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CHAPTER 1

The Chief

SYDNEY HARBOUR SPARKLED languidly beneath the mantle of summer. Stuart Bryson, a tall, young farmer from Trundle in central western New South Wales, stepped off the overnight Forbes Mail train, and made his way by tram to Circular Quay. The Quay was bustling, though not as crowded as usual with so many men away at the Great War. Yearning to join his wife and three young children for their holiday by the sea, he boarded the Manly ferry for the last leg of his journey. Forty-five idyllic minutes to take in the Harbour's January ambience before their reunion.

As the ferry drew away from Sydney Cove, he took a seat outside in the sun and breeze, and greeted the passenger beside him. The two men struck up a conversation. Having come to trust Christ only fairly recently, Bryson was delighted to find the gentleman beside him was a fellow believer – and a missionary, moreover, who had returned from service with the China Inland Mission. The missionary introduced himself as the Rev. C. Benson Barnett. As they talked, Barnett explained that he had lately been in charge of a Bible and missionary training institution in Adelaide; and that the very purpose of his recent move to Sydney with his family was to establish such a college there also.

The farmer, Bryson, could hardly believe it. He and his wife already had a strong interest in overseas mission, feeling that so many people were engaged in local gospel work that their own call as a family might well be to serve in distant lands. Although happy with their rural life, they had been praying for God's leading. Even in the short time since becoming Christians, they had seen God at work through them, bringing country people to life as they spoke the gospel to neighbours and itinerants. The more time they spent with the Barnetts during their seaside holiday weeks, the greater their conviction grew that God's call to them was to prepare themselves for missionary service. Perhaps, Mr. Barnett strongly suggested, it might later become possible for them to leave their farm and study at the college he believed God was leading him to open.

By the next harvest, they had made their decision. The farm was sold, and Stuart Bryson arrived at Croydon with his family, to join the third intake of students at the new college. In time, after Bryson's nineteen years of missionary service in Kenya, he would continue serving for years as a passionate advocate of missions and an unflagging member of the college's Board.

Tranquil summer sunshine aside, 1916 was a very dark year. All things considered, it was a most difficult time to be seeking support for any new ventures – the middle year of the Great War. Less than two weeks before the year began, the Australian and New Zealand military forces had been evacuated from Gallipoli after a disastrous and tragically costly campaign in which over 8,000 Australian lives were lost. By the year's end, 40,000 Australians would be killed or wounded on the Western Front in Europe. And worse was to follow.

Australia's home front was stretched by the war effort, and manpower was in short supply. Christians were divided: many, including some clergy, glorified or at least enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a 'just war', while others rejected such a notion. Some supported conscription, while others opposed it. The war had already continued longer than most people had expected, and the decline in the numbers volunteering led Prime Minister Billy Hughes to attempt introducing compulsory military service, an initiative which would be narrowly defeated in a referendum in October 1916. It hardly seemed a sensible, auspicious or even a realistic time to start a new Christian

training initiative. Some Bible and theological colleges had closed their doors to new intakes for the duration of the war. Many would have labelled the idea of starting a new venture as irresponsible, perhaps even unpatriotic. One man, whom a generation of students came to refer to as ‘The Chief’ – Benson Barnett – saw things entirely differently.

‘Was not the war draining the country of men and means? In a time like this ought not such a work as this to wait? God’s work wait! It seemed like blasphemy. God’s work wait! While the Devil’s went on unabated with the most diabolical fury, and while Christians supply fuel for the fire he has started. No! No! Never! if we could help it. We were caused to remember that such great institutions as the British and Foreign Bible Society, the work begun by Carey, The Church Missionary Society, The London Missionary Society, and others, were begun when Europe was convulsed by the wars of Napoleon, when England was in almost hourly dread of invasion; and we thanked God and took courage in Himself.’¹ What kind of man was this? What was it that energised him, drove him with urgency, and gave him such stubborn and courageous perseverance?

The Formation of a Missionary

Charles Benson Barnett was born in 1869 at Port Cygnet, a small township on the Huon River in Tasmania. His grandparents, William and Martha Barnett, and their four children had arrived in Van Diemen’s Land from England as pioneer settlers in 1833. Before leaving London William had been connected with Thomas Binney, the outspoken Congregational minister at the non-conformist Weigh-House Chapel. The Barnett family were staunch Congregationalists, and before long they became leading contributors in the life of ‘independent churches’ – both Methodist and Congregational church communities in southern Tasmania. William was a builder, and although never officially ordained, was soon officiating as a preacher, pastor and missionary. He was a literate, zealous and devoted Christian who knew the Scriptures well. By 1838 William Barnett had become the first, unpaid minister of the Wesleyan Association’s Argyle Chapel in High Street, Hobart which was soon attracting upwards of 150 children to its Sunday schools.²

The indefatigable William seems to have felt a conscious missionary calling to the colony of Van Diemen’s Land. By 1834, he and another Hobart

lay preacher were evangelising and planting house churches around New Norfolk and the Upper Derwent, travelling there and back fortnightly in a gig.³ After his early years of preaching and missionary work in Hobart Town (1833–1845), he later had a long association with the Congregational Church and Colonial Missionary Society in the Huon/Franklin area from 1845 to 1860. By that time an orchardist, he and his family were noted for their early apple and pear tree plantings in the fertile Huon Valley. William keenly supported various church communities, and appears often to have facilitated unity and bridge-building between different independent church groups: the Congregationalists, the Colonial Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Association and the Wesleyan Society. He died nine years before Benson Barnett was born, but his interdenominational and missionary outlook were to influence his descendants for many generations.

Three of William Barnett's sons married three Cane sisters, and one of these marriage unions was Benson Barnett's parents: Henry Barnett and Rebecca Cane. In Benson's childhood years his father Henry bred prize poultry and worked as the postmaster at Glenorchy, on the northern outskirts of Hobart. He and Rebecca and their family belonged to the Davey Street Congregational Church in Hobart, where the young Charles Benson attended Sunday school with his siblings. He was the fifth child of ten, with four brothers and five sisters. Not all survived childhood. Benson and his elder sister Edith both won prizes in Sunday school examinations. In 1881 Benson (already by this time being known by his middle name) graduated from Sixth Class at New Town Public School with the second highest marks.⁴

In 1882, Benson Barnett won an 'exhibition', that is a scholarship, enabling him to attend Hobart Town High School. There, he began to demonstrate a high level of both academic and sporting ability. In his first year of high school he won the 100 yards handicap. In 1884, he scored the highest pass in another examination which won him the Hobart Council of Education Exhibition, providing £20 for four years towards the continuation of his education.

A complex change of government policies and church regulations resulted in Hobart High School merging with the Anglican Christ's College in 1885. Eventually, it became part of the University of Tasmania. From 1887 to 1888 Benson Barnett continued his higher education at Christ's College, graduating with second class honours in the Associate of Arts degree. By this time, his twin passions for his studies and sport were well established.

Known as 'Ben' by at least some of his friends, he was head boy of Christ's College in 1888, and excelled in athletics, cricket and Australian football, being the captain of both the cricket and football teams. His family remembered him as an athletic all-rounder, rigorously keeping himself in training by running up and down the steep Hobart streets at night, long after other family members were asleep. His athletics achievements were illustrious: in 1887 he won the 100, 200 and 440 yards championships, as well as the pole vault and (with F. Dodds) the 150 yards 'Manx race'. (Dodds beat him into second place in the high jump.) The *Tasmanian News* reported that 'the lion's share of the prizes fell to Barnett, captain of the school, showing that intellectual and physical distinctions are by no means antagonistic.'⁵ He also won the Scripture, Classics and Mathematics prizes, and at the annual speech day recited a splendid speech by Mark Antony from *Julius Caesar*, as well as a French speech as Maitre Jacques, a coachman. Not surprisingly, he was dux of the school.



MR C. B. BARNETT.

An impressive young man: Charles Benson Barnett, in Hobart days.

Barnett's age at the time of his coming to trust Christ is not clear. As a young man, not long converted, he plunged himself into the ministries of the Davey Street Congregational Church. On his way to church by public transport one Sunday, he picked up a tract left behind on his seat. It had been written by an engine driver to rebuke travellers for catching trains on a Sunday, since trains running on Sundays prevented their drivers from attending church. Young Benson was so convicted by this that from that day on, he never used public transport on a Sunday. He was careful never to impose this scruple upon others – whether his own family, or later, other missionaries, or his students at the college. Nonetheless, it was his joyful testimony that he never once missed taking a church service because of his principles in this matter.

Following his graduation from Christ's College with his degree, Barnett continued to enjoy sport, playing for Holebrook Club and the College. He was awarded one of the 'Tasmanian Scholarships' for further studies, though temporary ill health prevented him from taking this up. By this time his enthusiastic Christian commitment was leading him to participate in a wide variety of local Christian activities. He became active in the Christian Endeavour Union, and there represented the Davey Street Congregational Church.

The Young Men's Christian Association was also to feature largely in his progress towards missionary work. The YMCA had been founded in London in 1844 by another member of the Weigh House Chapel, George Williams. Concern about the plight of the poor during the Industrial Revolution had motivated Williams to put Christian principles into practice by helping boys and young men to developing a healthy body, mind, and spirit. It developed branches in Australia from 1851, and by 1887 Benson's brother, Arthur Barnett, was secretary of the Hobart YMCA. While still a student at Christ's College, Benson's interest in China was beginning to grow. As early as 1887, he gave an interesting and well-received paper at the YMCA's gospel temperance meeting, on 'The Chinese: Their Manners and Customs'. In fact, at his farewell meeting at the YMCA in 1893, he remarked that it was in the Hobart YMCA rooms where he had been encouraged to begin thinking about foreign mission work. All three of these groups – Davey Street Congregational Church, the Christian Endeavour Union and the YMCA – were to become his keen supporters in prayer and finance during his missionary service with the China Inland Mission (CIM).

When Benson Barnett was twenty years old, in 1890, the great inter-denominational missionary pioneer Hudson Taylor arrived in Australia for

the first time. True to his humble principles, he travelled steerage class from China to Australia with fellow missionary Montagu Beauchamp. Beauchamp was one of the ‘Cambridge Seven’, an inspiring group of British students who left to serve in China with Taylor. Stopping briefly in Darwin, Taylor and Beauchamp sailed to Sydney, then to Melbourne where the Australasian Council of Taylor’s China Inland Mission had just been established with office bearers from Baptist, Brethren and Church of England churches. Hudson Taylor was frank in announcing his recruitment strategy: his earnest prayer was that Australia might supply one hundred workers for China. After becoming acquainted with the newly formed Council, and potential candidate meetings in Melbourne, Taylor proceeded to Tasmania, the home state of a very early CIM missionary, Mary Reed, who had been compelled to return home because of poor health.

Over the next week or so Taylor addressed thirteen meetings in Tasmania, most of them in Launceston and Hobart. On 18 September he spoke to about eighty friends of the Governor’s wife, Lady Hamilton, at a Government House gathering. Benson Barnett attended his Hobart meetings on 19 and 20 September 1890. There, he met Hudson Taylor in person and was immediately confirmed in his thinking that God was directing him to China. In November, Taylor left for China with twelve new Australian recruits: four young men and eight women including Florence Young, who would herself later establish the South Sea Evangelical Mission.⁶ Barnett was not a member of this group: he needed training before leaving for the field.

After the marriages of his older brothers and sister, Barnett left Hobart about the beginning of 1893 for Adelaide, to prepare himself for service in China. His Bible, in which his parents and other family members had written farewell verses and signed their names, seems to have been a pre-departure gift from friends, inscribed *To dear old Ben, in memory of 2nd November, 1892*. On arrival in Adelaide, Barnett enrolled in Hope Lodge, a newly established training college for missionaries at Belair in the Adelaide Hills. William Lockhart Morton, a Presbyterian minister, had moved to Adelaide in 1893 specifically to set up a missionary training home – largely in response to Hudson Taylor’s personal encouragement. Lockhart Morton heard and met Hudson Taylor during his Australian recruiting trip in 1890. He was keen to offer himself for the China mission field, but Taylor had seen particular qualities in him and suggested he would perhaps serve most productively by training young Australian people for overseas mission work. Morton was

committed to interdenominational training, and already had some experience through his independently setting up a home for needy and alcoholic men.⁷

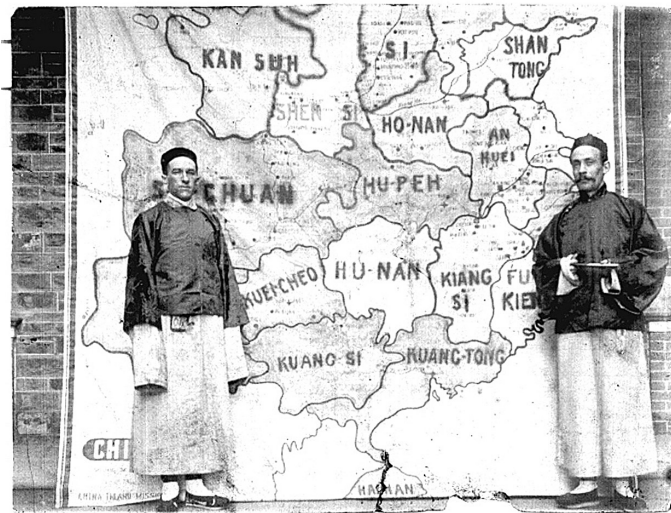


Benson Barnett (seated, second from right) and fellow Angas College students, January 1894. The tall man with a hat is William Fleming, the first CIM martyr.

Morton began his missionary training school in Adelaide, in a cottage at the rear of the Belair ‘Hope Lodge’ institution for inebriates. (Later, in 1898, this missionary training home would be officially renamed Angas College: John Howard Angas, a pastoralist, member of parliament and evangelical Christian philanthropist, gave a fine building – formerly Whinham College in North Adelaide – for the expanding training centre to use.) At Belair, under Lockhart Morton’s mentoring, Barnett prepared himself for cross-cultural work in China. Morton was most impressed with the calibre and earnest commitment of his early students, of whom Barnett was the second to enrol. The two men developed a great mutual respect, and Barnett was later to emulate many of Lockhart Morton’s principles for his college: interdenominational training, pre-eminence given to the Bible, rigorous preparation for cross-cultural work, serious commitment to prayer, wide-ranging practical ministry components, and unbending faith in God’s financial provision, without soliciting support from others.

In Barnett’s year and a half at Hope Lodge he and fellow student

Arthur Nicholls formed a lifelong friendship. They were to work together in the China Inland Mission, Nicholls for fifty years. In fact, four of the five original 1893 students from Belair proceeded to China with the CIM in 1894: Robert Middleton and Thomas Clinton in April, and Barnett and Nicholls in September. Benson endeared himself to the Morton family; the children especially loved him. During an outbreak of typhoid fever, he stood in as 'night nurse' to relieve the hard-pressed family. While he was studying, Benson also became closely attached to the principal's eldest daughter, Molly. When he departed for China she planned to join him overseas within the year. However, a few months after his departure, the informal engagement lapsed when she asked to be released from it.



Nicholls and Barnett presenting their intended CIM work at an early meeting.

By the time Benson Barnett was ready to sail for China, he was reasonably well known to Christians throughout Adelaide as well as in Tasmania. Like other students at the training college, he had done some preaching in Adelaide churches. All the students had conducted missions in parts of South Australia over the 1893 Christmas break. He had also travelled back to Hobart during his studies to speak at church and YMCA meetings. At his final Tasmanian farewell meetings, Barnett forcefully put China's needs for missionary workers before his listeners. He explained that despite significant gospel progress, China's population was increasing at a rate which meant heathenism was outstripping Christian conversions.⁸

When he left Australia as a missionary, Barnett was supported by a variety of groups: his own Davey Street Congregational Church and Melville Street Wesleyan, both in Hobart; Franklin Wesleyan and Franklin Congregational Churches in the Huon area; New Norfolk Christian gatherings; the Christian Endeavour Union; and the Hobart YMCA. After Barnett left Hobart, he and his CIM colleague Arthur Nicholls also spoke at various mission meetings in Sydney before they sailed for China on 12 September 1894.

China: 1894 to 1899

The closing years of the 19th century were a difficult and turbulent period in China. Barnett, Nicholls and others arrived in the midst of the First Sino-Japanese War, a year-long tussle over the control of Korea which ended in 1895 with the humiliating loss of Korea as a Chinese vassal state. The new missionaries saw Chinese troops armed only with long spears, heading towards battle against the Japanese who were equipped with modern rifles and cannon. China's defeat by Japan involved some loss of territory and an enormous payment of reparation money by China. These events sparked instability and a series of dangerous political upheavals within the country, which were to result in suffering and tragedy for large numbers of Chinese Christians, missionaries and other foreigners.

The China Inland Mission was the largest missionary organisation in China. Whereas some missions directed their energies more towards social, educational and medical goals, the CIM was unwaveringly fixed on the priority of evangelism. This meant that the field orientation and preparation programme was exhaustive and rigorous, especially in the area of language learning. Initial field training took six months. Men were trained at Anking and women at Yangchow, in adjoining provinces on the Yangtze River. The six-section course comprised Chinese culture, Mandarin language, geography, CIM principles and practice, and the study of a range of philosophical and religious texts and tracts in Mandarin.

In his first year on the field, Barnett studied at Anking before his posting to Taiho in 1896–97. From there he went to the Ing-cheo (now Yingchowfu) missionary station in Anhui Province, where he spent the remainder of his Chinese years. In the early years he wrote home with occasional triumphant news for supporters; but clearly he brooked many disappointments as local

Chinese expressed hostility, disinterest, or fell away after showing initial promising signs of gospel interest. The young missionary slowly learned the wisdom of allowing locals sometimes to keep old religious accessories as they came under the sound of the good news and began to consider it. Several of the people he mentioned with excitement and gratitude were elderly men, who seemed slightly more open to the missionaries' evangelistic efforts.

The First Convert

I was introduced to an old man, 73 years old, with a long flowing beard, pleasant face and bent back...What I learnt of him as we went on our journey kept me praying for him every now and again with increased fervency...One day just about the Chinese New Year, who should come to see us but this old man. I cannot say positively, but I believe it was one day just after we had been specially praying about him that he appeared.

From that day to this he has held to us like a leech, and last Sunday we had the joy of baptising him. Hallelujah! It was very simple little service, not a great number present, but yet it was very touching to see the old man with his long white locks – when called upon to answer a few questions, which were put to him so as to give him an opportunity of witnessing before the audience as to his faith in Jesus – rise and ask, “May I thank Jesus for allowing me to be baptised.” Then after the baptism it was good to hear his unconventional words of thanks as we took Communion together.

I want you to pray for this first convert, and especially that he himself might learn to pray, for it is not altogether an easy thing for him to join our ranks...The old man's wife is a vegetarian and worships the idol Kuang-yin. We tried to insist on the idol coming down from the walls of his house before giving him baptism...and then he removed this idol himself. This, however, only raised a storm of violent opposition from his wife, who went immediately and put it up in her own bedroom... So we prayed about it, and have now yielded to his wife, hoping that in the long run it may prove the best way of winning her to Jesus.

Benson Barnett's prayer letter, July 1898⁹

China: 1899 to 1904, and a Change of Circumstances

Amongst the new CIM missionaries arriving in China in October 1898 on board the *Changsha*, from Sydney, was a shy 29 year old Victorian woman named Elizabeth Irvine Ferguson. The eldest of eight children, she had spent a happy childhood on her Scottish immigrant parents' property near Broadford north of Melbourne. As a teenager, Elizabeth had lovingly become the family's surrogate mother when her own mother died at a young age. In her late teenage years Elizabeth heard the gospel preached by a travelling Presbyterian evangelist. Her subsequent conversion and call to missionary work brought an end to an early engagement to a local man, since her fiancé did not share Elizabeth's missionary call. Reluctant to leave her needy family, she resisted the call; but she eventually left her young siblings under her sister Allie's care and enrolled in the Belair missionary college with Lockhart Morton.

During her studies in Adelaide, a name Elizabeth heard frequently was Benson Barnett – a Belair graduate on the field in China, and still held in high esteem by the principal's family. When the time came for Elizabeth's departure for China, the principal's daughter, Molly, asked her to carry and return the engagement ring she still held from her broken engagement to Benson. Upon arriving in Shanghai, Elizabeth duly carried out her commission and posted the ring to its original owner, Benson Barnett. He had heard a good deal about young Miss Ferguson through letters from Adelaide. When he wrote from inland China to acknowledge the safe receipt of the ring, he asked if their correspondence might continue while Elizabeth did her six months' field studies at the Yangchow women's training centre. She agreed. After her preparation months, she was posted to the CIM station at Kien-ping in 1899.

And before long, it seems, Benson Barnett became a man with more than one kind of mission. Rather unexpectedly, a letter arrived one day to advise Elizabeth that Barnett would shortly be passing through Kien-ping. He gave no reason for the visit, but mentioned that he would arrive on horseback, and would only be there for the day. Although in the same province as Barnett's home station, the distance to Kien-ping was quite substantial – especially on horseback. It is difficult to imagine that Elizabeth was entirely in the dark about his intentions in coming.

When Mr. Barnett dismounted and tethered his steed at the Kien-ping mission station, the senior missionary thoughtfully waived the standard field protocol, and allowed the two young people time together to talk. By the

end of the day they were engaged to be married. He had come prepared: he brought with him a brand new engagement ring (not the one returned from Australia) to present to Elizabeth, along with a small file. Finding the ring a touch too small for her finger, he filed it through so he could see it in situ on her hand before taking it back with him to be enlarged.¹⁰

But before the engaged couple could marry, circumstances in China took a disastrous and ugly turn in the form of the Boxer Rebellion. Throughout the 19th century, the major Western powers had placed increasing pressure on the Chinese Empire to trade with them. By the century's end, the Western powers and Japan had forced China's rulers to accept wide foreign control over the country's economy. A secret organisation nicknamed the 'Boxers' blamed their poor living standards on foreigners colonising and influencing China. This led to the Boxer uprising against foreigners in the north. As the movement spread southwards, the Boxers killed Chinese Christians, missionaries and other foreigners, and wantonly destroyed property. In June 1900 the Empress Dowager, who bitterly resented the British, declared war on all foreign powers which had diplomatic relations with China.

Even before this, however, growing anti-foreigner sentiment was already gaining murderous momentum. In 1895, Victorian CMS missionaries, Nellie and Topsy Saunders, and CEZMS¹¹ Queensland missionary Annie Gordon, were massacred along with eight others in Fujian Province. Then in 1898, William Fleming, a CIM missionary with whom Barnett had trained at Belair in Adelaide, was gruesomely murdered with swords and an iron spike, along with his Chinese evangelist assistant, P'an, whom he was trying to protect from an attack. Fleming was the first of many CIM martyrs over the next few years. In October 1899, Benson Barnett was ordained as a Congregational minister. His ordination service took place in the chapel of the London Missionary Society in Shanghai, a Chinese coastal city where the CIM headquarters was located.¹²

Hostility against foreigners and Christians reached fever pitch during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Along with many other missionary women, Elizabeth was evacuated to the safer region of Shanghai. There she waited anxiously for news of her fiancé who had stayed on with other expatriate men in the inland areas, giving assistance to missionaries and Chinese Christians attempting to flee to the coast. These younger men of the China Inland Mission helped rescue many imperilled people by passing them from one mission station to the next, travelling under cover of darkness with the help of local Chinese

Christians and sympathisers. Benson's linguistic aptitude and his rapid progress in language acquisition over the last six years had made him quite an accomplished Mandarin speaker. This he was able to use to great effect when entering hostile areas, planning rescue routes, interceding with officials and negotiating with belligerent local nationalists.

In a prayer letter home to apprehensive supporters, dated July 1900, Barnett described various experiences of God's sovereign protection in this catastrophic time:

Yes! There has indeed been trouble, but go again, it has been true, "it shall not come nigh thee; only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked." For months past, China has just been working up to what has happened, and I'm sure we all have to praise God that a general massacre of every foreigner in China was not our lot...Mr. and Mrs. Gracie, with their little baby, and Mr. John Macfarlane fled, before anything was done or being done; but a lot was being said, with the result that they reached the City of Che-kia-k'eo just as the people were busy pulling down four large compound buildings; but even before reaching this city they had each and all been robbed and plundered. One Chinaman was just going to cut off Mrs. Gracie's finger to get her wedding ring, as she could not get it off, when God graciously helped her to get it off. The gentlemen were left with their trousers and socks only, except Mr. Macfarlane, who was allowed to keep his singlet. They got into hiding, and finally left in a hired cart, without anything to pay...and are now on their way to the coast (Shanghai.)¹³

The affection and support Barnett evoked throughout Hobart is revealed in the fact that the *Hobart Mercury* passed on such excerpts of his prayer news to the population at large.

In later years, Barnett told his children (and perhaps his students) stories of various miraculous missionary escapes, in many of which he had played a part, during the time of the rebellion. His daughter Rita recalled:

Three Swedish sisters on one [CIM] mission were captured by the Boxers just as they were preparing to flee to the coast. The Boxers with their great curved knives prepared to behead them. First, however, they asked which was the eldest and as she came

forward and put her head on the block she suddenly began to laugh uncontrollably. The executioner in amazement stopped in his tracks. 'Let her go,' he said, 'These Christians laugh in the face of death.' The sisters told my father when they arrived at his station where so far the Boxers had not penetrated, and he was able to pass the sisters on to Shanghai.¹⁴

Along with certain other CIM male missionaries, Barnett stayed in inland China right through the Boxer Rebellion. By the time the hostilities ended in September 1900, he had been in China for over six years and his furlough was due. Residual unrest inland made a return to their stations impossible for the moment. He and Elizabeth were joyfully reunited in Shanghai, where they sought advice from Mission authorities. Elizabeth was not yet due for furlough. The Mission's decision was to allow them to travel to Japan where they would be married and enjoy several months off duty; then they would return to service in China, and take their furlough three years later.

Charles Benson Barnett and Elizabeth Irvine Ferguson were married on 4 October 1900 at the Seamen's Chapel in Yokohama, Japan. One of Benson's oldest and closest friends was John Macfarlane, a Hobart merchant and the CIM representative for Tasmania. He had escaped with his life in July, during the confrontation with rebels mentioned above. Macfarlane travelled from Hobart to Yokohama as the Barnett family's representative at the wedding, and to fill the role of best man. Barnett's wedding attire was in the best CIM contextual tradition: wide, flowing Chinese trousers of pale grey hand-woven silk, with a tunic coat of mulberry satin. As was his custom, he wore the traditional Chinese 'queue' – a long braid of his hair, hanging down behind. Elizabeth was arrayed in a white satin gown and skirt, and her travelling outfit was a rich green with cream trim and a black embossed satin skirt. Both wore traditional Chinese footwear. The wedding photographs and the quaint clothes, which he kept for many years, were a source of delight to his children and friends in later life.



The Barnetts on their wedding day, 1900.

After the newly married couple's months of rest, their desire was to return to China as soon as possible. However, the continuing security problem of roaming bands of brigands throughout the inland areas caused the CIM leadership to decree that for the time being, men only could return to the interior. Not wanting to be separated, the Barnetts requested a special dispensation to return together, and were given permission to return if they accepted the personal risk. Recognising the risk of provoking a riot or theft, Elizabeth travelled to their station in a curtained sedan chair to avoid showing her foreign face. She thus became the first foreign woman to travel into inland China after the Boxer Rebellion.

The Barnetts were assigned to Benson's current station in Yingchowfu, where they would spend their years together in China. Their time there, 1901–1907, was fraught with hard work, danger, gospel advance, joy, and suffering. Elizabeth felt acutely lonely at first, until she gradually befriended some of the local women. She found their primitive rural hygiene customs and lack of sanitation difficult to cope with. When she made evangelistic bridge-building visits to homes, she initially recoiled: their custom was to drink plain sugarless tea from an earthenware pot, which they would pass around the room so that each lady could drink from the spout. Benson, often visiting further afield, was sometimes subject to opposition from local people who labelled him the 'Foreign Devil'. A leg wound from a savage dog and a bite on the forehead by a scorpion, which dropped onto him from the ceiling, both caused protracted suffering, and saw him feverish and close to death on several occasions.

The birth of their first child, Harold (Hal) Benson in 1901, brought delight and comfort to Elizabeth in her loneliness. Local Chinese and family at home in Australia rejoiced alike at the news of his arrival. Then in the burning heat of his first summer, little Hal became sick, and before the nearest doctor could reach Yingchowfu the eight-month-old had died. Benson built a small timber coffin for his son, dug the grave by himself and buried him while Elizabeth, devastated, sat in a rickshaw and watched. Together they tried to sing 'Safe in the arms of Jesus.' Returning home to the comfortless, empty house, Elizabeth desolately opened her Bible, which fell open at Habakkuk. She read 3:17-18 and was comforted; but the agony of loss, exacerbated by isolation and cultural alienation, is hard to imagine. It was years before they could speak frankly about this tragedy, though Benson did make limited mention of it as he spoke on furlough in Australia in 1903.¹⁵ They did not tell their later children about Hal's life and death until about 1927, when a letter came to Sydney

from the Chinese Red Cross advising them that Hal's Yingchowfu grave stone had been broken in the Communist uprising. The Barnetts declined the Red Cross's offer to renew Hal's damaged grave stone.

Benson and Elizabeth Barnett sailed to Australia for their first furlough in 1903. Their first port of call was Adelaide. There they spent some time on deputation, staying at their alma mater: Angas Missionary Training College, as it was now called. Lockhart Morton was still the principal and their welcome was warm indeed. It was while they were staying at Angas College that their second child, Marguerite Elizabeth (always known as Rita), was born. After Adelaide, the Barnetts spent a considerable part of their furlough in Tasmania. Some of their deputation meetings were shared with Arthur Nicholls, Benson's friend and missionary colleague from Belair (Angas College) and China.

The Second Term of Service in China: 1904-1907

Although the Boxer Rebellion was three years past when the family of three returned to China early in 1904, there was still palpable anti-foreign sentiment which complicated their journey to the inland. Settling back into Yingchowfu, they felt it wise to continue residing in a missionary compound. After some searching, Barnett found and rented a dwelling and compound large enough to hold meetings of reasonable size. Little by little members of the local community heard and accepted the gospel message. A small group began to meet in the compound, and grew slowly into a church.

Sometimes during this period, Barnett was separated from Elizabeth and young Rita for sustained periods, as he travelled far inland. One such journey took him to East Sichuan for two months: 1,000 miles up the Yangtze River by steamer and native junk, followed by several days' walking, then six weeks' work before returning home. He expressed his tension between the important work needing to be done, and the separation from his family. 'To me it spelt separation, disappointment and difficulty. Separation from my wife and child, just when it seemed that I ought to be with them...Difficulty because ascending the Yang Tsi at that season was most tedious and difficult, and... a constant watchfulness against imposition or being made a tool of, and yet a ready mind to see and appreciate every effort after truth, and every motion towards God.'¹⁶

Opium addiction was a tremendous bane in Anhui province, as it was throughout much of China. During their second missionary term, the Barnetts integrated their evangelistic work with much-needed amateur medical and dental assistance. Helping opium addicts to ‘dry out’ became a part of the family’s ministry. Addicts wishing to overcome their opium habit would often be cared for within the missionary compound at Yingchowfu. Those withdrawing from opium, especially those with prolonged addictions, suffered a range of harrowing symptoms over two weeks or more. The Barnetts dealt with addicts’ insomnia, anxiety and agitation, aching bones and joints, fever and chills, cramps, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Patients who had used opium long-term often suffered more intense cravings, and had to be observed carefully to guard against the danger of relapse. In the compound, the groans of people experiencing withdrawal sometimes filled the air. It was exhausting, unglamorous, largely thankless work; but as addicts heard the gospel explained and saw it lived out in the missionaries’ lives, a few came to know Jesus Christ.

Barnett also administered basic medical help to those suffering from malaria and various other febrile diseases, and carried his bag of homeopathic remedies along with the good news of Jesus Christ as he moved about the region. He was able to vaccinate his own family against smallpox. Moreover, this self-taught dentist’s no-anaesthetic tooth extraction technique was so much in demand from locals with abscessed teeth that he was often preferred to the American dentist working in the area!¹⁷ Evangelism, however, was always an inseparable part of the therapeutic relationships he fostered.



Benson with young Rita Barnett in the compound at Yingchowfu.

In this second term of service, their third child was born. Allan John Henry was born at Yingchowfu in 1905 and was named (albeit spelled differently) after a hero of his father's: Captain Allen Gardiner, a heroic pioneer missionary who had ministered in Zululand and subsequently founded the Patagonian Missionary Society (later the South American Missionary Society), before dying of starvation in Tierra del Fuego. Though not always entirely well, Allan and Rita grew healthily on the family's Chinese diet of rice, fish, and goat milk and sometimes meat. Rita grew fond of her local playmate and minder, Dasafu, a little goatherd boy who was kind to the children. When they accompanied their father on evangelistic and medical forays, Rita and Allan would often travel the dusty roads with him in a wheelbarrow – one on either side of the barrow, with their legs dangling over.

Elizabeth, however, was not faring so well. After Allan's birth her health deteriorated to the point where she found caring for Allan increasingly difficult, with Benson needing to provide much of his care. It turned out that she had tropical sprue, an intestinal inflammatory disease which prevents the absorption of nutrients and vitamins. Probably caused by bacteria in food, sprue causes multiple symptoms including fatigue, weakness, weight loss and bone pain, along with chronic diarrhoea. Later, in World War II, sprue affected allied troops in epidemic proportions in South East Asia and India. The disease is now treated with antibiotic therapy; but as Elizabeth's health worsened and her energy dwindled, the need for professional treatment became clear. The decision was taken out of their hands when the Mission advised them that there was no alternative: they would have to leave China to allow Elizabeth to recuperate.

The Barnetts left the field in May 1907 to return to Tasmania. They resigned at that stage as CIM missionaries. Dixon Hoste, Hudson Taylor's immediate successor as the Director of the CIM in Shanghai, described Benson as '...a missionary of more than ordinary devotion and energy. He laboured in a new and difficult field in Central China, and God was pleased to grant blessing to his efforts, both in the gathering of converts and the widespread preaching of the gospel.'¹⁸

As they sailed from Shanghai, their departure was made the more difficult by their own recognition that they were still needed in China, and would be greatly missed. Reassuring indeed was the verse they carried home with them, inscribed years earlier in the front of Benson Barnett's Bible by the late Hudson Taylor, in his small, neat, cursive script: *'Whosoever drinketh*

of the water that I shall give him, SHALL NEVER THIRST; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. John iv.14. J. Hudson Taylor.'

Testimonial to the Rev. C.B. Barnett from a colleague

I have known Mr. Barnett very intimately for over 10 years. For some time we were fellow-workers in this station, and missionaries at least know that even the relation of husband and wife scarcely affords a better opportunity of really knowing each other than to be fellow-workers in a missionary station.

For the rest of the time Mr. Barnett has been in charge of a station only 23 miles distant, so that I have all these years had ample opportunity of gauging his character. I may say then that Mr. Barnett is:

- 1. A really spiritual man.*
- 2. A most unselfish man.*
- 3. A very practical man.*
- 4. As a public speaker I have only heard him in Chinese, and in that he speaks very well.*

We are supremely sorry to lose Mr. Barnett and also Mrs. Barnett from our midst, especially as this our Presbyterian district has so few workers and Mr. Barnett has been very faithful to our Presbyterian interests. Any congregation calling Mr. Barnett to be its minister will be well served.

In conclusion I may say that all these 10 years Mr. Barnett has been my best friend in China.

As to Mrs. Barnett I may add that by her gentleness and sweetness of temper she has won her way into the hearts of most, if not all, of those who know her. I remember well how highly some of the junior missionaries who boarded with Mr. and Mrs. Barnett used to speak of her.

*Taiho An, China
May 6, 1907*

*Rev. W.R. Malcolm
China Inland Mission*

Australia: 1907–1915

While Elizabeth did recover from sprue, the healing process was slow. At first she convalesced in Hobart, then further north in Tasmania when Benson was called to pastor several Congregational churches. Despite being back in Australia, the recovering Elizabeth still found herself lonely – indeed, sometimes lonelier than she had felt in China. She felt keenly the separation from her own large family, especially in the evenings when the children had gone to sleep and Benson was attending church meetings.

Benson filled the pulpit for three months at Christ Church Congregational in Launceston before taking the north-western Tasmanian pastorate of Latrobe, Don and Forth. Although a city boy, he had long had a passion for horses, and the distances between churches in this sprawling parish gave him just the opportunity he needed to acquire a carriage drawn by first one, then two horses in tandem. At the opening of the 1910 annual congress of the Tasmanian Congregational Union, Barnett preached on the hard work and necessity of prayer. Reading between the lines, one can imagine the twin long-term petitions of China's gospel need and Elizabeth's healing in the preacher's mind: 'The speaker referred to Christ marvelling at the centurion's faith, and to Daniel who, after twenty-one days of waiting, was told that he was heard on the first day of his prayer.'¹⁹

After three years' ministry in northern Tasmania, Benson accepted a call to pastor Brunswick Congregational Church, Melbourne. Being in Elizabeth's home state of Victoria, the location offered great appeal to Elizabeth. Still convalescing and somewhat lonely, she was pleased to be closer to her family. The Barnetts sailed from Launceston in June 1910, and swiftly took up the new church responsibilities. During his time leading this thriving suburban church, the facade of the church building was rebuilt and extended, and a new Sunday school building was erected. Barnett's strong pastoral leadership and his biblical evangelistic preaching were much appreciated.

It was a demanding ministry. The picture of Barnett's four years at Brunswick is that of an energetic evangelist, a preacher, a community activist and a supporter and strategist of overseas missions. He came onto the councils of the China Inland Mission and the London Missionary Society. He became the Congregational denominational representative of the Victorian Alliance, an alcohol temperance and prohibitionist society. He spoke and lobbied publicly against local Brunswick community developments which would encourage gambling. And he served alongside a number of local minister 'missioners'

connected with ongoing follow-up from the successful Chapman-Alexander ‘simultaneous missions’ held in 1909 and 1912 across suburban Melbourne. Barnett even returned to Hobart on occasions to preach.



The Barnett family in Tasmania, about 1909.

Then, in the midst of the busy Brunswick pastoral ministry, came a request for Barnett to return to Angas College in Adelaide to train mission candidates – as an assistant director to the principal, his old friend and mentor Lockhart Morton. In fact, he was to become acting principal at Angas for several months while Morton was recovering from surgery. The circumstances of this call Barnett called ‘peculiar’, though without explanation; but he emphatically felt God’s call and direction in it, and said he could not refuse it. A report of the Barnetts’ official welcome to Angas College explained that ‘When Mr. Morton lay very ill Mr. Barnett was sent for, and he at once dropped his other activities and came to the assistance of the college...He felt that God had called him to assist at the college.’²⁰

Clearly, Barnett saw that the disappointing truncation of their own foreign mission work in China could be partly redressed by involvement in training others for similar urgent gospel ministry overseas. He was ripe for a

move from denominational parish work into interdenominational missionary training, and so resigned his pastorate. Another change, another wrench, as they parted from friends. The Barnetts were sadly farewelled and received many generous gifts including a purse of sovereigns. Their daughter, Rita, vividly recalled the trip as a twelve-year-old ‘standing on the deck of a ship in Port Philip Bay with my father, mother and brother and our hands filled with streamers; and as I watched the sad faces of my father’s former parishioners and saw the streamers snap one by one, I remember saying, “It’s like ‘O Love that wilt not let me go’, isn’t it?”’²¹

Commencing at Angas College in 1915, the Barnetts threw themselves with gusto into the work of training young people. Morton’s missionary college had grown in size, and since 1895 had been enrolling women students as well as men. By the time the Barnetts arrived to help, generous philanthropic donations had provided two new campuses closer to the city than the old Belair site. Men lived and trained at the new Angas College site in North Adelaide, while women were now accommodated at ‘Seaton’, an elegant mansion in Toowong Road, Kensington Park, east of the city centre.

Having left denominational ministry, the Barnetts had also therefore relinquished a stipend and were once again dependent on God to supply their needs and those of the college. Benson led, taught, administered, and preached frequently – often twice on a Sunday – at Adelaide Congregational churches including Hindmarsh Square, Port Adelaide, and Manthorpe Memorial in Unley Road. He was active, too, in the Christian community outside of college and church life. That year, Barnett headed up an intentionally interdenominational committee to start planning meetings for the deepening of the spiritual life, which resulted in the first Keswick Convention in Adelaide in September 1915. It ran over six days in the Willard Hall and Glenelg Town Hall. Like Keswick in England and the Katoomba Convention, the motto was ‘We are all one in Christ’ and the convention theme was ‘The person and work of the Holy Spirit’.

It was a year in which Barnett reported experiencing, markedly, the favour of the Lord and his rich blessing. Many expected Barnett to succeed Lockhart Morton as principal. However, this was the troubled year of the ANZACs’ failed Gallipoli campaign; and as the year progressed and Australia’s contribution to the First World War deepened, the college began to experience changes and threats. The student body shrank as some of the male students at Angas enlisted for military service and others decided against studying

during the war years. The government then requisitioned the main college premises for use as a meningitis and general infectious diseases hospital. A comfortable alternative residence was supplied, which the Barnetts lived in for a short time. But like the recently established interdenominational Chapman-Alexander Bible Institute, the college lost momentum as it lost enrolments, and then its campus.

A return to denominational ministry would have been easy, and a number of churches in Adelaide and Melbourne sought Benson Barnett when it became clear that he intended leaving Angas College. But his resolute sense of having been called by God to the specific work of training people for missionary service persisted, and he was not inclined to step back into parish work. 'Had not the Lord called me out from that particular work? Dare I go back to it? He had shown me that He was with me in the work I was then engaged in, and had given me such tokens for good, that I felt He had sealed the calling of me out, in a very definite way...Could a similar work be started there where I was? Unthinkable. Could it be done as efficiently, or more so, elsewhere?'²²

A number of other small evangelical 'missionary training homes' had sprung up in the 1890s and around the turn of the century, mainly in Melbourne. By the war years, most had closed or had been amalgamated: Dr. and Mrs. Warren's home, in Kew; James and Emily Griffiths' 'Hiawatha', in Fitzroy; the Rev. John Southey's training home for young men in Grey Street, East Melbourne; 'Rehoboth' Wesleyan Methodist training home, also in East Melbourne; and Eliza Hassall's 'Marsden House' for ladies, in Ashfield, NSW. Where, then, were the Barnetts to go to further their important and passionately enthusiastic Bible and missionary training objectives? In 1915, apart from the one they were leaving, there was just one other Bible institute. The recently founded Chapman-Alexander Bible Institute (also in Adelaide) had been set up in 1914 to nurture converts and sustain the evangelistic impetus of the Chapman-Alexander evangelistic missions. Otherwise, there were no Bible colleges (as distinct from denominational theological colleges) in any of the Australian states or in New Zealand.²³

Rita later recalled the days before Christmas when her parents seemed to be praying all the time. The more the Barnetts struggled in earnest prayer to seek the Lord's leading, the more they were convicted that Sydney was God's destination for them. It seemed absurd in many ways. They had barely enough money for the journey to Sydney, let alone for house rental or living

expenses there. Apart from conducting a couple of final YMCA deputation meetings with Arthur Nicholls en route to China over twenty years earlier, Benson hardly knew Sydney. He and Elizabeth were virtually unacquainted with anyone there, and had not received any invitation to establish a training institution. And yet the pressing need in the eastern states for a faithful Bible and missionary training college weighed heavily on them. Separated from family and old friends whom they might consult, they were cast upon God alone; and in their trusting perplexity, they found him – as always – sufficient.

By December 1915, the decision was made. Benson wrote a letter refusing the last overture from an Adelaide church awaiting his reply; composed a telegram of intention to a Christian man in Sydney of whom he had heard, but never met; and then waited. Within twenty four hours, Barnett received a letter from the only other Sydney man he knew. Two days before the Barnetts' decision was made, and unaware of their dilemma, this gentleman, W. Clarke Chambers, had written to offer them the use of his Sydney house for several weeks. On receiving his offer, they clearly saw God's seal and blessing, and immediately telegraphed their acceptance.

Lacking the wherewithal to transport their furniture, they stored it with Adelaide friends. And so, leaving many of their personal goods behind, the family of four left Adelaide by train. They covered the thousand-mile journey in a crowded train over two of the hottest days of summer, arriving in Sydney on 6 January 1916. As they left the station, they were unsure indeed of the next step beyond a few weeks in a borrowed house. Once again, they were strangers: in a strange city, in the middle of a world war, apprehensive, without permanent accommodation, with less than a month's rent to their name, and no promised monetary support; but waiting on God in trusting obedience. Pioneers, who knew without doubt – because he had already proved himself – that God had plans for them beyond their expectations.