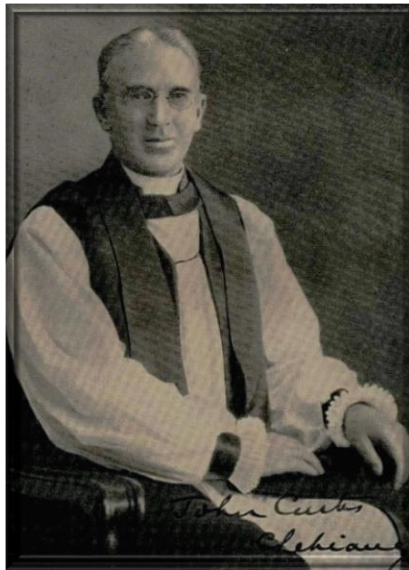


# Hangchow Rotarian John Curtis a Bishop in faith and football

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*Bishop John Curtis, an Irish missionary bishop in China*



*John Curtis was the big bloke with the moustache and his arms folded in the back row standing left 1.*

The Right Reverend Bishop John Curtis, D.D. (邱約翰主教) (1880--1962) was one of the 24 charter members (*Classification: Religion - Protestant Churches*) of Hangchow Rotary Club (杭州扶輪社) which was admitted to Rotary International on 23 June 1932 with Charter #3525. The Club was the first Mandarin speaking Club in history, located in Hangchow (*Hangzhou*), capital city of Chekiang (*Zhejiang*) Province of the Republic of China (中華民國浙江省省會杭州市).

In July 1937, the Imperial Japan launched full scale aggression to China, and Hangchow was soon captured and occupied by the Japanese forces. Rotary Club was not able to survive but to be terminated on 31 December 1943. After the War Victory in 1945, John joined the former and new members to re-organize the Club which was admitted to Rotary International again on 22 April 1947. Regrettably, the Club was ultimately terminated on 21 December 1950 due to unfavourable social and political environment under the regime of the Communist Party (中國共產黨) to the newly established socialist People's Republic of China (中華人民共和國).

John Curtis was the fourth or the last Irish bishop associated from Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Dublin University Far East Mission (DUFEM) to work in China. His career was the stuff of schoolboy adventure stories and comic strips: he was once an Irish soccer international; when the Imperial Japan invaded China at the start of World War II, he became a prisoner of war in Shanghai; and he stayed on in China as a missionary bishop after the Communist revolution, living in Hangchow until he was forced to leave in 1950. His vision of a Church in China that was truly independent and truly Chinese was advanced for his day, and prefigured much of the thinking in contemporary Chinese theology.



### It could happen to a Bishop -- in faith and football

John Curtis was the eldest son of Thomas Hewson Curtis and Margaret Curtis in Dublin, Ireland. Thomas was a clerk and later a manager in the corn exchange near to Christchurch Cathedral but as a youngster John lived with his family on Montpellier Hill its steep incline rising to the North Circular Road gate of the Phoenix Park where Bohemian Football Club would be founded in 1890 by a group of men only a few years senior to young John. By that time the growing Curtis family had moved the short distance to Blackhall Street, residing in a house next to the Law Society buildings at Blackhall Place which were then occupied by the King's Hospital school. Eventually the family moved to Hollybrook Road in Clontarf as Thomas' career continued to progress. The young John was educated not in King's Hospital but at Benson's Grammar School in Rathmines which was founded by Rev. Charles William Benson on the lower Rathmines Road, the school also educated the likes of George Russell (AE) and members of the Bewley family. John then graduated to study in Trinity College Dublin.

It was around this time that a teenage John Curtis first made an appearance for Bohemians. He appears in the first team in the 1897-1898 season. He played most of his games for the club at inside-left, and in that first season his partner at outside-left was none other than Oliver St. John Gogarty. The pair starred together as Bohemians won the 1897-98 Leinster Senior Cup final, defeating Shelbourne 3-1 while also progressing to the semi-finals of the Irish Cup.

The following season showed a similar pattern, another Leinster Senior Cup win and another lost Irish Cup semi-final (this time to Linfield) for the Bohs and John Curtis. Though

not yet 20 John was already a star player, in the 18 games he played that season he scored an astonishing 21 goals. Bohemians wouldn't join the Irish league until the 1902-1903 season so Cup competitions such as the Leinster Senior Cup and the Irish Cup, as well as the Leinster Senior League, would have taken precedent at the time and Bohemians were clearly the strongest side outside of Ulster at that juncture.

The 1899-1900 season saw further progress in the Irish Cup, this time Bohs got all the way to the final. John Curtis was instrumental in getting them there, scoring a vital equalizing goal in the semi-final against Belfast Celtic before Herbert Pratt scored the winner in a match played in the Jones Road sports ground, now better known as Croke Park. John lined out against Cliftonville in the final in Grosvenor Park in Belfast in front of 5,500 spectators. Alas it didn't turn out to be a first cup win for Bohemians.

Bohs had made it to the cup final once before in 1895 when they were hammered 10-1 by Linfield, but the 1900 final was to be a much closer affair with Bohs being defeated 2-1 with George Sheehan getting the goal for the Dublin side. The newspaper reports described a tight game with Bohs deemed to have been highly unlucky to lose, indeed many observers thought that Cliftonville's second goal was a clear offside. Matters weren't helped by four Bohemian players picking up knocks during the course of the match.

On a personal note for John Curtis it seemed that just a week prior to the Irish Cup final he might be honored with an international cap. A first ever international game was to be staged in Dublin's Lansdowne Road and Andrew Gara, the Roscommon born, Preston North End forward was earmarked for a spot in the Irish attack, however just days before the game Gara was injured and the Irish Independent reported that his place was to be awarded to John Curtis. This didn't come to pass however, the sole Dubliner in the line-up was John's team-mate George Sheehan who was given the honour of captaining Ireland in a 2-0 defeat to England. The closest John would come to an international cap would be representing Leinster in an inter-provincial game that season against an Ulster selection.

While John Curtis would continue to line out for Bohemians his appearances were reduced in number over the coming years, he had sporting commitments with Trinity College as well, representing them in as a footballer in the Irish Cup while also enjoying games of Rugby.

He features in a team photo from the 1902 Leinster Senior Cup winning photo but lined out for the club less frequently, he did appear in a couple of prestigious friendly matches in the early years of the century however, when Bohemians were keen to invite the cream of British football to their new home in Dalymount Park. John played against Celtic in 1901 and against Bolton Wanderers the following year.

By 1903 John had finished his studies in Trinity College and was ordained as a Reverend, his first parish being that of Leeson Park in Ballsbridge. By this stage his two younger brothers Edward (Ned) and Harry were both playing for Bohemians, though with less distinction than their older brother.

While his footballing life might have been coming to somewhat of an early close the even more remarkable parts of John Curtis' story were only beginning. After only three years in his Dublin parish John Curtis was setting sail for missionary work in the Ch'ing Empire (大清國) and embarking on a whole new chapter in his life.



## The 44 Years of Religious Service in China

John Curtis was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 15 March 1880, educated at Trinity College, Dublin (Trinity Master of Arts) and ordained in 1904. Following a curacy at Christ Church, Leeson Park, John opted to work in the Ch'ing Empire which was later the Republic of China (中華民國) since 1 January 1912. He left Ireland in 1906, working first in Fukien (*Fujian*) Diocese (福建教區) until 1928.

John was an army chaplain with the allied forces in Thessaloniki, including the Royal Dublin Fusiliers during the First World War of 1914-1918. He was Bishop of Chekiang (*Zhejiang*) Diocese (浙江教區), Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (中華聖公會) (CHSKH), from 1928 to 1950, during which period the Nationalist, Communist and Japanese armies fought over the country. "Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui", literally meaning "the Holy Catholic Church in China" or "Anglican-Episcopal Province of China", was the name of the Anglican Church in China from 1912 until about 1958.



*Map of the Anglican Church Dioceses in China in 1925*

The first Protestant missionaries had only begun working in the Ch'ing Empire in 1807 and among the early missionaries was another Irishman, William Armstrong Russell (祿賜) who arrived in the Ch'ing Empire in the 1840s. Despite these earlier arrivals John's journey was still very much a leap into the unknown and certainly a long way from leafy south Dublin parish work.

John arrived in Fukien in 1906 and later, while working there met fellow missionary Eda Stanley Bryan-Brown, she had been born the daughter of a clergyman in Australia, and in 1914 they were married. In 1916, John returned to Europe in the midst of the First World War. This meant separation from his wife and his missionary work. John Curtis joined the British Army Chaplains and shared the dangers of the combat troops in trenches and on battlefields. He spent time in Greece and also would have ministered to members of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers during his service. As one journalist who knew John well observed of his character: “one cannot picture him holding back from that cataclysm”. Indeed despite his obvious religious devotion most descriptions of John Curtis focus strongly on his energy and fearlessness, whether on the sports ground, or the battlefield or in his missionary work.

Luckily John survived the War and in 1919 received the Victory Medal, however he swiftly returned to his work in the newly established Republican China. Since arriving in the Ch’ing Empire in 1906 John had witnessed crowning of the child emperor Henry Puyi (溥儀) in 1908 as well as his forced abdication, the end of the Ch’ing Empire, and the founding of the Republic of China just a few years later. His post-war return witnessed further upheaval.

By this stage John and Eda had become parents to a son, John Guy Curtis in 1919, Arthur Bryan Curtis in 1924 and followed by a sister, Joan. It was a restless time to have a new family but there was further change. At one stage, John wrote with insight from Fu Ning (撫寧): “The situation out here politically is more and more perplexing. It seems as if we are drifting nearer and nearer to some sort of a “Red China”. Undaunted, he stayed on in the region until 1926. The Diocese of Chekiang became vacant with Bishop Herbert James Molony’s (麥樂義主教) retirement, and John was elected its new bishop. When John was consecrated in 1929 at Christ Church Pro-Cathedral, Ningpo (寧波基督代主教座堂), he was the first foreign bishop of the CHSKH to be consecrated in China, and his consecrating bishops included his predecessor, Molony, and the Chinese-born Assistant Bishop of Chekiang, T. S. Sing (沈載琛).

In 1927 John and his missionaries would no doubt have been aware of the first major engagements of the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang (or KMT, the major political party of the Republic) (中國國民黨) and the Red Army of the Chinese Communist Party (中國共產黨). There was a major battle for control of the city Nanchang (南昌) in the neighbouring province of Kiangsi (*Jiangxi*) (江西) which ultimately saw the Communist forces flee in defeat, many of their surviving troops marched hundreds of miles to take refuge in Fukien, the province where John and his family were living.

This meant that John and Eda moved to the beautiful city of Hangchow, referred to by some at the time as the “Venice of the east” due to its location on the Grand Canal of China and sections of the Yangtze River (長江) delta. By this stage Eda had brought the children to England in 1927 to live with one of her brothers though both parents visited every year up until the outbreak of the Second World War. In their young lives the children had witnessed a great deal of violence. Joan recalled as a four year old hearing “soldier and their cannon” from the missionary school. On another occasion in 1922 Eda and her two young children were obliged to undertake a long journey up river, during the course of which her oldest son John by then only three years old at the time developed laryngeal diphtheria. When it looked like he might succumb to his illness she was forced to perform a tracheotomy, her only instruments being a pen-knife and some hair-

pins. It was perhaps not surprising that the calm of rural England would seem a better place for the children to grow up.

As Bishop of Chekiang, John lived in Hangchow, once described by Marco Polo as “the City of Heaven, the most beautiful and magnificent in the world.” The Diocese covered 36,680 square miles, and by 1950 had a population of 23 million, of whom 11,574 were Anglicans. The Diocese was divided into three areas: Ningpo (*Ningbo*) (寧波), Taichow (台州) (today Linhai 寧海) and Hangchow, where he lived. In addition, a special commission from the Archbishop of Canterbury extended Bishop John Curtis’s jurisdiction to the 3,000 Anglicans in the so-called “English congregations in Shanghai, including Holy Trinity Cathedral, Shanghai.”

In his first years in office, John worked on bravely despite banditry, civil war and famine throughout his Diocese. “In his long journeys about his diocese, mainly on foot, he was a hard man to follow,” the Dean of Holy Trinity Cathedral, Shanghai, later recalled. “In a New Year’s sermon in the cathedral, with an unconscious Irishness, he urged us to ‘advance in all directions’.”

During his time, there was real growth in Sunday schools and in the work of women missionaries. After 25 years of separate existence, the Chinese CMS was incorporated into the Chekiang diocesan board of missions in 1930, making mission an integral part of the life and work of the Diocese.

Drama and upheaval followed the Curtis family to this new setting of Hangchow and as Christmas 1937 approached so too did the forces of Imperial Japan. In July 1937, the Imperial Japan launched full scale aggression to China. With the advance of the Japanese invading forces, large areas of the Diocese came under Japanese control, all CMS secondary schools were closed, and ordination candidates were sent out of the Diocese to Nanking (*Nanjing*) (南京) for training. On Christmas Day 1937, 90,000 Japanese troops entered Hangchow after fierce fighting. A week earlier the Japanese had advised all foreign consuls to evacuate any of their citizens from the area due to the danger of the fighting, in all there were only 31 foreigners in Hangchow in 1937 and John Curtis was the only Irishman.

As living conditions deteriorated in the city, John constantly visited the hospitals, medical camps and refugees, his overcoat pockets bulging with bottles of milk for the children. On what he called his “milk rounds,” he also shepherded large numbers of frightened women and children to the safety of the refugee camps.

By June 1938, only three districts of the Diocese remained outside Japanese control. But John spent six weeks touring the whole Diocese that autumn. By 1940, the number of baptized Anglicans in the Diocese of Chekiang was 12,000---more than double the number in 1920. However, in September 1942 all the missionaries were called in for questioning.

Journalist and Church of Ireland priest, Patrick Comerford notes that “living conditions deteriorated in the city, Curtis constantly visited the hospitals, medical camps and refugees, his overcoat pockets bulging with bottles of milk for the children. On what he called his ‘milk rounds,’ he also shepherded large numbers of frightened women and children to the safety of the refugee camps.”

John continued to administer to his Church's followers throughout his vast Diocese despite the restrictions caused by the Japanese invasion, and the subsequent outbreak of the Pacific War. By September 1942 more than nine months after the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii many missionaries were called in for questioning. John Curtis was arrested in November and taken to the Haiphong Road Camp (海防路集中營) in Shanghai (上海) and then held in Stanley Internment Camp (赤柱拘留營) in the British Crown Colony Hong Kong (英國殖民地香港). Comerford wrote that on one occasion, "the Japanese threatened to shoot him if he continued to criticize their treatment of his fellow prisoners, but it was said that in internment he was a great asset to the morale of the camp."

The Curtis's would remain in prison of war camps for the remainder of the War, it was in such a camp that they would learn of the death of their oldest son John, in January 1943. John, whose life Eda had saved as a toddler, was only 23 when he died in a flying accident while on service as a Royal Air Force pilot. When finally released from the camp at the end of the War both John and Eda were in their 60's and had suffered cruelly during their captivity. Eda had continued her medical work, helping other prisoners inside the camp and her thoughts were about returning to Hangchow to continue her work at the mission hospital, which they managed to do with support from the Red Cross.

After the War Victory in 1945, more missionaries did come out to China from Ireland and Britain missionaries began to return to China, but Curtis reported: "We are further away from self-help now than when I came here 17 years ago." At the end of his career, he appeared depressed about the prospects of the Chinese church surviving on its own. Yet he agreed it could be said "we are passing from mission relationships to Church relationships."

However their work was made increasingly difficult under the regime of Communist Party of China to a new socialist country since 1 October 1949. Eventually in 1950 John at the age of 70 and Eda were forced to leave the People's Republic of China for the last time and returned to England.

John became a vicar in the small village of Wilden, northeast of Stourport-on-Severn in Worcestershire before he eventually retired to Leamington in 1957 at the age of 77. Although struggling with arthritis it was noted that he remained in good spirits when in conversation with his old friends, and he kept in contact with his many old acquaintances and was eager for news from Dublin, indeed he had continued to visit Dublin regularly even while working in China. John was highly thought of as a missionary and often during his returns to Dublin he was asked to speak about his work and travels. And despite the passing of time his reputation as one of the best Irish footballers of his generation lived on for decades as well.

Rotarian John Curtis passed away suddenly in 1962, aged 82, and RotaryAnn Eda died just 18 months later. They had truly lived full, dramatic and difficult lives. In an obituary in the 《Church Times》, the former Dean of Holy Trinity Cathedral, Shanghai, wrote of him: "He was a faithful father in God, a wise counsellor and a sympathetic friend ... memories of him we shall treasure, and lives shaped by his influence and example will carry on God's work which he loved and made so attractive by his own life and ministry." A CMS missionary in China at the time, W. R. O. Taylor, recalled John Curtis as a bishop with "distinctively Irish gifts" that were valued in non-Anglican ecumenical circles which had little use for bishops. Taylor was the acting secretary for the CMS mission in Hangchow during 1937-1938.