

GEORGE McAFEE McCUNE  
(June 16, 1908 – November 5, 1948)<sup>1</sup>

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GEORGE McAFEE McCUNE was one of the very few scholars in America who had made Korea his primary field of interest, and he was almost unique among Americans in his ability to use Korean, Japanese, and to some extent Chinese sources for historical research. His death on November 5, 1948, was an immeasurable loss because he was in the process of correcting the situation in regard to Korean studies – endeavoring almost single-handed to bring them to the level of the better-established Japanese and Chinese fields. After the war, during two short years at the University of California, he had assembled several promising graduate students and had laid out a basic program of library development and research that would, had he lived, have put Korean studies on a firm foundation in this country. The inadequacy of such studies before the war and the paucity of American specialists became lamentably evident when our government found there were few experts it could call upon for wartime assistance, and when groups of nonspecialists, driven to research on Korea, found the entire subject virtually uncharted.

George McCune was born in Pyŏng-yang, Korea, on June 16, 1908, to George Shannon McCune and Helen McAfee McCune, who were educational missionaries of the Northern Presbyterian Church. He lived nearly half his life in the country that became his major intellectual concern. His college training he received at Huron College, Rutgers University, and Occidental. In 1930 he received the A.B. degree from Occidental College and then returned to Korea to teach at Union Christian College, Pyŏng-yang. There he also managed a successful import and export business for

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two years before he moved to Hawaii for his health. In Hawaii he married Evelyn Margaret Becker, herself the daughter of American missionaries to Korea.

George McCune's wife, and his father, George Shannon McCune, were instrumental in turning him toward a scholarly career. Their constant encouragement and aid – both spiritual and material – made it possible for McCune, in spite of ill health, to have a productive career of research and teaching. In 1934 he returned to Occidental College to begin graduate study and received the M.A. degree in 1935. He continued his studies at the University of California and after two years was granted a Mills Traveling Fellowship to do research in Korea. During the years 1937 and 1938 he worked in Seoul on the official Yi dynasty chronicles and other materials in the preparation of his dissertation. After his return to America he joined the faculty of Occidental College in February 1939. In May 1941 he defended his dissertation on "Korean relations with China and Japan, 1800–1864" and received the Ph.D. degree from the University of California.

When the war came George McCune would not stay out. In February 1942 he went to Washington where he served successively in the Office of Strategic Services, the Board of Economic Warfare, and the Department of State. During this period of war service he was generally recognized as the leading American expert on Korean affairs. As Chief of the Korea Section in the Office of Far Eastern Affairs in the State Department – from May 1944 to October 1945 – he held a key position during a crucial period of decision. In spite of serious ill health he worked tirelessly, under a heavy load of responsibility, and with deep concern for the future of Korean-American relations. In October 1945 when the war was over, he finally accepted the advice of his physician and retired from the government.

After nearly a year of rest and recuperation in Los Angeles, during which time he and his wife worked together on a number of articles on Korea, Dr. McCune joined the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley, in July 1946, as a lecturer in the Department of History. In February 1947 he became a member of the advisory editorial board of *The Far Eastern quarterly*. In addition to his teaching he helped to establish an intensive course in Korean language in the Far Eastern and Russian Language School of the University Extension. He was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor in 1948, but in February he suffered a serious breakdown in health and had to confine his teaching to a seminar conducted in his bedroom. His wife, who strengthened and supplemented him in many ways,

conducted his other courses at the university, lecturing from his prepared notes. He continued, however, to supervise personally the work of his graduate students and carried on an extensive research program. At the time of his death he was working on three books: *Korea today: a history of the occupation*; a textbook on Korean history; and an edition of American consular reports dealing with Korean internal conditions and foreign relations during the period 1882–1904.

The warmth of “Mac’s” personality was a characteristic that impressed most vividly his numerous friends. In discussions about him with his former students and associates, and in letters from those who knew him, this radiance of personality constantly comes to the fore. “He was a gentleman, warm-hearted and stoic. . . .” “He loved people, he loved to talk with and ‘kid’ a chance acquaintance. . . .” “He was a ‘Christian gentleman,’ honorable, friendly, kindly. . . .” “As an undergraduate, George had a lot of fun out of life. . . . We always remember the smile that lit up his face and the little quirk that came to his mouth when he was about to say something interesting. . . .” “As a teacher I regarded him with affection and admiration. . . .” “His letters were always full of fun as he, himself, was.” It is in words of this sort that his students, teachers, colleagues, and friends remember him. Especially did his students admire him for his friendliness, his unstinted helpfulness, and his enthusiasm.

“Enthusiasm” — intense enthusiasm — that is another trait which impressed those who knew him. He worked tirelessly on his own studies in Korean history, a field in which he had to chart his own way. He devoted his thought and energy to promoting Korean studies by helping students to secure fellowships, by developing teaching aids, and by trying to secure support from foundations for a soundly conceived program. Though professionally he concentrated intensively on Korea — and in this he maintained the highest standards of scholarship and a rigid code of objectivity in his teaching — “Mac” carried the same quality of enthusiasm into all he did. He had a rich family life with his wife and two daughters, Helen and Heather, in their pleasant home in the ranch country behind the Berkeley hills. He subscribed to a wide variety of magazines of opinion and read them systematically in order always to keep abreast of the world of ideas and issues. His intense interest in the national election of 1948 contributed directly to his death, for he overtaxed himself following the election returns far into the morning of November 3.

Optimistic adaptability was another important element of “Mac’s” character: important because it prolonged his life for useful scholarship.

His health was poor from childhood; all his adult years were lived on borrowed time. To this situation he skillfully and gracefully adapted himself: he used many devices to conserve his strength and conceal his handicap, and he always attempted to convert his infirmity to advantage. In a letter written only a month and a half before his death, when it was evident that he would probably not recover from his February breakdown, "Mac" wrote about his plans: "You fully appreciate, I know, the fact that in spite of the conditions of my health I am able to carry on an extensive research program. Therefore I hope to turn my ill health to good account by using what leisure I have on that side of academic work. I expect that the results of my work will not be without credit to the Department and to the University."

George McCune's writings on Korea were indeed a credit to the university as well as to the Far Eastern profession. The product of those few years of maturing scholarship when he was free to publish his writings are the outstanding contribution on Korea by an American in the past several decades. They fall into two categories: those dealing with Korea in historical perspective, and those discussing the problems of Korea's postwar position. The new perspective and interests which his war experience gave him were reflected — so far as publications are concerned — in his postwar concentration on contemporary affairs; but he had in preparation at the time of his death two books which reflected his earlier interest in Korea's past.

His first serious publications, appearing in 1939, dealt with rather technical problems. In "The romanization of the Korean language" he worked out with Edwin O. Reischauer the McCune-Reischauer system of romanization which has been adopted by the *Harvard journal of Asiatic studies*, *The Far Eastern quarterly*, the United States Government Board on Geographic Names, and the Army Map Service for all maps on Korea. "The Yi dynasty annals of Korea" is a pioneer work on Korean historiography in which he presented the philosophy underlying the annals, the methods by which they were compiled and composed, and the exact history of their preservation.

These two studies, for which all Western scholars on Korea are indebted to him, helped to clear the ground for his dissertation, "Korean relations with China and Japan, 1800–1864," of which typewritten copies are on deposit at the University of California. This is an important work which deserves to be widely known. The substance of only part of it was published in *FEQ* in May 1946, under the title, "The exchange of envoys between

Korea and Japan during the Tokugawa period.”<sup>3</sup> Another fragment appeared in the *Korean review* in 1948 on “The Japanese trading post at Pusan.” In his introduction to the dissertation the author states that he had intended to specialize on the period of the “opening” of Korea and on the international activities between the years 1870 and 1904. He discovered, however, that the dynastic annals did not extend beyond 1864, and that it was practically impossible in Korea to gain access to source material and be free to work as he chose upon this controversial period of Korean-Japanese relations. He therefore decided – it was characteristic that he should turn an obstacle to advantage – to concentrate on the period before 1864, which demanded some explanation and analysis in any case before the student could proceed properly to the subsequent period.

The dissertation begins with a systematic analysis of the ceremonial diplomatic relations between Korea and China, giving a careful exposition of the types of envoys sent in each direction, their frequency, the purposes for which they were sent, and the gifts offered and received. This is an admirable supplement to M. Frederick Nelson’s later study, *Korea and the old orders in Eastern Asia* (which McCune reviewed in scholarly fashion in *The American historical review*), and to the masterly study of China’s own system of international relations by Fairbank and Teng in *HJAS*, 6 (1941), 135–246. So much has been written about European embassies to China that it is refreshing to learn more about the Korean embassies and to see Peking, so to speak, through Korean eyes. It is also interesting to observe in what fashion news of China and the rest of the world – the Anglo-Chinese wars and the alarming T’ai-p’ing rebellion – reached Korea through its envoys. The dissertation also studies in detail the trade between the two countries. In the second part the author deals in similar fashion with Korean-Japanese relations – it is this section that was revised and published in *FEQ*.

In McCune’s own judgment the value of the study lay chiefly in its use of Korean sources; previously, he tells us, too much reliance has been placed by Western historians on Chinese or Japanese source materials. This became a guiding conviction for McCune; it impressed him ever more forcefully as his scholarship deepened. It has influenced his graduate students and must surely become a basic principle in future studies of East Asiatic history. The excellent annotated bibliography, which lists Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and European documents, is a valuable guide into these neglected Korean sources.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. 5, pp. 308–25.

The other major focus in McCune's writing — Korea's contemporary problems — was presaged in an article, "Korea: a study in Japanese imperialism," published in 1940. This is a balanced, though clearly pro-Korean attempt to assess the effects of Japanese imperialism on the lives of the Korean people and their economy. After the war, when McCune was free to express his opinions publicly, he wrote in rather rapid succession six articles for *Far Eastern survey*, *Pacific affairs*, *Foreign policy reports*, *Journal of politics*, and *India quarterly*. They all dealt with the consequences of American and Russian occupation policies, and they form a group, closely reasoned, penetrating, and critical of both occupations. Expanded and revised, they will form part of his book, *Korea today*, which is to be published early in 1950.

Two other books may yet appear under his name. There is a crying need for "A short history of Korea," of which he had prepared five chapters in draft. No American was so well equipped as he to write such a book. His wife and a group of friends are trying to bring it to completion. Of a more technical nature, but of historical value, will be the edition of Korean-American diplomatic documents, of which he had secured photographic copies from the U.S. Consular archives, and of which he was directing the editing.

The death of George McCune is a grievous loss to the many friends who held him in affection and esteem. It is also a serious blow to Korean studies in America. We have lost our helmsman. Less richly endowed men will have to assume the job where George McCune laid it down at the age of forty.

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