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MEI QUONG TART (1850 - 1903)

Quong Tart was a notably picturesque character, a successful businessman and a philanthropist.

He was born Mei Guang Da in 1850 in Xin Ning, some 100 kms west of Canton, in the Province of Kwantung, China.

His father was a prosperous merchant who sold ornaments and artefacts and was sufficiently wealthy to have his sons educated by private tuition.

At the age of nine, Mei Guang Da accompanied his uncle Guang Yin, who was in charge of a party of Chinese labourers, who were heading for the New South Wales goldfields at Braidwood, 200 kms south-west of Sydney.

At that time it was common practice for the Chinese to borrow money from credit syndicates to pay their way to the Australian goldfields with the syndicate representatives ensuring repayment whether they found gold and prospered or not. The syndicate frequently had greater control over the Chinese miners than the police.

At Sydney in 1859, the young lad in answer to the immigration official's question, gave his correct name in his boyish treble voice as Mei Guang Da. To the anglo-saxon ear of the clerk this was understood to mean "I am Quong Tart" and so the anglicised name Quong Tart became his name in Australia for the remainder of his life.

The gold mining camps must have been something of a cultural shock for the young lad. The sight of large, brawny men some with red hair, prone to settling disputes by fighting, and eating and carousing in strange ways, must have been almost terrifying when compared with his quiet, rural and cultured Chinese upbringing.

Even the Chinese behaviour of playing fan-tan and smoking opium was a new experience.

Quong Tart's uncle found him a job with Thomas Forsyth and his wife in their general store at Bell's Creek, some 20 kms from Braidwood.

Here, young Quong not only learned basic accounting and business practice but also a great deal about the needs of a remote and small, struggling community.

He also learned English, with a thick Scottish accent, from the Forsyth's from Argyllshire and the many other Scots in the area.

One Chinese interpretation of the name "Tart" would be "lucky" and Quong had the good fortune to be virtually adopted by Robert Percy Simpson and his wife Alice who were customers at the shop.

Simpson owned a large tract of land and several mining claims and rode around his property with young Quong perched on the same horse.

Mrs Simpson continued his education, converted him to Christianity, and he remained a devout member of the Anglican Church for the rest of his life.

As a teenager, he wore the latest in smart clothes, enjoyed cricket and had a very British view of the world. His upbringing gave him an immense advantage since he was fluent in Cantonese and English and he became a trusted translator without showing any prejudice.

It was a difficult time. Tens of thousands of Chinese came to Australia and there was a fear of cheap labour and a reduction of living standards. Each colony introduced legislation to restrict Asian immigration and there was serious rioting and anti-Chinese sentiment. It was one of the prime reasons which propelled the Australian Colonies towards federation.

Through all this, Quong maintained his impartiality and his popularity. When he was fourteen, Robert Simpson gave him a claim as payment for his services and he found payable gold almost immediately.

He purchased a claim from Thomas Forsyth for five hundred pounds and, although it was supposedly worked out, Quong employed Chinese labourers who, with great patience, were able to find payable gold and they were able to return to their Chinese villages as rich men.

At one time he employed some 200 men and earned their respect by always paying a fair wage for their labour.

By the age of eighteen, Quong had built his own house next door to Forsyth's store, owned a race horse and organised the local races at Jemaicumbene.

He celebrated his twenty-first birthday by becoming a naturalised citizen on 11 July 1871, having been sponsored by the local Justice of the Peace and Clerk of Petty Sessions.

His ability to steer the middle course led him to build a chapel in Braidwood for another denomination and a school for miner's children. He also became a member of the Board of the Bell's Creek Public School.

A photograph of the time shows him with his horse *Nobby* and looking exactly like an English gentleman.

The gold miners had no time for hypocrites, but Quong was loved by all for his good humour and sincerity.

In 1877, the Simpsons moved nearer to Sydney and invited the now wealthy and independent Quong to join them. He did not like life on their station property and he quickly returned to Braidwood.

He visited his family in China in 1881 but, with his western dress and manners, he was such a counter-attraction to the street jugglers and salesmen that they asked him to leave town!

Quong resisted his mother's desires to marry a carefully selected local girl and returned to Sydney.

He leased a warehouse and a small shop in the Royal Arcade and, in conjunction with his brother back in China, he began importing China tea, at that time much preferred over tea from India or Ceylon. He also sold some of his father's Chinese ornaments.

He was the first to conceive the idea of selling tea in small paper packets instead of wooden chests which became an immediate success with Sydney's housewives.

He set out tables and served tea with scones and butter which became the first, clean, moderately priced, temperance restaurant which was a great success with those who did not wish to frequent hotel or expensive dining rooms.

His business prospered and he eventually owned a chain of tea shops around Sydney.

Quong Tart now had time for some leisure activities, particularly cricket and *The Bulletin* featured him in cricket flannels as "the only popular Chinese in New South Wales" and a "true Briton ... who, at a recent, cricket match ... shone with refulgence!

Quong was always concerned for his countrymen and vigorously supported suppression of the opium trade.

In 1883, he was appointed to accompany an old Braidwood friend, Inspector Martin Brennan, to survey the ramshackle Chinese camps which were alleged to have degenerated from farm labourers camps into gambling halls, grog shops, opium dens and brothels.

Quong was so appalled at the wide-spread use of opium that he petitioned Bro. Alexander Stuart, the Colonial Secretary, to prohibit its importation.

He visited the gold fields in Victoria and commenced an anti-opium campaign in Melbourne and Ballarat.

The government levied duty on opium and his efforts were largely unsuccessful.

In 1887, he again petitioned the New South Wales Government to prohibit the opium trade and he published a pamphlet entitled:

A Plea for the Abolition of the Importation of Opium

He donated proceeds from the sale of the pamphlet to the Bulli NSW mining disaster fund.

This was just one example of his much acclaimed community benevolence which, for several years, provided free meals for the destitute.

On 30 August 1886 Quong Tart married Margaret Scarlett, a young Lancashire lass in opposition to her father's wishes.

She had kept a scrap book with newspaper clippings about her future husband which she continued after their marriage and which became the basis of much of the available biographical detail.

They had two sons and four daughters and their obvious happiness eventually reconciled her father to his daughter and oriental son-in-law.

In January 1888, the Emperor of China honoured Quong Tart with the official rank of Mandarin of the Crystal Button, the fifth rung on the Imperial silken ladder, equivalent to a Knighthood.

He again visited China to receive his honour and he became known as the "Australian Mandarin".

In December 1889, Quong opened an elaborate restaurant in King Street where Sydney's socialites were to be seen taking tea and scones.

In August the following year, he opened a bazaar at the Newcastle suburb of Jesmond which was followed in December 1898 by a dining room in the new Queen Victoria Markets which quickly became one of the most popular restaurants in Sydney.

Quong Tart was entertained at the Sydney Town Hall by the city's prominent citizens and presented with a handsome monetary gift.

He mixed with the most diverse company and was a close friend of Cardinal Moran and General Booth who made him an honorary Colonel in the Chinese Salvation Army. The famous London *Times* correspondent, "Chinese" Morrison, whose Peking home, for a time, became the Masonic Hall, also visited the King Street tea room.

Quong Tart received not only the famous but hungry newsboys and, when the gold began to run out, impoverished Chinese who were assisted with their passage back to their homeland.

Quong was in constant demand as a speaker and entertainer at charitable and social functions. His Scottish accent and an ability to create dreadful puns had his audiences groaning and, at the same time, roaring with laughter.

At a luncheon in honour of the Church of England Minister the Revd. Cakebread, Quong remarked:

"Friends, you have no taste for good things. You eat this cake and that cake until you're full, but the real Cakebread and the genuine Tart you leave untouched!"

When he refused to join his guests in a glass of wine, he added:

"No thanks, if I took more of that stuff, I shouldn't be a Tart but a roly-poly!"

He became known as "Quong Tartan" and he would announce "Ma name's MacTart", in an accent of which Bro. Robert Burns would have been proud, and then recite Bro. Rudyard Kipling's *McAndrew's Hymn*.

There's nothing new about a McFeast at McDonald's a century later.

Quong became an acknowledged authority on Scottish history and customs and he even managed to become a member of the Caledonian Society and, resplendent in kilt, would mingle with his *brother* members at the *heiland* games.

There was some discussion that the popular Quong should stand for election for the legislative Assembly but, always steering the middle course, he declined.

He even had his children baptised and educated in different Christian denominations to avoid any hint of prejudice.

The popular notion of him being a leader in the Chinese Community was, however, simply not true as the social gap was too great.

The Town and Country Journal reported:

"It matters not where Mr Quong Tart may be - feasting the poor, speaking at a social gathering, or plunging into business, he, in all circumstances, maintains a happy state of unruffled evenness. Men may come and go, but with Mr Tart happiness seems to flow on forever!"

Quong Tart was the first Chinese to be admitted to the Independent Order of Oddfellows in Australia.

On 8 October 1885 our brother Quong Tart was initiated into freemasonry in the Lodge of Tranquillity No.1552, English Constitution meeting in Sydney. The lodge is now No.42, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.

He was passed to the second degree on 11 March 1886 and he became a Master mason on 12 July 1886.

He would not have been at all concerned that the majority of the members of his lodge at that time were Jewish.

The *Freemason's Chronicle*, Vol.4, No.11, for 2 November 1885 reported his initiation and the toast proposed in his honour:

"Bro. Quong Tart responded in a very able manner, and thanked the brethren heartily for the cordiality with which they had received the mention of his name, and desired to express his gratitude, for having afforded him the opportunity of enrolling his name under the banner of this old and reputed Lodge. He could only say it would be his endeavour to become an apt student of the art, and he trusted no member of the Lodge would ever have cause to regret having admitted him as a member of its honourable association. He might in time become a true and upright man and Mason, and in conclusion, repeated a verse from the immortal poet, Bro. Robert Burns ---

"A man's a man for all that."

Bro Quong Tart remained a master mason and a member of the Lodge of Tranquillity until his death.

Right Wor Bro Christopher Haffner, a Past District Grand Master for Hong Kong and the Far East of the English Constitution and a Past Master of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge No.2076, London, wrote in 1992 that Bro Quong Tart was the third known Chinese initiate, the first being Bro Teh Boen Keh, initiated at Surabaya, Java in 1857 and the second Bro Tsung Lai Shun, initiated in the Hampden Lodge of Massachusetts in 1873.

On 19 August 1902 in his office in the Queen Victoria Markets, Quong was attacked by a man who described himself as a detective trying to catch a thief, but who repeatedly beat Quong over the head with an iron bar before stealing twenty pounds lying on his desk.

Quong staggered outside, bleeding profusely and was quickly hospitalised.

The Secretary of his lodge wrote to him:

"I have just heard with great regret that some infernal scoundrel has been maltreating you. The animal who could maltreat Quong Tart is not a man, but must be a fiend!"

The two best detectives in New South Wales were given the case and Quong was able to identify a suspect by both appearance and voice.

Quong made an apparent recovery but the effects of the attack became evident. His black hair became rapidly grey and his features lined and in June 1903 he caught a chill, developed pleurisy and, on 26 July 1903, he died after suffering a heart attack at his home *Gallop House* in the Sydney suburb of Ashfield.

Mei Guang Da, loved by and known to all as Quong Tart, was dressed in the robes of a Mandarin of the Blue Button, to which he had been promoted in 1894, and placed in an oak coffin on which was placed his Master Mason's apron.

After a service conducted by the Revd. Joseph Best in the living room of Quong's house, the Chinese band with hundreds of mourners accompanied the coffin on the train to Rookwood Cemetery. Thousands lined the route and the procession to the graveside was led by his son, Arthur, supported by forty Freemasons in regalia.

Bro Archdeacon Langley, the Worshipful Master of the Lodge of Tranquillity, gave a eulogy and the committal was conducted in Cantonese by the Revd. Soo Hoo Ten, an Anglican priest.

A poetic eulogy was published, especially meaningful in terms of the meeting of East and West:

*"Alas, poor Quong! A man of sterling worth,
Though not of our nationality - proud of Chinese birth,
Honoured by his countrymen, and by his nation, too --
Mandarin of Crystal Button - respected, loved and true.
Erect a noble monument to make a noble frame,
To all alike, both rich and poor, he ever was the same,
God rest him and reward him with an everlasting name!"*

G H Cumming - June 1994

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Above
Quong Tart, wealthy Chinese merchant, who had offices in the Queen Victoria Building. He was respected but most Chinese were treated with suspicion

Below

The Royal Arcade with Quong Tart's Tea Rooms and a uniformed attendant, in the growing prosperity of the latter years of the nineteenth century

