

A MISSIONARY FAMILY IN CHINA - 3

Michael Ball

- *Michael Ball is a retired Baptist minister.*
 - *Records of his wife's extended family of BMS missionaries in China show something of the demands of such service on family life. Here Ball looks at Sally's parents, Brynmor and Margaret Price.*
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BRYNMOR FRANCIS PRICE

Bryn was educated at Eltham College, then held a Neobard Scholarship at Mansfield College, Oxford, and was also associated with Regent's Park College. While a student, he visited Germany, staying with the family of Dr Schulz, a surgeon who belonged to the German Confessing Church. In 1935 Schulz wrote to Bryn, seeking help to leave Germany urgently to become a missionary doctor, because the family had some non-Aryan blood. Bryn asked the BMS¹ if they could help, requesting a prompt response, but the General Secretary replied that the Society could not help, although they had found a place in the Congo for a Polish Baptist who was an ethnic Jew.

Bryn rowed for St Catherine's: perhaps this is why Wheeler Robinson, in giving Bryn a reference to the BMS, said that he would have made him work harder had he been more in Regent's! Nathanael

Micklem, Principal of Mansfield, had no doubt of Bryn's goodness and ability, but could not affirm that 'great emotional and psychological stability, as well as a rock-like character before anyone dare say of him that he can commend him for missionary work without hesitation or qualification.'² Bryn was, however, accepted for BMS service on 14 December 1938.

MARRIAGE AND SERVICE IN CHINA

He met Margaret Watson, herself the daughter of China missionaries, at a BMS Summer School. Bryn wrote to the BMS on 8 September 1939, asking to be posted to China if at all possible and for special permission to marry. They went to China together. According to Margaret's accounts, they cycled across China in the company of some Canadian missionaries, with sacks of peanuts over their crossbars so as not to starve. She remembered seeking hospitality at a remote peasant farm in the pouring rain. The single-roomed dwelling was full of family and livestock, but the farmer kindly offered to turn his pigs out so the travellers could shelter in their sty. Margaret was willing, but resented the Canadians' attempts to teach her the Lord's Prayer in Chinese in those conditions!

Margaret wrote to her father that she was happy to be back in her 'native land'. In a letter of 29 November 1940, she wrote that 'living in Tsinan is like fairy-land, with Drake as Oberon' (Drake, a fellow-missionary with a love for antiques had taken her round the curio shops). In 1941 bombing in Sian damaged the station (whether railway or mission is not clear). In a letter of 8 July 1941 Bryn and Margaret described a rail journey to a mission centre in the North West. An air-raid warning made them evacuate the train and lie in the grain fields for more than an hour. They were scarcely back on the train when they had to dismount for another alarm. They arrived at their destination long after the service they were hoping to attend.

On the 24 June 1942, the BMS appointed Bryn a 'missionary in full standing'. He did so well in his language studies that on 30 July 1942 he was invited by the Chinese Government to teach English in a

military academy 20 li (1 li = 500m) south of Sian, giving nine lectures a week at a salary of \$300 dollars per month plus a sack of flour. The senior missionaries decided this was not a good idea. By 1943 Bryn was feeling that the mission work was not demanding enough. He told the BMS General Secretary that the station was over-staffed, and his job could be done by a Chinese native evangelist at much less expense. James Watson was aware that Bryn was dissatisfied and wrote to his daughter Margaret on 8 March 1944,

Don't be discouraged either of you about China. The present phase will pass, and some of the folks who made things difficult for you will be gone. Uncle Fred [Russell] has not proved himself a very capable or inspiring leader for young people. He takes things too easy himself and always did. It was most unfortunate putting you down with Miss C.E.W. He ought to have known better than that for she has given many young folks a sore heart. I don't think however she will be returning to China after furlough. She has now been out 31 years, and by the time she comes home and has had furlough, it won't be worth while sending her back – besides they know at home she is a problem. This of course is just for yourself and for your encouragement that one dragon will be out of the way ... Bryn will be able to say what he wants to do – instead of being told what he must do, and that will give a different feeling to things. I feel myself that with his gifts of language his work should be amongst students and not dull illiterate peasants, but even that experience won't be lost upon him ... I should not have been so effective in my latter years if I had not had the grind of unpleasant ways and work in my early days – long itineraries and preachings to twos and threes and getting to know living conditions amongst all sorts and conditions, and also the 'mind' of peasant and scholar and official and teacher alike.

Later that month he suggested that if Bryn and Margaret decided not to return as missionaries, Bryn might apply for Church of Scotland ministry with its better status and opportunities.

ARMY SERVICE

In autumn 1943, the British Military Mission in Chungking asked Bryn to consider undertaking military service in China. He knew three other missionaries who had signed up, and he enlisted on 1 December. Later he explained this decision in a letter to Henry Williamson of 11 February 1944. Frustrated with the tasks given him as a junior missionary, he saw that,

All over the world there were those who were leaving positions in which they were working hard and really achieving something so that they should take their share of responsibility in the war, while I was living in remote Sian doing less than a full-time job, waiting to enjoy the benefits of a peace that was to be earned through the efforts of others. The more I felt this way, the more intolerable I felt my position to be ... I could not feel that I was justified in hanging on to a secure existence while Dad was a prisoner waiting for a long-delayed freedom, Ron was in the Army and Dick was missing – where and in what circumstances nobody knew ... I was in Sian doing ... a vague mixture of City work and country work that was taking too little out of me.

The BMS China Committee was not convinced, and on 19 April 1944 expressed their disappointment at his decision.

Margaret and her little daughter, Sally, travelled from Sian to Chungking by public buses and flew to India. The flight over the Himalayas was in an unpressurized aircraft. A doctor fellow passenger warned her that Sally would turn blue, owing to oxygen starvation. When she asked what she could do to help, she was told to pray! Sally did turn blue, but lives to tell the story, apparently none the worse for the experience! As an officer's wife, Margaret had a fairly privileged life in India. Their second child, Elizabeth Alison, was born in Poona in 1944. Bryn offered to go to India for military training, but was told that this was unnecessary since he was only wanted for translating. As Acting Major, EC 13300, he was 'Administrative Officer in charge of Railhead, Forward Area, BMM', and evidently supervised the loading and despatching of trainloads of ammunitions for the Chinese Army.

He rarely spoke of his time in the army, but he was mentioned in dispatches – a letter from Henry Williamson, General Secretary of the BMS (6 August, 1947) congratulated him, while gently chiding his modesty in not speaking of it.

His own account of the time³ is not very revealing. He reached his first posting at Leiyang on 20 January 1944, where ‘events soon led to the first of several evacuations in which I took part that year, and which earned me the reputation of a Jonah’. He describes these evacuations as the Japanese advanced. When the BMM ended, he was commissioned into the India Army, to the 6th Gurkha Rifles. He wrote to Henry Williamson from Delhi on 13 February 1945, saying that he had had three weeks in hospital with dysentery and had suffered two attacks of malaria. More cheerfully, Mimi, (Elizabeth) was nearly walking. He asked the Ministry of Labour in London⁴ for demobilization when home on leave, since ‘I was virtually unemployable elsewhere owing to my lack of military training and experience.’

BACK TO CHINA

Their third child, Russell William, was born in Newport, Monmouthshire, in 1945. Bryn and Margaret went to live in Edinburgh, but were keen to return to China as missionaries. In July 1946 all three children had whooping cough. Dr Williamson⁵ advised them that missionaries then in China judged it ‘extremely unwise for young mothers and small children to proceed to China’. However, they took Sally, Mimi and Russell with them, and by 9 December were living on the Cheeloo University Campus in Tsinan. Bryn was involved in language teaching on campus,⁶ and Margaret taught English, but the Communist forces were getting close, and they frequently had to move on. Sally’s teddy bear’s glass eye was left on the mantelpiece of one house in their haste to flee. By 8 July 1947 they had moved to Shensi and on 23 September were in Fuyintsun, Sanyuan. They travelled there by a mule cart with rubber tyres which somewhat eased the jolting along the cart track. Bryn cycled with one child in the

carrier!

By 12 October 1948 they were at West China University, Chengtu, where they remained until at least 25 February 1949, with Bryn running a theological college. He was hoping to extend the work to Szechwan University which had over 6,000 students, compared with the 1,500 in Chengtu. During this relatively peaceful time their fourth child, Rosamund Margaret, was born in 1948. Rampant inflation made life very difficult: Bryn describes⁷ how they changed their money as soon as they received it into silver Chinese dollars. They increased in value fourfold in three weeks, while meal, lard, rice and other essentials had gone up six or seven fold. By 13 May inflation had made things impossible, and a week later they were planning to evacuate to Hong Kong. They asked about alternative missionary work in India but received no specific instructions, so they arranged to travel to England on *SS Empire Halladale* sailing on 20 May. The BMS cabled the ship at sea about accommodation arranged for their arrival.

INDIA

In 1950 Bryn went to serve in Serampore, India, though he longed to return to China. Margaret felt she had little opportunity to fulfil her missionary vocation in India. Sally and Mimi became boarders at Walthamstow Hall, although Mimi was only six. Russell and Rosamund went to India with them, and there Richard John was born. After the next furlough, Russell was left as a boarder at Eltham College, and a kind young Christian couple became guardians of all older three children.

Returning from Serampore in 1960, Bryn taught briefly at Eltham, and then became a translation consultant with the British and Foreign Bible Society. Among other work, he liaised with the American translators to produce the English edition of the *Good News Bible*; he was not pleased to have to alter all the imperial units to metric when the British Government announced shortly before publication that the nation was to go metric - and subsequently reneged on the decision! He also helped with the *Concordance*, sorting out proper names from the

computer-generated references. He had a key role in the publication of the Chinese *Good News Bible*, travelling to Hong Kong and Singapore to meet with the translators.

Bryn and Margaret never returned to China. In retirement, he regularly translated the magazines of the Three Self Church into English for the Friends of the Chinese Church. He and Margaret retired to Hereford, where Bryn died in January 1994, Margaret lived until December 2000.

- 1 Letter: Bryn Price to BMS, 18 November 1935.
- 2 Letter: Micklem to BMS, 20 January 1939.
- 3 In *Through Toil and Tribulation*, Carey Press, London pp143-156.
- 4 Letter, 29 January 1946.
- 5 Letter: 13 August 1946.
- 6 Letter of 2 March, 1947.
- 7 Letter of 14 April 1948.