

George Patterson

Scottish missionary who turned to journalism after alerting the world to the Chinese invasion of Tibet

George Patterson was a Scottish Plymouth Brethren missionary who during the Second World War decided that God had called him to serve the people of Tibet. In 1950 he helped to announce to the world the threat of Chinese annexation of Tibet and he attempted to obtain support for the Tibetans.

Though almost self-educated — he left school at 13 — he became a journalist and author, commenting on the politics of the Himalayas and South-East Asia. He regarded himself as a rebel against political and religious establishments and wanted to improve the lot of the poor.

George Nielson Patterson was born at Redding, Falkirk, in 1920. His father was a coal miner whose desperate early life turned him into a hardened socialist and then a member of the Plymouth Brethren and, by his mid-twenties, a mine inspector. George, the eldest of three, was brought up in hardship and in a family atmosphere of Utopian visions of socialism.

A head injury in a cycling accident when he was 11 upset his school studies and instead of catching up he left to be apprenticed to Carron Engineering Works. By 17 he was a tool setter. During the war this was a reserved occupation and he worked on armaments on 12-hour shifts, often seven days a week. In his spare free time, he climbed mountains and was an avid reader of books on the Himalayas. One day he felt the Lord was calling him for service in Tibet, a place with “countless benevolent and malevolent deities”.

In September 1945 Patterson gave all his money to charity, thinking to test God’s providence. Penniless, he was queueing for the London bus in Falkirk when someone who had heard him preach the night before thrust money into his hand to pay his fare to London for a year’s course at the Missionary School for Medicine. Other well-wishers paid his fees, lodgings and even his voyage to China. He sailed for Shanghai with another Plymouth Brethren missionary, Geoffrey Bull, also intent on serving in Tibet.

Patterson arrived in China “a mixture of Moses and Marx”. He found a collapsing nation in chaotic turmoil having suffered endless wars since the revolution of 1911. “No reasonable person could approve of the corrupt chaos of that Nationalist Chinese government,” he observed. His rejection of institutional churches and imperialist missionary Christianity resulted in the threat of being sent home by the Brethren who had greeted them. However, he and Bull heard about Watchman Nee and his Little Flock Chinese Christian movement, uninfluenced by Western practices and based on original New Testament principles of self-help. Nee’s family owned the China Biochemical Corporation which would cash Patterson’s and Bull’s overseas cheques in Hong Kong, so now they could operate independently.

A few months later they met George and Pearl Kraft, missionaries with the China Inland Mission (CIM), who invited them to Tatsienlu (Kangting) 2,000 miles west of Shanghai. They travelled up the Yangtze River by boat to Chungking, then by plane to Chengtu, next by rickety bus to Ya-an and finally on foot.

Patterson threw himself into an intense study of the Kham dialect of Tibetan and after a while was invited to preach in the CIM church. Some of his word confusions amused the congregation, which included Topgay Pangdatshang, a swashbuckling Kham-pa chieftain well versed in Marx’s dialectical materialism. With his brother he had led failed revolts against Chinese Nationalists and Tibet’s central



Patterson in Tibet in the 1950s: he was nicknamed “the Bearded Kham-pa”

government in Lhasa, the latter in 1934, and they had once fled into exile in India. Topgay discovered Patterson’s medical knowledge and invited him to his home to treat his 70 soldiers who were always raiding caravans or fighting the ever-intrusive Chinese. Patterson treated many gunshot injuries and cases of venereal disease and intestinal worms.

With the Chinese Red Army invasion of Tibet imminent Topgay

He made the dangerous crossing from Tibet into India in mid-winter

decamped to his home in Bo-mi south of Batang, taking Patterson and Bull with him. The Pangdatshangs knew they could stall the Communists for six months but would then need help. They decided to appeal to India, Britain and the US for aid. Patterson was requested to go to Assam, India. Permission to cross Tibet was obtained from Lhasa by radio in the town of Chamdo run by a British radio operator, Robert Ford. He and Bull were later imprisoned by the Communists.

On January 18, 1950, Patterson set off on a circuitous and perilous winter journey, crossing the great gorges of the rivers Mekong and Salween and the frozen, 17,000ft passes around them and followed the Luhit (a tributary of the Brahmaputra) to Sadiya, in Assam. There he chanced on the renowned Himalayan botanist Frank Kingdon-Ward who told him that he

had just traversed a route which no European had travelled before.

Flying from Dibrugarh, Patterson reached Calcutta where he informed the British High Commission about the communist threat. Subsequently he was introduced to Indian, British and US intelligence officers. Having given his report and conveyed the Pangdatshangs’ request for assistance, Patterson decided to return to Tibet. The monsoon, an earthquake and then illness prevented him from travelling, and by the time he was once more fit the Chinese invasion of Tibet was in full swing.

Meanwhile, the 16-year-old Dalai Lama had tried to reach agreement with the Chinese government and, as a precaution, he moved near to the Indian border. Soon Tibetan refugees were pouring into India. The world’s press descended on Kalimpong, near India’s border with Tibet. Several newspapers asked Patterson to act as a stringer. This started a long career as a journalist, an activity for which he discovered he had a natural talent. He wrote for *The Manchester Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Spectator*, *The New York Times* and others. While in Kalimpong he wrote his first book, *Tibetan Journey* (1954).

One day Patterson met a Scots-woman who, to their mutual surprise, had attended the same school in Falkirk as him. She introduced Patterson to “the saintly Meg Ingram”, a surgeon from Aberdeen and also a Church of Scotland missionary. Ingram was posted to the Ludiana Hospital, Punjab, and after two years’ corresponding,

they were married in Aberdeen in 1954. Her father was unimpressed on first meeting Patterson. He presented himself, having taken a job as an estate bailiff, carrying a gun and wearing a kilt — which his strictly religious prospective father-in-law regarded as “a woman’s garment, condemned by Moses”. The couple returned to Kalimpong, from where Patterson continued to report on the situation in Tibet throughout the 1950s.

On March 19, 1959, tens of thousands of Tibetans took to the streets of Lhasa in massive rebellion and the Dalai Lama fled. In Kalimpong Patterson’s assistant saw the Dalai Lama’s brother slip away one night, and Patterson guessed what was happening, so flew to Tezpur in Assam to get a scoop, but local guides refused to take him through the jungle at night. In Mussoorie in June that year he finally met the Dalai Lama — who had heard much about “Kham-pa Gyau” (the Bearded Kham-pa). Foreign aid flowed in for the Tibetans; much of it, Patterson thought, was misappropriated by Tibetan aristocrats and ecclesiastical factions. He and his wife returned to the UK in 1961.

Patterson, contemplating a career in politics, was selected as Liberal candidate for Edinburgh West but resigned before standing at election to concentrate on writing, lecturing and his BBC radio programme about Asian affairs. He also helped to establish, and was first director of, the International Committee for the Study of Group Rights (now The Minority Rights Group).

In 1964 one of the Pangdatshang brothers, who had travelled to London, suggested that Patterson make an independent film about CIA-backed Tibetan guerrillas. Accompanied by the cameraman Chris Menges and the producer Adrian Cowell, he trekked for 17 days in Nepal in search of Khampas who were attacking Chinese army convoys beyond the Tibetan frontier. Finally they chanced on a wounded fighter on a high pass, whom Patterson treated. They were led to their hideout and filmed a dramatic raid on June 6, 1964. The resulting *Raid into Tibet* was broadcast in many countries and won the Prix Italia. Patterson continued to report on Asian affairs between 1964 and 1973 on both radio and television when he and his wife moved to Hong Kong. At times he presented *Behind the Headlines* and *What the Papers Say*.

Patterson wrote 30 books covering the story of Tibet and his involvement with its liberation struggle; the purposes of God and the problem of drug addiction. Their titles include *God’s Fool* (1956); *Up and Down Asia* (1958); *Tibet in Revolt* (1960); *Christianity in Communist China* (1969); and *Requiem for Tibet* (1990).

He returned to Tibet again, as an adviser to a proposed Hollywood film, visiting Lhasa for the first time in 1987, where he was appalled by the destruction, now being rectified, wrought by the Cultural Revolution. In 2007 Patterson was pleased when, too old to travel, “China came to me”, as he put it, and he met Chinese academics interested in recording his experiences.

In March 2011 Patterson was awarded the International Campaign for Tibet’s Light of Truth award for his services to Tibet. Previous recipients include Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel. On hearing that the Bearded Kham-pa had died, the Dalai Lama sent condolences.

Patterson’s wife predeceased him in 2002. He is survived by two sons and a daughter.

George Patterson, missionary and journalist, was born on August 19, 1920. He died on December 28, 2012, aged 92