

Life story of John L. McPherson

In 1874, John McPherson, the son of a Scottish farmer, had been born, in Forest, Ontario, Canada. As a young man – a missionary – he had gone to Hong Kong where, for the next thirty years, he worked as General Secretary of the YMCA until his retirement. He spent his remaining years in England, the homeland of his wife.

Raised on a farm on the outskirts of Forest, John was educated at Forest High School, afterwards teaching there for two years. He was in his early twenties when he went to the University of Toronto, achieving a BA in Philosophy in 1901 and an MA in 1903, which he followed up with a year in theology at Knox College. During this time, he worked in the Home Mission Fields of the Presbyterian Church, as a worker in the Elizabeth St. Mission, and a Bible Class teacher in Central Prison, Toronto, and as a missionary at Squaw Island fishing Station on Georgian Bay and at Parry Sound and Sombra, Ontario. He was also involved with the YMCA's Provincial Committee of Ontario and Quebec, and the University of Toronto's YMCA (Who's Who Questionnaire, 1916).

At the age of 30, in 1905, he accepted an appointment as General Secretary of the YMCA in Hong Kong, and left Canada for a new life. He married in 1911, his wife also having come to Hong Kong as a missionary, in 1908. They started a family, while he worked at developing the Associations, which were in their initial stages when he had arrived, the Chinese YMCA beginning in 1901, the European YMCA in 1904. Reports suggest this was not easy going, nor was it a continuous endeavour – pitfalls, obstacles and challenges of other kinds made it a lengthy, difficult process. John was a very disciplined person, telling about his daily routine in his annual reports, even sometimes including a list of books read. His favourite forms of recreation were tennis and golf, he wrote on the form sent to foreign secretaries (Who's Who Questionnaire, 1916). At this time, he and his family—two daughters by 1916—were living on The Peak in Hong Kong.



John L. McPherson.
YMCA Photo. No date.

Over a thirty-year period, the European and Chinese YMCA continued to develop – the buildings, the membership, the programmes, outreach, and other community work. There were “organisations with the Association,” such as the Chinese YMCA's Amateur Dramatic Society and the St. John Ambulance Brigade (McPherson, J., 1916: 2). John also tells of a boat that was bought, and a preacher engaged, to conduct services at boat anchorages, to serve the 40,000 or so boat people, as he referred to them, of the Hong Kong waters. Called the *Hong Kong Harbor Mission*, this project, initiated by Mr. Leison who was training in Chicago at the time the report was written, had an “interdenominational character,” its directing committee consisting of “the pastors of all the churches and a few laymen.” (McPherson, J., 1913: 1).

Taking furloughs every six years, John and his family—there were to be three daughters—would travel by ship to England and Canada, visiting relations and friends. In his 1918 annual report, John wrote about a dilemma his family was facing. Although at this time their eldest was just five and their youngest only a few months old, he says, “As our children are becoming older the problem of their education is giving us some thought. We should like to be

able to educate them without family separation but are not certain that it can be done indefinitely” (McPherson, J., 1918: 8). Seven years later, in 1925, his wife returned with their three young daughters to England for good, enrolling them at boarding school, while he remained in Hong Kong, visiting them every three years or so, one of his daughters recalled.

In March, 1935, John’s retirement was reported in the South China Morning Post, first, in an article on the farewell dinner put on by the Chinese YMCA, then, in one on a gathering in his honour held by the European YMCA. In the latter, Mr E. H. Munson, General Secretary of the YMCA in South China, is quoted as saying,

For some who can exert their influence upon groups within a community, their services are unique. Mr. McPherson has done that, in the Rotary Club, Masonic circles, Children’s Playgrounds, Chinese Y.M.C.A., the Union Church and other activities. For a secretary to exert such an influence upon various nationalities is even more unique. This Mr. McPherson has done. For a secretary to exert an outstanding influence upon several generations is something which few have the privilege to accomplish in their lifetime (Services Recognised, March, 1935).

His personal characteristics were further commented on, H. E. Pollock stating that, “of even more importance than McPherson’s administrative abilities are his sterling qualities as a man” (Services Recognised, March, 1935), a quality attributed to him that I heard often over the years, from family members.

John’s retirement also inspired an article on the history of the Chinese YMCA, in the column *Old HongKong*. In it, he was credited as being “one of those European workers who devoted their time and energies to getting it [the YMCA] to grow and develop into the present vigorous body that it is” (Inception of Chinese Y.M.C.A., March, 1935).

There is, however, a twist on the official version of John’s retirement that came out of interviews with his daughters, which I carried out through correspondence and by telephone in the 1990’s. It seemed there was a serious family matter going on at approximately the same time John was preparing to retire from the YMCA.

John’s wife had suffered a stroke with resulting paralysis shortly after he had left to return to Hong Kong following a visit to England, probably in the early 1930’s. As the story goes, John received the news upon landing in Hong Kong and immediately returned to England. His daughter Katherine (my mother), remembered that her father had written to the three of them after first hearing of their mother’s stroke, saying “he would see them soon and that he loved them all” (Fulham, 1992). The letter came as a surprise to her, she said, as he had often seemed quite distant. John was said to have made arrangements for his wife’s care, then to have returned to Hong Kong to finish up, after which the plan was that he would come back to England to stay.

Not long after his retirement the Forest Standard, in John’s hometown in Ontario, Canada, reported his visit home on his way to England from Hong Kong, and announcing that he had been included in the King’s New Year honour list to receive an MBE, adding, “During the life of his father [his mother died when he was in his teens] he made many trips back to the old home town and on different occasions has preached from St. James’ Presbyterian pulpit.” (Honoured by the King, April, 1935).

At home in England, with his wife and grown family, John spent the final years of his retirement in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, becoming a member of St. Andrew's Church and, as



John L. McPherson
Tunbridge Wells, Kent.
1939 Family photo

stated later in his obituary, "serving on most of the church committees and acting as Session Clerk" (Services to the YMCA, 1947). He was a frequent guest at local Freemason Lodge functions, was "a popular member and past president of the Tunbridge Wells and District Scottish Association and was on the committee of the local Aid to China Fund" (ibid). On his death, in 1947, at age 72, his wife wrote in a letter to the YMCA that "he died peacefully and was busy with his many good works up till and during his last day. He was much loved here and everyone who knew him speaks of his wonderful character and his noble life" (McPherson, G., 1947).

John Livingstone McPherson: born 10 October, 1874; died 11 January, 1947.

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