

ROC, Mackay has been recognized by the Canadian Trade Office in Taipei (CTOT) as a perfect symbol of Canada's humanitarian face overseas. He was "the start of a people-to-people relationship that has evolved to our mutual benefit in the intervening years," says David Mulroney, Canada's representative. "Because, as Canada has grown, so too have our links with Taiwan and its people."

Canada's Mackay

George Leslie Mackay was born 21 March 1844 in the 7th concession of Zorra Township, Oxford County, Upper Canada (Ontario), the sixth and youngest child of George MacKay and his wife Helen Sutherland. Zorra was settled entirely by Highland Scots from Sutherlandshire, at the far northern tip, who were refugees from the tragic "clearances" in which the laird removed his clansfolk and replaced them with sheep farms. Soon, there were more Mackays in Ontario and Nova Scotia than there were in Scotland. Young George Leslie inherited the martial spirit of his grandfather, who had fought at Waterloo, and the strict Presbyterian evangelicalism which produced a host of ministers in the clan Mackay.

Once the forests were cut down, Zorra turned out to be fertile agricultural land, and the community prospered. There were so many log-cabin success stories they were gathered into a book called "Zorra Boys at Home and Abroad or, Success Illustrated by Example." "Born in humble though Christian homes, reared amid hardships and sometimes want, they were unconsciously trained by a stern but kind Providence in those habits of temperance, economy and hard work which have brought them to the front in almost every department of life." The author assures us, "no Zorra Boy to-day is ashamed of either the porridge or Catechism on which he was reared."

George Leslie was educated in the village of Embro, a mile from his farm, and started teaching at 14 to pay his way through Woodstock Grammar school. He took arts at Knox College in 1865-67, where he gained a reputation as a diligent eccentric. "He could scarcely be described as social," recalled R.P. MacKay of the Foreign Mission Committee. "Reserved even among his friends, among strangers he was often silent. He was dark and brooding, a country bumpkin, of rather under medium height, compactly built, deep-chested and of swarthy complexion. His eagle eye was mild and benevolent except when kindled with righteous indignation, as when" -- and this is significant -- "as when, for example, discussing the treatment accorded to Chinese by so-called Christians in North America. Then his intensity was unrestrained. He sometimes lost control of himself, and became painfully violent." He was a memorable figure, wiry, intense, "with raven hair, worn somewhat long,... an apostle of hard work."

After graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1870, he did post-graduate work in Edinburgh under Alexander Duff, the famous apostle of India. He applied to the Presbyterian church to be their first foreign missionary. Although Maritime Presbyterians and Baptists had been sending missionaries to the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) and India since the 1840s, Mackay established the first independent Canadian mission, and was the first Canadian sent by a Canadian church to China. He was thus the founder of the Canadian Protestant overseas missions, an important movement in 20th-century Canadian life.

Mackay was ordained on 19 September 1871 and left Toronto one month later, "like Abraham, not knowing whither he went." After six months visiting missions in mainland China and southern Taiwan, he arrived in Tamsui, the treaty port for Northern Taiwan, on 9 March 1872, which is still celebrated in the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. "This," his companion said, gesturing to the emerald hills, "this is your parish." "Here I am in this house," Mackay wrote in his diary, "having been led all the way from the old homestead in Zorra by Jesus, as direct as though my boxes were labeled, Tamsui, Formosa, China.... I took a look around me, toward the north and the south, and far inland to the green hills and I was content. There came to me a calm, clear prophetic assurance that here would be my home. And something said to me, This is the land."

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