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**Murder in the Land of the Morning Calm**

Robert D. Neff

Korea was one of the last oriental kingdoms to be opened to the west. It was often referred to as the Hermit Kingdom by the west, but in Chinese it was known as Choson- the Land of the Morning Calm. Chemulpo, now part of modern Inchon, was the gateway into the Land of the Morning Calm and as William Franklin Sands described it: “Chemulpo was an unattractive entrance to a great adventure.”1

Since Chemulpo’s opening in 1882, it had grown from a cluster of squalid Korean huts to a bustling city of modern buildings, hotels, stores and taverns with a mixed foreign population of 6,750 people in June 1898. Most of the foreign population was Japanese (4,350), but there was a large number of Chinese (1,350), and both of these groups lived in tneir own part of the foreign settlement, while the remainder-composed of Americans (17), British (15),Germans (10), Austrians (7), French (5), Portuguese (3), and Italians (3) dwelt in the General Foreign Settlement.2

While most of the foreign population in the interior of Korea were missionaries-the greater part of the foreign community in Chemulpo were diplomats, businessmen, members of the Korean Imperial Customs service and their families along with a large number of transients who served aboard the many ships that made calls upon the port. Crime wasn’t unknown in this small foreign settlement-petty crimes of theft and even assault were often reported but were usually committed by Koreans-rarely by westerners, but this was all to change.

On August 31，1898，the unexpected news of a death, possibly a murder，in Chemulpo made its way to the American legation in Seoul. The deceased was George W. Lake, “an elderly unamiable beachcomber” who ran a small shop selling alcohol and commodities in the slum section of the Chinese Settlement. He was found dead in his bed on the second floor of his[page 92] relatively empty house and shop, possibly murdered. It’s unknown who discovered the body, and under what circumstances the building had been entered, or even what time the discovery was made. However, we do know the constable3 was given the unhappy task of reporting the death to the only person in the city that had a close relationship with the deceased John G. Flanagan. It was with great difficulty that Mr. Flanagan was aroused from his sleep at the late hour of eight in the morning, and when he was told of the death of his friend and benefactor, instead of displaying sorrow, he complained about Mr. Lake and continued to eat his breakfast and drink his brandy.

A telegram was sent to the American Legation in Seoul by Walter Townsend4 and asked that someone be sent to examine the body. Franklin William Sands, the young flamboyant American vice-consul, was sent to Chemulpo to examine the body and determine if foul play had occurred. Sands went to the Chemulpo Club where most of the foreigners residing in Chemulpo whiled away their time. When he explained to them his mission he was met with laughter and jokes-obviously George Lake was not thought too highly of. The laughter soon turned into curses and complaints when Sands drafted these leading men of Chemulpo5 into a coroner’s jury and they were instructed to accompany him to the deceased’s home to help determine the cause of death. Most of these men were undoubtedly American but Sands did manage to get the English consul (H.A. Ottewill) and coerced an English doctor to join his coroner’s jury.

It seems that no one in the group knew the location of George Lake’s home and they were forced to wander around Chemulpo asking for directions before they found it in a run-down section of the Chinese settlement. It was a small two-story house located next door to an abandoned opium den. Sands described it as filthy and reeking with a rotten stench. The state of the body and the building was so poor and disgusting that Sands was only able to keep his Coroner’s Jury from deserting him by threatening “impossible and fantastic things”-even Sands was forced to leave the body for a short[page 93] time to regain his composure.

George Lake’s body was obviously badly diseased, and even though they were fairly sure that he had died from natural causes they none-the-less searched it for evidence of foul play. The English surgeon that conducted the autopsy stated that the combination of evident diseases were enough to kill anyone and concluded that Lake had died from natural causes. In addition, Sands and the British Consul questioned the Chinese that lived around Mr. Lake, inquiring of his activities on the day and night of his death, whom he had met, his acquaintances and his habits but none of these aroused suspicions of foul play. As a result of their investigation and the results of the British doctor’s autopsy, the Coroner’s Jury determined that George Lake had died as a result of natural causes and not foul play. Sands then returned to Seoul to report his findings and the decision of the Coroner’s Jury to Mr. Allen.

Chemulpo was like any other small isolated community, news-and especially rumors spread rapidly-often becoming exaggerated and distorted. Within days the news had reached the United States by cable and later by letter that Lake had been murdered. It was the cable sent to Senator Lodge7 of Massachusetts that aroused his powerful interest in the case and caused him to put pressure upon the American Minister, Allen, to ensure that the “murderers be brought to justice.” A letter from the United States to Korea described how it was printed in the papers in the States as “An American named Lake, who for years has kept a small store at Chemulpo, was found murdered in bed on Sept.3rd It is believed that Chinese, who owed him large sums of money, committed the deed. Every effort is being made to apprehend the murderers. Lake was an old man and is believed to have come from New York. He left considerable money.”8 The local newspapers reported him as having been found with a large hole in his head possibly caused by a Chinese weight which was found a short distance away with the victim’s hair on it. The initial Coroner’s Jury never mentioned a hole in Lake’s head, and it seems highly unlikely they would have missea it, but the[page 94] rumor surrounding the death included the hole in his head. A few days later, an offer of 100 dollars reward for any information leading to capture of the murderer was made in the local newspaper-a murderer had to be found even if there wasn’t one.

Sands was again sent to Chemulpo, this time to find a killer that he did not believe existed. It was finally decided on September 22nd that John Flanagan, a naturalized American that Lake had taken in and treated as a son, was responsible for the death of George Lake. Sands thought that Flanagan was one of the drifting seamen that often came in and out of Chemulpo and had given a “satisfactory account of himself as one expected from a discharged sailor in a rather low seaport town. He was indicated in my instructions, however, as the obvious person to arrest.”9 Flanagan was not a sailor and actually came to Korea as professional mining expert to work with the American Mining Company owned by Mr. Leigh Hunt, but Hunt thought he was of such poor character that he dismissed him before reaching the mines. Charges were drawn up by Alfred Stripling and a warrant was issued for the arrest of Flanagan for the murder of George Lake. It is unclear who accompanied Sands to Flanagan’s home to arrest him, and Sands was very nervous when he found Flanagan cleaning a large revolver and obviously feared the worst. Flanagan evidently didn’t want trouble, and much to Sands’ relief, agreed to put down the gun and accompany him to Seoul to stand trial in a consular court for murder.

Meanwhile back in Seoul, Consul-General Allen busily prepared for the up-coming trial. The European countries all had clauses in their treaties that the respective legations would try and punish their own citizens when it came to crimes committed in Korea by their nationals. It was widely believed that the Western countries had progressed from “barbarous forms of torture” and punishment to more humane and compassionate treatment of prisoners, where as the Asian countries had not progressed to this level yet. It was felt that Westerners could not get a fair trial under the Korean court and thus the need for these Consular Courts. United States still has a form[page 95] of this with its SOFA status in the various nations that it maintains military forces. Then, as it does now, it created a great disgust amongst the people who felt that the Westerners could not be adequately punished for their infractions of Korean laws.

Allen, with his own money, had a two-cell jail built on the American Legation grounds in preparation for Flanagan. Even though Sands doesn’t mention anyone accompanying him when he escorted Flanagan to Seoul from Chemulpo on October 18th, he was most likely not alone and may have been accompanied by Mr. Coleman, the American Legation’s constable, Mr. Alfred Stripling, the foreign advisor to the Korean police, or perhaps Sgt. Boxwell-the British naval assistant to Mr. Stripling. It is probably safe to assume that they walked the 26 miles from Chemulpo to Seoul, the Seoul- Chemulpo Railroad still had not been completed, and the steamships that plied the river were notorious for their long delays caused by their frequent grounding on the ever-shifting sandbars.10

The trial was conducted on October 31 at the American Legation presided by Consul-General Allen and four associate judges: Revs. Henry G. Appenzeller, Samuel F. Moore and Daniel L. Gifford, and the fourth member was the lawyer Clarence R. Greathouse. Sands described Greathouse as having sobered up long enough to partake of the trial but Allen made no mention of his drinking and instead described him as distinguished. The Rev. Dr. Underwood and later Alexander Kenmure represented Flanagan in his defense.

The murder weapon was the first point of contention. Allen claimed that when Flanagan was brought to the murder site he picked up the Chinese weight that had been used as the murder weapon-he then put it back onto the floor. Later, when he was asked about the weight, he denied seeing the weight claiming, “Well I never saw that before,” even though he claimed that he found the safe keys on the floor, which were right next to the weight. When he was shown the weight he suggested that Lake “must have fallen and hurt himself.” Allen scoffed at this idea that a man could have fallen[page 96] upon the weight and then, with a large hole in his head, climbed back into his bed-especially when he felt that the blow caused instantaneous death. It seems strange that Allen could not believe that Lake was that sick and weak that he could have fallen. Allen had noted that “on the day of his murder, he [Lake] was scarcely able to return the salute of a passing friend, and had twice to be assisted, once after falling down stairs at about 4 p.m. the day of the murder, and again at dusk, when he was taken sick at his door.”

The conclusion of murder completely contradicts the earlier diagnosis of the English doctor that Sands coerced into joining his first investigation. How is it that the Coroner’s Jury could conclude that it was natural causes that resulted in his death, had the body buried that night, but later, another jury would find that the cause of death was murder-even though they had not examined the body. It is remarkable that Allen, a former doctor, didn’t go to Chemulpo himself to see the body when it was thought that a murder had been committed, instead preferring to send Sands.

It was noted that there were several American axes at the foot of the bed that could have been more readily used as a murder weapon, but instead a piece of heavy iron was brought from the Chinese steel yards and used. This implies that it was premeditated murder and that it had been left conspicuously lying on the floor so that the suspicion would fall upon the Chinese-which in fact it did in the United States. Allen, however, did not suspect the Chinese and stated that the relations between the Chinese and Mr. Lake were very good and furthermore, they had no reason to rob an empty house. Allen was convinced that the Chinese were incapable of killing a “man with one sure steady blow, as was so neatly done in this case. A coward would have made sure of his work and caused more or less mutilation.”

Robbery wasn’t believed to be the motive because Lake was known to have very little ready money-a couple of days prior to the murder he had sold goods at a loss in order to pay off a pressing debt, and the house did not appear to have been ransacked. In fact, on October 3rd, F.H. Morsel sold off[page 97] his estate which consisted of “sundry articles and stores of all kinds,” two rice hullers and an assortment of Sherry, Portwine and Claret in 50 gallon casks. Nothing really seemed to be missing-only a set of binoculars found at the embankment on the property and appeared to have been set there to give credence to the robbery theory. These binoculars had not been noticed on the morning of the murder but the following day, a custom’s employee found them unbroken and just lying on the embankment-he opined that it was an attempt to mislead them into thinking it was a robbery.

There was a safe, unlocked, but it most likely contained nothing more than documents which were never found. Allen claimed that Lake was a ‘man of careful habits’ and would have kept careful notes and preserved any valuable papers in his safe. It was his believe that the safe, and what was within it, led Flanagan to murder Lake.

Why would Flanagan, a penniless wanderer when he met George Lake, kill the man who took him in and treated him like a son-Lake had loaned him some 714 Yen11 in cash and goods and had only received some 175 Yen back in payments, he let Flanagan live in one of his buildings, and had promised to let him run the new saloon that they were about to open. It was speculated that the motive of the murder was to obtain the documents that were within the safe-documents that may have implicated Flanagan of embezzlement or of forgery. There was evidence that Flanagan had practiced George Lake’s signature and that several letters sent to Edward Lake in Nagasaki appeared to be forgeries. Some of these letters were demands for goods to be sent to Chemulpo while other were letters George wrote to ask his brother why he was sending him these goods. Flanagan owed Lake over 500 Yen and he could have practiced forging his signature in order to wipe out the debt that he owed. When Edward arrived in Chemulpo a couple days after the murder Flanagan deliberately avoided him-even though they knew each other through frequent correspondence. It was further alleged that Flanagan had stolen the goods intended for the new saloon that Lake had planned on opening, all prime motives for murder. [page 98]

Flanagan was confident that he was in George Lake’s will and boasted to Alfred F.A.W. Busby that if there were a will, he was sure that he was the benefactor and would inherit all of Lake’s properties. What wasn’t mentioned is that Busby, an Englishman, had just recently returned to Korea (just in time for the trial) after having served three months at hard labor for assaulting a well-liked Korean national. Allen thought that Flanagan had motive to kill Mr. Lake: Either to obtain the documents that proved he owed the deceased several hundred Yen and had stolen materials and supplies that were to be used for the new saloon or because he was sure that he was a benefactor in Lake’s will and he was no longer willing to wait for the old man to die.

Throughout the trial Flanagan perjured himself on several occasions. When asked about his whereabouts on the night of the murder, he insisted that he was at home the entire night. However, he was witnessed entering Lake’s home just as the lamps were being lit on the streets but no one noticed him leaving. Later that night he was seen wandering the streets by three Westerners around 9 or 10, and later he was witnessed visiting the brothels, drunk, and wearing Chinese garments similar to those that Mr. Lake was known to have owned.

It seems that when Flanagan was first taken to Lake’s home by the police he was he was asked to open the safe, which only he and the deceased were able to open, he went right to the safe knowing that the safe was unlocked. When the constable noted that the safe would need keys in order to open it, he made his way back upstairs, by himself, and then returned “as quickly as though he taken them from his own pockets.” He stated that he made a protracted search through the pockets of the deceased and finally found them on the floor next to the bed. Later when he returned the keys he did not place them in one of the articles of clothing pockets but instead placed them under the deceased’s pillow. Flanagan was in the house for nearly an hour while they waited for the Chief of Police and he could have tampered with some of the evidence. [page 99]

On November 11th the court found him guilty and sentenced him to death but this was changed to life with hard labor, after Greathouse pointed out that consular regulations did not allow them to extend the death penalty. Kenmure, Flanagan’s representative, issued a statement to the court that he planned on appealing the ruling and it was perhaps his work that eventually caused Allen to request that the President of the United State review the case (he refused) and led to the final trial in California Several years later, Allen claimed that Flanagan could have been acquitted of the crime but he had perjured himself so often that it seemed to Mr. Greathouse that he was trying to protect an accomplice in the crime.

He was taken away to his cell where he was held in confinement guarded by a drunken constable named Coleman. Obviously Flanagan was not deemed to be dangerous. When Allen returned to the United States in April 1899 on a short vacation, Flanagan was able to walk away from his cell- possibly because the constable was drunk-and managed to stay free for about a day before he realized that his life was much better while he was in jail where he had hot food and companionship, all provided by the constable and the legation. While Allen was away, Sands was in charge of the Legation and promptly fired the constable and then paroled Flanagan (his reasoning was he couldn’t leave the country anyhow) and had him work as the Legation’s gardener and stableman until late June 1901.

It is possible that as time passed Allen began to doubt his own judgement or perhaps he felt guilty. In early 1899 he requested that the matter be presented to the President of the United States in hopes that the President would reduce the sentence but it was refused. Then, in October 1900， Attorney General Griggs gave his opinion that “in this case Flanagan appears to have been guilty of willful and deliberate murder, which，in this country, would have subjected him to the death penalty. He was, however, sentenced to life imprisonment for life. I can find no ground whatever for advising the President to grant any pardon of any nature.”

After almost a year and a half under semi-arrest, Thomas K. Keller, a clerk[page 100] in the U.S. State Department, finally escorted Flanagan to the United States and San Quentin prison. Allen was disgusted with the entire affair- the cost of the jail had come out of his own pocket, and the cost to the government to take Flanagan to the San Quentin Prison was some $2,000. Perhaps Allen thought that this was the end of the issue- but he was sadly mistaken.

At some point after Flanagan arrived at San Quentin prison, another trial was held and he was found innocent of all charges. Allen found himself under attack for the illegal confinement of Flanagan both in Korea and in California by the Honorable W.A. Day, Acting Attorney General, and Mr. G. Van Vorst of Cleveland, Ohio. Van Vorst even went further and accused the court of being a “board of missionaries who had to convict someone of the crime in order to protect themselves.” Furthermore he insisted that unless a man committed the crime on embassy grounds he could not be held responsible in the United States.

Allen rebutted some of these claims in a letter that he wrote to the Secretary of State on December 12, 1903. He claimed that he had done everything possible to protect the rights of Flanagan both during the trial and after and that it was a ‘grievous matter’ for him to have to convict someone to life imprisonment. As to the charges of the missionaries having to protect themselves, this might have referred to the sharp criticism that the religious leaders received for their perceived indifference to Lake’s death and the fact that none of them officiated the funeral. Their excuse for not performing the ceremony was that they were all attending the Presbyterian Conference in Seoul and were unable to return in time.

George Lake was an old man at 53 years of age; he was in very poor health, his eyesight was nearly gone and his voice was low and weak, and he lived in a poor section of the Chinese Settlement at Chemulpo just before he died. He was described in a Chinese newspaper as an unobtrusive man of most genial temperament and exceedingly popular among his circle of acquaintances and was ever ready to bestow charities upon the needy. The Chinese residents of Chemulpo took up an offering and raised a tombstone[page 101] over his grave as a token of their appreciation to the kindness that he showed them during the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895. Not only was he generous to the Chinese, but also to the penniless John G. Flanagan, an American that would later be tried and found guilty of Lake’s murder.

Prof. Lane Earns12 has done a great deal of research into the life of George W. Lake revealing another side to George Lake that was far from the kind gentleman that the Chinese knew. George Lake arrived in Nagasaki in September 1860 and established one of the most important western companies (Lake & Co.) there, and also served as Marshall to the U.S. Consulate. From the very start he ran into trouble, in 1862 he was charged with assaulting a fellow American, a couple years later threatening a Japanese police officer and in 1871 was party to a paternity suit brought against him by a former prostitute that he lived with for a number of years.

In 1871 George Lake was deported from Nagasaki and made his way back to the United States, most likely Massachusetts-his home, where he managed to find himself in even more trouble. At one point he was arrested and convicted of incest and served time at Auburn State Prison in New York. It was in January 1893 that he made his way back to Nagasaki much to the displeasure of the American Consul William Abercrombie.

George Lake wasted no time and promptly found himself in trouble again- this time for assaulting his brother Edward. He managed to remain in Nagasaki for the remainder of the year but on January 1, 1894, he was arrested, his business closed and he was deported from Nagasaki to Shanghai, China. Three times he returned to Nagasaki and three times he was deported-the final time to Pusan on July 13, 1894, and it was most likely because of the opening of hostilities between China and Japan that he did not remain in Pusan or return to Nagasaki but instead made his way to Chemulpo. Obviously he avoided the Japanese part of the settlement and took up residence in the Chinese section, supporting the Chinese in retaliation for the Japanese having deported him.

It is obvious that he was not well liked by the other western members of[page 102] the foreign community-his funeral was held late at night attended only by the coolies that had been hired to transport his body to the cemetery and the policeman that accompanied them. There were no ministers or religious leaders in attendance and none to say a prayer over his burial grave-his death was mourned by few if any.

The Korean government obviously did not like him because of the deal involving his company in Nagasaki in regards to a ship that the Korean government bought for some 9,000 dollars in the mid- 1880s. The Korean government, under severe economic problems, fell behind on the payments and was forced to sell it back to Lake & Co for only an eighth of the original price. Later, Edward Lake, George’s brother and in charge of the company, complained about it to the American government and sought their help in obtaining additional money.

George Lake does not appear to have been mourned by anyone other than the Chinese-it is even a safe bet that there were no tears shed by his brother who did not even raise a tomb over his elder brother’s grave and with his death became the sole owner of the company.

Giving the benefit of doubt to the Chemulpo police and the community, the body was most likely buried quickly because of the diseased state of Mr. Lake and the oppressive heat of early September, which would have caused the body to decay quickly. No explanation has been given as to why the English doctor’s diagnosis of a natural death was over ruled by Allen, who never saw the body，yet, was able to rule it as a homicide. The initial coroner’s jury verdict was overturned and a new trial held-were all of these done as a result of political pressure from Senator Cabot Lodge.

1 Undiplomatic Memories, By William Franklin Sands, Page 29

2 The Independent, June 7，1898

3 The constable might have been the old Chinese constable that went through the streets at night with a set of wooden clackers chasing away the thieves, but he was later fired[page 103] because the noise bothered the Western residents of Chemulpo and replaced by an ex-navy British sailor. He did not last long. Soon after he had been hired a crime wave of thefts broke out and the Chinese Consul in Chemulpo suggested that the criminals (who were mainly Asians) were not afraid of the western policeman, even though he was young and strong, they were afraid of the Chinese constable and what his clacker represented-the attention of the gods.

4 Pioneer American Businessman in Korea, By Harold F. Cook, Page 70

Walter Townsend was perhaps the best well known American residing in Chemulpo. He served on the Municipal Council of Chemulpo and was the owner of his own trading company-one of the largest American interests in the country.

5 According to Harold F. Cook, the coroner’s jury consisted of Walter Townsend and two other Americans. In his book, Prof. Cook speculated that Townsend and Lake knew each other from Nagasaki but this seems highly unlikely as George Lake was deported in 1871 and didn’t return to Nagasaki until 1893. It is unlikely that Townsend was close to George Lake, he didn’t know where he lived, Townsend had close dealings with the Japanese and he did not attend Lake’s funeral.

6 This might have been Dr. E.H. Baldock who was the doctor at the English Church Mission at Chemulpo.

7 Sands claims that Senator Lodge arranged for his appointment as secretary to the Legation in Seoul. He also claimed that he could have had the position of Minister to Korea but he told the Assistant Secretary of State that he only aspired to be the secretary of the Legation. Allen later tried to get Sands transferred from Korea to China-under the pretext that it was for Sands, own good.

8 The Independent November 17, 1898

9 Undiplomatic Memories, By William Franklin Sands, Page 82

10 Mrs. Isabella Bird Bishop described the journey from Chemulpo to Seoul by river as: [page 104]

 “Nearly every passenger who has entrusted himself to the river has a tale to tell of the boat being deposited on a sandbank, and of futile endeavors to get off, of fretting and fuming， usually ending in hailing a passing sampan and getting up to Ma-pu many hours behind time, tired, hungry and disgusted.” The river was “not much patronized by people who respect themselves.” As to the road she said that it was plagued with deep mud, “nearly bottomless.” “Bullock-carts owned by Chinese attempt the transit of goods, and two or three embedded in the mud till the spring showed with what success.” Korea and Her Neighbours -，page 35

11 In the treaty ports Japanese money was often used, as were other silver currencies such as the British Sterling, American Dollar and especially the Mexican Silver Dollar. All of these foreign silver coins bore chop marks that verified the purity of the silver but because of the fluctuation of silver the value of these coins also fluctuated. The Japanese had several banks in Korea and their money was considered one of the safest-being guaranteed by their banks in Korea, and tended to be the most widely spread and convenient. I think that the Yen at this time was about the same value of a dollar and Constable Coleman’s salary in 1901 was $50 - which was considered to be well paid.

12 Prof. Lane Earns of the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin (Oshkosh) has done a great deal of research into the westerners that dwelt in Nagasaki just after it was opened to the west. He has done extensive research into George Lake and provided most of the information on George Lake’s life in the United States and Japan.