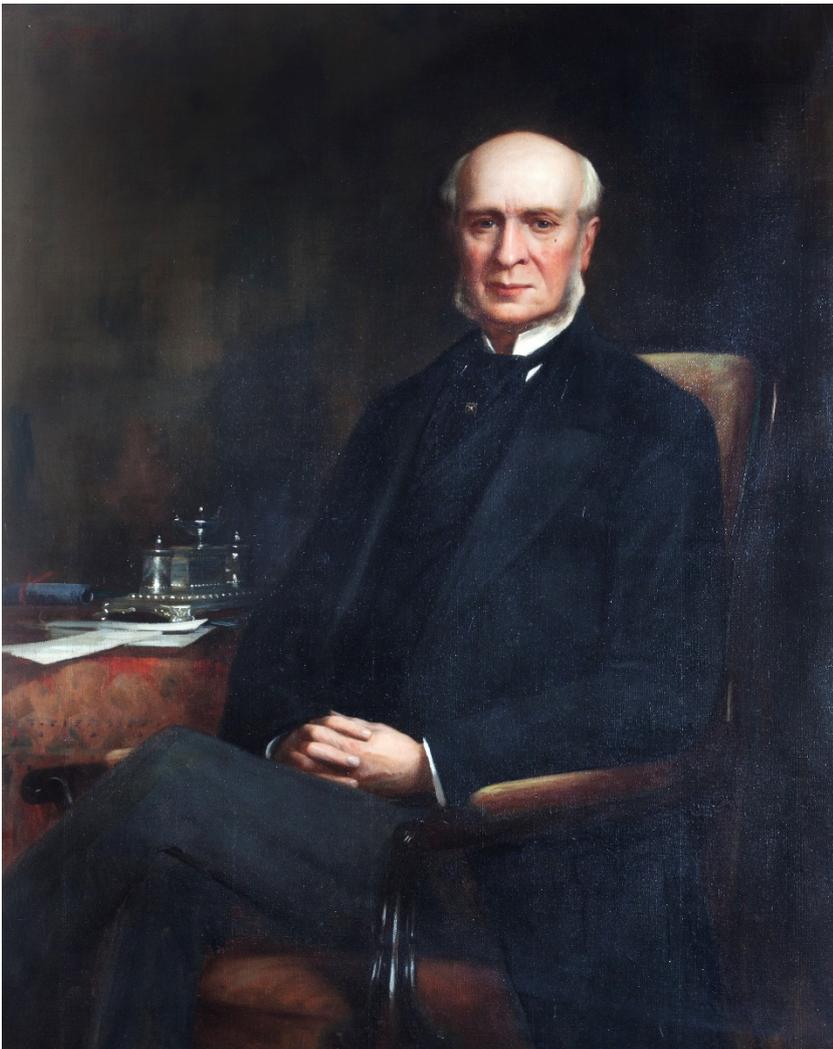




Portrait of the Month: January H. M. Matheson (1821-1898)

by James Coutts Michie (1861-1919)

A lifelong fascination with China and the Far East led to his support and leadership of the Foreign Missions Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England.



H. M. Matheson, by James Coutts Michie
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Hugh Mackay Matheson began his career in 1836 as a clerk for Glasgow merchant – but in 1843 he declined a good position at Jardine Matheson, his uncle's trading firm with important links to Hong Kong, because of their connexion with the opium trade. Instead, he got a job with the London branch of the company - Magniac Jardine & Co - which traded primarily in tea and silks with the East, instead.

In 1845 he spent 18 months travelling in the Far East, both to benefit his health and to learn more about trade. As he toured India and China on business, he became fascinated by the cultural differences between Europe and the East, and wanted to educate the people in the places that he visited about both business and the Bible.

By 1848, Magniac Jardine & Co had become Matheson & Co, with Hugh importing goods from China and India, and exporting cotton in return, as well as managing tea estates and railways. But since returning to Britain in 1846, Matheson had become a lifelong supporter of the Presbyterian Church of England's foreign missions.

The primary mission centres in the 1850s were in Amoy, Swatow, and in the inland Hakka-speaking areas – followed by expansion into mission in Formosa (now Taiwan) in 1865. Missionaries preached and also trained local preachers, as well as founding and running churches, primary and secondary schools, and hospitals. Matheson was Secretary, and later Convenor, of the Foreign Missions Committee, and maintained a personal correspondence with many missionaries in the field.

And his international interests and outlook also meant that in 1863, he was instrumental in arranging for the very first Japanese students – the Chōshū Five – to come and study at University College London. In 1873 he was part of the consortium which purchased the Rio Tinto copper mines in Spain, and later became President - where he tried to promote the education and housing of the workers.

Portrait by [James Coutts Michie](#) (1861-1919).

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Helen Weller, Archivist
2020

Bibliography and Further Reading:

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