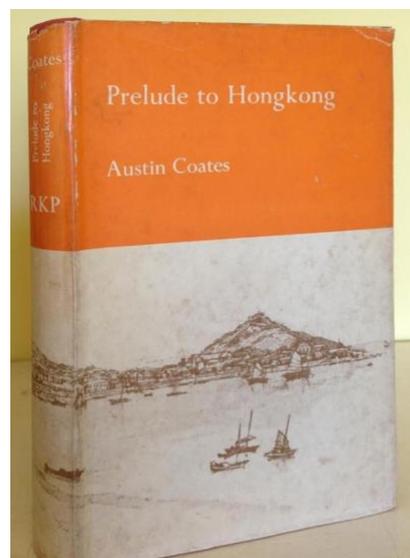


The In & Out Club Library

8 October 2020

As the 8th October is the anniversary in 1856 of the start of the Second Opium War, this seems a good time to remember the Opium Wars generally. They had begun in 1839, after the amount of opium sold through British colonial traders to Chinese smugglers reached record proportions; so much so that the Emperor ordered his commissioner to end the trade, and the latter considered sending a plea to Queen Victoria for her help. In the end, nearly 1300 tons of opium was seized by Chinese troops, and ransomed by the British commissioner, after which the Chinese destroyed it. It is hard to see now why this trade was propped up by the British government, since the opium smuggled back to the Chinese was having such a devastating effect on the people; but the trade and taxes accrued in Britain generated considerable wealth, and made it worth the intervention of the Royal Navy. The conclusion of this war in 1842 ended with the secession of Hong Kong and its islands to Britain, together with fines and trading treaties.



The Club possesses a copy of *Prelude to Hong Kong* by Austin Coates, a fascinating survey of British relations and trade with China, which takes the start of the process back for two centuries before the Opium Wars, with a further expedition back in time to the Portuguese establishment of the trading city of Macao in 1557. As Coates points out, 'Portuguese endurance in Macao was the foot by means of which... the door of China was prevented from closing entirely'. It was a hard door to squeak through, however, and it wasn't until eighty years later that the first English trading voyage took place.



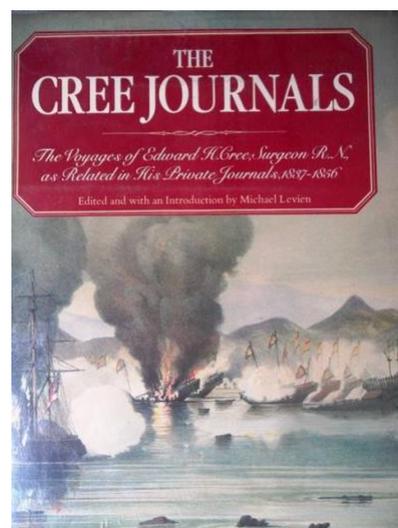
Peter Mundy, sketch of Macao made in 1637, on John Weddell's voyage

This was undertaken by John Weddell, bearing a letter from Charles I, but having very little understanding of the political situation between the Portuguese and Chinese, the viewpoints and verbal tone of the latter, and indeed no knowledge of the Chinese language at all, he was entirely unsuccessful, and both nations ended with even less knowledge of each other than they had had at the beginning. Coates's unpicking of their misunderstandings – ‘the total void in understanding which lay between the Chinese and the foreigners’ – is a masterly revelation of his own historical and geographical understanding.



Anson received by
the Viceroy of
Canton, 1743

The same incomprehension, but magnified, surrounded Captain George Anson's visit to Macao in 1742, when the Chinese did not understand that foreign ships might be war- rather than cargo ships, and that British warships possessed a power of which they were quite unaware. In the same way, the European idea of China had changed from, in the mid-17th century, regarding it as admirable, cultivated and well-governed, to a mid-16th century view of China as ‘badly governed and backward.. [full of] corruption, cowardice, greed and arrogance’. The stage was set for all the increasing frictions which finally led to the wars; although Coates makes it clear that, at several points in the history of Chinese-European trade, if the Chinese themselves had only cracked down on the illicit exploitation of opium, things would never have come to the pass they did.



The Cree journals, edited by Michael Levien, which retail the experiences of a Royal Navy Surgeon, are also a splendid introduction to the First Opium War, and fully illustrated with Cree's own

watercolours. This account is again rigid with incomprehension of ‘insolent message[s]’, which were the accepted Chinese way of enforcing their view, and in the Chinese of such fear of the ‘barbarians’ that they would slaughter their own families rather than leave them to the justice of the British.

Both books stop in the 1840s, with misunderstanding still at a height from which it may still not have declined very much at all.



Edward Cree, *Near the north gate of Shanghai*, watercolour, 1840s