

William E. Soothill (1861-1935): missionary and sinologist¹

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Synopsis: William Edward Soothill (1861-1935) from Halifax in Yorkshire was from the United Methodist Free Churches and for 25 years developed many facets of Christian mission in and around Wenzhou, China. He went on to be Principal of Shanxi University. On return to Britain he was making plans for a European style university for China when World War I intervened. After the war he was appointed Professor of Chinese at Oxford University. Regarded as an authority on Chinese linguistics he also wrote on Chinese history and religion. He had a great love for China and promoted links between China and the West.

Soothill, as Timothy Richard's biographer, usually appears in studies on Richard with a footnote² that he became Professor of Chinese at Oxford University so here is the story behind the footnote.

His Background

William Edward Soothill was born on 23 January 1861 at Halifax, England, a town renowned for its textile industry in which his father, also William (1836-1893), worked.³ The family belonged to the United Methodist Free Churches (UMFC) a denomination created in 1857 as an amalgamation of Methodist groups that had split earlier from the Wesleyan Methodist Church over such issues as democratic government and ministerial authority.⁴

Soothill's early education was 'at the twopence-a-week Wesleyan Day School'⁵ which he left at the age of twelve to work for a firm of Halifax solicitors. His work of copying estate documents at the Halifax solicitor's office was 'an invaluable start, he would say, for a man destined to hold in his keeping the deeds for the 250 churches he later founded in that very legalised land of China.'⁶ He was clearly an intelligent and able youngster and passed the legal preliminary exams. Although he matriculated at London University Soothill did not take his degree⁷ because

¹ An expanded version of a short paper given at the Methodist Missionary History Project Conference, 2012, 'Other Faiths and other Churches' on 4 November, 2012, at Luther King House, Manchester. A shorter version can be found at <http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/s/soothill-william.php>

² e.g. in Walls, Andrew F., *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Edinburgh:T&T Clark, 2002, p.237.

Cracknell, Kenneth, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, London: Epworth, 1995, p. 341, has the same remark. In writing on Richard he quotes extensively from Soothill's biography of Richard, and remarks that he was later Professor of Chinese at Oxford but incorrectly describes Soothill as a teacher at Shanxi before becoming its President.

³ He was described as a stuff presser in 1871 and as a cloth-presser in 1881 - Malcolm Bull's Calderdale pages (referred to as MBCP). Lady Hosie described him as a 'foreman dyer', *Methodist Recorder*, uncertain date, c January 1946, 'And they Offered their Gifts ...' by Lady Dorothea Hosie.

⁴ For the history of the UMFC see Beckerlegge, Oliver A., *The United Methodist Free Churches: A Study in Freedom*, London: Epworth, 1957

⁵ *Methodist Recorder*, uncertain date, c January 1946, 'And they Offered their Gifts ...' by Lady Dorothea Hosie.

⁶ Ibid. Soothill himself said 150 so Lady Hosie probably misremembered or used later figures.

⁷ *Who's Who in the Far East* (June) 1906-7, p. 295

a possible legal career and other studies were interrupted by a call to overseas missionary work. He expected to go attend the UMFC Theological Institute at Victoria Park, Manchester⁸ and then proceed to Africa but had to respond to an urgent request ‘to take the place of a pioneer missionary who had died in the Chinese seaport town of Wenchow’⁹ and so went straight to China in 1882.

To China

Protestants were not strong in China at the time and missions had been adversely affected by the eccentric Taiping rebellion. This had folded by 1864 when the UMFC began its work in China after raising funds and seeking advice and help from Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission. William Fuller and John Mara, the first missionaries, went to Ningbo about 100 miles south of Shanghai and were joined in 1868 by Frederick Galpin who remained there for many years. The mission was extended in 1877 when Robert Exley began work at Wenzhou¹⁰ (then Wenchow) 150 miles further south.¹¹ He died in 1881¹² and when Soothill arrived in the following year¹³ he found a church with thirty members.¹⁴

Language study

Known as Sing-Su¹⁵ by the Chinese William Soothill was energetic and extremely gifted. His great linguistic ability enabled him to relate quickly to the Chinese people and although his early experiences with language included mistakes¹⁶ he was at Wenzhou for less than six months when he attempted preaching in Chinese. Soothill became an acknowledged master of the local language:

years later a Chinese scholar on a visit to England announced triumphantly, but in public: "Sing Su! Why, he can outslang any of us". Another was anxious to impress his Chinese listeners with his foreign friend's proficiency. "He even understands our swear words," he remarked ... He, however, thoughtfully saved Sing Su's face by adding: "Yet he never uses them."¹⁷

Soothill worked out a Roman script for the Wenzhou language, translated the New Testament into it and compiled a highly regarded Chinese dictionary.

In those days Christians could face trouble in China and this was compounded in 1884 when

⁸ Soothill's younger brother Alfred (1863-1926) who also became a minister attended the Theological Institute 1883-5. He was headmaster of Ashville College for many years.

⁹ Soothill, W.E., *A History of China*, London: Ernest Benn, 1950 edition edited by Hudson, G.F., p. 8.

¹⁰ Places are referred to by their modern names except in quotes from older sources.

¹¹ Soothill, W.E., *A Mission in China*, London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1907, p. 14. Referred to as *MC*.

¹² *Ministers and Probationers of the Methodist Church*, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1947, p. 422.

¹³ This early history is described briefly in Beckerlegge, pp. 91f.

¹⁴ Beckerlegge, p. 92.

¹⁵ On this nickname Chinese scholar, Li Xinde, informs me that 'Sing-Su came from Wenzhou dialect Xiansheng Su or Sheng Su (Sing here is the shortened form for Xiansheng/xian sing in Wenzhou dialect), and Sing here means Mr.... or Teacher...., Su refers to Soothill in Chinese.' - Email from Li Xinde, 17/10/12.

¹⁶ *MC*, pp. 15ff.

¹⁷ *A Passport to China*, Lucy Soothill, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931, p. 23. Referred to below as *P*.

China was at war with France and European missionaries were regarded as ‘barbarians’. A riot started during the church’s usual prayer meeting on Saturday 4 October 1884 and the mission was attacked, set on fire and destroyed.¹⁸ With three workers from the China Inland Mission he found refuge at the magistrate’s residence though George Stott’s crutch was needed to keep them from being shut out. Escorted by soldiers the four missionaries were taken to the British Consulate on an island in the river as ‘it was deemed inadvisable for missionaries to dwell in the city’¹⁹ and services were held in Wenzhou at a member’s house.

Marriage

By that time Soothill had obtained permission to marry Lucy Farrar (1857-1931) from Southowram near Halifax.²⁰ News of trouble in Wenzhou reached her before she left but undeterred she set off from England in October 1884²¹ and they were married at Shanghai in December 1884.²² The newlyweds went by ship to Soothill’s station at Wenzhou, arrived on New Year’s Day 1885²³ and remained at the British Consulate for the next six months²⁴ with daily expeditions to the city where Soothill often encountered hostility from Cantonese troops who were guarding against the supposed French threat.²⁵ Compensation from the Chinese Government and donations from England enabled church building on the old site²⁶ and the construction of a new house which the missionaries occupied in June 1885.²⁷

The Soothills had two children, Dorothea and Victor.²⁸

Church extension

Along with language work Soothill was busy in church extension which he compared to the banyan tree which spreads by means of branches that carry aerial roots.²⁹ For example, ‘the branch that struck into the earth at Crystal Lily has added over a score more’.³⁰ This all began around 1886/7 when Soothill started an opium refuge in Wenzhou and some joined the church including four men from Crystal Lily. When they returned to their mountain village thirty or so miles NW of Wenzhou they started a church and met each evening and on Sundays using four

¹⁸ MC, p. 107.

¹⁹ MC, p. 109. On George Stott, the first missionary to Wenzhou, see <http://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/s/stott-george.php> by Rachel Erickson-Rui who is preparing a history of the church in Wenzhou.

²⁰ Her family were quarry owners and lived at various places in the area; 3 Highfield, Southowram (1851 census); Law Lane, Southowram (1861 census); Chancery Buildings, Southowram (1871 census); 6 Law Lane, Southowram (1881 census); Yew Tree House, Southowram (1891 census) - MBCP.

²¹ P, p. 4.

²² *Who’s Who in the Far East* (1906-7), p. 295.

²³ P, p. 9.

²⁴ P, p. 13.

²⁵ P, p. 18.

²⁶ P, p. 21.

²⁷ P, p. 31.

²⁸ Dorothea (1885-1959) married Sir Alexander Hosie (1853-1925) and was best known as a lecturer and writer on Chinese affairs. Victor (1888-1956) was a doctor and many of his descendants became eminent in medical science.

²⁹ It was a self-propagating church on the lines later suggested by Nevius, See Soothill, W.E., *Timothy Richard of China*, London: Seeley, Service, 1924, p. 93, referred to as TR.

³⁰ MC, p.46.

hymnbooks and two New Testaments. Their knowledge was limited after only ten days in the refuge and when they heard that Soothill was visiting a nearby area these men begged him to come to Crystal Lily. He responded and others joined including Mr ‘Summer’ who later became a minister. Soothill exploited the opportunity by sending Wenzhou’s only preacher, Mr Chang, to develop the work. From meeting in a house the growing congregation was to their surprise allowed to rent a large ancestral hall very cheaply. As the congregation grew further they rented a larger hall then built a ‘lovely new church’.³¹ Soothill noted that despite the images of deities etc these ancestral temples were very suitable for Christian worship and ‘That we are able to rent such buildings at all is the highest testimony that can be given to the character of our converts, and the respect in which they are held by their fellow-clansmen.’³² Preachers were usually drawn from those with a good standard of education. When their faith and ability were apparent they would have ten days of scripture training and practical work as an Evangelist or Assistant Pastor. In the early days three months with the missionary gave a good start but in due course a College was started. Soothill liked the idea of a self-supporting church but revealed that Sunday observance created problems because this rest day was unknown in a culture where work went on seven days a week. Christians could lose a day’s pay by observing it and this restricted their ability to give. Nevertheless, methods were in hand to bring about an increasing level of self-support.

Adaptation

As well as adapting to his environment by learning the local language Soothill needed to make other adaptations. His bachelor attempts to get his cook to prepare western food were largely unsuccessful and when his wife, ‘a gentle presence’, came she helped him to see that he had ‘been starving in the midst of plenty’.³³ Lucy Soothill remarked ‘Given time, one learns how excellent Chinese food can be’.³⁴

Soothill loved Chinese music which he began to study seriously around 1890.³⁵ A musician and singer helped him to become ‘competent enough to lecture on it’ and the ‘song-singing soprano man and his ravishing trills moved Sing Su to his soul’.³⁶ These studies resulted in a paper read to the Ningbo (then Ningpo) Missionary Association ‘with special reference to the feasibility of improving our Church music on Chinese lines’.³⁷ The Chinese people used a pentatonic scale which explained their difficulty with English tunes involving half tones, fourths or sevenths. Soothill gave an example of what could be attempted by preparing a hymn using the music of a local pentatonic tune, ‘Jasmine Flower’.³⁸

Church life also needed modification in the Chinese context. By 1899 the churches were

³¹ *MC*, p. 50.

³² *MC*, p. 51.

³³ *MC*, p. 23.

³⁴ *P*, p. 21.

³⁵ *MC*, p. 53.

³⁶ *P*, p. 132.

³⁷ *MC*, p. 53.

³⁸ *MC*, p. 54.

organised by the ‘usual Methodist basis of church, circuit and district’.³⁹ Wenzhou became a separate district and by 1906 had seven circuits and 150 congregations.⁴⁰ Soothill, however, felt that it was not a good idea to follow the British church in every detail; ‘we deem it better to advance with slower steps and introduce new rules to suit new needs.’⁴¹

Indeed, Methodist practice in Britain needed to adjust to the local scene. As Methodists they were in theory paedobaptists but the Wenzhou church dedicated infants and baptised adults after suitable instruction. This policy was supported by ‘the exceeding few who, in after years, have to be taken off the books as backsliders.’⁴² Soothill also had the ecumenical dimension in mind and bearing in mind the sensitivities of other local Christians, believed that this approach would encourage the possibility of a ‘united Wenchow native church, and the necessity, therefore, of avoiding the introduction of any rite that would prevent such union’.⁴³

Furthermore, some aspects of local culture needed to be addressed. Soothill introduced the thorny issue of polygamy. His relatively liberal conclusion was that ‘While we should not be opposed to the admission, after a prolonged probation, of an individual who in the days of his ignorance had entered into such an alliance, we set our faces rigidly against an actual member of the Church entering into any such state of bigamy’.⁴⁴

Chinese Religions

Soothill followed fulfilment theology⁴⁵ and thought that ‘an account of the religions we come “not to destroy but to fulfil” might be interesting to the reader’.⁴⁶ He concluded his book *A Mission in China*⁴⁷ with a survey of religion in China which he began with a tour around Wenzhou describing the various kinds of temple and what happened in them; phenomenology before its time. He counted 44 temples in the city; 13 Buddhist, six Taoist and the rest were Confucianist temples of various kinds. He explained that they complemented each other as, ‘three segments of a circle, Confucius standing for this life, for justice, righteousness, and the state; Taoism for the supernatural, for research into the forces of nature, immortality, individualism; and Buddhism for compassion, meditation, indifference to this life and preparation for the life to come.’⁴⁸

³⁹ *MC*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *MC*, p. 61.

⁴² *MC*, p. 91.

⁴³ *MC*, p. 83.

⁴⁴ *MC*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ This type of Christian theology was popular in the late nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth. It approached other religions with a certain amount of respect and suggested that they had points of contact which could be used as stepping stones to a fuller revelation in Jesus Christ. Its most famous proponent was J.N. Farquhar with *The Crown of Hinduism* (1913) but Timothy Richard (1845-1919) who showed great respect for other religions would have had a greater influence on Soothill.

⁴⁶ *MC*, p. 208.

⁴⁷ *MC*, pp. 208-93.

⁴⁸ *MC* p. 220; see also, Hinnells, J., ed., *Handbook of Living Religions*, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 344. Soothill’s exposition of Chinese religions seems to be very much in line with that in Hinnells’s *Handbook*, and similar works.

In speaking of origins Soothill considered that rather than evolving these religions had decayed and this led him to discuss their founders. Confucius, he said, tried to improve things but ‘in the clouds, Lao more nearly touched the hem of the divine robe than ever did Confucius in the plains below.’⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Confucius’s ‘disciples had planted deep the roots of their master’s teaching’⁵⁰ and in spite of around three hundred crowned emperors, ‘Confucius has ever remained the uncrowned King of China’.⁵¹ Soothill divided his treatment of Chinese religions into [i] Native religions; Confucianism and Taoism and [ii] Foreign religions; Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

On Confucianism Soothill thought its founder was ‘a not unworthy forerunner of Christ’⁵² and the Chinese beliefs in God and creation he regarded as ‘unguided gropings’ by which ‘they have attained to some dim perception of the “Infinite”... and have given utterance to conceptions noble and elevating’.⁵³

Whereas Confucius focussed on earthly duty Lao Tzu ‘sought the higher regions of philosophy’.⁵⁴ He considered that Taoism started well, degenerated but finally recovered some of ‘the original search after Tao and immortality in the region of the soul.’⁵⁵ His opinion was that ‘the nobler part of it still stretches up groping hands towards the silent heavens’.⁵⁶ He described the origins and history of Buddhism and its adaptation to Chinese cultures and treated Islam with a few hundred followers in Wenzhou briefly and in friendly terms.

Soothill closed his book with ten pages on Christianity which he believed ‘has had a much greater influence on China than its followers generally realise’.⁵⁷ Following Timothy Richard he suggested that Christianity had influenced the Mahayana school of Buddhism as well as Taoism and Islam. He described more direct Christian penetration of China from the early Nestorians and Catholics to the arrival of Protestants in 1806. By 1906 the UMFC mission in Wenzhou had 2200 communicants and touched about 10,000 people with ‘the light’.⁵⁸

Educational work

As well as applying himself energetically to church extension and careful observation of his cultural environment Soothill was involved, like many missionaries of the time, in education. He believed that the western educational style of mission schools revitalised Chinese life and the new National Colleges were modelled on Christian Colleges. The Methodist school at Wenzhou began in a small way with a few boys and simple equipment using the then novel method of class teaching. For most of Soothill’s time this had to feed into the traditional examination system

⁴⁹ *MC*, p. 231.

⁵⁰ *MC*, p. 232.

⁵¹ *MC*, p. 233.

⁵² *MC*, p. 246.

⁵³ *MC*, p. 253f.

⁵⁴ *MC* p 255.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *MC* p 270.

⁵⁷ *MC*, p 284.

⁵⁸ *MC*, p 292.

which limited the number of passes. Things began to change around 1900 and somewhat anticipating them he started a High School with 20 boys in 1897. Eventually, a College was built with financial help from Britain raised by Mrs Soothill. It was opened by Timothy Richard⁵⁹ and 200 students were enrolled in 1906.⁶⁰

Compulsory education in Britain inspired the Soothills to start a girls' school in Wenzhou and Mrs Soothill described how the school worked.⁶¹ The main items in her school curriculum were reading, writing, arithmetic, singing and sewing. When their daughter Dorothea visited for a couple of years she introduced some lively outdoor games after school. It was a rule that girls should have their feet unbound,⁶² a very controversial policy in those days, but it was generally agreed that the ancient custom of foot binding needed to be abolished.⁶³ There were more than 40 girls in her school by 1906.⁶⁴

Medical work

J T Wilkinson gives the impression⁶⁵ that Soothill's great work in Wenzhou was as a medical missionary. This is not so; he did some medical work but was glad to hand over to a colleague who came with more knowledge. Then a local doctor helped and eventually a medical missionary was appointed and finally hospitals were built by dint of effort and generosity from home.⁶⁶ John Dingley of Yarmouth enabled the building of the first hospital (c. 1898) and this was superseded in 1906 by a larger one built by Mr Dingley's friend John Blyth.⁶⁷ Soothill's great medical work was to apply his administrative acumen to setting up these hospitals.

Shanxi

Although Soothill was heavily involved at Wenzhou other developments would open further opportunities. For this we must go back a few years.

In early 1900 the Soothills were in New York for the World Missionary Conference.⁶⁸ There Soothill renewed his acquaintance with Timothy Richard.⁶⁹ This was a critical time; the Boxer rebellion was starting and foreigners were in danger but Richard's warnings were not heeded by

⁵⁹ *TR*, p. 266.

⁶⁰ *MC*, p 191.

⁶¹ *P*, p. 189ff.

⁶² *P*, p. 192f.

⁶³ Nevertheless, Mrs Butler reported that most women in Wenzhou had their feet bound in 1922, Butler, Mrs T., *Missions as I saw them*: London, Seeley, Service, 1924, p. 117.

⁶⁴ *MC*, p. 142.

⁶⁵ Davies, R.E, George, A.R., and Rupp, G, *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Volume 3, London: Epworth Press, 1983, p 173.

⁶⁶ *MC*, p. 149ff.

⁶⁷ *MC*, p. 156. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19930935> links to an abstract of an article Zhonghua Yi Shi Za Zhi. 2009 Jul;39(4):206-8. 'The establishment and development of Blyth hospital in Wenzhou' [Article in Chinese] that states that 'The establishment and development of Blyth hospital greatly accelerated the development of Wenzhou local medical and health work so that the health level of the Wenzhou people improved.'

⁶⁸ *Ecumenical Missionary Conference*, New York, 1900, Vol 2, p. 412

⁶⁹ *Timothy Richard of China; Seer, Statesman, Missionary & the most disinterested advisor the Chinese ever had*, London: Seeley, Service & Co. Ltd, 1924, pp. 146, 248. Referred to as *TR*.

the USA authorities. Many missionaries were massacred in Shanxi (then Shansi) but when things settled down Richard was called upon to help put things right. His proposed reparation was a substantial fine on Shanxi Province and for the money to be used to create a Western style university.⁷⁰ The Chinese leaders agreed and let Richard organise it for the next ten years. It was agreed that Chinese and Western education would run alongside each other and building in the Chinese style commenced in late 1902. The Revd Moir Duncan, a Baptist missionary, was the first Principal and when he died in August 1906 a successor was sought.

As well as the meeting described earlier the Soothills had stayed with Richard at a Missionary Conference in Shanghai. Soothill found the occasion inspirational; ‘Never have I stayed with or met a man with such a fund of inspiration. To be with him was to be lifted out of the daily round and common task and to stand on the hill-top looking to the far horizon.’⁷¹ Richard had been to Wenzhou to open Soothill’s new college and was clearly impressed by his work. Not surprisingly, Richard offered the position at Shanxi to Soothill who accepted because ‘the Shansi University had always appealed to my imagination as a concrete example of a magnanimous Christian spirit, and also because of my faith in education.’⁷² This resolved another problem because health issues were forcing Soothill to consider a long recuperative furlough in England. The climate of North China is all that the climate of the South is not... The summers if hot are short, and the long frozen-up winters are exceedingly bracing and very dry. Such a climate would be a finer restorative than England. It would enable Sing Su to continue, if in a different fashion, his efforts for the nation in whose interests his strength had been poured out, but which Southern heat and damp threatened to end.⁷³ So they went to Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi province but Soothill agreed to visit the south every year. At Wenzhou Soothill had been working hard on translating the Analects of Confucius. He continued at Shanxi and his book was published in 1910 after some adventures as Lucy Soothill explained:

some chapters had had to be rewritten, because the originals were burnt in a fire at the printers' in Japan. The whole had been lost when travelling with him on the railway across Siberia. To me, following later, was allotted the task of searching for the lost treasure – from Moscow to Harbin. To me also came the joy of seeing it restored intact to Sing Su in Taiyuanfu-the City-of-the-Great-Plain. A super-excellent, yet unknown European Customs official ran the box to earth, buried beneath a mountain of other so-called “Lost Luggage,” in a Japanese store in the heart of the city of Moukden!⁷⁴

Soothill did not propagate religion in his university teaching but tried to give a fair presentation of the various religions in his history lectures. He did explain Christianity in discussions with students, officials and intellectuals and invited such people to special lectures when leading missionaries came their way. The Baptist Missionary Society drew him into the YMCA and he presided at Sunday afternoon meetings which included ‘lectures on general topics considered from the religious standpoint’.⁷⁵ Great crowds came to hear Mr Sherwood Eddy ‘deliver four

⁷⁰ *TR*, p. 254.

⁷¹ *TR*, p. 266.

⁷² *TR*, p. 266.

⁷³ *P*, p. 272.

⁷⁴ *P*, p. 278.

⁷⁵ *TR*, p. 258.

lectures on Jesus Christ'.⁷⁶

Translators produced the university's Chinese text-books; 'the terminology in most subjects was in a hopeless state of chaos, every translator creating his own terms.'⁷⁷ There was need for standardisation and in 1910 Soothill used a quotation from Confucius to raise this obliquely with a Junior Secretary of the Board of Education. In due course a Bureau of Terminology was founded.

Soothill was awarded 'the Red Button, which was, under the Empire, of the Chief Order of Buttons.'⁷⁸ In June 1911 the University was transferred to Chinese authority but when the Revolution broke out in October the university was wound up and became Shansi Grand Academy.⁷⁹

Return to Britain

After relinquishing his Shanxi post Soothill was invited by Lord David Cecil 'to work for the Central University at Hankow.'⁸⁰ This proposed Central China University had been in preparation for three years and *The Times*, 15 July, 1911, reported that 'The Rev. W. E. Soothill, F.R.G.S., has been appointed Acting President of the University for five years'.⁸¹ This joint British and North American project was intended to 'render to China at the present stage a service of incalculable importance and of far-reaching consequence from the intellectual, moral, and religious standpoint'⁸² and when *The Times* of 24 November reported that Soothill was awarded an M.A. (*honoris causa*) by Cambridge University he was described as 'Organizing President of the new Central China University.'⁸³ The next day *The Times* carried a further appeal for funds explaining the commercial and moral advantages of the scheme. It was estimated that £250,000 would be needed to set up the scheme with running costs of £7000 per year. The Executive Committee included committees from Oxford, London and Cambridge Universities and an American Committee. Soothill had returned to Britain via Japan and America and it is likely that he was soliciting funds and publicising the University.

As well as organizing this proposed University Soothill continued his Chinese studies. The

⁷⁶ *TR*, p. 258. Sherwood Eddy (1871-1963) was a YMCA secretary who travelled widely in Asia. He was 'a flaming preacher of the Christian faith in many lands.' *A History of the Expansion of Christianity (Volume VI)*, Latourette, K. S., London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1945, p. 178; 'he became perhaps the most effective and most famous international evangelist of his generation.' *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World: Sherwood Eddy and the American Protestant Mission*, Nutt, Rick L., Mercer, Macon, Georgia, 1997, p.3.

⁷⁷ *TR*, p. 262.

⁷⁸ *p*, p.287.

⁷⁹ There is a Shanxi university to this day and it traces its origin to 1902 by the provincial governor and Timothy Richard. From 1912-31 it was described as Shanxi Grand Academy but thereafter mostly as Shanxi University. <http://english.sxu.edu.cn/AS/history/index.htm>

⁸⁰ *Obituary Notices. Professor W.E. Soothill, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1935, p. 783. July, 1911.

⁸¹ *The Times*, 15 July, 1911..

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Who was Who* also lists him as MA from Oxford

World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910⁸⁴ set up a Board for the Training of Missionaries and in that connection Soothill gave twelve lectures at Queen's College, Oxford, for students preparing to go to China. Given in the summer of 1912 they were published as *The Three Religions of China* (1913). After a chapter each on Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism he discussed their relationship to several themes: the idea of God, approaching the divine, cosmology, the soul and ancestors, morals, sin and public and private religion. His general approach was to expound and evaluate with a view to finding aspects that Christians could build on: fulfilment theology.

He continued his work on behalf of the Chinese Central University and on 18 June 1913 was listed to address MPs 'to consider the advisability of asking the Government to permit a certain amount of the Boxer Indemnity to be allocated for this purpose.'⁸⁵ These were 'the hardest two years of his life' during which 'he had persuaded Mr. Lloyd George, and through him Mr. Asquith, that the Boxer Indemnity money should be used for educational purposes on China's behalf.'⁸⁶ The scheme, however, seems to have been overtaken by the First World War and 'ultimately, in 1929, a certain proportion of the money was set aside for educational purposes in China.'⁸⁷ During the War Soothill was involved in the YMCA as Director of Religious Work from 1914-18. He was based at Leytonstone where he and his wife acted as hosts to Chinese interpreters on leave from the war in France. His daughter reported, 'During the European War, my mother and father led bands of young Chinese interpreters, ten at a time, about London, to behold its marvels.'⁸⁸ His war work also took him to France with the Chinese Labour Corps and the Chinese rewarded him with the Order of the Striped Tiger.

Oxford University and further writing

Soothill was in poor health during the war and 'his medical advisors forbade him to resume work in China'.⁸⁹ He was however, recognised as one of the foremost authorities on Chinese linguistics and in July 1920 became Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at Oxford University, a 'poorly paid'⁹⁰ post. He was also a member of the governing body of the School of Oriental Studies. His Oxford period resulted in several publications.

As we have seen Soothill was 'an enthusiastic admirer' of Timothy Richard, a Baptist missionary who, like Soothill, had a wide ranging concept of mission and a deep understanding of Chinese culture.⁹¹ When Richard died in England in 1919 Soothill bemoaned the poor attendance at his funeral and remarked that 'Had he died in China his funeral would have been the greatest of any foreigner who ever lived in that land'.⁹² Soothill went on to write *Timothy Richard of China*

⁸⁴ Soothill did not attend but was listed as 'The Rev. W. E. Soothill, Shansi University' - one of the Correspondents of Commission X9a, World Missionary Conference, 1910, Vol 3, p xv.

⁸⁵ *The Times* 16 June 1913.

⁸⁶ *Methodist Recorder*, uncertain date, c January 1946, 'And they Offered their Gifts ...' by Lady Dorothea Hosie.

⁸⁷ *Obituary Notices. Professor W.E. Soothill, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1935, p. 784.

⁸⁸ Dorothea Hosie, Foreword to *P*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ *Obituary Notices. Professor W.E. Soothill, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1935, p. 784.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Review of Soothill's *Timothy Richard* in *The East and the West*, Vol, 22, No. 86, April 1924, p. 181.

⁹² *Ibid.*

which appeared in 1924, the life story of his friend and missionary hero. Lectures given that year were published as *China and the West* (1925) and threaded through the history of this topic. He concentrated on the complex events of the nineteenth century but showed that China had for much of its history interacted well with the rest of the world. Then in 1927 he produced *A History of China* which in fewer than 100 pages was a masterpiece of compression. He also published *China and England* (1928) and *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law: or, The Lotus Gospel* (1930).

In 1926 Soothill was a member of Lord Willingdon's delegation on the settlement of the Boxer indemnities. In Beijing a dinner was given in his honour by the Principal of Shanxi University who said '60 per cent of the civil officials of the province were old pupils of his.'⁹³

Soothill had long seen the need for a Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms to help scholars to study Far Eastern Buddhist texts. As he was working on this at Oxford he found that Dr Lewis Hodous of Hartford Theological Seminary, Connecticut, USA, was involved in a similar project and they agreed to collaborate. The two scholars consulted directly when Soothill was visiting Professor at Columbia University in the early days of their Chinese Department⁹⁴ and when Hodous made a brief visit to Oxford.⁹⁵

Although the *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* is now dated, Charles Muller has made a digital version because .there is a large amount of information contained within it that can't readily be found elsewhere.'⁹⁶ Muller continues

I was led, as a fellow lexicographer, to come away with an immense respect for the efforts of its compilers. Very early in the age of attempts at mixed Chinese-Roman typesetting, and several decades before the advent of copy machines, these two men, working on different continents, sent their handwritten manuscript back and forth by ship over the Atlantic ocean no less than four times.⁹⁷

He commended their 'very solid command of classical Chinese. Their renderings from these sources are accurate, insightful, and nuanced'.⁹⁸

Soothill's wife died in 1931 and his serious illness in 1934 turned out to be terminal and he died on May 14, 1935; a funeral service was held at Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford on 17 May 1935.⁹⁹ His daughter Dorothea, Lady Hosie,¹⁰⁰ helped with the final revisions of text and indexes

⁹³ *Obituary Notices. Professor W.E. Soothill, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1935, p. 783. Clearly there is some ambiguity about the status of higher education in Shanxi after 1911.

⁹⁴ <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Spring2002/AsianStudies.html>

⁹⁵ Professor Hodous's Preface in *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* by William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, dated 1937, http://mahajana.net/texts/kopia_lokalna/soothill-hodous.html

⁹⁶ Charles Muller. Why Digitize Soothill? http://mahajana.net/texts/kopia_lokalna/soothill-hodous.html

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, May 15, 1935, p.19.

of *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: with Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index* (1937) by William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous which was published two years later. His manuscript for a major study of Kingship in Chinese was completed 'on the Good Friday before his death'¹⁰¹ and after editorial work by Lady Hosie and G. F. Hudson was published in 1951 as *The Hall of Light: A study of Early Chinese Kingship*.

Conclusions

That Soothill's work for Christ in China left its mark was seen in the short term by Mrs T Butler who toured the area in 1922 and saw the churches, schools and hospital he started and met people who knew the missionary couple.¹⁰² At the National Christian Conference at Shanghai in May 1922 she heard an outstanding address by Dr T. T. Lew who 'was educated in our Wenchow College',¹⁰³ and was one of Soothill's students.¹⁰⁴ Lady Hosie who visited China in 1936 not only saw the position in Wenzhou but in the north met graduates of the original Shanxi University who were in influential positions and felt indebted to Soothill.¹⁰⁵

In the longer term his language studies and the infrastructures he created for ecclesiastical, educational and medical institutions left a substantial foundation for others to build on. In addition he clearly encouraged Chinese initiatives, a prominent feature of twenty first century Wenzhou Christianity. Indeed, Wenzhou city, known now as China's Jerusalem, and Zhejiang Province, in which Soothill worked, have more Christians today than most other parts of China¹⁰⁶ suggesting that the work of Soothill and other missionaries bore fruit.¹⁰⁷ His memory has been revived in a website 'My Wenzhou',¹⁰⁸ which has a page recognising him as a pioneer Christian Missionary to the city. In 2011, Li Xinde, visiting researcher, King's China Institute, King's College London was investigating Missionaries and Modern Wenzhou Society with William Edward Soothill as a significant case study. Recently he remarked that Soothill was 'a down-to-earth missionary and a serious sinologist' and 'advanced the communication between missionaries and the native Wenzhou people, and the merging of Christianity and Chinese society and culture.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰ She was the author of several books about China and had seen her late mother's book *A Passport to China: being the tale of her long and friendly sojourning amongst a strangely interesting people* through to its publication. Lucy Soothill had died in 1931 at the age of 73 a grievous loss to her husband and family.

¹⁰¹ Obituary W.E. Soothill, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1935, p. 784.

¹⁰² Butler, Mrs T., *Missions as I saw them*: London, Seeley, Service, 1924, pp 111-43

¹⁰³ Op. cit., p. 151. This is Liu Tingfang otherwise known as Timothy Tin-fang Lew a prominent Christian leader; see <http://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/l/liu-tingfang.php>

¹⁰⁴ Lady Hosie mentions that Dr Lew was one of her father's pupils; Hosie, Lady Dorothea, *The Pool of Ch'ien Lung*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944, p. 95.

¹⁰⁵ Hosie, Lady Dorothea, *Brave New China*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938/40, pp. 108-23, 219ff.

¹⁰⁶ Lambert, Tony, *China's Christian Millions*, Oxford: Monarch Books, 2006 ed., pp. 232f, 276f.

¹⁰⁷ Aikman, D, *Jesus in Beijing*, Oxford: Monarch, 2006, devotes a chapter to Christianity in and from Wenzhou which he traces back to the China Inland Mission. Cao, Nanlai, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011, describes the vibrant, entrepreneurial Protestant Christianity of 21st Century Wenzhou.

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.mywenzhou.com/christianity.htm> gives brief biographical information (some inaccurate) and a downloadable file of *A Passport to China*

¹⁰⁹ Email to author from Li Xinde, 14/10/12.

As well as introducing certain western ideas to China, Soothill and his daughter after him built understanding of China in the West. As Li Xinde puts it, 'he strengthened the religious exchanges and dialogues between Sino-West, and made a great contribution to Chinese religious studies in the West.'¹¹⁰ In Andrew Walls's description of missionary scholars Soothill would likely be in the first rank as an expert on Chinese linguistics and his other scholarly work would most probably show 'competence and industry',¹¹¹ the product of tremendous energy and enthusiasm. Perhaps his greatest contribution was an attitude. Professor Hodous remarked that Soothill's linguistic skills were immense - 'But even more valuable was his profound insight into and deep sympathy with the religious life and thought of another people.'¹¹² Not surprisingly it was said that he had 'a quite enormous love and respect for the Chinese people and their civilisation'.¹¹³

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¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Walls, Andrew F., *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996, pp 197, 200.

¹¹² Professor Hodous's Preface in A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms by William Edward Soothill and Lewis Hodous, dated 1937, http://mahajana.net/texts/kopia_lokalna/soothill-hodous.html

¹¹³ Soothill Obituary, *Minutes of the Methodist Conference*, 1935, p. 214.

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