

William J. McKenzie's Diary in 1894

Elizabeth A. McCully, A Corn of Wheat or the Life of Rev. W. J. McKenzie of Korea (Toronto: Westminster Co., 1904), 104-109.

Rev. William John McKenzie (1861-1895), a graduate from the Pine Hill Presbyterian Theological College in Halifax, arrived in Korea in November 1893 as an independent missionary. He went to Sorae village in February of 1894. Mr. Sŏ and other Korean believers helped him. There he wore Korean clothes and ate Korea food in order to get nearer to the villagers and learn the Korean way of life. His presence and simple life itself was his message. Converts gathered. McKenzie opened a small day school for boys. In the spring of 1895, the Korean congregation decided to build a tile-roofed church on the site of a village spirit house. It was dedicated on July 3, 1895. Before the completion of the chapel, the Tonghak Uprising swept the region. McKenzie's life was threatened by the Tonghaks. Yet he helped the Tonghak followers and finally some of them joined the Church. In this stressful situation, however, after a sunstroke he got sick and shot himself on June 23, 1895. His tragic death called other seminarians in Halifax to Korea in 1898, which was the beginning of the Korea mission of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.
(by Sung –Deuk Oak)

Sorai, Korea, February 6th, 1894.

Dear Brother Bobbitt—

... Today is the Korean New Year, so I have given half a holiday to my teacher and I take to letter-writing for a little.

Fourteen chapters of Genesis today before my breakfast and two or three hours of study at the language have been my morning work, besides prayers with the natives. I arrived in the capital <104/105> city, Seoul, about the middle of December, and at once began trying to make arrangements to get out of it as soon as I could. There are quite a number of foreigners in the capital, of all nations. Many are consuls, besides quite a number of missionaries, who are stationed there, and some who are about to leave for some distant station in the spring. Don't understand me as being afraid of foreigners, i.e., English, German, French, American, et cetera, but so much time would be taken up calling and receiving calls that I could not give my undivided attention to the language. The other men stayed in Seoul for five months before they ventured out. I got my passport or permit from the government just as soon as I got here, and in less than a month was away over one hundred miles. I secured a teacher who knew just a few words of English, and by the few words I picked up we can get along nicely.

I am here (in Korea) now about one and a half months and have walked over three hundred miles; but I am anchored here now, one hundred and fifty miles from the capital, in the heart of the country, for, I hope, at least two months.

And now shall I tell you how I am situated? I am sitting on a straw mat, nicely woven, no chair; mud floor, mud walls, and straw roof to my house. I am fortunate just now in having a few panes of glass in my windows, but most of the time I have been with nothing but white paper, and light had to come in through it.

My food, what about it? In Labrador potatoes and milk were something to do without. Here I have no potatoes, milk, or butter. I have been already over two weeks without eating any bread. At every meal is rice. Rice here is like fish in Labrador. One does get tired of it twenty-one times a week with no change. They put in some other things with it, but most of them I can't touch. Fortunately, the people have cattle, but chiefly for carrying loads, so that I get occasionally a little beef. When traveling, one of our rules was not to ask what kind of meat we

had, as one missionary told me he asked and found he had been eating dog-meat, a rare dish with them, eaten only on, feast days as the choicest relish, That means appetite was not very keen for some time after, it is needless to say. I dread to ask what I am eating. So I ask no question, not for conscience' sake, but for stomach's sake.

My host has come in with a pair of Korean socks that he has kindly made for me. They are double cotton and cotton wool between. They are very comfortable for wear in the house. The people all dress in white cotton, men and women. It is quite warm and made thick with cotton wool padded between. Every Korean who breathes smokes—men, women, and children. A long bamboo stein, with a brass bowl and mouthpiece, make the outfit. A pot of embers on the middle of the floor serves two purposes—to warm the room and light the pipes. One who does not like tobacco smoke should never come out here. They smoke nearly all the time. Tobacco grows nearly like cabbage, and is cheap. <106/107>

Leaves and grass, with occasional shrubs, make the wood. The way of heating the rooms is very economical. No stove here—the fire is under me. The heat passes underneath my room, so that the rooms are virtually ovens. We have had some very cold weather here this winter; but, of course, nothing like Labrador—nearly as cold as Nova Scotia. The ground is white with snow for about two and a half months. In the first part of March the spring opens, and the weather is quite warm by May.

This is the paradise of hunters. Huge tigers roam over the mountains. ... The people know very little about firearms yet, so these animals are very tame.

Saturday I took a walk down to the shore, where the waters of the Yellow Sea, that separates me from China, were rolling at my feet. There was a long strand, of maybe over two miles, of beautiful white sand and nice shells of different kinds. I have always loved the sea. My old home on the Atlantic is near the water. In Labrador I liked it too, and before I knew it, as I stood upon that shore, my eyes filled with tears. Memories of my past and old associations came sweeping in upon me. Oh, how <107/108> I did love that broad expanse of ocean, even though a storm was beginning to sweep over it! I thought I was at home—I never felt so before—everything seemed natural. I thought the sea at least understood me. I could hardly realize I was in a dark pagan land, with all else so beautiful and natural; but as I turned to the slopes on the mountain side and saw the little mud and straw houses, strange dress, and my nice little guide, a boy of fourteen, pleasant and good—but could not talk with him, only a few incorrect words and the rest by signs—I knew it was only a momentary dream. Don't imagine by this I am lonesome. No; I am happy—never was much happier. Some asked me if I was lonesome in Labrador. I said, "Never"; but, ah! this is much more trying. Just think, here the women are secluded. I see none but those who have not much character. My hostess I by chance got a glimpse of the other day passing by the door. Her husband is a good, faithful Christian farmer. He is a true Christian—much of the spirit of the Master. It did me so much good on Sunday to hear him speak to the neighbors who gathered in his room to hear the Gospel. I spoke on his subject—the judgment day—through my teacher. There was good attention, and I believe God's Spirit was among us, so attentive were they.

Oh, what a field! I know no better. I have seen some of the triumphs of the Gospel here already. Eight were received into the Church by one man in one day. They are men who have been persecuted, <108/109> regarded as mad, hated by former friends, yet standing firm, and cheerfully bearing all for Jesus' sake.