



George Davis

This was the vision of George Thompson Brown Davis, “a great little man, full of earnest energy,”¹ who dedicated his life to the spread of the Gospel all over the world. Did he realise his vision of a million Bible readers worldwide? And how was Australia part of this vision?

George T B Davis, later known as “George Take-a-Book Davis”, had been a newspaper writer in Chicago, then went to England to write up the Torrey-Alexander revival meetings for American and English journals. He said:

I had not been in the meetings long before Mr. Alexander asked me to undertake personal work in leading people to Christ. I carried with me a Bible whenever I went to the meetings, but did not have one all the time. A few weeks later in Liverpool, England, there was a big sporting man who had been a referee in prize fights and a heavy drinking man. One night I heard the story of his conversion. He held up a little Testament and said:- ‘Friends, I want to tell you that whenever I change my coat I change my Bible. I have always got it with me.’ I was seated in the audience listening to him, and as he spoke I felt ashamed of myself. I had been a Christian for years and had been doing this personal work, but I did not always carry a Testament or Bible with me. The speaker had been a wicked man, and had only been converted a short time, but he loved the Book so much that he always carried it with him. I said to myself, ‘God helping me, I will carry the Bible with me wherever I go from now.’ I began to do this and found it such a big help that I decided to help other people by giving them Testaments to read and to carry about with them. This led me to a grand discovery. I found in the gift of a little Testament an easy method of getting at a man’s heart and speaking to him of Christianity. And it transformed personal work from a drudgery to a delight. I had found this difficulty as a personal worker – it often took me so long getting round to the subject that I sometimes missed it altogether, but to hand a man a Bible is at once an introduction and a short cut to the point. He doesn’t wonder what you are driving at – he knows!²

Mr Davis started “Testament Circles” in Philadelphia whose members pledged to carry a New Testament in their pockets. In 1906, Charles Alexander heard of these, and decided in 1907 that he would encourage people to adopt that habit.

THE ORIGINAL POCKET TESTAMENT LEAGUE

When Mrs Helen Alexander (nee Cadbury), Charles’ wife, heard about the “Testament Circles”, she said to her husband and Mr Davis, “That reminds me of our old Pocket Testament League at the High School.”³ It was while attending the Edgbaston Girls’ High School at Birmingham that Helen had begun what was called the “Pocket Testament League.”⁴

Her grandfather, John Cadbury, had founded the Cadbury chocolate and



*Mrs Helen Alexander
(nee Cadbury)*

cocoa company in Birmingham, and later took his brother, Benjamin, into partnership. Her father, Richard Cadbury, and his brother George, sons of John, relocated the factory to Bournville, near Birmingham.⁵ The family were Quakers and Richard built a mission hall in one of the districts of Birmingham. It was there one Sunday night that Helen gave her life to Christ at the age of 12.

In quoting Scripture to her schoolmates, Helen found that she sometimes made mistakes, so she kept a Bible in her desk at school. At recess and other times she would take it out and show the girls how to become Christians. She commented that “it was a great opportunity, for the school was made up of girls representing all kinds of denominations and forms of religious belief, including many Unitarians and Jewesses.” However, there was no Bible in the playground as it was “not handy”, so Helen and other Christian girls had pockets made in their dresses for carrying either a Bible or New Testament. Conditions of membership for this group were that each girl should read the Bible daily, carry at least a Testament with her and try to lead people to Christ.⁶ Soon they had a membership of 60, and in 1893, when Helen was 16, they were known as the “Pocket Testament League.” For a while after the girls left school the League continued, then ceased.

When Charles Alexander heard about the Pocket Testament League (PTL) he immediately decided to revive it. It became a prominent feature in his work and was officially launched in Philadelphia in 1908 during an evangelistic campaign with Dr J Wilbur Chapman.

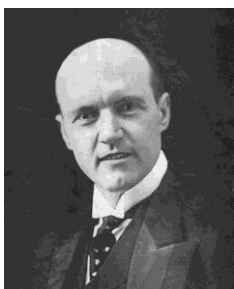
THE FOUNDATION FOR REVIVALS IN AUSTRALIA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

It should be emphasised that well before the Chapman-Alexander campaigns in Australia, thousands of Christians all over the country had been praying for revival. Added to this were Christian organisations such as The Evangelisation Society of Australia, The Christian Endeavour Movement, The British and Foreign Bible Society (later The Bible Society) and The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), which gave strong support to visiting evangelists, including Dr R A Torrey and Charles Alexander in 1902, Charles and Helen Alexander in 1907, and Dr Chapman and Charles Alexander and their teams in 1909 and 1912.

Helen Alexander wrote about a decade later: “With such a corps of workers, supported by the efforts of local ministers and committees, and with thousands of prayers going up from the United States and Canada, as well as from all parts of Australia, it would have been strange indeed if the blessing of God had not been poured out in abundant measure.”⁷

THE FIRST CHAPMAN-ALEXANDER CAMPAIGN

The Pocket Testament League (PTL) was introduced to Australia by Dr Chapman and Charles Alexander during their campaign in 1909. Mrs Helen Alexander accompanied her husband and did personal work with women. George Davis, who was also one of the party, wrote that “the idea seemed to take the country by storm.” Before the mission party arrived in Australia, 35,000 special League Testaments were shipped from London to



Mr Charles M Alexander



Dr J Wilbur Chapman

Melbourne. These were sold or given away after a few weeks so 40,000 more were ordered. This supply was also soon exhausted because the demand was so great.

It was in Australia that a new part of the work was established with local secretaries in as many churches as possible. They promoted the work of the League among their congregations, in the Christian Endeavour, Sunday Schools and other organisations such as the YMCA and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). They obtained membership cards (or pledge cards) from headquarters which were given out at meetings. *The Methodist*, June, 1909, stated the pledge: "I hereby accept membership in the Pocket Testament League by making it the rule of my life to read at least one chapter in the Bible each day, and to carry a Testament or Bible with me wherever I go."⁸ The cards were signed by those wanting to become PTL members.

In Melbourne, where the League was launched, 14,000 League Testaments were sold and distributed as well as other Bibles and Testaments before the end of the campaign. Meetings were held at the Exhibition Building, the Town Hall and other places. There was strong support from the clergy and church attendance increased. It is estimated that 200,000 people in Melbourne heard the Gospel preached by the missionaries, particularly Dr Chapman, and approximately another 300,000 in other districts where team members worked.⁹ George Davis wrote that "probably the most signal victory of the League in Melbourne was with the tramway men" - in a short time there were 300 League members among them. The headquarters for the PTL was at 376-382 Swanston Street, where the General Secretary for Australia, Miss Ada Shum, handled queries from all over the country.

A Miss H R Higgens who had had both arms and both legs amputated, devised a way of holding and manipulating a fountain pen on the stump of one arm to write Scripture verses and letters – no mean feat. Known as the "Sunshine invalid", she encouraged over a hundred people to become members of the League and gave New Testaments to those unable to buy them. Sometime later she also lost her voice and could only communicate by writing or pointing to letters of the alphabet. In a letter to George Davis, she wrote, "God has supplied all my need in such loving ways, and although I am suffering much I can truly say I am happy, and my blessings are innumerable."



Robert Harkness, accompanist and composer of hymn tunes

Mr Robert Harkness, the pianist of the mission party, came from Bendigo where a strong branch of the League was formed. It grew in the Sunday Schools and Christian Endeavour Societies. In addition, The Director of Education gave permission for League representatives to work with voluntary Scripture teachers.

In Ballarat there were more than a thousand people enrolled in the League. This was overseen by Mr R Tribe, the Secretary of the YMCA. Many boys carried New Testaments.

The Pocket Testament League was received as enthusiastically in Sydney as it had been in Melbourne. At the end of one week's campaign, there was a huge gathering of mostly women at the Town Hall, and one planned for men as well.¹⁰ Three hundred tramway men became members and 18 local secretaries were appointed at tram sheds to promote the movement. Weekly Gospel services were held at the YMCA, and at one of those the address was given by Mr T R Johnstone, the Chief Commissioner of Railways and Tramways for New South Wales. At La Perouse some

Aborigines came to Christ during the month of the mission in Sydney. Approximately 20,000 membership cards were distributed in Sydney, as well as thousands of New Testaments.

The Queensland headquarters for the PTL was at the YMCA in Brisbane. An advertisement said that local secretaries were wanted for the League in every church in Queensland. Anyone interested could communicate with Mr Edward Bignold, the organising secretary for the State.¹¹ During the meetings in Brisbane, the evangelists gained many recruits for the PTL.¹²

George Davis wrote that during the mission in Adelaide it was his privilege to address the prisoners in the Yatala Labour Prison which resulted in a considerable number of men joining the League. Several months later he received a letter from one of them, part of which said, "I am still sticking to the faith and trying to keep my promise. I am doing a long sentence, fifteen years. It is a struggle at times to keep believing. I sincerely hope that your mission is still prospering, and will continue to do so, and that wherever you go you will not forget the poor prisoners in the gaols, because I think they need your help and prayers more than others."

In Adelaide, at a crowded meeting at the Stow Memorial Church, Mrs Alexander presided and led the singing and Rev Ralph Norton, one of the team, addressed the church workers. Mr Davis said that during the previous few weeks between 20,000 and 30,000 people had pledged themselves to read a chapter of the New Testament each day, and to carry it with them.¹³



George Davis enrolls a new member

A few months after the conclusion of the mission in Adelaide, Mr R H White, who became the President of the PTL for South Australia and who was the manager of one of the largest manufacturing establishments in the state, presented a copy of the New Testament to each of his employees.

Many people joined the League in Western Australia during a mission with Rev W P Nicholson and Mr J Raymond Hemminger. At one meeting Mr Hemminger gave a copy of the New Testament to each of the first 100 men who joined the League.¹⁴ These two men, who had been part of the mission party, remained in Australia for a year or so following the Chapman-Alexander mission.

BETWEEN CAMPAIGNS



*Charles Alexander,
Song Leader*

In 1911, we read that, "Efforts are being made to resuscitate the work of the Pocket Testament League, organised by Mr. G. T. B. Davis during the Chapman-Alexander mission. It is likely that the committee of the N.S.W. auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society will take the matter up. The Society has recently issued new editions of the New Testament suitable for carrying in the vest pocket."¹⁵ Here we see the concern that the British and Foreign Bible Society had for the survival of the PTL and its willingness to help while the League was struggling after the missionaries left.

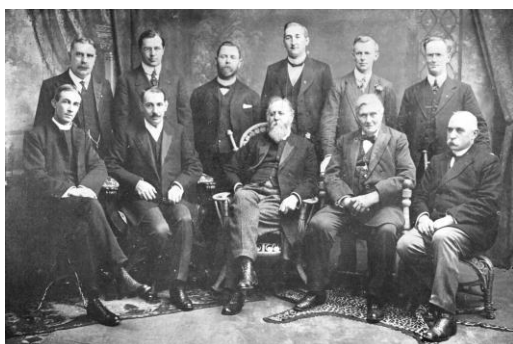


*Charles Alexander,
Song Leader*

THE SECOND CHAPMAN-ALEXANDER CAMPAIGN

Dr Chapman, Charles Alexander and their team returned to Australia early in 1912. At a meeting at the Queen's Hall, Perth, in March, an enthusiastic gathering sang hymns, including "The Glory Song" and "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." The missionaries were warmly welcomed by the Chairman, who said, "... the people of Western Australia had been disappointed that the principal members of the mission party had not extended their campaign to this State when they were previously in Australia."¹⁶ Arrangements were made for a mission in Western Australia to take place in November.

After spending two days in Melbourne, the missionaries travelled to New Zealand. They returned to Melbourne and conducted meetings from 20 April to 17 May in the Exhibition Building.



Adelaide Executive, 1912 campaign

In Adelaide 4,500 people were present at the Exhibition Building for the campaign. It was thought that 100,000 people had joined the League in Australia.¹⁷ As a result of the mission in Adelaide, a proposal was made to establish an interdenominational Bible school similar to the Moody Bible Institute of America.¹⁸ Mr and Mrs R H White felt moved to offer their home as the headquarters for the Institute and afterwards gave an additional piece of land adjoining it.

During the second campaign it was reported that, "Mr. George T. B. Davis became the promoter of the League in different parts of the world, and today the Pocket Testament League is in almost every country where Christianity is, and is spreading rapidly every week."¹⁹

In Sydney meetings had been so crowded that thousands were unable to enter the Town Hall, and one night it had been filled long before the advertised time of starting. Dr Chapman preached on the text, "Come, now, let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow," and added: "I don't know if the world is growing worse, and if Sydney is growing worse ... but not in any time I have preached the Gospel have I received so many sad letters from mothers, fathers, young men and women, from thieves and sinners."²⁰

At a children's meeting in Maitland, Mr Davis told the story of the PTL and asked everyone to carry a Testament or Gospel with them always. He recommended the League Testament which was beautifully illustrated, the coloured pictures having been taken from paintings by Queen Alexandra's art teacher.²¹

Later, in Brisbane, *The Brisbane Courier* reported:

The coming of the Chapman-Alexander Evangelistic Mission party to Brisbane marks the consummation of two years of organising and preparatory service on the part of the Australasian council of the campaign and the Queensland executive. From tomorrow, and extending over a period of some six weeks or more, the combined religious life of the community and the State will sympathetically follow the united efforts of what has been characterised as the greatest spiritual combination ever known in Australasia. Dr. J Wilbur

Chapman, Mr Charles M. Alexander and their party of mission specialists are conducting their meetings throughout the States of the Commonwealth and New Zealand as the outcome of a united and unanimous invitation from the great majority of the Churches extended to them at the close of their brief visit to Australia a little more than three years ago, and the manner in which the Evangelical Churches have unitedly thrown themselves into this enterprise has been an outstanding feature of the mission in the States already visited. ... Every member of the party is a specialist in his or her own line, and the peculiar qualifications of all will soon be familiar to the Brisbane public.²²



The members of the mission party for the second Chapman-Alexander campaign were:-

Front Row: Mrs Chapman, Dr J Wilbur Chapman, Charles Alexander, Helen Alexander (nee Cadbury)

Back Row: Mr R Rock (Secretary to Dr Chapman), Mr E Naftzger, Mr and Mrs Ralph Norton, Mr Robert Harkness, and Mr W Rock (Secretary to Charles Alexander).

On the way to Western Australia, where meetings were conducted for three weeks in Perth and one week in Fremantle, Mr Davis had been busy signing up a large number of people on the boat.²³

After leaving the mainland from Melbourne, the mission party arrived at Hobart where they were welcomed at the wharf by the Premier of Tasmania. Afterwards they were entertained by Admiral Sir George and Lady King-Hall, who had already taken a deep interest in the work of the Sydney mission a few months earlier and had frequently entertained the party at Admiralty House.

The YMCA notes recorded in the following year in Perth, that Mr Ernest Pickering, the PTL secretary, had said there had been great activity in the PTL work and the signing of an unusually large number of membership cards.²⁴ Soon after, the British and Foreign Bible Society reported at their annual meeting in Perth, that special provision had been made to meet the requirements of the PTL.²⁵

A weekly Bible class had been formed in Townsville in the YWCA as a result of the Chapman-Alexander mission in September the previous year, and had proved very helpful to those who had attended.²⁶

RESULTS OF THE CAMPAIGNS

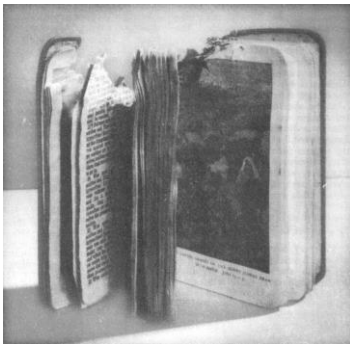
Undoubtedly the two Chapman-Alexander campaigns had brought revival to Australia. It can be concluded that this had occurred because of the godliness of the mission teams, the overall sympathy of the newspapers, the fervent prayers of Christians, the wholehearted support of the majority of the churches, the promotion of the PTL, and the counselling and follow-up of those who had signed the pledge. As a result church attendance increased, as did the desire to read God's word, pray and sing hymns. Family prayer was established in many homes.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Australian newspapers reported the Bible revival among British soldiers quartered on the Salisbury Plain and elsewhere in England. Charles Alexander and his team had travelled from one YMCA marquee to another holding Gospel meetings. Special waterproof Testaments, published by the PTL, London, were offered to soldiers who wished to join the League, on the condition that they first sign a membership card and then sign the pledge in the Testament.²⁷

In Adelaide, in 1915, a chaplain by the name of John Nelson wrote in a letter to the editor:

As an old chaplain, I know it is only a small portion of the drinking, swearing, and gambling wasters who bring down the credit and character of their regiments. Hundreds of the young men before they left for the front joined the Pocket Testament League, signed the temperance pledge, and were converted to God, and the letters which have been received from the Y.M.C.A. secretaries and chaplains who are working with the boys in Egypt go to show that only a small number of them taught the Gurkhas to swear, play cards and drink.²⁸



"My life was saved"

A remarkable story was recorded in *The Methodist*, of a Mr W Phillips of Auburn, Sydney, who showed a New Testament which had been given to him early in the First World War by a PTL worker. He had carried it all through the war in his left breast pocket. About three weeks before the war ended, he was hit by a bullet which tore away the top part of the Testament, then "ricocheted across his chest and passed out through the right shoulder of his tunic, merely burning his chest." As a result of having his life spared, Mr Phillips trusted in Christ and became an active preacher of the Gospel. He carried a copy of God's Word with him, for his own use and for witnessing.²⁹

Australian Christian soldiers who fought in the First World War read their Bibles or New Testaments, which they had received from the British and Foreign Bible Society, the PTL or other Bible agencies, and joined in fellowship with other Christians in church services and Bible studies. Every effort had been made by churches and Christian organisations in Australia to supply Scriptures to those going to the front.

THE DEATH OF CHARLES ALEXANDER

The death of Charles Alexander in 1920 was reported in Australian newspapers. One report said:

A cable message brings news of the death of Mr Charles M. Alexander, the evangelist who visited Australia in 1902 with Dr. R. A. Torrey, again in 1907 with his wife, and twice afterward with Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman. ... Realising the important part that singing plays in any religious revival, Mr. Alexander specialised in the work. ... in Australia he found scope for the development of his

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genius as a song leader. ... He founded a worldwide organisation known as the Pocket Testament League. During his first visit to Australia he published a volume of hymns, of which hundreds of thousands of copies have been circulated.³⁰

Four lines of "The Glory Song" were written on Charles' gravestone. This song had become very popular and was whistled or sung in many places when he had been in Australia. Many of the other hymns he popularised were also sung in Australia for decades to come.

THE REALISATION OF GEORGE DAVIS' VISION

Was the vision of George Davis ever realised? Yes. In 1921 Mr George Davis, the International Secretary of the PTL, had commented while on a visit to Sydney, that during the war about 1,000,000 British, American and Australian troops had joined the League and received Testaments.³¹ In 1922, it was reported that the PTL had spread rapidly throughout the world and that over 3,000,000 members had been enrolled.³² The League in Australia had made its contribution to these figures because of the revival that had spread throughout the country due to the vigorous efforts of Dr Chapman, Charles and Helen Alexander, George Davis and their teams.

¹ *The Register*, Adelaide, 24 July 1909, p 10

² *Ibid.*

³ Alexander, Helen C and Maclean, J Kennedy: *A Romance of Song and Soul Winning*

⁴ *The Methodist*, 26 June, 1909, p6

⁵ Fact sheet: *The Story of Cadbury Limited*

⁶ *The Methodist*, 26 June, 1909, p6

⁷ Alexander, Helen C and Maclean, J Kennedy: *A Romance of Song and Soul Winning*, p 153

⁸ *The Methodist*, 26 June, 1909, p 6

⁹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 1909, p 9

¹⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June 1909, p 8

¹¹ *The Brisbane Courier*, 14 July 1909, p 1

¹² *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 17 July 1909, p 10

¹³ *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 23 July 1909, p 9

¹⁴ *The West Australian*, Perth, 16 November 1909, p 6

¹⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July 1911, p 6

¹⁶ *The West Australian*, Perth, 6 March 1912, p 8

¹⁷ *The Register*, Adelaide, 21 May 1912, p 6

¹⁸ *The Register*, Adelaide, 19 November 1912, p 10

¹⁹ *The Port Pirie Recorder and North Western Mail*, 22 June 1912, p 5

²⁰ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1912, p 15

²¹ *The Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 24 August 1912, p 6

²² *The Brisbane Courier*, 4 September 1912, p 6

²³ *Western Mail*, 22 November 1912, p 41

²⁴ *The Daily News*, Perth, 8 February 1913, p 6

²⁵ *The West Australian*, Perth, 22 April 1913, p 8

²⁶ *The Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 24 July 1913, p 6

²⁷ *Watchman*, Sydney, 25 February 1915, p 5

²⁸ *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 15 April 1915, p 11

²⁹ *The Methodist*, 10 January 1959, p 10

³⁰ *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, 22 October 1920, p 30

³¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1921, p 8

³² *Barrier Miner*, Broken Hill, 19 July 1922, p 1