William Booth (10 April 1829 – 20 August 1912)

By mid 19th Century the Industrial Revolution was well under way. Towns and Cities had huge populations. There were opportunities for entrepreneurs to get rich. The rest were condemned to hard work and poverty.

As an adult William said: *"My father was a Grab, a Get. He had been born into poverty. He determined to grow rich; and he did. He grew very rich, because he lived without God and simply worked for money; and when he lost it all, his heart broke with it, and he died miserably."*

In 1842, when William was aged 13, his father sent him to work as an apprentice to pawnbroker's shop situated in the poorest part of Nottingham.

2

He disliked his job, but it was through this work that his social conscience was stirred and he became aware of the plight of the poor. In September that same year, his father Samuel became ill and died, though not before making a death-bed repentance. Shortly after, his mother had to leave her the house for a small shop in one of the poor quarters of Nottingham where she earnt a meagre income selling toys, needles, cotton and the like. William was the main breadwinner.

It was at this time that William started attending a Wesley Chapel (Methodist) and in 1844 he had a conversion experience, noting that: *"It was in the open street that this great change passed over me".*

3

He joined a group of fellow believers who preached in the streets. He delivered his first sermon in Kid Street. The chapel goers did not take kindly to his habit of seating his youngsters from the street in the front row.

In 1849 William moved to London working in pawnbroking but also joining a chapel in Clapham. Through this church he was introduced to his future wife, Catherine Mumford. After William became an evangelist in the Methodist New Connexion, they married on 16 July 1855, forming a formidable and complimentary lifelong partnership.

4

Following a brief honeymoon, he was appointed as minister to circuits in Halifax and Gateshead. The large middle-class congregation was shocked one Sunday when William announced that Catherine would preach. She developed a popular but unauthorised ministry. Finding the structures restrictive and feeling himself called to itinerant evangelism, he resigned in 1861.

Four years later William and Catherine moved to London and were in great demand as itinerate evangelists and preachers.

5

One Sunday evening walking home after an engagement William came across an inter-denominational group witnessing outside the Blind Beggar (Kray gang murder) pub in Whitechapel Road. He joined them and a crowd gathered to hear him.

When he got home he told Catherine “I have found my vocation”.

That group became organised as “The East London Christian Mission”. Today they might be called a Pioneer Ministry or Fresh expression of Church. Meeting in streets, tents, theatres etc. Their aim was that those converted would join any of the more established churches who would accept them. Most did not.

6

The missioners set up nurture groups and found that some of the converts became effective evangelists. Their activities spread beyond East London and to other towns and cities so they shortened the name to “The Christian Mission”

Designing a publicity pamphlet it was at first headed “The Christion Mission is a Volunteer Army”. William struck out those two words and replaced them with “Salvation Army”. He summed up the purpose of this body in the following way*: "We are a salvation people - this is our speciality - getting saved and keeping saved, and then getting somebody else saved.”*

7

He was designated as the General Secretary then on a poster someone advertised a visit he was to make as “General of the Salvation Army.” The idea caught on and enthusiasts started devising uniforms and giving themselves military ranks. The name was adopted as the official title in 1978.

The previous lifestyles of the converts made it necessary to establish a code on conduct for these highly noticeable members. Alcohol addiction was a particular problem and a first the Temperance Movement was recommended but many found temperance hard to maintain. It was Catherine who pressed for Total Abstention as it provided those with a weakness to be part of a social community where no alcohol was offered on social occasions.

8

That ruling is still part of the Salvation Army and was of real help for me when I became a convert over 60 years ago. But it did arouse fierce opposition from those involved in the alcohol trade and Salvationists were subjected to violent attacks.

A moto of “Go for souls and go for the worst” was an incentive for Salvationists to take on many of the social problems of the time. Alcohol abuse stoked up domestic violence and exacerbated poverty. Prostitution and particularly child prostitution were tackled and the SA was at the forefront of establishing a legal age of consent.

Such activities won them a great deal of admiration and support and the movement grew rapidly.

9

With many new outposts being established the training leaders became essential. As these new leaders were not ordained ministers women followed Catherine’s influence meant the women were recognised as equal to men. When the Salvation Army was given recognition as a Christian body this equality was maintained with even the top post of General being filled by women.

The Salvation Army movement spread rapidly across the British Isles and within decades was established across the globe in countries such as America, Canada, Australia, France, Switzerland, India, South Africa, Iceland, and Germany.

10

After suffering from cancer, Catherine Booth was 'promoted to Glory' on 4 October 1890, leaving a significant void in William's life. In the same month he published his major social manifesto, 'In Darkest England and the Way Out'. He explored various far-reaching ideas, such as providing hostels, employment centres and helping young men learn agricultural trades before emigrating.

Booth then turned back to preaching and evangelism, with day-to-day administration of the Army passing to his oldest son, Bramwell

11

In August 1904 William Booth, always eager to make use of new technology, commenced his first motor tour, travelling from Land's End to Aberdeen. Six more motor tours followed. Then in the spring of 1905, he went to Australia and New Zealand. On his return he was honoured by being given the Freedom of the cities of London and Nottingham.

Though his eyesight started failing at this stage in his life, it didn’t prevent him from conducting campaigns, with his last trip abroad being to Norway in 1912.

On 17 August 1912,  it was reported that the General was "not so well." Three days later, on 20 August God’s warrior laid down his sword.

12

A public memorial service was arranged at Olympia on the following Wednesday 35,000 people, including Queen Alexandra, attended a public memorial service. The heart of London stood still for nearly four hours as the lengthy procession of some 7,000 Salvationists, including forty bands, wended its five-mile way through densely crowded streets from the Victoria Embankment, no fewer than 580 City and 2,370 Metropolitan police being on duty.

His legacy was a Salvation Army that numbered 15,875 officers and cadets, operating in 58 lands.

His last public speaking was in the Royal Albert Hall and finished with these words:

13

“I have no intention to depart in the smallest degree from the main principles on which I have acted in the past. My only hope for the permanent deliverance of mankind from misery, either in this world or the next, is the regeneration or remaking of the individual by the power of the Holy Ghost through Jesus Christ. But in providing for the relief of temporal misery I reckon that I am only making it easy where it is now difficult, and possible where it is now all but impossible, for men and women to find their way to the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“While women weep, as they do now,  
I’ll fight  
While little children go hungry, as they do now,  
I’ll fight

14

14

While men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they

do now,  
I’ll fight  
While there is a drunkard left,  
While there is a poor lost girl upon the streets,  
While there remains one dark soul without the light of God,  
I’ll fight-I’ll fight to the very end!”