, the education of the children of converts, and literature work; the extension of medical missions; and the encouragement of industrial work designed to lift the depressed classes to economic independence. In contrast, the fields in the South Seas, Madagascar, and South Africa were said to offer little scope for extension, while any new missions among "uncivilised races" must be entered into with great caution, since long experience showed them ultimately to be far more costly than might appear in their initial stages. In consequence, Thompson concluded, "the amount to be set aside for extension to new regions and for Missions among uncivilised tribes should be comparatively small, certainly not more than one-fourth of the whole fund." Of the remainder, Thompson proposed that half should be devoted to strengthening existing missions through the erection of new hospitals, schools, and training institutions, and the other half to enabling two selected districts in each of the India and China fields to develop toward fully self-supporting status.

**LMS Emphasis on Asia**

The substance of Thompson's memorandum was reproduced in the policy adopted by the society in late 1905. At the second meeting of the LMS Arthington committee, Thompson presented nine resolutions to govern the society's use of the bequest. The second of these observed that it was desirable that due regard be paid to Arthington's known wish to promote pioneer evangelism and translation work. But the force of this concession was outweighed by the preceding and following resolutions, which were adopted "without much discussion." The first stated that it would be "more profitable" to base any extension of work made possible by the bequest on existing missions rather than to undertake missions in entirely new regions. The third affirmed that "the work of the Society has now reached such a stage that extension of the Kingdom of God is more likely to be satisfactorily provided for by the more thorough evangelisation of the vast districts in which the Gospel has begun to be preached, and by the provision of such educational and other advantages for the converts as will
make them better fitted to carry on the enterprise of the Church among their
countrymen, than by the commencement of work in entirely new districts.”[9] Here was the voice of a mainstream Protestant society approaching the imperial high noon of its maturity, content enough with the extent of the territory that had been claimed by the nineteenth-century missionary army, yet still far from satisfied with the quality of the indigenous churches planted in that territory, and determined by substantial investment in education to remedy that deficiency. The commitment to the priority of equipping the indigenous church was genuine enough and was repeated in public statements explaining the society's policy on the use of the bequest, such statements making no attempt to conceal from the LMS constituency the preeminence of prudence.[10]

There is little doubt, however, that another agenda was at work here than financial prudence alone. Pioneer evangelism among tribal peoples was inexpensive compared with the reinforcement of mature fields by investment in educational and medical institutions that Thompson indicated as the first priority. One of the guiding principles of his secretariat had been the priority of reinforcement. Another was to shift the center of gravity of the LMS from work among those he regarded as "uncivilized" peoples - notably in South Africa and the Pacific - to the great Asian fields of India and China, and specifically to the attempt to construct a mature church capable of sustaining its own life and identity amid the historic Oriental civilizations. Over the period of Thompson's secretariat, the proportion of LMS missionaries working in Asia rose from under a half in 1881 to over two-thirds in 1914. The eastward direction that he imparted to LMS expansion, first through the Forward Movement of 1891-94, and then through the Arthington fund, proved an enduring one.

In accordance with Thompson's recommendations, it was agreed that LMS pioneer work among unevangelized peoples should consume no more than £4,000 a year (representing about one-quarter of the LMS Arthington fund), to be divided between three missions.[11] The Bemba Mission at Mbereshi in modern Zambia had been established in 1900-1901 following a donation of £10,000 from Arthington.[12] His bequest was now used to reinforce that new and initially struggling venture. With the aid of Arthington money, Mbereshi
developed into a major center of Christian education and industrial training. By 1930 young men educated at Mbereshi were contributing to the birth of Zambian nationalist politics. Second, a new station was to be opened in Matabeleland. John Whiteside was dispatched in 1906 to commence a new work at Insiza, which was moved a year later to Tjimali in the Marula district. Support from the Arthington fund brought the mission over the next decade to self-supporting status.[13] Third, the society's most celebrated pioneering field - the Papua New Guinea mission, where the martyrs of James Chalmers and Oliver Tomkins were still freshly etched in memory - was reinforced in its most recent branch in the west.

The remaining three-quarters of the LMS portion of the bequest were devoted entirely to the established fields of India and China, being divided equally between the development of general work in districts of particular need or opportunity, and investment in capital-intensive projects such as hospitals, education (including industrial training), and literature production.[14] The newly formed commitment of Protestant missions to the provision of institutional medical care carried enormous financial implications. Samuel Southall commented in 1901 that there was reason to fear that Arthington, for most of his life, had been indifferent to bodily suffering, seeing it as his task to save souls.[15] In 1906 Southall laid before the trustees a memorandum reminding them of "Mr. Arthington's strongly expressed desire that his bequest should not be used to save the funds of the missionary societies, but rather to enable them to take up work which otherwise they could not cover."[16] It is ironic that the priorities of the mission boards, at least in the LMS case, ensured that much of this work turned out to be the provision of high-cost institutional medical care. It could thus be claimed that the fund was employed to correct the theological deficiency that Southall had identified in the understanding of mission held by Arthington himself.

**BMS Policy vs. Arthington's Vision**

At the BMS, A. H. Baynes drafted a similar memorandum for the guidance of the society.[17] In some respects it was closely patterned on Thompson's model. There was the same care to preserve the society from a crippling financial burden once the
fund was exhausted. Yet Baynes's memorandum was also markedly different. Repeated allusion was made to Arthington's own preeminent concern for pioneer evangelism, often through direct citation from his letters and statements. Since Arthington's greatest interest had been in Africa, and specifically in the idea of a transequatorial chain of mission stations, Baynes suggested that one-half of the BMS share of the fund should be devoted to new or extended mission enterprise in Africa. The other half was to be split equally between new building projects in existing fields and the strengthening of districts of strategic importance in India, Ceylon, and China in order to bring the churches there to financial independence. While the structure and categories of Baynes's paper mirrored those of Thompson's earlier model, the mathematics and the geography were crucially different. Baynes's intention was that the fund should complete what he and Arthington had initiated: namely, the evangelization of the Congo basin principally through the agency of the BMS, and a corresponding reorientation of the society from its historic but largely disappointing geographic focus in North India to the more promising field of sub-Saharan Africa.

Baynes presented his paper to the BMS Arthington committee on January 29, 1906. The committee asked that it should be circulated with a view to further consideration at the next meeting. In the interim, on March 31, Baynes retired as general secretary of the BMS, to be succeeded by C. E. Wilson, an educational missionary from Serampore College. Thus by the next meeting, on April 9, an Asian man was at the helm of the society. Baynes's memorandum was "carefully considered" but not adopted. Instead a resolution was passed to the effect that the best policy would be to use the fund to strengthen the churches in one or more districts of strategic importance and potential with a view to enabling the BMS in due course to withdraw its assistance in favor of other fields. The subsequent pattern of allocation of the fund makes it clear that India and China, rather than Africa, received the bulk of the BMS grants. The extension of the China Mission, for example, received over £10,000 of Arthington funds in the space of two meetings of the BMS General Committee in January and March 1907.

To this extent, the pattern of BMS usage of the fund parallels that followed by the LMS more closely than Baynes originally envisaged. Nevertheless, the spirit of Baynes's memorandum was preserved insofar as its insistence on fidelity to Arthington's belief in pioneer evangelism was respected. The society that had been Arthington's favorite during his lifetime proved consistently more willing than the LMS to employ his bequest to advance into new territory. Thus in Shaanxi Province in China a line of new stations was opened in 1910-11, stretching northward from Xian city. In India the expectation of
money from the Arthington bequest encouraged the society in 1901 to begin work among the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and in the following year to resurrect the adjacent tribal mission in Mizoram. This had been pioneered by J. H. Lorrain and F. W. Savidge under the auspices of the "Arthington Aborigines Mission," a venture launched by Arthington in 1889. Compelled to relinquish this work in 1898 by Arthington's impatience with their evangelistic methods, Lorrain and Savidge had started a mission of their own in Arunachal Pradesh. From this they were in turn recalled by the BMS to lead the Mizoram Mission, which became a notable success and a primary instrument in the Christianization of the northeastern states of India. Further south, in Orissa, Arthington funds enabled the BMS to institute another tribal mission among the Konds, which later bore fruit in a mass movement of conversion. Hence the BMS struck a rather different balance than did the LMS between the conflicting demands of fidelity to Arthington's insistence on evangelistic expansion and alertness to the danger of overextension. As the fund neared exhaustion in the mid-1920s, the financial difficulties that the society experienced might suggest that prudence had been sacrificed to fidelity, yet no important BMS project initiated through Arthington money had to be abandoned once the fund had run its course. Although more open than the LMS to advance into new mission territory, even the BMS devoted a substantial proportion of the fund to projects that conformed to the increasingly broad and institutionally focused agenda of Protestant missions in this period rather than to the strictly evangelistic understanding of mission held by Arthington himself. This was one consequence of the shift in policy consequent upon Baynes's replacement by C. E. Wilson. Thus, in the field of theological education, at least £20,000 of Arthington money was made available to make possible the reopening in 1910, after an interval of thirty years, of Serampore College as an institution of advanced theological education and, in the following year, the resumption of an arts department affiliated with Calcutta University. There is evidence that the trustees expressed reservations about awarding Serampore such a large slice of the cake but were overruled within the BMS Arthington committee.[21] These developments laid the foundations for the strategic role played by
Serampore College in higher theological education in twentieth-century India. The irony is that this revival of Serampore as an institution of general higher education in the English language marked the defeat of those within the BMS, led by Baynes, who believed that the college ought to be primarily or exclusively a vehicle for offering lower-level vernacular training to supply the Baptist churches of Bengal with adequately equipped pastors and evangelists. Baynes’s view had been challenged within the society and finally overturned after his retirement.

In China, similarly, the BMS was not exempt from the tendency to utilize the Arthington bequest to promote the massive Protestant investment in institutions of both higher education and medicine that was so marked a characteristic of the years after the republican revolution. The BMS was closely associated with one of the two Christian universities to receive grants from the bequest. The Shandong Christian University, founded in 1904 by the BMS and the American Presbyterian mission, was in its early years a federal institution occupying three separate locations in the province. One of these, in the provincial capital of Jinan, housed the Union Medical College, erected in 1910 with aid from the Arthington fund. In 1917 a further grant from the fund enabled the other two components of the university - a theological institute and an arts college - to be relocated on the Jinan site. The Union Medical College at Jinan developed into one of the three leading institutions of medical education in China. The other two - the Peking Union Medical College and the Mukden Medical College - also benefited from the Arthington bequest.

The scale of the fund’s contribution was, however, dwarfed by the vast resources now being pumped into mission teaching hospitals by the China Medical Board, set up by the Rockefeller Foundation. The latter’s involvement in China after 1914 transformed the context of medical education, forcing a rapid upgrading of standards and a lively debate about the relative merits of English-medium (favored by the foundation) as opposed to Chinese-medium instruction. As a result, the scale and sophistication displayed by Christian medical and educational institutions by the late 1920s dwarfed anything that Protestant missions in China could boast coming from Arthington’s legacy. In 1926 C. E. Wilson commented in relation to Shandong Christian University
that Arthington "would perhaps have been more surprised than pleased" if he knew that his money had laid the foundations for a Christian university.[22] It is in the dispersal of the £130,000 vested in the third Arthington fund, where the trustees were free to operate without any obligation to consider the long-term interests of a particular society, that the imprint of Arthington's distinctive missionary vision can most clearly be seen. These resources were widely employed to support the evangelistic and translation work among tribal peoples that was so close to Arthington's heart. Nevertheless the chief impression made by a reading of the fund minutes is of the broad range of uses to which the bequest was put, extending from pioneer evangelism by interdenominational "faith" missions to YMCA work in the Far East. Moreover, the mission that received the largest single share of the third fund (£25,000) was the Friends' Foreign Mission Association, which Arthington himself had despised as lacking in enterprise.[23]

**Conclusion**

Robert Arthington's million pounds thus confronted both the missionary societies principally concerned and the Arthington trustees themselves with a series of complex choices whose outcome was of potentially lasting significance for the evolution of Protestant missionary policy in the early twentieth century. In the event, his legacy was neither large enough nor specific enough in its conditions to break the mold that most Protestant mission policy assumed in this period, one that had a very different shape from Arthington's own missionary vision. Nonetheless, the contrast in the responses of the LMS and BMS to the opportunities created by the bequest points to significant variations between the two societies and may reflect the beginnings of the divergence between the theological pathways of the Congregational and Baptist denominations that has characterized the history of the Free Churches in twentieth-century Britain.

Of even wider interest is the theme of the missiological and indeed racial attitudes implicit in the geographic preferences of the societies. The gaze of the LMS and, to a lesser extent, of the BMS under C. E. Wilson remained firmly fixed on eastern horizons. The explosion during the twentieth century of Christian growth in sub-Saharan Africa that Arthington and even Baynes appeared dimly to perceive from afar was for Wilson or Thompson, as for so many others in early twentieth-century Protestant missions, a much less tangible prospect than the alluring hope of capturing the new generation of the
Western-educated elite of India or China for Christ. As Kwame Bediako has shown, the missionary movement in this period did not anticipate that its greatest triumph would soon be recorded among the animistic peoples of the African continent.[24] The balance of expectation between Asia and Africa may conceivably have been different in the CMS, with its substantial investment in both West and East Africa. The CMS, however, made few applications to the fund, perhaps believing that the bulk of that fund would be distributed to the newer nondenominational missions.

In conclusion, despite the enduring magnetism of the dream of a chain of gospel light across the "dark continent," it was the hope of a new Oriental dawn for Christianity that governed the allocation of Robert Arthington’s legacy.

Notes

* Brian Stanley is Director of the Currents in World Christianity project - a continuation of the North Atlantic Missiology Project (NAMP) - and a Fellow of St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge. A fuller version of this article was delivered in Cambridge on 6 February 1997 under the auspices of NAMP, coordinated by the University of Cambridge and financed by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts. Full sources for the article are cited in the complete version available from the CWC office in Cambridge.

1. It seems likely that Arthington was indeed the donor of the £5,000, even though he publicly denied it. See Friends' Quarterly Examiner 35 (1901): 283; Missionary Herald, 1877, pp. 183, 265; Oxford, Regent's Park College, BMS Archives (hereafter BMSA), H/31, Arthington to Baynes, October 6, 1877. I am grateful to the Baptist Missionary Society of Didcot for permission to cite material from their archives.

2. Leeds, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Sheescar, Arthington Trust papers (hereafter AT), AT/A2, Minute Book 1917-33, p. 282. I am grateful to the district archivist, Mr. W. J. Connor, and his staff for assistance in my research for this article.

3. BMSA, H/31-32.


6. CWMA, LMS Home Odds Box 7, Folder 4.
9. CWMA, LMS Committee Minutes, Arthington Trust Minute Book 1, pp. 5-6.
11. CWMA, LMS Committee Minutes, Arthington Trust Minute Book 1, p. 8.
13. CWMA, LMS Home Odds Box 7, Folder 4.
14. CWMA, LMS Committee Minutes, Arthington Trust Minute Book 1, pp. 8-9.
17. BMSA, H/29-30.
20. BMSA, General Committee Minutes, January 16, 1907, p. 27; March 20, 1907, pp. 49-50.