

**ROBERT STANES (1841-1932):  
A MERCHANT 'SON' OF  
GEORGE MÜLLER**

**Peter Cousins**

Roy Coad, author of the standard history of the Brethren, describes Robin Stanes's book, *Stanes History 1771-1964*, privately published in 2002, as 'important on at least three counts: in its own right as an interesting personal insight into English-in-India family life during the Raj, as a small corrective to much of the current 'politically correct' conception of the British and British missionaries in India, and not least as a contribution to Brethren history'. This paper is based on Stanes's book, supplemented in a few places by independent research.

Our story begins with James Richford Stanes, born in 1771, and his son James (1796-1880). In 1822 J.R. Stanes became a Freeman of the Merchant Taylors. He (or possibly his son) is described in official records as 'a Chinaman', probably because he sold porcelain (either he or his son is described elsewhere as 'a Staffordshire warehouseman). But he took an opportunity to go into partnership with his brother-in-law, a sea captain, and thus became a partner in the shipping line, Brass and Stanes. By 1873, the directories refer to Stanes and Watson as East India commission agents and merchants. When he died he left £9,000 and a house in Hampstead but 'doubtless much more invested in coffee in India'.

From c.1802 until c.1835 the Stanes family worshipped at St Botolph's, Aldgate. But James's fifth child and fourth son, Tom (1837-1905) was, like his younger siblings, baptised at the Weigh House Chapel in Fish Street. The denominational shift is significant; Weigh House was Congregational and the minister

was Thomas Binney, who wrote 'Eternal light' and whom Matthew Arnold described as 'the representative Nonconformist of his generation'. The *Spectator* called him 'the great Dissenting Bishop' and, according to the *Companion to Congregational Praise*, Binney 'made a special appeal to the young men who came in crowds to hear him'. At this time James Stanes would have been about 39. It is not unreasonable to think that the move to Weigh House was related to the contemporary sense of dissatisfaction with the established church.<sup>1</sup> It was in 1833 that Newman delivered the sermon on 'National Apostasy' that is conventionally regarded as marking the beginning of the Oxford Movement.

#### **The Indian Connection**

James Stanes had seven children. His daughters, Jane and Isabella, do not feature in this summary, but a link with India was established in 1852, when the second eldest son, James (1830-52), went to Southern India and bought an estate ('Runnymede') just below Coonoor where he grew coffee. Very soon afterwards he was drowned while swimming and his eldest brother William (1826-65) went out to clear up the estate and was enchanted by the climate of the Nilgiris. He settled there and subsequently married Harriet Scudder, who had been born to missionary parents in Ceylon in 1831, and who was later the aunt of Ida Scudder (1870-1960), founder of the Christian Medical College in Vellore. After twenty years as a planter, William and Harriet's son William went to Australia as a CSSM worker, financing his work by income from his Nilgiri estates. He travelled widely and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-1835* (Edinburgh, 2001).

died at Santos in Brazil. Thomas, the youngest son but one, soon followed his brothers in 1853/4.

Later James Stanes visited India himself and was so enthusiastic about what he saw there that he sent his youngest son, Robert, out to Coonoor in 1858. Robert's journey from Madras to Coonoor is an interesting example of Christian (or evangelical) 'networking'. He stayed with a member of the Scudder family at Chittoor and went on to Bangalore, staying en route with the Revd Campbell of the London Missionary Society; later he visited a sugar factory at Pahbully (or Paulhully?) which was run by Frank Groves.

Frank was the younger son (born in 1820) of Anthony Norris Groves. Born in 1795, Anthony Norris Groves was one of the founders of the Brethren movement; he died on 20 May 1853, having spent his last 24 years as a missionary in Iran and India. According to Roy Coad, in a private communication, the *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves* (<sup>2</sup>1857) shows that part of Groves's work in India was taken up after his death by the Scudder family. The Groves *Memoir* also states that 'his own beloved sons in Pahbully' had taken on some of Anthony Norris Groves's work there.<sup>2</sup> In 1847 'Mr. F. A. Groves arrived with his wife in India, and the Paulhully Sugar Works commenced'.<sup>3</sup> Later Robert's second daughter, May, married Nosco Groves, who was presumably a son of Frank. (The F.W. Groves referred to in the Stanes book as managing two coffee estates was presumably another son unless the initials in one or other of the books are incorrect and it was Frank himself.)

At Ootacamund ('Ooty') Robert met not only his brothers but also Colonel Robert Shedden Dobbie. Dobbie, whose *Pocket*

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<sup>2</sup> [Mary Groves], *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves by his Widow* (London, <sup>2</sup>1857), p.520.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.412.

*Dictionary of English and Hindustani* was published in 1847, is commemorated in Holy Trinity Church, Bangalore. 'Lt. Col. Robert Shedden Dobbie, Commandant 39th Regiment N.I., who died at Bangalore 2 May, 1868 47 yrs'. The unusual second name suggests that he was related to General Sir William George Shedden Dobbie, best known for his role in the defence of Malta during World War Two and for his strong evangelical faith. But since General Dobbie was born in 1879 and his father William was in the Indian civil service, it seems likely that he was a posthumous nephew of the Colonel.

It was not until 1869 that Robert married. His bride was Harriet Huntingdon Harris, the daughter of an Indian Army Major General. The marriage took place in a Brethren stronghold, Clifton Bethesda, where the bride was 'in fellowship', and it was George Muller who officiated. The previous thirty-five years had seen almost unbelievable growth in Muller's charitable and faith-based work. This began in 1834. By 1874, according to Müller,<sup>4</sup> this included sixty day schools (thirty-seven in England and Wales, ten in Spain, three in Italy and seven in British Guiana); these were fully supported, eleven others were assisted. Of Sunday schools, twenty-eight were fully supported and fifteen others assisted. Seven adult schools were fully supported, three in England, three in Spain and one in India. 38,819 attended these schools. Bibles and New Testaments were sold or given away, tracts distributed and missionaries supported. During the year ending 26 May 1874, £10,816.2s.10½d was distributed among 189 missionaries. In 1874 Müller was responsible to feed, clothe and educate and place in employment more than 2,000 children. He raised funds not by public appeal but by prayer; he did not even publish names of donors.

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<sup>4</sup> [George Müller], *A Narrative of some of the Lord's Dealings with George Muller, written by Himself* (London, 1881).

According to John Winter, a son of Robert's daughter Maud, although Robert's formal connection with the Brethren eventually ceased, Müller was the person he followed and admired most in his life. The web site of Stanes Higher Secondary School, Coimbatore, quotes their founder as having said that on one of his visits to England, he had a deeply religious experience after which he became 'religious as well as charitable'. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that this may have been the crucial occasion.

### **The Schools**

This account will show how his lifelong admiration for Müller influenced Robert Stanes's subsequent charitable work. But as early as 1862 he had founded what was to become Stanes Higher Secondary School in Coimbatore. It began as a day school and a Sunday school and now has 2,000 pupils. Robert's memoirs explain his motivation. 'When I came to Coimbatore I was anxious to do some good amongst the Anglo-Indian people who were much neglected and started a Sunday school for children and finding them entirely uneducated I decided to start a day school also and opened this under a pandal attached to the teacher's house.' He was then 21.

His brother Tom shared Robert's faith. Although children loved him he may have been rather more strict than his younger brother. An occasion is recalled of a Sunday when some of his nieces and their friends were playing tunes on a piano. "Well children," he allegedly said, "you play the piano well enough; but now get down on your knees and pray to God for forgiveness for your sin in not keeping the Sabbath day holy." In 1875 he founded what is now Stanes High School, Coonoor (900 pupils in 1991).

It is hard to believe that the two brothers were not influenced by memories of George Müller's enterprise. Their concern for

Anglo-Indians is explained by the fact that the term was applied to children of ‘mixed’ relationships, between British men and native women—rejected by both ethnic groups. ‘A touch of the tar-brush’ was a term of contempt and rejection. But Robert allowed and perhaps even encouraged his eldest daughter, Winifred, to marry an Anglo-Indian. ‘I think he was largely colour-blind’ concludes his grandson, Robin.

The motto of the Coonoor school is ‘*Nisi Dominus frustra*’ (‘Unless the Lord builds the house the builders labour in vain.’). The Coimbatore school (‘To God be the glory’) has links with the Church of South India and thus with the Anglican communion. The Coonoor school is linked with the Union Church in Coonoor (‘independent evangelical and non-denominational’), of which Robert was a founder.

Much of Robert’s wealth was used to build and develop the Coimbatore school. Indeed, he was criticised by members of the Stanes family for spending too much on the school at the expense of Eva and Lily, his two unmarried daughters. But Lily later kept open house for missionaries in need of a holiday in the two small houses she owned in Kotagiri. And in his old age Eva kept house for her father, aided by his devoted servant, Sebastian.

#### **A ‘high sense of honour’**

In 1885 Stanes & Co went out of business. Robert recalled that ‘the firm suffered great losses and Messrs Stanes Watson failed in business, which led to the collapse of my firm. I had to begin all over again, all that I had was 500 rupees’ [about £40 at that date]. Later, in 1913, he was to be awarded the Kaiser-I-Hind gold medal for services to Coimbatore and to education. His subsequent citation for a knighthood in 1920 (cf. the citation below) refers to the ‘high sense of honour’ demonstrated when he ‘assumed responsibility and paid off the whole liabilities of the company to which he had formerly belonged’. Failure in business

was at that time a disgrace and Robert's son, Fred, who was five at the time, remembered both the shame and also having to return to England on a cargo boat. Robert put it on record that 'my dear wife endured it all without a murmur and with the greatest patience.'

He started again. 'By God's goodness the business again prospered.' Although his grandson believes the Stanes spinning mills in Coimbatore were 'not particularly generous' in wages, yet by 1912 the company had commenced a pension fund which included the lower paid workers. The Stanes Higher Secondary School web site describes the textile mill he started in Coimbatore as 'the forerunner to the huge textile industry of world repute which Coimbatore has today'.

By 1886 there were at least four male members of the family in India, with interests in eleven tea or coffee estates. In all, sixteen Stanes men with their cousins and brothers-in-law, made a good living from tea and coffee for over a century (1856-1964). It was emphatically a family business; exemplifying, for many years the apostolic principle defined in 2 Corinthians 6:14. Apart from the schools, there remain in India two tea estate companies; T. Stanes & Co. with its subsidiaries, Stanes Motors, The United Coffee Supply Company, and a fertiliser company.

Like his nephew Eric, who finally succeeded him in 1929, Robert enjoyed driving. He used to return to England fairly regularly, rent a biggish house, entertain friends and family, hire a car and travel. Once he visited the Holy Land: "I wanted to see the spots where our Lord and Saviour suffered for us." Even in old age he was tall, attractive, imposing and genial"; he remembered children's names. He both had a sense of humour and would intersperse his conversation with texts from Scripture.

**"Thy neighbour as thyself"**

1947 saw the division of the subcontinent between India and the newly-created state, Pakistan. Full independence followed in 1950. Changes of many kinds were inevitable, not least in the ownership and management of European enterprises. Robert, who had supported both of the schools financially and had established a trust fund for Coimbatore wanted to 'tie' the schools to his successful company, so stipulated in the trust deeds that a director of the company should be on the governing body of each school, with the proviso that the Director be a Protestant Christian. Eventually this proved impossible since the 'new' directors were all Brahmins. The difficulty was solved, for a time at least, by the appointment to the governing body of both schools of a distinguished Indian Christian who had been principal of a Christian college in Bangalore.

In 1928 Robert was succeeded as managing director of T Stanes & Co by his son Fred, whose Christian faith sustained him through the Depression and a serious threat to the existence of the firm. The first Indian director was appointed in the same year. Twelve years later Eric Stanes took over as managing director, continuing until 1961, just a century after his great-uncle had started to cure coffee in Coimbatore. He was the son of Robert's brother, Henry (1835-1917), who at the age of seventeen found himself in the Crimea as purser of one of his father's ships. He witnessed the Charge of the Light Brigade and on returning home wrote: 'War, believe me, consists of horrors, the 'glories' are only to be found in the fine articles written by the newspaper correspondents. Let us all pray that the time may speedily come when war shall be no more and our Lord Jesus Christ alone shall reign and rule over the whole world.'

When the time came to dispose of the company Eric was concerned to find a buyer who would maintain the open-minded liberal style of the Stanes family. He turned down several bids but eventually secured an undertaking that the new proprietors



would see to it that the company continued to support the Christian schools. When the company had been sold, he wrote, 'May I wish that the company continues on the principles laid down by its founder. 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.'"

The tensions that culminated in independence were already present in 1932, when Robert Stanes died. But the notices in the Indian papers are far from presenting him as an imperialist figure, preferring to speak of this 'missionary business man' as 'a Christian knight', 'a great gentleman', 'the children's friend' and 'the grand old man of South India'. Not only did they flock to his funeral, one Indian paper devoted a whole page to his obituary. A memoir written in 1986 by the head of the Coimbatore school sums up his career:

'Here was no Midas who turned everything he touched into gold, but rather a simple and lovable man who made money only to give it back. . . .'

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**Citation for the Honour of Knight Bachelor (1920)**

'Mr Stanes first came to India fifty-seven years ago and joined a commercial firm. Owing to financial difficulties the business had to be wound up and Mr Stanes started business on his own account. His ability and enterprise have been shown by the high position which he has won for himself in commercial circles and the high sense of honour which has always distinguished him was signally demonstrated at the outset of his career he assumed responsibility for and paid off the whole of the liabilities of the company to which he formerly belonged. His firm are the proprietors and agents of a large number of commercial undertakings in Coimbatore including the important Coimbatore Spinning and weaving Company and are also intimately connected with the planting industry. Throughout his long career Mr Stanes has taken a keen and generous interest in education more especially that of the domiciled community [sc. the Anglo-Indians]. Shortly after his arrival in India he founded

a school in Coimbatore for the education of poor European and Eurasian children. The school now has about two hundred children and Mr Stanes continues to manage it and undertake all financial responsibility. A similar school is maintained by him at Coonoor and he is also Chairman of the Trustees of the Brecks memorial school at Ootacamund, which is one of the most important European schools in the Presidency. His interest in education is not however confined to the domiciled community; for many years he served as Secretary of the committee of Coimbatore College, an institution which including the connected High School has about seven hundred pupils on its rolls. The success of the College has been largely due to his capacity and generous financial assistance and he is a life member of the Committee. All movements in connection with the war work and for the benefit of soldiers and convalescents stationed in the Nilgiris have found in him a warm and generous supporter. Mr Stanes is universally respected by all sections of the community and his ability, integrity and unostentatious benevolence have won for him a unique position in the districts with which he has been connected.'