



LESSONS  
FROM THE  
ARCHIVE  
EPISODE

**4**

# GEORGE SAUNDERS: REVIVAL IN RETIREMENT

**Mark Pickering** explores how ‘home medical mission’ in the late nineteenth century led to a new movement among Christian medics under the inspirational leadership of a retired army surgeon.



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he first article in this series traced the remarkable birth of the Christian Medical Association (CMA) in 1853-4. It also outlined the amazing and timely transformation that God wrought in the life of Dr Golding Bird, enabling him to be the key person in launching the CMA.<sup>1</sup> Despite providing much encouragement

to Christian doctors and medical students in those early years, the CMA was fading by 1869 and had ceased to exist by 1871.

Yet far from being the end of the Christian medical movement in England, this ended up simply being the passing of the baton from one generation to another. Through numerous remarkable coincidences, in God’s providence, something incredible was again about to happen.

## key points

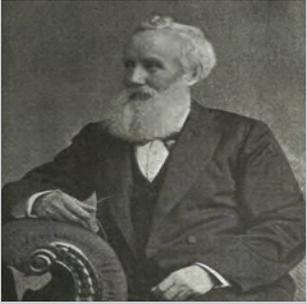


- Serving the poor with medical care and the gospel of Jesus were the cornerstones of a new wave of ‘home medical mission’ that swept from Edinburgh across the UK in the latter half of the nineteenth century.
- Inspired by the movement, Dr George Saunders joined and then led the London Medical Mission.
- Not content with just focusing on London’s poor, he also focused on equipping Christian doctors for medical mission at home and abroad and walking with Christ throughout their careers by founding both the Medical Missionary Association and Medical Prayer Union.



SCAN FOR MORE

## the birth of Home Medical Missions



Dr William Burns Thomson

In the second article in this series, I detailed how the visit of Dr Peter Parker from China to Edinburgh in 1841 catalysed the birth of the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society (EMMS), which is still in

existence today after more than 180 years.<sup>2</sup> One of several highly influential projects promoted in Edinburgh by the EMMS and exported elsewhere was the development of 'home medical missions' – free dispensaries operating in poor areas of large cities, where Christian doctors and nurses would provide free healthcare and engage in evangelism, thus fulfilling Jesus' call 'to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick'. (Luke 9:2) In the years before the universal health coverage of the National Health Service, these medical missions were a wonderful way of promoting the physical and spiritual health of many thousands in desperate need.

The very first home medical missionary sent out by EMMS was to Parsonstown (today Birr), in County Offaly, Ireland, in 1848. This was at the height of the Irish Potato Famine when many poor people in Ireland were dying of starvation and disease.<sup>3</sup> Many also emigrated, resulting in large Irish Catholic populations in numerous other crowded cities around the UK.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1850s and 1860s, the EMMS dispensary grew into a well-established training institution for generations of Christian medical students. Providing accommodation, medical teaching, and evangelistic training, it prepared many students for medical mission careers, such as Dr Vartan, who went on to found the Nazareth Hospital in Israel that still operates today.<sup>5</sup>

The driving force behind the EMMS dispensary and its worldwide influence during much of this period was Dr William Burns Thomson, whose story was also outlined in the second article in this series. Sensing the wide applicability of the project he led in Edinburgh, he often travelled to other cities and helped to establish similar medical mission dispensaries elsewhere, such as Glasgow (1865), Liverpool (1866), Aberdeen (1868), Bristol and Manchester (both 1872), and Birmingham (1875). This work of spreading the work of EMMS throughout the rest of the UK had been begun in 1857 by Dr Edward Blackmore of Bath, who travelled around England

for six months, promoting medical missions, and encouraging the establishment of affiliates of EMMS, such as the Liverpool Medical Missionary Society.<sup>6</sup>

## 'Home Medical Mission' comes to London



Mr Hugh Matheson

In the late 1860s there were early hopes and plans to launch a similar venture in London. These came to a head in October 1869 when Dr Burns Thomson visited London, and two events occurred within a few days of each other.

A meeting was held at the Theological College of the English Presbyterian Church in Queen's Square, chaired by Mr Hugh Matheson, and mentioned in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, 'to hear an address by Dr Burns Thomson on medical missions', where it was agreed that 'steps should be taken to establish a medical mission in London. A committee was appointed to make the necessary arrangements.'<sup>7</sup>

In the same week, Dr Burns Thomson also spoke at the annual Mildmay Conference in London, an interdenominational forerunner of the Keswick Conventions.<sup>8</sup> The connection between the Mildmay movement and EMMS was outlined in the third article in this series.<sup>9</sup>

One of the last evidences of the Christian Medical Association is a report in the *BMJ* in December 1869, describing a 'large attendance' at a CMA meeting, and that, 'The Committee hope soon to be in a position to help forward a medical mission in London in a similar manner to those of Edinburgh, Liverpool and other places.'<sup>10</sup>

Hugh Matheson was a business leader, a solid supporter of foreign missions, and a friend of Prime Minister WE Gladstone.<sup>11</sup> He now led the committee that sought to establish a home medical mission in London. He secured the lease of a building in the St Giles area of London, near Covent Garden, which was a notorious slum area in those days.

As a result, mission work began 'in a closed public-house [pub] once a notorious haunt of thieves!'<sup>12</sup> It was initially used as a church mission house for varied outreach to the local area. In due course, the London Medical Mission opened there, on the corner of Endell Street and Shorts Gardens, in May 1871, initially staffed by three local doctors. Amazingly,

Christian doctors and nurses...fulfilling Jesus' call 'to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick'

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1841

Peter Parker visits Edinburgh and Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society is established

1853

The first EMMS Dispensary is founded in Edinburgh

1869

Dr Burns Thompson visits Mildmay and the Christian Medical Association (CMA) in London

1871

The London Medical Mission (LMM) opened at Endell Street and Shorts Gardens in May

1871

The CMA closes down

1871

George Saunders retires as an army surgeon and is invited to join the LMM in October

1874

Dr Saunders and William Fairlie Clarke are instrumental in setting up the Medical Prayer Union (MPU)

1878

Dr Saunders and Dr Farlie Clarke set up the Medical Missionary Association (MMA)

1882

Dr Saunders retires from the LMM

CMF was founded in 1949, and 2024 will be its seventy-fifth anniversary. However, its roots go back much further, and there is plenty to learn from the people and organisations that came before it. This is the fourth of a series of articles featuring some of the main highlights.

the mission expanded rapidly, treating many people with little other option, and combining regular gospel meetings, one-to-one discipleship, and free medical care

- ◀ the building still stands and houses London's oldest fish & chip shop, which also proudly dates its origin back to those very days in 1871!<sup>13</sup> This shared history appears to relate to an initial feeding project for local poor people in the winter of 1870-71.

### Dr Saunders enters the scene



Dr George Saunders

Dr George Saunders was an Irishman who graduated from St Bartholemew's Hospital in London in 1845. He had a distinguished career as a military surgeon, eventually retiring in 1871 with the rank

of Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals.<sup>14</sup>

His autobiography, *Reminiscences*, details his experience in the brutal Crimean War during 1854-1855. In that conflict, he himself became sick with a fever and was brought back to the British military hospital at Scutari, in what is now Istanbul, Turkey. There he relates two fascinating details from February 1855:

*Through some mistake my name was included in the monthly obituary list...and my death was announced in the British newspapers. I had to declare that I was still alive...When I came to Scutari I found that the hospital there had now every appearance of comfort, and was unsurpassed by any other, civil or military. For this improved state of things all the praise was due to the noble and indefatigable efforts of Miss Nightingale, who fortunately had carte blanche to do whatever she thought necessary for the comfort and well-being of the sick and wounded.*<sup>15</sup>

Dr Saunders was clearly a man who loved to share the gospel with his colleagues. In the latter years of his military career, he supervised new recruits in Bristol, many of whom were 'careless and indifferent'. Undaunted, he 'commenced to hold Bible and prayer meetings for them, which I was compelled by order to discontinue. Then I began to distribute Testaments to those who could read... Although my mouth was stopped, the Word of God was not.'<sup>16</sup>

Also, during his time in South Africa, he spent significant time treating the local population for free, including beginning a smallpox vaccination programme.<sup>17</sup> This experience of 'foreign medical mission' helped to prepare him for his future service back in England.

He retired from the military after 25 years in February 1871, and was considering his future options when a letter arrived asking him to run the dispensary of the Liverpool Medical Mission whilst

its Superintendent was ill. Dr Saunders '*knew from experience that medical missions offered a wide and valuable field for doing good, particularly among the poor*' and so he spent three months working there.

During this period, he visited Edinburgh and met Dr Burns Thomson, '*the pioneer of medical missions*', receiving '*some valuable counsel on their management*'. He also met Lord Lister, the pioneer of antiseptic surgery, and discussed Saunders' own similar ideas on antiseptics that he had used to excellent effect with Crimean War injuries!

Shortly after this trip, he received three postal requests in quick succession to join the staff of different medical missions – those in London, Bristol, and Liverpool. The request from the recently-formed London Medical Mission (LMM) had come first, and so he resolved to accept it, beginning work in October 1871.<sup>18</sup>

### the growth of the LMM

The initial few months of the LMM were covered by three local doctors, who each took time out of their private practices to do free clinics there one day per week, but who did not have the time to provide a fuller service, including home visits. The initial success of the mission clearly called for this, and hence the trustees appointed Dr Saunders as the first Superintendent of the LMM, giving his full time to it. In those days, the St Giles district of London (now Covent Garden's Theatreland) was a notorious slum. It was described as '*the headquarters of depravity and squalor, like a legacy from the barbarous past*'.<sup>19</sup>

Dr Saunders got to work, and the mission expanded rapidly, treating many people with little other option, and combining regular gospel meetings, one-to-one discipleship, and free medical care. The work was supervised by trustees and a committee of 26 in addition to Dr Saunders. Anyone who has ever battled with unwieldy committees will have great sympathy! Eventually, in 1874, it became clear that the arrangement needed streamlining, and so the entire committee resigned, leaving the running of the mission to Dr Saunders and the trustees. The work continued to expand successfully under his leadership.<sup>20</sup>

### The Medical Prayer Union

After the demise of the CMA around 1871, sporadic efforts were made over the next couple of years to restart something similar. These finally gained traction in 1874, as Dr Saunders relates:

*I arranged with Dr Fairlie Clarke, of Charing Cross Hospital, to hold a conference at Endell Street with such medical men and students as were likely to be interested in the matter. Of this conference the Medical Prayer Union was the result; its purpose was to establish Bible and prayer meetings at the various*

metropolitan medical schools, to be arranged and conducted by the students themselves. Several of the teachers lent their assistance, and encouraged the movement with much zeal...

*The steady growth of the Union was remarkable, for by 1880 nine of the eleven medical schools held meetings weekly for Bible study and prayer, with a total membership of 250. Two of the members went as medical missionaries abroad...to China and...to India.*<sup>21</sup>

Although Dr Saunders had never experienced the CMA due to his military service, Dr William Fairlie Clarke had been a student at King's College during the flourishing of the CMA, and he had been inspired to help replicate it. This illustrates again how training and inspiring a student will often reap benefits in future generations, as they go on to be leaders themselves.

Whilst the CMA as an organisation ran out of steam, there was clearly an ongoing desire for Christian doctors and medical students to meet and support each other. Though one incarnation failed, the vision remained and was soon reborn.

The Medical Prayer Union continued, through various ups and downs, for 75 years, until it merged into the newly-formed Christian Medical Fellowship in 1949. I plan to tell more of its story in the next article.

## The Medical Missionary Association

The dynamic duo of Drs Saunders and Fairlie Clarke was not yet finished! Just a few years later, in 1878, they brought together another group of Christian doctors and others at the LMM in Endell Street, to form the Medical Missionary Association (MMA). The previous articles in this series have highlighted some of the firm connections between the EMMS in Edinburgh, and their Christian colleagues in London. This took firmer shape with the founding of the MMA. Again, Dr Saunders tells the story:

*Meanwhile another union with similar aims had been formed by Dr Fairlie Clarke and myself in the Medical Missionary Association, for the purpose of assisting such Christian work at home and abroad as might lie within the sphere of medical agencies... A journal was soon published entitled Medical Missions at Home and Abroad; it was first edited by Dr Fairlie Clarke, and afterwards by Dr James Maxwell, formerly a medical missionary in Formosa [Taiwan], and then director of a medical students' training home at Highbury.*<sup>22,23</sup>

The MMA also went through many inspiring twists and turns over its 126-year history until it finally merged with CMF in 2004.<sup>24</sup>

## later years

Dr Saunders retired from the LMM in 1882 and led a quieter life in his second retirement, dying in 1913. He wrote his *Reminiscences* in 1907, and remained full of thankfulness to the Lord. Despite the fascinating, exciting, and varied scenes of his life, he ended his autobiography thus:

*Above all, and beyond any earthly pleasure or satisfaction, has been the love of God in my heart – to me an unworthy sinner saved by grace.*

*The interests, the pleasures, the duties of life pass away: but the salvation which Christ gives, He gives for ever.*<sup>25</sup>

training and inspiring a student will often reap benefits in future generations

## what can we learn from the life of George Saunders?

In a dramatic life that has had an incredible influence on the Christian medical movement, the following things stand out to me:

- Retirement is not necessarily a barrier to doing great things! His distinguished 25-year military medical career was, in many ways, simply a prelude to his main lasting achievements with the LMM, the MPU, and the MMA that have benefited thousands down to the present day.
- God's exquisite timing is yet again present – the consistent support of the EMMS and Dr Burns Thomson began to bear fruit in 1869-1871 with the formation of the LMM, just before Dr Saunders was in the right time and place to take it up. Even then, the chance timing of letters led him to London rather than Bristol or Liverpool. We never know how the small details of life can change history.
- The disappointment of the CMA ceasing to exist was not the end, but merely one swing of the pendulum. The work done to inspire Christian students and doctors in the 1850s and 60s left them hungry to see it reborn in the MPU and inspired the next generation of leaders, such as Dr Fairlie Clarke.
- Dr Saunders demonstrated a rounded, whole-life approach as a Christian doctor. He pursued clinical excellence in his military career whilst never forgetting the need to share the gospel. He supported and inspired students whilst giving himself sacrificially to the care of the poor and disadvantaged. His devotion to prayer and fellowship led to the creation of the MPU, and his commitment to both 'home' and 'foreign' medical missions brought about the MMA. ●

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15. Saunders G. *Reminiscences*. London. James Nisbet, 1907: 43-44
16. *Ibid.* 67-68
17. *Ibid.* 47-54
18. *Ibid.* 69-72, 77
19. *Ibid.* 76
20. *Ibid.* 77-79
21. *Ibid.* 88-90
22. *Ibid.* 90-91
23. Numerous references wrongly state that Dr Maxwell was the founder of the MMA. However, he returned from Formosa/Taiwan to London in 1885 and became the MMA's first full-time Superintendent as the organisation grew.
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This series will continue to sketch out the history of the modern Christian medical and nursing movements in the UK, as we approach CMF's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2024. If any readers have an interest in this area, or relevant material to contribute, please contact Mark on [admin@cmf.org.uk](mailto:admin@cmf.org.uk)