

## Emily Georgiana Kemp



Portrait head of Miss Emily Georgiana Kemp by Alphonse Legros (1837-1911)

This sketch by Alphonse Legros is a portrait of Somerville College Chapel's founder, Emily Georgiana Kemp (1860-1939). Emily left a significant bequest of Western and Eastern Art to the Ashmolean; she also donated the Chapel to Somerville during her own lifetime.

Emily was one of the first students to study at Somerville and upon leaving led an adventurous life, writing a number of travel books about her journeys in Asia.

Alphonse Legros (1837-1911) was Slade Professor of Art at University College London, under whom Emily studied Fine Art between leaving Somerville and embarking on her first trip to China. This picture is dated 1892 by the artist – when Emily was a student at the Slade School.

A number of Legros' works were left to the Ashmolean in Emily's bequest, including the oil 'Interior with an organist and procession' and a sketch of her sister, Lydia Peto Kemp.

## Reading Emily Georgiana Kemp's Books



E.G.Kemp's self-portrait, from the frontispiece of 'The Face of China'

The donor of Somerville College Chapel, Emily Georgiana Kemp, wrote a number of books over her lifetime. By reading these it is possible to learn much about her experiences, and their role in forming her unique vision for Somerville College Chapel.

Emily travelled extensively and documented her adventures with her own watercolours. These are reproduced as colour plates in the following travel books: *The Face of China* (1909), *The Face of Manchuria, Korea and Russian Turkestan* (1910), *Wanderings in Chinese Turkestan* (1914), and *Chinese Mettle* (1921). Each of these books follows the format of a travel journal or diary, often demonstrating Emily's fascination in the various religions and places of worship she encountered. They also show her continued preoccupation with the welfare and education of women.

Emily wrote two books about the work of missionaries: a biography of her sister, *Reminiscences of a Sister, S. Florence Edwards* (1919), and a general account of the work of women Baptist missionaries, *There followed Him, women* (1927). In these she expresses her belief in the importance of women in Christianity, a theme expounded most overtly in her last book, *Mary, with her son, Jesus* (1930).

Emily, unlike her sisters, was never a missionary, but she loved exploring and encountering different people and places. She writes in *Reminiscences of a Sister* that her 'imagination was fired with stories of adventure' by accounts of missionary work she heard as a child at her parents' home. It is because of her love for travel, and the countries she visited, particularly China, that her memorial plaque in the Chapel reads 'friend of China' as opposed to 'missionary', and why her books are given over to documenting her travels rather than giving an account of evangelisation. An unfavourable review of her first book published in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1909, states:

'Slightly attached to sundry evangelising bodies, she shows a moderate interest in the Christianising of the Chinese, and a much livelier interest in their country, manners and customs. On these she chatters shrewdly and agreeably, according to her own fancies.'

According to our College records, Emily also published a book on Buddhism in 1910 which she translated from German. It is possible that this is a reference to 'Buddhism as a Religion: its historical development and its present conditions' by H. Hackmann (1910). Although not mentioned by name, the author refers to the translator – 'a lady who herself is personally acquainted with the Far East, having travelled in China twice

for a considerable time' (p.ix). Kemp refers to this volume elsewhere in her writings as a good reference book for further information about Buddhism.

### On the trail with Emily Georgiana Kemp

In 1940, the Ashmolean Museum received a sizeable bequest from the founder of Somerville College Chapel, E.G.Kemp. This included, among other things, a sum of money equalling £8,000; three oil paintings, perhaps most notably *The Holy Family* by Ambrosius Benson (c.1550); and a collection of her own watercolours completed while she travelled in Asia.

Here are a selection of Kemp's own pictures, accompanied by extracts from her travel books.



Copper Image, Suifu, China.

'A Roman Catholic priest is deeply interested in the local divinity, which is certainly an interesting specimen of art, if nothing more; but the priest is firmly persuaded that it is St. Thomas [the Apostle Thomas, or 'doubting Thomas'], and takes all his friends to see it. The god is enshrined in a temple on a hillside overlooking the town. It is a most beautiful situation, but somewhat spoilt by the fact that it is entirely covered with graves. Hills are frequently utilised for this purpose, and contain thousands of graves. The gaudily painted figure is 18 feet high and 5 [and a half] feet broad, made of fine red copper. It stands on a large bronze turtle, from which, unfortunately, a good part has been stolen; the head alone is in excellent preservation. It was erected some hundreds of years ago by the Lolos or Ibiens, an aboriginal tribe who then held possession of this part of the country. They believed that he was a saint who came over the seas on a turtle, and this certainly corresponds with the legend of St. Thomas going to India. It is a very truculent-looking saint, not lightly to be parted from his sword. The figure is well fenced off from view by large bars, though one has been removed, so that people can push through and get a closer look at him. While I was busy sketching, a priest came up to look, with his long hair fastened on the top of head by a carved wooden pin. The priests do not plait their hair, but simply twist it up into a sort of "bun." A woman came up with offerings – fowl, sweets, etc. – which, after they had been offered to the god, she would take home and eat with the greater relish. This is certainly a way of killing two birds with one stone, as she was too poor to have eaten chicken on ordinary occasions. As we came down the hill we met the chief mourner of a funeral, wearing the coarsest sackcloth, which he could scarcely prevent from falling off, as it is incorrect on such occasions to gird it round the waist.' *The Face of China* p.196-197.



‘Near the mission there is a pretty Mosque, built exactly like a Buddhist or Taoist temple, which provides schools for boys and girls. ... My sketch [of the Mosque at Ashiho] was done under considerable difficulties, for the boys had just come out of school, and would jostle up and down, and round about me on the mound of earth where I was sitting, raising such a dust that at last I was driven defeated from the field.’ *The Face of Manchuria, Korea and Russian Turkestan*, p.146.



Opium Refuge, reproduced in *The Face of China*, p. 80.

‘Shansi [Shanxi] is one of the worst provinces of all as regards opium smoking, and the poppy is largely cultivated. In the accompanying sketch a group of patients is seen, who have come to a mission refuge to try and break off the habit. They are allowed to smoke tobacco, but are mostly resting or sleeping on the khang; the brick bed seen in every inn and in most private houses. On the floor in front of it is seen a small round aperture\*, where the fire is red, which heats the whole khang.’ *The Face of China*, p.80.

\* Unfortunately not captured in this photograph; it is just in front of the man in white at the front right.



Camel Inn (1893), *The Face of China*, p. 74.

‘On the roads [near Pao-Ting-fu, China] we met long strings of camels carrying packs, the tail of one animal being attached to the nose of the one behind. They have inns of their own, being cantankerous beasts, and are supposed to travel at nights because of being such an obstruction to traffic. Certainly if you lie awake you can generally hear the tinkle of their bells. They are the most attractive feature of the landscape in the north, whether seen in the streets of Peking, or on the sandy plains of Chili. My sketch was taken in the summer when the camels were changing their coats, so that the one in the front has a grey, dishevelled look, corresponding with Mark Twain’s description. He says that camels always look like “second-hand” goods; but it is clear that he cannot know the fine stately beast of North China.’ *The Face of China*, p. 74-75