

Free Trade's First Missionary

Sir John Bowring in Europe and Asia

Philip Bowring



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Introduction

This book is about a man in his time. Born in 1792 and died in 1872, Bowring deserves to be recognized as one of the most remarkable men of his era, not because he was the most famous in any one field but because of his impact on so many, at the moment when Britain was the world's leading nation.

Bowring was the original advocate of free trade, which he saw as a key part of the reform movements of the early 19th century, linked to freedom of religion and the development of parliamentary democracy. He acted as its tribune around Europe and the Levant as well as in Britain. Then, on being posted to the East, he played a key if controversial role in the opening, by force when all else failed, of China and Siam to the benefits of trade.

The lesser legacies of Bowring include public accounts reform; decimalization; his translations of poetry from many languages; his support for Spanish reformers, Greek independence fighters, Chartism and Unitarianism; his opposition to slavery; his promotion of the ideas of his friend Jeremy Bentham; his enlightened entrepreneurship in iron and railways; his composition of hymns; his writings on subjects varying from Egypt under Mohammed Ali to Siam and the Philippines; and his representation of the kings of Siam and Hawaii to the courts of Europe.

His five years as plenipotentiary in China and governor of Hong Kong were not his most successful, but his lifetime achievements mark him out as the most accomplished of the twenty-eight individuals to hold that post during 156 years of British rule. He helped lay the foundations of free trade to which he had devoted his life and for which Hong Kong remains a global symbol to this day. He bears comparison with Sir Stamford Raffles, ruler of Java and founder of modern Singapore. Raffles left a much bigger mark in Asia, but not much of one elsewhere. Both men were from modest backgrounds, with little formal education; both had remarkable

capacities for work, were accomplished linguists, dedicated to learning as well as action, ambitious risk-takers who believed that Britain, trade and science could together make the world a better place. Both were better at advancing ideas than implementing them; both fell afoul of officials in London. And, curiously, both were shipwrecked on their way home from the East.

Born the year in which revolutionary France became a republic, Bowring died shortly after the creation of the German Empire and the Meiji Restoration in Japan, and just as the population of the United States surpassed that of the United Kingdom. His adult life thus spanned the whole period of British dominance. Over a long life, he accomplished more than contemporaries who are better known today such as Richard Cobden. The diversity of his activities, and the controversy over his role in China, has distracted attention from the totality of his legacy.

He was the product of a revolutionary era. His life began in the immediate aftermath of two revolutions, the French and the American. The American Revolution was the more fundamental. The Americans declared “no taxation without representation” doing so in language that was measured, yet brooked no argument. The rights of man were “self-evident”. The Americans then put into practice—other than for black people—the democratic, decentralized, power-dispersing ideals they wrote into their constitution.

The French Revolution was a belated rejection of a whole social order of kings, priests and aristocrats. It quickly degenerated into Jacobinism and then into an aggressive nationalism that led to years of warfare throughout Europe; years of reaction followed and then new revolutionaries—the socialists reacting against industrial capitalism, empire and free trade.

The ideas behind these revolutions were defining issues also for Britain, shaping the intellectual debate over political reform. Bowring, an associate of Bentham and then a founder of the Anti-Corn Law League and supporter of the Chartists, was a participant for forty years in the reform politics of this time, and in liberalism’s fight against post-Napoleonic reaction in Europe. He had direct personal involvement in the struggles of European liberals, for which he was briefly jailed; he was an acquaintance of Coleridge, Carlyle, and others; the editor of a leading journal, the *Westminster Review*; a translator of various foreign poets and a writer of hymns. He was a link between British and European figures in literature, trade and politics.

Before anyone else did, he preached free trade, not just as a theoretical idea or as good for his business but as a path to economic growth. He used his linguistic

skills to preach it around Europe, adhering to mercantilist views of trade. He was acknowledged in Europe as Britain's foremost espouser of the idea of unfettered commerce, by governments and by opponents such as Karl Marx and Friedrich List.

A third revolution that took place in his lifetime was the Industrial Revolution, gathering momentum around 1790 with canals, large-scale factories, the advent of mechanization in textiles and the application of steam power. In Britain, it reached its apogee some fifty years later, with the age of railways, iron, mass manufacture, steamships and globalized trade. Bowring, sometimes to his cost, was involved as an entrepreneurial businessman, as well as a politician, in trade, iron and railways. The Industrial Revolution brought radicalism to new manufacturing cities such as Bolton, which he represented in parliament. Manufacturing in turn generated free trade politics, the end of protection for agriculture and its attendant aristocracy, and boosted British interest in trade and empire.

The other global event of the time was the extension of European, especially British, direct rule to most of the non-European world. Europeans had had overseas possessions for three hundred years already, but these were mostly commercial enterprises. Imperialism developed differently as the 19th century wore on, acquiring its own logic of expansion, pushed by new communications, big power rivalries and new production technologies. The various facets of freedom—national, individual, economic, social, religious—clashed; different versions of progress contended with one another. Bowring began as a strong critic of imperialism, but became, despite many reservations, an agent of empire, even while maintaining many radical opinions.

This was the age of the inspired amateur, the self-educated polymath, the skilled craftsman who invented his way to big business, all the while supporting radical opinions. This was the pre- and early Victorian age of enterprise, before Britain settled into a self-satisfied high noon of empire, comfort and high Anglicanism. This was the era of the small trader from Exeter made good as linguist, economist, writer, politician, entrepreneur, poet, historian, diplomat, amateur scientist and family man. He was a representative of the radical liberal spirit of the first half of the century—his career in business and politics reflected both the strengths and contradictions of that liberalism.

Bowring was a flawed man. He wore ambition on his sleeve, perhaps the result of his relatively lowly middle-class, Unitarian origins at a time when literature and politics were mostly the preserve of the well-born. In his younger days, he was

notorious for name-dropping and ingratiating himself with famous people. Later, he could be boastful, high-handed and over-confident. His enthusiasms tended to be stronger than his judgement, which got him into trouble commercially, politically and diplomatically.

Yet nothing should take away from the breadth of his achievements in diverse fields and his lasting impact on several, including the ideal of global free trade and relations between China, Siam and the Western powers. Nor could his weaknesses hide his success as a husband and father of a brood of high-performing children who were typical of their own, different, generation. Bowring encapsulated and helped shape the sixty years of British dominance, from the Siege of San Sebastián to the Franco-Prussian War.

Chapter 1

Exeter Lad's Radical Roots

On 23 October 1856, Rear Admiral Sir Michael Seymour, acting on the instructions of Sir John Bowring, Her Britannic Majesty's plenipotentiary in China, attacked and captured the four barrier forts guarding the Pearl River's access to Guangzhou (Canton), in retaliation for the Chinese seizure of a small merchant ship, the *Arrow*. A few days later, HMS *Encounter* shelled Guangzhou to back up broader British demands for access to the city, as promised by the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. Thus, the liberal trader and intellectual who had once been the secretary of the Peace Society found himself starting what had been intended as a "police action" but became a four-year war. Now known as the Second Opium War, it was fought between the world's major power, Britain, and the world's most populous nation, China.

The man who had seen the waste of war as a supplier to the Duke of Wellington's army during the war against Napoleon had, without quite knowing it, started another. That October decision would do much to undermine the reputation of a man whose remarkably diverse talents had been on public display for forty years; in the process, he lost many friends in the radical and literary worlds in which he had thrived—without winning new ones among the aristocrats and conservatives who thought him a radical upstart.

By another irony, a little less than a hundred years later, China came to be ruled by the Communist Party, devoted not just to anti-imperialism but to the ideas of Karl Marx. It was this same Marx, theorist and journalist, who had viewed Bowring as a key opponent. Bowring—the radical, secular advocate of free trade, capitalism, open markets and liberal democracy—stood against Marx, who saw those ideas as leading to the exploitation of the working class in England and the promotion of imperialism abroad. Bowring never wrote either a long theoretical work like *Das*

Kapital or a rousing pamphlet like the *Communist Manifesto*. But in his time he did as much to promote free trade as Marx did to attack it.

Indeed, until the First World War destroyed most of the empires and institutions of Europe, it was Bowring's world view that was in the ascendant. Lenin rescued Marx from obscurity, while Bowring sank.

Yet, if Bowring and his version of free trade came to grief at least temporarily in China, they flourished in Southeast Asia, partly as a result of his remarkable friendship with the King of Siam. His treaty with Siam, of historic importance for Southeast Asia, provided at the time little counterweight to his failures in China, but proved to have greater long-term impact. Bowring's years in the East were but the epilogue of an extraordinary career that began on the quayside of his hometown, Exeter, and that echoes today in decimalized coins, chapel hymns, and iron and railway projects that were at the heart of industrializing, risk-taking Britain.

It was on that Exeter quay, where woollens were loaded and wine unloaded, that a young boy of modest family background developed an interest not just in trade but in the many languages of the traders who came there. It was on the quayside that he first learned some Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, German and Dutch, through speaking as well as studying. Later, he achieved lasting fame as a polyglot. This facility with languages also became the foundation of almost all his subsequent interests—trade, Spain, liberal movements, literature, politics, economics, the affairs of Europe and of East Asia. But it was always to Exeter that he returned, dying in 1872 close to where he had been born eighty years earlier.

The West Country of England, of which Exeter is the major city, appears on the nation's fringe, modestly populated, far from London, with no huge castles or famous palaces. But it has usually punched above its weight in a nation built on enterprise and the sea. When conquered by Roman legions in AD 49, it was already a town with a history of trade with the Mediterranean. They named it Isca Dumnoniorum, meaning "water of the Dumnonii", after the Celtic tribe that had inhabited the area; today, in Welsh, the city is known as Caerwysg and the river Exe as the Wysg. The Romans made Isca Dumnoniorum the terminus of one of their trunk roads, the Fosse Way, which ran to Lincoln in the northeast. It was the limit of Roman westward expansion but an important urban centre with a marketplace and public baths and a port trading wool and minerals with the European mainland.

The ancestors of John Bowring would have been among the Saxon settlers who reached the area in the 7th century. The suffix *-ing* means “belonging to a clan or family group”; in 1303, one John Bouryng held the manor still known as Bowringsleigh, near the old port of Kingsbridge in southwest Devon. (The suffix *-leigh* means “clearing or meadow”.) This branch of the Bowring family fell on hard times and sold out in the late 17th century. The manor house still stands. Another branch of the Bowring family lived at Chulmleigh, a small Devon town also engaged in the wool trade. Its years of prosperity are indicated by its large parish church; its dissenter past is evidenced by a Congregational chapel, later patronized by Unitarians. It displays the “Arms of John Bowring who gave the ground”. Sometime in the early 18th century, the Bowring business moved from Chulmleigh to Exeter, where it remained.¹

Dissent was the norm among those in the wool trade. The Bowrings were no exception, being strongly anti-Jacobite in the late 17th century and remaining so through subsequent generations. Like many artisans and merchants, they were out of sympathy with the ruling classes—the big landowners and the established church. The West Country had a history of non-conformism due to the absence of large estates, remoteness from London and an economic dependence on the sea, on trade and on wool. The Bowrings and their ilk came to be associated with what many saw as the most extreme version of non-conformism, Unitarianism, which rejected the notion of the Holy Trinity.

Exeter had strong links to the North American colonies. Bowring's grandfather, also called John, a fuller and woollens merchant, had expressed sympathy for the American colonists. Comparing the American Revolution to England's Glorious Revolution in 1688, which overthrew King James II, he said, “It appears to me that we had *no* right to tax America.”² He attempted to alleviate the plight of American prisoners held at Exeter during the war. Later, John Adams, second president of the United States, as the US ambassador in London, called on him to offer thanks on the Americans' behalf.³ The visit also had a family basis, as the two were distantly related through Adams's wife, Abigail. The Adamses were also Unitarians. Such transatlantic connections were not unusual, but became a source of pain during the War of Independence and the War of 1812.

The grandfather's strong character left an impression on young Bowring, who was born on 17 October 1792, the first child of Charles Bowring and Sarah Lane, daughter of the vicar of St Ives in Cornwall. His parents' house, Little Larkbeare,

was next door to that of his grandfather where a portrait of Oliver Cromwell hung in the parlour.⁴

Little Larkbeare was then owned by the Baring family who lived across the road at Great Larkbeare. They were originally from Bremen, the Hanseatic state, but became Exeter wool merchants and one of the richest families in the West Country. In 1762, they founded Baring Brothers, the merchant bank that became the most prestigious in the City of London before being brought down in 1995 by the speculations of a trader in Singapore. Charles bought Little Larkbeare, described as a “substantial brick house with the great serge warehouse by its side”, in 1822.⁵ The original houses no longer exist, but an elaborately carved Tudor stone doorway from Great Larkbeare is displayed at Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum.

Young Bowring would regularly go next door for breakfast with his grandfather, from whom he learned to recite poetry and acquired a passion for reading. He was later to note that “the arrival of the *Gentleman's Magazine* was in those days a great event, and a long series of volumes from its very commencement occupied no small space on the library shelves being to him and to me a field of constantly instructive and amusing reference”.⁶ The magazine was a fixture in the houses of many politically aware people for at least a century, from its foundation in 1731. Samuel Johnson was one of its earlier employees. Indeed, it pioneered the word *magazine* (originally meaning “storehouse”) as applied to journalism. The Bowrings were also readers of the *Flying Post*, a Whig paper that arrived from London but which also had a local equivalent known as *Treuman's Exeter Flying Post*, covering local news.

Bowring's father, Charles, a reforming liberal in the family tradition, traded woollen cloth to the Baltic and the Iberian Peninsula and to the East India Company (EIC), for sales to China. The young Bowring was the eldest of nine children, of whom only three survived into adulthood. He appears to have had a happy childhood, adoring his grandparents, describing his father as having the “sweetest temperament” and noting his mother's aptitude for mental arithmetic and knowledge of the Bible—though her religion was “unostentatious and silent”. At least as viewed from later in life, even St Leonard's, the Exeter parish where he was born and grew up, was a haven of peace and modest prosperity:

There was neither doctor nor lawyer, clergyman nor publican, tax-gatherer nor soldier. There was little disease to be cured by the physicians, little vice to be reprov'd by clergymen, no pothouse or tavern to encourage drunkenness, no riots to be suppressed and there being no paupers there were no poor-rates to be collected.⁷

But if Exeter life was quiet and secure, the wider world was in turmoil, political and intellectual. For the Bowrings, the centre of worship was not St Leonard's church but George's Meeting, an imposing building in the heart of the city where dissenters gathered, and where the doctrine of the Trinity had been under attack since early in the 18th century. By 1800, George's Meeting had three Unitarian ministers—one renowned for his rapport with the poor, one for his intellectualism, one for his interest in science—representing the three facets of the radicalism of the age. These were not easy times for Unitarians. They were viewed as religious heretics, unpatriotic sympathizers with American independence and, after the French Revolution, as dangerous Jacobins. Grandfather John had his effigy burned in Exeter's cathedral yard. The Unitarians were a close-knit community and, in Bowring's own words, "took to money-making, as persecuted frequently do and found compensation in doing better from a worldly point of view than their neighbours".⁸

School for Bowring was a Unitarian establishment in Moretonhampstead, a small market town on the lower slopes of bleak, granite Dartmoor and hometown of his maternal grandmother, Margaret Hutchings.⁹ According to Bowring, "there were then no roads passable by wheeled carriages of any sort".¹⁰ Transport was by pack-horse. Unitarians may have been enlightened, but the school had drunken masters and a headmaster later convicted of forgery. This gentleman, James Bransby, stayed out of jail but went from forgery to plagiarism, making a modest living as a writer.

The boys of Moretonhampstead were a trouble-making bunch, prone to annoying the local inhabitants. Bowring was flogged only once, for a minor and un-deliberate act of carelessness, but it left a deep impression on him. He had accidentally spilled ink over the drawing of another boy he believed was a good friend but who then personally inflicted the punishment. "The early lesson in human faithlessness was engraved on my heart," he later wrote.¹¹ He did learn a lot and enjoyed the local countryside: "Those were most happy days. Our rambles were delightful. We were accustomed to trace the hill streams to their very source, to scramble over rocks and to visit the waterfalls . . . the lighthearted days of healthful, joyous boyhood." However, he also noted, "The moor was indeed in winter a most dreary and desolate place on which people were not infrequently frozen to death when they lost their way."¹²

By the age of 12, he was writing letters that his son Lewin would describe as having “a somewhat didactic and moralising tone which seems strangely at variance with the natural buoyancy of youth”.¹³ He engaged in strenuous religious debates, notably with a cousin who became an eminent barrister. He was later to write of these arguments:

As to the results of the religious controversy, they were exactly what they ordinarily are. Neither made any advances towards the conversion of the other. We became angry, each despising his adversary for being blind and deaf to the counter arguments which each deemed irresistible.

Indeed, his late life reflections seem to contain implied self-criticism of his tendency to be moralizing and stubborn:

Too many a controversy has been, I fear, rather instrumental in developing impatience, ignorance, intolerance and evil passions rather than in furthering the progress of truth and charity.¹⁴

Formal schooling was short. By 13, he was back in Exeter as a clerk in his father's business. Strong religious feelings gave rise to the idea that he might become a dissenting minister. But there was another side to his character, inquisitive more than moralizing, which appears to have swayed him from joining the ministry. Instead, he joined Kennaway & Company, a substantial firm in the woollen and wine trade with Iberia. The boss, Robert Kennaway, encouraged his linguistic talents; he began writing a daily journal in various languages. His broader education also continued. The most important non-family influence was Dr. Lant Carpenter, who had become a minister at George's Meeting in 1805. To Carpenter “he owed a boundless debt”, not only for his religious teaching and example, but for his lectures and experiments in “chemistry, electricity and galvanism” and also “geography, astronomy and the use of globes”.¹⁵ Carpenter combined earnestness with an ability to communicate with his pupils.

A sense of the wider world was easily acquired in Exeter. The port was past its prime, but was still “crowded with the ships of all nations carrying away a great variety of woollen goods”.¹⁶ Exeter merchants were well travelled and familiar with foreign languages. Through a mix of conversations with visiting merchants and the study of books, Bowering's diligence and facility with languages soon found him with a working knowledge of six. But the future did not lie in Exeter. Though its merchants were prospering in the 18th century from their traditional cloth

businesses, the industry was still a closed shop, with all manner of regulations protecting established players:

There was an influential guild whose magnates met in an ancient building in the main street of the city called the Tuckers' Hall. Time was when the merchants, fullers, tuckers, weavers, dyers, pressmen and packers of Exeter held the representation of the city in their hands.¹⁷

As Bowring later wrote:

The trade of Exeter was crushed by privileges and monopolies. All the conditions of production were imposed by stringent laws. No one would enter except through the narrow door of apprenticeship and the freedom of the few was necessarily associated with the vassalage of the many . . . It was all in vain. The fetters imposed by monopoly were feebler than the pinions of freedom and the trade fled to regions where it had least to fear interference and molestation.¹⁸

His own father, Charles, was “one of the last representatives of the ancient woollen trade of Exeter and saw its final decay and departure to the north”.¹⁹ There, the West Riding of Yorkshire had coal for power as well as water for other processes. A short distance away across the Pennine hills, Lancashire's cotton industry was to grow even faster than the wool industry to meet imperial markets; it drew its raw material from the southern United States, where cotton was replacing tobacco—in the process increasing demand for slave labour at a time when slavery was being abolished elsewhere.

The world outside was moving faster than Exeter. Needing to widen his own horizons, Bowring moved to London in 1810, at the age of 18, to work in the house of Milford and Co. Originally from a similar Unitarian and cloth-making background, the Milfords had already expanded their range as merchants and had a branch of the family business in London.²⁰

Chapter 5

Polyglot Poet Meets Kubla Khan

The Greek and trading traumas notwithstanding, the *Westminster Review* position and his Bentham relationship gave Bowring continuing status. He was in constant touch with assorted literary figures from around Europe, entertaining them at Bentham's Queen Square house and showing off his ability to converse in many tongues—which monolingual English guests found extremely tedious, leading at least one contemporary to refer to him as “Dr. Boring”. That writer, Charles MacFarlane, later described one Bowring gathering as:

A tedious, desolating affair full of foreigners and political refugees from all countries . . . and the agreeable pastime was to hear the Doctor talking Magyar with a Hungarian, Slavonic with a Pole, German with a German, and Spanish, Portugese, Swedish, Danish and Dutch . . . I never saw such a display of vanity . . . The Doctor was one continuous torrent of talk.¹

The doctoral title, which he invariably used until his knighthood, was conferred in 1829 by the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, in recognition of his contributions to various European liberal movements and his interest in the Netherlands, shown in particular by his publication in 1824 of *Batavian Anthology*, a collection of poems in Dutch, and *Sketch of the Language and Literature of Holland* four years later. University doctorates were then much scarcer than today, so the title lent him an aura of learning that he used to great effect.

He churned out a stream of translations, while also continuing to write poetry, or rather hymns, of his own. All together he wrote eighty-eight hymns, most of them in his younger days. The majority were published between 1823 (*Matins and Vespers*) and 1825 (*Hymns*). Editions were published in the United States. The first American edition, published in 1827, was the second London edition. Enlarged volumes appeared in 1841 and 1851; he also contributed to a collection

by Unitarian minister J. R. Beard of Manchester in 1837. *A Memorial Volume of Sacred Poetry* was published after his death by his widow, containing already published hymns and others from periodicals and manuscripts. Most of his hymns were known mainly to Unitarians but a few became more widely used.

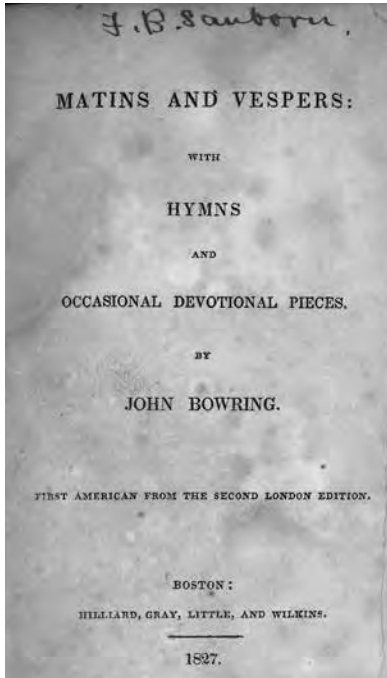


Figure 2

Title page from *Matins and Vespers with Hymns and Occasional Devotional Pieces*, John Bowring, 1827, author's collection

Their peak of popularity was in the 1860s and 1870s, but a few remain in hymnals and are still sung today. By far the most popular has always been “In the Cross of Christ I Glory”:

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.
When the woes of life o'ertake me,
Hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
Never shall the cross forsake me,
Lo! it glows with peace and joy.
When the sun of bliss is beaming

Light and love upon my way,
From the cross the radiance streaming
Adds more luster to the day.
Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.
In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

Three others are still well known: the Christmas hymn “Watchman, Tell Us of the Night, God is Love”, “His Mercy Brightens” and “How Sweetly Flowed the Gospel’s Sound”.²

The enthusiasm for writing hymns was in keeping with his earnest Unitarian background and his instincts for self-promotion. But it also reflected his deep attachment to family as the anchor of human existence, sentiments expressed in these well-known verses:

Sweet are Joys of Home
Pure and sweet for they
Like Dews of Morn and Evening Come
To Wake and Close the Day

The World hath its Delights
And its Delusions too
But Home to Calmer Bliss Invites
More Tranquil and More True

...

The Pilgrim’s step in Vain
Seeks Eden’s Sacred Ground
But in Home’s holy joys again
An Eden may be Found

A glance to heaven to see
To none on earth is given
And yet a happy family
Is but an earlier heaven.³

The last two lines are still often quoted but frequently ascribed to George Bernard Shaw—who had not yet been born when they were written and who never had children.

This versifying seemed at odds with his friendship with Bentham, who had little time for religion or poetry. But the two managed an accommodation of mutual interest, partly because in the *Westminster Review* Bowring was preaching a new doctrine, well ahead of his time: free trade. Back in 1820, his first venture with Bentham had been *Observations on the Restrictive and Prohibitory Commercial System, especially with reference to the decrees of the Spanish Cortes of July 1820*, in which Bentham was described as “author” and himself as “writer”. Three things were coming together in Bowring’s universe: political liberalism, open trade and the role of technology in human progress. Bentham’s prestige gave the book standing, but Bowring was the driver—his actual experience in commerce and Spain added weight.

Bowring lived through a time of ferment in political philosophy and action, an era whose ideas still shape the world two hundred years later. He was known to many of the minds of the time—some older, some younger, some exact contemporaries—and corresponded with and about most of them. Bowring was never counted among the major English political thinkers and writers of the reform era of the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries—Bentham, J. S. Mill, William Cobbett, Richard Cobden and Robert Owen. But he straddled most of the issues to which they gave their identities—and added an international dimension they lacked. Indeed, he was the leading advocate of free trade, long before Cobden appeared on the scene. Cobden and John Bright were the capitalist representatives of manufacturing interests that stood to gain most from free trade; Bowring’s free trade views, on the other hand, were founded on liberal idealism and commercial experience.

Bowring’s role was as a publicist of ideas, primarily of utilitarianism and free trade but also of liberalism and popular representation. He was a link between literary and political figures and entrepreneurs from radical and non-conformist backgrounds who were transforming industry. He was a particular promoter of Bentham’s utilitarianism, whose underlying principle was defined by Bentham as “the greatest good of the greatest number”. Actions must be judged by how much misery or happiness they caused. This has sometimes been interpreted—not least by its many 19th-century critics—as an amoral calculation placing utility before

principle or aesthetics. Dickens attacked it for allegedly putting commercial success before other considerations. But for Bentham and Mill, utilitarianism was based on the moral principles of avoiding harm to, and helping, fellow men. An open economy and free trade were viewed as a means to achieving utilitarian aims; the emphasis on the good of the “greatest number” was inherently favourable to the masses. But utilitarianism was in no way socialist and could be harsh. The 1834 Poor Law, which replaced parish-level relief for the destitute and unemployed with a more centralized system of large workhouses, was influenced by the Benthamite notion that conditions in the workhouse should be worse than in other employment, so as to act as a deterrent. Socialism, as associated with the likes of Robert Owen and Karl Marx, was a slightly later product of the Industrial Revolution. The earlier radicals were often capitalists themselves.

Utilitarianism also had an uneasy relationship with religion. Leading lights such as Bentham, the Mills and Erasmus Darwin were agnostics, but maintained that there was much in common between their ideas and those of Jesus and other religious figures. This position seems to have been acceptable to the likes of Bowring, who maintained throughout his life his Unitarian faith, a religion focused, as his hymns showed, on Jesus as exemplar and moral force. In practice, despite Bentham’s agnosticism, utilitarian ideas appealed to a God-fearing constituency, later finding expression in the liberal Anglicanism of mid-Victorian reforming educationists. Bentham was admired as much for his efforts at law reform as for his philosophical ideas, proposing many ideas for making the administration of justice fairer, simpler and cheaper. He believed that “no glory that Napoleon ever acquired” would equal his codification of the law “bringing the vast and confused mass of written and unwritten law into order and harmony”.⁴

The philosophical counterpoint to the Benthamites was provided by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although Coleridge is now known for his still much-quoted poetry—*Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—J. S. Mill described Bentham and Coleridge as the “two great seminal minds of England in their age”. While Bentham subjected existing institutions to criticism and sought their improvement, for Coleridge the “neglected truths” lay within these existing norms. Like Confucius, Coleridge looked back to an idealized past for his vision of a more equal world. Coleridge’s philosophy has largely been forgotten, but his poetry has proved amazingly durable. For that he owed a debt to Bowring, whose disagreement with Coleridge’s philosophy did not impede his admiration for his poetry.

The *Westminster Review* under Bowring showed as much interest in literature as in politics. Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan or a Vision in a Dream* had been written in 1797 but was only published, at the instigation of Byron, in 1816. It sold little and attracted mostly unfavourable reviews, including by William Hazlitt, the foremost literary critic of the day. But when in 1830 it appeared again in an anthology of Coleridge's poetry, Bowring enthused about it in the *Westminster Review*, after which the poem suddenly attracted public attention. Bowring wrote:

The tale is extraordinary, but *Kubla Khan* is much more valuable on another account, which is, that of its melodious versification. It is perfect music. The effect could scarcely have been more satisfactory to the ear had every syllable been selected merely for the sake of its sound. And yet there is throughout a close correspondence between the metre, the march of the verse, and the imagery which the words describe . . . our author is always felicitous in their management, but nowhere has he blended them in so perfect a combination as in this instance.⁵

The opium which inspired *Kubla Khan* seems to have been a regular habit of Coleridge who

always seemed to live in the dreamy regions of cloudland and it was difficult to follow him through the mazes of his misty eloquence . . . Every now and then he was observed to put his finger and thumb into his waistcoat-pocket, from which he took an opium pill which he clandestinely conveyed to his mouth, and so he seemed to feed his gentle and often most touching oratory.⁶

Coleridge's great contemporary, William Wordsworth, had in early life admired the romanticism and freedoms of the French revolutions—but he became appalled by the Jacobins and Napoleon and turned increasingly conservative. He opposed the Great Reform Act, seeing it as a victory not for progress but for the industrialists who oppressed factory workers.

In 1813, needing money, Wordsworth had got a government job, spurring Bowring to his first piece of published verse—a short skit at Wordsworth's expense:

When favour's golden hook is baited
 How swiftly patriot zeal relaxes
 In silent state see Wordsworth seated
 Commissioner of Stamps and Taxes.
 Wordsworth, most artless among bards
 Who talked of Milton and of freedom

Scorned services purchased by awards
And pitied those who chance to need 'em
Some poets are but men, 'tis said,
The question may be well disputed,
If they can eat corruption's bread
And still continue unpolluted⁷

This piece of doggerel by the young Bowring, quoted in his own *Autobiographical Recollections*, may also be seen as a self-criticism, given his own future reliance on government jobs to support himself. As for Wordsworth, this critic of the industrial age would himself later be found investing in the iron works in South Wales of which Bowring was to become chairman!

Bowring's satirical verses about Wordsworth were published in *The Examiner*, a periodical edited by Leigh Hunt, the poet, whom Bowring had met while Hunt was in jail for libelling the prince regent. Leigh Hunt was one of a number of literary figures with whom Bowring became acquainted, both through his editorship of the *Westminster Review* and as contributor to the *London Magazine*, to which the likes of Charles Lamb, poet and author of *Tales from Shakespeare*, and the essayist William Hazlitt contributed. Hazlitt had lost his Unitarian faith but remained true to its radical social tenets, becoming an admirer of Napoleon. As a close associate of Bentham, Bowring could hardly avoid Hazlitt, though he might have wanted to do so. According to Bowring, "Hazlitt occupied the house in Bentham's garden where Milton lived while secretary to Cromwell, and a great plague he was when he inhabited it." Hazlitt, he maintained, not only paid no rent but was "a dirty fellow and seldom washed his hands. Whilst playing whist with Lamb, the latter said to him in his stammering way, 'Haz-Haz-Haz-l-l-it. If dirt were trumps what hands you'd hold.'"⁸

Bowring made the acquaintance of Walter Scott, who invited him to his Abbotsford estate. In *Autobiographical Recollections*, Bowring was complimentary about Scott and his aristocratic living style, but in a letter to son Lewin he made a somewhat unfavourable contrast between Scott and General Lafayette, after visiting Lafayette in 1833:

I am contrasting my recollections of Abbotsford with those of Lagrange [Lafayette's chateau]. *There* was a great man, surrounded by a thousand interesting things picked out of history and romance, and charming conversation, but the whole thing a little damaged by aristocratical vanities. *Here* is

the representative of one of the oldest noble families of France who will have no title but General—who with a large fortune has no powdered and liveried lackies, no parade of carriages and horses, no armorial bearings thrust forward at every step . . . the good old man benign and gentle as a beautiful sunset, who would believe him to be the hero of two worlds . . . the bosom friend of Washington, Franklin and Jefferson—the pole-star of three revolutions . . .?⁹

Meanwhile, he threw himself into travels throughout Europe, making literary friends, talking liberal politics and continuing to publish translations of poetry. After his two volumes of Russian poetry (in 1820 and 1823) came *Ancient Poetry and Romances of Spain* (1824), *Servian Popular Poetry* (1827), *Specimens of the Polish Poets* (1827) and *Poetry of the Magyars* (1830).

Several works were printed at the author's request, suggesting that they were partly a means of self-promotion. Details of the numbers printed are not available. But this was a great age for reading. At least one of his translations—*Peter Schlemihl* in 1824—went into several editions, including one in 1861 illustrated by the eminent George Cruikshank, which itself was subsequently reprinted in both London and the United States.

Bowring's claims—or, at least, those made by others and not denied by him—to speak a bewildering variety of languages and dialects have always been suspect. The one language of which he could claim total mastery was Castilian Spanish: he was a genuinely expressive and accurate interpreter of its poetry. Spain was his first and foremost love:

I love Spain as a country, and Spaniards as a people. In other lands I single out special objects for my regard and inscribe their names on the tablets of friendship and sympathy—in Spain, my affections pervade and cling to the whole population.¹⁰

Bowring clearly found learning languages to be easy as well as interesting:

It is scarcely more difficult to acquire five languages than one and I have known of many instances of five or more languages spoken with equal purity and perfection . . . For myself I often dream in other languages than English . . . I learnt Italian from intercourse with itinerant instrument-sellers, a race of men that have disappeared; while French I picked up from a refugee priest and from seeking the company of French prisoners.¹¹

This linguistic facility and his willingness to communicate with local people explain his love of travel and also his ability to gain access to important people.

In addition to the Iberian languages, he was fluent in French, Italian and German. He was well versed in Dutch and had at least a good working knowledge of Russian. He also had a good grasp of other Slavic languages as well as Scandinavian ones and Hungarian. He studied lesser languages and dialects, apparently more to understand their relationships than to master them. For his poetic translations, he evidently relied heavily on the literal translations provided by more fluent speakers, which he then rendered into poetic English. That was the technique used in his “translation” of the Chinese work *The Flowery Scroll*. Though he had some conversational ability in Chinese and probably a basic knowledge of characters, the translation was mostly derived from a German one that he only partially acknowledged, and to which he added extensive footnotes explaining Chinese customs and attitudes. This was an age when exaggerated boasting and a touch of plagiarism were not as frowned upon as today. *The Illustrated London News* of 18 February 1854 described him as speaking Spanish, French, Portuguese, Castilian, Valencian, Viscayan, Galician, Gascon, Italian, German, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Russian, Polish, Serbian, Bulgarian, Bohemian, Slavonic, Illyrian, Finnish, Estonian, Lettish—and more.¹²

The claim to fluency in dozens of languages was exaggerated, yet it has survived in some accounts today: *Wikipedia* describes him as “ranked . . . among the world’s greatest hyperpolyglots—his talent enabling him at last to say that he knew 200 languages, and could speak 100”.¹³ Many of his contemporaries took the claims with a pinch of salt. Bowring’s linguistic abilities became the butt of jokes in some quarters, not only among his enemies.

Bowring’s linguistic exploits left him with an enemy whose publication in 1857 of a vicious attack on him—a curious mix of fact and fiction—would influence subsequent accounts of Bowring’s career. *The Romany Rye* was by George Borrow, a remarkable linguist with whom Bowring, ten years his senior, had at first collaborated. Borrow had himself achieved modest literary success. But friction gradually developed between the two men, partly over translation issues. They were collaborating on a work called *Songs of Scandinavia*, to be dedicated to the king of Denmark, but it never appeared, either because the two fell out or Bowring lost interest, due to his many other activities.

Borrow’s resentment rose as Bowring made a success of his post-literary life, while he struggled to get coveted appointments or the recognition he thought he deserved. Borrow even sought a consular post though he had no obvious qualifications for one; he was infuriated when Bowring was appointed to Guangzhou

and enraged when the knighthood and governorship followed. *The Romany Rye* described Bowring as “too ugly for marriage” and his wife as one “who looked the very image of shame and malignity”. In his study of Borrow and Bowring, Angus Fraser of the George Borrow Society has concluded that “at the best of times he [Borrow] was not given to impartial judgment and logical argument. In his dealings with Bowring he magnified his grievances into a deadly feud and ended by completely abandoning all restraints of reason.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, some of his bile made an impact, particularly as Bowring was then in Hong Kong and unable to hit back. Borrow’s taunts found ready readers among British critics of his actions in China. The bile was later regurgitated by Borrow’s biographer, doing further damage to Bowring’s posthumous reputation.

Bowring’s linguistic talents caused wry amusement to the poet and humorist Thomas Hood, who even wrote a verse entitled “John Bowring”:

To Bowring, man of many tongues
 (All over tongues like rumour)
 This tributary verse belongs
 To paint his learned humour;
 All kinds of gab he talks, I ‘wis,
 From Latin down to Scottish;
 As fluent as a parrot is
 But far more *Polly*-glottish!
 No grammar too abstruse he meets,
 However dark and verby;
 He gossips Greek about the streets.
 And often *Russ*—in urbe—:

Strange tongues whate’er you do them call,
 In short, the man is able
 To tell you what’s *o’clock* in all
 The dialects of *Babel*.
 Take him on’ Change; try Portuguese,
 The Moorish and the Spanish,
 Polish, Hungarian, Tyrolese,
 The Swedish and the Danish;
 Try him with these and fifty such,
 His skill will ne’er diminish
 Although you should begin in Dutch
 And end (like me) in *Finnish*.¹⁵

Chapter 13

Frustration at Canton

The lofty imperial aims depicted by Eitel were far from Bowring's mind as he arrived in Guangzhou (Canton) in April 1849 after a stopover in Hong Kong, where he stayed with "Mr. Jardine at his beautiful bungalow close to the large set of buildings where John lives and where the offices are", but where he was advised by the European informants that the Chinese had "no notion of the claims of veracity and always seem to think that lying is safer than the truth".¹

Soon enough he was, he wrote to his son Edgar,

overcome with a feeling of loneliness. I contrasted my domicile here with the house I had left . . . for Canton is absolutely and truly a prison—with no access to the town—and the Europeans incarcerated in the factories and the two gardens in front of them before the river. As my duty has placed me here I have made up my mind to make the best of it bearing my exile and forbearing to complain of a fate of my own devising.²

He wrote again to Edgar the following month, "I feel I am growing old", complaining at length of the problems of trying to deal with the Chinese authorities.³

But he was quickly almost as frustrated with a London that had other things than China on its mind:

If the government at home think that my communication or the plenipotentiary from Hong Kong is going to the emperor they are greatly mistaken. I am as pacific as can be but unfortunately I have every evidence that the imperial commissioner has set his heart on destroying the provisions of the treaty.⁴

Hong Kong was a problem, too:

The inhabitants of Hong Kong being mostly the pirates and robbers who cannot live in China itself . . . there is not even a shadow of personal intercourse

between our functionaries and the functionaries of China. It is not that Mr. Bonham wants capacity—or that anyone who would be in his position would do better than he—but he is 100 miles off on a barren island . . . his communications with the Chinese receive no attention (whatever he may think or say). This is the place for *commercial* policy Peking for *diplomatic* action.

The analysis was correct. He wrote his thoughts regularly to Palmerston—but was ignored. After such an active life in England, the enclave in Guangzhou was suffocating. He had little in common with the merchants, or indeed with the other consuls. However, he was as observant as ever in the things around him. He wrote, in his first letter to Edgar after walking around the streets of Guangzhou:

I saw symptoms of ill-will towards us . . . crowds gathered around the shops into which we entered but considered how much the governor has endeavoured to inflame the people against us I did not find so much excitement as anticipated.⁵

He also made a serious effort to learn Chinese, getting to the point where he could chat with locals on walks in the vicinity of the factories, acquiring some knowledge of local ways and customs. In October, he wrote to Edgar an explanation of the Chinese banking system, displaying his knowledge of a few characters used in banking.⁶ A few months later, he sent Edgar a Chinese chessboard, with a drawing and description of how the game was played.⁷

His zeal for learning provided an escape from tedium. He wrote:

I devote myself to Chinese studies in the dream that I may be called to a wider field of interest here—if not—I may perhaps write a book upon China and contribute something to the field of human knowledge. I have seen something no one else has seen—and may have my own views in respect to Chinese matters.⁸

He had the consolation that his eldest son, John, was in Hong Kong with Jardine Matheson. On Christmas Eve, 1849, he was delighted to hear from Bonham that his youngest son, Charles, would be offered a vice-consul's post. This seemed to resolve one of his major worries. He had written in May:

I am more anxious about Charles than anything or anybody. Though he must not be reproached for his unhappy change [of religion] he must not think it diminishes the demand upon his own strenuous efforts for the means of honourable existence.⁹

This piece of personal patronage sat oddly with Bowring's House of Commons denunciation in 1843 of vice-consulships as a *refugium peccatorum* (a "refuge of sinners") for well-connected failures.¹⁰ But the good news about his son Charles turned to bitter disappointment when he rejected the offer, instead decided to become a Jesuit priest and entered the novitiate at Stonyhurst, the leading Jesuit college in England. Bowring saw this as a personal betrayal, believing that the jobless Charles had agreed to accept an offer if one could be secured. His father had thought it was a handsome one, with a salary of 750 pounds, and that Charles could live with him, save most of the salary and learn Chinese. He even felt the post took account of Charles's "religious feelings", as "persons of his own communion were more agreeable than any other [similar] body—for the Catholic missionaries are the only ones who can be said to have had any success in this country"¹¹—a frank recognition of reality, given Bowring's antipathy towards the Roman church.

In his frustration with Charles's joining the Jesuits, Bowring claimed that Charles "is now a puppet moved by the strings which he calls conscience . . . these strings have been pulled by dexterous intrigues of plotting Fathers."¹² However, he calmed down: "There is no advantage in any future controversy. I can never feel towards him but as one of my beloved children."¹³ He acknowledged the support he had received from his family: "In the days of difficulty they have acted so well that they have every claim which paternal affection could have desired."¹⁴ John and Edgar, in particular, appear to have sustained the rest of the family in Exeter while Bowring paid off his debts.

Bowring wrote constant letters to all his family, but Edgar probably got the most at this time, as he was in charge of arranging his father's messy financial affairs. These problems redoubled in early 1850, when the news arrived, almost simultaneously with Charles's rejection of the vice-consulship, of the cancellation of his Llynfi Iron Company shares, held as security for loans not just from the company itself but from the London and Blackwall Railway. The cancellation was technically legal, but Bowring saw it as confiscation "just at the point it was rising in value and the confiscators knew of its rising value. Half my property is thus destroyed at a blow. I ought not to have left England and trusting to the men who direct the LVC [Llynfi Valley Company]."¹⁵ He wrote to Edgar:

The conduct of the company I consider an intolerable injustice. I consider that each of my children is pillaged of nearly 2,000 pounds. I now grieve that I ever left England to be humiliated and scorned here . . . My sun is fast declining and the infirmities of age intellectual and physical make their gradual inroads.¹⁶

But he gradually recovered his spirits as his salary and Edgar's astute management of affairs enabled all debts to be gradually settled.

Edgar himself was doing well as an official of the Board of Trade, having been appointed secretary to the Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in 1851, with Prince Albert as driving force. This stupendous forerunner of all international exhibitions saw not only displays of Britain's achievements in science and manufacturing but characteristic examples of products from all over the world. From Guangzhou, Bowring was initially confident that "many curious and beautiful objects from this country"¹⁷ would be supplied.

However, the merchants in Hong Kong, so solicitous of British arms to further their interests, were not at all interested in contributing "specimens of Chinese products and manufactures." He encountered "vehement opposition from some of the merchants";¹⁸ they accused the government of not protecting their rights and were derisive of Chinese culture. Bowring managed to raise funds to acquire some fine objects, but while he was away on his tour of the treaty ports, the initiative lapsed and the money had to be returned to the donors. He was furious that "all I had accomplished with the Chinese"¹⁹ in getting their support had come to nothing. In contrast to India, things Chinese were very poorly represented at the exhibition, which contained 17,000 exhibits and was attended by six million people. Hong Kong's only representation was a "tiny pagoda, a jade cup and two silver race cups."²⁰

Before going to Guangzhou, Bowring had held to his belief in spreading free trade only by peaceful means. But he followed James and John Stuart Mill, both employees of the EIC, in justifying Britain's imperial role, even as he criticized the policies of its principal agent, the EIC. The liberal who pushed for elections and national self-determination in Greece and Italy also defended British rule in India. In an 1829 essay in the *Westminster Review*, he referred approvingly to the passage in James Mill's *The History of British India* claiming that "a stupendous power of good is in our hands and the chances of happiness for the Indian people are greater from our dominion than from that of any masters to whom it is likely they will be transferred."²¹ He saw the British Empire as bound together by "the benefits of profitable commercial interchange" rather than military might.

However, in Guangzhou, he quickly acquired a low opinion of government in China, writing that he did not believe "that ten percent of the revenues reach the Imperial Treasury", and "every day I have found some new evidence of the universal

corruption”²² In defiance of the Nanjing treaty, the viceroy refused to receive him in the city; relations remained difficult. The frustrations of dealing with—or being ignored by—Chinese officials altered the perceptions of an impatient man with a profound belief in the civilizing benefits of trade and contempt for the corruption and monopoly that characterized Qing China. He was powerless to compel China to abide by the Treaty of Nanjing and permit him to enter the city when the viceroy claimed “the Chinese government cannot thwart the inclinations of its people”. His obligations to Palmerston also influenced his attitudes. Within a year of arriving in Guangzhou, he wrote to Cobden, asking rhetorical questions that showed the drift of his thinking:

If our treaties with China engage that we shall have access to the Offices and the Officers of the Chinese government—& that access is to be denied—what is to be done? If our treaties put an end to all monopolies . . . & such monopolies are established—& disobedience to the mandates of such confederacies is punished with horrid tortures & even death—what is to be done?²³

Bowring, who even as an unofficial trade emissary with no power had dealt directly with the khedive of Egypt, now found that as consul he could not even talk with the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi. With Ye as viceroy, matters were going backwards. In early 1849, Bonham had managed a meeting with Xu Guangjin (Sen Kwang-tsin), Ye’s predecessor, aboard a British ship near the Bogue. But Ye was unyielding. Bowring later wrote:

Year after year I implored [Viceroy] Ye (the Chinese word means *leaf*) to admit me in his presence in his *yamun* (official residence) at Canton, or to visit me either at the factories or in Hong Kong, but he was deaf to every entreaty. I went to Peiho and was visited by Mandarins but only to learn that Ye’s conduct was approved, and that we must not attempt to visit the capital.²⁴

He urged Bonham to take a firmer line, saying that China saw the lack of determination to enforce the treaty as a sign of weakness. Force was something that Ye understood, as shown by his ruthless and successful suppression of the Taiping rebels in his region. But London did not rank Guangzhou high on the list of priorities for making threats backed by real force. The British may have been the world’s premier power but its forces were very thinly spread. Bowring was also frustrated by the fact that, as consul in Guangzhou, he was accountable to Hong Kong governors. He vented his frustration in a letter to Edgar:

They know nothing at Hong Kong of what happens here. Sir Henry Pottinger never visited Canton at all. Sir John Davis came and made a fool of himself . . . took all the forts, had everything at his feet and went away.

He dismissed Hong Kong as being “no more like China than a stone is like a garden . . . It is absurd to make Hong Kong a fulcrum of diplomacy.”²⁵ Bonham’s policy was

to cover over everything to agitate nothing . . . The truth is that China, and the Foreign Office and the Treaties are all subjugated to the influence of that miserable colony of Hong Kong . . . a nest for robbers and riff-raff who commit all sorts of crimes unpunished thanks to lawyers who have received their education in Botany Bay.²⁶

Bowring and Bonham were contrasts in every way. Bonham was cautious and wanted to avoid trouble. He admitted that China had not carried out its previous undertakings, but did not press the matter. He made an attempt to approach Beijing in 1850 but got no further than Baihe (Peiho), the fort giving access to Tianjin (Tientsin), and contented himself with sending a letter to the emperor’s advisers, which was ignored. His efforts were, however, rewarded with promotion. Bonham had no interest in China beyond his own job. To quote Eitel, “like most common sense Europeans in China he was of the opinion that the close attention indispensable for a successful study of the Chinese language warps the mind.”²⁷

Bowring, the liberal radical, was interested in Chinese language and culture, but was impatient for China to be taught the benefits of free trade and engagement with other nations. He was generally critical of Britain for military spending “in the interests of those who want to fight”, referring to the gentry who formed the officer corps. But China was proving a special case, with none of the give-and-take that characterized dealings with other empires, particularly as it was impossible to deal directly with Beijing. “The interests of the two greatest nations in the world can never be fairly represented, still less adequately developed, between Hong Kong and Canton”, he wrote to Palmerston in 1849.²⁸

Despite the frustrations Bowring stuck to his post in Canton because he needed the job. In 1852 came two developments that would have a huge impact not just on Bowring’s career but on the history of Sino-British relations. The first was the appointment of Harry Parkes as Bowring’s official interpreter at Guangzhou. At the age of 13 in 1841, Parkes had arrived in Macao from England to stay with an aunt who was the wife of Karl Gutzlaff, a German missionary and linguist who

was fluent in Lao and Cambodian as well as Chinese. Parkes joined the office of Pottinger's interpreter, John Morrison, accompanied Pottinger on his expedition to Nanjing and was present at the signing of the treaty. Becoming fluent in Chinese, he was employed at the consulates in Xiamen, Fuzhou and Shanghai before being appointed to Guangzhou.

The second development came only a few months later, when Bonham went on leave and Bowring was made in his absence acting governor and chief superintendent of trade. Parkes, at the tender age of 24, became acting consul; the following year, he was officially appointed vice-consul after persuading Clarendon to override Bonham's distrust of Chinese speakers—a year later, he was made full consul in Xiamen. Parkes was handsome, able, ambitious and shrewd. He was a typical example of the self-confident go-getter of modest background who seized the opportunities offered by the empire. The possibility of succeeding Bonham had been at least in the back of Bowring's mind for some time. In June 1851, he had written to Edgar: "I do not say that I would not accept the Hong Kong governorship but could do no good there or anywhere in China if condemned to absolute inaction."²⁹ Being acting governor moved it to the forefront.

Bowring's tenure as acting governor of a colony that a year earlier he had described as a "great receptacle of thieves and pirates protected by the technicalities of British law"³⁰ went off smoothly enough. He did nothing to ruffle Chinese feathers, and though he occupied the governor's residence he did not interfere in Hong Kong's domestic affairs other than, according to Eitel "by resuscitating by sundry sinological contributions and by inspiration the moribund Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society."³¹

With an eye to succeeding Bonham, he was determined to show restraint in his dealings with China. "Lord Palmerston wrote to me that he wished to give me Carte Blanche. However, I shall not act imprudently or rashly," he wrote from Hong Kong.³² In a letter to Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon, he summed up the situation precisely:

The Pottinger Treaties inflicted a deep wound upon the pride, but by no means altered the policy of, the Chinese Government. They were submitted to as hard necessity . . . Their purpose is now as it ever was, not to invite, not to facilitate, but to impede and resist, the access of foreigners. This policy is impressed upon all the high officers of the Empire, associated, however, with the most stringent commands to avoid collision with foreign nationals, and to take care that the public peace shall not be disturbed.³³

He was acutely aware of the nationalist spirit of the Chinese, writing to son Frederick:

I have been writing an article for the Asiatic Society on the character and composition of [Commissioner] Lin—an interesting man because an object of much veneration to the Chinese as Washington is to Americans . . . philosopher, poet, statesman, patriot.³⁴

Yet aware of the sensitivities Bowring concluded to Clarendon that establishing entry into Guangzhou was the key: if this could be achieved, other issues with China would be easier. The implication was clear: the treaties had been gained by force and could be implemented only with the credible threat of more force.

Meanwhile, Parkes in Guangzhou was sending letters that gave a sense of life there. In March 1853, prior to presiding over the first marriage there of an English couple—a Jardine Matheson tea-taster named Williams and his bride—he wrote to his sister:

Courtships and weddings have hitherto been entirely unknown here . . . Everything here is so very public and we are so very close together, with doors and windows opening into each other's houses, that the necessary retirement is not available. If you wish to make love, there is positively no place to do it in. You can never meet a young lady alone at home, and if you walk with her in the garden it must be in the face of 275 witnesses, the number of the whole community. How Williams therefore managed the business I can't conceive.

Later in the year, Parkes complained about the need to preside over many formal dinners, including one for the “old American Commodore Perry who has visited Canton and is slowly eating his way through a phalanx of dinners.”³⁵

Bowring was only briefly back in Guangzhou from filling in for Bonham before he took off for Java on three months' leave, which then became the home leave he had earlier requested and that came at a convenient moment for his hopes of succeeding Bonham. Meanwhile, he delighted in the opportunity to travel around Java, visiting Batavia (Jakarta), Buitenzorg (Bogor), Cirebon, Jogjakarta, the Borobudur temple and the Bromo volcano in east Java. He also went to Bangka, the tin-producing island near Singapore where most of the workers were Chinese. Not only did he appreciate Java's beauty, but he opined:

No greater political blunder was ever committed by British negotiators than the cession to the Dutch [after the Napoleonic Wars] of the fertile regions of Netherlands India, while we retained a portion of their West Indian colonies

of incomparably less value. The teeming population, the prolific soil, the excellent roads and fine harbours of Java give it advantages rarely enjoyed by any colonial possession

plus the resources of Borneo and Sumatra.

... If the choice was offered to me of being Viceroy of these dominions or King of Holland I should not hesitate to prefer the former.³⁶

From Java, it was straight back to England: he rushed around London meeting old colleagues, gave evidence to parliament on decimalization, and prepared his book on the subject for publication. He preached the attractions of the China market to manufacturers in Liverpool, meeting the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, who described him as a

brisk person, with the address of a man of the world—free, quick to smile and of agreeable manners. He has a good face, rather American than English and does not look above sixty . . . He talked in a lively way for 10 to 15 minutes and then took his leave, offering me any services in his power in London—as for instance to introduce me to the Athenaeum Club.³⁷

His main business in England, apart from his family, was to press his claim to succeed Bonham in China. Indeed, Bonham recommended him for the job, with the proviso “under proper instructions and restraints”. Others had their doubts, including the chief clerk—the administrative head—at the Foreign Office, who wrote: “Of his talent and intellectual vivacity there can be no doubt but there might possibly be a question of his carrying sufficient ballast to countervail his superfluity of sail.” In the end, Clarendon decided to appoint him plenipotentiary, chief superintendent of trade and governor of Hong Kong, partly to satisfy the radical MPs on whom the government depended—but also warning him not to take advantage of old relationships to try to get consular appointments for his sons. Clarendon also recommended him for a knighthood, more to impress, he hoped, the Chinese than out of recognition for past achievements. The title and status fed his tendency to self-importance, though the words often quoted against him on this score were not written until long afterwards:

To China I went . . . accredited not to Peking alone but to Japan, Siam, Cochin China and Corea, I believe to a greater number of human beings (indeed no less than a third of the race of man than any individual had been accredited before).³⁸

Notes

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Notes: The abbreviations in sub-entries for Sir John Bowring is “JB” and for his son Edgar “EB”. His son, John Bowring, is referred to by his full name to avoid confusion with his father.

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