

Edinburgh 1910:

Scottish roots and contemporary challenges

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Introduction: Why remember Edinburgh 1910?

The World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910, is probably the best known ecclesiastical event to have taken place in Scotland and arguably the most influential. John R. Mott, the Conference chairman, called it 'the most notable gathering in the interest of the world-wide expansion of Christianity ever held, not only in missionary annals, but in all Christian annals.' Marking its golden jubilee in 1960, Hugh Martin observed that: 'By the general consent of all competent judges the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in June, 1910, was one of the most creative events in the long history of the Christian Church.' The passing of a further fifty years has not diminished its significance as a point of reference in regard to world Christianity. As Andrew Walls remarks:

The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, has passed into Christian legend. It was a landmark in the history of mission; the starting point of the modern theology of mission; the high point of the Western missionary movement and the point from which it declined; the launch-pad of the modern ecumenical movement; the point at which Christians first began to glimpse something of what a world church would be like.³

As an emblem of the movement through which Christianity in modern times has become a truly worldwide faith, the Conference demands attention as its centenary approaches. This article considers the influence of its Scottish provenance on the Conference and explores the meaning which the centenary might have in our contemporary context.



Why Scotland?

One question which has to be asked is why Edinburgh was chosen to be the location of the Conference? The simple answer is that the Scottish churches offered to host the event. Fairley Daly, the Secretary of the Livingstonia Mission Committee, wrote early in 1906 to Robert Speer, Secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in New York, to raise the question of whether plans should be laid to hold a major missionary conference following the one which had been held in New York in 1900.4 Speer and his American colleagues were positive about a conference in Great Britain and Scottish foreign mission committees and missionary societies needed no further encouragement to offer to host the conference in Edinburgh in 1910.5 More of a question is why the missionary leadership of a such a small nation had the confidence to offer to host a World Conference and why their counterparts elsewhere had confidence to accept the offer. It appears that this confidence was inspired by their understanding of Scotland's standing in the Western missionary movement which was then at its zenith:

Edinburgh was a fitting place of meeting. In the earlier missionary enterprise which evangelised Europe no country was more prominent than Scotland, and no country has in proportion to its size contributed to the evangelisation of the world during the last century so large a number of distinguished and devoted missionaries.⁶

Scotland was a suggestive base for a World Missionary Conference but this is not to say that it would be successful in organising one. By universal consent, the fact that it did so is attributable to the remarkable qualities of the Conference Secretary, Joseph Houldsworth Oldham.⁷ Invalided home at an early age from missionary service in India, Oldham had a mission studies remit from the United Free Church when the unexpected call came for him to take up a full-time role as Secretary to the Committee organising the Conference.⁸ Alarmed by the prospect of a world conference being organised by an exclusively Scottish committee 'consisting of fossils',⁹ Oldham set about

establishing a fully international framework for the organisation of the Conference. Without this vision and the capacity to make it a reality, it is very doubtful if the Conference would have had the epoch-making significance it did. Along with vision and organisational powers, Oldham demonstrated remarkable gifts of diplomacy. His strength lay in the warm relationships and careful diplomacy which enabled him to hold together a diverse coalition which was not without its jealousies and turf wars.

Oldham and the mobilisation of Scottish theologians

earlier Whereas international missionary conferences had concentrated on a demonstration of enthusiasm, Edinburgh aimed to be a working conference, its subtitle being 'To consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World'. 10 In order to do this, thorough preparatory work was carried out by eight Commissions on topics established by the Oxford meeting of the International Committee in June 1907. 11 It can be argued that it was the work of these Commissions which gave the Conference its depth and enduring quality. 12 Time did not allow the Committee to settle the membership of the Commissions so considerable discretion was allowed to Mott and Oldham to finalize the selection. This they used to good effect, as will be seen shortly in regard to Commission IV. While responsibility for the writing of the Commission Reports lay with their Chairmen, Oldham played a coordinating role, sometimes advocating 'quite drastic restructuring'. 13 In this way, Oldham set his stamp upon the Conference at a much deeper level than simply ensuring that it ran smoothly. He also exploited to the full the Scottish provenance of the Conference to strengthen the work of the Commissions.

Scots participated in the work of all of the Commissions but on some they had a particularly formative influence; none more so than Commission IV. This was the most strikingly original of all the Commission Reports and the one which attracts the greatest interest today, described by Kenneth Cracknell as '[...] one of the great turning points in the Christian theology of religion.' It is remarkable for the degree to which it scotches the idea that Western missionaries were iconoclasts bent on the eradication of existing religions in order

to impose their own understanding of Christianity. On the contrary, the Report concludes by noting 'the practically universal testimony that the true attitude of the Christian missionary to the non-Christian religions should be one of true understanding and, as far as possible, of sympathy.'15 Scottish correspondents, notably Donald Fraser,16 George Douglas, John Nicol Farquhar, 17 A. G. Hogg18 and Nicol Macnicol, ¹⁹ played their full part in contributing to that testimony. Decisive, however, for the innovative and ground-breaking work of the Commission was the choice of the Chairman. Mott and Oldham opted not for a recognised missionary leader but for the Professor of Systematic Theology at the United Free Church College in Aberdeen, David Cairns. As Cracknell observes: 'The choice of a theologian suggests already that Mott and Oldham were looking for something more than a competent survey of the world's religions.'20 If so, their choice was to be vindicated. Not only had they chosen a theologian, but one who had wrestled with his own doubts and, in finding answers through re-thinking traditional theology, had been an important influence on the great Scottish missionary thinker in India, Alfred George Hogg.²¹

More than to any other single individual, the guiding theology of the Report is attributable to the work of John Nicol Farguhar, described by Andrew Walls as: 'the most considerable Indologist produced by the missionary movement.'22 Anticipating his soon-to-be-published and highly influential work, The Crown of Hinduism, 23 Farquhar's extensive response to the questionnaire developed the idea of fulfilment which saw Hinduism as India's Old Testament which prepared the way for the coming of Christ and found its fulfilment in him. This allowed him both to engage Hinduism with deep understanding and profound sympathy and to regard it as being fulfilled and therefore superseded by the coming of Christ.²⁴ As he would conclude his *magnum opus*: 'In [Jesus Christ] is focused every ray of light that shines in Hinduism. He is the Crown of the faith in India.'25 As Eric Sharpe observes, though Farquhar was not present at Edinburgh 1910, 'his influence is clearly seen in the Report of Commission IV. '26 Farguhar's approach became the guiding light for David Cairns and his fellow Commissioners. It should be noted, however, that the fulfilment approach was not uncontested and Farquhar's 'most rigorous critic'27 was another

Scottish missionary in India, Alfred George Hogg, who at this time was at an early stage in his distinguished teaching career at Madras Christian College. For Hogg the idea of fulfilment was an abstraction and a condescension. While eager to take a sympathetic approach and find points of affinity whenever possible, the essential point for Hogg was the contrast between Christianity and Hinduism on such crucial points as divine agency and the concept of merit.²⁸ For our purposes at this point it is sufficient to note that in the debate at the heart of this ground-breaking Commission there were no voices more influential than those of the three Scots: Farquhar, Hogg and Cairns.

Commission III on "Education and the Christianisation of National Life" was chaired by John Campbell Gibson, a missionary of the English Presbyterian Church who had been born and educated in Scotland. Scots were also to be found among the influential correspondents: Dugald Mackichan, 29 William Miller, 30 Alexander Hetherwick³¹ and Robert Laws.³² The Conference met at a time when the contribution of women to the missionary movement was becoming ever more substantial.33 It was significant, therefore, that among the members of Commission V, which examined the preparation of missionaries, was Miss Annie Small, Principal of the Women's Missionary College in Edinburgh. The extent of her influence on the Commission is acknowledged in its Report: 'This institution, which appears to be the only one exemplifying many of the methods which have commended themselves to the Commission, is necessarily used as an illustration here and elsewhere. '34 Chairing the Commission was Douglas Mackenzie of Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut, USA, who had been brought up by Scottish missionary parents in South Africa

Commission VII was devoted to a topic which was regarded as 'novel' and 'unusual' at a missionary conference – the relation of missions and governments.³⁵ It was chaired by Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the leading Scottish politician and churchman who also served as President of the conference.³⁶ While Balfour brought weight to the Commission, it is apparent that much more influence on its content was wielded by its Secretary, Andrew Blair Wann of the Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Board who was responsible for drafting large sections of the Report.³⁷ Wann was very cautious when

it came to engaging overtly political questions and it appears that J. H. Oldham's intervention was decisive in ensuring that the Report did include sharply critical comment on such matters as opium, the liquor trade and forced labour.³⁸ The concern for social justice which marked Scottish missionary endeavour thus left an impression on the work of Commission VII.

The flagship Commission I on "Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World", chaired by John R. Mott himself, had the redoubtable George Robson, editor of the United Free Church of Scotland Missionary Record, as its Vice-Chairman. Commission II - on "The Church on the Mission Field" - and Commission VI - on "The Home Base" - included such capable Scots as Rowland Ellis, Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney, and Fairley Daly, Secretary of the Livingstonia Mission Committee. The influential Commission VIII, on "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity", was chaired by a Scot, the recently retired Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Andrew Fraser, J. H. Oldham's father-in-law.³⁹ To Fraser fell the task of formally moving the resolution to form a Continuation Committee, 40 the only formal decision of the Edinburgh conference and the action which gave rise to the International Missionary Council and the wider ecumenical movement.⁴¹ Taken together there can be little question that Scots played a role in the Commissions out of all proportion to their numbers in the worldwide missionary movement.

Particularly distinctive was Oldham's attempt to connect the missionary movement with the intellectual and theological mainstream in a way which was unusual and innovative. Among the speakers at the conference were such prominent Scottish theologians as W. P. Paterson, H. A. A. Kennedy, A. R. MacEwen and James Denney. ⁴² Their speeches demonstrated how much their thinking was informed by the missionary movement and how concerned they were to bring their theological learning into engagement with it. A major contributor both to the preparations and to the conference itself was Denney who was able to look beyond the immediate demands of the foreign missionary movement to the challenges which lay ahead for the church in the so-called 'Christian world'. Through the contributions of these theologians, Edinburgh 1910 brought the missionary

movement into engagement with greater depth of theological analysis and more sophisticated intellectual discourse than anything which had gone before. It its nineteenth-century history it had been, in the main, an activist movement, if not anti-intellectual then simply so occupied with the immediate demands of its activity that it had no scope for extensive reflection. Perhaps Oldham's most distinctive contribution was his determination to recruit Scotland's most capable and creative theologians to bring their scholarly acumen to the work of the Conference. The Reports of the eight Commissions marked a new maturity in the missionary movement and set the bar by which subsequent ecumenical conferences would be measured. The Scottish provenance of the 1910 World Missionary Conference therefore lent it a depth of intellectual grounding and a sophistication of theological analysis which helped to mark it out as a distinctive and ground-breaking event.



After a century: critique of Edinburgh 1910

Acknowledging the spell cast by the 1910 Conference is not necessarily to be blind to its limitations and shortcomings. From today's perspective there is no mistaking the reality that Edinburgh 1910 was a deeply flawed occasion. With the benefit of hindsight we can see how much the Conference was limited by the conceptual landscape of its participants. A number of serious limitations can be identified.

- The thinking of the Conference was premised on a territorial idea of Christian mission. A key distinction was drawn between 'fully missionised lands' and 'not yet fully missionised lands'. The task of mission was to 'carry' the gospel from the 'Christian world' to the 'non-Christian world'. This 'Christendom model' of Christian expansion would be obsolete within half-a-century.
- As a century of critique has made plain, the Conference did not acquire sufficient distance from the Western imperialism which was at its height at that time. The enthusiasm and drive which marked the Conference drew much more than it realised on the

optimistic self-confidence of imperial expansion and technological advance

- The territorial understanding of Christian expansion was allied with an activist mentality and a military metaphor. The reports and speeches abounded with metaphors such as 'army', 'crusade', 'council of war', 'conquest', 'advance' and 'marching orders'. The aggressive and confrontational understanding of Christian mission which characterised Edinburgh 1910 has provoked much resentment and does not serve to commend Christian faith today.
- The Conference was marked by an unmistakable ambivalence towards what it described as 'the church on the mission field'. On the one hand, the objective of the missionary movement was the emergence of self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating churches. On the other, the missionaries were jealous of their 'field' and showed an ill-disguised interest in retaining the initiative.
- Tactically, in order to achieve the widest possible participation, it was a stroke of genius to exclude doctrinal and ecclesial issues from the consideration of the Conference. However, it meant that the discussion of mission was abstracted from theological debate about the content and meaning of the gospel, and from ecclesiological debate about the nature and calling of the church. While the conscious thrust of Edinburgh 1910 was aimed at achieving greater unity, the structure of its discussion traded short-term gains for long-term struggles as the years ahead would see more fragmentation than integration.
- The Conference was over-heated and over-ambitious. Edinburgh 1910 which understood itself to be on the brink of a great new surge of missionary advance was, in fact, the high point of the movement. Never again would the Western missionary movement occupy centre-stage in the way that it felt it did at Edinburgh. For most of the mission boards and societies represented, the twentieth century would be one of remorseless decline in their operations.

The scenario envisaged by the Edinburgh delegates never came to pass.

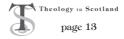
Despite the many limitations of the Conference, however, the twentieth century has witnessed a vindication of a fundamental conviction of Edinburgh 1910: that the good news of Jesus Christ can take root in every culture across the world and produce fruit in church and society everywhere. Largely as a result of the seeds planted by missionary endeavour, vigorous and numerous expressions of Christian faith are to be found on all six continents today. The delegates who gathered in Edinburgh in 1910 caught a vision of something which did not then exist: a 'world church' with deep roots and vigorous expression widely apparent on every continent. It was the first clear glimpse of what William Temple would describe as 'the great new fact of our time' – a truly worldwide Christian church.⁴³

After a century: echoes of Edinburgh 1910

We live at a time when the paradigm of mission represented by the Western missionary movement has run its course. New dynamics of mission are emerging, as yet unclear and liminal in their outline. Can the memory of Edinburgh 1910 provoke us once more to take stock comprehensively of the progress of Christianity in relation to its missionary mandate? Can it identify and stimulate the new vision and the fresh energy which will shape church and mission in the twenty-first century? Can the marking of the centenary do for the twenty-first century what Edinburgh 1910 did for the twentieth, i.e. catch a vision and set an agenda which will give direction and energy to churches and missionary movements?⁴⁴ There are a number of features of Edinburgh 1910 which could helpfully be echoed today.

1) Imagination

Never did the modern missionary movement articulate its ambition more comprehensively than at Edinburgh in 1910. It was a moment of imagination when people came together to think seriously about something which had never existed before: What a truly worldwide church would look like and how it would exercise its missionary



obligations. We live today with the awareness that the paradigm of mission which prevailed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has run its course. New models of mission are needed but we do not yet know what form they will take. An act of imagination is needed so as to generate a compelling vision of Christian mission for our time. Will the memory of Edinburgh 1910 play a part in casting such vision?

2) Gathering

Within its limitations, Edinburgh 1910 succeeded in bringing together a wider range of Protestant Christians than had ever cooperated before. It also signalled the possibility of reviewing the division between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Despite its self-imposed limitations, particularly in regard to doctrinal and ecclesial questions, nonetheless a vision of the unity of the church broke surface at Edinburgh and remained a guiding light for many in the century which followed. The ecumenical impulse of Edinburgh, however, has increasingly been supplanted by forces making for fragmentation as old divisions consolidated and new splits occurred. The historical perspective opened up by the centenary creates the possibility to think again about inherited divisions. Indeed the world of the early twenty-first century provides greater opportunity for listening attentively to one another within the world church than anything the Edinburgh delegates could have dreamed of in 1910.

3) Reflection

Much of the enduring value of the Edinburgh Conference stems from the depth and range of its reflection. This found expression not only in the debates of the Conference itself but, remarkably, in the eight study Commissions which prepared reports for the Conference. Though the limitations of their conceptual landscape are apparent today, it is equally evident that their authors were grappling with profound questions of perennial importance to Christian mission. Today a broad consensus holds that we have arrived at a time of fundamental change in the shape and direction of Christian mission. In this context, the centenary of Edinburgh 1910 is an occasion which challenges the global missionary movement to re-gather and take stock again of how

it stands in relation to its task. This is not with a view to nostalgia but rather to be forward-looking – catching a vision and setting an agenda which gives direction and energy to the missionary movement.

4) Movement

At the heart of Edinburgh 1910 was a pressing sense of urgency about the fulfilment of the Christian imperative for mission which could find its proper expression only in action. Analysis was offered as a basis for action and the ambition of the Conference was to generate energy and fresh movement in worldwide mission. Hence any process of reflection worthy of the centenary must issue in clear direction and fresh impetus for the Christian missionary movement. It must identify, support and promote missionary praxis which is proving effective for our time. The discernment and elucidation of the key themes around which Christian mission will revolve in the twenty-first century must be undertaken in such a way as to stimulate a fresh concentration of missionary commitment and endeavour. The famous words with which Mott concluded the Conference must also shape any worthy celebration of the centenary: 'The end of the planning is the beginning of the doing.'45



After a century: contemporary challenges

Amongst the contemporary challenges which call for the engagement of Christian mission are the following.

- Whereas in 1910 the missionary task was conceived as one of 'carrying' the gospel from the 'Christian world' of the West to the 'non-Christian world' elsewhere, in the course of a century the geography of Christianity has turned by almost 180 degrees. Today it is Western Europe which presents itself as a 'mission field'.
- The people who take the faith from one place to another are more
 often migrants or refugees than missionaries in the traditional
 Western sense. Dynamic witness to Jesus Christ is borne by a
 criss-crossing pattern of diasporic communities spread across the
 face of the earth.

- The agents of Christian mission come increasingly from among the weak, the broken and the vulnerable. Swept by unmerciful currents of history, Christian believers bear witness to the suffering Lord in whom they find the strength to meet adversity. A new (or recovered) pattern of missionary activity is emerging in which the poor take the gospel to the rich.
- Right on the doorstep of the church in Europe today there is a cultural gulf to be crossed, a new language into which to translate the gospel, a new missionary frontier to cross, a new idolatry to combat. Do postmodern Western societies possess features that will make possible a new, revealing, and energizing appropriation of the gospel of Christ? Is not such a new cultural frontier one that excites the Christian imagination?
- One obstacle to be overcome is the fact the religion has had a bad press often deservedly so. People have been dismayed to see religion being used ideologically to undergird political injustice or military aggression. They have also witnessed faith being reduced to a commodity, losing its transcendent reference and being treated as a marketable product to serve the interests of those who 'own' it. What is required is not so much a new form of words as a translation of the gospel into a lived reality which vouches for its authenticity.
- The intensely spiritual expression of Christian faith found in the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement has proved compelling for large numbers of people. It taps into traditional religiosity much more effectively than the more cerebral approach of Western churches and, for many, has offered a greater sense of authenticity in worship and discipleship. It may be that it is with this movement that the future of Christian mission lies
- There is no point at which the credibility of Christian faith is more on the line than in regard to its claim to offer a 'ministry of reconciliation'. The claim of Christian mission, that it is in the business of peacemaking, is put to the test by the reality of a world

where religion is often at the root of the most intractable conflicts. The inner personal experience of reconciliation with God through Christ has to find expression in spiritual practices that create space for truth, for justice, for healing and for new departures.

- In 1910 there was great confidence among missionaries in the superiority of Christianity as a religion and an expectation that the other ancient religions would fade away in face of the Christian advance. Today, by contrast, it is apparent that all faiths have been renewing their life and mission. The challenge for proponents of Christian mission is how to hold in balance the peace imperative and the evangelistic imperative as they relate to individuals and communities adhering to other religions.
- The extent of the calamity already taking effect through climate change, water scarcity, rising sea levels and desertification has awoken missionary thinkers and strategists to a challenge ignored for too long. There has been a move from a personal to a cosmic view of salvation which is far-reaching in its implications for mission. Caring for creation, as a theological imperative, is emerging as a key way to witness to Christ and commend the gospel in today's world.
- Obscene inequality prevails in the global economy as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Taking up the biblical imperative to combat poverty which threatens human dignity, the churches have a mandate to speak out for justice. With their eschatological imagination, the churches are uniquely well-placed to sustain the conviction that 'another world is possible'.
- Whereas in Edinburgh 1910 it was the missionary societies and church mission boards which were regarded as the primary agents of mission, in 2010 it is the local congregation with which initiative lies. This has been an energising development and has brought mission and evangelism close to the heart of local congregational life, rather than being regarded as something to be left to a few dedicated professionals. It presents a considerable challenge,

however, in regard to forming a coherent strategy for the task of worldwide evangelisation.

 Both historic divisions and new tensions challenge the ecumenical identity of the churches. Will there be a fragmentation into a variety of Christianities which scarcely recognise one another? Or will a new ecumenism find ways to celebrate diversity while affirming unity in inspiring and energising ways?

Conclusion: Ambition and imagination

Edinburgh 1910 challenges us today by the extent of its enquiry, the width of its participation and the depth of its analysis. Scots contributed significantly on all three counts. As the centenary attracts the attention of the world church once more to Edinburgh, there is opportunity to draw on this memory as a source of fresh inspiration. The challenges facing Christian mission today will not be met without the scale of ambition and imagination which was evident at the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910.

Notes

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- See Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J. H. Oldham* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Geneva: WCC, 1999), 73–99.
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- 11 Ibid., 10–12.
- ¹² See David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross eds., *Edinburgh 1910: Christian Mission Then and Now* (Oxford: Regnum, 2009).
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- ²³ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913).
- ²⁴ See Eric J. Sharpe, "J. N. Farquhar 1861–1929", in Anderson et al., *Mission Legacies*, 290–96.
- 25 Farquhar, The Crown of Hinduism, 458.
- 26 Sharpe, "J. N. Farquhar", 290.
- ²⁷ T. E. Yates, "Edinburgh Revisited: Edinburgh 1910 to Melbourne 1980", *The Churchman*, Vol. 94 No. 2 (1980): 152 [145–55].
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- ²⁹ See Dugald Mackichan, *The Missionary Ideal in the Scottish Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927).
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