

Biography of George Leslie Mackay

By Michael Stainton, York University

George Leslie Mackay (1844-1901) was the first Canadian missionary to China, and national hero in Taiwan. Considered the most famous Canadian missionary of his generation, Mackay was also a strong critic of the anti-Chinese head tax.

“GLM” was born March 21, 1844 in Zorra, Oxford County, Ontario, of Highland Scots refugees from the Sutherland Clearances. Brought up in the strict Free Church evangelical tradition, he was the greatest of 40 ministers who came out of the Zorra church. After study in Princeton and Edinburgh, he was sent to begin the first Canadian Presbyterian mission overseas, in Formosa. Taiwan was then part of the Qing Empire. Arriving in Tamsui in northern Taiwan on March 9, 1872, Mackay began a one-man mission that continued for 30 years. That date is still observed as the anniversary of the schools and hospital he founded. Mackay is credited in Taiwan today as the founder of the first hospital, first modern school, first school for Women, and first museum in Taiwan. Alone of all missionaries who worked in Taiwan, he is remembered in school textbooks and a commemorative stamp, issued in 2001 on the centenary of his death, June 2, 1901.

Yet it was not so much Mackay’s institutional contributions to Taiwan that made him famous then or now, but his “peculiar” methods and total identification with the people of Taiwan, which while they made him controversial in Canada, endeared him to the Taiwanese people, including those who did not become members of the 60 churches he established. Working lone and reviled as “the black bearded barbarian”, Mackay learned the Amoy dialect through intense study and spending the days in the hills with herd boys watching waterbuffalo, and after five months began to preach in Amoy Chinese. Visited by the local literati who debated the merits of Confucianism and Christianity with him, Mackay immersed himself in the Chinese classics, and reported that he was soon able to outargue them all. One of them became his first convert, Giam Chheng-hoa. Mackay would walk through northern Taiwan, preaching in front of temples, the public squares of the day. Despite the rain of garbage and abuse that first met him, he soon had a small band of followers, his famous peripatetic school, who itinerated with him and learned on the job. No other China missionary so immersed himself in local culture and life. Once trained his disciples were assigned as pastors of the new churches.

In early years he was followed by a hostile group of Qing soldiers assigned to keep an eye on him. One of them once suffered a painful tooth abscess. Mackay improvised a pair of pliers and pulled out the tooth. Enemies became loyal friends and Mackay was thereafter preceded with his reputation for “ho sim” (a good heart), and tooth pulling. Sneered at in Canada for his amateur dentistry, Mackay defended his work as “doing good” in the pattern of Jesus.

Concerned that his efforts were only reaching men, and having a low opinion of the value of other foreign missionaries in Taiwan, Mackay in 1878 married a Taiwanese woman, Tiuⁿ Chhiong-mia, the granddaughter of one of his strongest local supporters. In Canada all his supporters opposed this interracial marriage, predicting that he would regret it. Indeed, Mackay was the first China missionary ever to marry locally, and remains one of only a handful to have done so. Mackay defended his marriage by saying that as his Lord made no distinction, neither did he. He also defended it by its results, a rapid increase of women in his growing church.

By the time he and “Minnie” returned to Canada in 1881 Mackay, and his methods, were famous not only for their uniqueness, but also for their results, the most rapidly growing mission in the whole China field, and one led by local pastors, whom Mackay treated as equal partners in his work. Contributions poured in and they returned to Taiwan with enough to build a clinic, and a school, Oxford College –named