

“George Leslie MacKay”

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A Monologue as Dr. MacKay addressing the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1895.

Thank you for this opportunity to talk about my mission, here at the General Assembly of 1895, a zeal for which I found at the age of 10. It remained my primary aim and passion as a student of arts and medicine at the University of Toronto and later when studying theology at Princeton. With my life prepared, I approached the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church. They were unsure of my calling, they said. In truth, they were unsure of THEIR calling. The Committee had existed for 16 years and never once appointed a missionary! And they told ME I should wait a few years to give it more consideration!!! My, the work of committees can be so long and ponderous! Our good Lord would never have even made it to the cross if he had to rely on the corporate decisions of such a committee! But the following year the General Assembly accepted me as their first missionary to the heathen world. To China!

Now not all were enthusiastic. Some very uncomplimentary things were said, and I was called “an excited young man”. I found a great deal of coldness and apathy for the cause of mission. But seeing how things are today 23 years later, I can only give thanks to God for the work of His spirit, for now all congregations are organized around the desire for missions. Indeed every passing year sees the sending out of new missionaries. Thank God I have lived to see this, I who was our church’s pioneer in this work of God. My prayer is that tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundantly so!

As I descended to the dock in Tamsui, Formosa in 1871 at the age of 26. I heard a voice call, “Is this MacKay from Canada?” What an astounding thing to hear half a world away from my homeland. It was a Mr. Ritchie of the English Presbyterian Mission who would be my first tutor in the language and ways of these people, and in the application of evangelism in Formosa. Then I was left on my own on the north of the island as its first missionary. I could not speak the language. My home was a filthy place that the rainwater ran through. My bed was borrowed from the British Consulate. My first task was to master the language. First I turned to my Chinese servant to be my tutor. He took me as being so daft that he left my service. My greatest teachers were a group of herdboys. When I first approached them they ran away screaming “foreign devil, barbarian!”. But my persistence turned into friendship. For weeks I spent four hours a day with them in the fields. In five months I learned enough to preach my first sermon. It was listened to with strict attention. The room was full. Some scoffed and laughed but most were respectful. One serious man came back the next day, and the next. A few days later he brought teachers with him, and I argued with them on points of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Later this quiet man confessed, “I brought these teachers to you as a test, to see how your religion would stand up against the religions of our land. I know now with certainty that what you believe is the truth. I want to become a Christian”. A Hua did that day, and he has served our Lord well for 25 years.

It had been in my mind before I even left Canada that the natives of this land should be served by a native church. And so on this my hopes for A Hoa were founded.

He became my student and my companion. Our neighbours thought we were mad. One day a man entered our home with cups of tea, but in truth it was also out of curiosity. Just as the man entered my home, A Hoa and I began to sing a hymn. The man, in horror, dropped the cups and fled for his life. He never returned, although an hour later a child came to retrieve the fragments of the cups.

A Hoa joined me as I went about preaching. Occasionally we were stoned, set upon by dogs, chased by crowds, shouted down by listeners crying "Foreign devil. Black bearded barbarian!" We were pummelled by bricks once. Beset by robbers. I was even once crowded by lepers who thought by rubbing up against me they could scare me away. In this I kept in mind the many suffering of the Apostle Paul, who faced this and more for the sake of the Gospel (2 Cor. 11:-28, 30). This example of the greatest of all missionaries gives me strength to face my own trials.

Villagers from Go-Ko-Khi invited us to preach the gospel there. They gave us a piece of land to build the first church in North Formosa. We made it from stones and sun-dried mud bricks. There was much enthusiasm among the villagers. But when the walls were but three feet high, a company of soldiers came from the Prefect and ordered the work to end. They went to the headman's house, but he said "I am determined to follow the ten commandments". So the soldiers went on to the home of the eldest widow, but she declared "I am determined to follow the one true God". The construction continued, and A Hoa became its preacher.

It was odd worshipping in that place. During the sermon men would commonly light pipes and smoke them reflectively as they listened. In the middle of an important point someone might jump up and shout, "Buffaloes in the ricefield! Buffaloes in the rice field!" and they would all run out in the middle of worship. Other times they would sing hymns while pigs walked about. But such is the pace of their lives.

To bring Christ to this people I believed I had to make the audacious act of complete identification with the Formosans. So I took up their language, their dress and their customs. I even took a Formosan to be my wife, Chang Tsung Ming. She has been my help mate, my companion, and my partner in mission. In this culture I could never appeal to women as well as she can. And she has been a wonderful mother of our three children. I have been criticized for my choice, and more than a few friends have suggested that there are fine wives to be found in Canada. But I believe that Chinese and Canadians are alike in the presence of our Lord. In this I also looked to the example of the great missionary, the apostle Paul. He dealt with many different peoples in his journeys. He wrote,

"to the Jew I became like a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those outside the Law, I became as one outside the Law, that I might win some of them. To the weak, I became weak, that I might win some who are weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."

And so I will continue to become even more like these people, even if it continues to upset the Mission Board of our Church. And I will continue in my outspoken criticism of the unjust headtax the Government of Canada imposes on Chinese immigrants. Imposed as a means of keeping them out of Canada. They are honourable people: excellent in commerce, determined in their livelihood. We should welcome them.

One day I approached a new village, and was greeted by the usual shouts, "Barbarian! Foreign Devil". On my very first day there, a boy had received a blow that cut his scalp. As I had my instruments with me, I cleaned and sutured his head. The villagers were impressed, and now called me "Good heart! Good heart!" The next day an elderly man fell and broke his leg. They brought him to me, calling me Good Heart, and I set it. Through this I helped them see that my aid was a practical expression of the Gospel of love. I am content to know that in that village today is the finest church building in Formosa, with some 200 in attendance each Sunday, the pastor being one who was once a Confucianist teacher.

Of all the cities in Northern Formosa, the most heathen was Bang-Kah. It was the region's largest centre. All they desired was money. Over the years we had established congregations all around Bang-Kah, but never within it. When I set my eyes on that city, the authorities issued proclamations that anyone caught renting me rooms would be executed. I did not know this. I obtained a small hovel. In the doorway I placed a sign "Jesus' Holy Temple". Soon soldiers arrived with written orders that I was to be evicted. And so I left. We must respect Chinese law and act wisely if we are to succeed with the Lord's work. I went down river to the nearest chapel, where we prayed for an opportunity to preach in Bang-Kah. When we returned some Chinese men simply let me use their place. Again I put up my sign, "Jesus Holy Temple". What ensued was the greatest riot I have ever seen. A crowd of perhaps a thousand screaming people, threatening me with stones. We made our way to the protection of an inn, but the crowds climbed the walls and onto the roof, and started to dismantle the inn to get to me. The innkeeper politely offered me the key to the inn, inviting me to leave before he had no inn at all. Then, suddenly, all went quiet. The local mandarin arrived, as did the British consul. The three of us sat down for tea. "You must order your missionary to leave" the Mandarin demanded of the Consul. "I have no such authority" replied the consul. "In fact, the law states that you must protect this man as he is a British subject". I love British officials of this calibre! The Mandarin then got down on his knees, clasped his hands together and beseeched me to leave the city. In response I showed him my Bible and my medical instruments and said, "I will not. I will extract teeth, tend to the sick and preach the gospel". The Mandarin relented. The clamour died after a day. We built our chapel in Bang-Ka, and as we did the Chinese soldiers patrolled the streets protecting us.

They came to know me as a man of compassion and so came to accept me. It was often through my application of dentistry. The Chinese had the disgusting habit of chewing on Betel nuts. They did so for the mild narcotic in the nut, but the habit destroyed teeth. Now *their* treatment of teeth is bleak indeed. It is not uncommon that rotten teeth are pried out with knives and scissors, and the consequences of such surgery can be broken jaws, hemorrhage, even death. Curiously, people there are not anxious to have their dental problems corrected! I was not prepared for this kind of work, and so I directed a blacksmith to beat out instruments for me from crude metals. Today I have the very best in tools. It is common to see 100 line up for my help. It is often my custom when I enter a village to go to the steps of one of their temple, and for my companions and I to sing a hymn or two to attract attention. Next I extract teeth. That is followed by the preaching of the Gospel. Many times this has been my introduction into a new village. Over the past 22 years I have extracted 21,000 teeth.

There was great need to provide an education to the people of Formosa. And so we built Oxford College. Now many have supposed we had pretensions on that famous school in England, but this is not the case. The newspaper of Woodstock in Ontario made this school their cause in 1880, and the people of that county raised \$6,200. Such generosity was overwhelming and made my dream a reality. And so we named the school after this county of benefactors: Oxford. It accommodates 50 students, two teachers and their families. It has classrooms, a museum, a library, a bathroom and a kitchen. Our main text is the Bible, but we also study zoology, botany and so on, as in any Western college. Yet God is our primary subject. It was maddening to teach them, for they all learn out loud! Yet in that great Babel sound, they were still excellent students. In this land no one would ever think to educate a girl, so we built the Tamsui Girl's School as well. And in the evening we would gather for worship, with the girls from their school coming to join the boys. What a blessing to hear their songs of praise... the air ringing out with the 23rd Psalm in English! With praise sung to God in their own language with their own music. Praise be to God for his marvelous work in this place!

My central medical post was of course in Tamsui. I began with only one room, but today we have a commodious hospital due to one benefactor in Detroit. In 1894, in that one single year, our hospital treated 3,100 patients.

The Christian faith has taken hold in Formosa, even in Bang-Ka. The change was apparent when I took my leave to return to Canada in 1894. The headman of Bang-Ka insisted on ushering me through the city in a sedan chair, followed by three dozen important men in sedan chairs, with an honour guard of six soldiers on horseback. And as we boarded our ship, a choir sang "I'm not ashamed to own my Lord". I can report to you, the Venerable General Assembly, that today in 1895 in Northern Formosa there are 60 native preachers serving 60 chapels, 24 native Bible women, and 2,700 baptised Christians.

I thank you for the honours you have extended me, by the conferring upon me a Honorary Doctoral Degree by Queens University. And I thank you for the privilege you have given me this year to be the Moderator of this General Assembly. But I must leave Canada again and return to Taiwan. It is where my heart lay. It is the native home of my wife, and the birthplace of our three children. It is the land of my work. But most of all it is the place of my calling. For when I first saw that green island I heard the whisper of God, "This is the place".

But the half has not been told. My tale today is but a fragment. Indeed the real story is only just begun in Formosa. As has our Christ, who has only begun His work in that land. It is only left to our imagination what wonders may yet be wrought by those many Formosan servants of God who this day compose the Church in Formosa. What they will do, to the further glory of God, is only known to Him alone. But I have hope.

Epilogue

The hopes of Rev. Dr. George Leslie MacKay were fulfilled, in ways beyond what even he could imagine. Oxford College grew into the first university of Taiwan.

MacKay Memorial Hospital continues to serve the people of Taipei as a work of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan.

For years there has been a nursing school named in MacKay's honour, and in 2009 a new medical school was opened named in his honour.

The Presbyterian Church of Taiwan today is a denomination of 1,215 congregations and is larger in size than the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

MacKay was not only a missionary, but also a botanist, zoologist, geologist and anthropologist. His collection of natural history and artifacts are housed in the Royal Ontario Museum.

His writings on the people of Taiwan continue to be read by anthropology students today.

Many events occurred to mark the 100th anniversary of MacKay's death. The government issued a postage stamp in his honour. The government of Canada sponsored a symposium in Taiwan that explored the lasting legacy of Dr. MacKay.

In 2004 the people of Taiwan erected a monument to MacKay's honour in Woodstock, Ontario. A large delegation from Taiwan, including representatives of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, attended the unveiling.

In these ways and more, the legacy of Rev. Dr. George Leslie Mackay lives on today.