

MAN WITH A MISSION

Dr Robert Morrison was a missionary who travelled to Asia 200 years ago and set about translating the Bible into Chinese as well as creating the first-ever English/Chinese dictionary. **Valery Garrett** translates his story

With its many hundreds of characters and vastly differing sounds, Chinese is one of the hardest languages to learn. Yet one man learned to read and to write it before he even set foot in China.

Born in Northumberland in 1782, Dr Robert Morrison went on to use his skills to compile the first-ever English/Chinese dictionary and to translate the Bible into Chinese. This month marks the 200th anniversary of his arrival in China. But what brought him to Canton, or Guangzhou as it is now known?

In the middle of the 18th century, the Chinese Emperor closed all his ports, except Canton, to trade with the West. So the city grew increasingly prosperous and by the early 19th century it was the second largest after Beijing, with a population of nearly a million. Western traders were confined to its factories, part warehouse, part residential, fronting the Pearl River. Their ships brought in cargoes of opium, the only import the Chinese desired in any quantity, in exchange for tea, porcelain and silk.

For centuries, the West had seen China as ripe and ready for conversion to Christianity and Canton was the only entry port for missionaries. The 25-year-old Dr Morrison was the first Protestant missionary in China, sent by the London Missionary Society in 1807.

Denied a passage on a ship belonging to the British East India Company, the biggest and most powerful trading body in Canton, he travelled via America – a journey that lasted 222 days at sea.

On the voyage out he was asked if he really expected to make an impression on the idolatrous Chinese.

"No, sir," he answered, "I expect God will."

Despite the East India Company's initial disapproval,



Dr Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary in China, was engaged as a translator with the East India Company

Dr Morrison's knowledge of Chinese was proving so valuable that, by 1809, they were glad to engage him as their Chinese translator, a position that he held until his death in 1834.

Since foreigners in China were forbidden to buy Chinese books or learn the language – any local caught assisting them could be executed – Dr Morrison learnt it from a Cantonese in London.

In 1813, Dr William Milne from Aberdeenshire arrived to join him and they worked together for a few months – but the printing of Christian literature aroused the wrath of the Chinese mandarins.

This led Dr Milne to move to Malacca where he founded the Anglo-Christian College and set up a printing press to produce the tracts and Bibles needed for the mission in China. By 1818 the two men had succeeded in translating the Bible into Chinese.

Dr Morrison then set about compiling the first Chinese/English dictionary. The whole six-volume work, consisting of 4,595 pages, was published by 1823 at a cost of £12,000, paid for by the East India Company. He also dispensed medicine to the Chinese, reasoning that it

was better to treat their bodies before their souls.

Local people, who were trained to assist the doctors, became medical students and, eventually, doctors themselves. They included Liang A-fa, the first Chinese man Dr Morrison converted to Christianity.

But although he was greatly respected, Dr Morrison was not an easy man to be with.

"His whole heart and soul is bound up in religion. He has resolved to give his whole life to the Chinese," said American Harriet Low. Though she knew him to be "a very good man", she did not want to socialise with him, "for I neither like the man nor his sermons".

Samuel Wells Williams, an American missionary in Macau and Canton, felt the same.

"He was not by nature calculated to win and interest the sceptical or the fastidious, for he had no sprightliness or pleasantries, no versatility or wide acquaintance with letters, and was respected rather than loved by those who cared little for the things nearest his heart."

Despite all Dr Morrison's best efforts, "after 25 years of labour, the converts were [just] 10 in number".

Yet the respect in which he was held would have another

long-lasting effect: the opening of a Protestant cemetery in Macau. Each year, when the winter trading season was over, the western traders had to leave China and travel 75 miles (120km) down river to Macau.

The enclave, governed by the Portuguese until 1999, was staunchly Catholic and Protestants had to be buried outside the city walls. Finally, however, thanks to the high esteem of Dr Morrison, land was obtained within Macau's city walls.

It happened in this way. In 1811, his wife, Mary, had a baby, James, who died at birth and was buried on Meesenberg Hill. Then, when she lay dying of cholera in 1821, her husband promised she would be buried in the same grave as their son. But it was a crime in Chinese law to disturb a grave. Faced with breaking the law or his promise to Mary, a solution had to be found.

Such was the regard in which Dr Morrison was held that the East India Company pressed the Portuguese for land inside the city walls for her burial.

Casa Garden was the home in Macau of the chief of the British East India Company, rented from a Portuguese nobleman, as no foreigner could own property there.

Fortunately, at the time, the baron was in urgent need of ready cash, and agreed to sell the land at the side of the house for use as a cemetery.

The Protestant cemetery opened soon after with the burial of Mrs Morrison, and became the final resting place of many characters from Macau's colourful past.

Robert Morrison died on 1 August 1834 in Canton and his body was brought down the Pearl River to the cemetery in Macau. His tomb is in a corner next to that of Mary and their second son, John. A small chapel dedicated to the doctor stands at the entrance to the cemetery and is the main place of worship for the Protestant community of Macau today. ☪

● Morrison Chapel, Camoes Square, Macau, is open daily and at 10am every Sunday morning for services.