

Alexander Mackay



Biography of a missionary to Uganda

Alexander Mackay was a pioneer missionary to Uganda. He was born in 1849 in Rhyme, a village not far from Aberdeen. His father was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland, so it is no surprise to learn that the Bible and the Westminster Catechism were the two most important books in the house.

Until he was 14 he was home-schooled and during that time he came to love and trust Christ. He could recollect that his parents had a map of Africa hanging on a wall of the house. The map was rather empty at first, apart from the coasts, but they gradually filled it in as discoveries were reported. At 14, he went to Aberdeen Grammar School, and then six years of study in Edinburgh followed, two years at the Free Church Training College for Teachers, and four years studying engineering at the university. During his time in Edinburgh his minister was Horatius Bonar, a name you will often see in your hymn book.

A great work waiting

When he was 24, he took an excellent engineering job in Berlin. Here he learnt German and led a local Bible class. His mail from Scotland included the Edinburgh Daily Review. In its pages he came across a letter from the explorer H.M. Stanley, who said: 'There is a great work waiting to be done in Uganda. The king is sympathetic to the white man's God. What is needed is a practical Christian.'

Mackay recalled his mother had said to him that if God ever called him to be a missionary, he must not ignore it. At the time, the only group with the desire to evangelise Uganda was the Anglican Church Missionary Society, so he applied to them and was accepted.

It was a 7,000-mile voyage to Zanzibar, a small island off the East African coast. Then the whole of what is now Tanzania had to be crossed. Finally, a voyage of eight weeks up the enormous Lake Victoria would lead a traveller to Uganda.

It is completely wrong to have the idea that the people of Uganda and East Africa were spiritually hungry and keen to hear the gospel. The opposite is the truth. They were quite happy as they were, and they were definitely not seeking the Lord.

Two and a half year journey

The first job was to hack through the jungle to get inland from the coast. Mackay took charge of building a road 230 miles in length which was wide enough for ox-carts.

During this activity he was frequently ill with malaria, and it became clear to him, after two of his original party had to be invalided home, that illness was part of the price he would have to pay if he intended to stay on in Africa.

A boat was actually carried in pieces along this road through the dense jungle until they

reached Lake Victoria. Here Mackay assembled it and fitted the engine. It was now clear to him why, in God's providence, he had trained as an engineer, rather than a minister. In November 1878, he finally reached Uganda. It had taken two and a half years to get there from the coast of East Africa.

Unlike most modern missionaries, this man never had a furlough. He never asked for one or wanted one. As with all these pioneer missionaries, we have to remind ourselves that there were no telephones, faxes or aeroplanes home. Mackay was isolated in a world of degradation and eventually persecution.

The king of Uganda had supreme power. It was a sort of feudal system with the king at the top of the pyramid of power, and women and slaves at the bottom. By now Mackay understood Swahili, so he realised that the king's wealth came from using his army to gather slaves and sell them to Arab traders.

Three obstacles

There were three open obstacles to the gospel in Uganda: the traditional religion of witchcraft, the persistent Islamic teaching of the Arab traders; and to confuse the king even more, French Roman Catholic priests followed on the heels of the CMS Mission.

When Mackay explained in Swahili that he opposed slavery, the king was angry as well as confused. Nevertheless, the Christian mission started. Mackay had permission to teach any who would listen.

He built his own house. He assembled a printing press so that he could print portions of Scripture he had translated. Then he taught many young people how to read their own language.

Eight Protestant missionaries had set out on Mackay's mission to Uganda. Two were murdered; two had been invalided home; and the others had died, except for Mackay who was now the only one left.

The work was frustratingly slow. But then in 1882, God gave him the first converts. Five young Ugandans were baptised by an Anglican minister who had just joined him. Mackay wrote: 'May they not only be baptised with water, but also with the Holy Ghost. May they be the seed of the church in this land.'

In 1884, the king died - sadly in his sin and without Christ, who had been freely offered to him in the gospel. A 17 year-old son succeeded him.

The Muslim Arabs, looking for ivory and slaves, turned the young king against all that Mackay stood for.

Three of the young Christians were burnt to death on the orders of the 17 year-old. But, strange to say, danger increased the desire of many to profess Christ. Then in 1886, 32 Ugandan Christians were burnt alive. Others went into hiding.

Mackay himself decided to leave Uganda in the hope that the martyrdoms would stop. He withdrew to the south of Lake Victoria, and settled outside of Uganda. Here he carried on teaching, translating and printing Scripture, and in his forge he was building a new boat in which he had hopes of returning to Uganda. But it was not to be. In 1890, after 14 years in Africa, Alexander Mackay died of malaria. He was 40 years old. While many white people wept at his funeral, the black converts burst out with the triumphant singing of 'All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name'.

D.J. Stephens