
Denis Bray was born in Hong Kong, and entered the Hong Kong Government in 1950 as a Cadet Officer, retiring in 1985 as Secretary for Home Affairs and Deputy to the Governor: since his retirement, he has continued to live in Hong Kong. Given this history, he is uniquely qualified to speak about the development of Hong Kong in recent decades. His book, however, is not a history. It is a series of reminiscences. Many parts of his career are passed over. He does not produce any deep analyses of events: nor does he philosophise on what it was that inspired and motivated him. He merely describes those events which, looking back, he remembers with affection and continuing interest.

The book opens with one of the best and sunniest descriptions of a happy childhood that I have read for many years. His home in Foshan, in the centre of Guangdong Province, where his father ran a missionary hospital, his holidays in Hong Kong, his schooling in North China, and the journeys to and fro, are all remembered and described well. His family’s return to England as war approached, his education at Cambridge, and his discovery of rowing, follow, in an almost equally beguiling account. This was first given as a lecture to HKBRAS, as is handsomely stated in the book.

The central half of the book relates scenes from his early career in Hong Kong before he reached the level of Secretary for Home Affairs with a seat on the Legislative and Executive Councils. Few personal details intrude, apart from occasional glimpses of Denis on his dinghy, or, later, his yacht. What we see is Denis the administrator, and what a splendid glimpse he gives of a classic Colonial Service administrator of the best type! He notes that a Colonial Service officer could be assumed to ‘be used to championing the interests of the people where he was working against the tendency of London to give more importance to the interests of Britain’ (p. 171), and, again, ‘everyone knew that our job was to look out for the ordinary citizen’ (p. 138). Time and again, Denis describes situations where hide-bound bureaucrats, anxious only to “play it by the book,” and to maximise Government income, were creating unfairness for ordinary people. Denis, once and again, comes up with some scheme to eliminate the unfairness, often by bending the rules, or introducing some extra-legal administrative procedure, which
could be slipped past the powers-that-be. Slaughterhouse butchers, villagers in New Territories villages, hawkers in urban street-markets, taxi-drivers, factory-hands forced to commute on wildly inadequate bus-services, all were helped by schemes introduced by Denis. When I first joined the Hong Kong Administrative Service in 1972, I heard a good deal about the problems these "Bray-waves" caused to the bureaucrats who were teaching us the ropes, and who wanted nothing so much as a comfortable life, bolstered by rule-books which never needed to be questioned, but, having looked at what Denis did, and how he did it, I have no doubt at all that what he did was politically essential, well thought out, practicable, and necessary. Letters "B," the Small House Policy, the Hawker Control Force, the Mutual Aid Committees, and so much more, were the right solutions to real problems, and genuinely did alleviate real unfairness. All too often, after Denis moved on, his successors would hamstring his reforms by refusing to implement them in the spirit in which they were introduced, unfortunately, but I do not believe anyone reading in an unbiased way Denis’ account of the introduction of Letters “B” (p. 76), or the Small House Policy (p. 163-166) could fail to see the need for the new policy, nor the skill and intelligence with which Denis undertook the work.

Reading this book, I was amazed to see just how many of the policies I attempted to implement had been introduced by Denis. In the Urban Services Department, the Home Affairs Department, and as District Officer in the New Territories, almost all the policies that governed my life had been introduced by him.

The later part of the book, on the years when Denis was “near the top,” and at the top, will prove of interest to political historians in later years, giving glimpses of an insider’s view of the negotiations on the future of Hong Kong. I personally found this part of the book duller and of less interest. Loyalty to the system makes the descriptions thin and the reticence is widespread. Nonetheless, this part of the book is without doubt of considerable historical value.

At the end of the book is a short “Epilogue” in which Denis gives his views on the political development of Hong Kong after his retirement. His utter rejection of the Patten position is made very clear, and his espousal of a slow-but-steady development towards universal suffrage for the Legislative Council and for the election of the Chief
Executive, with what he sees as the inevitable concomitant to these - development of a ministerial system - are made fascinatingly clear.

Hong Kong was immensely lucky to have had Denis in senior positions throughout the formative years of modern Hong Kong. Without innovative, intelligent, and vigorous officers like him, what would the place have been like? At the same time, Denis, too, was lucky. For much of his early career he had the sympathetic support of Ronald Holmes as his immediate superior: almost the only man with the imagination to countenance Denis’s guerrilla attacks on the shibboleths of administration, and, more important, with the intelligence and drive to support them when he was satisfied they were needed. Had Denis had a succession of stolid and lazy lame-brains as his superiors, how long would it have taken for him to have been black-listed as just someone who “rocked the boat,” who was “too clever for his own good”? I wonder if anyone with his flair and instinctive feel for the needs of ordinary people could survive in the Administrative Service of today?

Denis comes over in this book as a man of great intelligence and charm, wit, and decency. His ‘horror and disgust’ at the things disclosed by the Independent Commission Against Corruption come through, for instance, very clearly. Having worked for him for a couple of years, I know that the book shows the real Denis.

The book is very well printed by Hong Kong University Press. There are a few errors that should have been caught by the copy-editors (for instance, ‘Rodean School’ and ‘the Ordinance Survey,’ both on p. 151). Denis states that he is no historian, and there are a few places where there are minor errors of historical fact, although none which affect the overall value of the book. Among them are the names of the Seven Yeuk of Tai Po (p. 96), the date of the New Market at Tai Po (founded 1892, and not after the building of the Tai Po Road a decade later, as suggested on pp. 96 and 170-171), and the date of the Tolo Harbour arable reclamation (almost all in the nineteenth century, rather than the late eighteenth as suggested on p. 61).

All in all, this is a book of considerable charm; thoroughly to be recommended to anyone interested in today’s Hong Kong.

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