

Oxford Blue Plaque Unveiling: James Legge **May 16th 2018 at 3 Keble Road**

My Lord Mayor, Minister, Professors, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good afternoon. And thank you for coming out, on this rather cloudy day.

The family are most appreciative to the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board for this honour. Judy, my wife, and I thank you for your invitation. I would also like to add my thanks to Professor Clunas for championing this cause. I think it fair to say that without him, Legge might have continued to be overlooked.

In this country, Legge has in fact been overlooked for too many years. Since 1998 there has only been the commemoration plaque donated by the Legge family, which is in the cloisters at Corpus.

The turning point, perhaps, was the three heavyweight volumes on Legge, written by Professors Giradot, Pfister, and Bowman, who send apologies as they cannot be here today. I continue to be in touch with them and will meet Pfister and Bowman again this year in Hong Kong at a conference to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Anglo-Chinese College, where Legge was headmaster.

I am Legge's great grandson, in fact the eldest son's, eldest' son's, eldest son. And as a result, Judy and I have found ourselves with a considerable amount of Legge paraphernalia, from writing tables to locks of his hair, from portraits to a most incredible 2ft 6in tall silver Tablet, given to him when he left Hong Kong, engraved in the silver by many of his Chinese and European friends, supporters, and sponsors.

And while there are stories and memories that have been passed down the family, it is of regret, that Helen Edith, Legge's devoted daughter who looked after him in this very house after my great-grandmother, Hannah Mary's death, destroyed so many of Legge's letters, writings, and personal effects, after his death in 1897.

It was always implied to me that she wanted her own rather uncritical and fawning biography to be the definitive source of information, to protect and glorify his reputation, but the book does not stand up to present day academic scrutiny.

Legge was born in Huntley in 1815, the year of Waterloo, to a strict non-conformist family, at a time when the Anglican Church ensured that Anti-establishmentarianism was penalised in legislation, family law and civil rights. Daily prayers, morning and evening, Church every day, and services three times on a Sunday. He had a tough beginning.

He took the premier Hutton prize at the University of Aberdeen at the age of 19 – that consisted of being locked away for four days to translate large tracts of Latin into Greek (which he did directly and not through English) , as well as papers in algebraic, geometric, and astronomical mathematics, and moral philosophy – with nothing to sustain the candidates except one meal a day and six bottles of port smuggled in by the porter!

He studied to become a minister at Highbury Theological College and there became convinced that his calling was to be a missionary. It took a lengthy and difficult period fighting to be accepted by the London Missionary Society, proving his faith, his talents, and his suitability.

He married the daughter of the local London non-conformist minister, Mary Isabella, and the next day embarked on the vessel *Eliza Stewart* and sailed for Malacca. He was 23 and she 22.

The London Missionary Society had decreed his health not strong enough for India, so he was sent to the LMS-supported Anglo-Chinese College, then in Malacca – Hong Kong being closed to foreigners.

When he reached Malacca in 1840 after five months' turbulent voyage and sea sickness, he found a potentially disastrous situation of incompetence, inefficiency, fraud, and you name it. For the full details of this quick skim through his life I commend the tomes of the Professors Giradot, Pfister, and Bowman.

Suffice to say, Legge rose to the occasion and put the College back onto a more confident footing. With the end of the 1st Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking in 1843 ceded the rocky island of Hong Kong to the British and the LMS instructed Legge to move the College, lock stock and barrel, to the new colony.

There he fought the Governor Pottinger for land for the School. He fought to build and train teaching staff. He fought to maintain Christian teaching, throughout political opposition from the authorities , not then fully convinced of the value of a Christian school, as well as apathy from local families, for whom full-time education was not yet an established idea.

He built a school of over 50 boarding pupils and nearly as many days. And he and Mary Isabella even introduced schooling for girls, which is a further example perhaps of his modern ideas and thinking.

In 1846, on one of his return visits to the UK, mainly to recover his health, he took three lads from the School who were introduced to Queen Victoria, which all helped persuade the authorities to take what Legge was doing, more seriously. He remained at the ACC until 1864 when with the LMS withdrawing funds, the school ran into

difficulties. It reopened some years later and is now the large and very successful Ying Wa School.

His priorities had moved with the times and in 1853 he had been asked to chair the new Hong Kong Education Board, as a precursor to setting up a new Central School in 1861, now the Queen's School. That offered secondary education for *all* primary pupils – along English lines. And it is that that is the foundation of the education system on the Island today.

And from the time he first landed, he continued his missionary work to serve the increasing number of merchants, traders, administrators and others from England – and markedly from Scotland – as well the local population seeking a place to worship.

He built a Non-conformist Chapel to serve the growing congregation who followed his sermons. The Union Church he founded continues to this day – now in its third phase in temporary quarters while a new Church is built for the thriving and ever-growing congregation, who continue the community work and outreach care that Legge began.

He was a leader in the community, alongside the Flemings, the Swires, and the big trading and banking names we still know today. He was their conscience, their sermoniser. He regularly visited the poor and the needy. Frequently attacked by criminal gangs, he suffered considerable personal hardship and tragedy – he lost five children early in their lives, and his first wife in Hong Kong. My great-grandfather was a rare survivor.

And all the time, as he had in Malacca, he was up at 3 am to continue his work as a translator – of the Bible and English tracts into Chinese and of the works of Confucius, in particular, into English. He is credited with defining the Chinese word for God to resolve what was called 'the term question'.

By 1876, after 33 years in the colony with constant bouts of malaria and other epidemics, he was weak and worn down and had to retire to England to recover his health.

The good and the great saw him as an opportunity to confirm the importance of the East in the thinking of the Mother country by endowing a faculty of Chinese Language and Literature in the UK. They wanted this at Britain's premier University – Oxford, with Legge as the inaugural first holder of the Chair.

The federalist system of the University meant, however, that as Legge was never at Oxford, he had to be found membership of a College. Corpus Christi accepted him and the endowment. Let us not underestimate the difficulties they faced. Oxford was then dominated by a tightly knit congregation of Anglican ministers to whom a non-

conformist was an anathema. Many laws and statutes had to be circumvented, amended, and got round until the deed was done and Legge moved into no 3 Keble Road with his second wife, Hannah Mary, my great grandmother, and their children, my grandfather and the surviving siblings.

Here he spent the rest of his days, still rising at 3 a.m. or so to continue translating the classics and other books, often tackling some three times to improve his interpretations.

And as Judy and I discovered in Beijing at the Legge conference there in 2015, many Chinese scholars we met, rather turn to his work as their preferred primary source as few can interpret the old script. Legge puts his English translation underneath the old script and his notes and explanations of his interpretation under that.

He died at no 3 Keble Road here in 1897 and after a tussle, – he was a non-conformist – he was eventually allowed burial in Wolvercote Cemetery.

Legge was a pioneer, a man determined to see changes for the better and a man who recognised that Christian belief and education went hand in hand towards a better civilisation.

Missionary, yes – Sinologist yes – and certainly a translator. But also an educator, a community leader, and a teacher. A man of his time, who set parameters for others to follow. Oxford to the core.

Thank you for this recognition.

Christopher Legge