3.
THE SHAPING OF A CHRISTIAN SPORTSMAN

Eric Henry Liddell was born in the Madaifu Hospital, Tientsin (Tianjin), in China on 16 January 1902. He was the second son of missionary parents, James and Mary Liddell. James Dunlop Liddell, Eric's father, had been born in Greenock to Robert and Elizabeth Liddell on 6 September 1870.

Robert Liddell was a native of Killearn in Stirlingshire, where he had been born in 1833. His wife, Elizabeth Strachan, hailed from Kilmarnock. They married in Greenock on 20 April 1859 and in the course of time they were blessed with four daughters and the one son. James, the only boy, had three older sisters and one younger. Robert worked as a joiner in Greenock and the family was associated with the Evangelical Union Church in the town.[1] The Evangelical Union emphasised simple gospel preaching and was notably committed to the cause of temperance.

Sadly, Elizabeth Liddell died in 1874, aged thirty-six, not long after the birth of their fourth daughter. Shortly afterwards Robert moved to the village of Drymen in Stirlingshire near the 'Trossachs'. Drymen was not far from his birthplace, and he brought up his five children there on his own. Though a joiner by profession, he became a grocer in Drymen and the family associated with the United Presbyterian Church in the town, there being no Evangelical Union or Congregational Church congregation in the neighbourhood.[2] The influence of the Evangelical Union clearly, however, continued in the Liddell family. It was said that 'the Liddells, a highly respected family, were noted for piety at a time and in a place when evangelism was considered unorthodox'.[3] Grandfather

Liddell family group at Drymen in 1907.
Eric's grandfather is seated in the centre. His parents James and Mary are second and third from the left in the back row. At the front are, left to right, Jenny, Robert and Eric.

Liddell passed away, aged eighty-six, in Drymen on 7 December 1919, full of faith and with a lively hope for the life everlasting.

In the late 1880s James became an apprentice in a draper's business in Stirling. He attended the ministry there of the Rev. William Blair (1856–1936) in the Stirling Congregational Church.[4] Under Blair's influence James was encouraged to think about missionary service. With that in view, in 1894 he began studies at the Evangelical Union Theological Hall in Glasgow. While in Glasgow he became a member of the Dundas Street Evangelical Union Church, but served as missionary in the Anderston Mission of the Elgin Place Congregational Church in the city between November 1895 and October 1897, as part of his training. With the merger of the Evangelical Union and the Congregational Union at the beginning of 1897, this hall became a college of the Congregational Union of Scotland, and James finished his course there in the following year, being ordained to the ministry of the Congregational Union in 1898. After completing his studies, James applied to the London Missionary Society as a prospective missionary in the foreign field.

James and Mary Liddell after their wedding in Shanghai, 1899.

The Rev. William Blair (Stirling) in his earlier days had been a member of the Elgin Place Church before pursuing studies for the ministry. In those early days he became friendly with a family by the name of Reddin who were involved in that congregation. The father, Henry Reddin (1833–1908), was a native of Bowden in Roxburghshire and had plied his trade there as a master blacksmith. Henry had a daughter, Mary Jane Smith (1870–1944), one of five children born to himself and his wife Janet (née Mabon) in Paxton, Berwickshire, before the family moved to Glasgow in the late 1880s, when he became a worker with the Scottish Colportage Association, distributing Bibles, Bible portions and other Christian books and tracts. It was a visit by Mary to a Sunday School outing of Blair's congregation in Stirling in 1893 that brought her in touch with James Liddell. This was the start of a romance which culminated in their engagement and marriage in Shanghai Cathedral in 1899, after James had begun his work in North China under the auspices of the London Missionary Society. Before Mary went out to China for the wedding she took a nursing job in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, which lies off the north-west coast of Scotland. She was there for barely a year. However, she must have been powerfully conscious of the deep respect the islanders had at that time for a careful observance of Sunday as the Lord's day. It is not fanciful to believe that her experience there may even have influenced her own love for the Lord and His day, which was subsequently conveyed to her family.

Just why Eric Liddell was so conscientious about refusing to compete in sports on Sundays is, strangely, a question little touched on by biographers. None of them really explains the theology behind such

a position. D. P. Thomson mentions that Eric was in effect working out what he had been taught from childhood.[5] Biographers, however, do not discuss this to any great extent. It is clear that Eric took his position from the Fourth Commandment (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15), being convinced that it was of perpetual obligation and the basis for the observance by Christians of the Sabbath. The Christian Sabbath, or Lord's day, was the first day of the week, Sunday, by virtue of two great events of redemptive history: the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The observance of the first day of the week is, however, also motivated by the Fourth Commandment. It seems clear that the Liddell children would have been instructed in such a view of Sunday by their parents. This was fairly widespread in Scottish church life at that point and was commonly maintained across the denominational divides.

Congregationalists could be as ardent for the Sunday Sabbath as any Presbyterians. It is of more than passing interest to note that James Gilmour (1843–1891), the pioneer missionary of the gospel work in Mongolia, was one of those. It is not at all unlikely that James Liddell was impressed by the position held by Gilmour, into whose work he was appointed in 1898. Gilmour had passed away seven years earlier, but James Liddell would certainly have been aware of the details of his predecessor's work and position. This was said of James Gilmour:

> …like Jesus, he preached and lived ideals which even his associates could not accept. His periods of fasting, his intense reverence for the Sabbath which, however, always included its right use, his strong position with reference to the use of tobacco and liquor, and his gradual rise from asceticism to a life singular in its imitation of Christ, constitute a legacy to every missionary and stimulus to higher living for all Christians.[6]

Of Gilmour it was noted that 'his strong Sabbatarian views never permitted him to travel by rail or omnibus on that day'.[7] It is quite possible that either James Liddell in his youth or his father had heard Gilmour speak at meetings held on his visits home on furlough. His last furlough had been in 1889–90. It is also more than likely that

James Liddell read Gilmour's popular books, such as his famous *Among the Mongols*, first published in 1883.

Another notable characteristic of Gilmour was to become a distinct feature of Eric Liddell's life, and very likely was exemplified in his father: 'His modesty in relation to episodes in which he was chief actor deprived the public of hearing many a thrilling tale. People often wanted to know what James Gilmour had done, but James Gilmour insisted on telling what God had done.'[8]

Though James Liddell would not have taken on all of James Gilmour's ways, there seems little doubt that Gilmour must have had some influence on his life and work, and through him on his sons. This may help to explain at least in part Eric's reverence for the Sabbath, his modesty in his work and his discipline and desire for Christlikeness in demeanour. The general tenor of Gilmour's position one way or another became true of Eric Liddell, no doubt encouraged by his father's teaching and example.

There is another area of possible influence through James Gilmour, as well as the earlier family connection with the Evangelical Union. Throughout his life Eric Liddell, like Gilmour before him, had an aversion to smoking and drinking. He would have been in what may be termed 'the total abstainers' camp'. Very often he appeared on platforms speaking out against the use of alcohol or tobacco. Sometimes he was sharply criticised for this. However, given what we now know about the effects of these substances, it may be suggested that this was beneficial to Eric Liddell in relation to his sporting interests. The fact that he had been brought up in a smoke-free, alcohol-free environment would have been no disadvantage to his lung and heart power, to say the least. It may even be argued that this gave him an 'edge' over less abstemious athletes!

The London Missionary Society was closely associated with the Congregational Union of Churches, though it was constitutionally independent. Perhaps the most renowned missionary of the LMS was David Livingstone (1813–1873), who had 'opened up' Africa under its auspices. The LMS mission field in Mongolia was pioneered by James Gilmour. Mongolia was a large, remote and sparsely populated country

situated between Russia in the north and China in the south. It was a province of China up to 1911, when it became an autonomous state. The religion of the country then was largely Buddhist. Gilmour began his work there with the London Missionary Society in May 1870. It was said that 'He made lonely, heroic efforts to preach the gospel to a people steeped in Lamaist forms of Buddhism; spending summers with nomadic Mongols on the plains of Mongolia and winters with Mongols in Peking.'[9] It was his life's work, which ended only with his death from typhus at Tientsin on 21 May 1891. Gilmour's work was continued first, briefly, by a colleague, the Rev. John Parker, and then, in 1898, by James Liddell.

The work in Mongolia, however, came to a rather abrupt end with the Boxer Rebellion. That rebellion was initiated by a society known as the 'Righteous Harmonious Fists'. They were commonly known as 'Boxers' on account of their devotion to martial arts. The rebellion lasted from November 1899 to September 1901 and was motivated by objections to foreign influences in trade, politics, religion and technology. There was concern that Chinese culture was being submerged under Western values (or lack of values). Much of the aggression of the Boxers came to be directed against Christian churches and missions, somewhat 'soft' targets, but targets which they saw as a particular threat to their traditional values. The Boxers were intent on resisting with force any such thing that tended to undermine their own authority and power. The end of the rebellion came in September/October 1901 through the intervention of a coalition of Western armies. As a result of the rebellion 182 Protestant missionaries and 500 Chinese Protestants, as well as 18,000 or so Chinese Catholics, were murdered. It was said that the China Inland Mission lost more personnel than any other single society: fifty-eight adults and twenty-one children. However, when the allied nations were demanding compensation from the Chinese government, Hudson Taylor refused to accept any payment for loss of property and life 'in order to demonstrate the meekness of Christ to the Chinese'.[10]

At the time of the Boxer Rebellion, James and Mary Liddell were at Ch'ao Yang (Chaoyang) in Manchuria, North China. They were then

staying with LMS doctor Tom Cochrane, a Scotsman from Greenock, and his wife Grace, with their three children. James took on the church-based side of the work there. When stories filtered through, early in 1900, of atrocities committed by the Boxers nearby, it was clear that they would have to flee for their lives.

Tom Cochrane saw it as his duty to remain behind with his Christian friends. It was arranged that his wife Grace and their children, together with Mary Liddell, would be taken by James Liddell to the railhead sixty miles away in an attempt to get them to safety. James would then return to the mission premises. Their journey was fraught with many dangers. However, in view of the very precarious situation in which he found himself, Tom later decided to make a dash for the railhead in the hope of catching up with his family. He dressed in Chinese clothes and went on horseback, once again facing terrible danger. Eventually he met up with his family and the Liddells at the railhead, where Grace Cochrane had refused to go on in the hope that her husband would join them. In the goodness of the Lord he did. They duly boarded the next train for Shanghai and relative safety.[11]

In their time at Shanghai Mary Liddell gave birth to their first child, a son whom they named Robert Victor. That was on 27 August 1900, at the London Missionary Society Compound in Shanghai, where the Liddells had taken refuge after their narrow escape from death in the flight from Ch'ao Yang. A few months later, however, the intrepid James and Mary returned to the north to be settled in Tientsin. Meanwhile James took a trip into Mongolia to see what had happened to

James and Mary Liddell with Eric, Rob and Jenny on a visit home in 1907.

the Chinese Christians there. He toured the Mongolian area for four months or so, accompanied, among others, by 200 soldiers!

It was in Tientsin that Eric Henry was born, sixteen months after Robert. When things returned to some semblance of normality in 1902, Mary Liddell and her boys moved to Siaochang [Zaoqiang], some 185 miles inland to the south-west, as James Liddell had been posted there in the interval. A daughter, Janet Lillian (Jenny), was born at Siaochang on 3 October 1903 and another son, Ernest Blair, was added to the family circle in Peking on 12 December 1912.

It is hard to grasp fully just how dangerous and volatile life was at that time in that area of the Far East. But this was the situation in which Eric Liddell and his older brother came into the world and spent the early years of their life, before they were brought by their parents, with their younger sister Jenny, to the United Kingdom for the first time in 1907.

Before James Liddell returned to China in the autumn of 1908 he arranged for the boys' education at the 'school for the sons of missionaries' then situated in Blackheath, London but which since 1912 has been located in Mottingham, Kent, where it came to be known as Eltham College.

The four Liddell children in 1914.
From left to right: Rob, Jenny, Ernest and Eric.