NOTES AND QUERIES

WILLIAM THOMAS MERCER (1822-1879): HONG KONG'S POET LAUREATE?

Hong Kong, a city dedicated principally to the acquisition of wealth, has produced few, if any, English writers of quality. But it did provide a home for over twenty years for a poetaster deserving of a niche in D.B. Wyndham Lewis's anthology of bad verse, *The Stuffed Owl.* This colonial versifier was William Thomas Mercer, who arrived in Hong Kong in 1844 as Private Secretary to his uncle, Sir John Davis, Governor of Hong Kong, became Colonial Secretary in 1854 and remained thereafter the chief executive officer of the Colony until retirement on pension in 1867, being then only forty-five years of age.

In 1869 Mercer appeared on the London literary scene as the author of *Under the Peak; or, Jottings in Verse,* written during a lengthened residence in the Colony of Hong Kong. This book, an octavo volume of 305 pages, was published in London by John Camden Hotten of 151b Piccadilly. That Hotten published Mercer's innocuous poems is surprising. That Mercer should have entrusted his precious verses to such a man is even more startling. Hotten, a speculative and disreputable publisher, in 1866 took over the publication of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* after the original publisher, Moxon, had withdrawn, frightened by the clamour that arose over Swinburne's 'fleshly' poems. Hotten, who died in 1873 of 'a surfeit of pork chops', was in his day a notorious publisher of erotica and facetiae. His list included not only Swinburne and, in 1869, the 'unfleshly' Mercer, but such works as *Aphrodisiacs and Anti-Aphrodisiacs* and *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus.* Mercer, who was described by Sir Richard Macdonnell as 'a gentlemanly, scholarly person', was in Hotten's list keeping decidedly curious company.

It seems likely, however, that Mercer paid for the cost of publication of *Under the Peak,* for Hotten was a shrewd businessman and not likely to invest his own money in such a humdrum and tame book. Mercer had, in fact, done this before. In 1867, soon after his return from Hong Kong, he had put out at his own expense *Addresses presented to W.T.M. . . . recently Acting Governor of Hong Kong; with services, testimonials, etc.,* a eulogistic volume prompted by pique at failure to obtain a colonial governorship.
The making of verses was a gentlemanly pursuit in early Victorian days, encouraged of course by the system of classical education which emphasised translation from Latin and Greek and hence a detailed knowledge of the rules—or mechanics—of prosody. Mercer received such a traditional education: he was educated at Exeter College, Oxford, where he took a B.A. degree, and for a time was at the Inner Temple, though he did not take the Bar examination. When he came to Hong Kong as his uncle's private secretary, he sought solace from the chores of day-to-day colonial administration in his poetic exercises and the result was *Under the Peak*.

There are five poems in this book—'a string of sonnets'—which refer specifically to Hong Kong. They are, respectively: The Peak; The Bay; The Triads' Cave; The Water Fall; The Temple on Taplichow; The Pic Nic Cottage at Heong-Kong; and The Chinaman's Grave on the Lonely Hill Side. According to Mercer's note on the poem, The Triads' Cave, 'a cavern romantically situated, has now disappeared before the utilitarian demand for granite. It was long the chosen resort of the members of the infamous San hop hwai, or 'Triad Society', where:

The robber horde oath-bound to mutual aid
Would plan foul murder and unpitying raid
O'er midnight counsel in their secret den

The gem among these sonnets is without doubt The Chinaman's Grave, and should be given in extenso:

Oh Chow, or Wong! or by whatever name
Men call'd thee, or the Gods may call thee now,
Why so extravagantly vast thy claim
To mortuary earth upon the brow

Of yon fair hill? If all men spread as thou
No room for things created would be found
Throughout the Seric land, but all the ground
Would teem with graves, and well might it be said
That living ones were push'd from off their stools
By men all useless, now that they are dead
And vanish'd. Did Confucius leave no rules
To bind a soul's ambition by the tomb?
Then let survivors show themselves no fools,
But dig thy bones up to make elbow-room
For once Hotten had backed a loser with the publication of *Under the Peak*; certainly no further edition or impression was called for by a panting public. We do not know whether Mercer continued to write verses until his death at Reading on 23 May, 1879, but it seems likely for Mercer had all the enthusiasm of the bad poet.¹¹

**NOTES**

¹ One would like to cite P. G. Wodehouse, the son of H. E. Wodehouse, a Hong Kong Cadet Officer; but P. G. Wodehouse was born at Guildford, Surrey, and did not spend much time in Hong Kong. After leaving Dulwich College he worked for two years at the London branch of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation.

² London, 1930.


⁴ For information on Hotten see especially Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud*, London, 1969, pp. 387-90; and Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, New York, 1966, pp. 68-75. Hotten was born in Clerkenwell, London, and showed an early interest in books and bookshops and achieved the dubious distinction of having been struck in a bookshop by the irate historian Macaulay. In 1848 Hotten went to America and there acquired a good knowledge of American literature. On his return to London he published the works of a number of American authors, including Bret Harte's 'heathen Chinese' poems.

⁵ An account of Swinburne's dealings with Payne of Moxon's is given in Humphrey Hare's *Swinburne*, London, 1949, pp. 109-134.

⁶ Written by Richard Payne Knight in 1786 but reprinted by Hotten in 1865.

⁷ Written by John Davenport and published in 1873. In 1872 Hotten reprinted seven works on flagellation alone.

⁸ Copies of both *Under the Peak* and *Addresses* are in the British Museum. The Library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, London, has a copy of *Under the Peak*, now a very scarce book.

₉ p. 4.

₁₀ p. 6.

₁₁ Several cadets maintained their interest in classical studies after reaching Hong Kong, notably (later Sir) Cecil Clementi (1875-1947). In 1911 Clementi published his translation, with *apparatus criticus* and explanatory notes, of the *Pervigilium Veneris*. In a preface to a later edition of this work, published by B. H. Blackwell of Oxford (3rd edition, 1935), Clementi tells us that he worked on his manuscript in Hong Kong and during periods of leave in England and Europe.