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EDITORIAL

The history of Scottish Christian mission 'overseas' is probably most famously associated David Livingstone whose bicentenary was celebrated in on 2013. This year marks the bicentenary of two Scottish missionaries to China, by no means as well known as Livingstone, although significant in their own right. One of these, James Legge, has had an influence well beyond the missionary sphere—a conference dedicated to his legacy and context is planned for Edinburgh in June. The continuing significance of the other, William Chalmers Burns, is more difficult to assess.

James Legge (born 20 December 1815) was raised in a strict, evangelical Congregational family in Aberdeenshire, educated at the Grammar School in Aberdeen, then King's College, Aberdeen, from which he graduated with distinction and as a prizeman in 1835. He proceeded to study divinity in Highbury College, England, and after a period of language study in London, ordination, and marriage, arrived in Malacca in January 1840. He soon became the Principal of the Anglo-Chinese College there and deepened his knowledge of Chinese language and literature. He seems to have been an effective preacher. By 1843 he was transferred to Hong Kong and to take charge of a new L.M.S. mission station. Here he stayed until 1873, dividing his time between theological education in the seminary, advancing his own scholarly pursuits, acting as pastor to the English congregation of the non-Conformist chapel, and being a 'judicious citizen of the colony', as his DNB entry puts it.¹ Before he left for good, he toured north China in order to visit five 'great sights': 'the Tomb of Confucius, the Altar of Heaven, the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs, and the T'ae Shan, the sacred mountain of China'.²

At this point, Legge returned to Scotland, having left his missionary career behind. He was determined to satisfy his own inclinations during his remaining years, and this coincided with his interest in the Chinese classics. In 1876 he became the first non-Conformist to hold a professorship in Oxford with his appointment to a new chair in Chinese language and literature, held in conjunction with a fellowship at Corpus Christi College, a post that he held until his death in 1897. His influence here continues to be tangible, as he was a seminal figure in the emerging fields of Sinology and comparative religions. Amongst his other activities, he

¹ N. J. Girardot, 'Legge, James (1815–1897)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Oct 2006) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16354>>.

² Helen Edith Legge, *James Legge, Missionary and Scholar* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1905), pp. 177–8.

contributed six volumes of translations to Max Müller's Sacred Books of the East series, which comprised fifty volumes in total.

It would seem that the 'scholar' part of Legge's career offers the more straightforward case for assessment, for here his achievement was substantial and his influence pervasive. It came, however, as part of a reassessment of the place of Christianity in the community of 'world religions'. This shift had begun already during Legge's time in China, and placed him in some tension with the L.M.S. which was his 'sending' agency. This is to belittle neither his significant contribution to the development of the Protestant Chinese church—especially in terms of theological education and resources for worship—nor to the missionary enterprise: one of the aims of his translations was to provide a cultural context and awareness for missionaries that followed.

It does make for a marked contrast, however, with the career of William Chalmers Burns (born 1 April 1815) whose story intersects deeply with that of two more famous individuals. Like Legge, Burns was educated, in part, in Aberdeen, but grew up the son of the manse, his father being minister in Kilsyth. While for a time he harboured hopes of going into Law, he was gripped by a call to gospel ministry and in 1834 proceeded to study divinity in Glasgow rather than law in Edinburgh. Within a fortnight of being licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Glasgow in March 1839, Burns was deputizing for Robert Murray M'Cheyne in his Dundee pulpit, while M'Cheyne—Burns's elder by a scant two years, but already a seasoned and beloved pastor—was away for seven months on assignment in Palestine. Burns was instrumental in the dramatic revivals of Kilsyth and Dundee that followed in July and August that year. His zeal for evangelism unabated, he continued to preach in Scotland, based first in Perth, then in Aberdeen where simmering controversy surrounding the revival meetings in 1840 became very public in caustic and skeptical press reports. Inquiry by the Aberdeen Presbytery to a large extent exonerated Burns, although it regretted some decisions taken regarding the logistics of the meetings, and the fixation on Burns's involvement in them.

During this period, Burns was often travelling as an itinerant evangelist which ultimately took him also into northern England, to Ireland and, for a period of almost two years, to Canada. All of this activity, however, delayed a commitment that Burns had made while still a Divinity student in Glasgow:

[S]oon must I offer myself, miserable as I am, to the Church of God as a candidate for the work of an evangelist; and still more, that Church must decide, so great is the honour I have in prospect, whether in this land or among the

perishing heathen it shall be my lot to preach to sinners the unsearchable riches of Christ crucified.³

In the event, the intended destination was India. But the intervention of bureaucratic uncertainty about overseas placement, combined with the invitation to fill M'Cheyne's pulpit led to a delay of several years. In 1846, Burns, having returned to Scotland from Canada, received the invitation from the English Presbyterian Church Missionary Committee to be their first missionary to China. The offer threw Burns into some confusion, as Indian mission was still in his thoughts. Over a period of months, however, the conviction grew that China should be his field of service. He arrived in Hong Kong in 1847.

His first seven years were full of activity, but devoid of converts—surely a difficult circumstance for the evangelist of Kilsyth and Dundee. A move of almost 300 miles north to Amoy provided the base for an evangelistic tour which saw the first baptized converts to Christianity in his ministry. A brief, enforced return to Scotland interrupted this phase of mission. Back in China, by December 1855 his path had crossed that of the young James Hudson Taylor whose own missionary career in China was still in its early days. They spent seven months together, with Burns's prayer life deeply impressing the younger missionary, while Hudson Taylor's practice of wearing full Chinese dress inspired Burns to adopt the practice as well.⁴ In spite of the firm friendship, ill health necessitated Hudson Taylor's return to Shanghai in the north. They never worked together again, but the influences had been mutual and lasting.

Burns never stopped travelling, it seems, even when he had a local base. Frequent tours into the interior were interspersed with his own translation activities, including a selection of psalms and hymns. By the mid 1860s, now based in Peking, Burns turned his hand to the translation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* which he loved and had read repeatedly since childhood. While attempting to plant churches in Manchuria, Burns contracted an illness and, weakened by deprivation, he died in Newchwang (Yingkou) on 4 April 1868, three days after his fifty-third birthday.

Although they had much in common, comparing the careers of Legge and Burns nonetheless throws up some striking contrasts. It is not clear how often they met, although they may well have encountered each other

³ Letter of William Chalmers Burns to his sister Jane, 17 October 1838. Cited in Islay Burns, *Memoir of the Rev. Wm. C. Burns, M.A., Missionary to China From the English Presbyterian Church* (London: James Nisbet, 1870), p. 47.

⁴ I. Burns, *Memoir*, p. 446.

as boys at the Grammar School, but Legge went to King's College and Burns to Marischal College in the days before they united to form the modern 'University of Aberdeen'. They were in their own way both able mathematicians and linguists. Their time in Hong Kong has some overlap: Burns arrived in Hong Kong on 13 November 1847; Legge was on furlough in England and Scotland between 1846 and 1848. It appears, at least, that they served together on a working party of Protestant missionaries in Hong Kong during February 1850. Their contrasts emerge starkly in light of a characterization of Legge by one of his modern biographers:

Never much of a mass converter of the heathen Chinese, Legge had by [the time of his departure in 1873] proven his missionary credentials as a compassionate minister and educator to the Chinese community and his scholarly mettle as a translator and transmitter of Chinese traditions. However, he was in some ways more of a transformer of Westerners to a vision of a classical China than he was a converter of Chinese to the Christian gospel.⁵

Nothing would have satisfied Burns more than to be used in his evangelistic ministry in China as a 'mass converter of the heathen Chinese'. Their chief literary legacies are faintly symbolic: Legge's English renderings of the *I Ching* and other Chinese classics represent a significant monument of humanist learning; Burns's Chinese *Pilgrim's Progress* continues to exert a wide influence on Chinese readers.

⁵ N. J. Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 69-70.

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The set of Self World and Time articles were originally presented at the annual meeting of the Tyndale Fellowship Ethics and Social Theology Group, 3-5 July 2014, held at Tyndale House, in cooperation with the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics. Professor O'Donovan was present at the event and kindly agreed subsequently to write a response.

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