

The Presbyterian Bishop of Chiang Mai

Introduction

If one were to choose the one individual, who has exercised the most influence over the course of northern Thai church history, that one person would have to be the Rev. Daniel McGilvary. Although the vision for a northern mission originated with others, notably his father-in-law, Dr. Dan Beach Bradley, McGilvary pursued that vision with a determination that eventually brought it into being in 1867. He took the exploratory trips that charted its expansion. He pushed for the founding of schools and hospitals, as key agents for evangelizing the North. When he died in 1911, the city of Chiang Mai is supposed to have shut down in mourning over this beloved elderly man, who had lived and worked in Chiang Mai for 44 years.

All of the foregone facts are true, and they tell an important part of the story of the founding and development of northern Thai Christianity in its first decades. They do not, however, tell the whole story. By the 1920s, indeed, Daniel McGilvary had already become an almost legendary figure, beyond criticism and question. He was truly what the northern Thai called him, *phokru luang* (literally, Highest Father Teacher). What has all but disappeared from the historical record is another fact, namely that at the time of his death an important faction in the Laos Mission resented his influence and his opinions regarding certain fundamental principles of mission policy. Among themselves, they sarcastically referred to him as "the Bishop of Chiang Mai," not a kindly thing to say among Presbyterians.

The primary resources previously available, notably at the Payap University Archives, carry no such references and contain only vague hints of anything amiss between McGilvary and some of his colleagues in the mission. Among the things revealed by Callender in the field correspondence contained in the two letter books now housed at the Presbyterian Historical Society is the fact that he was a leading member of the anti-McGilvary faction in the Laos Mission. Apart from these two letter books there are only obscure hints in the rest of the records of the mission suggesting that such a faction might exist. Politically, Dr. McGilvary dominated the councils of the mission from its inception in 1867 until roughly 1890 when the number of missionaries, stations, and mission institutions expanded to the point where no one person could dominate it, especially given the communication and travel difficulties of the day. McGilvary himself had also begun to take long annual evangelistic trips that took him away from the mission for several months a year. It also seems that McGilvary did not attempt to dominate the mission, at least not consciously. He remained, however, a powerful figure in a highly politicized mission that included any number of other "strong" personalities, and he took stands on issues in mission politics, which proved unpopular among many of the other members of the mission. The story goes like this.

The Story

In a letter dated 23 December 1909 to Dr. William A. Briggs of the Chiang Rai Station, Callender gives us a first glimpse of his less than flattering view of Dr. McGilvary. He is discussing the decision just taken by the Laos Mission in its annual meeting to transfer the Palmer family from Chiang Mai Station to the Nan Station. Callender calls it a surprising move, and although he does not explain why it was surprising it is likely that the Palmers had been making a good contribution in Chiang Mai and were needed there. Why, then, did the mission send them to Nan? Callender writes, "I surmise that the Palmers were not wanted in Chiengmai by the Harris-McGilvary element. Otherwise I do not think the good old man would be so anxious to assist Nan to the detriment of Chiengmai." The powerful McGilvary clan, led by McGilvary himself and his son-in-law, the Rev. William Harris, that is, disliked the Palmers for some unspecified reason and used its power to have the family removed to the distant Nan Station, the Siberia of the Laos Mission. Callender was also suggesting that the Palmers' move to Nan was forced on them, although he notes in the same letter that he talked with the Palmers personally, and they were willing to go to Nan. The

tone of Callender's letter implies that this move was not in the best interests of the mission; the McGilvary faction, in short, put personal preferences ahead of the good of the work. The reference to McGilvary as "the good old man" may or may not have been sarcastic, but it is less reverential than we might expect for a founder (along with his wife, Sophia) of the mission and a senior missionary then 81 years' old with 42 years' service in the Laos Mission behind him. Finally, the quotation suggests something of a small station against large station feeling. Chiang Mai dominated the Laos Mission in numbers of missionaries, size of institutions, and numbers of churches; and in the years after 1910 there were clear tensions between Chiang Mai and the smaller stations of the mission. Callender was definitely a "small station man."

The Palmers were not the only ones, according to Callender, to suffer from the political intrigues of the McGilvary "element." Those machinations also victimized the Rev. William C. Dodd (1857-1919), a man who was emerging as a major voice in the Laos Mission. Dodd and Callender were close friends who had worked together in the aborted Kengtung Station. Dodd, it appears, had gotten himself on the wrong side of Dr. McGilvary, and in a letter to Dodd dated 24 December 1910 Callender states that, "Of course, you know that you are not wanted in Chiang Mai by the McGilvary-Harris element." He speculates in this letter that the McGilvary faction planned to have the Rev. Roderick Gillies, another McGilvary son-in-law, reassigned to Chiang Mai—partly to forestall the possibility of Dodd's being located in Chiang Mai to start a theological training school and partly for "sentimental reasons." Callender was given to understand that if Dr. McGilvary "should be called to his reward" his wife, Sophia, wanted to live with the Gillies. "That's fine for her," Callender observed, "but," he asked, "should such weighty matters be determined by sentimentality? Dr. Mason says that when the Dr. goes Mrs. McGilvary will soon follow him, so the sentimental reason scarcely obtains anyway."

Callender once again accused McGilvary and his party of influencing the placement of missionaries on the basis of personal feelings and needs. The McGilvary-Harris "element" supposedly did not like Dodd and so did not want him in Chiang Mai, whatever the need or his abilities to meet that need. The McGilvarys, furthermore, had selfish reasons for wanting the Gillies in Chiang Mai, which yet again had nothing to do with the good of the mission. Given the limitations we face in the documentary record, it is not possible to judge whether or not the McGilvary party had such deep feelings against Dodd. If so, we can sympathize with Callender's sense of scandal that it would allow those feelings to interfere with the placement of a key missionary in an important position. On the other hand, his attitude about Sophia McGilvary wanting to spend her last years with the Gillies seems to be callous, unkind, and otherwise somewhat uncharacteristic of Callender, who had a kind-hearted streak in him. Given Sophia's long service to and important place in the life of the Laos Mission, one would think that the mission would want to honor her desire (if she did in fact so desire) to live with the Gillies, if at all possible. Callender's speculations about how long Sophia would survive her husband may not have been intended to be hard-hearted, but the tone of his remarks does seem unfeeling and suggests little sense of respect for either of the mission's senior most missionaries. As it turned out, he and Dr. Mason were wrong anyway. McGilvary died in 1911, and Sophia lived on until 1923.

It seems evident from another letter that Callender sent to Briggs, this one dated 30 June 1911, that Callender's feelings about the "McGilvary-Harris element" had a political context, which may have been more important than personal and sentimental issues. Since the early 1890s, the majority of the members of the Laos Mission had been pressing the Board of Foreign Missions in New York City for permission to expand their work into the Shan States of Burma and beyond. They argued that there were millions of Tai-speakers—ethnic cousins of the northern Thai—throughout a huge area encompassing Eastern Burma, French Indo-China, and southern China who had not been evangelized and who could be best reached by the Laos Mission. Callender, Briggs, and Dodd were key leaders of the expansion party, which as noted above succeeded in briefly opening a station in the city of Kengtung in the Shan States in 1904, a city that remained the strategic center of their desire to expand into the Shan States even after the Presbyterian Kengtung Station was closed in 1907. The expansionists faced, however, three difficulties obstructing their

wishes. First, the Presbyterian Church USA had only limited resources for such an expansion. Second, Baptist missionaries working in the Shan States of Burma where Kengtung was located objected adamantly to the idea that the Presbyterians should be allowed into "their" territory. Third, Dr. McGilvary disagreed with the drive to expand Presbyterian work in Kengtung State.

The Kengtung enthusiasts found all three obstacles frustrating. They tried to override the first by a public relations campaign aimed at convincing the Board of Foreign Missions and the Presbyterian Church generally that the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. had a "special calling and obligation" to reach the Tai peoples of inland Asia. No one else, they contended, could perform this task. They dealt with the second problem, the Baptists, primarily by carrying out extensive fact-finding missions aimed at proving that the Shan peoples of Burma are really kissing cousins of the northern Thai, and, therefore, the Laos Mission was the best missionary agency for bringing them to Christ. The Baptists denied the Presbyterians' arguments, and the two sides conducted a decades-long debate, which eventually proved more wearisome than helpful to the Presbyterian leadership in New York City. The most immediate and most manageable obstacle facing Callender and his expansionist colleagues was "the good old man," McGilvary. They could deal with him politically.

McGilvary over the course of the years had written a number of letters to the Board of Foreign Missions voicing his doubts about the wisdom of the Laos Mission expanding into Kengtung. Central to his worries was the observation that it did not seem to be the best use of missionary forces for two missions to occupy the same territory. This was an unnecessary and potentially troublesome duplication of efforts.¹ His objections to Kengtung seem reasonable, and they were shared, at times, by other members of the mission. The Kengtung expansionists, however, felt that McGilvary's opposition flew in the face of God's clear call to expansion; and in that light they had trouble seeing that there could be an honest difference of opinion concerning Kengtung. They also feared his influence with the Board.

Matters came to a head in mid-1911 as the Kengtung party pushed for a mission resolution supporting immediate expansion, which it planned to send to the Board. The smaller stations were all in favor of the resolution, but Chiang Mai Station seemed to be split between those siding with McGilvary and those supporting expansion. Callender, thus, wrote to Briggs his 30 June 1911 letter, cited above, in which he complained about the Chiang Mai Station's opposition to Kengtung. He asked Briggs what was the matter with that station's members that they could oppose opening a station in Kengtung. "Why," he inquired with some bitterness, "do some of the Chiengmai brethren allow [the] sentiment of a dear old man 83 years old to blind their sense of right?"

His question is a revealing one. It betrays the depths of his personal desire to see the old Kengtung Station reopened and his personal resentment against McGilvary for opposing that desire. McGilvary was no longer a wise missionary veteran in Callender's eyes. He was an old man whose opinions amounted only to "sentiment" that was not grounded in factual reality. The number 83 emphasized how truly old, truly sentimental "dear" Dr. McGilvary actually was. These old man's sentiments, furthermore, blinded some members of the mission from seeing what was right. The key word in the sentence is "right," and we need to keep in mind the moral and theological weight that the word carried in this context. To be right was to be doing God's will. The expansion party frequently cited the biblical image of Paul's vision of the Macedonian Call (Acts 16:9) to explain their desire for Kengtung and the region beyond. Callender, in sum, accused McGilvary of thwarting God's will, which he took to be a result of the senility of this "dear old man."

Callender's correspondence from late 1910 through mid-1911, then, accused the McGilvary-Harris faction of manipulating the placement of missionaries in Chiang Mai for personal reasons and obstructing the clear call of God to the Laos Mission to expand into Kengtung State. Among the specifics of the first charge was the supposition that the McGilvarys wanted their son-in-law appointed to Chiang Mai instead of Dodd,

against whom they were supposed to have a prejudice. Even Callender soon had to admit things were not quite what he supposed them to be. In a letter to Dodd written 6 July 1911, Callender reported that the Chiang Mai Station had unanimously passed a resolution supporting reopening the Kengtung Station. The resolution had not been passed easily, however, and he claimed that it had been successful only as the result of a deal that would bring Gillies to Chiang Mai instead of Dodd. Callender admitted he was wrong, that is, about McGilvary trying to frustrate mission plans for a station in Kengtung, but he was still sure that McGilvary was trying to keep Dodd out of Chiang Mai. Then, in a subsequent letter to Dodd, dated 16 August 1911, Callender had to admit that he also had been wrong about there being a "deal" to use Gillies to keep Dodd out of Chiang Mai, demonstrated by the fact that the mission had decided to appoint the Gillies family to the Phrae Station. He now went so far as to tell Dodd that he felt that if Dodd wanted to work in Chiang Mai no one would object.

Callender, however, continued to express resentment against Dr. McGilvary. Between the above two letters to Dodd, the first in July and the second in August, Callender had gained more information about the Chiang Mai resolution. It turned out to be a watered-down, general resolution supporting the opening of new work "in the North." It did not specifically mention Kengtung. In the 16 August 1911 letter to Dodd, Callender wrote, "The action of Chiangmai Station, as reported by Mason, still leaves a wee hole for the 'bishop' of Chiangmai to oppose Kengtung as the exact location of the station in the north." Fearing that McGilvary would continue to use his influence with the Board on the question of Kengtung, Callender went on to ask, rhetorically, "Is it not time for the Board to understand that this Mission has no bishop and that two or three dissenting members should not carry the judgment of the Mission?"

These last comments provide an important measure of Callender's resentment of McGilvary. In spite of the fact that all of his speculations about keeping Dodd out of Chiang Mai, putting Gillies there in his place, and McGilvary's opposition to northward expansion had proven wrong, he still sarcastically referred to McGilvary as the "bishop of Chiang Mai." He still could not accept McGilvary's opposition to re-starting the work in Kengtung as representing an honest and understandable difference of opinion. He still suspected that McGilvary might go behind the mission's back to influence the Board directly. He need not have worried; so far as we can tell from the missionary correspondence with the Board, McGilvary did not write them on the matter, and on 22 August 1911 he died, thus bringing to an end Callender's string of letters lamenting the supposed influence of the "McGilvary-Harris element" over the Laos Mission.

A letter from Callender to the Rev. D. G. Collins written nearly two years after Dr. McGilvary's death, dated 29 May 1913, suggests that the McGilvary-Harris element remained in place and, in Callender's eyes, a problem for the rest of the mission. Collins had, evidently, written to Callender telling him that a rumor was being bandied about in the Chiang Mai station blaming Collins for the Rev. Evander McGilvary's resignation from the mission twenty years' earlier. That rumor was being used as an excuse to obstruct the appointment of Collins' daughter as a member of the mission. Evander McGilvary, it should be noted, was the son of Daniel and Sophia McGilvary and had joined the Laos Mission in 1890 with the express intent of translating the Bible into northern Thai. Evander, however, took what in the 1890s was seen as an "advanced" view of the Bible, specifically rejecting the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. The Presbyterian Church's General Assembly of 1893 ruled such views heretical, and soon thereafter Evander McGilvary resigned from the mission. It should be noted that it seems clear from the extant record of the Laos Mission that there were some efforts to retain him in the mission in spite of his theological views, and that Evander himself refused to remain.

In the letter of 29 May 1913, Callender disclaims any personal knowledge of the cause of Evander's leaving the Laos Mission since the events just described took place before he joined the mission. However, he had never heard anything that would confirm the rumor blaming Collins and himself, and he understood that Evander McGilvary resigned of his own accord. Callender speculated that the source of the rumor was the jealousy of unnamed members of the Chiang Mai Station against Collins, and he wrote he was sorry for

such jealousy, observing, "It seems to me that jealousies and misunderstandings cause more trouble than all else put together." Callender does not name names, but we can only surmise that members of the McGilvary clan were the source of the rumor and the resentment. No one else would have cause to use this particular justification for denying the Collins' daughter an appointment to the mission.

The Chiang Mai Station, that is, probably continued to be divided into McGilvary and anti-McGilvary factions even after the death of Dr. McGilvary. There is cause to suspect that the division lingered on at least until 1920-1921 when an important faction of the Chiang Mai Station attempted to prevent the union of the Laos Mission with its sister mission to the south, the Siam Mission. All of the smaller stations in the Laos Mission favored that union as a way to end the power of the Chiang Mai Station in the mission; and while there is no mention of the role of the McGilvary clan and allies in the other records of the mission it is possible and even likely that they would have resisted union with the Siam Mission for reasons of both politics and sentiment.

Reflections

When read in the context of his field correspondence, one cannot but be struck by how uncharacteristic Callender's views on McGilvary were. During the years' covered in the letter books, he came into conflict with several individuals, sometimes over personal matters and sometimes over matters of mission policy. He consciously tried to behave according to his understanding of what it means to be a Christian gentleman, and he virtually never indulged in expressions of petty, sarcastic, and resentful feelings towards his protagonists except in the case of "the Bishop of Chiang Mai." Why did he have such bitter feelings against Dr. McGilvary? He never explains, and we can only speculate on the matter.

McGilvary's opposition to the Kengtung Station almost certainly heavily influenced Callender's feelings towards him. Callender's correspondence reveals a deep sense of loss, of grief over the closing of that station in 1907 and an intense longing to go back to Kengtung. He could not possibly understand why McGilvary, one of the premier evangelists of his day, opposed the Presbyterian presence in Kengtung. That opposition must have felt like a personal betrayal to Callender. More generally, as already pointed out above, Callender belonged to a mission faction that felt God's call to expansion into Kengtung State and beyond with a deep intensity. McGilvary's attitudes, again, simply did not make sense to him. They seemed perverse, faithless, and timid. Callender could deal with them only by insinuating that McGilvary must be senile and by turning McGilvary's undoubted stature in the mission against him with the epithet, "bishop." Callender's almost snide attitude toward McGilvary, then, is a gauge of how important the whole matter of establishing a permanent Presbyterian station in Kengtung was to most of the members of the Laos Mission, Callender himself in the forefront.

Callender's comments also help us to better understand McGilvary's role in the life of the Mission in later years. It seems from other sources available to us that, as indicated above, his influence in the mission waned. The Callender correspondence suggests a more complicated picture. On the one hand, a substantial faction of the mission seems to have resented him for his unpopular stand on Kengtung. On the other hand, Callender still considered him to be a powerful figure in the mission, one who could get people he did not like transferred to places like Nan. Callender thus seems to have felt that McGilvary was a man who still had a great deal of influence over the Board and used that influence to frustrate the desires of the majority of the mission. It appears, then, that by 1910 McGilvary no longer was able to take positive leadership in the life of the Laos Mission; his views on Kengtung, plus the inevitable animosities between persons, limited him to the role of a "spoiler," one who could more easily keep things from happening than make things happen. There is no clear evidence that McGilvary actually played the role of spoiler, as Callender's several misguided speculations about what McGilvary and his "element" imply, but apparently those allied with Callender still saw him as a largely negative influence in terms of his leadership role in the Mission.

Finally, it seems to me that Callender's attitude about McGilvary reflects more poorly on Callender than on McGilvary. Whoever was ultimately correct concerning the Kengtung question, McGilvary took a principled stand that put mission comity before the wants of the Laos Mission itself. So far as we can tell now, McGilvary felt that the Presbyterians should not intrude in Kengtung unless the Baptists welcomed their presence, which they did not. It was not as if the Laos Mission lacked for work to do in its own territory. In light of what we know today, my own feeling is that McGilvary was right, the expansionists were wrong. They wasted incredible amounts of time and resources chasing a receding mirage at a time when the Laos Mission only had limited amounts of time and resources.

We can understand that what seems clear on hindsight today was not nearly so clear in 1910 and 1911, but what is striking in Callender's correspondence is the fact that he seems to never have stopped to consider that McGilvary might have had a point. He does not seem to have taken into consideration that, in fact, no one in the history of the mission could match McGilvary's own record regarding expansion. No one had faced nearly the dangers he had faced nor taken the risks he took. He was a man of proven courage and an obviously deeply principled Christian. Why didn't Callender take all of this into account? The answer to this question is surely not simple. It is possible that McGilvary did use his influence from time to time to ship someone out of Chiang Mai that he felt should not be there, for whatever reason. It is possible that McGilvary did not effectively communicate his concerns to his colleagues. It is also certain that Callender, Dodd, Briggs, and other members of the mission simply could not compromise on the matter of Kengtung. They could not treat kindly opposition to what they thought was God's will—not even when that opposition came from a man of McGilvary's quality and experience.

The contents of the Callender letter books, among other things, serve to remind us of the peculiarly evangelistic and theological nature of Laos Mission politics. The members of the mission had their personal visions for what they took to be God's work. They could not compromise those visions, even when individuals of the quality of a Daniel McGilvary disagreed with them. Some of them also, evidently, could not treat those visions with an eye to the practical, mundane, and very tangible restraints imposed on the Laos Mission by the realities of limited funds and personnel. As a consequence, the Laos Mission was not frequently an intensely politicized arena of contending wills, which fact sometimes had a highly negative impact on personal relationships as well as the institutional health and effectiveness of the mission.. As Hazel Brunner, a young missionary, wrote at roughly the period under discussion here, "The mission field is just like a great big family only without the family love."²

¹See McGilvary to Brown, 9 November 1905, 18 December 1905, and 25 December 1907, Records of the Board of Foreign Missions.

²Brunner to Home Folks, 18 April 1914, in Claralice Hanna, *Letters From Hazel* (Typescript, 1983), quoted in Herbert R. Swanson, *Khrischak Muang Nua: A Study in Northern Thai Church History* (Bangkok: Chuan Press, 1984), 73.