

His career spanned ten countries in four continents. He spoke to audiences that numbered in the thousands, making him one of the most widely heard speakers ever to hail from the Eastern Shore of Virginia. He wrote some twenty books and was listed in "Who's Who."

And yet today on the Eastern Shore, as everywhere else, he is virtually forgotten.

George Douglas Watson (1845-1924) was born in a



Chronicles

By Kirk Mariner

farmhouse on Ames Ridge, between Keller and Painter, the third son of devout Methodists James and Mary Watson. As a child he attended camp meetings at "Nock's Branch" near Melfa, witnessed the dedication of the new building at Garrison's Chapel in 1855 (the oldest portion of the church still standing in Painter), and at an early age showed such a "serious turn of mind" - he once returned home from church and climbed upon a box to preach to his playmates - that he seemed destined for the pulpit.

He was 10 when his family moved to Mount Prospect, just south of Onancock, and at the age of 14 young George was apprenticed to Dr. George O. Tyler, Onancock physician. Still a teenager when the Civil War began, Watson joined the Confederate forces, despite the Union tendencies of his tutor. He may well have been among the rebels who marched north to New Church to repel

a Union invasion, only to flee at the approach of the northern forces when they entered the Shore in November 1861. Shortly thereafter Watson escaped to the Western Shore, hiding out en route for two nights on Watts Island to avoid the Union blockade of Chesapeake Bay. Under General Henry A. Wise of Accomack he saw service of Yorktown, Seven Pines, Charleston, Johnson's Island, and Petersburg, though he spent much of the war hospitalized in ill health.

After the war George D. Watson returned to the Shore, where for some years he worked as a clerk in Onancock and on Watts Island. He joined Cokesbury Church in Onancock, and was persuaded by the Reverend Levin P. Causey to study for the ministry. After a year at the Methodist General Biblical Institute in New Hampshire, he was licensed to preach by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1866, and for the next several years served churches across the Delmarva Peninsula: Snow Hill (1866), Laurel (1867), Annemessex (1868), Pocomoke City (1869), Frankford (1870), Wilmington (1871), and Dover (1872-75). While at Annemessex he preached the first sermon ever preached in Crisfield, Maryland. While in Pocomoke City he married Margaret Eva Watson of Onancock.

Thus far his career was not unlike that of many another Eastern Shoreman who entered the ministry. But while at Dover, Watson received a call to the pastorate of the Meridian Street Church in far-off Indianapolis, and with the change in locale came a significant turn in his career. He arrived in Indianapolis in 1875, and was at that time one of a growing minority of American Methodists who were convinced that their denomination was moving too rapidly away from the teachings of John Wesley. In particular Watson held to the

Wesleyan insistence, then increasingly ignored, that after conversion the Christian could move on to "perfection," or "santification," a second state of grace in which complete "holiness" is achieved. "The truth of Wesleyan theology," wrote Watson, "is that no converted soul can retain the clear sense of justifying grace without going on to perfection." Though he had been preaching holiness since 1870, it was not until 1876 in Indianapolis that he himself experienced this "second blessing." Thereafter he led his large city church in a massive revival, and quickly gained a wide renown as a revival speaker and evangelist. Four years later he left the settled pastorate and took to the revival circuit as full-time evangelist.

Watson was well-suited for the evangelist's role. He had a unique, forceful pulpit style; said one admirer, "When Dr. Watson got through with a text there wasn't any more to be said on the subject." He possessed a "commanding voice" that enabled him to lead easily in singing. He was unusually adept at Bible study; "when the bell boy would announce on the camp ground 'Dr. Watson's Bible Reading,' you would see hundreds of people making their way to the tabernacle to get a seat near the front." He buttressed his preaching with the publication of books which had a wide circulation during his lifetime. His preaching was conservative and, after 1892 when he left the Methodist Episcopal Church for the smaller Wesleyan Methodist denomination, convinced of the impending end of the age. After laboring in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Georgia, he led his first big successful revival in South Carolina. Thereafter he went wherever called, crossing denominational boundaries if necessary to preach to the Baptists of Philadelphia, the illiterate

cotton mill workers of Alabama, the affluent of Mobile. Soon the calls came from further afield - to Clear Lake, Iowa, and to Toronto in Canada, where he filled the largest hall in the city three times a day for ten days straight.

In 1891 - by then he was two years beyond the last visit he ever paid to the Eastern Shore of Virginia - he made an evangelistic tour of Great Britain, preaching among the Methodists in rural Yorkshire and in urban Manchester. In London, where his audiences frequently numbered in the thousands, he preached in the slums in the morning and in the afternoon led Bible studies in the drawing rooms of the gentry among members of Parliament and their wives.

In 1900 he made the first of three journeys to the West Indies, to Jamaica, where Methodists were holding revivals in Port Antonio and Bowdoin. There followed further missions in Canada, Japan and Korea, Hawaii and Samoa, and in 1915 and 1916 New Zealand and Australia. Though everywhere he went he preached in the biggest cities - Honolulu, Auckland, Sydney - typical of his greatest successes were the results in the small mining town of Waihi in New Zealand. There Watson led the revival that completely transformed the town; by the time he left, miners who before had been a rough and ready lot were holding prayer meetings underground, the churches were packed to capacity, Baptists and Methodists were working together, and conversions were numbered in the hundreds and still increasing.

Upon his return to the United States in 1916, Watson settled in Los Angeles, rented a building capable of seating several hundred, and preached weekly on the "Grand Old Doctrines of the Bible." The crowds came from all over the city and out

in the far suburbs, among them large numbers of tourists. By now he was in his seventies, and he had the aura of a grand old landmark of the conservative school. Even so he was still at work to refine the revivalist's technique, experimenting with newspaper advertising, perfecting the methods by which the preacher could keep track of those who answered the altar calls, using address lists to reach potential audiences. And still he was crossing denominational boundaries, eager to attend worship at First Methodist, willing to substitute for the pastor at Tabernacle Baptist, making occasional forays to the Japanese mission in town.

George Douglas Watson made a fine evangelistic tour to the East Coast in 1921, preaching as often as twice a day. When he preached in Syracuse, New York, he was physically so weak that he

had to sit down to do it. In July 1923 he took finally to his bed, afflicted by old age and diabetes. By then he was 78, and had been preaching steadily for 57 years. He died in Los Angeles in 1924, and is buried in the Rosedale Cemetery there.

At his death a colleague said of him, "I question whether he had an equal in the entire Holiness Movement," and "there is something about Dr. Watson's books that will live forever." But what renown he enjoyed in life evaporated quickly after his death. Today, in fact, it is not known for certain even how many books he wrote. His wife claimed 14, "Who's Who" lists 10, the Library of Congress, 18, and there may be as many as 21. But nobody reads them anymore - not even on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, where surely a man of his achievements deserves to be remembered.



George Douglas Watson (1845-1924), Eastern Shore revivalist, unremembered even though his work brought him renown halfway around the world.