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INTRODUCTION

QUA IBOE MISSIONARY PAPERS

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Qua Iboe Missionary Papers (D3301)

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Summary

c.150 volumes, 13 files and c.750 documents comprising the records of the Qua Iboe Mission in Nigeria and Belfast, 1887-1963.



Samuel Alexander Bill

In 1887, some chiefs of the Ibuno tribe on the southern shores of Nigeria were becoming increasingly disillusioned by the superstition and the cruelty of the customs of their people - slavery and human sacrifice were common and twin children were strangled at birth. They appealed for a European teacher to instruct and teach Christianity in the region of Qua Iboe, one of the most densely populated areas in the whole of Nigeria. In response to this call, Samuel Alexander Bill, aged 23 and a builder by trade, set sail from Belfast for Africa in the autumn of 1887. He arrived in Qua Iboe by the end of that year and, assisted by friends in the Scottish United Presbyterian Mission, was able to establish a house and small school on the banks of the Qua Iboe River.

At this early stage Bill was as much a scholar as a teacher, learning from his young pupils the sounds and meanings of the words in the Efik language. As communication improved there was evidence of spiritual growth and, in practical terms, this saw fruition in the erection of a small church where the first Communion service was held on 18 February 1890. Bill wrote in one of his diaries that survive in the collection:

'Eleven sat down to the Table, all with black skins - except Mr Bailie and myself - but all looking to a common Saviour... There were about 100 people in the church, and they were mostly orderly and attentive'.

Sam Bill has been described as a 'shirt-sleeve missionary' because of his practical skills as a builder and he also planted maize, cassava and coffee. He had dreams of a sawmill, a coffee plantation and even a trading station.



The mission

The most important early convert was a man called Egbo. Egbo had much influence with the people at Ibuno and was able to persuade all the chiefs to make a law that newborn twins were not to be killed but brought to the Mission House. When the Government formed the first Native Court in the whole of Qua Iboe, Egbo was appointed president and where there had been no knowledge of English law, he succeeded in establishing a Court, which, largely, was a force for righteousness. Factors such as this helped the development of the missionary work which spread geographically and individuals such as Mr and Mrs A. Bailie and Mr John Kirk established Christian strongholds amongst the Ibibios at Okat and Etinan which, in 1900, was a stronghold of all the evil customs.

By the latter half of the twentieth century Etinan, with its beautiful church, printing press, hospital and leper colony was the headquarters of a major missionary establishment. The construction of roads by the British Government opened up the whole country and enabled the Qua Iboe mission to reach previously inaccessible regions. By the 1940s there were 14 central and over 700 out-stations connected with the mission, with almost 50 European workers and over 650 native helpers on the staff. There was a Bible College for training pastors, a school for evangelists and Training Institutes for boys and girls.

The mission also sought to play a central role medically - Samuel Bill had an only son who was killed in the Great War, whose ambition had been to be the first Qua Iboe mission doctor. In 1948 the S.A. Bill and R.L. McKeown Memorial Hospital was founded. Bill, who died in 1942, did not live to see the growth of a hospital that by 1957 was treating over 6300 outpatients and performing almost 750 operations. At the beginning of the 21st century the mission still thrives embracing an inter-denominational and evangelical approach. It has 12 missionaries in the field and is looking further a field to spread its Christian message into countries such as Chad.



The papers

The papers of the mission are a rich source for students of the history of missionary work in Africa. There is detailed correspondence about the work and development of the mission, 1888-1942, including a large section comprising 725 letters, 1900-1942, from the Superintendent in the field, Samuel Bill, to R.L. McKeown (himself a missionary in the field between 1899 and 1901), as General Secretary of the mission in Belfast. The letters contain details of every aspect of the work such as: discussion about a saw-mill, January, 1911; various illnesses and diseases affecting the missionaries; teaching issues; relations with the Mission Council in Belfast; the effects of the two World Wars on the mission etc.

Also of considerable interest are the diaries of Samuel Bill, 1887-1941, and his loose-leaf daily journals, 1902-1922, which are very detailed because of his desire to keep the Home Council informed about the progress of the work. The earliest diary, September-October 1897, is an original daily account of Bill's initial voyage to Qua Iboe via Old Calabar. Other contents of the archive include: bound volumes of the Mission quarterlies, 1892-1962; Annual Reports of the Belfast Qua Iboe Missionary Association (including financial reports), 1889-1941; minute books; records of donations; financial statements etc., of the Mountpottinger and Londonderry auxiliaries of the Central Council, 1896-1960, established for fundraising and spreading information.

There is a range of photographs relating to the mission, c.1890-1940, including one of Samuel Bill and his family taken in 1896.

