



British Union Conference executive committee, 1958. Alfred H. Williams is in the back row, third from the left. Front row fourth from the left is Walter W. Armstrong and fifth from the left is John. A. McMillan.

Photo courtesy of the Stanborough Press archive.

## McMillan, John Alexander (1901–1981)

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### AUDREY BALDERSTONE

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John Alexander McMillan served as president of the British Union Conference, South England Conference and Scottish Mission, departmental leader, director of the Voice of Prophecy, as well as evangelist and pastor.

## Early Life and Family

John Alexander McMillan was born in Belfast, Ireland (later Northern Ireland), January 5, 1901.

An avid reader, he read himself into the Adventist Church, presented himself for baptism, and enrolled for the ministerial course at Stanborough College in Watford without knowing about Ellen G. White or the 2300-day prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

Like many of his time, McMillan became actively involved in college life as a leader of the college "Gospel Band."<sup>3</sup> He also obtained a student colporteur license<sup>4</sup> so that he could go door-to-door in Ireland and England sharing the gospel and earning much needed funds to see him through college.<sup>5</sup> His thirst for knowledge and deep spirituality led to him receiving a First-Class Diploma when he graduated on May 17, 1926.<sup>6</sup> The following August he married Georgina Malcolm. The couple eventually had two daughters, Erma and Paulina, and four grandchildren. In 1976 John and Georgina celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary.<sup>7</sup>

## Ministry

Acknowledged as one of the foremost administrators in the history of the British Adventist Church,<sup>8</sup>

John McMillan began his ministerial career in Watford. He had a pioneering spirit. When he commenced work in Ireland in 1926, leadership sent him to Dublin<sup>9</sup> where, in 1929, he led 20 to prepare for baptism.<sup>10</sup> Later assigned the smaller towns of Ulster, he worked in Ballymena and Coleraine.<sup>11</sup> Initial meetings in Coleraine were well attended<sup>12</sup> and on July 17, 1930, five persons were baptized.<sup>13</sup> After McMillan's final assignment in Ireland in the city of Cork,<sup>14</sup> he returned to England to conduct evangelism in the Doncaster area beginning January 1937.<sup>15</sup>

For seven years, starting in 1938, McMillan served as president of the Scottish Mission and set up a recording studio as principal (director) of the Voice of Prophecy Bible School in Watford.<sup>16</sup>

In 1950 McMillan began an eight-year tenure at the South England Conference<sup>17</sup> and during that time the division asked him to visit all the British missionaries in West Africa. His wonderful Irish sense of humor served him well at one airport. An official, hoping to get a "dash" (bribe), told him the airline had no seat available for him on the plane, McMillan replied, "I think you should look at my passport." As 'MacMillan' was the name of the British prime minister of the time, the official quickly offered to carry his bags to the plane.<sup>18</sup>

Serving with distinction as British Union Conference president from 1958-1967,<sup>19</sup> McMillan had the honor of being presented to HRH Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, at the church's New Gallery Centre in London.<sup>20</sup> He was also the first Adventist president to appear on national television in the program 'The Saturday People,' aired on Sunday August 22, 1967.<sup>21</sup>

## Leadership During the Early Years of the West Indian Member Influx

"Between 1948 and 1970 nearly half a million people left their homes in the West Indies to live in Britain. The West Indies consists of more than 20 islands in the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad. These people changed the face of modern Britain. They were all British citizens and, although they had never lived in Britain before, they had the right to enter, work and settle here if they wanted to."<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the 1950s the British Adventist Church was nearly 90 percent indigenous white, but with the immigration from the West Indies that would change in the decades that followed as the white membership began to decline.<sup>23</sup> McMillan was a man of vision with a mission who led the church at a time of fast-changing demographics. At the 1958 British Union Conference he said, 'It takes courage to shine in darkness. Some people are like thermometers—their courage rising and falling according to their surroundings. Instead they should be thermostats, holding an even faith amid changing surroundings. No man should allow his courage to seep out through leaking toe-caps.'<sup>24</sup> Another quote encapsulates the boldness of McMillan's leadership: "expect and attempt great things for the Kingdom of Christ."<sup>25</sup>

During his presidency of the South England Conference, McMillan took a special and enthusiastic interest in the individual evangelistic work of pastors conference-wide.<sup>26</sup> Vigorous public evangelistic meetings held by pastors and visiting speakers were constantly at the top of his agenda. Reports about them appeared regularly in the *Messenger*.<sup>27</sup> Once he wrote that on a given Sunday 2,500 visitors listened to the evangelists in the various series being conducted.<sup>28</sup>

The focus on evangelism paid off. Within two years there were 445 baptisms and a net increase of 232 members, more than three times that of the previous two years before he took office and matched by a similar growth in tithe.<sup>29</sup>

As SEC president, McMillan officiated at the organization of two churches in one day: Bristol Lodge Causeway in the morning with 49 charter members, and Weston-Super-Mare in the afternoon with 23 members. The Lodge Causeway group had purchased land and later erected a church building.<sup>30</sup> McMillan was instrumental in acquiring the building for the South England Conference's headquarters at 25 St John's road in 1951. From 1939 until then the office had been located at 780 St Albans Road, Watford.<sup>31</sup> He supported the Lewisham church building extension (1953).<sup>32</sup> Another first, of which there were many, was the fellowship meeting of the Federation of London Dorcas Societies on December 6, 1953.<sup>33</sup> That same year saw the highest net membership increase of 222 in the history of the conference until that time.<sup>34</sup> McMillan was a man of deep spirituality, burning passion for evangelism, and action. Besides visiting churches, preaching to packed congregations, and encouraging members,<sup>35</sup> he received regular invitations to baptize new members.<sup>36</sup>

The quadrennial session of South England Conference (1950-1953) reported increases on every front during the previous four years: 25.6 percent in tithe, 27.7 percent in membership, 19.8 percent in Ingathering, and 17.7 percent in Sabbath School offerings. The conference had acquired eight churches and church halls. McMillan called for total member participation in the mission of the church.<sup>37</sup>

The following quadrennial period (1954-57) yielded similar remarkable results. McMillan was happy to report that “the number of souls accepted into church fellowship by baptism and vote was the highest in our history.” He fostered a strong and sustained spirit of evangelism that yielded excellent results. The conference conducted about 14 public evangelistic series each year.<sup>38</sup>

In August 1958 the British Union Conference Session held in Watford Town Hall elected McMillan as president.<sup>39</sup> At the conclusion of his first four years as president of the British Union Conference (1958-1961), McMillan reported at the Watford Town Hall on September 10-15, 1962, “progress in every phase of our work”. At the end of 1961 membership stood at 9,561, a net gain of 1,309. He went on to declare, “Evangelism is the vital life-blood of the church and must ever be promoted with vigor and Spirit-inspired vision.”<sup>40</sup> The following four years as president (1962-1967) he saw the net membership increase by 1,000.<sup>41</sup>

## Leadership During the Large-Scale Evangelistic Use of the New Gallery Centre

A committee comprising the officers of the division, union, and South England Conference managed the “New Gallery Centre” in the West End of London. Its annual budget depended on General Conference appropriations, office rents, and offerings.<sup>42</sup>

George A. Vandeman from the U.S.A. spent two years in London. In 1954 McMillan reported that 276 people were baptized as a result of Vandeman’s work at the Centre.<sup>43</sup> Other well-known evangelists such as R. Anderson, H. M. S. Richards, and K. Lacey held public meetings at the New Gallery Centre. McMillan took an active part in some of the meetings and on the center’s administrative committee.

## McMillan’s Biblical Theology

McMillan’s biblical theology was a wholesome balance between justification and sanctification. He quoted profusely from Scripture and the writings of Ellen White to highlight the gospel message at every occasion. In addition, he drew his inspiration and motivation to lead largely from those two sources. Before he left college he had read the whole nine volumes of the Testimonies by Ellen White.<sup>44</sup> Whenever he spoke, he exuded the same calmness that those who interacted with him personally could testify to. Always he encouraged his listeners to seek Christ. The supreme purpose of our lives should be to find Jesus that “through the blood of the everlasting covenant we might be made perfect.”<sup>45</sup> Wherever he went he lifted the spiritual atmosphere and motivated member participation. At the very heart of his theology was God’s love. His love for us and our love for Him and each other was supreme.<sup>46</sup>

In an editorial for the *British Advent Messenger* entitled “Winds Blowing,” McMillan demonstrated his wide knowledge of both the Bible and the writings of Ellen G White in addressing and confronting with grace, humor,

and incisiveness so-called “reformed Adventists” who were misusing Ellen White to sow division and confusion in the church.<sup>47</sup>

## Later life

Having led the church with great skill and courage for nine years, McMillan requested that he not be considered for election as union president in 1967. Instead of retiring, however, he continued to pastor the headquarters church at Stanborough Park. In addition, he was instrumental in establishing the St. Albans church which he also pastored.<sup>48</sup>

Always in demand for his prodigious knowledge of the *Church Manual* and church policy, as well as for his pastoral skills, McMillan received an invitation in 1981 to attend division meetings in Manchester in the north of England. During a morning session he suffered a stroke. As he was being wheeled into the ambulance, he said, “Carry on with the discussion!” They were the last clear words he uttered, and he died a week later on September 7, 1981.<sup>49</sup>

At his funeral service E. H. Foster, another former BUC President, paid tribute to McMillan:

He was his own man; he gave honest counsel, holding logic superior to sentimentalism; he had Christian dignity but delighted to burst the bubbles of pomposity; he was thrifty but generous. He was always circumspect but enjoyed good humour. He was an avid reader and diligent student but despised intellectualism. He loved righteousness and truth but despised intellectualism; he exalted the law of God but deplored legalism. He could confidently hold discussions with able theologians yet remarkably communicate with children and youth. He knew no generation gap.<sup>50</sup>

## Legacy

McMillan lived a life focused on Jesus and grounded in the Bible, and constantly sought to share the gospel with others. As a pastor and administrator, he always upheld sound doctrine and practical Christian living, remained loyal to the church and its procedures, and searched for ways to help the church stay focused on its mission.

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## NOTES

1. The Partition of Ireland took place under the Government of Ireland Act (1920) in May 1921. After the War of Independence, the South seceded from the UK in 1922. Northern Ireland opted to remain as part of the UK.  
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2. B. P. Phillips, 'Pastor J.A. McMillan 1901-1981', in *A Century of Adventism in the British Isles*, ed. by David Marshall (Grantham: Stanborough Press, 2000), 25. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Books/CABI2000.pdf>.
3. G. Baird, "College Notes" *The Missionary Worker*, November 16, 1923, 2.
4. H. D. Clarke, "Annual Meeting", *The Missionary Worker*, July 11, 1924, 5.
5. See for example "Canvassers' Book Report" *The Missionary Worker*, September 19, 1924, 7; "British Union Conference Colporteurs' Report" *The Missionary Worker*, November 14, 1924, 7.
6. Graduation Exercises Programme of Stanborough College, (May 17, 1926). Family copy with Paulina Rinta-aho.

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9. F. A. Spearing, "Notes of the President," *The Missionary Worker*, December 31, 1926, 5.
10. S. G. Joyce, "Irish Mission," *The Missionary Worker*, November 29, 1929, 4.
11. J.A. McMillan, "Ballymena," *The Missionary Worker*, March 20, 1931, 6; J. Harker, "Notes from the Superintendent," *The Missionary Worker*, June 3, 1932, 6.
12. S. G. Joyce, "Ulster," *The Missionary Worker*, March 7, 1930, 7.
13. S. G. Joyce, "1930 Baptisms Begin in Ireland," *The Missionary Worker*, July 25, 1930, 8.
14. W. E. Reid, "Notes from the Union President," *The Missionary Worker*, October 18, 1935, 3.
15. N. H. Knight, "Secretary's Notes", *British Advent Messenger*, December 25, 1936, 4.
16. B. P. Phillips, "Pastor J. A. McMillan 1901-1981," in *A Century of Adventism in the British Isles*, ed. by David Marshall (Grantham: Stanborough Press, 2000), 25.
17. Ibid.
18. Anecdote related by his daughter, Paulina Rinta-aho.
19. B. P. Phillips, 'Pastor J.A. McMillan 1901-1981,' .25.
20. Photograph supplied by his daughter Paulina Rinta-aho. Neither the date nor the occasion is identified.
21. *British Advent Messenger* (1965), 4-6; see also (1967), 26.
22. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/bound-for-britain/> Accessed October 25, 2019.
23. *A Century of Adventism in the British Isles*. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Books/CABI2000.pdf>
24. J.R. Lewis, "Enlargement—A morning devotional," *British Advent Messenger*, September 5, 1958, 14.
25. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/bound-for-britain/> Accessed October 25, 2019.

26. J. A. McMillan, "President's Notes," *British Advent Messenger*, April 6, 1951, 2.  
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28. Ibid. (1957), 6. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19571101-V62-22.pdf>
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35. Ibid. (1951), 4. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19510810-V56-16.pdf>
36. Ibid. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19510824-V56-17.pdf>
37. Ibid. (1954), 3, 4. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19540806-V59-17a.pdf>
38. Ibid. (1958), 12, 13. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19580828-V63-17a.pdf>
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44. Ibid. (1958), 14. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19580905-V63-18.pdf>
45. Ibid. (1951), 2, 3. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19511005-V56-20.pdf>

46. Ibid. (1952), 5. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19520822-V57-16,17.pdf>

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48. Ibid. (1978), 2. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19780804-V83-16.pdf>

49. Ibid. (1981), 1, 7. <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/BAM/BAM19810930-V86-19.pdf>

50. Ibid.

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