

1859 + 1

Colin Tan

Fear not—this is not an article about mathematics. On the contrary, it is about time. The number “1859” in the title refers to the year A.D. 1859; whilst the meaning of “+ 1” will become clear as you continue to read.

According to Burmah Road Gospel Hall (BRGH) tradition, 1859 was an important year.¹ Why?

In 1959 BRGH celebrated the centenary of assembly work in Penang. If you do the math, you will appreciate the significance of 1859.² Also, BRGH tradition recognises Mr. John Chapman of Bristol, England, as the initiator of the work.

Tradition can be a source of knowledge. But there seem to be some problems with ours.

In the course of his research, the author could not find any evidence from primary sources that suggests that 1859 was the year in which assembly work commenced.³ At the same time, some have doubts as to whether Mr. Chapman was from the assemblies. These are serious doubts.⁴ If Mr. Chapman was not a “Brethren”, then much of our history must be rewritten.

In this article, the author will attempt to answer the following questions:

- Was Mr. John Chapman from one of the assemblies in England?
- If Mr. Chapman was a “Brethren”, when did he arrive in Penang?

To find the answers, the author turned first to tradition. While it may not be a perfect knowledge source, tradition is still a good starting point for research.

To begin with, tradition informs us that Mr. Chapman came from Bristol. This probably means that Mr. Chapman came from an assembly in Bristol. The question, then, is: Was there one in Bristol in the late 1850s?

¹ *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines “tradition” as “a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people”. This article adopts this definition.

² It was also thought for a time that 1855 was the year in which assembly work began in Penang; but newly uncovered evidence strongly suggests that that cannot be true.

³ According to the Princeton University Reference Desk, a “primary source” is “a document or physical object which was written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event”. They include original documents (excerpts or translations are acceptable): Diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records.

⁴ The reader should note that only certain things we know from tradition about Mr. Chapman are being disputed. In other words, BRGH tradition is not always wrong. For instance, BRGH tradition has long maintained that Mr. Chapman was a missionary who served God in Penang in the 1860s and that his base was on Farquhar Street—these assertions have been corroborated by several secular writers (e.g. the Canadian anthropologist Prof. Jean DeBernardi and the local historian Ms. Khoo Salma Nasution).

There was—and it was an important one. Bristol was the base for Mr. George Müller, one of the leaders of the “Brethren Movement”. Furthermore, Mr. Müller left behind a large number of records, chief among them are his autobiographical *A Narrative of Some of the Lord's Dealings with George Müller* (hereinafter referred to as “*Narrative*”) and his annual reports concerning the operations of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution (SKI). These could potentially be important sources of information for the author, and indeed, they were.

The analysis of Mr. George Müller’s works can be a daunting task, however. One of the key challenges: Mr. Müller had a strong disinclination to name people.⁵ For example, instead of Brother Chapman, he would write “Brother C.” So what is a researcher to do when he is faced with an “identity crisis”?

The researcher could become a weaver, so to speak. That is, he could draw together different strands of information—from primary as well as secondary or traditional sources—and weave them into a coherent whole. And that is what the author did.

Was Mr. John Chapman a “Brethren”?

The first strand comes from Mr. Müller’s *Narrative*. In Chapter Four, he wrote these words:

In August, 1859, a brother in the Lord and two sisters went out from our midst for missionary service, to labour in Penang, Straits of Malacca. We had especially asked the Lord, among other things, that He would be pleased to bless the labours of this little missionary party, whilst yet on board, and thus give them an earnest concerning their future service. I had also supplied them with tracts and bibles for the sailors. This prayer was answered. The wife of the missionary writes from Singapore, Jan. 19, 1860, thus with reference to their voyage, and blessing on one of the tracts: “I think I mentioned we had a meeting every night for reading the Word, the captain and officers not on duty being present, and with joy I have to tell you that the Lord has blessed the Word to the conversion of two, the chief officer and the carpenter, one a Welshman and the other a Scotchman, who for some months walked so as to give us real joy.”

The author wishes to draw the reader’s attention to several phrases in the passage:

- Note the phrase “a brother in the Lord and two sisters” in the first sentence. Based on his research, the author believes that the three were Mr. and Mrs. John Chapman and a certain Ms O’Callaghan.
- Note also the phrase “went out from our midst” in the first sentence. This meant that the three individuals were part of Mr. Müller’s flock.
- Finally, note the breadth and depth of their fellowship. Mr. Müller and other believers—as implied by the pronoun “We” at the beginning of the second sentence—prayed for the “little missionary party”. In addition, Mr. Müller “supplied them with tracts and bibles”. The fellowship was evidently very warm and very real.

⁵ According to the George Müller Charitable Trust (GMCT), the organization that now runs the Scriptural Knowledge Institution, George Müller “was not a person to divulge names”. These included the names of his parents, siblings and other relatives, all of which remained unknown for a long time. GMCT adds: “[To] discover his family is somewhat akin to a detective unravelling a mystery in an Agatha Christie novel.”

Other strands of information from Mr. Müller’s writings serve to reinforce the traditional contention that Mr. Chapman was a “Brethren”.

In his twenty-first report on the work of SKI, which covered the period from May 26, 1859 to May 26, 1860, Mr. Müller wrote that he was supporting a “European” missionary “labouring in Penang”.⁶ The amount: £285, which “includes the expenses connected with the voyage of the missionary and his wife, from England to Penang”.

In his next report (the twenty-second report which covered the period from May 26, 1860 to May 26, 1861), Mr. Müller again wrote that he was supporting a “European” missionary “labouring in Penang”. This time around, the amount was £150, and there was more information about the work in Penang and the workers:

The following extracts are taken from letters which were written by a missionary brother who went from Bristol, with his wife and another sister in the Lord, who for a long time had missionary work laid on her heart, to labour among the Chinese in Penang. He writes on July 16th, 1860: “On the 20th May, 1860, two Chinamen were baptized. For some time previously they gave a credible testimony that they believed in our Lord Jesus. Since that time other three have been baptized. In the chapel the congregation has increased, and oh! that the Lord may work by the power of His Spirit among them. Several of the Chinese are now examining the Scriptures for themselves. I should think at least twenty have renounced idolatry since we came here.”

Note the following phrases in the first sentence:

- “A missionary brother who went from Bristol, with his wife and another sister in the Lord”: This is another reference to Mr. and Mrs. Chapman and Ms. O’Callaghan.
- The three individuals “went from Bristol”: Once again, Mr. Müller made mention of their connection with the assembly in Bristol.

Based on the aforementioned evidence, it can be safely concluded that Mr. Chapman was indeed a “Brethren”.

When did Mr. John Chapman arrive in Penang?

With the first question answered, the author now turned his attention to the second one, “When did Mr. Chapman arrive in Penang?”

Thankfully, the man himself has supplied the answer. In his *Second Annual Report of the Income and Expenditure of the Protestant Mission School* to the London Missionary Society (LMS),⁷ he wrote these words:

⁶ The author is grateful to Dr. Neil Summerton of the Brethren Archivists and Historians Network for the annual SKI reports.

⁷ The London Missionary Society (LMS) was not a “Brethren” organization. This has prompted the question: “Why did Mr. Chapman report to LMS if he was a ‘Brethren?’” Historians have informed us that Mr. Chapman was using LMS-owned assets for his mission work *rent-free*. These included two school buildings which he used for educational outreach. LMS was gracious towards the Chapmans; and Mr. Chapman responded accordingly by sending the missionary organization regular updates.

It is with heart felt thanks to God my Heavenly Father, that I have to present the second annual Report of the Income and Expenditure of the Protestant Mission School; and also to give some particulars of the way in which the Lord has supplied the means for the carrying on of the work. When I arrived in Pinang two years ago 31st last month, as a Missionary with my dear wife and Miss O'Callaghan, I had no arranged plan as to how I should proceed, as I waited upon God daily by prayer for direction and guidance in all things.

How does this excerpt help us answer the second question?

The second annual report was dated 11 February 1862. Therefore, when Mr. Chapman wrote that he had “arrived in Pinang two years ago”, he meant 1860; and the date “31st last month” meant 31st January. So Mr. and Mrs. John Chapman and Ms. O'Callaghan arrived in Penang on 31st January 1860.

One would have thought that this was an open-and-shut case; but it was not to be. The author's findings were in fact met with some measure of incredulity. A typical reaction: “The Chapmans took a long time to reach Penang, didn't they?”

Yes, it does seem long. But how long exactly, the author does not know; for Mr. Müller did not provide us with the Chapmans' departure date. If the Chapmans had left on the last day of August, it would mean that it took them five months to travel to Penang—“a long time even by 19th century standards,” a brother remarked. How can this mystery be solved?

The author's reply to the friendly sceptics: Let me go back to the sources and re-examine them. The main findings are as follows:

- Firstly, Mr. Müller did not write that the Chapmans sailed *directly* to Penang. It is thus entirely possible that they might have gone to another place first. What is certain is that the Chapmans did spend some time in Singapore. This is evidenced by Mrs. Chapman's letter to Mr. Müller (cited above).
- Secondly, prior to the Chapmans' arrival, Capt. George Felix Gottlieb, the Harbour Master of Penang at the time, was temporarily put in charge of the LMS properties on Farquhar Street.⁸ According to Dr. Lee Kam Hing, Capt. Gottlieb wrote a letter to LMS in January 1860.⁹ Here is an excerpt:

With respect to the Chapel [i.e. the original Farquhar Street Chapel] I have not time to draw up an estimate of the probable expense of putting in order but as the missionaries for this place Mr. and Mrs. Chapman, and Ms O'Callaghan (of the Chinese Evangelization Society) have arrived at Singapore, and are expected here in a few days; I had better, I think, leave it with Mr Chapman to make his report to you on the condition of the Chapel.

⁸ Nasution, K.S. 2006, *More than Merchants: A History of the German-speaking Community in Penang, 1800s – 1940s*, Areca Books, Penang. Capt. George Felix Gottlieb was the first Harbour Master of Penang. Gottlieb Road in Penang was named after his son, Felix Henri (Henry) Gottlieb, a prominent lawyer.

⁹ Lee, K.H. 1990, ‘The history of the assemblies’ in *The Christian Brethren of Malaysia: Our Heritage*, ed. Thiran, N., Assembly Leaders' Conference, Highlands Christian Centre, Cameron Highlands, pp. 20-34.

Had the Chapmans arrived by sea in Penang in 1859, Capt. Gottlieb would have known—he was after all the Harbour Master. Furthermore, the contents and the tone of his letter seem to indicate that he was about to meet the Chapmans for the very first time.

Therefore, the available evidence strongly suggests that the Chapmans arrived in Penang on 31st January 1860.

Concluding remarks

Human beings are fallible creatures. We make mistakes, and they show up in our products: buggy computer software that needs regular updating; product recalls due to manufacturing lapses (think hazardous toys, toxic milk, and faulty cars); best practices that become bad practices in many professions over time.

We are also producers of tradition. But because of our imperfections, tradition may never be perfect.

The findings herein suggest that a mistake was made in 1959. It was not a critical one. But it was a mistake nevertheless.

Given the human propensity for error, how certain is the author of his findings?

He is confident, but never certain: for he is acutely aware of the possibility that a hitherto unknown document may one day surface and compel us to rewrite our history—yet again. Although that scenario does seem improbable, he can never be sure it won't happen.

There is, however, one thing he is sure about: our Lord Jesus is the perfect Saviour. He was the perfect, spotless Lamb of God; His work at Calvary was perfect; and His perfectness never diminishes. We praise and thank our Heavenly Father for these precious assurances.

The author would like to end this article with a long unsung chorus which he learned as a boy at a Sunday school that no longer exists:

*Yesterday, today, forever
Jesus is the same
All may change but Jesus never
Glory to His Name
Glory to His Name
Glory to His Name
All may change but Jesus never
Glory to His Name*