

# Jessie McLaren

Andrew Gosling describes the background to the Library's McLaren–Human Collection

Jessie McLaren (1883–1968) was a remarkable Australian missionary, teacher, translator, gardener and book collector. She spent 30 years in Korea, where she developed a major library of old and rare Korean books. In 1984, her daughter Rachel Human donated 136 of these titles to the National Library of Australia as the McLaren–Human Collection.

Jessie was born in Hobart, the second daughter of Charles and Annie Reeve. Charles Frederick Reeve (1859–1941) had founded the Poona and Indian Village Mission in 1892. A dynamic figure, he raised funds and recruited missionaries from Australia, New Zealand and Britain. Reeve remained in western India for most of his life. Annie Reeve (1856–1941), whose maiden name was Pirani, converted from the Jewish faith to Christianity before marrying Charles in 1880. She and the children did not stay long in India. In 1893, their baby daughter Alice died and Annie and several of her remaining children suffered serious ill health. They moved back to Australia in 1895. Reeve visited the family periodically, Jessie later recalling that she 'always seemed to be bidding her father farewell'.



## An Australian in Korea



Jessie attended Presbyterian Ladies' College in Melbourne from 1899 to 1901. In her final year she gained First Class Honours in English and History. As they completed school, Jessie and her four sisters each spent protracted periods in India with their father. Jessie was there in 1902, and in 1904 she accompanied him on one of his fundraising and recruiting visits to Britain.

She subsequently obtained a Master of Arts degree from the University of Melbourne, where she majored in Philosophy. In the words of her daughter Rachel, 'she had a deep love of literature, especially poetry, and was interested in languages, having studied Greek and Latin'. After graduation, Jessie became a travelling secretary for the Student Christian Movement in Australia and New Zealand. She intended to join her father at his Indian mission, but her plans changed when she met Charles Inglis McLaren (1882–1957), a medical practitioner. On 31 October 1910, Charles Reeve wrote to Charles McLaren, agreeing to the young man's request to

above:  
A. von Graefe  
*Seoul (Keijō)* c.1930  
reproduced from *Japan, Korea and Formosa: The Landscape, Architecture, Life of the People* by F.M. Trautz (Berlin: Atlantis-Verlag, 1930)

below left:  
Jessie Reeve (later McLaren) prior to her marriage and move to Korea in 1911  
reproduced from *Messenger of the Presbyterian Churches of Victoria and Tasmania*, 11 August 1911  
Courtesy of Presbyterian Church of Victoria Archives



above left:  
Jessie McLaren, in her forties,  
with daughter Rachel (later  
Rachel Human)  
Courtesy Rachel Human



above right:  
Jessie and Charles McLaren in  
retirement at their home in  
Kew, Victoria, during the  
mid-1950s  
Courtesy Rachel Human

marry his daughter, but adding that, 'It has been my view that Jessie might be better equipped for her work with me amongst the people of India', and that he had already 'suffered her separation from me here, to pursue further study and later to become Travelling Secretary of the student movement'. In the same letter, Reeve offered his future son-in-law a hospital at his mission, but this was not to eventuate.

Charles and Jessie came from similar missionary backgrounds. He had been born in Japan, son of the Presbyterian missionary and teacher, Samuel Gilfillan McLaren (1840–1914). In 1886, the family had moved to Melbourne where Samuel served as the well-respected principal of Presbyterian Ladies' College from 1889 to 1911, including the years that Jessie herself had attended the school. Charles' elder brother Samuel Bruce McLaren (1876–1916) became a brilliant mathematician; he died in France during World War I.

While studying Medicine at the University of Melbourne, Charles, like Jessie, played a prominent part in the Student Christian Movement. Esmond New's biography of Charles McLaren, *A Doctor in Korea*, contains the following anecdote. When Jessie and Charles became engaged, Charles' father commented, 'You haven't the money to buy a ring'. To which Charles replied,

'If the Lord has provided the girl, the ring will doubtless be provided also!' Apparently it was, and Jessie and Charles were married in Melbourne on 22 August 1911. In September, they sailed to Korea as missionaries of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. Given their backgrounds, their vocation was hardly a surprise. 'Perhaps no calling is more a family calling than this missionary business,' Charles wrote.

Despite Korea's official ban on Christianity, and quite recent persecution of Catholics, Protestant missionaries had begun to enter the country from 1884. The earliest included the Americans, Horace Allen and Horace Grant Underwood, as well as the Canadian, James Scarth Gale. Underwood and Gale both became prominent scholars. (Several of their works on Korean history and language are to be found in Jessie McLaren's collection.) The first Australian missionary in Korea, Henry Davies, had been founding headmaster of Caulfield Grammar School in Melbourne. He had reached Korea in October 1889 but had fallen ill and died after only six months. Nonetheless, his example had inspired others, and Australian Presbyterians became active in the south-eastern corner of the peninsula, around Pusan. By the time the McLarens arrived in Korea two decades later, Australians were among those foreign and local believers who, in the words of

Professor Kenneth Wells of The Australian National University, helped 'to produce in Korea a Christian growth and socio-political influence unparalleled in East Asia'.

The McLarens lived in Korea from 1911 to 1941. For the whole of this period the country was under Japanese administration: Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910 and its colonial rule was only ended with defeat by the Allies in 1945. The Japanese brought a degree of modernisation but also considerable suffering to the Koreans, who were treated as a subject people. Missionaries such as the McLarens laboured to improve the welfare of the local population.

From 1911 to 1923, Charles McLaren worked at Paton Memorial Hospital, Chinju, in the far south of Korea. Soon after arriving, Jessie described her new home: 'Chinju is a very pretty place, nestling in amongst the hills, with a wide river flowing beside it, and a small lake to the west of the town'. In 1917, after his brother Bruce died from war wounds, Charles served as medical officer to the Chinese Labour Battalion in France. He visited Bruce's grave, and that of Jessie's only brother, Fred Reeve, who had fought at Gallipoli and died after a plane crash near the Western Front in 1917.

Charles and Jessie's daughter, Rachel, was born in February 1923. As she wrote many years later:

Korea was my home; I was born there; I lived there until the age of 18; I spoke Korean before English; I had three Korean 'sisters', whom my parents had fostered and educated and whom I firmly believed during my childhood to be my real sisters.

(In March 2007, Rachel told me that as a young child travelling with her family by ship, she was puzzled by European and Chinese children on board who were unable to converse with her in Korean.) Later in 1923, Charles, Jessie, their adopted Korean daughters and baby Rachel moved to Seoul, the Korean capital. Charles became Professor of Neurology and Psychological Medicine at Severance Union Medical College, which was to become the medical faculty at Yonsei University.

During the early 1930s, Jessie's father was in poor health, and in 1935 she and her family stayed with him in India on their way back to Korea after leave in Australia. In 1939, Charles McLaren returned to a

temporary assignment in Chinju, while Jessie and Rachel remained in Seoul. As the Pacific war approached, the two women left for Australia in March 1941. They arrived too late to see Jessie's parents, who had both died early that year. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, Charles was imprisoned by the Japanese in Korea, was then moved to Japan, and was finally repatriated via neutral Portuguese East Africa. Thus the family was reunited in Australia.

The McLarens have been described as one of Australia's powerful Student Christian Movement missionary partnerships in Asia and the Pacific. Charles wrote of Jessie:

it would be withholding what is due a thousand-fold, if I did not express my gratitude to the wife without whose unfailing courage and upbuilding help, at times when nervous and spiritual energies stalled, my missionary service could not have continued.

Jessie McLaren had a particular interest in advancing the status of Korean women. In 1916, Charles McLaren had written:

Jessie is full of all sorts of good works ... The kindergarten school, her night school for teaching the little nurse-servant girls to read and her other night school for teaching Scripture, as well as her Sunday school, all thrive ... Jessie seems to act as a magnet, attracting all sorts of children and then bringing joy and satisfaction into their lives.

A. von Graefe  
*Village near Kyongjyu (Keishū), the Ancient Korean Capital*  
reproduced from *Japan, Korea and Formosa: The Landscape, Architecture, Life of the People*  
by F.M. Trautz  
(Berlin: Atlantis-Verlag, 1930)







Title page of *Present Day English-Korean* by J.S. Gale. Jessie McLaren's bookplate shows fan-shaped gingko leaves and symbols of Korea (Kyönsöng: Chosön Yasogyo Söhoe, Taejong 13, 1924)

After they moved to Seoul, Jessie taught at Ewha College, now one of Asia's most prestigious women's universities. Having studied History and Philosophy at school and university, she lectured there in History as well as Bible studies. She served on the Board of Management, and was responsible for the layout of the new college grounds, its flowerbeds, trees and lawns. Her husband noted:

Jessie has been very busy out at the women's college, laying out their site and landscape gardening there. She is so happy and enthusiastic about it.

Jessie herself wrote:

I have a few outside jobs to keep me busy—librarian of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society ... but my more strenuous job is the landscaping at Ewha College and the work on the college executive ... You would laugh to see me dusty shoed and earthy fingered.

Her love of gardening is obvious from her book collection, especially the many titles on East Asian botany. In an early letter from Chinju, Jessie described how she had obtained cuttings of poplars, willows and mulberries for her garden, and how her strawberries were flourishing. The bookplate specially designed for the titles in the McLaren-Human Collection incorporates fan-shaped gingko leaves. In Rachel's words, 'The gingko tree has featured in our family experiences both

in Korea and in Kew [Melbourne], where my mother planted a gingko after her return in 1941'. (When I visited Rachel and her husband Peter in Kew in March 2007, there were dried gingko leaves scattered among their books. Rachel explained that Jessie believed they kept away the silverfish.)

During her second decade in Korea, in the 1920s, Jessie became seriously ill with a heart condition. She remained housebound for a long period. Rachel recalled:

It was characteristic of her that instead of fretting over what could have been regarded as an imprisonment, she used the time to dig deep into Korean history and culture.

She improved her knowledge of Chinese, which was the written language of educated Koreans up to the 20th century. Her translation from Chinese of the *Tonggyong Chapki*, an historical miscellany about Korea's ancient capital, Kyongju, was published by Rachel in 1986. In its introduction, dated 29 January 1931, Jessie wrote modestly: 'as fitness for the task [of translation] I can only plead enforced leisure from more strenuous duties and a certain acquaintance with my native tongue, small Korean and less Chinese'. She also translated Chinese Confucian texts and Korean poetry.

Charles McLaren died in 1957, and Jessie in 1968. Part of the legacy of their affection for Korea is the Library's acquisition of Jessie McLaren's books.

Jessie McLaren's unique book collection will be described in a future issue of *National Library News*. A reader's guide to the McLaren-Human Collection is also underway. It will include greater detail on the life of Jessie McLaren, and on the titles she collected in Korea between 1911 and 1941.

ANDREW GOSLING is former Chief Librarian, Asian Collections, at the National Library. He is currently preparing the guide to the McLaren-Human Collection