

LONDON REFUSED TO BE CONVERTED

(Written for "The Listener" by NELLE SCANLAN)

SO Aimee Semple McPherson is dead. I did not see her famous Temple at Los Angeles, where among the attractions was the Angel Choir of Harpists—20 of them, or perhaps it was 50. I really forget the exact number. They were dressed as angels and played harps. But they were not the only theatrical touch about her service in the Temple; it was a most elaborate and emotional spectacle, and one which drew great crowds, and was liberally endowed by the ardent followers of the evangelist. This sect was known as the Four-Square Gospel.

It was in London about 10 years ago that I heard Aimee Semple McPherson. I don't know if she considered that her mission in America had been accomplished, or whether she felt England was in greater need of her ministrations, but she declared that she would convert London in a week. This challenge was conveyed in her advance publicity, much of which had the real Hollywood touch. But she did not understand the British people. Strange and dramatic stories

about this amazing woman were built up into an exciting climax the night before her first meeting. Sinful London was warned of its fate if it rejected this opportunity to repent. She had no doubts or distrust of her ability to storm the great city and conquer it, and her spiritual mission was launched with a burst of theatrical splendour. She took the Albert Hall, which holds about 7000 people, for a whole week. Few preachers assess their congregation in such numbers, but she was confident of repeating in England her American success. This trumpeting was the wrong approach to the English; it woke curiosity, but London remained sceptical.

I had spent the Sunday in Kent, and was motoring home in the evening when I saw the crowd of people swarming into the Albert Hall through every door. I joined the crowd. Most of them, I imagine, had come to be entertained rather than converted. They were not taking it very seriously. The English find any public display of emotion or sentiment embarrassing, and Aimee Semple McPherson had made the initial mistake of making her appeal on this basis.

Community Singing Fell Flat

For the first hour, there was no sign of the famous evangelist herself, but a man, one of her company, tried to flog up some show of enthusiasm—to warm the rather chilly atmosphere, by conducting community singing. London found this rather tame; it had not come here to sing, and it wouldn't sing. There were, of course, groups of very earnest

members of the Four-Square Gospel, who responded heartily—but it wasn't going very well.

"Now sisters, you will sing the first line of the hymn—now, brothers, you will sing the first line. Now, all together." Poor man, he shouted and exhorted, he flung his arms about and worked himself into a fever, but London had come to see Aimee Semple McPherson, and his effort fell flat. After an hour of this, he paused, from exhaustion. Then suddenly, dozens of men and women appeared among us, each with a collecting-box. But it was a type of box I had never seen before, and each one was securely padlocked. Even the Faithful were being spared temptation.

"Now, I want each one to turn to your neighbour on the left and say: 'Good evening, sister, I'm glad to know you,' and shake hands. Then turn to the neighbour on your right and say 'Good evening, brother, I'm glad to know you,' and again shake hands."

Immediately, those rows of British backs grew rigid; they took on an aloof and defensive attitude, as if to say: "You dare!" The suggestion was received in stony silence, or regarded as slightly comic.



AIMEE MCPHERSON
She made a mistake

Aimee Appears—And Disappears

The audience was beginning to show signs of impatience by this time, so after a hurried consultation, with appropriate music, Aimee Semple McPherson appeared on the stage.

She was a tall woman, not young, and she was clothed in white draperies, with long, full sleeves which hung like angels' wings when she raised her arms. As she glided on to the stage, her hands were crossed on her bosom, where she held a Bible bound in white leather.

As a speaker she made no great impression upon that vast audience. I don't know where her appeal lay, for she had neither personal magnetism, nor any great gift of words. That night she was a complete failure. Next day, the newspapers dismissed her campaign to convert London as a passing novelty. After all the preliminary boost, even from a sensational point of view, it had fallen flat. That night, the Albert Hall was nearly empty. But Aimee Semple McPherson was not yet defeated. She had one more try to catch and hold her London audience. But she went only from bad to worse. Having failed in her attempt to convert London, she tried to entertain it. The third night she began a series of talks of her personal life and loves. London wasn't interested. That was the finish. We heard no more of Aimee Semple McPherson; she simply faded out of town. The vast empty spaces of the Albert Hall had finally defeated her.

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