



Ada and Harry Robson in Tanganyika, 1937.

Photo courtesy of Stanborough Press Archive.

## Robson, Henry “Harry” (1894–1976), and Ada Alice (Baldwin) (1893–1999)

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Henry Robson was a long-serving missionary to Tanganyika and Uganda. He and his wife, Ada, helped establish and develop the Adventist mission work in Africa, serving there for 32 years.

## Early Life

Henry Robson, known as "Harry," was born on May 14, 1894 in Gillingham, Kent, southwest of London.<sup>1</sup> As a young boy, he was invited by his friend, Rawlings, to attend tent meetings by the Adventists. His father, a devout Baptist, opposed Harry becoming a Seventh-day Adventist. It took the intervention of Pastor S. G. Haughey for him to allow the young Robson to exercise his faith.<sup>2</sup> The father placed one condition, that Harry spends a year studying both sides of the Sabbath/Sunday question before making his decision. Together with Rawlings, Robson embarked on the study of the Bible, and at the end of the year, both young men joined the Seventh-day Adventist church. Keeping the Sabbath led to him losing his job at the dockyard.<sup>3</sup>

In 1913, he found a job at the Caterham Sanitarium, working there for eight years, rising to become its business manager. During this time, he also served as the clerk of the Adventist congregation that met at the Sanitarium.<sup>4</sup> After Dr. Olsen left the Caterham Sanitarium, the sanitarium staff had great difficulties to accommodate all patients, but Robson managed to provide two army huts for operations to continue.<sup>5</sup> However, despite his efforts the Sanitarium closed in 1921. Robson moved to work at The Stanboroughs Sanitarium before being appointed as secretary-treasurer of the South England Conference,<sup>6</sup> working under veteran missionary F. A. Spearing who was conference president.<sup>7</sup>

## Marriage and Family

On September 12, 1922, Robson married Ada Alice Baldwin at Fuller Baptist Church in Kettering, near Northampton. The Adventists had rented the church for that occasion. The Robsons were married by Pastor L.W. Barras, who was assisted by Rev. Evan Williams, the Baptist pastor.<sup>8</sup> Ada remained by Robson's side, serving as his constant companion throughout his missionary service and their marriage of 52 years.

## Call to Africa

In 1924, while still serving as the secretary-treasurer of the South England Conference, Robson was called to service in Africa. His place in the South England Conference was taken up by J. H. Parkin from Wales.<sup>9</sup> The Robsons moved to Tanganyika travelling up north to Mwanza where they began missionary service at the Ntusu Station under the Mwanza Mission.<sup>10</sup> They worked among the Sukuma people. The Mwanza Mission was under William Cuthbert,<sup>11</sup> who would soon move to Kenya, handing over his leadership post to G. A. Ellingworth, formerly of Malamulo. By 1923, there were four stations among the Sukuma people based at Ntusu, Itilima, Kanadi, and Mwagala.<sup>12</sup>

Robson took charge at Ntusu while E. B. Philips, who had previously served in Kenya, took the lead at Mwagala.<sup>13</sup> The missions had been founded by German missionaries, but in their absence, due to the hostilities of the First World War, most of the stations in Tanganyika were abandoned. Ntusu was not an accessible station, and the

Robsons endured long periods of isolation and deprivation.<sup>14</sup> In February 1929, after returning from furlough, Robson set about conducting teacher training classes for students at Ntusu. He also supervised the building of accommodation huts to house the girls joining the school later in the year.<sup>15</sup> The teacher training was to equip teachers to take a Grade 2 Government Certificate required of them. He did this with H. A. Matthews, who was in charge at Majita.<sup>16</sup> In 1921 the West Tanganyika mission field had only ten members.<sup>17</sup> By 1932, the church membership had grown to 529; of those, 155 were at the Ntusu Mission. Robson had 170 in the baptismal class.<sup>18</sup>

## Further Work at Ntusu

In 1929, Sister L. Clarke moved to Ntusu to start a girls school, with a few girls lodging in one of the huts in the Mission village. During that time, the colonial government in Tanganyika assisted the Mission by providing better accommodation, and in due course, they were able to construct four dormitories and a dining hall that was also used for evening worship. The expansion of facilities would include a teacher's room, a kitchen, and a store!<sup>19</sup> By 1933, there were 42 girls in Clarke's school. With help from the Big Week Fund, Robson was able to build a modern dispensary at Ntusu, and by 1933, they saw an average of 50 patients every day.<sup>20</sup> Robson also oversaw the construction of a modern church at Ntusu through voluntary labor from the members and financial contributions from them. In February 1933, the building was ready, and the inaugural service was held there. With a congregation of 300, of whom 100 participated in the ordinances. The Robsons were assisted by William Raitt (who helped with the roof) and A. F. Bull (who organized the young people's work) as well as the other missionaries in Tanganyika.<sup>21</sup>

Tanganyika was a part of the East Africa Union, together with Kenya and Uganda, and the Union was part of the Northern European Division. During the Autumn Council of the General Conference of 1932, the decision was made to reorganize the work in the East Africa Union. Tanganyika was moved to the Central European Division while Uganda was separated from the East Africa Union to become a Union. The Kenyan and Ugandan fields remained under the Northern European Division.<sup>22</sup> This action resulted in many British missionaries in Tanganyika moving to Kenya. Bull and Raitt and other missionaries from England, moved to Kenya, but Robson chose to remain in Tanganyika.

## Further Work in Tanganyika

In August 1935, Robson was ordained at the Ntusu Mission. In 1940, the Robsons moved to Suji Mission, taking over from W. Fenner.<sup>23</sup> Suji, in the Pare Mountains region, was a long distance, nearly 900 kilometers, away from Ntusu. In 1941 at Suji, Robson greatly expanded the treatments offered at the dispensary tripling the number of patients seen there.<sup>24</sup> In 1943, he moved to Busegwe, 200 kilometers northeast of Mwanza town to serve as superintendent.<sup>25</sup> Ada took charge of the Busegwe Mission Dispensary. Busegwe is about 30 kilometers from

the lakeside town of Musoma. At the same time, Robson served as the secretary-treasurer of the Tanganyika Field under F. H. Thomas.<sup>26</sup> In 1947, Thomas was replaced by H. E. Kotz, and Robson continued in the position of secretary-treasurer.<sup>27</sup> In 1951, H. E. Kotz was replaced by F.G. Reid, with Robson continuing as secretary-treasurer.<sup>28</sup> By this time, the Tanganyika Mission had over 6,000 members.<sup>29</sup>

## Moving to Uganda

In 1955 the Robsons left Tanganyika for neighboring Uganda. By the time of their departure, the Tanganyika Mission had 33 churches with a membership of 8,887<sup>30</sup> compared to less than 800 in 1932.<sup>31</sup> Robson moved to Uganda to serve as the secretary-treasurer of the Uganda Mission serving under F. H. Muderspach.<sup>32</sup> He took over from W.O. England. The Uganda Mission was based at Kireka Hill a short distance from Kampala on the road to Jinja.

## Return to England

On June 19, 1956, the Robsons retired, ending their missionary tour to Africa. Their boat left Cape Town for England that day, ending 32 years of service in Africa.<sup>33</sup> In total, they had given 43 years to denominational service.<sup>34</sup> They retired to Kettering in Northamptonshire and remained active in church affairs. Robson also served as an elder in the Kettering Seventh-day Adventist Church. Robson passed away on August 9, 1976, after months of declining health.<sup>35</sup> He was survived by his wife who died on December 22, 1999, at the age of 106.<sup>36</sup>

## Legacy

Harry and Ada Robson spent over three decades in Tanganyika, one of the longest-serving missionaries in one location. They endured incredible hardships to bring the gospel message to thousands in colonial Tanganyika and help develop the foundations of the Adventist work there. In addition, the Robsons helped develop the African staff, teachers, evangelists, and ministers who furthered the work in Tanganyika. Today, the Adventist church is one of the largest protestant denominations in Tanzania, and much of that is attributed to the tireless labor of the early missionaries, among them Harry and Ada Robson.

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