

# JAMES EVANS AMONG THE CREES: A MISSIONARY GOES HOME

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

*To-day the ashes of James Evans, Methodist missionary to the Cree Indians, are to be collected in Hull by the Secretary of the International Methodist Historical Society and sent to Canada.*

James Evans is still revered in Manitoba, not only as "Nistum Ayumeaookemow," the first missionary, but as "Keché Ayumeaookemow"—the great missionary. Although born in Hull in 1801, and buried there in 1846, "home" for Evans was his beloved Hudson Bay Territory. The return on which he had set his heart was postponed by a breakdown in health, and apparently cancelled for ever by his death. The Rev. William Vevers, who buried him in the "Preachers Vault" of Waltham Street Chapel on November 25, 1846, acknowledged where he really belonged when under the heading "abode" of the burial register he wrote—not "9, Whitefriargate, Hull," where he was living with his cousin Charles Lundy, "milliner and straw hat maker," but—"Hudson Bay Territory, Canada." For six crowded years his heart had been there, and now at last, a century after his death, his earthly remains are being returned to the care of his beloved Crees.

## HUDSON'S BAY APPEAL

The drift of Indian trappers and *voyageurs* to the Canadian south, seeking fuller knowledge about the Great Spirit proclaimed by white missionaries, had furnished a warning signal during the 1830s for the Hudson's Bay Company. "The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay" accordingly sent an appeal to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for missionaries, and promised to underwrite their expenses. Three young men sailed from England to work under the leadership of a seasoned missionary of 39—James Evans. Already he bore the marks of the pioneer—courage, adaptability, ingenuity, a spirit of adventure, and a selfless dedication to the service of God through the service of his red-skinned brethren, among whom he had already laboured for 12 years as teacher and preacher.

In 1840 Evans arrived at Norway House, the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters on Lake Winnipeg, only a few months before an apprenticed clerk who later made the frozen north vivid for generations of youthful readers, many of whom still love their R. M. Ballantyne. Quickly he got to grips with the many unique problems, and found the answers to most. His greatest difficulty led to his greatest service for Christian missions in general. The completely illiterate braves who came to Norway House to exchange their furs for food and piece-goods and trinkets were only there for a day or

two at a time. Nor was this essential difficulty of access effectively overcome by the most arduous routine of travelling by canoe and dog-sled which Evans set himself. For he was in charge of the largest and loneliest mission field in the world—an area of about a million square miles, with a scattered population of 100,000 Red Indians. Mass-evangelism under such conditions was impossible without mass-education. "Each one teach one" was a principle which he already understood and practised, but the process of acquiring the Cree alphabet and then laboriously learning to spell out clumsy looking words was quite impossible in a few days—and by the time another haul was brought in the tiny gain in literacy had gone.

## THE TALKING BIRCH BARK

Dedicated ingenuity applied to a considerable analytical study of the Cree language showed Evans a way out of the impasse. He devised a system of syllabic characters, nine geometrical figures reminiscent of the shorthand which he had studied. These figures represented the nine basic consonants of the Cree language, and were oriented to denote the four basic vowel sounds. He carved his own type-moulds with a pen-knife, melted tea-chest linings to make type, mixed soot with sturgeon oil for ink, and with the aid of a fur-baling press managed to imprint his characters on pages of birch bark. Within a few hours he was able to teach the Crees to read passages chosen from the Bible or the hymnbook. They returned to their hunting camps carrying a few pages of birch bark wrapped in a deerskin folder and covered with strange-looking signs. Around a hundred camp fires they were able to interpret these signs, "making the birch bark talk." The secret of the talking birch bark was passed on to such good effect that within a generation practically every member of the Algonquin tribes became literate. To-day there is a considerable literature in this syllabic script, and Evans's principle has been adopted by all denominations working among Indians and Esquimaux.

## TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

So well did Evans succeed with his mission that he found himself in trouble with the Hudson Bay authorities. A little religion was a good thing to keep the Indians available and contented, but you could have too much of a good thing! Evans's teetotal principles caused offence, but his teaching Indians to observe a day of rest created a near-panic. For when the ice cleared from lakes and rivers, the brigades of *voyageurs* must set off on a long and arduous journey which was always a race against time, and sometimes an unsuccessful race, so that the furs were held up for a year. How could the company afford this Sabbatarian luxury! Evans insisted that the seventh day rest would be a physical as well as a spiritual asset, but the despotic Governor would not listen. Even a practical demonstration by a group of

Christian Indians, who arrived at their destination earlier and fresher after working only six days out of every seven, made no difference.

Evans became the butt for abuse, scandal, underhand crippling of his labours, and eventually open litigation. He was sent back to England to answer charges preferred both by the Missionary Society and the Hudson's Bay Company. Investigation proved him completely innocent. But his enemies had achieved their purpose. He was too ill to return to his Indians. All he could do was to tour England firing Methodists and others with his own enthusiasm for the pioneer work in the frozen north. It was after one such missionary meeting, at Keelby, in north Lincolnshire, that he collapsed and died during a late night chat with his host. The Cree Indians were upon his heart to the end. As his wife had retired a few minutes earlier she had turned at the doorway and said, "Well, my dear, it is pleasant to think of going back to those dear people; but I have had a strange presentiment all day that we will never see Norway House again." Whether he too had a presentiment of death or not, Evans's reply was: "Well, my dear, heaven is just as near from England as from Norway House."

## HAPPY COINCIDENCE

The great-great-grandchildren of "those dear people" are now eagerly awaiting his return to Norway House, where a cairn is being prepared to receive his ashes on the occasion of the opening of a new million-dollar school for the Indians. This is one of the happier results from the sad aftermath of war. The Waltham Street Methodist Chapel in the centre of Hull, one of the architectural showplaces of Methodism a century ago, was gutted by bombing, and in view of the nearness of the Queen's Hall it was decided not to replace the building. Public notice was given by the Rev. W. D. Watts, B.D., Minister of the Queen's Hall, that permission was being sought from the Home Secretary for a mass cremation of the 250 bodies buried there, opportunity being thus afforded for relatives to claim their dead. At almost the same time came an inquiry from Manitoba to the Rev. Dr. Frank Baker, as secretary of the International Methodist Historical Society, for information about the resting-place of the Rev. James Evans, who was understood to have died during "a Methodist conference at Keelby." These two apparently unrelated streams of event converged at exactly the right time to carry James Evans back to Hudson Bay. Had the Manitoba inquiry been a year earlier it could hardly have happened; a year later, and it could not possibly have happened. But it *has* happened, and we say "God speed!" to one of England's worthiest sons as after a century's exile he returns to his beloved Indians.