



184 ALEXANDER AVENUE

**BRITISH AND FOREIGN BIBLE SOCIETY BUILDING
(BIBLE HOUSE)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

December 20, 1979

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This building was erected in 1912 by the British and Foreign Bible Society, and came to be known as Bible House. Bible societies were a Protestant phenomena which achieved widespread popularity in eighteenth century Europe and which were based on the right of the individual to read and interpret the Word of God as the spirit might direct.¹ The British and Foreign Bible Society was organized in England in 1804 with the obvious intent to bring the Bible to heathen peoples throughout the world. From the start, the dominating purpose of this group was simply to make the word available to all who could read and, by and large, no attempt was made to interpret its comments;² this concept is the mark of the reformed churches.

The work of this Bible Society in Canada began in 1808, with support and literature donated from the parent organization. The Bible was translated into several Indian languages as well as a stock of European languages, and was distributed at little or no cost to anyone interested through a system of colporteurs. Missions and missionaries of all denominations were also able to draw from the supply of Bibles, and the rate of distribution was consequently high.

Bibles had found their way to the west through the work of individual colporteurs but it was not until 1872 that a Manitoba and Saskatchewan Auxiliary depot was formally opened in Winnipeg.³ Nine languages, including the native dialects, were needed in the first few years. As the population of the west began to grow, so did the work of the Bible Society and in 1904, the Manitoba district society changed from a missionary auxiliary to a contributing auxiliary under the direction of Ernest J.B. Salter. A new building with offices and a book depot was clearly needed. In 1911, the Alexander Avenue site was purchased at a cost of \$14,000,⁴ and demolition commenced the Canadian Laundry building that was still on the lot. Construction was started in the summer of 1912.

The escalation of activity of the Bible Society and the choice of a locale for their operations were not chance occurrences and can be viewed in a wider context. The federal government's aggressive immigration policy had enticed thousands of people to come to Canada west from across Europe. The majority of these immigrants were quite poor and had little to make a strong start in the new

country. Although intending to take homesteads on the prairie, many remained in the cities where there was a possibility of a cash income. The problems accompanying this influx in Winnipeg has been well documented and described in various sources; suffice to say that some deplorable conditions were present. There was a decided grouping of these immigrants and urban poor into the "foreign quarter",⁵ the north end of the city.

Urban blight, unequal distribution of wealth, intemperance and nativism were the problems of the period and those groups seeking solutions were numerous. By the turn of the century, there was a mass movement to correct these problems. This social upsurge was channelled through a variety of groups that were emphatically non-partisan and non-denominational. The movement as a whole has been called the social gospel, embracing the idea that the Kingdom of God should be achieved on earth by the alleviation of those social problems.⁶ The farmers' movement, the alliance of labour, the W.C.T.U., women's suffrage and the welfare movement by such people as J.S. Woodsworth and Margaret Scott were all pledged to reform society in their own way. The North End was both a hotbed for this radical reform movement and a target for the philanthropic endeavours.

The Bible Society was certainly a part of the movement, albeit not as forceful or celebrated as most of the other groups, but they shared a common cause. In a deliberate non-sectarian approach, the colporteurs distributed the word of God to those who needed direction most: the new immigrants, the wretched urban poor, and the families living in isolation on the prairie. Innumerable books in scores of languages were circulated, without comment, to the new Canadians in the hopes that they would learn of a better way of living. In their north-end location, they were near to the people who needed them most. Nearby, on Stella Avenue, Woodsworth's All People's Mission looked after the more immediate needs of the newcomers who poured off the trains in the CPR Station and were channelled through the immigration halls. The Bible Society's hawkers were there also.⁷ Before the 1914 war put an effective end to mass immigration, Canadians had every indication that the population of the west would continue to increase at a rapid rate. The Alexander office was built for the Bible Society with this anticipation. It was five storeys high, with 45 rooms, which was only fitting for an auxiliary with 586 branches in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.⁸ The building was 66 feet

across and a depth of 48 feet. The cost of construction was around \$75,000, which was 20% higher than they had planned.

At a sod-turning ceremony in the summer of 1912, appropriate hymns were sung, prayers recited and speeches given. The President of the Society, Thomas Ryan, read a dedication "concerning a stranger that is come from a far country", to receive the word of God. Further, the new building would become "a centre for all who were endeavouring to make Christ known."¹⁰

The structure was rushed to completion and was occupied in 1913, but Bible House was not formally opened until the tenth anniversary ceremony of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan Bible Society, in April, 1915. The moving force behind this growth locally, Rev. Dr. Salter, was paid tribute, and he stated his motives in reply. Moulding the empire, he said, "could best be done by placing Bibles in the hands of the people."¹¹

The Architect of Bible House was William Bruce. Bruce was Scottish-born and trained, and came to Winnipeg in 1906. He was an eccentric man who laid out a comprehensive design for a city of half a million people where the town of Churchill is. He also worked extensively with a kind of local stone in an effort to find the ultimate fireproof material.¹² It is not known what other buildings he designed. The contract was John Dolmer. Bible House immediately proved to be an overly-ambitious undertaking. The flood of immigrants ceased with the war, and the Saskatchewan and Alberta auxiliaries became independent and self-sustaining chapters. As a result, Bible House had too much space and by 1914 it had rented out several offices and suites. The Children's Aid Society, which had been founded the century previous, became a major tenant until 1957. It was an appropriate tenant, compatible with the good works of the Society, and intimate with the other social gospel agencies in the North End.¹³ Dominion Weights and Measures was the second major tenant that kept offices from 1920 to 1933. The Church of England Missionary Society, the Dorcas Society, the Children's Bureau, and the Ruperts Land Women's Auxiliary were also early tenants. With the exception of the government offices, these groups were all part of the social movement. There were also between five and twelve private suites of tenants in the upper floors of Bible

House.¹⁴

The Children's Aid staff grew to over 60 people and by 1957, overcrowding, a lack of adequate parking and the changed nature of the location resulted in their moving to offices on Donald Street.¹⁵

The Bible Society itself had moved out of its building in 1949. The district around Alexander Avenue had deteriorated and it was thought that the Society should be placed in a busy shopping street, where it would attract passers-by. The colporteur work was completed, and smaller quarters were needed. The building was sold and the Society moved to its present Kennedy Street location.¹⁶

The building was purchased by the Ukrainian National Publishing Company, publishers of the Ukrainian newspaper the New Pathway. The paper was actually printed in the building. In the 1950s such groups as the Ukrainian National Youth Federation, the Ukrainian War Veterans' Association, and the Ukrainian Women's Organization located in the building but by 1958, all these organizations were transferred to Toronto, leaving the building substantially vacant. In 1971, the top two floors were leased by the Ukrainian Cultural Centre and the new building was sold to them in 1974 and renamed OSEREDOK. In 1977, New Pathway moved to Toronto and the building was then transformed in a heritage site for Ukrainian culture. The building was renovated at a cost of half a million dollars to include a library, museum, art gallery and office area.¹⁷

The building is solid brick on a foundation of concrete. It had a fire escape added by Vulcan Iron Works in 1930,¹⁸ but few structural changes were undertaken until the major renovation. The windows have now been altered, but the exterior remains near identical to as it was in 1913. It has bold horizontal lines emphasized by a series of stone bands that are complemented by the stone base and a cornice and pediment.

The institution of the British and Foreign Bible Society is still active, although it has altered in character from its early years in the west. The building is a statement of the strength of the commitment of its founders, and has found new life as a resource centre for the descendants of the immigrants that the Bible Society sought to serve.

FOOTNOTES--

1. E.C. Woodley, The Bible in Canada, J.M. Dent and Sons, Toronto, 1953, p. 4.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Free Press, August 10, 1957.
4. Free Press, March 17, 1911.
5. Alan F.J. Artibise, Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 1975, Chapters 10 and 13.
6. Richard Allen, The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28, University of Toronto Press, 1971, p. 64.
7. Woodley, op. cit., p. 207.
8. Loc. cit.
9. Free Press, August 13, 1912.
10. Loc. cit.
11. Winnipeg Telegram, April 17, 1915.
12. Frank Howard Schofield, The Story of Manitoba, Volume II, The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, Winnipeg, 1913, p. 325-6.
13. Free Press, December 2, 1908. The relationship is also documented in Kenneth McNaught, A Prophet in Politics, The biography of J.S. Woodsworth.
14. Henderson's Directory, Winnipeg, 1913-47.
15. Myron Gulka-Tiechko OSEREDOK Building: A Brief History hand-out of the Ukrainian Cultural and Education Centre, 1978.
16. Woodley, op. cit., p. 212.
17. Gulka-Tiechko, op. cit.
18. City of Winnipeg, Permits, no. 4111, October 6, 1930.

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Plate 1 – 184 Alexander Avenue, New Pathway Building, 1969. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Architectural Survey.)