

JOHN R. MOTT, WORLD CITIZEN

by Katherine Buxbaum
Cedar Falls, Iowa

On a September morning in the year 1881 certain aspiring young Iowans may have been seen climbing the hill above the River Volga on which the town of Fayette, Iowa is situated. Their goal was the gray, stone building that housed the school called Upper Iowa University. One of these was a 16-year-old Postville lad, who would in time become known the world over as a great Christian leader. His sense of "mission" would be fulfilled in his zeal for Missions. He would journey far and wide, crossing the Atlantic more than 100 times; the Pacific, 14 times. In pursuit of his calling he would gain a vast knowledge of other cultures. He would rightly be called a world citizen.



John R. Mott
1865-1955

John R. Mott's biographer, Basil Mathews, gives interesting glimpses of the Postville boy, crazy about railroads and railroading. He dreamed trains, and he built replicas of them. Playmates helped run these strings of make-shift cars while John went on building more. He spent much time around the station, helping wipe machinery in the roundhouse, listening to railroad talk, asking questions. A few years later he was reading timetables with absorption. In imagination he could visit all the far away places.

A world traveler was even then in the making.

Strong religious influences helped to shape the adolescent. His was a Bible-oriented mother. An unusually well-educated minister became his friend. A Y.M.C.A. secretary, a Quaker, sojourning in the town one winter fostered his awakening religious impulses. In another direction he was influenced by a Postville lawyer, a student of Shakespeare. This gentleman could recite at length from the plays for the pleasure of all

who would listen. Here was a rural youth reaching out for the cultivated minds in the community, coming in contact with the world of ideas.

At Upper Iowa University John Mott was pretty much on his own, as were all freshmen at the time. There were no guidance courses; no testing for skills and aptitudes that might help a student choose a curriculum. An eager young person could make his own voyage of discovery. There was a literary society, which gave opportunity for oratory and debate. An occasional mock trial was staged with due legal practices observed to the letter. The requirement of arguing a case from evidence sharpened logical thinking. Mott learned to speak and think on his feet. And he learned that he could write. His prize-winning essay is worth mentioning. It had a rather unusual title: "What we owe to the twentieth century." It would have been only natural for young people, excited about the approach of the magic date — 1900, to write and speak of what the new day would bring them in the way of benefits. Not so, this serious young man who already felt oppressed by the weight of the materialism he saw about him. He asked, in his essay, for higher aims and ideals which he and his fellows might bring to fruition in the decades ahead.

In due course Mott left Fayette for a larger school with a broader curriculum: Cornell University at Ithaca, N. Y. A transfer was arranged and he found himself enrolled in the sophomore class. There he began to think seriously about choosing a vocation. Should it be law? Politics? (Governor Larrabee of Iowa had encouraged him to fit himself for public life.) Or would it be a business career? (Mott's father had counted on turning over the lumber business to his son.) All these possibilities looked good.

The Y.M.C.A. at Cornell, called simply The Christian Association, had about 100 members out of a student body of 800. Mott joined it, but was not especially enthusiastic. Although at Fayette he had toyed with the thought of a religious vocation, the idea had lost its appeal. Like most young people, he had his seasons of skepticism. One evening he went to hear a speaker from England, a Cambridge man who combined

a zeal for sport — he was a famous cricket player — with a passion for saving souls. Mott entered the hall a little late, just in time to hear a ringing challenge: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God." He went home to wrestle with the question this one clear call had brought home to him. Next day, he sought out the speaker for counsel. He studied Scripture; he prayed about the decision he must make. The result was a definite commitment to a life of Christian service.

Now he cast his lot unreservedly with the others in the Christian Association. He became its president. His dynamism attracted others, and the membership tripled. Opportunities for practical service opened up. One of these, probably initiated by the students themselves, would seem today a strange sort of "extra-curricular activity." Mott joined others who made regular visits to the local jail, bringing a gospel message to the inmates. This was evangelism, pure and simple, and it was wholly consistent with John R. Mott's view of a worthy life work. He would not take up theology nor become the minister of any church. His ideal was the career of a Christian layman.

College branches of the Y.M.C.A. had for some years been sending delegates to the famous student conferences led by Dwight L. Moody at Northfield, Mass. Mott, a delegate from Cornell at one of these meetings, had been caught up in the enthusiasm generated there. He saw himself increasingly attracted to the work to be done among students. He would take up this work as soon as an opportunity was offered. It came almost immediately upon his graduation from Cornell in 1888. A responsible position was vacant at the moment, and Mott assumed its obligations with the zeal of a dedicated leader. His official title was a long one: National Secretary of the Intercollegiate Y.M.C.A. of the United States and Canada. It was strenuous work, involving many miles of travel, and it lasted for 27 years.

Mott was in and out of campuses all over the land, wherever the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. had taken root. He brought inspiration to the active associations; he shored up the weaker ones. While he had a genius for puttings things

in smooth running order, his best contribution was something else — the manly vigor he possessed made the Christian experience seem vital.

An important outgrowth of college Y.M.C.A. activity was the Student Volunteer Movement. Begun some time in the Eighties, it was in full swing by the time the new century came in. John R. Mott, missionary-minded and an alert student of the dark peoples, put his talents to work in this movement. When the "Volunteers" met in convention, as they did every four years, he was there in the thick of things. At nine of these conventions he presided, from the one at Cleveland, Ohio, in 1888 to the one at Des Moines in 1920. He gave his audiences a watchword, an ambitious one. It was: "The evangelization of the world in this generation." Students thrilled to the challenge. Hundreds in response to it found their way all over the globe — teaching, preaching, nursing, sharing the life of people in native villages, learning to cope with loneliness, danger and despair.

The year 1895 found Mott in Sweden, cooperating with a Christian leader there. The result of their efforts was the World's Student Federation which united Christian student societies in about 300 colleges and universities of 27 countries.

The year 1910 is a landmark, for it was in that year that the World Missionary Conference met in Edinburgh, Scotland. Twelve hundred delegates were present, representing the leaders of the world forces in Protestant missions. At the close of the meeting a "continuation committee" was agreed upon. Who but John R. Mott would be asked to head this? He set off at once on a tour of the Far East with a view to follow-up work. Visiting Japan, India, China and Korea, he spelled out the meaning of "continuation." He spent his days organizing; and in the evenings he addressed throngs of interested native students. The national councils, thus formed, grew to an International Missionary Council, self-supporting and self-perpetuating. Here were the seeds of ecumenism, which in later years would prosper mightily.

When Mott came in contact with faiths other than Christianity he looked squarely at these. He got on well with

leaders in the churches and temples where his travels led him. He studied the Buddhist and Mohammedan scriptures. Acknowledging the sound religious principles contained in these, he gave their disciples a hearing, even as he strove to show them, in the words of Paul, "a more excellent way."

The record of Y.M.C.A. work in World War I and Mott's part in it is a story in itself. Even before the United States entered the conflict, Y. M. C. A. workers were carrying on a ministry to prisoners-of-war on both sides. After 1917 the work was greatly expanded. Vast sums of money for material and spiritual aid were contributed by organizations wanting to help. President Wilson asked Mott to coordinate the funds and to direct their use, which he did with efficiency.

A full report of the activities of this man's fruitful years would be very long and somewhat bewildering. The account is studded with names of movements and of offices held. Taken alone, they seem lifeless, even dull; in context they are full of significance: general secretary, executive committee, committee chairman, presiding officer. National leads to international. It was inevitable that Mott, with his knowledge of foreign affairs should be offered diplomatic posts. Woodrow Wilson sent him on a mission to Mexico; later the President offered him the post of envoy to China, renewing the offer after Mott refused. It may have been tempting, for he had the mind of a statesman. Yet his held steadfast to his original goals.

Honors were heaped upon him. At the World Council of Churches, meeting in Amsterdam in 1948, he was chosen honorary chairman, the only layman to be accorded this position. The honor was renewed six years later, when the World Council met in Evanston, Ill. One observer noted how impressive was that towering figure of an old man (six-foot-two) high up on the rostrum. A contemporary theologian speaking of him said, "He is something like the mountains and the sea, rather simple and a little bit sublime." The year 1946 was reserved for a high honor, for it was then in his 81st year, that he was co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. This was richly deserved. All that he had accomplished was in the interest of peace.

John R. Mott did not lose touch entirely with his Iowa connections. Back in Fayette, speaking at the 50th anniversary of his class, he acknowledged the importance of small colleges. They had, he thought, a significant role in the educational program. A few friends were left to greet him. Postville has mementos that keep his memory green. And visitors to Upper Iowa University may see, if they wish, the room in Alexander Dickman Hall where he had his living quarters. It may have been in this room that he sat down to pen his convictions about what he, for one, "owed" to the 20th century. The debt which he chose to assume would be paid by a lifetime of noble striving. Paid in full.

LIBRARY NOTES . . .

A TERRITORIAL LIBRARY RECEIPT BOOK: 1841-1843

by Lida L. Greene
Librarian, State Historical Library

We came upon the old library receipt book quite by accident. Aloys Gilman, assistant librarian, who keeps a careful eye on the Manuscript Division, was making an inventory of a box of documents when the folio volume came to light. It was 12x7½ inches, the cover gray-blue with black and corner pieces of russet now dimmed and dog-eared with wear. Handwritten, in letters shaded with the flat of a quill stroke, were the words *RECEIPT BOOK Morgan Reno*. A catalogue card revealed it had been in a Department vault for seventy-five years. Morgan Reno, the man who kept the record, was the third director of the Iowa Territorial Library. It was like turning back time to sun-browned farmers riding horseback to meet in legislature.

Inside the volume were printed charge forms, five to a page. "Received of the Librarian of the Iowa Territorial Library . . ." followed by spaces for the choice of reading, the date and the borrower's name. Page one, number one registers the loan of *Rowlet's Interest Tables* on June 1841 to Jesse Williams, a practical choice for a territorial secretary and a businessman.

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