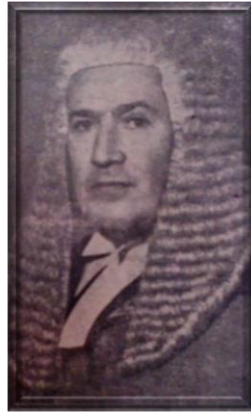


Chief Justice Sir Alasdair Duncan Atholl MacGregor
Honourary Member of Hong Kong Rotary Club
By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian)

15 December 2015



The Honourable Sir Alasdair Duncan Atholl MacGregor (麥理高爵士), Kt, CStJ, KC, MA (*Edinburgh*), BA (*Oxon*) (4 June 1883 – 30 October 1945) was a British jurist whose career spanned colonial administration and high judiciary in several British territories, culminating in his appointment as Chief Justice of the British Crown Colony Hong Kong (香港正按察司) from 1934 until his death in 1945. During this tenure, Sir Atholl MacGregor was elected Honourary Member of the Rotary Club of Hong Kong (香港扶輪社). He was the 5th Rotarian from the Club to be invested Knight Bachelor in 1935 by the British sovereign.

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, MacGregor earned a Master of Arts degree (MA) from the University of Edinburgh and a Bachelor of Arts (BA) from Lincoln College, Oxford, before being called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1909. His colonial service began as Assistant District Commissioner in Southern Nigeria (1912–1914) and progressed through roles including Police Magistrate in Lagos (1914–1922), Crown Counsel and Solicitor-General of Nigeria (1922–1926), Attorney-General of Trinidad and Tobago (1926–1929), and Attorney-General of Kenya (1929–1934), and was elevated to King's Counsel in 1927.

In Hong Kong, Chief Justice MacGregor demonstrated resilience amid the Japanese occupation of World War II, internment at Stanley Camp (赤柱拘留營) from 1941 to 1945, and continued to preside over cases for internees, including divorces, while contracting beriberi. His final official act was swearing in Franklin Charles Gimson (詹遜), CMG, as Acting Governor after the Imperial Japan was defeated and surrendered.

He was noted for his judicial acumen and popularity across postings, dying of illness aboard the hospital ship Highland Monarch en-route to England and buried at sea.



The Life of Alasdair Duncan Atholl MacGregor

Early life and education

Birth and family

Alasdair Duncan Atholl MacGregor was born on 4 June 1883, the son of Henrietta Forrester and Robert Roy MacGregor, an official in the Exchequer. His family resided at 55 Grange Loan in south Edinburgh, Scotland, a setting consistent with middle-class stability afforded by his father's civil service position.

MacGregor generally used the Christian name "Atholl". In some sources it is spelt "Athol". However, official announcements, such as his appointments and honours published in the 《London Gazette》, refer to him, as would be expected, by his full name of "Alasdair Duncan Atholl MacGregor".

In 1919, MacGregor married Gertrude Mary Tasker, the youngest daughter of R. Brandon Tasker of Marino, Caernarfon, North Wales. The couple had no children.

Education and bar admission

MacGregor attended the University of Edinburgh, where he obtained a Master of Arts degree. He then pursued further studies at Lincoln College, University of Oxford, earning a Bachelor of Arts. These qualifications provided the academic foundation for his legal career in the British Empire. In 1909, he was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn, enabling him to practice as a barrister in England and its colonies.

Colonial legal career

Service in Nigeria

MacGregor entered colonial service as Assistant District Commissioner in Southern Nigeria, a role he held from 1912 to 1914. This position entailed administrative duties in the British protectorate, including oversight of local governance, revenue collection, and enforcement of ordinances amid a patchwork of ethnic groups and traditional authorities resistant to centralized control.

In 1914, coinciding with the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria into a single colony, MacGregor transferred to the judiciary as Police Magistrate in Lagos, serving until 1922. Based in the bustling port city and administrative hub, he conducted summary trials for offenses ranging from petty theft to breaches of public order, applying English common law principles alongside native customs where applicable. His caseload contributed to the stabilization of urban law enforcement in a diverse populace of Europeans, Yoruba merchants, and migrants, helping to underpin colonial authority without extensive military intervention.

MacGregor's promotion in 1922 to Crown Counsel marked his shift to higher legal responsibilities, followed by elevation to Solicitor-General in 1923, positions he retained until departing Nigeria in 1926. As Crown Counsel, he prosecuted major criminal cases and

advised on legal interpretations. As Solicitor-General, he supervised the Attorney-General's department, drafted legislation, and represented the Crown in appellate matters. These senior postings honed his expertise in adapting British jurisprudence to colonial exigencies, such as land disputes and fiscal regulations, fostering a structured legal environment that prioritized evidentiary proceedings over arbitrary rule.

Attorney-General of Trinidad and Tobago

MacGregor was appointed Attorney-General of Trinidad and Tobago in 1926, serving until 1929 in the British Colony. In this role, he acted as the chief legal advisor to the colonial governor and administration, overseeing the prosecution of criminal cases and the enforcement of British common law principles adapted to local conditions.

During his tenure, MacGregor was elevated to King's Counsel in 1927, a mark of distinction for senior barristers demonstrating exceptional proficiency in advocacy and legal scholarship within the British Empire's judicial hierarchy. His responsibilities extended to drafting and reviewing legislation to align colonial statutes with imperial standards, thereby supporting administrative stability amid the diverse ethnic and economic dynamics of Trinidad and Tobago's sugar-based economy and growing urban centers. This period marked a progression in his colonial service, emphasizing impartial application of rule-of-law mechanisms that predated modern independence frameworks.

Attorney-General of Kenya

MacGregor was appointed Attorney-General of Kenya in 1929, following his service in Trinidad. He held the position until 1934, during which he provided legal advice to the colonial government on policy matters and oversaw the administration of justice, including prosecutions under British common law adapted to the East African context.

In Kenya, a colony characterized by European settler dominance in the highlands and resultant frictions with indigenous groups over land tenure and labor obligations, MacGregor's office handled legal oversight amid these administrative pressures. His tenure involved applying imperial legal frameworks to maintain order, though specific reforms or high-profile cases directly attributed to him remain undocumented in available records. The role demanded balancing colonial property rights with local customary practices, contributing to the stability of British governance in the territory.

MacGregor's Kenyan service marked a progression in his colonial legal career, leading to his appointment as Chief Justice of Hong Kong in 1934. This transition reflected recognition of his expertise in advisory and prosecutorial functions across diverse colonial jurisdictions.

Chief Justice of Hong Kong

MacGregor was appointed Chief Justice of Hong Kong in 1934, succeeding Sir Joseph Horsford Kemp (金培源爵士), and held the position until 1945. In this role, he oversaw the Supreme Court of the British Crown Colony, administering justice amid growing regional

tensions in East Asia, including extraterritorial responsibilities as a member of the full court of the British Supreme Court for China (英國在華最高法院／大英按察使司衙門) in the Shanghai International Settlement (上海公共租界).

Beyond Hong Kong, MacGregor extended his influence through ad hoc imperial duties, notably chairing a 1937 commission to examine the restoration of allowances for Malayan civil servants, a role that addressed post-Depression fiscal adjustments in British colonial administration across Southeast Asia. His tenure emphasized consistent enforcement of British common law principles in a multicultural jurisdiction, earning contemporary accounts of his “abilities of a high order” and personal rapport with legal peers, though primary evaluations prioritize documented case administration over anecdotal acclaim.

World War II internment

Capture and camp conditions

Outbreak of the Pacific War followed by the Imperial Japan’s attack on Hong Kong in the morning of 8 December 1941, and the subsequent Battle of Hong Kong (香港保衛戰), British colonial authorities surrendered on 25 December 1941, marking the onset of occupation and the disruption of pre-War governance structures. Sir Atholl MacGregor, as Chief Justice, was among the Western civilians interned by Japanese forces, with transfers to Stanley Internment Camp commencing on 21 January 1942. The Camp, located on the southern tip of Hong Kong Island, initially held internees in former military barracks and prison facilities, accommodating roughly 2,400 British, 300 American, and 60 Dutch nationals by early February 1942, totaling about 3,000 men, women, and children.

Camp conditions were marked by severe overcrowding and resource scarcity, with groups of up to nine individuals, including MacGregor and his wife, sharing single large rooms lacking basic amenities like electricity and adequate water in the initial months. Japanese rations consisted primarily of polished rice supplemented minimally with salt, vegetables, and occasional meat or fish---often requiring internees to pay from frozen bank accounts, such as a collective \$86,000 withdrawal in February 1942 for extras---resulting in chronic calorie deficits and nutritional imbalances. This diet precipitated widespread malnutrition, manifesting in deficiency diseases. Beriberi, caused by thiamine shortage, afflicted at least 250 internees in 1942 alone, with symptoms including edema, heart complications, and neuropathy, though medical efforts by camp doctors mitigated fatalities relative to military prisoner-of-war camps.

Additional hardships included firewood shortages in 1942–1943 for cooking, periodic water crises (e.g. autumn 1944), and limited medical supplies, exacerbated by Japanese military control from January 1944 under figures like Colonel Tokunaga Isao (德永功大佐), who enforced strict oversight but allowed some internees self-organization for daily operations. Three deliveries of International Red Cross parcels provided sporadic relief, but overall, the environment tested physical endurance amid the Axis occupation’s logistical

strains, with internees documenting resilience through improvised adaptations rather than capitulation to despair.

Judicial role during internment

During his internment at Stanley Camp from December 1941 to August 1945, Sir Atholl MacGregor informally assumed the role of Chief Justice for the approximately 2,000 civilian internees, adjudicating disputes and performing legal functions such as granting divorces despite the absence of formal judicial authority under Japanese occupation. He also solemnized marriages among internees, maintaining a semblance of British legal order in the face of captivity and resource scarcity, which included rudimentary proceedings held in camp facilities like the hospital block.

MacGregor's actions exemplified a commitment to legal continuity, resolving interpersonal conflicts over rations, accommodations, and personal matters through ad hoc tribunals that relied on pre-War statutes and common law principles, thereby fostering camp governance amid Japanese oversight. This role extended to advisory functions for camp committees, underscoring his prioritization of rule of law over capitulation, even as Japanese authorities nominally controlled the internees' administration.

Following the Japanese surrender on 15 August 1945, MacGregor's final judicial act occurred on August 16th, when he administered the oath of office to Colonial Secretary Franklin Charles Gimson as Acting Governor of Hong Kong, reasserting British civil authority in the territory prior to formal Allied military administration. This ceremony, conducted within the Camp, symbolized the restoration of pre-occupation governance structures and highlighted MacGregor's enduring authority among British officials.

Circumstances of death

Following the Allied liberation of Hong Kong in August 1945, MacGregor, severely debilitated by over three years of internment, was carried aboard the first hospital ship evacuating ill civilians, the Highland Monarch, en-route to England. The physical toll of camp conditions, including chronic malnutrition, had left him with beriberi---a thiamine deficiency disease causing heart failure and edema---that proved irreversible despite medical efforts during repatriation.

On 30 October 1945, aged 62, MacGregor died at sea off Port Sudan in the Red Sea, before the ship could pass through the Suez Canal. His remains were committed to a burial at sea, with a memorial stone subsequently erected on his parents' grave in Morningside Cemetery, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Posthumous recognition and impact

MacGregor is memorialized on his parents' grave in Morningside Cemetery, Edinburgh. In Hong Kong, his tenure as Chief Justice (1934–1945) included sustaining courts within Stanley Internment Camp---handling cases like divorces despite privation.

Honors

Rotarian Atholl MacGregor was invested Knight Bachelor in the 1935 Birthday Honours, reflecting recognition of his judicial service under George V, King of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, and Emperor of India.

He was further appointed Commander of the Venerable Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem (CStJ) in 1940, honoring his contributions to imperial legal and charitable institutions.



1978 年以前，這棟最高法院大樓是香港正按察司辦公室所在地。

Before 1978, this Supreme Court Building housed the Office of the Chief Justice of Hong Kong.



1943 年以前，英國在華最高法院設於上海公共租界的英國領事館大院內。

The British Supreme Court for China was housed in the British Consulate compound in Shanghai International Settlement, before 1943.