

William Alexander Pickering

1840 - 1907

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(Edited by Douglas Fix)

William Pickering joined the British navy in 1856, when his indentures were signed, and apprenticed for the next four years aboard the "Lady McDonald." During those years, Pickering traveled to many ports in Burma, Siam, China, and Malaysia. By 1862, Pickering had been promoted to third mate and was serving aboard a Liverpool tea-clipper, the "Spartan," which was then docked near Fuzhou, Fujian Province.(1)

Pickering had served aboard the "Lady McDonald" with the customs officer ("old Johnston") who boarded the "Spartan," and he used this connection to get a job in the Imperial Maritime Customs (IMC) office in Fuzhou. Pickering studied the local dialect and the written language while working as a tidewaiter for the IMC. After only five months, Pickering was noticed by his superiors, in particular for his language abilities, so he stepped up these efforts, paying one quarter of his salary to hire a native instructor of Mandarin. Within a year of beginning work for the IMC, he was given a grant to continue his language studies.(2)

In 1863 Pickering accompanied Mr. Maxwell, then Commissioner of Customs for Formosa, to the island, where he aided in establishing customs houses in the southern port cities of Tamsui, Kelung, and Takao. Pickering stayed on in Takao, continuing his work as a tidewaiter for the IMC. While there, Pickering took the opportunity to study the local dialect and to visit aborigines in the interior. In 1865, he was placed in charge of customs at Anping, the port of Taiwanfu.

In 1867, Pickering accepted an offer to take charge of the Taiwanfu branch of the British firm Messrs. McPhail and Compant (subsequently Messrs. Elles and Company), who were carrying on the business formerly belonging to Messrs. Jardine and Dent. In his new job, he was given access to horses and servants and encouraged to travel inland to assess resource and trade potentials.(3)

However, Pickering fell ill with dysentery and fever in 1870 and, after some treatment from Dr. Patrick Manson in Taiwanfu, he was invalided home to England. He was

granted free travel home and a twelve-month leave. He first traveled with a friend, Captain Farrow, to Amoy, visiting the headquarters of his employer. He visited Fuzhou briefly, and then boarded the French steamer "La Guienne" bound for France, as he desired to see something of the state of France since the outbreak of the Franco-German war.(4)

During his stay in England, Pickering was appointed Chinese Interpreter to the Government of the Straits Settlements, and was subsequently appointed the Protector of Chinese for the Colony in 1877. He occupied the latter post until 1890, when he retired from the IMC on pension. It is unclear where Pickering lived from the time of his retirement until his death in 1907.(5)

During his time in Formosa, Pickering made extensive trips throughout the island -- being the first to establish contact with some southern aboriginal tribes -- and he wrote on the geographical, racial, and linguistic distribution of Chinese and aborigines across the island.(6) He also served as a translator and liaison for Charles Le Gendre in his resolution of the Rover incident, and was instrumental in the recovery of the body of Mrs. Hunt and the personal effects of some of the Rover crew.(7)

Selected Publications:

Pickering, W.A. "Among the savages of central Formosa, 1866-1867." *The Messenger and Missionary Record of the Presbyterian Church of England* n.s. 3 (1878): 15-16, 29-31, 69-71, 91.

Pickering, W.A. *Pioneering in Formosa: Recollections of adventures among mandarins, wreckers, and head-hunting savages*. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1898.

Notes:

1. Carrington, George Williams, *Foreigners in Formosa 1841-1874* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, Inc., 1978), pp. 1, 239.

2. Ibid., pp. 2-6.

3. Ibid., pp. 6-8; Otness, Harold M., *One thousand Westerners in Taiwan, to 1945: A biographical and bibliographical dictionary* (Taipei: Institute of Taiwan History, Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica, 1999), pp. 129-30.

4. Carrington, 1978, pp. 8, 239-240.

5. Ibid., p. 8.

6. Ibid., pp. 251, 255; Goddard, W. G., *Formosa; A study in Chinese history* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 28; Campbell, William, *Sketches from Formosa* (London; New York: Marshall Brothers, 1915), pp. 40, 237.

7. Yen, Sophia Su-fei, *Taiwan in China's foreign relations, 1836-1874* (Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1965), pp. 134-135, 140.