J. L. McPherson: Hong Kong YMCA General Secretary, 1905-1935
Sue (Fulham) McPherson

In 1905, Mr. John L. McPherson accepted an appointment as General Secretary of the European YMCA in Hong Kong. He was to spend the next thirty years of his life building up the YMCA, an initiative that was only in its early stages when he arrived; the Chinese YMCA having begun in 1901, the European Association in 1904.

Born in Forest, Ontario, Canada, on 10 October 1874, John Livingstone McPherson, the son of a Scottish farmer, was raised on a farm on the outskirts of the town, attending Forest High School, where he taught for two years following graduation. In his early twenties he went to the University of Toronto, in Toronto, Ontario, gaining a BA in Philosophy in 1901 and his MA in 1903, which he followed up with a year studying theology at Knox College, also in Toronto. In his final undergraduate year, he states, he was first Vice-President of the Literary and Scientific Society, the highest office in the University held by an undergraduate.1

McPherson became a member of Central Presbyterian Church, Toronto, and worked for periods of time in the Home Mission Fields, as a worker in the Elizabeth Street Mission, 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 had also been a member and General Secretary of the University College YMCA, 1901-02, Student Secretary of the YMCA's Provincial Committee of Ontario and Quebec 1902-04, and General Secretary of the University of Toronto YMCA from September 2004 to January 2005. It appears he was also quite athletic, playing soccer and rugby football for his college’s teams.2

Thus, having completed his formal education and gained experience working in the community and for the association, on 20 February 1905, at the age of 30, John McPherson sailed from Vancouver, Canada, arriving in

In 1957, aged ten, the author emigrated with her parents and brother from England to the province of Ontario in Canada, where her grandfather J.L. McPherson had once lived. Now a mother of two, and a graduate of UWO and Windsor University, she has since revisited England and returned to Ontario, where she now lives in the Toronto area. Her e-mail is s.a.mcpherson@synpatico.ca.
Shanghai on 11 March to begin a new life as a missionary in Hong Kong working for the International Committees of Young Men's Christian Associations. From 14 March 1905 to 30 November 1906, he was General Secretary of the European YMCA. He became General Secretary of both European and Chinese Associations on 1 December 1906, remaining in that capacity until 31 January 1910. At that time the European section occupied the top floor of Alexandria Building, while the Chinese branch occupied premises on Des Voeux Road and later on Queen's Road Central.

In this account of John McPherson's life the emphasis is on the work he did, the growth of the YMCA, and the influence on him of living and working in Hong Kong. This research includes information from annual reports and forms that he sent to the International Committee of YMCAs in New York, USA, from letters, and from oral and written recollections of John McPherson passed down by family members. His daughters have said that their father was known as Jack to many people, while it seems he was also known as Mac, from a mention of that nickname reportedly by Mr E.H. Munson, in an article in the South China Morning Post on the occasion of McPherson's retirement.

Christian organizations contributed to changes in Hong Kong that would have been beneficial, for instance, in education, medicine, and women's rights. The YMCA was one such influence, intervening in ways that were meant to improve the lives and outlook on life for young men living in Hong Kong and South China. The YMCA was, in part, secular, as well as a Christian association. Both the social activities and moral guidance, together, were seen as a vital necessity by McPherson. His early training in the field, working with underprivileged groups in Canada - people on the margins of society - no doubt influenced his own outlook on his arrival and throughout the years ahead, though now in this new country working towards a different purpose, new challenges lay before him.
Annual Reports: the Early Days

In a report on his work with the European YMCA, McPherson tells of his arrival in March of 1904, a year earlier:

I have devoted the time to getting acquainted with the constituency, and looking after the regular work of the various departments. One hour daily, before the regular work of the day began, was spent in the study of the Cantonese colloquial.7

In those early days he was confronted with the problem of class and racial difference, by which some nationalities in Hong Kong were seen as lower in social status than others. The term racism may not have been common at that time, although differences in race were acknowledged in his report, by McPherson himself and in the comment of one Association member who referred to the right to 'exclude persons of races other than those the names of which the departments bear'.8 Differences in country of origin could easily translate into matters of class, and vice versa, and it was class that was named as the issue to be dealt with. McPherson explains what he understood as the reasons why the European YMCA came to be founded.

The principal motive for establishing the European YMCA was that a higher standard of morality might be developed amongst the Europeans and thus remove one of the great hindrances to the progress of Christianity among the Chinese. It was also anticipated that the interchange of social visits, and inter-Association activities would make for the mutual understanding and respect of the two races.9 One could assume from the first part of this statement of purpose that, in order to set a good example for Christianity amongst the Chinese in Hong Kong, Europeans themselves needed religious and moral guidance. The second part relates to an endeavour being struggled with in western society today - the diverse cultural differences of individuals living in the same geographic area. But differences among Europeans themselves, and the problem of large numbers of Eurasians and various other nationalities, and the accompanying financial limitations, were seen as restricting the option of opening up the European Association to all. At the end of this written report, however, an addendum stated that the matter of class and racial differences had become public knowledge through a statement to the press, by which 'this European Department has decided to remove all class barriers to membership'.10

A year later, J.L. McPherson and fellow secretary C.C. Rutledge announced in a joint report that the fears they had had the year before had not been
realized. They were encouraged to see that prejudice against the Association was becoming 'less noticeable', with a subsequent change in the 'practical response' from businessmen. In addition, contributions of money and books were made by the community, including the proceeds of a concert arranged by the organist of St John's Cathedral, towards the still very small library, now 600 books better off. A further indication of the lessening of prejudice was being granted permission to have an Association tent at the annual Hong Kong Volunteer Camp.

There was also coming to be more interest by members of the YMCA for taking responsibility and doing work that needed to be done - leading groups, for instance. While the clubs - the glee club, and the football, debating, swimming, tennis club, etc. gained more interest, it was a disappointment to see a lack of interest in the area of 'religious work'; Bible study and prayer meetings, in other words.

McPherson and Rutledge were optimistic, however, in their vision of the ships that traded out of Hong Kong, 'both the coastal steamers and the TransPacific', to be an undeveloped field, requiring only a steam launch to enable them to visit and to bring the men ashore. At the end of 1905-06 year, for the most part, there was some discouragement that active workers/members were having to move on, either to return home or to some other station. Their thoughts are reflected in this final paragraph:

The little results that we have in the religious work is always a cause for much regret. A few of the members are becoming more deeply interested but the majority appear entirely indifferent. They join us for our club privileges.

From this uncertain start, the YMCA progressed, attracting more members, building up the library, and enhancing its reputation. The main discouragement still was that, while the YMCA seemed to increase in popularity among the Europeans, the majority were far from being 'working' Christians, the lack of spiritual life in Hong Kong, as he saw it, being 'a continual weight'. On top of this, lack of adequate funds to keep the Association going was an ongoing problem, causing him some anxiety, McPherson wrote.

This responsibility he had taken on must have seemed of such great magnitude, especially as the spiritual element seemed to be slipping away in favour of the social activities. These first reports provide a flavour of the efforts he went to, what progress was made, and even how he spent his time. He was of course, still single, but it appears he spent many evenings in the Association rooms' meetings and activities, starting up Bible Study classes, and for a period
of time taking daily language lessons.

In the annual report of 1907-08, McPherson wrote about the re-organization of the Associations in Hong Kong that year. The 'metropolitan system', as he called it, had failed to meet the needs of this mixed community over the four years of its existence. Early in the year the European and Chinese Associations were 'practically separated', he stated, bringing in changes he saw as favourable, a separate Board of Directors for each Association working out well.  

In this report McPherson discloses how they managed to work through preconceived notions that the YMCA was 'only a prayer meeting place'.  

Showing that it was about social activity overcame resistance to their presence in Hong Kong. But it was time, he thought, to emphasize the religious side of the YMCA. Meetings had begun to be held at outside locations as well as in the Association rooms, and some young men had made the decision to live Christian lives. The clubs and societies, and various other organizations within the Associations were growing (currently six of them), as were the numbers of young men willing to give time to look after them. Obtaining speakers to come to give lectures to the Literary and Debating Society was becoming easier. The membership was increasing, with new men often being reached upon their arrival in Hong Kong. Several testimonials had been given to the value of the Association's hostel, the supervised rooms away from temptation seen as valuable both by employees who lived in them and by their employers.

There was no time to devote to language study during this year, from 1907 to 1908. Hard work and thoughts of the needed land and buildings must have preoccupied John McPherson. There was no vacation and no conference. Plans for the following year included investigating the possibility of renting rooms in a part of the colony where there were about twenty young Europeans in the poorer homes, and starting some work for them, drawing on the skills of volunteer members. The building scheme was another large project, important if the Association were to be seen in as good a light as the Hong Kong Club. Queen's College was willing and only slightly hesitant about assisting.  

On a brighter note, the United States Consul-General to Hong Kong and member of the Association's Board of Directors, Amos P. Wilder, was soon to leave, but before doing so attracted a large audience when he spoke at a special service on Religion and the Average Man.  

The problem of not being able to compete with the Hong Kong Club for members, due to its reputation and equipment, was again a subject of concern.
in 1908-09 for Mr McPherson, who thought that the Association would come
to be looked upon as existing for those only who were ineligible for the Hong
Kong Club. At this time, the European Association occupied rented premises
on the top floor of a large building in the centre of the city. There were 24
rooms in all, six for Association purposes, and 18 residential rooms. They had
a reading room, library, meeting room, and billiard room, but no gymnasium,
bowling alley or recreational field. The tennis courts were leased. Comparing
these facilities with the Victoria Recreation Club, which had not only a
gymnasium, a winter swimming bath, and a sea enclosure for summer
swimming, McPherson expressed the wish for a building of their own, for the
Association.\(^{18}\)

In the year 1909-10, McPherson spent a great deal of time at language
study. Reiterating some of the thoughts expressed by other secretaries in the
centre, in their reports, he focused on the positive aspects of the European
Association for young men away from home, even though many of those men
would soon leave Hong Kong for other places, and other work. One member,
who spent almost every evening in the Association's rooms, referred to the
Association as his 'home'.\(^{19}\) McPherson adds a thought, not about this member
in particular, though it does relate to such seemingly minor advances made by
the Association:

There may be nothing striking in our work that will make it interesting to friends at home
where things are done on such a large scale, as only those of us who actually live in them
can really understand them, there is much cause for encouragement in even the small
things that are being done.\(^{20}\)

Once again, McPherson named the most important problem 'the securing
of premises and equipment adequate to the needs of the work in Hong Kong'.\(^{21}\)
After going over the details of the present facilities, the same they had had for
the past six years, he added that the lease was due to run out at the end of
1911. Explaining the class problem in more detail he wrote:

Our membership is largely made up of what might be termed the middle classes. We have
to a large extent left out the soldiers and sailors, while bank clerks, assistants in the large
shipping firms and government officials, who think themselves the highest grade of society,
have left us out. The soldiers and sailors are by not means a neglected class as two well-
equipped institutes are at work among them, but the class which tries to hold itself above
us is indeed a needy one, which we cannot afford to let go without the greatest effort.\(^{22}\)

He continued to reflect on these problems, seeing as a solution to these
'seemingly impassable barriers' having all classes actively working within the
organization and being able to offer something that would ‘appeal to every class and which can be obtained here better than in any other place in the colony. A suitable building and adequate equipment’, he thought, ‘would go a long way towards the solution of this difficulty’.23

Planning for the needs of students within Hong Kong was high on the agenda, particularly because the University [of Hong Kong] was undergoing construction and expected to open not too far in the future. Leaving the advancement of the Chinese Central Association up to Messrs Mohler and Lerrigo to report on, McPherson notes that the chief problem was no longer how to secure members but how to take care of and put to good use the members they already have. A final note added to his report for 1909-10 was that he hoped to ‘continue at language study up till the end of January or early in February 1911, when I expect to be married and afterwards take my furlough’.24

Commencing Family Life

Sometime during these first years in Hong Kong he had met a woman who had also come there as a missionary, from England, in 1908, and was teaching art classes. He had become a member of Union Church, Hong Kong, and it was here in this church that he married the missionary and artist, Gertrude Briggs, on 2 February 1911. A few months later, in May, McPherson took his first furlough.25

McPherson departed in May 1911, with his wife, quite likely travelling to New York, where the YMCA Foreign Office was located, as well as to Canada, his birthplace, and to England, from where his wife originated. I do not have precise details of his visit, but these are among the known places he visited, and going to all three countries during one furlough, since they occurred so infrequently, would probably have been his aim, if at all possible. A son, Angus, born in 1911, must have been born either just before the McPhersons left on furlough, or while they were away. Unfortunately, this child, their firstborn, died on the return voyage to Hong Kong and was buried in Singapore, according to McPherson’s daughter, Katherine, recalling these events later.26

On his return to Hong Kong from this furlough, John McPherson began work once more. In his report for the year 1912-13, he tells of two capable Chinese men who were soon to be put to work for the Chinese secretaryship. One was Mr Ho Leison, who had once been a student at the Association school and then later had worked in insurance. He was in Chicago the year
the report was written, in 1913, but was expected back the following year. The name of the other man, Mr S.L. Hoh - a Queen's College student who in 1912 attended the Secretaries' Training School at Mokanshan - was mentioned again in the September 1916 report, having spent about a further year in training in Shanghai and now doing 'remarkable work'.27 A third recruit, Mr K.T. Yeung, at this point, in 1916, was just on his way to Shanghai to begin his two years training. Mr McPherson found this very encouraging, from the way he wrote, and an improvement for the YMCA on the whole.

But there were many other changes happening - a time of rapid growth, it seems. The year 1912-13 was the year in which a boat had been bought, according to the annual report, and 'a preacher and a colporteur engaged'.28 The initiative for doing work with the boat population came from Mr Leison, who undertook this work, gaining the cooperation of the Chinese churches, and arranged for services to be conducted at the various boat anchorages in the harbour. The work had an interdenominational character, McPherson wrote, pastors of all the churches and a few laymen forming the religious work committee. An effort was also made to teach some of the people to read, especially the children. In Hong Kong waters the boat population numbered about 40,000, says the report, 'sadly neglected, outsiders more or less, beyond the protection and restrictions of the law as far as China was concerned'.29 Bible classes, too, thrived in Hong Kong, with 1,400 people attending one weekend's events.

The Student Hostel was completed that year, and the Playground attached to it. It was noted in the report that the Student Hostel was well-situated, the largest schools in Hong Kong being not five minutes walk away. The Playground was small, but large enough for volleyball, basketball and indoor baseball.

A new site for the Chinese YMCA, and an offer of a building for it, was being talked about that year. Sir Henry May, Colonial Secretary, and later to be Governor of Hong Kong, was taking considerable interest in the Association - after showing indifference to it in the past - another good sign. The acting Governor, the Hon. Mr Claud Severn, also expressed appreciation, mentioning a former employee who had been an active member of the YMCA.30

By this time, Mr. McPherson had a daughter, Elizabeth, born in September, 1913, in Kowloon.31 As far as the personal side of the work was concerned, in his report he explained that their housing was not entirely satisfactory as he was living on the Kowloon side of the harbour, out of necessity,
even though he could not get home for the evening meal, while the Mohlers were disturbed by noise, from all sides, while no home was as yet available for the Elliotts upon their return from furlough.

The highlight of the 1916 report was the announcement of a successful Building Fund Canvas for the European Association. In 1914, the European Association had been obliged to close their premises in the Alexandria Building, but with the support of Sir Henry May, the Governor of Hong Kong, the Association had been able to start work towards eventually procuring its own building. McPherson referred briefly to the circumstances affecting China and Hong Kong, and how, for instance, 'the unsettled state of neighbouring China had brought business to a standstill, the high cost of living made all feel poor, and the war was presenting its claims continually'.

Nevertheless, the governor, who was determined to proceed and get the European Association back on its feet, was quoted as saying, 'We are all more thoughtful and less selfish and self-centred than we used to be and I believe it can be done'.

Life in Hong Kong was not much affected by World War I, according to historian Frank Welsh. More significant, in his view, was the enthusiasm and condemnation of 'that old standby, opium'. The equivalent, some thought, of the west's fondness for alcohol. Opium had a lengthy tradition in the east, though it did not appear to be a matter McPherson and the YMCA addressed directly.

There was another accomplishment during that time: 1,200 members in the Chinese Branch, or as McPherson phrases it, '1,200 wide-awake men among whom to work'. Outreach programs were multiplying, two new organizations that year - organizations within the Association - being the Chinese YMCA's Amateur Dramatic Society, and the St John Ambulance Brigade, composed of men who had taken at least one course in First Aid at the Association.

The Association school was beginning to find its place within the field of education, progress being made and attendance increasing 25 percent. McPherson describes this in a way that might remind one of continuing education classes in society today, their evening classes having developed into a 'regular commercial school', offering 'programs for earnest men who are anxious to improve themselves in their spare time', with a graduate from the University of California in charge.

The emphasis of the Association, however, was on the spiritual lives of men and boys, and in his 1916 report McPherson emphasizes the progress
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made, under the direction of Mr Hoh, in inviting members to Bible study classes and seeking to increase attendance. This effort was not without its problems, however. As Mr McPherson overheard one day, one of the clergymen, on saying he would like to have the opportunity of speaking to young men, was informed by a listener to go to the Fanling golf course and he would find 150 of them there any Sunday. Working for foreign employers - representatives of Christian countries - seemed to be the main problem, of this untoward influence on their work among the Chinese.

The Chinese Association occupied a four-floor building on Bridges St, with a gymnasium, baths and dressing room on the first, the student hostel taking up the third and fourth, leaving only the second for 'offices for five secretaries, lounge, dining room, class room, billiard room and library', as well as for night school and Bible school in the evenings. A new building, with new equipment, and a physical director, were needed more than ever.36

Finally, in the report, the problem of the university having no accessible headquarters or residence as a centre for Christian work was as yet unresolved. Boys in government and private schools in the area, however, were familiar with the Association and friendly towards it. Problems lay in how to reach students at the university.

On the personal side, Mr McPherson included a list of books he had read during the past few months, as well as a list of the books his wife had read. The list included Flexner's *Prostitution in Europe*, Leong & Tao's *Village and Town Life in China*, Peabody's *Jesus Christ and the social question*, and Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.37 In January, 1915, a second daughter, Katherine, was born. His favourite forms of recreation were tennis and golf, he wrote on the 1916 Who's Who form sent to foreign secretaries, and his address was No. 6, The Peak, Hong Kong.38 Writing on the history of Hong Kong, Frank Welsh tells how attitudes changed over the years. Segregation had not always existed in Hong Kong, but in the early 1900s, Chinese came to be excluded from the Peak, a favoured area.39

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*Mr & Mrs McPherson with their daughter, Katherine, c.1917*
In January, 1917, Mr McPherson, with his wife and children, left on furlough, arriving in the USA in February. Several months later, on 27 September, Mr and Mrs McPherson and the two girls, by now age four and two, sailed from Vancouver aboard the Empress of Russia, bound once again for Hong Kong. They arrived back in Hong Kong on 18 October 1917.

A Time of Change: the Chinese and European YMCAs

McPherson’s report for the year 1917-18 tells how the Chinese YMCA took over its new building in 1918, five stories high and with a basement, each floor having an area of 7,000 square feet. The building’s uses and equipment are described in detail, from the boiler rooms at the bottom to the flat roof, fitted up with a tea garden, with plants and palms. The third floor entrance is directly from Bridges St, on that level. Besides the kind of rooms and equipment already noted, from previous buildings, such as library and gymnasium, the new one also contained a running track, a pool, a large social room, and 28 residential rooms.

The membership of the Chinese Association was more than 1,900, most of whom were senior members. The immediate aim was to get as many of the members to take an active part in the programmness offered in the new building. Mr Leison, who had been with the Association since 1913, had made consistent growth, becoming the senior Chinese secretary, leading the directors into new enterprises with great skill while also tactful in handling junior staff members. Mr S. L. Hoh, the senior student secretary, was in many respects the equal of Mr Leison, McPherson wrote, with a capacity for getting things done, and done on time. He was in charge of the old building which was directly opposite the new one, and which had been remodelled as a boys’ building, the Junior Division of the Chinese YMCA, accommodating 48 students in residence. Intent on convincing the Foreign Committee in New York that the staff was more than adequate in its ability during this most important period for the Association, Mr McPherson mentioned by name several of those working with the Chinese Association. Tsui Mo Fat (T. Moffat), a graduate of the Canton Christian College and head of the social department, was full of schemes, McPherson wrote, for making the Association attractive to the members. Ho Chung Yu was a scholarly young man at the head of educational work, though had not been with the Association very long, while K. T. Yeung, the new physical director, was proving himself to be a real leader. Moreover, the team worked harmoniously together.
This year, 1917-18, was a time of great change. The Chinese Association settling into their new building, free of debt, free from many of the problems and difficulties of the earlier years, the membership by that time was the largest it had ever been, and they had good equipment. Every member of staff was doing his part. Some had been introduced to a different kind of work for which they were better suited, but without hard feelings, said Mr McPherson, ending on this note:

One of the Chinese secretaries at the staff meeting last week threw out a warning about the danger of allowing the multiplicity of duties to crowd out the cultivation of the spiritual life by Bible study and prayer. There are so many things to be done now that it is difficult to remember that their real work is 'with men not things'.

Mr McPherson’s duties - both the work of the Association and military duties - had kept him in Hong Kong from the time of his return from furlough in 1917 until the next summer, attending no conferences, nor taking regular language study. Books he had read included the novel, Charles Reade’s *Christie Johnstone*, Patrick MacGill’s *The Red Horizon*, J.M Tyler’s *Man in the Light of Evolution*, and Harold Begbie’s *Souls in Action*. His health was good, he wrote in his report, his chief exercise being walking. His house was very high on the Peak and, except in downpours, he would walk from the car every night. The military drills, three times a week, were also good exercise. Soon, he hoped to be able to do regular gymnasmium work and swimming at the Association.

By the time of this report, a third daughter had been born, in May 1918. It was at this time that McPherson mentioned at the end of the report the problem of education for their children, and how he and Mrs McPherson were having to give this some thought. Since most Europeans sent their children home to attend school or had private teachers, little attention was given to European schools in Hong Kong. He expressed concern that they would not be able to continue indefinitely this way, keeping the children in Hong Kong. One less worry was the lease on their home, which was due the following year, but he thought it likely they would be able to have it renewed.

In 1922, Mr McPherson took his furlough, sailing with his family to the USA, arriving there in May, then returning the following year from San Francisco on 6 September 1923, arriving back in Hong Kong on 27 September. Many years later, the daughters of John and Gertrude McPherson recalled this memorable trip which included stays in England as well as Toronto, and Forest, Ontario, where their father had grown up. A brief notice in the local Forest newspaper reported their visit, announcing that Mr and Mrs John
McPherson, of Hong Kong, had spent the past week there with Mr and Mrs J.D. Livingston and friends. Over the following years, the European and Chinese YMCAs continued to develop - the buildings, membership, programmes, Bible study, outreach, and other community work. Mr McPherson’s wife, Gertrude, had returned to teaching art, and the family had moved, possibly as early as 1919, from the house on the Peak above Victoria to the island of Cheung Chau, where they had had a house built. In 1920, Miss Olive McKay wrote to her mother in Canada from Hong Kong, telling about her visit to Cheung Chau to spend Christmas with the McPhersons. Miss McKay sometimes looked after the children so would not have been unfamiliar with them. On Christmas morning, after opening presents beside the tree, and after prayers, they went for a morning walk, ‘just cool enough to feel comfortable walking in a sweater’. She describes it further:

We walked to a part if the island I had never seen before and passed through such a pretty orange grove the trees just loaded. The McPhersons wouldn’t let us pick any oranges but we came across an old woman working there who was delighted for a few cents to let us each take one. The most interesting part of our walk was finding a cave right on the point of the island. Mrs Mac. had been wanting to find it for some time so we got two Chinese men to guide us...you had to slide down quite a long passageway to get to it. It was pitch dark but we had candles and walked all through it.

After a traditional turkey dinner with all the trimmings, and a game of baseball, Miss McKay returned to Hong Kong by launch.

The McPhersons had Chinese servants - amahs - to look after the home and help care for the children, allowing more time for Mrs McPherson to paint, and to return to teaching once again as she had done when she first arrived. Daughter Katherine recalled the trip to Forest, Ontario, during either the 1917 or 1922 furlough, when the girls chatted among themselves in Chinese, drawing the attention of the local residents. From then on they were referred to as ‘the little Chinese girls’, she wrote, adding that Chinese was their first language.

The slavery of women for domestic use was a controversial matter among the Chinese, colonial Hong Kong, and within Britain although it is necessary to distinguish between different types, and individual experience. Chinese amahs are spoken of as ‘devout, down-to-earth and utterly dependable servants with a style of their own’, although historically there were girls being sold into slavery who would be sexually exploited or otherwise cruelly treated. The
traditional Chinese custom of selling girls for domestic service was not as innocent as it sounded. In 1923, the Chinese YMCA gave their support to a bill being discussed in the Hong Kong Legislative Council - The Mui Tsai Bill, an ordinance to regulate certain forms of female domestic service.

Further Developments at Home and Work

In 1925, Mrs McPherson returned with her three young daughters to England. Although she and her husband had been considering the move, there may have been other reasons for their returning to England besides the education of the girls. All three girls had had malaria, though fairly common for the time, and Katherine had also had typhoid fever at age 9, for which she was hospitalized for several months, so health was a factor. Lastly, political unrest in China, as described by John McPherson in a letter to his brother in Canada, may have influenced their decision. He and Gertrude had been in Canton, where fighting broke out between the Cantonese and the Yunnanese on 6 June 1925. They left, taking the ferry, and were only a short distance down the river when the first shots were fired. This fighting continued for several days, only about two miles from the Canton Christian College, creating a rather alarming atmosphere, as sniping was going on all the time. Finally, the Cantonese crossed about five miles downstream, sending the Yunnanese on the run. Thus, in the summer of 1925, Gertrude McPherson and the children, age 7, 10, and 12, left for England, to Birchington-on-Sea, Kent.
A statement made by Mr McPherson in September 1925 gives figures on the progress of the YMCA: 'In 1906 there were 130 members and a staff of four secretaries, with a budget of $7,000. Today the membership has increased to 3,550, the staff has developed to 18 experienced Chinese Secretaries, and the budget has jumped to $66,500... During the past year, 42 different Bible Study groups were held, with 289 men and boys in attendance'. The 'educational work of the Association is holding an important place in Hong Kong' he wrote. A day school, an English Commercial night school, a special summer school for backward students & two educational clubs are provided'.

In November, 1925, the European YMCA completed the first part of their new building in Salisbury Road, Kowloon, in part due to the faith of Mr McPherson and his persuasive techniques, as said Sir Henry Pollock, as quoted in the South China Morning Post in 1935; the International Committee of the YMCA played a part in it also, having made them a grant of $75,000 gold, in 1922. For the ten years from 1925 to his retirement, McPherson would serve the European Association as General Secretary in an honorary capacity.

The 1927 Secretary's Record, for the Foreign Committee in New York, gave further details about John McPherson's interests. He had joined the Union
Church on arriving in Hong Kong and during these later years served as Deacon, and Secretary of Trustees. He held many other positions over the years, including being President of the Hongkong Missionary Association, and Secretary and President of the Cheung Chau Residents' Association. He listed his address on the foreign field as YMCA, Hongkong, and on the home field as 347 Madison Avenue, New York, the address of the National Councils of YMCAs.58

In 1928, and again in 1932, Mr McPherson returned to England to visit his family. It was following one of these trips home that Mrs McPherson had a stroke. On hearing the news, he immediately returned to England (a 4-6 week journey), staying until she was better and arranging for further care. Lesley Reader wrote in a letter many years later that her mother had insisted that he return to Hong Kong, not only for the YMCA work but to take up his year of office as Provincial Grand Master in the Freemasons - a great honour she did not want him to miss.59

In 1929 the Chinese branch opened a new YMCA building on Waterloo Road, in Kowloon.60 Six years later, in March, 1935, commenting on the expansion of the Chinese YMCA from its small beginnings to the building in Kowloon, Mr David Au Wai-Kwok, President of the Young Men's Christian Association, addressed the guests at a farewell dinner in honour of Mr McPherson on his retirement, saying:

In his period of long service with the YMCA, Mr McPherson has seen many changes. He has seen the Chinese YMCA grow from a little apartment on the site of what is known as King's theatre to its present spacious quarters in Bridges Street...He has seen the membership increased from hundreds to thousands; he has seen even a second generation of Directors and a third generation of members. Above all, he has seen the YMCA work being appreciated by the community.61

In 1933, the Children's Playgrounds Association was formed, its purpose being to equip and manage playing areas for the poor children of the Colony. Details of the scheme currently being formed were set up by Mr J.L. McPherson and Mr M.K. Lo. Many organizations had already pledged financial assistance, the article read, practically every club in the Colony supporting the idea.62 In 2003 a commemorative book by Professor Kwok Siu-tong was published, celebrating the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Playground Association. Earlier, on 4 May 1929, the Hong Kong Government had founded the Playing Fields Committee, to provide social welfare services to local children, J.L. McPherson being among the founding members. On
4 May 1933, when the Children’s Playgrounds Association became a reality, McPherson was named Honorary Secretary.63

Retirement

In an article in the South China Morning Post, on 12 March 1935, the topic was the Playgrounds Association, with the subtitle, Monument to Mr J.L. McPherson.64 Mr McPherson was to retire that month, officially, and leave for home, and this was one of several articles and speeches expressing gratitude and showing appreciation for his efforts over the thirty years he had been in Hong Kong.

A week later, on 20 March 1935, a farewell dinner put on by the Chinese YMCA was the subject of another article, details of which I have mentioned in reference to the opening of the Chinese YMCA on Waterloo Road in Kowloon in 1929, a significant event in the history of the YMCA, and Hong Kong’s. In response to the tributes paid, Mr McPherson spoke to those present of the ‘joy and privilege to have been a small part in this work,’ saying, ‘As I look back over the years I can see a whole procession of able and devoted men both in the lay membership and on the secretarial staff who have united their efforts for the common good’.65

Mr McPherson’s retirement inspired an article the following day, 21 March, on the history of the Chinese YMCA, in the column Old Hong Kong. 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’.66
Finally, an article appeared in the SCMP on 22 March 1935. At a gathering held in his honour by the European YMCA the day before, Mr E.H. Munson, General Secretary of the YMCA in South China, was 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.67

The article announced Mr McPherson's departure, to take place that day, 22 March, on the Empress of Japan for Canada where he would be staying for two weeks before continuing on to England.

The following month, April, Mr McPherson had arrived at Forest, Ontario, his visit reported in the *Forest Standard* stating, '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', and announcing that he had been included in the King's New Year honour list to receive an MBE.68, 69

At home in England, with his wife and grown family, Mr McPherson spent the final years of his retirement in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. A member of St Andrew's Church, he was also a frequent guest at local Freemason Lodge functions, a member and past president of the Tunbridge Wells and District Scottish Association, and on the committee of the local Aid to China Fund.70 On his death, on 11 January 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'.71

J.L. McPherson's character had also been commented on by Sir Henry Pollock, whose personal friendship with him went back thirty years, to when he first arrived in 1905. At the get-together in his honour on 21 March, the day before McPherson left Hong Kong, he commented that, 'of even more importance than McPherson's administrative abilities are his sterling qualities as a man'. Harkening back to Mr McPherson's own speech that day, after thirty years determined effort at building up the YMCA, these were his final words on progress and the YMCA: 'I believe this Association has always had a forward view, and this has accounted in no small measure to its success'.72
Notes


2. ibid.

3. ibid.


5. All three of McPherson's daughters referred to him as Jack in letters they wrote.


8. ibid.

9. ibid. McPherson was referring to the Chinese and the Europeans when he mentioned 'the two races'.

10. ibid.


12. ibid.


15. ibid.

16. ibid.


18. ibid.


21. ibid.

22. ibid.

23. ibid.

24. ibid.

28. A colporteur is a seller or giver of books, especially religious literature. http://www.tiscali.co.uk.
30. ibid.
35. ibid.
36. ibid.
37. ibid.
42. ibid.
43. ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Secretary's Record for J.L. McPherson. N.Y.: Foreign Committee of the National Councils of YMCAs, 1927.
47. Forest Standard, c. 1923. The article states that John McPherson was 'a son of Angus McPherson and has been in YMCA work in Hong Kong for 18 years'.
49. Olive McKay, Letter to her mother in Canada. 27 December 1920.


55. J.L. McPherson, Letter to Duncan McPherson, his brother in Canada. 18 June 1925.

56. J.L. McPherson, Statement on the progress of the YMCA. September 1925.

57. 'Services recognized: Mr J.L. McPherson honoured by the European YMCA'. South China Morning Post, 22 March 1935.

58. Secretary's Record for J.L. McPherson. N.Y.: Foreign Committee of the National Councils of YMCAs, 1927.


60. 'Inception of Chinese YMCA'. Old Hong Kong. South China Morning Post, 21 March 1935, p. 17.

61. 'Farewell dinner: Chinese YMCA Fete Mr J.L. McPherson'. South China Morning Post, 20 March 1935.


64. 'Children's recreation: Monument to Mr J.L. McPherson'. South China Morning Post, 12 March 1935.

65. 'Farewell dinner: Chinese YMCA Fete Mr J.L. McPherson'. South China Morning Post, 20 March 1935.


67. 'Services recognized: Mr J.L. McPherson honoured by European YMCA'. South China Morning Post. 22 March 1935, p. 10.

68. MBE: Member of the Order of the British Empire. The Order's motto is For God and the Empire.


70. 'Services to the YMCA recalled by death of Mr J.L. McPherson'. Kent and Sussex Courier, Tunbridge Wells, 17 January 1947, p. 5.


72. 'Services recognized: Mr J.L. McPherson honoured by European YMCA'. South China Morning Post, 22 March 1935.