



PARLIAMENT, THE PRESS, AND THE CHINESE WARS

by

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P R E F A C E

The purpose of this book is to make a systematic examination of how events in China between the years 1832 and 1860 presented themselves to the English mind; it is a study in public opinion rather than a historical record of material development. In the interest of the reader it has been necessary to retell the story of events in China, although to hope to do this better and more fully than has already been done by H.B. Morse in The International Relations of the Chinese Empire, and, after him, by Mr. W.C. Costin in Great Britain and China, would be presumptuous indeed. I have striven to be punctilious in acknowledging actual arguments and quotations consciously taken from either book, but only those who know them at first-hand will be aware of my full debt to both writers. In one important respect only is my story different from theirs: my business has been to draw special attention to those events in China which had what present-day journalists call news-value rather than to give a comprehensive account of all that happened there; in doing this I can only hope that my attempts not to distort historical truth have been successful; those who want the full record must refer to the two authorities that have been mentioned. In the circumstances I have been free from the discipline imposed upon himself by Morse, 'to give the events of the period such relative importance as they deserve; to lay no undue stress on picturesque episodes, even though they might help to lighten the narrative; and, knowingly, to omit none of those minor occurrences which, dull and uninteresting though they might be,

were still important elements in moulding the opinions and guiding the actions of the principal actors on the scene.¹ To say this,

Op. cit. p.VII

however, is not to mean that I have been free from all discipline; my responsibility has been to give a just account of how the news of events in China was received in England, a responsibility which I think the reader will in due course see has been a very onerous one.

It will be clear from what has been said that the present book is about England and not about China. It is a social study of Victorian life - an attempt to recapture the spirit of the period from Hansard, the newspapers, biographies, travel books and other popular sources. After so much work I have naturally developed a great interest in Chinese life and a profound sympathy for the Chinese people, but I hope that I have at no point assumed an authority which is not mine; to do that would be to repeat the mistake of many of the Journalists and others whose opinions we are in due course to study. My method of work has been to read contemporary sources to the point at which I became aware that I was discovering ~~nothing~~ fresh of significance, and that to push on further would be to risk becoming stale and writing a book that was dead. The pedant might require of a writer on public opinion that he should read everything that was said about the subject he is to discuss, but those who have any idea of how much is said, and repeated, in press and public places about topical excitements will know how impossible of achievement this ideal is, and may recall the story of Dr. Johnson's having refused fresh material for his life of Pope on the

grounds that he had enough already. Mass observation is no more possible of the past than it is of the present.

In giving my evidence I have striven after fairness and accuracy and am not uneasy about the general spirit of my book - after reading the material the effect left upon my mind is as is stated in the following pages. But I fear that I may have unwittingly made minor mistakes and in an occasional detail been unjust (or over fair) here and there to newspapers and persons I have quoted. In my original search I took every care in copying the documents, but those with experience will know how difficult it is to avoid the creeping in of error. I had hoped to return to England to check my references, but the outbreak of war makes the possibility of this so remote that I have thought it better to publish my work as it is. Should any reader discover inaccuracies, I should much appreciate his pointing them out to me so that I may correct them if an opportunity occurs. Inconsistencies in the spelling of Chinese proper names should not be regarded as mistakes; in my own comment I use identical spellings throughout, but in quotations I have reproduced the original. This will present no practical difficulty to the reader.

Another fear I have about my work is that it may fall between two stools, that the reader may say that, although it purports to be about English opinion rather than the Chinese wars, the emphasis is not clear enough. If he makes this criticism, I can only ask his indulgence; in practice a satisfactory mode of presentation was very difficult to find. The documents seemed worth recording but, after consideration and experiment, I concluded that a book composed mainly of documents

would fail to bring out completely their full significance, and I hope in due course the reader will agree that it is only with their background as a foil that they are shown in their proper light. An alternative might have been to tell the story even more directly from topical sources, but I think that such a course would have made my work unnecessarily diffuse and too much of a scrap-book. As it is I fear the reader will sometimes wish that the newspaper writers and parliamentary orators whose opinions are quoted had expressed themselves more succinctly. A deeper consideration is that it would be wrong to give quoted material a greater order than it can properly bear. In times of excitement the public mind works in such a confused way that to represent its thought as a coherent and logical process would be to distort the facts. Whatever it may have been at other times, the immediate determining factor in Anglo-Chinese relations at this period was economic, and most of the opinions that are to be quoted in the following pages would have been regarded by Carlyle as a Logic-varnish to a very material process. In fact, what in large measure we have to do is to study the difference between what men say and what they do. It seemed best, therefore, to describe their actions directly and to let them speak for themselves when the time came to justify those actions.

It must not be concluded from what has just been said that my work is thrown into a rigid Marxian framework. The sensible materialist who wants food for his mind, or ammunition for his guns, will find it in plenty in the following pages, but he will misread them if he treats them in a doctrinaire spirit. Lowes Dickinson rightly made his John Chinaman say to the Englishmen 'it is a matter of life and death to me

to find markets in which you may dispose of your manufactures, and from which you may derive your food and raw material¹², but we must not jump

¹²Letters of John Chinaman (George Allen & Unwin), p.11.

from the truism that imperialism is an economic process to the ⁱⁿprobable philosophic assumption that economics is the final cause of all human development. To do so in fact would be to be as simple as many of the politicians, merchants, missionaries, journalists, foreign-office officials, soldiers, and others, who are shown in the following pages to have regarded the opening up of China as a stage on the road to a commercial and social and religious millenium. If we are to interpret history properly our imagination above all things must be kept alive, and to attempt, for example, to explain away the sack and burning of the Summer Palace at Peking in 1860 on the grounds that the English wished to sell nightcaps to the Chinese is as ridiculous in fact as it sounds in words. The task of the philosophic historian is to make such an act intelligible to the student, to discover and display the human motives and states of mind that made it possible, to treat it as a manifestation of the hidden forces behind social development. In the following pages no attempt whatever is made to do anything of this kind, but it is hoped that what is said may be some slight aid to those who wish to make a more subtle interpretation of history than is fashionable at the moment. And the matter itself of the story to be told may be moving enough to produce that exaltation of mind without which thought is sterile.

E.G.B.