

**ASSUMPTIONS AND EVIDENCE:
THE CASE OF PHILIP ROBINSON
(1830-1886)**

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Introduction

Europeans had arrived in Singapore to trade or take up professional careers ever since Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) established a trading outpost in 1819. The European community, although a small one, held great political and economic power in colonial Singapore. Yet within the European community, there were some who remained in Singapore for brief periods of time and kept very much to their own social circles. Consequently, very little information is available on them. Their names may be found in the list of principal inhabitants in the *Straits Calendar and Directory* (for several issues also called *Singapore Almanack and Directory*), but almost nothing beyond that.

One such person was Philip Robinson, an English merchant now remembered for two places—the commercial firm of Robinsons which he founded in 1858, and the first Christian Brethren assembly organised in Singapore in 1864.¹ Although Robinsons has two major department stores today, with the parent company managing another two retail entities including

¹ For a brief explanation of the Brethren use of ‘assembly’, see John Heading, ‘The Church and the Churches’, in John Heading and Cyril Hocking (eds), *Church Doctrine and Practice* (Neath, West Glamorgan, 1970), pp.16-20 and H. G. Mackay, *Assembly Distinctives* (Scarborough, Ontario, 1981), pp.9-10.

the Singapore franchise for Marks & Spencer, we know very little about its founder.²

The writer's interest in Robinson arose from a personal study of the history of the Christian Brethren assemblies in Singapore. This article will consider accepted beliefs about Robinson in previous research work and the need for verification of information. But in order to keep the article within a reasonable length, the writer will only be looking into selected aspects of Robinson's life, namely, his birthplace, religious convictions, employment in Melbourne, founding of the first Christian Brethren assembly in Singapore, and his death.

Previous Works on Robinson

Charles Burton Buckley wrote a short two-paragraph biography on Robinson in *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (1902).³ Buckley noted Robinson's arrival in Singapore from Melbourne in 1857, where he had worked for the firm Passmore, Watson & Co. Upon arriving in Singapore, Robinson worked as an assistant at Cursetjee & Co. before venturing into a partnership with James Gaborian Spicer in 1858. The new firm of Spicer & Robinson did not last long. Spicer left the partnership, and the firm became Robinson & Co. Buckley's seminal work also recorded Robinson as one of the founders of Bethesda Gospel Hall, his introduction of frequent 'tea meetings' there and a library attached to it. Robinson apparently came from a well-known family in western England, and one of his brothers had been a mayor of Bristol

² An online history of Robinson & Co. can be found at <http://www.robinsons.com.sg/history.asp> [accessed 1 August 2005]. However, as the present paper shows, it is not entirely accurate.

³ Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*, 1st edn 1902 (Kuala Lumpur, 1965), p.672.

Since the publication of *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* in 1902, nearly every publication has quoted it and included more (unproven) details on Robinson's life and work. Makepeace, Brooke and Braddell added very little else to what was already known of Robinson in their work *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, published in 1921 after the centenary of the founding of Singapore.⁴ They seemed unsure about Robinson's arrival in Singapore, recording that he did so 'about 1857'. His family was a prominent one from the west of England, but this time the editors also noted that it was 'a family well known for its ability to put into the cricket field 'Robinson teams''.⁵ The editors not only mentioned Spicer, but noted that George Rappa, Jr., and T.C. Loveridge were his partners for some time, and that A.W. Bean, H.T. White and F. Apps were to join the firm of Robinson & Co. later.⁶ The editors also noted Robinson's association with Bethesda Gospel Hall.⁷

In 1958, a book chronicling the history of Robinson's was published to commemorate 'a century of progress' for the firm.⁸ This booklet, in turn, used *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore and One Hundred Years of Singapore* as the central sources of evidence. New references were made on how Robinson conducted his business through the employment of travelling representatives throughout Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, the archives of Robinson's were destroyed in a horrific fire in November 1972, making any future reconstruction of Robinson's life and work even more difficult. The centenary

⁴ Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke and Roland St. J. Braddell (eds), *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 2 vols. 1st edn 1921. (Singapore, 1991).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, p.215.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.272, 535.

⁸ Robinson's and Company, *The Story of Robinson's, 1858-1958* (Singapore, 1958), n.p.

souvenir also mentioned that Robinson ‘gave more time to his religion, the Plymouth Brethren’ and his connection with Bethesda Gospel Hall.

On the occasion of the centenary of Bethesda Gospel Hall in 1964, a recent graduate from the University of Singapore was asked to prepare a centenary booklet. She was given the assembly record book—a register kept at Bethesda Gospel Hall chronicling major events in the assembly from 1864 to 1934—to prepare the booklet. In mid-1964, when she could not carry on the project, Matthew Finlay, an elder at the assembly, decided to finish the booklet on the assembly’s behalf.⁹ In preparing the centenary booklet for Bethesda Gospel Hall in 1964, Matthew Finlay used *The Story of Robinson’s 1858-1958* as his central source on Robinson but included new information gleaned from an old missionary magazine. An 1886 issue of *Footsteps of Truth* edited by C. Russell Hurditch noted that Philip Robinson was schooled at Oxford, converted to Christianity at the age of 14, and ‘soon afterwards’ worked as a Sunday School teacher at Tewkesbury. It recorded the last few hours of Robinson’s life before he passed away on 14 February 1886.¹⁰ Finlay also recorded that Robinson was born in 1831, his wife’s name was Eliza, and that they had ‘at least’ a son and a daughter named Stamford Raffles and Blanche respectively.¹¹

By September 1964 the booklet *The Story of One Hundred Years of the Lord’s Blessing 1864-1964* was published. Finlay’s effort was commendable considering the limited amount of time he had, and this was also recognised by the Secretary of the assembly, who noted that ‘the record is far from being complete,

⁹ Personal interview conducted with Mr Matthew Finlay, Room 3-F, 17th Floor, RELC Centre, 18 October 1997.

¹⁰ M.H. Finlay, *The Story of One Hundred Years of the Lord’s Blessing 1864-1964* (Singapore, 1964), pp.36-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

but sufficient material had been collected and presented to give us some idea of the Lord's dealings'.¹²

Research on Philip Robinson and Bethesda Gospel Hall after the publication of the assembly centenary booklet in 1964 consulted the same (usually secondary) sources. Not surprisingly, with no fresh study of Robinson, conclusions from earlier works were not verified. In her thesis submitted in 1973, Mabel James wrote that 'Robinson found time to engage in sports'. She assumed that since Robinson came from a prominent cricketing family in the west of England, he had to be a keen cricketer and 'became a valued and popular member of the team that played on the Padang'. James also assumed that between 1857 and 1864, 'Robinson continued his lay ministry'.¹³ Yet no evidence was given for both claims.

By 1990 the assumptions were expanded further. Two factors placed together could have led to the unfortunate belief that Robinson was born in Bristol—his brother was Mayor of Bristol and Bristol was one of the early centres of Christian Brethren activity. To confound matters further, the Trust Deed of Bethesda Gospel Hall provided that, should the assembly be reduced to just two members, all its possessions would be given to George Müller, one of the pastors of Bethesda Chapel (the original Christian Brethren assembly in Bristol) or any Director of the Scriptural Knowledge Institute (SKI) for missionary work in the Straits Settlements.¹⁴ Small wonder then that Jasmine Wong suggested that it all seemed to point to Robinson being

¹² 'Bethesda Gospel Hall Newsletter', No. 20, December 1964, p.1.

¹³ Mabel Lalitha James, 'Philip Robinson and the Origins of the Bethesda Movement in Singapore' (1864-1883)', unpublished Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Singapore, 1973, pp.14-15.

¹⁴ Copy of Trust Deed of Bethesda Free Meeting House, found in the 'Assembly Record Book', pp.453-4.

born in Bristol, 'though no concrete evidence have [sic] been produced to that effect'.¹⁵

Most biographies tend to focus on Robinson's Christian work. And it is here that assumptions and facts were not differentiated. Researchers assumed that since Robinson founded the first Christian Brethren assembly in Singapore in 1864, he was in fellowship with the Christian Brethren in England and Australia. In 1990, Kenneth Newton wrote that 'we can only assume that it was with the Brethren that Robinson met from 1850 to 1857 during his years in Australia'.¹⁶ Bobby Sng wrote of how Robinson and his wife were 'brought up in the Brethren tradition' and that by 1864, Robinson's 'Brethren upbringing asserted itself', resulting in the opening of Mission Rooms.¹⁷ In 1997, Jasmine Wong also concluded that upon his arrival in Singapore in 1857, Robinson did not join the existing Christian congregations in their religious affairs because of his 'Brethren heritage'.¹⁸ Again, no evidence was given in these instances

Analysis of accepted sources

E.H. Carr had warned that 'when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it'.¹⁹ This can be seen in the

¹⁵ Jasmine Liang-May Wong, 'The English-speaking Brethren Assemblies in Singapore (1864-1986)', unpublished Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Academic Exercise, Department of History, National University of Singapore, 1996/1997, p.3, n. 8.

¹⁶ Kenneth J. Newton, 'A History of the Brethren in Australia with Particular Reference to the Open Brethren', unpublished PhD thesis in Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990, p.38.

¹⁷ Bobby E. K. Sng. *In His Good Time: the story of the Church in Singapore, 1819-1992*, 2nd edn (Singapore, 1993), pp.80-81.

¹⁸ Wong, 'The English-speaking Brethren Assemblies in Singapore', p.5.

¹⁹ E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, 1st edn 1961 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1964), p.22.

early biographies of Robinson. While *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* and *One Hundred Years of Singapore* are useful in giving us insights into the European mercantile community in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the personalities mentioned were still relatively fresh in the minds of the writers and readers. Soon after Buckley re-established the *Singapore Free Press*, he began a series of articles from 4 October 1884, which were collated in *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore*. But as Buckley indicated, any interest generated through these articles would 'be very much restricted to those who take a *personal interest* in the place we live in'.²⁰

The editors of *One Hundred Years of Singapore* took a similar approach. Not many details were recorded on the personalities mentioned. It was taken for granted by the writers that readers of their time should know who they were writing about, the achievements these key personalities accomplished, the firms they founded and the services provided, and even who their descendants were (at the turn of the century). It results, of course, in gaps that need to be filled. It was possible that the editors of *One Hundred Years of Singapore* treated Buckley's work as a primary source. They noted that his series of articles in the *Singapore Free Press* 'was a most useful reference work for the history of the Settlement [i.e. Singapore], as in it appeared all Mr Buckley's knowledge of the place for twenty years'.²¹ They remarked that 'no effort was spared by him [Buckley] to verify the references, and the work will always remain as a most valuable record of the earlier days of Singapore'.²² The editors of *One Hundred Years of Singapore* might not have verified Buckley's work; consequently it 'owed much in style and content

²⁰ *Singapore Free Press*, 4 October 1884, p.7. Emphasis added.

²¹ Makepeace et al. (eds), *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 2, p.284.

²² *Ibid.*, p.455.

to Charles Burton Buckley's *An Anecdotal History of Times in Singapore, 1819-1867*.²³ The authors of both books gave no details on Robinson's childhood, education, employment in Melbourne and Christian convictions since these issues might not be of (European) public interest in Singapore. But the influence of the historian on research about Robinson is evident after the publication of *The Story of Robinson's* in 1958. Major studies on Robinson focussed almost exclusively on his role at Bethesda Gospel Hall. Since 1964, with the publication of *The Story of One Hundred Years of the Lord's Blessing*, researchers with a keen interest in Robinson were themselves associated with the Christian Brethren assemblies in Singapore, and the assembly record book was used as a primary source. Furthermore, with the loss of the archives at Robinson's in 1972, it is perhaps inevitable that research on Robinson tended to study the founding of the firm in 1858 as a background before devoting the rest of the work to Robinson's role at Bethesda Gospel Hall. This had been the case for the theses of James (1973) and Wong (1997), as well as *Robinson and Bethesda* by Samuel Wee (1996).

The literature review so far confirms that very few attempts were made to verify what is written about Robinson. No detailed work on Robinson has ever been undertaken. This may not be surprising since Robinson's influence in Singapore pales in comparison to other Europeans. Consequently, conclusions made in an earlier work were assumed to be accurate. They would then be extensively quoted, and even expanded (with more unproven details), in later works. The crux of the problem lay in the very beginning. Buckley's 'facts' were not verified, and it was widely assumed that his work was a true description of European

²³ C. M. Turnbull, 'Introduction', in Makepeace *et al.*, (eds), *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, 1, p.ix

society in Singapore at the turn of the century. Through time, many assumptions about Robinson came to be accepted as facts.

One noticeable feature in the literature review is that of a distinct lack in the use of primary sources other than the assembly record book, whether for verification or the discovery of something new. Since ‘historical facts are knowable only by the evidence they leave behind’,²⁴ evidence must be found before we attempt to give a proper account of Robinson’s life and work. It is time that we address some misconceptions about his life in England, Australia and Singapore. Only in cases where evidence is not clear-cut—such as sketchy details in primary sources—could careful assumptions be put forward.

Robinson’s Early Years (1830-1850)

In order to get a better picture of Philip Robinson, extensive enquiries had to be made with various individuals and institutions in England, Australia and Singapore for any materials available.²⁵ Yet, it was felt that, for lesser known individuals such as Robinson, the dearth of primary documents was more or less expected. Indeed, many attempts at unearthing his past would eventually come to a dead end. The writer also recognises that the authors of many secondary sources quoted did not have the luxury of time to do extensive research work.

²⁴ G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, 1st edn 1967. (London, 1987), p.81.

²⁵ Letters to Bristol Record Office, Bristol and Avon Family History Society, Bristol Central Library, Gloucestershire Family History Society, Geoffrey Roberts, Tewkesbury Library, Tewkesbury Historical Society, Worcestershire County Record Office, Mrs Cecily Hadley, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Mrs Susan Campbell, Mrs Hilary Clare, John Loosley, Victoria Baptist Historical Society, Anne and Robin Bailey, the State Library of Victoria, Bethesda Hall (Ang Mo Kio) and Ang Mo Kio Gospel Hall between March 1998 and August 2000. My grateful thanks to all for their help.

Correspondence with one of his descendants revealed that Philip Robinson was born on 7 December 1830, in Overbury. A small village in Worcestershire, its estimated population in 1841 was just over 800 and his father Edward Robinson (1791-1870) was a paper dealer there.²⁶ Robinson's childhood was spent at a large house called 'Silver Rill' which his parents moved into just before his birth.²⁷ His family was indeed a prominent one in western England, and his brother Elisha Smith Robinson did become Mayor of Bristol in 1866. The Robinsons were indeed ardent cricket players, as eleven Robinsons would take to the field in annual matches with the Flax Bourton Cricket Club, Somerset, from 1878. Robinson players who had played included Wroughton (son of Philip Robinson) and Kossuth (son of Elisha Smith Robinson) in 1883.²⁸ Whether Philip Robinson played cricket for the Robinson team is not known.

Little is known about his childhood, but Hurditch seemed to be the first to record that Robinson went to school at Oxford, where he was converted to Christianity at the age of 14. An enquiry was made at the Oxfordshire Archives for his name among schools run by nonconformists—Protestant churches outside the official Church of England—but to no avail. It had also been claimed that soon after his conversion, he worked as a Sunday School teacher in Tewkesbury.²⁹ Tewkesbury was a small town in Gloucestershire—the borough and parish had only 5,878 inhabitants according to the 1851 census.

²⁶ *Bentley's History, Gazetteer, Directory and Statistics of Worcestershire* (Birmingham, 1841), pp.111-12.

²⁷ Isobel Robinson and William Webb, 'The Robinsons (of Bristol and Gloucester)', unpublished work, nd.

²⁸ 'A Cricket Centenary', *Bristol and West Country Illustrated*, 13, No.2 (June 1978), p.30.

²⁹ Finlay, *One Hundred Years of the Lord's Blessing*, pp.36-37.

There is evidence to show that Robinson was a Sunday School teacher at Tewkesbury Baptist Chapel. The Chapel records show that Robinson attended Sunday School teachers' meetings as early as 1844, when he was 14! He was received into fellowship in September 1847, and baptised later that year. It is also noteworthy that a Miss Elizabeth (or "Eliza") Knight, daughter of a shoemaker, was born in Tewkesbury on 18 August 1829, and had been worshipping at Tewkesbury Baptist Chapel since 29 November 1839.³⁰

It is therefore interesting to learn that, while still in England, Robinson did not attend any Christian Brethren assembly, but identified himself with a Particular Baptist church. The Particular Baptists were so-called because of their Calvinistic view that the death of the Lord Jesus Christ attained limited or particular atonement—that He died on the cross specifically for those whom God had predestined to be saved.³¹ The Particular Baptists had been in Tewkesbury since 1655, and services were carried out in the Tewkesbury Baptist Chapel from 1711.³² Robinson joined Tewkesbury Baptist Chapel during a period of Evangelical revival in which the number of Particular Baptists in England increased from 24,000 to 86,000 between 1773 and 1851!³³

There is no evidence of any link between Robinson and Bristol before 1844. It is possible that Philip Robinson was influenced by his brother Elisha Smith Robinson. The latter had worked in a grocery and general shop owned by his grandfather

³⁰ Gloucestershire Record Office, 'Membership Register of the Tewkesbury Baptist Chapel'. Copying of the records was not granted.

³¹ Henry C. Vedder, *A Short History of the Baptists*, 1st edn 1907 (Valley Forge, 1993), pp.205-206.

³² Christopher Stell, *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England* (London, 1986). pp.98-100.

³³ G. M. Ditchfield, *The Evangelical Revival* (London, 1998), p.90.

the Revd Elisha Smith, a Baptist minister at Campden, in Blockley, Gloucestershire. Elisha Smith Robinson left the family paper mill at Overbury in 1844, borrowed £100 and ventured into Bristol. He founded the paper firm of E.S. & A. Robinson with another brother Alfred that year. Elisha Smith Robinson was a staunch Baptist who opened his home to visiting missionaries. He believed in the ‘commercial value’ of foreign countries, and indeed, also went on several missionary visits to India.³⁴ How much influence Elisha Smith Robinson had in getting his brother Philip Robinson to venture overseas is unclear.

Robinson in Australia (1850-1857)

The membership register of the Tewkesbury Baptist Chapel noted Robinson’s departure for Melbourne, although it is unclear when he did so).³⁵ The Gold Rush would come in 1851 and that would indeed make Melbourne a most attractive place to work. But Robinson had gone there to eke out a living even before the Gold Rush began.

The first mention of the firm Watson, Passmore & Co., however, was only in the *Melbourne Commercial Directory* of 1855. It means, therefore, that Robinson could not possibly have worked for Watson, Passmore & Co.—since this is the correct name³⁶—at least until 1855. What he did upon his immediate arrival in Melbourne is something we may never know, since there seem to be no private papers extant on his life.

³⁴ Bernard Darwin, *Robinsons of Bristol 1844-1944* (Bristol, 1945), pp.10-11. Interestingly, E.S. & A. Robinson also had a Far Eastern representative in Singapore between 1953 and 1957.

³⁵ See note 30 above.

³⁶ Even the 23 June 1857 edition of the *Straits Times*, for instance, carried an advertisement that ran ‘WATSON, PASSMORE & CO., Merchants and Commission Agents, Melbourne, Australia’.

In Hurditch's obituary of Robinson, he made no mention of Robinson's employment in a firm named Passmore, Watson & Co. The only note made about Robinson's sojourn in Melbourne was that 'he (Robinson) found time to engage in various kinds of Christian work in spare hours after his ordinary business avocations'.³⁷ Hurditch was a prominent member of Clapton Hall, where Robinson was to be received into fellowship in 1876. Hurditch probably made no mention of Robinson's occupation in Melbourne because he chose to focus on Robinson's Christian, rather than secular, work.

Yet Robinson did attempt a business venture in Melbourne between 1853 and 1857. A title deed dated 30 July 1853 recorded that Robinson and one James Walter Douglas Roche leased a plot of land at 194, Flinders Lane, in North Melbourne from John Duerdin, a solicitor. The agreement recorded that a plot of land along Flinders Lane would be leased by Duerdin to Robinson and Roche at an annual rent of £250, payable quarterly for the next twenty-one years.³⁸

Barely seven months later, however, the firm was in trouble. On 17 February 1854, the land was mortgaged to Richard Grice. A new memorial was signed on 19 April 1855, and Robinson paid £675 to Roche for release of the leasehold. In other words, Roche backed out of the partnership. The firm then continued as Robinson & Co. at Flinders Lane. Robinson was listed in the Melbourne Commercial Directory of 1856 as a factor, that is, a merchant who bought and sold on commission. Exactly what commodities he handled was unclear. Land prices at Flinders

³⁷ Finlay, *One Hundred Years of the Lord's Blessings*, p.36.

³⁸ Registrar General's Office [hereafter RGO], Victoria, Memorial No. 431, Book Two, dated 10 October 1853.

Lane were low, and many merchants built their warehouses on this land.³⁹

Researchers have so far taken ‘the fallacy of the circular proof’ in studying Robinson’s Christian work in Melbourne. In other words, researchers had assumed what needed to be proved.⁴⁰ Therefore, since Robinson was the founder of the first Christian Brethren assembly in Singapore, it was believed that he had been associated with the Christian Brethren while in Melbourne.⁴¹ This was not so. Robinson was received into fellowship at Collins Street Baptist Church on 4 April 1850, probably soon after arriving from England. His membership there did not last long, and he moved to Albert Street Baptist Church on 2 February 1851.⁴² The Collins Street Baptist Church still stands today, but the Albert Street Baptist Church was closed in 1925.

On 27 March 1855, Robinson and Eliza Knight were married by Revd William Penford Scott of Albert Street Baptist Church at the home of Mr Robert Kerr in St. Kilda, ‘according to the forms of the Baptist denomination’.⁴³ The Registers of Collins Street and Albert Street Baptist Churches did not record anybody named Eliza Knight between c.1849 and 1857. Their first child, a daughter named Maria Florence, was born on 27 April 1856.

³⁹ Michael Cannon, *Melbourne After the Gold Rush* (Melbourne, 1993), p.199.

⁴⁰ David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: toward a logic of historical thought* (New York, 1970), pp.49-51.

⁴¹ Newton, ‘History of the Brethren in Australia’, p.38.

⁴² Baptist Union of Victoria, Collins Street Baptist Church and Albert Street Baptist Church registers.

⁴³ Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne, Schedule C, Marriages Solemnised in the District of Bourke Registered by W. P. Scott, 1855, pp.408- 409.

In terms of theology, the Baptists in Melbourne 'tended to reproduce in Australia the varieties of faith and practice they had known in their homeland'.⁴⁴ Most were Calvinistic. It also appears that some Baptist churches had a plurality of elders and strict requirements for communion. One certainly wonders why, after 13 years as a Baptist at Tewkesbury and Melbourne, Robinson started the first Christian Brethren assembly in Singapore.

Depression came to Melbourne in the mid-1850s, and it could be at this stage that Robinson found times difficult. The Colony of Victoria went through a period of deflation and unemployment between 1854 and 1861. There was an oversupply of imported goods, and events took place which led to an economic crisis by 1857.⁴⁵ Robinson suffered economic losses, and on 27 January 1857, a final memorial came into effect whereby the piece of land and everything on it was surrendered back to Duerdin. It must have been a huge blow to Robinson, as all he got from the surrender of the land was five shillings!⁴⁶ More compensation could have come later, but this was not recorded in the memorial. Five days before the memorial took effect, Robinson took his whole family on board the 196-ton British brig *Aim* and sailed to Singapore.

⁴⁴ Basil Brown, *Members One of Another: The Baptist Union of Victoria, 1862-1962* (Melbourne, 1962), p.21.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: a history of the Colony of Victoria, 1851-1861* (Melbourne, 1963), pp.239.248.

⁴⁶ RGO, Memorial No. 229, Book Eight, dated 28 February 1854; Memorial No. 610, Book 25, dated 19 April 1855; and Memorial No. 956, Book 44, dated 27 January 1857

Robinson in Singapore

The foundation of historical research is ‘the supremacy of evidence’.⁴⁷ Perhaps it was assumed that Robinson’s personality and lifestyle were not too dissimilar from other Europeans in Singapore. The very first paragraph of *The Story of Robinson’s* states that the year 1857 had begun ‘inauspiciously’ for Singapore, assuming that Robinson had arrived during ‘this atmosphere of unrest and interracial distrust’. This was quoted in subsequent works.⁴⁸ However, the ship *Aim* arrived in Singapore only on 20 March 1857.⁴⁹ *The Story of Robinson’s* also jumped to the conclusion that ‘like other new arrivals of the time he [Robinson] found accommodation easy to come by in Singapore’.⁵⁰ As evidence, the compilers of the book at Robinson’s & Co. used an advertisement of the Esperanza Family Hotel from the *Singapore Free Press*. But did they stay at the Esperanza?

We do not know what Robinson and his family did immediately upon arrival in the colony. Seeking employment would evidently have been on Robinson’s mind. He was married with a daughter, and his wife Eliza was pregnant. Robinson eventually got a job as an assistant at Cursetjee & Co., a departmental store and auctioning firm managed by the prominent Parsi entrepreneur Frommurzee Cursetjee. In Robinson’s obituary, it was noted that he was a book-keeper in the firm.⁵¹ Cursetjee’s firm dealt mainly with gentlemen’s and

⁴⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York, 1997), pp.271-272.

⁴⁸ Robinson and Company, *The Story of Robinson’s*, n.p.; Finlay, *One Hundred Years of the Lord’s Blessing*, p.7; James, *Philip Robinson*, p.11; Wee, *Robinson and Bethesda*, pp.3-4.

⁴⁹ *The Straits Times*, 24 March 1857, p.4. The newspaper recorded the ship’s name as ‘Ann’ by mistake.

⁵⁰ *The Singapore Almanack and Directory for the Year 1857*, p.67.

⁵¹ *The Straits Times*, 20 March 1886, p.2.

ladies' apparel, baby linen, jewellery, stationery and books, wines and spirits, and items from Japan and China, amongst others.⁵²

Robinson left the firm after a year. On 1 February 1858, he went into partnership with James Gaborian Spicer and established the new firm of Spicer & Robinson at North Bridge Road. The firm placed their first advertisement in *The Straits Times* on 20 February.⁵³ A week later, *The Straits Times* carried three small notices of a 'new family warehouse' that was 'now replete with a well-selected stock, which they are determined to offer at the lowest remunerative rates, in order to ensure a large amount of public support'. The notices then highlighted what the firm sold—beverages, foodstuff, wines, cigars, ladies' apparel and children's hats—along with its coming attraction: 'an assortment [of] very superior English-made Boots and Shoes'⁵⁴ Spicer had been nominated by Colonel William John Butterworth, the Governor, to be Sealer of the Court on 8 April 1844.⁵⁵ He had also been Keeper of the Jail. In 1848, he had left the Court and gone into a partnership with Hugh Morrison. The new firm of Spicer & Morrison were shipwrights based at Telok Ayer. The partnership had not lasted long, and the firm collapsed a year later. Spicer had remained in Singapore, and purchased a coconut estate at Kallang Grove in 1854. In any case, Spicer's partnership with Robinson soon came to an end. In 1859, the firm was renamed Robinson & Co. and moved to Commercial Square. Spicer remained a planter at Kallang Grove until 1863, when he either died or sold the estate.⁵⁶

⁵² *The Straits Times*, 20 February 1858, p.1.

⁵³ *The Straits Times*, 20 February 1858, p.2.

⁵⁴ *The Straits Times*, 27 February 1858, p.2.

⁵⁵ National Archives of Singapore, microfilm NL 110, Governor Miscellaneous Letters Out, January 1843 to September 1844, pp.233, 234.

⁵⁶ *The Straits Times Almanack, Calendar and Directory for the Years 1846-1847*; *The Singapore Almanack, Calendar and Directory for the Years*

Robinson remained a sole partner until 1860 when George Rappa Jr. was brought into the firm. The latter's son Jacob Rappa and another man named Abraham Meyer were appointed assistants. In that year, Crescens Robinson & Co. at 79, Upper Street became the London agent for the firm.⁵⁷ The Robinsons returned to England on 28 March 1863, and Robinson started the London business office of Robinson's & Co. with himself as partner. Robinson departed England once again on 26 January 1864, with his wife Elisa and daughter Blanche departing for Singapore via India on 14 February 1865.⁵⁸ George Rappa Jr. remained a partner until 1864, when he became a General Broker. Like Spicer, he also owned a coconut estate named 'Ravenscraig' located at Bedok Road. He was to give it up later and move to Serangoon Road. In 1878, Robinson promoted one of his Assistants, Thomas Loveridge, to be his partner, but Loveridge left the company in 1883 and established his own dressmaking firm. The only source left that could be consulted on the work of Philip Robinson in Robinson's & Co. is the firm's centennial publication *The Story of Robinson's*. With the loss of the firm's archives in 1972, this book—however inadequate in its study of Robinson's personal life—remains the

Table 1. Philip and Eliza Robinson's children

	Name of Child	Date of birth	Date of death
1	Maria Florence	27.04.1856	12.06.1937

1848-1850; The Singapore Almanack and Directory for the Years 1851-1855; The Singapore Directory for the Year 1857; The Singapore Almanack and Directory for the Year 1858; The Royal Almanack and Directory for the Years 1859-1860; The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Years 1861-1863.

⁵⁷ *The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1861*, p.44.

⁵⁸ Robinson and Webb, *The Robinsons*, p.249.

2	Stella Elizabeth	29.05.1857	04.04.1860
3	Blanche Agnes	18.03.1859	17.12.1936
4	Philip Thomas Stamford Raffles	08.04.1860	29.11.1936
5	Alice May	09.05.1861	18.05.1861
6	Wroughton William Key	27.08.1866	26.01.1949
7	Percy	08.09.1867	18.08.1868

only source of information on Robinson's business ethics and practice. Much information was taken from advertisements in the *Singapore Free Press*. The advertisements showed the types of goods on sale at Robinsons, and revealed the level of competition it had with other commercial firms such as John Little & Co., which Robinsons eventually bought over in 1955. As Spicer & Robinson, the firm sold mainly grocery. By the end of 1859, the firm of Robinson's & Co. had diversified into millinery and dressmaking. The archives of Robinsons proved immensely useful in giving us an insight into the expansion of the firm. Robinson sent trading representatives to the Malay Archipelago, Borneo and Siam and on 10 September 1863, King Mongkut of Siam wrote to Robinson, acknowledging receipt of goods purchased.

The Robinsons were blessed with the birth of a third daughter, Blanche Agnes, on 18 March 1859. A year later, however, tragedy struck the Robinsons. Stella Elizabeth, their second daughter born soon after their arrival in Singapore, fell ill and died Mount Erskine on 4 April 1860, aged two years and ten months.⁵⁹ Four days later, their first son, Philip Thomas Stamford Raffles, was born. On 9 May 1861, Alice May was born, but she died nine days later. A son, Wroughton William Key, was born on 27 August 1866. Another son, their seventh and last child, Percy, was born on 8 September 1867 but he died

⁵⁹ *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 5 April 1860, p.2.

on 18 August 1868. Therefore, while previous research works had accepted the Robinsons as having a son and a daughter, in reality they had seven, of whom three died in infancy (Table 1). Philip Thomas Stamford Raffles was to succeed his father as partner of Robinson's & Co. after his father's death in 1886 while Wroughton William Key worked in the London office of the firm until 'about 1932'.⁶⁰

Robinson was also assumed to have played cricket on the Padang, a belief drawn up perhaps from his link with a family of cricketers in England. *The Story of Robinson's* appeared to be the first source to mention Robinson as 'one of the most valued members' at the Padang.⁶¹ But it gave no evidence of the games Robinson played. James took this further when she suggested that Robinson was 'a valued and popular member' of the cricket team. She concluded that as Robinson was ambitious, deeply religious and 'a keen sportsman', he fulfilled 'the requirements of the rugged yet cultural [*sic*] Singaporean'.⁶² Modern expectations of a Singaporean have been used to describe a Englishman living on the island in the mid-nineteenth century. It seems odd that the term 'Singaporean' was used even though he would not regard Singapore as his country. But Robinson as a keen cricketer was also accepted by later researchers.⁶³ Yet, no evidence had been found so far on Robinson ever having played cricket on the Padang, let alone whether he had ever played for any of the clubs in Singapore.

One wonders where Robinson stayed in Singapore. Is it possible that all Europeans owned houses with gardens in large

⁶⁰ Robinson and Webb, *The Robinsons*, p.254.

⁶¹ Robinson's and Company, *The Story of Robinson's*, np.

⁶² James, *Philip Robinson*, pp.14 , 17.

⁶³ Wee, Robinson and Bethesda, p.6; Wong, *The English-speaking Brethren Assemblies in Singapore*, p.5.

compounds?⁶⁴ From the *Straits Calendar and Directory* between 1861 and 1879, Robinson's address had always been either that of Robinson's & Co. or Bethesda Gospel Hall. The 1861 issue noted that he lived in Mount Erskine. Later that year Robinson moved to Lessudden House at Cross Street, where his second daughter Stella Elizabeth died. In 1864 the Robinsons moved again to 'Sunny Side' at Campbell Road. The next year, they stayed at Brass Bassa Lodge along Bras Basah Road. Sometime in 1867, the Robinsons stayed at 'Dunman's Corner' located at Bras Basah Road, which was also the location of Bethesda Gospel Hall and Chinese Gospel House. The next year, they shifted to 'Coleman House' at Coleman Street, where Robinson's & Co. was located. All these places were located around the city centre.

It could have been that while the Robinsons stayed at Lessudden House or 'Sunny Side', Robinson introduced the brass name-plate at the entrance of his house. In a *Singapore Free Press* article on 20 February 1886, one writer expressed his disappointment that Robinson's introduction of the brass name-plate was 'not an epidemic'.⁶⁵ It failed to generate interest until a brief revival in 1884. The introduction of enamelled metal plates at the entrances of houses was eventually sanctioned by the Postmaster-General in 1885 or 1886!

It is not known where Robinson worshipped after his arrival in Singapore. There were no Particular Baptist churches in Singapore, and the only three Protestant churches were St. Andrew's Church (now Cathedral), the Malay Chapel (now Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church) and the Scotch Church (now the Orchard Road Presbyterian Church). It may be possible that Robinson could not fit into any of the churches due to differing

⁶⁴ Wong, *The English-speaking Brethren Assemblies in Singapore*, p.4.

⁶⁵ *The Singapore Free Press*, 20 February 1886, pp.114.

church practices. But we do know that Eliza was a committee member of the Ladies' Bible and Tract Society (established 1858) from 1862 to 1869.⁶⁶

On 3 July 1864, the Robinsons broke bread with Mr and Mrs William Macdonald at 108, Bencoolen Street, at a place aptly named 'Mission Rooms'. The founding of the first Christian Brethren assembly can only be the result of either one of two possibilities. First, through Elisha Smith Robinson, Philip Robinson could have heard about George Müller and the work of the Christian Brethren assemblies in Bristol. Robinson had been in England in 1864, and could have heard of Müller's work in Bristol through his brother, or witnessed Müller's work first-hand. When Bethesda Gospel Hall was erected in 1866, it could be no coincidence that the name 'Bethesda' was chosen—Bethesda Chapel was the name of Müller's church in Bristol. Second, Philip Robinson could have started the assembly so that those who could not identify themselves with any of the existing Protestant churches in Singapore would have a place to worship. The possibility is that Mission Rooms began as a Christian fellowship and then developed into a Christian Brethren assembly. The Christian Brethren in the United Kingdom had always considered themselves 'unsectarian' or 'un-denominational'. In 1866, Robinson wrote that the assembly should give thanks to God for 'the building up of an *unsectarian* church for His own glory'.⁶⁷ It is clear then that Robinson the Baptist had established the first Christian Brethren assembly in Singapore.

⁶⁶ *The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1862; The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1863; The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1864; The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1865; and The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1866; The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1870.*

⁶⁷ 'Assembly Record Book', p29. Emphasis added

Robinson was also involved in the Singapore Young Men's Christian Association organised on 30 July 1862. In 1865, he was listed in *The Royal Almanack and Directory* as a committee member of the association along with William Burrows Haffenden, a master mariner who later joined Bethesda Gospel Hall. The association was interdenominational, as its Presidents were Revd John Mathison (minister of the Presbyterian Church) and Revd Edward Shermann Venn (from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, an organisation affiliated with the Church of England).⁶⁸

Since Finlay's work in 1964, researchers have begun to make use of primary sources, mainly through consultation with the 135-year-old assembly record book. But the book only records events from the founding of the first Christian Brethren Assembly—the Mission Rooms—one hundred years earlier. Through the use of the assembly record book, Samuel Wee produced an excellent account of Robinson's role in the assembly in 1996. Finlay, James and Wong, however, dealt very briefly with Robinson since their focus was on the entire Christian Brethren movement in Singapore. Wee also seemed to be the only researcher thus far to consult other primary documents on Bethesda Gospel Hall. He used the *Echoes of Service*, a missionary magazine established in Bath in 1872, and associated with the world-wide Christian Brethren movement.

⁶⁸ *The Royal Almanack and Directory for the Year 1865*, p.25.

Robinson and Bethesda Gospel Hall

The claim that Robinson remained active in the Christian Brethren assembly he started until his death cannot be denied. From the assembly record book we learn that Robinson suggested, on 29 July 1866, that since the assembly had accumulated a small building fund, a small and temporary place of worship could be built. A week later, another \$34.15 was collected for the fund.⁶⁹ Bethesda Gospel Hall was eventually opened on 30 September 1866 at 6.30 am, and the first record of Robinson preaching at the new Bethesda Gospel Hall was on 7 October 1866.⁷⁰ Robinson also suggested that deacons appointed to attend to the ‘temporal affairs’ of the assembly.⁷¹ Consequently, John Joseph Leonard Wheatley and John Sausman—apothecaries at the Convict Hospital along Bras Basah Road—became the first deacons of the new assembly on 4 March 1866.

On 6 June 1865 the Christian Book Society and Circulating Library was opened within the Mission Rooms, and later at Bethesda Gospel Hall. Robinson was its President and John Matthew Moyle—Superintendent of the Sailors’ Home—became the Secretary, Treasurer and Librarian. The Library was ‘instituted for the purpose of circulating purely evangelistically religious literature amongst its members and others’. Subscription was fixed at fifty cents per month.⁷² Buckley, however, also recalled that the Library ‘collapsed after some years’.⁷³ A check with the *Straits Times Calendar and Directory* revealed that the Library was no longer listed from the 1877 edition. The Library, therefore, existed for about twelve years.

⁶⁹ ‘Assembly Record Book’, p.39.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.41. Unfortunately, the book did not record the topic of his sermon.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁷² *The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1870*, p.18.

⁷³ *Singapore Free Press*, 27 March 1886, p.201.

In March 1867 Robinson proposed that a new trust deed be drawn up for the benefit of Bethesda Gospel Hall. Although the land was purchased in the names of Robinson and Macdonald, it was found that the property would pass into the hands of their estates should they die. Hence, a new trust deed was needed. Accordingly, a draft was submitted to members of the assembly on 31 March and a final trust deed was completed in April. In the early years of Bethesda Gospel Hall, new names would be proposed for the trust deed as replacement for members who died or returned to the United Kingdom, thereby ensuring that the property would remain in the hands of the assembly.

It is noted that far more work had been carried out on Robinson's work in Bethesda Gospel Hall. This was due to the extensive use of the assembly record book which recorded how the Robinsons were heavily involved in the lives of those in fellowship at Bethesda Gospel Hall. Here, however, another problem had surfaced. As the writers of *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* and *One Hundred Years of Singapore* made cursory mention of Robinson's work at Bethesda Gospel Hall, it means that any research conducted in this area would have to rely, almost unquestioningly, on the use of the assembly record book. Fortunately, the assembly record book is a chronicle of Bethesda Gospel Hall, with cursory mention of meetings and long entries on events that either brought joy to those in fellowship or which threatened to divide the new assembly. Robinson was mentioned throughout the assembly record book as he preached frequently and played an important leadership role in the assembly. But these entries were chronicles of events, and it was up to the historian to study the assembly record book and draw his or her own conclusions from this primary source, and this was what Finlay, James, Wee and Wong have done.

The assembly record book can be a source to verify what the writers of *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* and *One Hundred Years of Singapore* had recorded. For instance, it confirmed the introduction of ‘tea parties’ by Robinson at Bethesda Gospel Hall for visiting military personnel and non-believers. The first entry of a ‘tea meeting’ at Bethesda Gospel Hall was on 1 August 1867, when one was organised at the assembly grounds for soldiers, sailors and ‘many others’. About 130 people were present, and Captain McGowan, Sergeant Charles Philips, Robinson and Miss O’Callaghan addressed the meeting.⁷⁴ Another ‘public tea’ organised on 15 July 1870 saw a turnout of about 150 people, with addresses by five men, including Robinson.⁷⁵ The tea parties were indeed a huge success by the assembly in evangelising to the masses.

In an effort to spread the gospel to the Chinese, a new assembly—The Chinese Gospel House—was opened on 24 March 1867 with Tan See Boo as the pastor.⁷⁶ On 22 September 1867, at the behest of Robinson, the assembly agreed to give the following week’s offerings to the Chinese Gospel House for a new building. A similar collection was made on 18 April 1869. On 27 April 1873, Robinson proposed organising joint Breaking of Bread services with the Chinese Gospel House. The first joint service was eventually organised a month later on 18 May.

The assembly record book and the *Straits Calendar and Directory* also recorded Robinson’s occasional return to England. On 12 June 1873, the Robinsons departed for England, only to return to Singapore on 23 September 1877. Robinson also found new agents for Robinson’s & Co. in London with the appointment of Messrs G. Hitchcock Williams & Co. at

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.55.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.105.

⁷⁶ *The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1874*, p.18.

Paternoster Row in 1872. The new London office of Robinson's & Co. was finally set up in either 1875 or 1876. 76⁷⁷

Robinson could have attended to business affairs in London, but there he and his family expressed their desire to be in fellowship with the believers gathered at Clapton Hall on 25 November 1876. They were formally accepted into the assembly on 3 December.⁷⁸ This assembly was originally opened as the Iron Room on 1 November 1867 and replaced by Clapton Hall on 1 February 1880. It is interesting to note that many prominent men associated with the Christian Brethren were in fellowship in this assembly, including Henry Soltau, Dr. Frederick Baedeker, Hudson Taylor (founder of the China Inland Mission), Alexander Grant (a missionary in Singapore), Thomas Newberry, Robert Chapman and Dr Arthur Pierson.⁷⁹ Robinson returned to Singapore on 23 September 1877 but went back to London again on 8 September 1878. The decennial United Kingdom census of 1881 confirmed that he was residing in London, Middlesex, with his wife, his son Wroughton, his daughters Maria and Blanche, a nephew named Alfred Knight from Tewkesbury, and a servant named Mary Beels.⁸⁰

Robinson returned to Singapore and rejoined Bethesda Gospel Hall on 7 January 1883. While here, he was involved in

⁷⁷ *The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1873*, p.14; *The Straits Calendar and Directory for the Year 1877*, p.98. The London office of Robinson's & Co. became Robinsons & Little in the 1950s before it was dissolved in July 1984.

⁷⁸ John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Christian Brethren Archive, Clapton Hall Minute Book, 2, pp.295-299.

⁷⁹ A. Milne Kyd, *Brief History of Clapton Hall, 1867-1917* (London, c.1919), pp. 16-22. For biographies of Baedeker, Chapman, Newberry and Soltau, see Henry Pickering, *Chief Men Among the Brethren*, 1st edn 1918 (Neptune, New Jersey, 1986), pp.27-29, 69-73, 287-289 and 341-344.

⁸⁰ Census 1881: RG11/0286, folio 29, p.51.

the negotiations for the sale of the land that the assembly was built upon. Unfortunately, the assembly record book recorded no entries between 19 August 1883 and 25 September 1884. When this was discovered, ‘fragmentary notes from private papers’ were consulted and added into the book.⁸¹ Consequently, there was no record of when Robinson left for London once again, never to return to the assembly.

During this period, while Robinson attended to the affairs of his London office, he also took part in various meetings at Clapton and Kilburn Halls. It is not known when Robinson joined Kilburn Hall, an assembly opened for the Evangelical Mission in 1880. Both Clapton and Kilburn Halls have since been closed—Kilburn Hall in 1913, and Clapton Hall in the 1980s. He may have travelled to Penang during this period—the Penang branch of Robinson’s & Co. was opened in 1879.

Robinson did not live long after his final return to London. On 14 February 1886 he died as a consequence of ‘granular disease of the kidneys’, after suffering ten days of lung congestion. His obituary, however, recorded that he died of cardiac asthma.⁸² Robinson was buried in Abney Park Cemetery at Stoke Newington, London, the next day. The London office of Robinson & Co. was taken over by Eliza Knight Robinson, while his son Stamford Raffles Robinson and Alfred William Bean became agents of the firm in Singapore.

⁸¹ ‘Assembly Record Book’, p.248.

⁸² Haringey Council, London, Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages, certified copy of an entry of Death of Philip Robinson; *The Straits Times*, 20 March 1886, p.2.

Conclusion

The central theme in this article is the importance of verification. From the literature review of Robinson, it appears that information gleaned from the books *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* and *One Hundred Years of Singapore* had generally been accepted without question. It is clear that we had assumed too much that the editors of both books had got their ‘facts’ right—that since the editors were contemporaries of Robinson, they could not possibly be erroneous.

Over the years, these ‘facts’ about Robinson had perpetuated themselves so that later writers accepted them unquestioningly. The books *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* and *One Hundred Years of Singapore* had assumed the role of primary sources. But the information given in these works should be verified to confirm if they were accurate. Primary (unpublished) sources from archives and record offices are immensely useful in verifying what is recorded. Tracing them may prove time consuming, but it could set the historical record straight. Inasmuch as an historical imagination is part of the historian’s work, it should be built on concrete evidence and not on assumptions or previous works. Research work may have to start from scratch.

Verification would have established that Robinson was born in Overbury, Worcestershire, and that even though he founded a Christian Brethren assembly in Singapore, he had identified himself with Particular Baptist churches in England and Australia. In Melbourne, he worked as a merchant before giving it all up and moving on to Singapore.

It is also hoped that a historical inquiry into works produced on Robinson would spur others on to do more research on lesser known personalities in Singapore’s history, in order to give an overall picture of colonial society. The life of Robinson shows that the various merchants who came to Singapore could have

led very different lives. What was common for some merchants might not be so for others. In the case of Robinson, he may not have achieved a very high social standing in colonial Singapore compared to other Europeans. But his twin role as merchant and active church member had made him a unique person in the colony, and it is hoped that more research could be carried out on other such personalities through a greater awareness of unproven assumptions and the greater use of primary sources for collection and verification of information.