

Mr Tradescant Lay, the Naturalist

The Government of China is purposely absurd.

There won't be many gardeners around who enjoy the weed *Tradescantia*. Appreciated by children in the past for showing how quickly a cutting could sprout roots in a glass of water, it is hard to get rid of and has few redeeming horticultural qualities. Would this have annoyed or amused the John Tradescants, father and son, after whom it was named?

The father (c.1570-1638) was a plant collector, naturalist and gardener to the Cecils and the to-be-assassinated Duke of Buckingham, James I's favourite. He was later Keeper of Gardens, Vines and Silkworms for Charles 1. His son (1608-1672) took over from him, and whereas his father travelled as far as the Arctic and North Africa to collect plants, the young John went to Virginia, bringing back seeds for plants now common in English gardens. His museum and library was later taken up, some say stolen, by Elias Ashmole, to form the basis of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. A century later, in 1752, Carl Linnaeus named the genus *Tradescantia* after them.

Just when you think you have got rid of *Tradescantia* it reappears, so the Tradescant name filters down through the years, to reappear in the 19th C with another botanist and plant collector, George Tradescant Lay (1799-1845). Lay was born in England, and in his twenties must have had a good reputation as a naturalist, since he was selected by the Admiralty to sail as naturalist on Captain Frederick Beechey's expedition to the Bering Strait in *HMS Blossom*, a three year mission in 1825-1828.¹ The aim of the voyage was to explore the western coast of North America in concert with the approaches of Franklin and Parry on the eastern or Atlantic side, all seeking the fabled North-West passage. Beechey was to meet with Franklin if the latter was successful. The voyage included South America, Mexico, California and the Pacific North-West coast, across to Kamchatka and China, and the Pacific Islands. That provided numerous opportunities for Lay to explore and collect, including the composite plant from California, *Layia galiardioides*, named after him by William Hooker. Hooker published the botany of the Beechey voyage in 1841.²



Layia galiardioides

Beechey criss-crossed the Pacific, following the routes of Cook, the *Bounty* and Vancouver, reaching as far North in the Arctic Sea as Point Barrow (which he named after Sir John Barrow of the Admiralty, an old China hand, having accompanied Macartney on the first British Embassy to Peking), and west to Macao. He never reached New Zealand, but gets into the New Zealand bibliographies (Hocken and Bagnall) by virtue of describing Māori arriving on a ship in Tahiti and performing a haka that frightened the locals. Beechey wrote an entertaining two volume account³, but in it Tradescant Lay only gets a few mentions. We find him in April 1826 soon after leaving Otaheite, suffering from dysentery, severe enough to have carried off a young

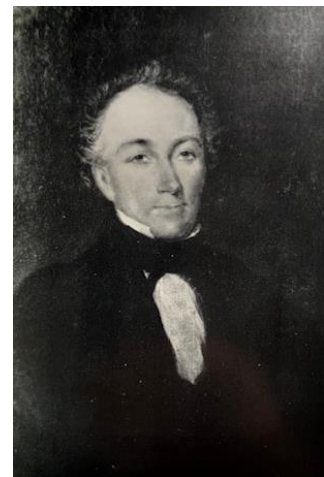


Frederick Beechey, painted by his brother George, around 1822.

midshipman. In May, Lay is still ill and he is left in the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) while Beechey heads off to Kamchatka, Beechey deciding that *'it appeared to me that his time during the absence of the ship could be more profitably employed among the islands of the Sandwich groupe than on the frozen shores of the north...'*. In January 1827, Beechey is back in the Sandwich Islands and finds Lay recovered, though his illness had been such that he hadn't been able to do much collecting.

Lay pops up again briefly, distributing some religious literature during the visit to the Loo Choo and Bonin islands between Japan and Taiwan, now call the Ryukyu Islands and Ogasawara Islands respectively, administered by Japan. He was the first western botanist to collect there. You'd have to say that he didn't seem to have made much of an impression on Beechey, though he did manage to collect in excess of some 170 plant species that kept William Hooker in Glasgow happy for a while. Lay is called 'Mr Tradescant Lay' in the more formal parts of Beechey's account, not anywhere 'George' or 'Tradescant', the latter the name he preferred in his publications, and later was referred to by Beechey as just 'Lay' or 'the Naturalist'. In one of the few instances when he is mentioned, when visiting the numerous islands near Tahiti, on trying to land, Beechey writes: *'the Naturalist was unfortunately drawn into a deep hole in the coral by the recoil of the sea, and but for prompt assistance, would in all probability have lost his life.'*⁴

In 1836, back in England, Lay became a proper missionary and was sent off to China by the British and Foreign Bible Society. The Society was founded in 1804 by William Wilberforce, amongst others, and had been active in China since 1811, funding Robert Morrison's translation of bible. In Macao, Lay and the pioneer American missionary Samuel Wells Williams⁵, distributed Christian literature, continuing with this over the next three years. He wasn't restricted to Macao, but visited Brunei in 1837⁶, and is recorded sailing in the ships the *Himmaleh* and *Huron* with the missionary Edwin Stevens in the China seas as far as Singapore, attempting to extend their missionary activities.⁷ The brig *Himmaleh* was owned by the American firm Olyphant & Sons⁸, who put it at Lay's disposal for his voyage to Brunei, with Lay's instruction to *'to gain a footing for medical and Christian residents'*.⁹ Lay wrote an account of his voyage which was published in 1839 as the second of two volumes along with an account by Charles King of the latter's voyage to Japan.



George Tradescant Lay, from a painting by R Woodman, in 1831

King, Charles W., & George Tradescant Lay. *The claims of Japan and Malaysia upon Christendom exhibited in notes of voyages made in 1837, from Canton, in the ship Morrison and brig Himmaleh. under direction of the owners. Vol. I: Notes of the voyage of the Morrison from Canton to Japan. By C.W. King. Vol. II: Notes made during the voyage of the Himmaleh in the Malayan Archipelago. By G. Tradescant Lay. New York, E. French. 1839.*

This was reviewed favourably in the Chinese Repository in 1840: *'No intelligent reader can carefully peruse Mr. Lay's book without pleasure and profit. Great versatility, good taste, and*

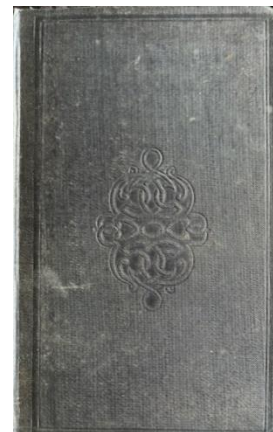
erudition are displayed in its pages; and we sincerely hope that these qualities will be employed in behalf of China. ¹⁰

In 1838 he was a co-founder of the Medical Missionary Society, becoming vice-president under Dr Thomas Colledge. A year later, Lay seems to have left his missionary service, becoming an interpreter for the Government during the first Opium War, 1840-1842, joining other notables such as John Robert Morrison and Karl Gutzlaff on the staff of Captain Elliot and then Sir Henry Pottinger at the war's end. On the voyage with Pottinger up the Yangtze to Nanking, Lay was wounded in action, June 16, 1842, near the Wusong (Woosung) Forts at the entry to the Wusong river. Success in this battle opened the way to Shanghai and on to Nanking. He doesn't seem to have been badly wounded as it didn't affect his role in negotiating the treaty.¹¹

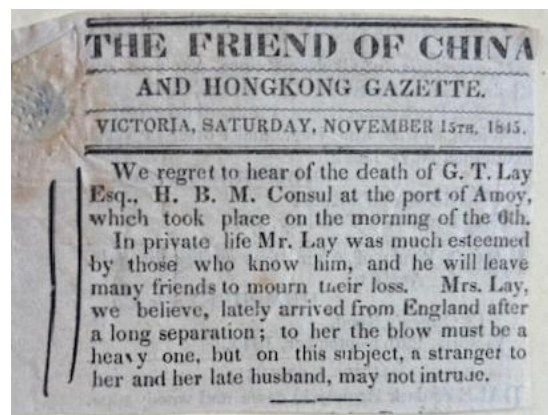
Missionaries such as Morrison and Lay were greatly valued for their linguistic skills, and took part in negotiations, at a level beyond their more prescribed translating roles. After the Treaty of Nanking, Lay was appointed British Consul in Canton, where there is an indication that his experience as missionary and naturalist failed to turn him into a particularly successful diplomat, particularly in the troublesome environment of post-Treaty Canton. In 1844 he was transferred as Consul to Fuzhou (Foochow) and then Xiamen (Amoy), dying in the latter city in 1845.

In the middle of all this in 1841, Lay published his views on all things Chinese.

Lay, George Tradescant. *The Chinese as they are: their moral, social, and literary character; a new analysis of the language; with succinct views of their principal arts and sciences.* London: W. Ball and Co., 1841.



My copy includes a clipping from the *Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette*, November 15 1845, announcing Lay's death. It also has a 14 line hand-written note, dated 1845, relating to the death of Lay: 'George Tradescant Lay Esq. her Majesty's Counsel at Amoy expired on the morning of the sixth of November. To the remains of this most amicable and accomplished gentleman every demonstration of honour has been paid by the English and Foreign residents and the masters and crews of all vessels in the harbour, and by the Chinese authorities in a manner hitherto unprecedented testifying their respect by a special Book of Condolence..... 11th November.'



In his Preface, Lay immediately exposes the ambiguities that China presented to the visitor, common to his contemporaries and those before him and after. *China, with those countries who look up to her for models, may not unfitly be styled a moiety of the world,...*' but then '*..the aim of the Tartar Government is to render intercourse with foreigners as wayward and as contradictory as possible, because such a course tended to keep light from flowing into the country, and replenished*

the coffers of half paid officers.’ However, ‘ the people are reasonable in their views and conceptions.’ And ‘are so friendly to good order, that as soon as they are practically convinced that the civil administration has changed, not for the worse, but for the better, they will rank with the most quiet, the most happy, and best conducted subjects of the British empire.’

The book has chapters on the current (first) opium war, and the opium trade, the Chinese character and morals, the missions, and on just about every aspect of life in China, including music, food, language, art and their origins. He particularly wants us to read the chapter on language, where we will *‘...find principles stated in it...and a mode of dealing with the Chinese language suggested, which will ultimately unravel all the absurdities adhering to that or any other language.’* The language is absurd, the Government is absurd, but if they submit to British administration, the people will become happy and obedient subjects.

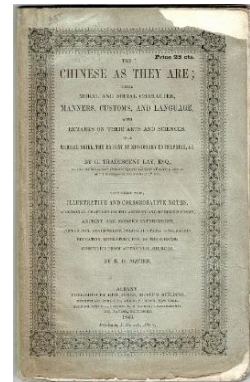
On opium, Lay takes the high ground. In discussing the causes of the present war, he says: *‘As to the motives which induced the Tartar government to throw down the gauntlet with Britain, and hurl defiance in her teeth, I will take it upon me to say, that it was not from any concern at the demoralising effects which the use of opium had upon the population.The real causes of the part they have taken with us, I believe, were, 1. The fear of truth and discovery; 2. Secret, though ill-defined abhorrence of our religion; and 3. A dread of our arms.’* As to the first of these, he believes the Chinese were concerned to keep secret their active, indeed principal, role in the opium trade, it is mostly their fault. *‘Opium...has served as An admirable instrument for maintaining a system of wholesome terror in the empire; it has been infinitely more valuable, as a pretext for insulting the British nation, and keeping her sons from doing good aiming the Chinese.’* And a bit further on: *‘Opium, doubtless has her victims in persons who, but for her fascinating lures, might have escaped their ruin; but in the great majority of instances she only adds one more stain more to a character already polluted.’* Thus while he deplores the opium trade, he sheets home the fault and blame to the Chinese, and the answer can only come from the downfall of the current government, *‘which has been the chief agent in nursing this abominable trade...the repeal of all prohibitory edicts against its importation, and the laying open of the whole country to the healthy influences of foreign commerce...’*, plus establishing temperance and philanthropic societies and the spread of the Gospel. In twenty-five years, *‘...we, with God’s help, will turn that country upside-down in all its moral relations.’*



While his chapters on the language, music and philosophy have had some deserved recognition, Lay shows little empathy for the people or the nation, in contrast with his contemporaries such as Charles Toogood Downing, or Karl Gutzlaff. He does become more interesting however, when he gets down to detail, as when he describes being instructed in Chinese music and instruments; there are also some very fine etchings of instruments in the book.

A couple of years later, there was a second edition of the work published in America, but in combination with some notes from the anthropologist Ephraim Squier¹².

Lay, G Tradescant, & Ephriam George Squier. *The Chinese as they are; their moral and social character, manners, customs, language: with remarks on their arts and sciences, medical skill, the extent of missionary enterprise, etc.* By G. Tradescant naturalist in Beechy's expedition, late resident at Canton, author of "The voyage of the Himmaleh," etc. Containing also, illustrative and corroborative notes, additional chapters on the ancient and modern history, ancient and modern intercourse, population, government, civilization, education, literature, etc. of the Chinese, compiled from authentic sources by E. G. Squier. Jones, New York, 1843.



This is a double-columned, 116 page work published in America in printed wrappers (my copy as shown a titch torn at the top cover). It seems to be a total appropriation of Lay's book. Ephraim Squier (1821-1888) at this time was a journalist, but later in the 1840s commenced a long distinguished career as an archaeologist in both North, Central and South America. He states in his preface that early Jesuit priests, travellers, traders, including member of various embassies and commercial residents in Macao and Canton, wrote of China often hurriedly, their works often 'fruitful in error'. Adventurers wrote accounts 'well suited to the popular taste for the wonderful and extravagant'. However, recent Protestant missionaries 'have thrown a flood of light upon the actual state and condition of the country, and have corrected many of the mistakes into which the civilised world had fallen.' Lay's book was one of these, investing 'his subject with an interest which we look for in vain in other works, written under less favourable circumstances, and by individuals less competent to the task.' He, as editor, then decides in publishing the present book, 'to supply, not what he conceived a deficiency in Mr Lay's work, for that professes only to give an account of the Chinese as they are now, but a deficiency which he believes to exist, resulting from the limited sources of information in this country to Chinese history, laws and literature.'

Squier thus provides seven chapters in 48 pages on history, civilisation, law, philosophy, Government and state of the nation, all based on the very literature that he has so readily scorned as inadequate and error-prone, including the works of Du Halde, Barrow, Davis, Staunton, Timkowski, Dobell, Ellis, Medhurst, Gutzlaff, and others. Squier never visited China, but seemed happy to discern what was true, false or fanciful in the writing of others. Lay's book is then condensed, rearranged, with much omitted: 'Several chapters of Mr Lay's work relative to the war with China, breathing an ultra British spirit, as well as one or two others uninteresting to the reader, have been omitted entirely, or condensed into less space. They have all been rearranged, and brought into something like a connected order.' Did Lay know and if so approve? Either way, there's no questioning Squier's self-confidence, or should we say gall. And although the 'ultra British spirit' was all Empire, at least it was authentic for the time.



Ephraim Squier, perhaps near the age when he edited lay's book on China, in 1843.

There are a few other publications by Lay, particularly in the *Chinese Repository*. One was on the Manchu tartars of Chapu (now Zhapu), a small garrison town on the northern shore of Hangzhou Bay, and taken by British forces in May 1842. It appears to have resulted from lay's

own visit there.¹³ Another is on Chinese musical instruments and their harmonic system, very much along the lines of his later chapter on music in his book.¹⁴ He also published an article on trade in China, advocating that the British should take possession of the Bonin Islands (now Ogasawara, lying between Japan and Guam). As mentioned above, Lay visited the group during Beechey's voyage.¹⁵ There was also a prospectus for the Chinese medical Philanthropic Society that he co-founded.¹⁶

Lay was the progenitor of a widening family of men in the imperial and missionary services in China. He presumably married his wife Mary after returning from the Beechey voyage, and his first child Horatio Nelson Lay was born in Forest Hill, Kent in January 1832. Mary was a distant relation of Lord Nelson, hence the son's name. His second son William Hyde Lay was born in March 1836. There was a further son born in China in 1840 (Walter Thurlow Lay) and a fourth (Amoy Lay, named after the treaty port of Amoy, now Xiamen, and the first British subject to be born there) born in 1846, the year after Tradescant's death.¹⁷ The names Hyde (Lord Clarendon, Charles II's Chancellor from 1660 to 1667) and Thurlow (Chancellor from 1778 to 1792) are those of earlier Lord Chancellors with whom Mary also had some distant connection. Horatio Nelson didn't go out to China until 1847 at the age of 14, after his father's death. He had a particularly distinguished life in government service in China, dying in 1898. Both William Thurlow and Amoy also served for a long time in the Chinese Maritime Customs service, and had families which continued the tradition in serving in China. Among these, Horatio Nelson Lay became the most distinguished, and appears in most of the historical literature of the British in China in the second half of the 19th C.^{1,18,19}

Tradescant Lay's rapid progression through three consular posts suggests a man with no great diplomatic or administrative skills, and while at his death he was bereaved for his amiability, less empire and gospel might have widened his perceptions and appreciation of China and its people. Well, perhaps that's a little harsh, particularly after the cavalier treatment that Squier gave him, despite the latter's appreciation of him, but there were many acting in the theatre of Empire at the time who had a deeper empathy with other societies and cultures.



Lay, A. C. Hyde. Four generations in China, Japan and Korea. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1952. The red cloth boards are illustrated with a green flag with yellow St. Andrew Cross, the 'Customs Jack', required to be flown by Chinese Customs shipping, designed by Horatio Nelson Jack,

¹ **Lay, A. C. Hyde.** Four generations in China, Japan and Korea. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1952. This is an account of the Lay family by a descendant of George Tradescant. It is largely devoted to Lay's son Horatio Nelson Lay and other prominent descendants working in China, Japan and Korea.

² **Hooker, W. J.,** The botany of Captain Beechey's voyage: including an account of the plant collected by Messrs Lay and Collie and other officers of the expedition, under the command of Captain F. W. Beechey, R.N., F.R. & A.S., in the years 1825, 26, 27 and 28. London, Henry G Bohn, MDCCCXLI [1841]. See also: https://www.cpp.edu/faculty/larryblakely/whoname/who_lay.htm

³ **Beechey, F.W.,** Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Bering's Strait, to Co-Operate with the Polar Expeditions: Performed in His Majesty's Ship Blossom, under the command of Captain F. W. Beechey, R. N. in the years 1825, 26, 27, 28. London, Henry Coburn & Richard Bentley, 1831.

⁴ Ibid., vol 1,p. 213.

⁵ **Samuel Wells Williams** (1812-1884) was an American missionary and linguist who arrived in Canton in 1833 to run the printing press of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. He was editor of the *Chinese Repository* from 1848 to 1852, then leading journal for all things Chinese founded by his fellow American missionary Elijah Bridgman, the first American missionary in China..

⁶ <https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.person.bm000055412>

⁷ <https://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/lay-george-tradescant>. Much information about Lay comes from the A.J. Broomhall's, book 'Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century: Barbarians at the Gates, Vol. 1., London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1981.

⁸ **David Olyphant** (1789-1851) was an American shipping owner and trader who did much to support American missionaries in China. He first arrived in Canton in 1820 where he founded a trading company. Over the years he lent his ships to missionaries for voyages for the dissemination of Christian literature and missionary activities. Olyphant, along with James Matheson, William Wetmore, James Innes, Thomas Fox, Elijah Coleman Bridgman, Karl Gützlaff and John Robert Morrison, founded the *Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China* in 1834.

⁹ **Lay, A. C. Hyde.** Op. cit.

¹⁰ Review: ART. V. The claims of Japan and Malaysia upon Christendom, exhibited in notes of voyages made in 1837, from Canton, in the ship Morrison and brig Himmaleh, under the direction of the owners. In 2 vols. New York, 1839. *Chinese Repository*, Vol VIII, 359-372, 1840.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ephraim George Squier (1821-1888) was a noted American anthropologist specializing in Central and South America.

¹³ **Lay, G Tradescant** A brief account of the Mantchu Tartars at Chapu. *Chinese Repository*, Vol. XI, pp. 425-434,1842.

¹⁴ **Lay, G. Tradescant** Remarks on the musical instruments of the Chinese, with an outline of their harmonic system. *Chinese Repository*, Vol. VIII, pp. 38-54, 1839.

¹⁵ **Lay, G Tradescant.** Trade with China. Letter addressed to the British Public on some of the advantages that would result from an occupation of the Bonin Islands. London, Boyston & Brown, 1837. Cordier 2360. Also in: *Chinese Repository* Vol.VI, pp. 381-387,1837.

¹⁶ **Lay, G Tradescant.** Prospectus of the Medical Philanthropic Society for China and the East. Provisional Committee. London, Boyston & Brown.1840.

¹⁷ <https://www.geni.com/people/George-Lay/6000000018460287749>

¹⁸ **Jack J. Gerson.** Horatio Nelson Lay and Sino-British relations, 1854-1864. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.

¹⁹ See also accounts of Lay in A.J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century: Barbarians at the Gates*, 1981; K S Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, 1929; R.G. Tiedemann, *Handbook of Christianity in China*, 2001.