

OURS IS THE FRONTIER



K. E. CROSS

G. W. Cross was one of the founders of the Baptist Union of South Africa, its first General Secretary, and four times its President. This biography traces the life of a pastor who was dearly loved and honoured in his time.

What kind of man was he? He was reserved and sometimes remote, yet he attracted many and diverse friends. Sensitive and imaginative, he would have liked to be a scholar, a writer, a poet, yet his time was increasingly taken up with practical affairs. In his early years in South Africa Cross found himself facing serious theological problems, and consequently withdrew from the ministry until he had found answers that satisfied his mind and heart. After five years he was able to return to the ministry with renewed vigour. His ministry was not confined to his church but also found expression in his service to the community.

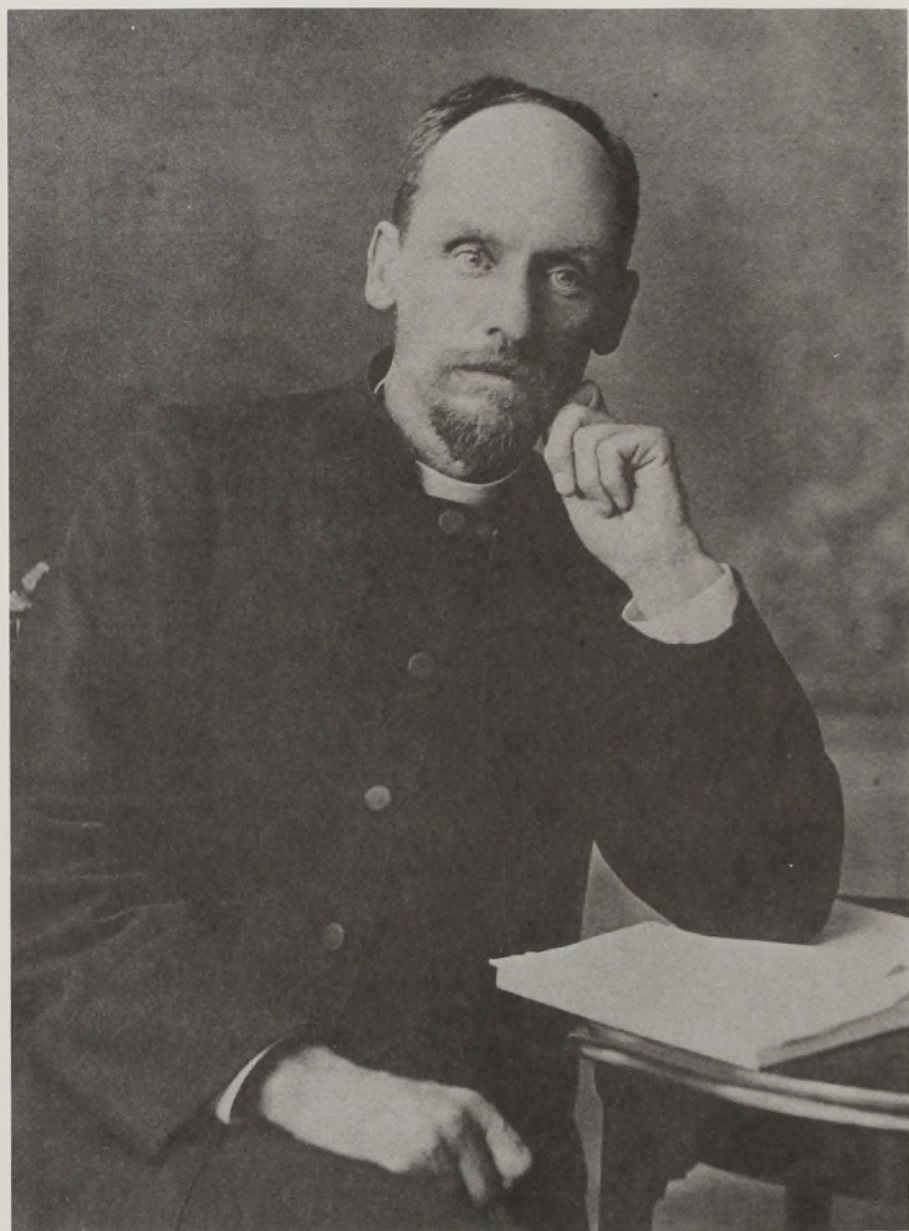
His involvement in education, social service and the arts (especially literature) brought him into contact with some leading personalities of the time amongst whom were Olive Schreiner, Francis Carey Slater and the Rev. James Moffat. His life also touched the lives of President S.J.P. Kruger, President F.W. Reitz and General J.C. Smuts.

Cross's 43 years in this country, from his arrival in 1877 to his death in 1920, span some of the most important events in its history – the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, the Anglo-Boer War, and the unification of the separate colonies as a British Dominion in 1910.

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*G.W. CROSS: A founder and President of the
Baptist Union of South Africa*

OURS IS THE FRONTIER

**A Life of G.W. Cross
Baptist Pioneer**

K.E. CROSS

*To E.B.E.
with love and gratitude*

University of South Africa
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*“Ours is the frontier. Let us count
it our privilege, as it will be our
distinction, to be pioneers. We ad-
vance in the name of Christ”*

G.W.C. 1898

To E.B.E.

with love and gratitude

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Preface

It is many years since I first conceived the idea of writing a life of my grandfather. He died before I was born, and the realisation that he was worth remembering I owe chiefly to my mother. In a desultory way I began to collect letters, scrapbooks, family papers and photographs, and personal reminiscences, with the intention of writing a memoir to keep his memory alive for his descendants.

However, when at last the time and the opportunity came for me to spend long days in libraries and archives, the additional information I unearthed gradually changed this intention. The wealth of material at my disposal could never be contained in a brief memoir. In the brittle pages of old newspapers and periodicals I began to discover the man behind the legendary grandfather: a vital individual playing his part in the drama of South African events during the momentous period between 1877 and 1920.

Cross made no claim to academic honours, nor was he a minister of a large or influential church in South Africa, but his contribution to the life and development of this country at a critical period of its history is immeasurable. His success as a pastor may be attributed to the fact that he identified himself completely with the country of his adoption and the people among whom he lived. He did not confine himself to the churchly activities of his calling, but gave of his time and talents also to the social, educational and cultural life and needs of the places where he served. He was known and loved throughout South Africa, and far beyond the bounds of his own denomination.

An ordinary man, perhaps, but the world owes far more to ordinary people than it ever realises. Those whose lives are lived to the glory of God, and whose talents are dedicated to His service, are the salt of the earth.

Acknowledgements

A book like this could never have been attempted without the resources of many libraries, archival collections, churches and other institutions, or the assistance of many individuals in South Africa, England and Ireland who have helped me with personal reminiscences or specialised knowledge.

I acknowledge with gratitude the courteous and patient help I have received from the directors and staffs of the following libraries: The State Library, Pretoria; the South African Library, Cape Town; Johannesburg Public Library; Port Elizabeth Public Library; the Education Library of the Transvaal Education Department; the Archives of the Baptist Union of South Africa in Johannesburg. A very special word of thanks is due to Mr. J.M. Berning and the staff of the Cory Library at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, a treasure house for anyone researching South African history. The Olive Schreiner letters to G.W. Cross, from which I have quoted in Chapter 10, were donated to Rhodes University by my father, and are now housed in the Cory Library.

My thanks also to the Rev. G.W. Rusling of Baptist Church House, London, for allowing me to use the library there; and to the Rev. D.M. Whyte of the London City Mission, whose records introduced me to my great-grandfather, George Cross, and his work. The Secretary of Spurgeon's College, London, kindly searched their records for information on G.W. Cross's connection with the College. In the British Library, London, I found pertinent books and periodicals which were no longer available anywhere else. The Public Library of Banbury, Oxfordshire was a useful source of information about 19th century Banbury, as was also Janet Sutterby of Banbury, with her knowledge of the history of Baptists in Banbury.

A special word of thanks to the Rev. S. Hudson-Reed, chief historian of the Baptists of South Africa, who introduced me to the Archives of the Baptist Union of South Africa, and who has taken an interest in this project from its inception. Mr E.J. Dicks, of Grahamstown Baptist Church, Rev. D. Macpherson of Pretoria Central Baptist Church, and Rev. R.J. Baston of Lambert Road Baptist Church, Durban, allowed me access to old Minute Books and other records of their respective churches. The Secretary of the Antrim Road Baptist Church, Belfast, provided me with the information about the history of that church. Rev. D.P. Kingdon helped me with his unique knowledge of Baptist history in Ireland. My neighbour, Mr. J.H. Naude gave me useful advice about publishing the book. My sincere thanks to all these friends.

Many individuals: members of the family, old friends, new friends made in the course of my researches, professors and lecturers at the University of South Africa, have encouraged me and patiently endured my importunities. In particular I would like to thank my brothers and sisters for their moral support, their unobtrusive help in many little ways, and for the loan of photographs and other material. My cousin Sheila von Ahlefeldt gave many hours to typing the manuscript, a very practical form of help which I deeply appreciate. It is a personal sadness that her mother, Mrs. Carson Cross, who was so interested in the progress of the work and read the chapters as they were completed, did not live to see the final book. My sister, Mrs. M. Vermeulen and my friend, Mrs. N. Parris, gave much help with proofreading.

Finally, a very special thank you to the Rev. E.B. Edwards. Without his faith in this undertaking, his encouragement, his insight into Baptist theology and polity, his willingness to discuss problems and to read and criticise each chapter in the making, and his persistent prodding, this book would never have been completed.

CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

*“Youth, what man’s age is like to be doth show;
We may our ends by our beginnings know.”*

John Denham

The little village of Great Tew is one of the prettiest in the whole County of Oxfordshire. It lies a few miles east of Chipping Norton, off the main road to Banbury, along a lane that winds between fields which have been tilled and sown and harvested for more centuries than can be remembered. You come upon the village suddenly, almost hidden among trees, the English trees that are strange to South African eyes. It is almost too picturesque to be credible; and indeed it was in recent times (that is, recent by English standards – early 19th century) largely rebuilt by an enlightened landlord as a “model” village, with the assistance of John Loudon, the landscape gardener.¹ Some of the cottages date back to the seventeenth century; but whether seventeenth or nineteenth century, all are as agreeable in their golden-walled and thatched-roofed beauty as the trees which close the view at every turn. The village shop-cum-post office and the little public house have the same story-book charm, and across the lane from the “Falkland Arms” stands the village school, at the upper end of the green, and near it a great chestnut tree which has provided conkers for generations of school children.

But the church, usually the most prominent feature of an English village, is not to be seen, and it is unlikely that you will find it without asking the way. You go

past the school, beyond the village; on your left you will see the Manor House, and on your right a row of cottages, and then the Vicarage. Opposite the Vicarage there is a gateway, and a long straight path running between high walls and shrubs. If you follow this path to the end the view opens out, and there, on your left, is the ancient churchyard sloping down to the 14th century Church of St Michael, square-towered, golden, serene, against a background of huge old trees.

Along that path, on an autumn day in 1847, a bride walked to her wedding. Mary Ann Nurden, Spinster, of Great Tew, was to be joined in matrimony to George Cross, Bachelor, of Banbury. Her father, Stephen Nurden, was a farm labourer, and since at that time the average wage for a farm labourer was six shillings per week, it was inevitable that as soon as she was old enough she should go to work as a domestic servant. She had had little opportunity or incentive to learn to read or write. When the Clerk in the Church handed her the pen to sign the marriage register she could only make her mark with a cross.²

George's father, James Cross, was also a labourer,² but George was intelligent and energetic, and determined to improve himself. At present he worked as a groom in his native town, but by constant reading and study he hoped that he would one day find more congenial work.

After the wedding the young couple settled down in Fish Street, Banbury.² To this day there is an old inn, the Wheatsheaf, in the street, which is now known as George Street, and it may well be that George Cross was employed as a groom at the inn.

In 1847 Banbury was a busy little town of about 7 000 inhabitants, many of them employed in textile and leather industries. From prehistoric times there has been a settlement here, on the main routes that cross the midlands of England. It was sited near a ford over the river Cherwell, and in Saxon times a chief called Bana built a burh or fortified place near the river to guard the ford – hence the name Banbury. Under the protection of the burh, trade developed and flourished, and by the time of the Norman conquest, Banbury was already a town. In the ensuing centuries it became a centre of the wool trade; and all the crafts connected with the making of cloth and leather were practised there. In 1554 a Charter of Incorporation was granted to the town by Queen Mary, and (among other provisions) this Charter conferred the right to hold a Fair on the Thursday after the 12th of October every year: a right which is still exercised.³ For centuries the Michaelmas Fair was a great occasion, visited by thousands of people, some of whom walked long distances to attend it. It was the only holiday of the year for domestic servants, many of whom went to the Fair for the purpose of being hired. They “stood in the street in groups, seeking new masters and mistresses, the farmers seeking grooms, wagoners and shepherds,

who stood waiting to be hired. Such were the immense crowds waiting on the pavement ... that shopkeepers were compelled to erect hoarding in front of their windows to prevent the pressure of the crowds from breaking them. Hiring was a busy feature for several hours during the Fair – the usual time for the hiring contract being one year."⁴ It is tempting to imagine that George Cross first met Mary Ann Nurden at the Banbury Fair.

On January the 1st 1851, Mary Ann gave birth to a son. They called him George William.² There is no record of George William having been baptised in Banbury Parish Church, or in the church at Great Tew, for George Cross was a Baptist. There had been Baptists in Banbury since 1787, and in 1850 a new young minister, W.T. Henderson, had come to take charge of the chapel in Bridge Street. Henderson was a radical who took a great interest in national and local politics, and who was passionately concerned about the poverty and distress that were the common lot of the labouring classes. He became involved in the town affairs of Banbury when the local authority decided to levy a rate on everybody in order to pay for a new burial ground, while at the same time allowing only members of the established church to be buried there. Many Non conformists therefore refused to pay the rates and were brought before the magistrates. Henderson took their part so effectively and spiritedly in the *Banbury Advertiser* and in the ensuing furore that the Banbury authorities had to back down. As a result Henderson was offered the editorship of the *Banbury Advertiser*, a position he occupied for three or four years in addition to his work as pastor of the Baptist community.⁵

Henderson was just the kind of man to encourage George Cross to improve and educate himself by reading, and to interest him in the plight of the poor. Some time in the early 1850s Cross left the horses and stable yards to work as an assistant to a Chemist and Druggist. Then, in 1854, at the age of 32, he offered his services as a Missionary to the London City Mission.

The London City Mission⁶ was born out of the industrial revolution and John Wesley's great revival. The industrial revolution was responsible for the drift to the cities, where the factories sprang up; the hopelessly inadequate housing, and the population explosion, with all the consequent miseries and social problems which came in their wake. Wesley's revival produced the men with the necessary courage and power to tackle the problems. The Mission was founded in 1835 by a Scot, David Nasmith, and so great was the support he obtained that within two years the Mission had sixty three full-time paid missionaries. Its aim was (and still is) to reach those people whom the conventional churches and church organisations do not touch. It was based firmly on two great principles, namely, that it was necessary for all the evangelical churches (Anglican or Non-conformist) to co-operate in the Mission; and secondly, in order to reach the lost population it would use a paid, lay (i.e. unordained) staff. These principles were not maintained without a fight, which is not surprising considering the religious barriers that separated one denomination from another in Victorian

England; but such barriers were certainly meaningless in the appalling conditions of London's slums, whose inhabitants' chief concern was their fight to maintain a bare existence.

The Missionaries of the London City Mission were carefully selected and thoroughly trained. Most of them were either Church of England or Baptist and, in Lord Shaftesbury's words, "the classes from which the missionaries are selected are akin to those that they are appointed to visit and address."⁷ New recruits were required to attend lectures for at least a year; in addition they formed mutual improvement classes among themselves. All candidates had to serve a probationary period of six months before they were finally accepted. In this way a large body of dedicated, highly trained men were, by the 1850s, operating within the chosen field of the Mission, a circle within a twelve-mile radius of St. Paul's Cathedral.⁶

George Cross's application was accepted by the Mission on October the 9th, 1854,⁸ and he was appointed to start work in November in Twickenham. He was making preparations to leave Banbury when his wife suddenly fell ill with cholera. She died two days later, on their wedding anniversary, October the 19th.

This unexpected and heavy blow did not prevent George Cross from beginning his work in Twickenham in November. He was a lonely and sore-hearted man when he set out for London, deprived at one stroke of wife and child, for he was obliged to leave his son in the care of the maternal grandparents in Oxfordshire. Little George was then not yet four years old.

Twickenham, a town on the Thames, just across the river from Richmond, had at that time a population of between 6 000 and 7 000 inhabitants. It lay on the perimeter of the City Mission's defined field of operations.⁹ About 500 poor families were allotted to Cross's care, and he worked under the supervision of the Rev. James Wilkie, of St. Mary's parish church. Cross found the Vicar's co-operation and sympathy encouraging, and he needed all the encouragement he could find, for the work, especially in the first year, was hard and thankless, and showed little result. Cross was up against the hostility of working men and women for whom life was a hard battle, "nasty, brutish and short," and who never attended church except for an occasional baptism or funeral. Their chief means of livelihood were the market gardens, in which both men and women worked. Others were watermen on the Thames, or hucksters, or "mechanics." Kindness, forbearance and perseverance were needed to break down their deep-rooted prejudice against anything to do with religion.

At first Cross found it almost impossible to gain access to the homes of these people, and he tried talking to them as they went about their daily affairs. He was greatly distressed at what he called "the awful profanation of the sacred day

of rest," so different from "the strict observance and sweet serenity of the Sabbath" in Banbury.⁹ Gradually, however, by his persistence and sincerity he gained the confidence of the people, and was able to start open-air services and cottage meetings.

But the loneliness and discouragement of that first year told on his health, and his eyes were affected. His sight became so bad that he could not see to read or write. However, in 1856 came a turn for the better. Kindly friends, among them the Rev. James Twining of Trinity Church, Twickenham, were a help and support; and when he remarried, another Mary, from Charlbury in Oxfordshire, his spirits and his health improved, and his sight was so far restored as to enable him with the aid of spectacles to carry on his regular duties.

Slowly his work began to show results. Sunday evening meetings in the school-room at Whitton (where there was no public place of worship) grew until they were attended by an average of 100 adults. Cottage meetings were also well attended, and occasionally a visiting minister would be asked to conduct the services.

Life was sometimes rough, even dangerous. In 1857 Cross decided to start open-air services for the watermen. His own account of this venture was published in the *London City Mission Magazine* of February 1859: "The first service was held by the river-side. The Rev. T.W. Webb, from Dunchurch, Warwickshire, was spending a day with us, and kindly preached a sermon from Heb. ii, 3. Before Mr. Webb had well introduced his subject, the noise of the people completely drowned his voice. I sought by persuasive means to calm them, but failed in my object. The mob then surrounded us, evidently intending to get us into the water, and it was with great difficulty we extricated ourselves. We, however, at length escaped, with no further injury than our clothes being very much torn. They followed us, shouting and pelting us with dirt, etc. until we took shelter in a grocer's shop. I must confess I felt a little discouraged at this ..."

This unpleasant experience did not prevent Cross from returning to the same place the following Sunday, and this time there was little trouble. From then on the services by the river were continued every Sunday morning and Tuesday evening until the cold weather made them impracticable. Sometimes the audience was increased by parties who came to hire boats for fishing or pleasure. They would launch out from the shore and enjoy the service from the comfort of the boats.

In 1857 Cross decided that something must be done to teach the neglected and illiterate young people of the district to read and write, and with the help of sympathetic friends who paid the rent of a ground-floor room in a cottage by the riverside and supplied the necessary forms to sit on, he commenced an

evening school for those who were working during the day. The Ragged-School Union made a grant of books, and soon Cross was devoting two evenings a week to teaching an average of 14 young men the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. In this work he was encouraged by Miss Elizabeth Twining, sister of the Rev. James Twining, one of those formidable Victorian women who devoted their lives and fortunes to Philanthropy.

Cross seized every opportunity to bring the Gospel to the people of Twickenham. He would talk to people at the periodical fairs held on the green; or he would assemble a party of gypsies encamped on the roadside in summer and conduct a service for them. He visited them in their tents where (he reports) he was cordially received.

In view of his incessantly busy life it is not surprising that, in spite of his happy domestic life and the growing success of his labours, his health again and again gave cause for concern. He carried on sometimes under serious handicaps, until ultimately he was retired from the L.C.M. on medical grounds in 1871, and granted a disablement pension. His sight had deteriorated to such an extent that it was impossible to carry on. He had worked for the Mission for nearly seventeen years, and the whole of that time was spent at Twickenham.⁸ On retirement he returned to Banbury, where he died on 7th February 1883.²

In this atmosphere of self-sacrificing Christian piety, rooted in the strong soil of Evangelical and Puritan traditions, but without stifling denominational barriers, young George William grew up. The family was a happy one. The second Mrs. Cross was not only a worthy helpmeet to her husband, but a loving stepmother. In due course she had children of her own: William, born in 1863, Thirza in 1865, and Louie, in 1866.

When George William was old enough he was sent to school in nearby Teddington;¹⁰ family tradition has it that it was a bluecoat school. In view of his own life-long interest in education it is disappointing not to be able to discover more about his school days. The only knowledge we have comes from evidence he gave to the Religious Instruction in Schools Commission in the Transvaal in 1905,¹¹ in answer to questions put to him about his own schooling. But whatever its quality this we do know: he was largely self-educated, and he went on learning all his life. School did not quench his enquiring spirit, nor blunt the edge of his fine mind.

He was not, however, to remain long at school, for his father could not afford to keep him there. It was expected of him that at an early age he should begin to earn his living. He began his working life in the firm of Messrs. Richard Twining and Co., Tea and Coffee Merchants, of the Strand, London.¹²

This famous firm, which is still flourishing, was founded in 1706 by Thomas Twining.¹³ By the 1860s the fifth generation of Twinings, Richard III and his

cousin Samuel, were in charge. The Twinings, although not Quakers, resembled in some ways famous Quaker families like the Frys, Rowntrees, Cadburys, Barclays and others: merchant princes who produced not only sons to carry on their businesses from generation to generation, but also outstanding men and women in other walks of life. England owes much to these scholars, educationists, philanthropists, social reformers, clergymen, and holders of high offices at all levels of government.

Thomas Twining, founder of the firm, had in about 1720 bought two small houses in Twickenham near St. Mary's Church, and converted and enlarged them into a family home. Dial House remained the family home of the Twinings until 1889, when, on the death of Miss Elizabeth Twining, it was presented to the parish for use as a vicarage. Miss Elizabeth, who was born in 1805, lived there until her death, devoting her energy and money in her later years to the restoration of the parish almshouses, and the building of a hospital at Twickenham. Her interests brought her into contact with George Cross, and as he was also a friend and associate of the Rev. James Twining it may be assumed that it was through the recommendation of the Twinings of Twickenham that young George William entered the service of the famous tea merchants when he was about twelve or thirteen years old.

With his intelligence, energy and diligence young George would doubtless have done very well in the firm if he had remained there; but by temperament he was not suited to the world of commerce. As he grew up his interests and talents led him in another direction. The training he received at Twinings was nevertheless a valuable experience, which was to stand him in good stead all his life. Because of it he was able to bring a very practical and businesslike attitude to the sometimes tangled financial problems of the churches he was later to serve.

Lodgings were found for the boy at 235 High Street, Camden Town.¹⁴ This was not far from Regent's Park Baptist Chapel, and he was soon drawn into the orbit of a remarkable congregation and minister.¹⁵ The chapel itself had originally been a place of entertainment, known as the Diorama, and had been purchased in 1852 by Sir Morton Peto, a wealthy and farsighted businessman, Member of Parliament, and Baptist layman of great influence, who wished to establish a new church in that part of London. About £18 000 was spent on the building, and it was transformed into one of the largest and most beautiful chapels in the metropolis. The church was formally constituted in 1856, with 192 members, and a call was sent to the Rev. William Landels of Birmingham. This choice was a happy one, as the congregation had already decided that their church was to be of the "open" variety; neither admittance to membership nor the Communion service was to be limited to Baptists. According to his son (who published a biography of William Landels in 1900) "when he commenced his ministry in London Landels was subjected to a good deal of persecution and misrepresentation on account of his theological views. Such a broad

interpretation of the Gospel as he gave was strange to the majority of Baptists in those days ... The new minister was soon being denounced by the leading men of the denomination as heretical ... Even some of the General Baptists ... looked askance at him, and thought that he said too much about the love of God ... Nor did this early opposition in any way interfere with his popularity and success. He gathered around him a congregation of which, not only for its size but also for its quality, any man might well have been proud. A large proportion of it consisted of young men, who congregated there from all parts of London ... Members of every denomination were among the regular attendants, attracted there by the eloquence of the preacher and the freshness of his message."¹⁵

Cross joined the Young Men's Association of the church, which "had for its object the spiritual and mental improvement of the large numbers of young men connected with the church ... In connection with it series of lectures were delivered by many of the most popular lecturers of the day, a Bible Class was conducted by the Minister; and there were in addition classes for discussion and devotional meetings."¹⁵ Cross therefore found ample opportunity to cultivate both his mind and his spirit. The influence of Dr. Landels on his life was thorough and permanent.

When he was sixteen years old Cross was baptised by Dr. Landels, and within weeks he was called upon to take part in an open-air meeting.¹⁶ He became enthusiastic about this kind of Christian work and witness, and learned the skill of public speaking (as his father had done before him) in the hard school of the street corner, with a frequently hostile audience. He practised sharpening his wits and defending his opinions against experienced London hecklers and cynics.¹² Gradually it became clear to him that God was calling him to the ministry.

At that time there were two Baptist theological colleges in London: Spurgeon's and Regent's Park. They differed in their aims and theological colouring. The latter had links with London University, and was academic in tone. Spurgeon's, or the Pastor's College, as it was generally called, was Calvinistic in theology and had, as its primary aim, the training of preachers and pastors. It had been started in a very modest way in 1856 by the great preacher, Rev. C.H. Spurgeon, and by 1870 it was well established.

Young George Cross decided to apply to the Pastor's College for his ministerial training. With his theological views he would have been more at home in Regent's Park College, but he did not come up to that College's academic requirements. Spurgeon, on the other hand, stated quite explicitly that "no considerations of poverty or backwardness in education need prevent earnest and efficient speakers from applying to us."¹⁷ But applicants had to be

“preachers of some experience and ability, sound in the faith, and earnest in soul, or we cannot receive them.” They also had to be able to convince Spurgeon that they had a clear call to the ministry, or they would be refused. “Our one aim,” wrote Spurgeon, “has been to train preachers and pastors; we leave more ambitious attempts to other institutions. Let the men be scholars by all means, to their fullest bent, but first and foremost let them study their Bibles, hold the faith clearly, and know how to defend it valiantly.”¹⁸

Cross was able to satisfy Spurgeon’s somewhat formidable conditions, and with twenty other young men he entered the College at Michaelmas 1871. The Rev. George Rogers, the Principal, who had held the office since the foundation of the College, and in whom Spurgeon had the fullest confidence (although, oddly enough, he was a Congregationalist and never accepted Baptist views on Baptism) was now over 70, but still a force to be reckoned with. He was assisted by two full-time lecturers and a panel of occasional lecturers, of whom Dr. Landels was one. Spurgeon himself conducted the sermon class. The course of study was demanding, and students were expected to stay for at least two years. Subjects included Latin, Greek, Elementary Hebrew, Theology, Biblical Studies, Pastoral Theology and Homiletics, as well as English, Geography and Metaphysics.¹⁸

In 1871 classes were still held in the basement rooms of Spurgeon’s church, the great Metropolitan Tabernacle. The accommodation was totally unsuitable and inadequate, being dark, close and stifling, and the health of the men suffered in consequence, especially in winter. Plans were in hand and funds were being sought for the erection of new buildings, but, in Spurgeon’s picturesque phrase, “at present we dwell in dens and caves of the earth,”¹⁹ and it was not until 1875 that the College moved out of the Tabernacle into the fine new premises which had been specially designed for it.

Students lived in lodgings with private families in the vicinity of the Tabernacle.²⁰ This was a deliberate policy on Spurgeon’s part. He thought it “far preferable to having all under one roof, for by the latter mode men are isolated from general family habits, and are too apt to fall into superabundant levity. The circumstances of the families who entertain our young friends are such that they are not elevated above the social position which in all probability they will have to occupy in future years, but are kept in connection with the struggles and conditions of everyday life.”

Poor, earnest young students! We hope they were allowed some levity sometimes, for they were certainly kept busy. In addition to their studies they were expected to take on regular preaching duties and act as a sort of Home Missionary Society for the spread of the Gospel. During his college years Cross held a student pastorate at Great Marlow, in Buckinghamshire.¹² He would travel to Marlow on Saturday, probably by train to High Wycombe, and then a

walk of five miles. He would preach on Sunday, and return to London on Monday morning to start another week of college work. It was very demanding, but at the same time the weekends in the little country town by the Thames were a welcome break from the noise and grime and smoke of London.

Cross retained a feeling of affection for C.H. Spurgeon and the College all his life, in spite of his divergence of opinion with Spurgeon in the "down-grade controversy" of 1887-1888. This unhappy affair,²¹ which convulsed the Baptist Union of Great Britain, was so named after two unsigned articles which appeared in Spurgeon's magazine, *The Sword and Trowel*, in the spring of 1887, under the title, "The Down Grade," and which were generally regarded as an attack on the General Baptists. These articles were followed up by three more, signed by Spurgeon. He was increasingly out of sympathy with new trends in Biblical scholarship and theology, and convinced that the "faith once delivered to the saints" was being diluted and distorted. "The Atonement is scouted," he wrote, "the inspiration of Scriptures is derided, the Holy Spirit is degraded into an influence, the punishment of sin is turned into a fiction, and the resurrection into a myth." In October 1887 Spurgeon withdrew from the Baptist Union.

In the subsequent controversy he was pained to discover that he did not have as wide-spread support as he had expected. He was particularly cast down over the fact that not all his old students agreed with him. As a result, he took it upon himself to dissolve the Pastor's College Evangelical Association, which had until then consisted of all present and past students of the College. A new Association was formed, whose membership was confined to those who were prepared to sign a form drawn up by Spurgeon defining his views on what he called "The Doctrines of Grace." All old students received a printed letter from Spurgeon with the accompanying form. In far away South Africa Cross received it, studied it, and refused to sign it.²² He therefore ceased to be a member of the Association, and his name was struck from the records of the College.²³ But a few months before his death in 1920, when the Rev. Ernest Baker was collecting for College funds from the Pastor's College alumni in South Africa, Cross wrote to him: "Please find my cheque for £1.1s, which is all I can afford I fear, but it is very heartily given. One's heart warms at the very thought of the Alma Mater. May she brood over a better batch than ours was."²⁴

Cross completed his course at the College in the summer of 1873. Shortly afterwards he accepted a call to a new church in Regent Street, Belfast, his name having been recommended to the church by Spurgeon.²⁴ And so, in the late summer of 1873 he crossed the Irish Sea to take up his first pastorate. He was never to live in England again.

CHAPTER 2

Ireland

*“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let
thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth,
and walk in the ways of thine heart
and in the sight of thine eyes.”*

Ecclesiastes 11:9

Belfast is essentially a Victorian city. Like Birmingham or Manchester it grew out of the industrial revolution. In the nineteenth century the linen and ship-building industries brought increasing prosperity to Ulster, and made Belfast the only industrial city in the whole of Ireland. The population consisted for the most part of the descendants of the English and Scottish colonists who had been “planted” in Ulster in the early years of the seventeenth century by King James I to “pacify” and develop that part of Ireland which had suffered most from the devastating wars of Tudor times. The Scottish settlers were almost all Presbyterian, and to this day about one third of Belfast’s population is Presbyterian.

For centuries Ireland has had more than its share of misery, through war and famine and through the greed, ignorance and unimaginative administration of its rulers. The strife between Catholic and Protestant seems to be endemic and insoluble, and has been a cause of much suffering; but the differences among Protestants have been almost equally distressing. It was not only Catholics who suffered from legal disabilities because of their refusal to join the Church of Ireland (the Anglican church imposed on Ireland by the dominant English). By an Act of 1704 no one could hold office under the Crown who refused to take the Sacrament according to the rites of the Church of Ireland, which effectively

excluded Presbyterians as well as Catholics from the civil service and military posts. An Act of 1719 gave Presbyterians the right to worship in their own way, but they were still required to pay tithes to the Church of Ireland. Small wonder that in the eighteenth century there was a steady migration of Ulster Presbyterians to America in search of religious freedom. The loss to Ireland may be judged by the great contribution they made to the life of their new country, out of all proportion to their numbers, and it has been contended that it was their courage and tenacity and resistance to English rule that tipped the scale in the American War of Independence.¹

Nevertheless Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians had this in common: the belief that the Church must be "established" by the State and that the entire population of a country must be herded into the same ecclesiastical fold, willy nilly; *which* fold depending of course on the views of those who happened to hold the political power. The history of England in the seventeenth century shows that the Presbyterians, when they gained the upper hand politically, were quite as anxious to impose their church upon England as King Charles I had been to impose Anglicanism upon Scotland. Later, at the end of the 19th century, the chief objection of Ulster Protestants to the breaking of political ties with England was that "Home Rule would be Rome Rule"; that is, that the Roman Catholic Church would become the "established" church.

Baptists, by their origin and nature, have always rejected the concept of a church imposed by the State, which in their view equates church membership with citizenship. Most people are citizens of their country by right (or accident) of birth, not of choice. Baptists have steadfastly held that no one can take it for granted that he is a Christian simply by reason of his birth into a Christian family or society. As a responsible individual he must take the responsibility of accepting or rejecting the claims of God in his life. The church can never be a department of the Civil Service.

In a politically obsessed country like Ireland this view of the church is not likely to be popular, and Baptists have never been numerically strong there. They have suffered as much from the antagonism of the powerful Presbyterian group in Ulster as from the legal disabilities imposed by the Anglican ascendancy and the inflexible intolerance of the Catholics.

In 1814, the year of the formation in London of the Baptist Irish Society for "the promoting of the Gospel in Ireland" there were only five Baptist churches in the whole country. The aims of the Society were to be achieved by the use of itinerant evangelists, who rode about the country in much the same way as Wesley had done in England; and travelling teachers, who taught the elements of reading and writing to both adults and children in temporary schools before moving on to another district. Evangelists and teachers taught the people in their own tongue, and made the Bible available to them also in their own

tongue, and so carried their simple message of personal salvation to the remotest corners of Ireland. By 1840 the five churches had increased to forty-five.² The membership of these churches could probably best be described in the words of St Paul: "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble." For the most part they were poor and humble folk.

Yet one of the most illustrious scholars in the history of the Baptist church, a man who was once called the first Biblical critic of the nineteenth century, was Irish. His name was Alexander Carson. Born of Presbyterian stock in County Tyrone in 1776, he was educated at the University of Glasgow, where he excelled as a Greek scholar. At the age of twenty-two he was ordained a Presbyterian minister at Tobermore, County Derry; but his own studies of the Bible led him to discard the Presbyterian concept of the church in favour of the Congregational, and to resign his pastorate in 1804. This meant the sacrifice not only of his income but of many old friends. Some members of his congregation followed him out of the Presbyterian church, and for ten years he preached in barns and in the open air until the little company built a small meeting house in 1814. Here he ministered until his death in 1844, supporting his wife and family of 13 children partly by his writings.³ His adoption of the Baptist view of baptism came about when he, in attempting to refute the doctrine of believers' baptism in a series of sermons, was led by his own study of the New Testament to reject infant baptism. In 1831 he published his *magnum opus*: "Baptism: in its modes and subjects," which, in the enlarged edition of 1844 sold more than 10 000 copies.

Carson's intellectual integrity cost him a great deal. When he left the Presbyterian church he knew he was giving up not only the chance of high office in the church but the possibility of the Chair of Greek at Glasgow University. To quote his own clear words: "As in the baptismal controversy I have taken the side opposed to interest and popularity, I could have no temptation to become a Baptist ... I anticipated the end, I counted the cost, and I am daily paying the instalments." ⁴Nevertheless the *Scotsman* wrote of him: "He has long been well-known, not only in this country, but in Great Britain and America, as a first-rate scholar, a sound philosopher, an irresistible reasoner, and a profound theologian."⁵ Two American universities bestowed on him the honorary degree of Ll.D.

In the terrible famine years of the 1840s, when about a million people died of starvation and fever, and another million emigrated to America and the colonies, many of the Baptist churches disappeared, especially in the south and west of Ireland, where the famine was most devastating.² In the north the church was revitalised in 1859 by a wide-spread revival, and also by a visit from C.H. Spurgeon,² who encouraged Baptists to adhere boldly to their principles, in spite of "the bitterest and most deadly antagonism" of the Presbyterians (to quote from a letter written in 1861 to the Baptist Irish Society by the Rev. R.H. Carson, Dr. Alexander Carson's son and successor at Tobermore).⁶

When Cross went to Ireland in 1873 there were only 18 Baptist ministers in the whole country.⁷ Belfast at that time was expanding rapidly. The population had grown from 28 000 in 1813 to over 150 000 by 1870.⁸ There had been a Baptist congregation in the city since 1811, but it was not until 1866 that a second church was formed. Spurgeon, ever sympathetic to new enterprises, sent over a recently graduated student from his College to take charge of the work. This man, a Mr. Gilkes, emigrated to America in 1871, and was succeeded by another of Spurgeon's young men. It was during the latter's short pastorate that a site was obtained in Regent Street for a new chapel, and the building begun. The new chapel was a plain but dignified brick building which could seat 350 people. Before it was opened in June 1873 the minister resigned to accept a call to Nottingham, and the pastorate was again vacant. Once again the church appealed to Spurgeon for help. He was a true friend to the little congregation, and had donated and lent a considerable part of the £1 200 that it cost to erect the chapel.⁸ Of that year's crop of students he recommended George Cross as a suitable pastor for the new church and its challenges.

Cross was twenty two years old when he took up his first pastorate. He spent almost four years in Belfast. They were happy and productive years, in which the work was thoroughly established, all debt on the building discharged, and the membership increased to 125.⁹

In 1873 most of the Regent Street church members were of the labouring or artisan classes, but there were notable exceptions. Chief among the new friends Cross made in Belfast were two families of Grahams: Mr. and Mrs John Graham and Mrs. James Graham, a widow, and their numerous children. The two Mrs. Grahams were sisters, Charlotte and Maria, daughters of the famous Dr. Alexander Carson, and they had married two brothers. Between them the two sisters had twenty one children¹⁰ (although not all survived to adulthood), so there was a large crowd of double cousins. One of them, John Graham's daughter Susie, in a letter written nearly seventy years later to one of Cross's little granddaughters in South Africa, recalled those happy childhood days in Belfast: "We in Belfast were all *so* fond of your Grandfather Cross, & he was exceedingly good to me! He had a *beautiful* singing voice. He used to carry me up to bed, as I was ailing."¹¹

Tall, dignified Mrs. James Graham, Maria, was the youngest child of Dr. Carson. Of her, Cross was later to write:¹² "She was like her father a keen theologian, learned, and mighty as all the Carsons were in argument." She encouraged him to read widely, and at his first Christmas in Belfast she honoured him by presenting him with a copy of her father's great work on Baptism, inscribed "with Mrs. James Graham's kind regards."¹³ She was a cultured, sometimes formidable woman of great strength of character; but, as Cross noted, she was also a humble Christian "who could and did accept help of the simplest, plainest, disciple."¹²

During his first few weeks in Ireland Cross kept a diary, apparently for the first and only time in his life. The little diary was preserved by his wife, and when, at his death, his friend and colleague, the Rev. Ernest Baker, was asked to write a biographical sketch about him for the *South African Baptist*,¹⁴ Mrs. Cross showed him the diary and gave him permission to quote from it. The diary itself, a Blackwood's Octavo Diary for 1873, still exists, but pages from the front and centre of the book have been torn out. All but the extracts Baker used in his article have been lost.

Enough still remains, however, to show the kind of man Cross was when he first went to Ireland. In the front of the diary he wrote the following rules for life:

Give simply.

Work systematically.

Work from the bottom.

Work patiently; abandon no plan without a good reason.

Be careful of resolving; having once resolved, carry it out.

Prepare and preach always with an aim.

The quotations reveal him as sensitive, not only to the beauties of the world around him, but also to human needs. There are such entries as:

"Most delightful evening. Soft, cloudy sky, half moon. Reflection from sun, long set, at midnight."

"Started for a tour round the Antrim coast. Coast and sea sometimes beautiful, sometimes sublime, and sometimes grand and awful. 'Who by His power setteth fast the mountains.'"

"Visited - . After half an hour's conversation, in which I was trying to lead up to religious things, she said abruptly, 'I find it so hard to believe.' Then had an hour's interesting conversation."

Being young and inexperienced he is inclined to comment on his own feelings about his success or otherwise as a preacher. Sometimes he is "lifted out of self" or "has great freedom." At other times he notes that he is "constrained" or "medium." One entry runs: "Was this day conscious of lost power. The Lord revealed to me that I had not carried out my consecration in the matter of time. Save me, Lord, in future."

At some time during the Belfast years Cross visited the village of Tobermore to see the home of Dr. Carson - "Solitude" - and the simple chapel where he preached. Thirty years later he wrote of "the lonely little house where this great man lived and laboured and where he brought up a family of 13 children, many

of whom became illustrious in the ministry of the Gospel or in the profession of medicine. The tiny village too, where he was content to labour and build his church!"¹² With such an example set before him at the beginning of his career, Cross was forearmed against any temptations to worldly advancement which might assail him later.

Among the throng of Graham cousins who drew the young minister into their loving family circle, one face and one voice began to emerge, until they filled his whole consciousness. He had fallen in love, wholeheartedly and for ever, with Margaret Graham, daughter of Mrs. James Graham. In addition to his genuine and humble desire to serve God and his fellow men he now wanted to be worthy of Maggie, to win Maggie for his wife.

Margaret Ledlie Carson Graham was the third child and second daughter of James and Maria Graham. James Graham, through his mother, Arabella Park, could trace his ancestry back to the royal Stewarts of Scotland and Robert de Bruce, King Robert I of Scotland.¹⁰ Nine generations later, King Robert's descendant, the fifth son of Andrew, Lord Ochiltree, went to Ireland as a colonist or "planter" in the reign of James I. One of his sons, William, married a Mary O'Neill, one of the Tyrone O'Neills, the ancient royal family of Ireland, and the family became completely identified with Ireland.

The Grahams were gentefolk in the best sense of the word. They made no parade of superiority. Their quality was manifest in their lives of quiet service. The combination of a well-developed sense of humour and a genuine Christian humility prevented them from taking themselves too seriously. Yet the breeding was there, and Margaret, all her life, could quietly but devastatingly put in their place those who might rashly or clumsily transgress the bounds of good manners or intrude on her privacy.

She was born on July the 7th 1854,¹⁵ in Portstewart, on the north coast of Londonderry, described in the guide book as "a picturesque town girdling a crescent bay extending from the neat little fishing harbour to the old rock-perched castle."¹¹ The house where she was born was still standing in 1938 when her son Nurden visited Portstewart with his Uncle, Harry Graham.¹⁶

The family probably moved to Belfast after the death of James Graham in 1862,¹⁷ so that Maria could be close to her sister Charlotte, Mrs. John Graham. When George Cross came to Belfast they were living in a tall house in Ullswater Terrace.

George Cross found in Margaret Graham one who shared his concern for those "in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity." As in his later pastorates so in his first he identified himself whole-heartedly with the community

in which he lived. Twenty years later, in a sermon preached in Grahams-town,¹⁸ he recalled "a scene I witnessed in Belfast at a Police Court. There came into the dock, brought in by a policeman, a sodden, wretched looking man, grey and old before his time, and a policeman began to give evidence of an assault, part of which he had witnessed, of this man upon his wife; and then he held up a poker that had been bent by this wretch as he beat his wife with it. The magistrate said: 'Can the wife be called?' and they brought her in. The head bound, the dark blood staining the bandage, her eyes black, her face bruised, knocked almost out of all similitude to humanity. The magistrate spoke to her and asked her to give evidence, but she said not a word; and then the policeman said: 'He did it your worship. He was beating her when I went in ...' And then the woman spoke: 'Your worship,' she said, 'he is a very good husband to me.' And then nothing else would she say." Cross did not say why he was at the Police Court, but it is not unlikely that this couple were members of his flock.

He was interested also in the wider world and its problems. 1876 was the year of the great outcry against the Turks for their ruthless suppression of an attempted insurrection of Bulgarian nationalists,¹⁹ Bulgaria being at the time a province of the Ottoman Empire. The indignation felt in England about what came to be known as the "Bulgarian atrocities" was kindled by the press, especially the London *Daily News*, whose Constantinople correspondent had first brought the "horrible atrocities" to the notice of England. On June the 23rd a startling despatch appeared in the *Daily News* reporting that from 18 000 to 30 000 men, women and children had been massacred. The *Manchester Guardian* and the *Times* took up the story, adding to the tale of horrors with stories of 1 000 children sold as slaves, and 10 000 people imprisoned and tortured. Disraeli, who was then Prime Minister, refused to take the stories seriously or even to send a competent person to investigate the matter on the spot. His government was in the embarrassing position of being the protector of Turkey against the pressure of Russia, and he had sent a British fleet to Turkish waters for this purpose. This was most untimely, for it seemed that Britain was not only condoning but conniving at the suppression of Bulgaria.

The public, however, wanted facts, not political manoeuvring, and the *Daily News* sent a special correspondent to the area to make a full investigation. As a result, concern in England developed into what R.T. Shannon, in a recent study, called "one of the great semi-religious, semi-political agitations which aimed in nineteenth century Britain at bringing the force of organised moral indignation to bear on the conduct of public affairs." It had the immediate result of bringing back into active political life William Gladstone, who had resigned the leadership of the Liberal Party in January 1875.

On the whole the agitation was supported and maintained largely by the Non-conformists of England and Wales: Methodists, Congregationalists, Unitarians

and Baptists. The Church of England was divided on the matter. Canon Liddon, preaching at St. Paul's Cathedral, attacked Disraeli for his flippant references to the atrocity stories and stressed the need for a moral, humane Christian policy in the East. High Church men supported him, but Low Church Evangelicals reacted violently, on the grounds that "the Moslem power was commissioned by God to chastise the apostate idolatrous Christians of the East." Roman Catholic prejudice against the Eastern Orthodox Church was so great that it was driven into a pro-Moslem, pro-Turkey stance, although certain influential English Catholic laymen supported the agitation. Thus Anglo-Catholics stood together with Nonconformists in condemnation of the atrocities, while the Evangelicals of the Church of England, in their zeal against "ritualism" found themselves on the same side as Roman Catholics. Strange bed-fellows indeed!

In Ireland, accordingly, there was little support for the agitation either from the numerically strong Roman Catholics, whose bishops discouraged it; or from the Anglicans, who were traditionally Low Church. The question also became entangled with Irish politics. The people of Ulster would not be seen on the same side as Gladstone, for they feared his Home Rule policy. They remained loyal to Disraeli and the Conservative party and had complete faith in the ability of the Government to deal justly and diplomatically with the situation. On the other hand, the Home Rule party and the Irish nationalists felt that with their history of atrocities in Ireland, the English were in no position to criticise the Turks, and they would certainly not support any English agitation.

These conflicting currents of Irish opinion bewildered Cross, who was English to the core. In addition, the Baptists of Ireland, by long tradition, kept out of all political involvement. There would be no official Baptist support in Ireland for the protest, in contrast to the situation in England and Wales. The powerful Baptist organ, the *Freeman*, heartily supported Gladstone and the agitation, and the Baptist Union of Britain presented a memorial to the Foreign Office protesting against the government's Eastern policy. Furthermore, the President of the Union, Cross's old friend, Dr. Landels, with the Past President, Dr. Maclaren, were among the convenors of the National Conference on the Eastern Question held in London on the 8th December 1876.

Cross refused to regard the atrocities as a party political matter. For him it was "a great human question." On September the 5th he attended a meeting in the Belfast Town Hall which had been convened to express public condemnation of Turkey and the Foreign Office. The result was disappointing. Irishmen, it seemed, were too absorbed by their own quarrels and grievances to take any interest in Eastern Europe. Wrote Cross: "I am sorry that in Belfast even human affairs do not seem to stir us much. Party spirit runs so high ... One of the chief men (at the meeting) declared in my presence that, though he believed the government was to blame, he could not say so in public, replying, in answer

to a remonstrance from me, that 'I should have to wait till I got to a purer world before I could speak out all the truth'."²⁰

Young and ardently idealistic, Cross was shocked by this cynical attitude of political expediency. Determined to rouse the consciences of his fellow townsmen he went home and immediately started to write a ballad, which he hoped "would appeal even to the very poorest among them". The ballad was soon finished, but it was not so easy to find a publisher. By the beginning of October, however, it was out, and Cross noted in his preface: "There is as much need for it as ever. Belfast has sent less than £50 to the relief of homeless, starving, dying Bulgarians!"

The ballad, entitled *Bulgaria's Woes*, consists of 144 stanzas, and the story is based on incidents culled from the *Daily News*. The author has attempted to rouse his readers' sympathy by focussing attention on events in one Bulgarian village, and by presenting as the central figure a lovely young maiden, the priest's daughter, who embroiders the banner under which the young men of the village rise in revolt against their oppressors. This rising is, of course, crushed by the merciless armies of Turkey with unspeakable cruelty.

Although the ballad, sometimes crude, sometimes trite, shows signs of the haste with which it was written, it never sinks into bathos. It reveals an imaginative understanding of the wrongs suffered by a faraway people, and there are occasional lines not unworthy to be called poetry.

Whether the ballad had any effect at all on opinion in Belfast is doubtful. Cross was fighting against prejudices whose complexity and depth he never suspected, let alone gauged. There were letters to the *Belfast Evening Telegraph*²¹ by anonymous writers who used pseudonyms like "Common Sense" and who urged people to support Disraeli and his government's "calm, prudent and fearless action." One letter condemned not only "over-zealous Christian friends" who identified themselves with "unscrupulous agitators," but also "designing politicians, Radical sensation-mongers, sixpenny pamphleteers and twopenny rhymsters." This letter elicited a reply from G.W. Cross, and from its tenor one can see how emotionally involved he had become in the whole issue. "There is one atrocity," he writes, "that is greater than any perpetrated by the Turk. It is that of the power which, in the interests of statecraft, attempts to stifle the human heart when it cries out 'These people shall not go back again to their old tyrant.'"

Many years later, in 1895, when the Turkish slaughter of Armenians exceeded their record in Bulgaria, Cross's ballad was reprinted in Grahamstown. In England, however, the political and religious climate had changed, and the Armenian atrocities of the 1890s did not arouse popular indignation to anywhere near the same extent as the Bulgarian atrocities of 1876.

As soon as the ballad was printed Cross had one copy specially bound in dark green leather stamped in gold to present to Margaret Graham. On the fly leaf he wrote a sonnet:²²

To Maggie

My dearest

This to thee, for thine the strain
Tho' mine the voice. All humanness – pity
Patriotism, love within the ditty,
Are thine effect in me, to thee again
Returned in this sad song

Clearly, by October 1876 the young couple had come to some kind of understanding. There is no record of when the formidable Mrs. James Graham gave permission for her daughter to make public her engagement to the young minister. Much as she liked him she could not approve of the match. For one thing, he was so very poor. The church of which he was the pastor could not afford to support a married minister, and until he received a call to a more prosperous congregation marriage was out of the question. Maggie, however, was quite as determined as her mother. She had made up her mind that she would marry George Cross no matter how long they might have to wait.

In November Cross went to Dublin to attend a great Christian Convention, and wrote reports about it for the new *Irish Baptist Magazine*.²³ About 3 000 people attended the meetings, and the chief speaker was Pasteur Monod of Paris. The Convention lasted three days and was described by Cross as “interdenominational and pietistic in nature” – the remark of a detached observer rather than one who has been deeply touched. Perhaps, for him, the most exciting experience was hearing the Jubilee Singers, a group of American Negroes, singing their haunting Spirituals.

In December the Regent Street Church held its annual Soiree, and this event was also reported in the *Irish Baptist Magazine*.²⁴ “There was a capital attendance both at the tea and public meeting, at the latter of which the pastor, who presided, had cheering things to say. The income of the church had exceeded £200 and spiritual results had not been lacking.” Several guest speakers addressed the meeting, among them the Rev. Mr. King, Episcopalian. Throughout his pastoral career Cross made a point of co-operating cordially with fellow parsons of other denominations. Whatever differences of theology or church policy might separate them, as fellow Christians they could meet and work together for the good of the community.

The year 1877 opened with no prospect of any immediate change in the fortunes of the young couple, nor much hope of their being able to be married. But already a letter which was to change their whole lives was on its way to England from a distant country, and Cross was soon to be faced with the most far-reaching decision of his life.

The letter, dated from Grahamstown, Cape of Good Hope, 21st December 1876,²⁵ was addressed to the Rev. William Landels, D.D. President of the Baptist Union, London. It was an appeal to Dr. Landels from the Grahamstown Baptist Church (whose minister had recently resigned) to undertake the task of selecting a new minister for them, since "at a time like this they feel very much the isolated position in which they are placed."

This mail-order method of getting a new minister had doubtless great disadvantages at the time, but a century later we have reason to be grateful for it. The long, leisurely letter, written in a beautiful copperplate hand, which is still very legible although the ink is fading, opens for us a window on the Grahamstown of a hundred years ago.

The writer of the letter, James Hay, Secretary of the Baptist Church, has given very precise specifications as to the kind of minister the church requires: "We cannot stipulate all the qualities we should like the minister to have, for it is more than likely that such an one could not be found. We may say that having had a very good one, we should like the best that is to be had, but at the same time we are well aware that there are better openings than this one. We may say in general terms that he must be a Baptist Minister who holds what are known as open communion views with close membership (that is we allow all who are members of Christian Churches to commune with us, but only those who have been Baptized to take part in the government of the Church). One who has the love of the work at heart and who wishes as far as lies in his power to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. A minister without some preaching talent would have a difficult task as the people in this colony are able to appreciate what is good in this way. We cannot expect to obtain another minister with such intellectual attainment as the Rev. Mr. Foot, but it is highly necessary that the one sent should be fairly educated, for the want of education would be a hindrance to him in his work.

"We do not think it desirable that a young man just from college should be sent, but it should be one who has had a charge in England and has had some experience of the working of a church; one of the reasons for this is that it is not a very easy thing for either minister or people to make a change and most young men like to move after a very short residence. While we do not wish for a young man we do not want a very old one, if we were asked to fix an age we should say from about 27 to 40, we think a married man would be best, but it would not be desirable for a man with a large family to come out. There may be good reasons for departing from any rule and therefore will not bind you down in the matter but leave the matter entirely in your hands and are sure that whatever you do will be approved of by the church here.

"The church guarantees to pay the minister not less than £300 per annum, but he may well receive more. He should undertake to remain for at least three

years. To pay his expenses to the Colony the sum of £100 is sent to London, "the whole of which is to be at the disposal of any one you may select, whether a married or single man." This was a considerable sum of money at a time when it was possible to make the voyage from England to Cape Town for as little as 12 guineas.

Appended to the letter was what its writer called "a rough sketch of the Church and City," so that "any minister who may be asked to come may have some knowledge of what the work is likely to be ... and he might be somewhat prepared for what lies before him, in most cases persons coming to this colony start with wrong ideas and are considerably taken aback when they see things as they really are. Without going into the history of the Church it may be stated that it has been in existence about 50 years ... The Church at present numbers 90 members besides which there are a large number who are scattered through the colony who have been members and are still in some slight measure connected with the church. At the Kareiga about 14 miles from this we have a chapel which is supplied by lay preachers from here, and occasional visits of the minister, the members here number about 30.

"All the members of the Church and Congregation are either Europeans or of European parents and are White (as white as any congregation in England) this is mentioned as a good many persons are under the impression that all who are born here must be black ... the minister would not be what is commonly understood as a Missionary.

"The Congregation is fairly intelligent and quite equal to an ordinary English congregation in any town in England. The work devolving on the minister is exactly the same as if he were in any town in England except for the fact that there are no poor, for every one who is willing to work can earn enough to live with some degree of comfort."

After giving a fairly detailed description of the Church property and finances the letter concludes: "The City is about 85 miles from Port Elizabeth, with which it will soon be connected by rail, more than half the distance being completed and the trains running. The European population is about 6 000, it is the most healthy town in the colony, and according to the military authorities one of the healthiest stations in the world ... It is the residence of the Episcopal Bishop, boasts of a Dean and a number of clergymen. 4 Churches for English and one for Natives. A Roman Catholic Bishop, schools for Male & Female, Church, etc. The Wesleyans have a large connection 3 English chapels & 2 Native ones and have six ministers. The Presbyterians 1 Church & Minister. The Independents 1 Native Church & Minister. All these churches are carried on with vigour and if a person from England was to drop in at any one of the services he would not know any difference from similar churches in the old country.

“The Colonists as a whole are very much like the people in England. They build their houses as far as possible in the same manner, furnish them as expensively as their means will allow, follow the fashions as far as possible, and generally try to live with as much comfort as they can, their model is the old country and it is not their fault if they cannot attain to the same standing.”

This letter probably reached Dr. Landels about the beginning of February 1877. After some thought and consultation with his colleagues, he decided to put the proposition to Cross.

When Dr. Landels' letter, accompanied by the letter from Grahamstown, arrived in Belfast it must have seemed like an answer to prayer. Here was adventure, opportunity undreamed of in Ireland, and the offer of a salary that few young ministers would earn in England or Ireland. He hastened to Maggie with the good news. If he accepted the call it would mean that they could be married.

Yet it was not till nearly the end of April that he was able at last to reply to Dr. Landels that he had decided to accept the offer and go to the Cape Colony.²⁶ It had not after all been an easy decision to make. He was happy in his church, and the folk at Regent Street would be sorry to see him go.

Also, it had proved difficult to convince Mrs. Graham of the desirability of such a step. She was adamant that she would not allow her daughter to go so far away to all imaginable discomforts and dangers. In vain was she shown the letter from Grahamstown with its reassuring picture of an ordinary English town. She would not relent. But her daughter too could be stubborn, and was moreover of age. Eventually a compromise was reached. If George insisted on going to Grahamstown he must go alone, but if, after a year, she was satisfied that he had a settled home for his bride to go to, Margaret would follow him. Since, however, Mrs. Graham would not allow her daughter to travel alone as an unmarried woman they must be married just before his departure.

On May the 1st Cross received a letter from Landels:

I am glad you have decided to go to Grahamstown. I hope the issue will prove that you have been divinely led. I think you had better write to the Church yourself telling them that you have received from me, and accepted the invitation I shall expect to hear from you as to your future movements and to see you when you come to Town.

The next two weeks were very busy. Cross had decided to leave Belfast on Monday May the 14th. On the 13th he preached his farewell sermons at Regent Street.²⁷ Next day, in a quiet ceremony, he was married to Margaret Graham in the Great Victoria Street Baptist Church by the bride's uncle, the Rev.

R.H. Carson of Tobermore. Was Mrs. James Graham there, one wonders? She did not sign the register. The marriage was formally witnessed by the bride's sister and brother, Arabella and Harry.²⁸ That same day Cross left Belfast for England.²⁷ He had much to see to before sailing for the Cape, and many farewells to make of old friends and family. It was to be more than a year before he was reunited with his bride.

CHAPTER 3

South African apprenticeship

“Large streams from little fountains flow.”

David Everett

Baptist beginnings in South Africa are traced to the coming of the British Settlers in 1820. Among the 4 000 settlers there were only nine Baptist families, comprising 16 adults and 18 children:¹ hardly an impressive number, yet they soon made their presence felt. The majority settled at Salem, where the first Baptist chapel – a wattle and daub hut – was erected soon after their arrival. It was situated near the little river that ran through the settlement, and was later washed away in a flood.

Crop failures and a lack of understanding of agricultural conditions in a strange environment caused many of the settlers to give up farming and establish themselves in Grahamstown. As early as 1823 the Baptists built a chapel there. It was one of the first places of worship in the town, and was opened less than a year after the Wesleyans built a chapel by public subscription, which was used at first by all denominations, including the Baptists.

The man who is generally regarded as the founder of the Baptist Church in South Africa, William Miller, was the Pastor of the little congregation, first at Salem and then in Grahamstown. He was an earnest man, a carpenter by trade, with strongly held convictions, his theology being of the hyper-

Calvinistic variety. It was difficult for him to be tolerant of those who differed from him, and this led inevitably to dissension in the church, and eventually to the temporary suspension of services. In 1831 he left Grahamstown and went to live in the rural settlement of Kareiga, about 15 miles away. Here another Baptist congregation was formed, becoming a sort of out-station of the church in Grahamstown.

After Miller's departure from Grahamstown the Baptists there sent an urgent appeal to the Baptist Missionary Society in England to find a minister for them. This resulted in the coming of the Rev. William Davies in 1832. Under his guidance the work was firmly established both in Grahamstown and Kareiga. Building commenced in 1834 on a church in Kareiga, and a plot of ground in Bathurst Street, Grahamstown, was purchased for the erection of a new church. Davies did not live to see it. He died in 1838 at the age of 36. The foundation stone of the new church (which is still in use) was laid in 1840, and the completed building officially opened on March the 12th 1843, during the ministry of the Rev. G. Aveline.

Aveline's successor, the Rev. Alexander Hay, was a preacher in a very different tradition from William Miller. His evangelistic fervour offended some of the old strict Calvinists in the congregation, which caused a serious split. Hay resigned the pastorate, but many members of the congregation sided with him, and formed themselves into a separate community. From 1849 until Hay's death in 1871 there were two Baptist churches in Grahamstown, representative of the two main streams of Baptist theology since the Reformation.

When Hay died the Rev. R.H. Brotherton of the Bathurst Street congregation decided to resign in order to make it easier for the two churches to be re-united. This generosity brought its own reward. Under his successor, the Rev. H.M. Foot, the two congregations were brought together and the church was re-established. Foot was a well-educated and scholarly man who was never very happy in Grahamstown. He left in 1876 to go to Cape Town, where he eventually became the first Professor of Literature at the South African College (later the University of Cape Town).

Such was the history of the church to which Cross was called in 1877: a church holding what are known as "open communion" views, coupled with "close membership". It was a church which had become accustomed to a reasonably high standard of preaching, from the time of Davies onwards. Of Davies it was said, in a tribute written after his death: "To very respectable attainments as a scholar he added considerable ability as a public speaker ... Although loyal to the particular doctrines of his church he was catholic in spirit and truly fraternal in his relations with other ministers".

It was not until the 1850s that other Baptist churches began to be formed. In Port Elizabeth regular Baptist services began in a house in 1854, the first

minister came from England in 1855, and by 1858 a handsome stone church was completed in Queen Street.

During 1858-59 some 2 000 German immigrants arrived in the Cape Colony and were settled in the area around East London and King William's Town. Only five of them were Baptists, yet within a few years they had formed a church. In 1867 they applied to the Rev. Johan Oncken, the leader of the German Baptist movement, to send them a minister. His choice was a happy one. At the end of 1867 the Rev. Hugo Gutsche arrived: one of the most remarkable men in the history of the Baptist Church in this country. Within ten years of his arrival 12 churches had been built – all debt free – and two thirds of all Baptists in South Africa were members in German churches.

In far-away Natal the first Baptist church was formed in Durban by Isaac Cowley, a stone mason from Gloucestershire who came out in 1859. While still continuing to earn his living at his trade he became the beloved Pastor of the church, and remained so until his death in 1892.

A group of Baptists in Alice formed themselves into a church in 1874, and called the Rev. R.H. Brotherton to be their first minister. Strangely, considering that Cape Town is the oldest city in Southern Africa, there was no Baptist work there until 1875, and their first minister arrived in 1876.

In 1877 there were scarcely a thousand Baptists in the whole of South Africa, and the few churches were widely separated. Communications were poor, distances great, and travel slow and difficult. Railways from Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London were beginning to reach into the interior of the Colony, but were still in the course of construction. The little isolated groups of Baptists rarely had the opportunity of meeting fellow Baptists in other centres, and their ministers (who had all come from Europe) felt their isolation keenly.

The Rev. G.W. Cross sailed from London on Thursday, May the 31st 1877, to take up his appointment in Grahamstown, leaving his bride at home in Belfast. He travelled on the R.M.S. *Courland*, of the Donald Currie Line, 1 241 tons, commanded by Captain E. Griffin.² In addition to about 145 passengers and a general cargo it carried the mails to the Cape. Like every ship of the Currie Line it called at Dartmouth, where it took on the mails. It was delayed there by storms, and did not leave until 8 o'clock on Saturday evening, June the 2nd. Cross's last glimpse of his native land was of the green soft hills of Devon glowing in the late light of an English summer day.

The wind was still blowing hard when they left Dartmouth, and next day it freshened to a gale. The seas were running high, and the ship was taking on great quantities of water: an alarming experience, especially for those who had

never been to sea before. On Monday the gale moderated slightly, but the weather remained unkind until they had almost reached Madeira, where the ship put in for a few hours.

Among the passengers was a party of nearly 100 Scottish emigrants, bound for East London. In the calmer waters of the tropics the passengers were able at least to enjoy the voyage, and to pass the long, tranquil days making the acquaintance of their fellow passengers. Once over the equator and into the southern Atlantic they ran into winter gales and confused seas, and again the *Courland* was plunging heavily and shipping water. The last part of the voyage was as uncomfortable as the first.

After four weeks at sea the *Courland* reached Cape Town on Friday, June the 29th, in the late afternoon. The short winter day was already drawing in, but Table Mountain was waiting, as always, with outstretched arms, to welcome yet another newcomer to the "fairest Cape", the Cape of Good Hope. On the quayside stood the Rev. William Hamilton, like Cross one of Spurgeon's young men, who had received his training at the Pastor's College. He was full of zeal and energy, and within a few months of his coming he had organised a congregation in Cape Town, and opened preaching stations in Mowbray and Wynberg. The Baptists of Cape Town welcomed Cross very warmly, and he was invited to preach at both the morning and evening services on the Sunday after his arrival.³

The *Courland* left Cape Town on the following Tuesday to continue the voyage to Algoa Bay and East London. Hamilton accompanied Cross,⁴ having decided that this was a good opportunity to meet the Baptists of the Eastern Province, as yet unknown to him. At Port Elizabeth, where they arrived on the evening of Thursday, July the 5th,⁵ there was another cordial welcome from the local Baptist community, and from their minister, the Rev. W. Stokes.⁶ They were persuaded to tarry for a few days before continuing the journey to Grahamstown, and the following Sunday Hamilton preached at one service and Cross at the other.⁷ Stokes, a man of striking appearance, was also a Pastor's College man. He had been in Port Elizabeth for ten years: a lonely man, especially since the death of his wife. The arrival of Cross and Hamilton cheered him greatly, and he decided to accompany them to Grahamstown on the last stage of Cross's long journey from Belfast to his new home.

Early on Monday morning, July the 9th, they left Port Elizabeth by train, going as far as they could by this means. Four hours later they reached what Anthony Trollope (who travelled the same route about a month later) described as "a wretched place called Sandflats". From there they continued the journey to Grahamstown, still forty or fifty miles distant, by Cobb & Co's coach.⁸ To the young men from England the country looked very wild and bush-covered and empty of human habitation. "But," wrote Anthony Trollope, "as we

approached Grahamstown it improved, and farming operations with farmsteads – at long distances apart – came into view.”

The news of their coming had preceded them, and they were met in the late afternoon on the hills above Grahamstown by a deputation from the church. One of the deacons, Mr. Joseph Dicks, never forgot that meeting, and passed on to his grandchildren the memory of how they presented their new minister with a gift of five golden sovereigns, and escorted the coach into Grahamstown, riding on either side.⁹ Below them, in the darkening valley, lay the little city, serene among its encircling hills.

And so, at last, journey's end, and the beginning of a new life for Cross.

The first week after his arrival was crowded with events and impressions. Two other ministerial colleagues had also come to Grahamstown to welcome him: the Rev. R.H. Brotherton and the Rev. Hugo Gutsche. There was also a handsome young Irishman, the Rev. W. Kelly, newly arrived in South Africa, and eager to serve wherever a place could be found for him.

In addition to these six ministers – Brotherton, Gutsche, Stokes, Hamilton, Cross and Kelly, there were leading laymen from Kareiga and Cape Town as well as Grahamstown. The arrival of the new minister was a cause for rejoicing. There was a sense of upspringing hope and a new feeling of unity. The time was ripe for a very important step: the linking of all the scattered churches in a properly constituted body.¹⁰

Mr. T.B. King, a merchant of Grahamstown, and in later years a Member of the Legislative Assembly of the Cape Colony, took the lead in pressing for the establishment of a Baptist Union.¹¹ On Wednesday afternoon, July the 11th, 1877, the first meeting for this purpose was held. A sub-committee, composed of the Revs. Stokes, Cross, Hamilton and Brotherton, and Mr. J. Filmer of Cape Town, was appointed to draw up rules and regulations and to present a draft for discussion on July the 14th.¹²

Twenty one years later, in a Presidential Address, Cross recalled these beginnings of the Baptist Union and the motives of the founders. “I, present at the founding, can bear witness that the brethren were animated with strong desires:

“First, to reach and help those of our own faith and practice who were isolated in this ‘great lone land’, or clustered in little knots in its towns and villages.

“Further, there was a strong sense upon them that they were called to larger activities in the cause of the truth for whose witness alone our church lives – that light we derive from Heaven for which our church is a mere candlestick, and which we are charged to hold well aloft on the pain, if we refuse our function,

that our candlestick will be removed out of its place. It was said, at that meeting, 'We must go forward in South Africa or go out of it'.

"And further, they banded themselves together for the purpose of co-operating more effectively with the other free churches in the land. The battle to free religion from State control and the churches from State patronage had been waged for twenty years by Saul Solomon and an indomitable band in the Cape Parliament, *and it had recently been won*. The rights so won needed, and still need guarding. But not to resist merely were we banding together. We wanted to take our share in the nobler work of evangelising this land, and of leavening a new country with the spirit of Christ."¹³

Few ministers can ever have been so thoroughly inducted into a new pastorate as Cross was in Grahamstown.¹⁴ Beginning on Wednesday evening, July the 11th, there was a special service every evening for a week. The visiting ministers took turns to conduct these services. It was not until the Sunday evening, however, that Cross occupied his pulpit for the first time. He took his text from II Samuel, 1:26 – David's lament for Jonathan – and his theme was the infinite love of God.¹⁵ It was to be the keynote of his whole ministry.

The following evening a social gathering was held in the Shaw Hall, which had been kindly lent by the Wesleyans. The *soiree* was attended not only by Baptists but also the ministers and members of the Congregational, Wesleyan and Presbyterian churches. The next day *Grocott's Mail* devoted a column and a half to a description of the event.¹⁶ It reported that the Rev. W. Hamilton of Cape Town said: "If only in uniting the scattered ministers of their churches Mr. Cross's arrival had done great good." In his reply to all the speeches "Mr. Cross returned thanks for the kind, hearty and cordial welcome he had received from all ... He could not convey to them the feelings their kindly reception had raised ... Personally he would have preferred a quieter reception, for whenever he thought of rockets he was reminded of sticks."

Cross's formal induction service was held the next evening.¹⁷ The charge to the new minister was delivered by the Rev. R.H. Brotherton, the oldest serving Baptist minister in South Africa. The week-long festivities closed on Wednesday with a service at which the newly-elected first President of the Baptist Union of South Africa, the Rev. W. Stokes, was the preacher.

What a week it had been! With Carey's words lingering in their ears – "Attempt great things for God" – a small, obscure and isolated group of Baptists had constituted the Baptist Union of South Africa, at a time (be it remembered) when politically speaking there was no such place as South Africa, only a collection of British Colonies and independent Republics. Before the visitors left Grahamstown to return to their own places two definite and practical steps had been taken towards the expansion and consolidation of Baptist work in the

Cape Colony: Hamilton returned to Cape Town with a gift of over £100 which had been given towards the building of a church in Cape Town; and Mr. Kelly had been employed to work as an Evangelist in Port Alfred and Kareiga, with his salary guaranteed for a year by the new Union.¹⁸ Cross had not only taken a notable part in the drafting of the constitution and bylaws of the Union: he was now its elected Secretary.¹⁹

When the celebrations were over and the visitors had gone, Cross at last had time to look about him, to make the acquaintance of his congregation, and to explore the little city which was to be his home for the happiest and most fruitful years of his life.

Grahamstown is a pretty place, pleasantly situated.²⁰ It is quite unlike any other town in South Africa, with its plain, early nineteenth century English architecture; and it has probably changed less in the last century than any other city or town in the whole country. Founded in 1812 as a military headquarters for the troubled frontier of the Colony, it had been built up by the British settlers of 1820. By 1877 it was a well-established city with a population of about 9 000 people, of whom 6 000 were of European, chiefly British, stock. It was no longer a frontier post, the Colonial boundary having shifted to the Kei River, further to the east, with the British Garrison stationed in King Williams Town. Grahamstown was now primarily a market and manufactory centre, with many religious and educational institutions: an oasis of culture in a wilderness of uncivilized Blacks and uncouth Boer frontiersmen. Or so it seemed to the people of Grahamstown, who were, according to Anthony Trollope, "full of their own excellencies." It could boast three newspapers. Apart from Cape Town it was the only city in the Colony with an Anglican Cathedral and Bishop. It was also the stronghold of Wesleyan Methodism in the Colony, and there was a flourishing Roman Catholic community. Above all, Grahamstown was then, as it still is today, an important educational centre. The Convent schools had been started in 1850; St. Andrew's, the Anglican school for boys, was firmly established by 1857; in 1875 the Jesuits arrived to found St. Aidan's College. The Public Udenominational School (now known as Graeme College) was launched in 1873, and the (Anglican) Diocesan School for Girls in 1874. The Wesleyans had a Girls' High School, and there were other, smaller schools, such as the Cathedral Grammar School and St. Patrick's Day School. On West Hill there was a large educational institution for Black boys, known as the "Kaffir Institution", supported by grants from the Church Missionary Society.

Cross was eager to adapt himself as quickly as possible to this new country, but he must surely have found it very strange at first. The broad, dusty streets with their traffic of laden wagons, each drawn by a span of sixteen oxen, were quite unlike any street in England or Ireland. Behind the Cathedral, in Church Square, there was room for a span, still yoked up, to lie down and rest while the waggons conducted their business in the leisurely fashion for which

Grahamstown was even then famous. Then there were the noisy, colourful Fingoes and Xhosas; the strange trees lining the streets; the unfamiliar local accent, the spaciousness, the general air of "plenty of time, plenty of room" which must have been strangest of all to one bred in nineteenth century London. He liked to stand and watch the stonemasons working on the new Cathedral tower, that stately Gothic erection designed by Sir Gilbert Scott, and the pride of the whole city – though to be sure it looked decidedly incongruous stuck at the end of the plain, squat old nave which had been a familiar landmark since 1830.