A year or more ago I purchased what appeared to be an interesting clock at an auction of the residue of the estate of an elderly spinster lady domiciled in the UK, but without any surviving relatives.

My instant reaction to the likely function of this clock was that it had been used or owned by a merchant traveller or campaigner and so it turned out to be. Similar in substantive construction to a ship's chronometer, but with a lever escapement, it had been lovingly embellished with a gilt oriental bow and strut at some later date and was contained in a mahogany travelling case, which could be laid flat, carried by a flush brass handle, or hung from a concealed bracket. The silvered dial is cursively engraved *Douglas Lapraik, Hong Kong*.

Having no provenance from the previous owner, my researches had to begin. Many residents of Hong Kong will know the legend of Douglas Lapraik, but it is worth paraphrasing here. He left Scotland as 'a young businessman' in 1839 at the age of 21 in order to seek further fortunes in the Far East. He spent some time in Macao before moving to Hong Kong, which had recently become a British Dependency. Before arrival there in 1842 in somewhat straitened circumstances he had become acquainted with a fellow ex-patriot and clockmaker, Leonard Just, to whom he became apprenticed. There were several Justs who were devoted to the clock making industry, but Leonard had been supplying clocks and watches to the Chinese market before he emigrated from Scotland a little earlier. His son Leonard Just Junior was listed as an apprentice along with Lapraik. During this time, Douglas Lapraik must have become acquainted with numerous mariners, their ships and their clocks, which he undoubtedly repaired. After a few years he is recorded as setting up his own clock making business, which, after his final departure from Hong Kong, became 'Falconer Jewellers', a trading name that survives to this day.

Perhaps a more important development was that pari passu with this horological activity he became commercially interested in ships and shipping, the building of docks and warehouses and the establishment of a very successful shipping line chiefly concerned with
coastal trading. He offered cheap fares to Chinese workers to encourage them to engage with Hong Kong. In this he was hoist with his own petard as some of the imported bandits crawled up the storm drains and burrowed into his clock and jewellery business premises, removing many valuables. He ultimately left a line of eight coastal steamers to be managed by his nephew and great-nephew.

In short, Lapraik became a wealthy merchant prince, building a castellated residence for himself and his company; he was a respected civic dignitary and benefactor, but not without his detractors. Memorials to his achievements included the presentation of a civic clock for the clock tower at Pedder Street and Queens Road, but the tower itself was demolished in 1913 and the clock itself has been lost. Much later, his nephews had an elaborate stained-glass window installed in St John’s Cathedral and dedicated to his memory; it was regrettably destroyed during the WW2 occupation and few substantial records remain.

At the relatively youthful age of 48 he retired and returned to England, leaving his nephews to run the shipping business and Mr Falconer, a one-time employee, inherited the clock and jewellery enterprise. That same year he married a lady from the Isle of Wight, having settled a trust for his Chinese concubine before leaving Hong Kong. Sadly, he died a few years later of a malignancy at the age of 51, but with a smile on his face, it is said.

One of the beneficiaries of his will was a Douglas Dixson, the son of a late colleague who was a newspaper proprietor in Hong Kong and we discover circumstantially that the lady who previously owned my clock had documented connections with that particular family. So, who knows, with such slender conjecture, I may have the master’s own clock.

This is but a thumbnail sketch of the life of an extraordinary man, stitched together from information provided by very many kind people both here in the UK and in Hong Kong. In the interim, I should like to thank in particular Mr Philip Kemp, related to Lapraik through marriage; Dr Dan Waters and Dr Solomon Bard of Hong Kong; and Bernard Hui of the Hong Kong Public Records Office, who made available to me some archival record cards compiled by the Reverend Carl Smith. My searches are not complete and I shall be ever grateful to receive any further anecdotal recollections about Lapraik and particularly about his clocks.
1. A photo of the clock. It is seven-and-a-quarter inches square (18.5 cm) and three-and-a-half inches deep (0.9 cm). It weighs eight pounds (3.5 kilos).
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