

Watson, Albert H. (1873–1958)

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Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*.

Albert Watson was one of the pre-war (First World War) missionaries pioneering the mission station at Rusinga Island on Lake Victoria, Western Kenya. He worked in Kenya for a total of 17 years as a missionary.

Early Life

Albert H. Watson was born in 1873 in Banbridge, Northern Ireland. He became an Adventist in 1891 from the work of Elder William Hutchinson, who held a number of evangelistic meetings around Northern Ireland¹. Albert's older brother, Joseph H. Watson, who also accepted the message, moved to the United States and began working at the Review and Herald.² Joseph H. Watson then moved to Canada to work with the Toronto branch of the Review and Herald. In 1901 he returned to the United States to continue with the publishing work at Battle Creek. On December 30, 1902, fire gutted down the Review's Battle Creek printing works, causing his redundancy.³ He then decided to become a missionary in Africa, moving to Central Africa together with his wife to pioneer the Adventist work there. On February 28, 1903, Joseph Watson was ordained at Battle Creek before setting off to Africa. He connected with the newly acquired Plainfield Mission near Blantyre, Nyasaland, present day Malawi. The mission would in time be renamed Malamulo, the name it bears to this day. All the while, Albert Watson remained in Northern Ireland.

Going into Ministry

While his brother went to the United States, Albert remained in Ireland and worked on the farm near Banbridge. On occasions he would travel around the Banbridge area selling the *Present Truth* magazine.⁴ One day as Albert worked at the plough on his farm near Banbridge, he received the news that his brother had died in Africa following a short illness.⁵ His brother had barely started his work in Africa when he became ill and died on December 11, 1903, leaving behind his American wife who was the granddaughter of J. M. Aldrich, one of the pioneers of the Adventist publishing work.⁶ Albert immediately prepared himself to take his brother's place as a missionary in Africa. A photograph of students and staff at Stanborough College in the school year 1911--12 show both Albert and Hilda.⁷ He moved to Belfast to do some evangelistic work. Later he located in Dublin

where he worked for several years, often doing tract work.⁸ On August 29, 1912, Albert was elected as the elder at the organization of the Dublin church and continued evangelistic work in the area.⁹

Moving to Africa

In June 1913 Albert Watson moved to British East Africa. After a brief stay at the mission station at Gendia, he went on to Rusinga Island on Lake Victoria. There was already a school at Rusinga with forty children in attendance.¹⁰ Earlier that year, Pastor L. R. Conradi, then the president of the European Division, had visited Rusinga and had sought and obtained permission to establish a new mission station.¹¹ Rusinga at that time was only accessible by boat, although today a causeway takes you there by car from Mbita Point. The island is elongated in shape, approximately ten miles (16 km) end to end at the longest point and three miles (5 km) at its widest point. The people of the island were mainly from the Suba, a Bantu people who had lived for years with the Nilotic Luo people having come by boat from the ancient Buganda kingdom fleeing from war. The people of the islands lived largely by subsistence agriculture and fishing.

Watson was received by the Paramount Chief Nyakriga of Rusinga, who had welcomed the Adventists earlier. Watson settled at Kiwegi Hill in Waregi village in the east of the island where the Adventist mission was located. Waregi School was already operating, and Watson continued the work at the school and also superintended running the mission. Some of the pioneer Adventists on the island included Samwel Kaoga, Daudi Ogoe, Zakaria Sudhe, Petro Orwa, James Owala, and Mathayo Opiyo.¹²

Coming of War

When World War broke out in 1914, it was particularly difficult for the Adventist missionaries in British East Africa. Watson was immediately placed in detention and moved to Kaimosi, 100 miles north of Gendia, where the main Adventist mission station was located.¹³ Despite being British, Watson remained in detention at Kaimosi until October 1916 when he and the other Adventist missionaries were released. The government authorities had been reluctant to release the Adventists after they learned that the headquarters of the European Division were in Hamburg Germany, the nation they were at war with. Those in detention with Watson included A. Carscallen, Alfred Matter, J. D. Baker, E. B. Philips, L. E. A. Lane, B. L. Morse, and their spouses. Following a direct appeal to the government authorities, the Adventists were released and allowed to return to their mission stations.

Watson was more fortunate than the rest, his station had not been looted as much as the other stations were!¹⁴ It had remained largely untouched, thanks to Daniel Onyango, who had been placed in charge while Watson was away.¹⁵ When Watson returned, the work expanded further. The church took in new believers who were baptized at the Gendia Mission. The school continued to grow in attendance.

In 1921 Watson returned to the British Union and spent a “furlough” year in Belfast during which time he married Miss Hilda Blair. Hilda was a Bible instructor in Britain. They returned to Kenya in 1922 to continue the mission work, initially locating in the Mwanza district of Tanganyika.¹⁶ They had two sons, Albert and Charles, both born at Gendia.¹⁷

Return to Europe

In 1930 Pastor and Mrs. Watson returned to the British Union permanently. Albert’s work was not over as he was to pastor in Newcastle, Rugby, Torquay, and Exeter,¹⁸ and also served in Ireland and Wales.

Later Years

In 1953 Watson retired and moved to Derby. He remained there until June 28, 1958, when he passed away. He was survived by his wife and sons.¹⁹

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NOTES

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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Present Truth, Agents' Record," *The Missionary Worker*, April 16, 1902, 59.
5. W. A. Spicer, "Africa Loses a Worker," *ARH*, January 14, 1904, 24.
6. Ibid.
7. See Stanborough College 1911-12 Photo.
8. A. H. Watson, "Irish Mission," *The Missionary Worker*, April 8, 1912, 56.
9. J. J. Gilant, "Irish Mission", *The Missionary Worker*, October 7, 1912, 158.
10. J. D. Baker, "Wire Hill, Kisumu," *The Missionary Worker*, July 28, 1913, 1.
11. L. R. Conradi, "Experiences in British East Africa," *ARH*, May 8, 1913, 11.
12. Interview with Philemon Okwaso, a long serving elder and clerk at Rusinga Got Seventh-day Adventist Church, Lake Victoria Field, West Kenya Union Conference 2021. Interviewed by Pr. Wilson Wandago February 17, 2021, at Rusinga Got SDA Church Compound.
13. Virgil E. Robinson, "Kamagambo since yesterday," *Southern Africa Division Outlook*, December 15, 1955, 4.
14. Ibid.
15. Isaac Okeyo, *Adventism in Kenya* (Kendu Bay; Kenya: Africa Herald Publishing House 1990), 14.
16. M. N. Campbell, "The East African Institute," *The Missionary Worker*, February 8, 1922,.8.
17. W. W. Armstrong and Norman, Alan, "Pastor Albert Watson" (Obituary), *British Advent Messenger*, August 8, 1958, 8.
18. R. S. Joyce, "South England Conference," *The Missionary Worker*, May 17, 1935, 4.
19. Armstrong and Alan, "Pastor Albert Watson" (Obituary).

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