CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

V. W. W. S. PURCELL

C.M.G., Ph.D., D.Litt. (Cantab.)

A MEMOIR BY SYBILLE VAN DER SPRENKEL

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

I should like to thank all those who have helped by answering my enquiries, particularly Dr Hugh Purcell for allowing me to have access to his father's papers. S. v. d. S.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

The man whom we honour in these pages attained distinction in several different fields—as colonial and later international civil servant, poet, historian, publicist and teacher.

Most of those who have contributed to this volume came to know Dr Victor Purcell when he was already a distinguished and a rather imposing figure, both in bulk and reputation, and anyone could have been forgiven for supposing that the position he occupied in our society was the natural culmination of a career begun in favoured circumstances. This was not so. Though it would be wrong to describe his origin as humble, he had in fact had to make his own way, for, in terms of the distinctions of class in English society, the family had suffered a decline in the previous generation. Victor Purcell's grandfather, as an agent on the estates of the Earl of Warwick, may be counted as having enjoyed minor professional status—he lived in a rather large, solid house and was on friendly (if inferior) terms with the Warwick family. However, this grandfather died relatively young leaving a large family, so Purcell's own father did not have the benefit of much formal education. He made the Royal Navy his career, but having once entered as a petty officer, it was impossible in those days for him to attain commissioned rank. (He was nevertheless a man of literary and scholarly leanings: he published a story for children[1] and translated a number of books into Basic English.) Victor Purcell felt his father's lack of worldly success keenly, and this is thought by some to have been a factor in his own motivation, as well as a reason for his sympathy with others who were still struggling.

Purcell himself was educated at Bancrofts—a public school, but not among those most esteemed—which he left shortly before the first world war. He made one or two false starts, but he had found no real sense of direction before he was drawn into the war. At the time, these years seemed to be an interruption of his activities and a marking time in his education, but they were in fact a forcing-house of experience, as, later, he realised himself. They gave him a lot of time for thinking as well as a lot to think about, and he learned a good deal about the smallness and the greatness of which human beings were capable. Through the interest of the Warwick family, he obtained a commission (slightly sooner than he would have done merely by reason of having been in

[1] *Into the Heart of Make-believeland.*

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

the O.T.C. at school) and in 1914 he became, in his own words, 'a temporary gentleman'. The significance this had for him is a reminder of the rigid social distinctions of those days (and perhaps, some have suggested, he never to the end of his days quite lost the awareness of his promotion). He saw service in some of the grimmest battles in France, and was twice severely wounded. In the 1918 'push' he was taken prisoner and spent the rest of the war in a German P.O.W. camp. There the prisoners were resourceful in organizing their own entertainment and education in ways that became familiar in the second world war. (These experiences furnished material for an autobiographical novel.[1]) It is typical of Purcell's fairmindedness that he never became embittered by his experiences, and he was among those who deplored the British blockade of Germany after the armistice and the suffering it caused to the civilian population.

After the war the veteran admission scheme enabled Purcell to spend the next two years at Cambridge University, reading history at Trinity College. The horrors of the preceding years made the intellectual and other activities possible there doubly enjoyable. He made his mark by becoming secretary of the Union and editor of *Granta*, but it seems that in those days he was not specially interested in politics (nor in political science!). Nor does he appear at that stage to have contemplated an academic career, though he said himself that he always wanted to become a writer and, from this time on, writing was always an important part of his life.

With his way to make, in 1921 he left Cambridge and entered the Malayan Civil Service. Given a choice of training, he elected to specialize in Chinese affairs (though he was warned at the outset that by thus becoming a 'specialist' he might jeopardize his career prospects). Some interruptions apart, he spent 25 years serving in various posts in the Chinese secretariat of the M.C.S. He was sent to China to study the language and, given this opportunity, applied himself with characteristic energy to understanding Chinese civilization and Chinese problems, and he found in these studies the reward of an abiding interest. Purcell has given his own account of the years in Malaya,[2] so perhaps they may be briefly passed over here. The country then

[1] *The Further Side of No-Man's Land*, London 1929. This he thought himself would be chiefly valued for the evidence it gave of the way prisoners were treated by the Germans which he summed up as 'little ill-treatment but much neglect'.

[2] *Memoirs of a Malayan Official*, London (Cassell) 1965.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

consisted of the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, over which Britain had advisory powers, and of the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang and Malacca), which were under the direct control of the Colonial Office (and which contained the majority, though by no means all, of the Chinese residents). In the absence of representative constitutions, as Purcell has himself written, the M.C.S. played a more important part in government than the civil service does in democratic countries. Its servants were moreover expected to be able to undertake administrative work of any kind, no matter what expertise it might require. Over the years, therefore, he enjoyed a great variety of responsibility and experience—at different times conducting a census, supervising immigration, and inspecting schools, as well as acting as magistrate, and supervisor of prisons.

Among the problems which particularly engaged the attention of the Chinese Protectorate in those years were the activities (in Malaya) of Chinese secret societies, the suppression of the traffic in women and girls, the regulation of conditions of Chinese labourers and—by no means the least—the question of Chinese schools. The processes of education assumed new significance in the 1920s when nationalism and anti-imperialist sentiment were growing in China and political parties there took an increasing interest in Chinese communities overseas. One major problem was the content of school text books, which had to be imported from China. The matter was complicated by the inclusive Chinese idea of nationality. The Chinese thought of this as based on descent and cultural identity without regard to place of birth or residence. In Malaya, as elsewhere in South-east Asia it raised the question of the ultimate loyalty of the generation being educated (a matter still on the agenda for clarification at Bandung in 1954).

Purcell has described the duties of the local Protector of Chinese as being more like those of a village headman than of a mandarin, and he seems to have entered into the role with gusto. Each morning the Protector held an unofficial court for domestic and other cases, which the parties attended voluntarily: the decisions did not have binding force (with the exception of certain labour cases), but they were usually accepted. This particular Protector made it his business to 'visit every nook and cranny of the places of labour', whatever the difficulties of travel or distance. All this must have afforded a wonderful insight into the ways of life and thought of the Chinese community. An

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

English friend visiting Malaya watched him at work, and impressed no doubt with Victor's official title, describes the court sessions as follows:

> It seemed to be entirely a matter of protecting the Chinese against one another, and he was prepared to listen in three or four dialects. There would be a tremendous noise, and then he would beat the table for silence and say, 'Split the difference. Next case.' It seemed a very popular form of justice.

Having in the course of his official duties become particularly interested in problems of Chinese education, he returned to his old university in 1939 and presented a dissertation on the subject for the Ph.D. degree (at the same time qualifying in law, the better to equip himself for duties as a magistrate in Malaya). This work led to an invitation to serve on a committee on the teaching of English in secondary schools set up by the Chinese Ministry of Education, an activity which involved travel in both China and the U.S.A.

He returned to Malaya, and was there in the early years of the second world war—by this time as Director General of Information and Publicity—until ordered to leave, shortly before the capitulation to the Japanese (1942). For the rest of the war he held various official appointments in the Pacific area, travelling also in Australia and the United States, and ending up with the rank of colonel, attached to Admiral Mountbatten's staff in Ceylon.

In 1945, he returned—now as Principal Adviser on Chinese Affairs to the British Military Administration in Malaya—to face some of the most difficult problems of his career, and for his work at this time he was awarded the C.M.G. When the civil administration took over from the military in 1946, he was appointed Acting Secretary for Chinese Affairs. He had then to take a decision affecting his future career. He was fifty, the minimum age for retirement, and had a choice: to stay and grapple with new problems in the country he knew well—and, presumably, to reach the honours that usually mark the peak of a conventional career—or, with this experience behind him, to make a break and embark on something new. After weighing the question carefully, he decided to resign because, he said, he wished to lead the rest of his life according to the dictates of his own nature. He had no exact idea where this would lead him and he looked around for a suitable opening.

His first assignment after leaving the M.C.S. was as a U.N. consultant, first as secretary to a Working Group on 'Devastation and Reconstruction in Asia and the Far East', and then as a consultant to

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

E.C.A.F.E., in which capacity he visited and reported on conditions in Hong Kong, Malaya, Sarawak, Siam (Thailand) and Burma, attending an economic conference in Calcutta in December 1947 as U.N. representative.

Meanwhile he conceived the idea of making a comprehensive study of Chinese communities in the various countries of South-east Asia and, under the joint auspices of the Institute of Pacific Relations and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, he spent 1948 in the United States on research for the study which has become a standard reference work on the subject.[1]

Back in England, he found himself a specialist in an almost unexplored field—in the universities, at least. The involvement in Chinese affairs which he had found a handicap in his career as a colonial official, combined with his knowledge of a wide area of Asia, made him a notable authority on a region now recognized as one of interest and importance, and entitled him to a place in the ranks of scholars trying to make up for the almost total neglect of these subjects in British universities hitherto. In 1949 he was invited to a lectureship in Far Eastern history at Cambridge, and there as scholar, writer, teacher, and publicist he spent the rest of his life. (It was during this period that most of the contributors to this volume came to know him: that they were mostly younger men follows from the facts of academic demography.) He continued to make occasional journeys to the scenes of his earlier life, and by these personal visits and through his regular and vast correspondence, he remained at the centre of a network of relationships accumulated in the course of his former experiences. He worked untiringly to spread interest in this region to a wider public. He was in demand as a public speaker and regularly addressed audiences of widely differing character. He received the Litt.D. from Cambridge in 1951, and in 1952 he was elected to membership of the Athenæum, a privilege he claimed that he enjoyed because it offered distinguished company recruited on the basis of merit and achievement without consideration of birth or wealth. (Many of us owe our acquaintance with this particular microcosm to Victor Purcell's generosity.)

As a member of the history faculty at Cambridge he gave courses on the history of the Far East and offered two special subjects for Part II of the History Tripos—the first on the Opium Wars and the second on

[1] *The Chinese in South-East Asia.*

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

the Boxer Movement (which led up to his published study on this subject). The pioneering nature of his work is attested to by the diffidence of the Seeley librarian concerning the library's ability in the first days to provide for 'subjects such as yours'.[1] Whether for this or other reasons, he did not succeed, it must be recorded, in communicating his enthusiasm for his subject to undergraduates, and he was disappointed that over the years his courses did not attract more interest. Rather surprisingly, this particular medium does not seem to have suited him. While he gave a polished paper occasionally to a learned society and discoursed fluently with popular audiences, his routine lectures were delivered in a rather jerky style and on these occasions he tended to discourage students' questions. He was, however, much in demand, and a popular speaker, with undergraduate societies and he was very successful both with adult education audiences and as a supervisor of postgraduate researchers: to these he gave generous encouragement, and none for whom he was responsible ever gave up without finishing his work.

For one who had known the pomp of imperialism in its heyday, the style of Purcell's life at Cambridge was modest (though he was always ready to enjoy—and to offer—the pleasures of good food and wine). Having lost most of his possessions in Malaya during the war, he made a simple home in which, apart from a much-loved Chinese vase and a scroll or two, books were the only treasures. Here he entertained students and friends to tea or coffee brewed with no little ceremony, while he also entertained a wide circle of friends in restaurants or at his club in London, both casually and at parties which were planned with much attention to detail and were greatly enjoyed by his guests.

After his retirement from the university in 1963, he continued to live in Cambridge (using the University Combination Room as he would his club), with an even simpler retreat in the country—a caravan tethered in a paddock belonging to friends in Hampshire, where he could work undisturbed, or, in relaxed moments, enjoy talk about the days in Malaya. From these bases he pursued his many activities with what appeared as only slightly diminished vigour until he completed the last sentence of his last chapter the night before his death.

From his undergraduate years at Cambridge, writing was for him

[1] Letter from the Seeley Librarian. (The Seeley Library is the special library for History at Cambridge University.)

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

always an important and regular activity. He wrote a great deal, and published work of many different genres—a novel, poetry, essays, periodical-articles, historical studies, works of reference, a book of travel[1] and countless reviews. (Though he enjoyed the theatre, he never seems to have attempted a play.) He was a master of the effective use of words, a good classical scholar, and wrote verse with facility. These talents enabled him to write surveys that were hailed as masterpieces of compression, and on occasion, when roused by the seriousness of a matter in which he was concerned, to write a telling letter to the press—often acting as spokesman for informed but less articulate opinion. Under a pseudonym which did little to conceal his identity (indeed it has been suggested to me that the name 'Myra Buttle' suited him perfectly), he published a series of skilful and witty parodies which he used in the best eighteenth century manner to attack a host of *bêtes noires*, ranging from Gertrude Stein, through various established 'worthies', to modern architecture. These he took trouble to bring to the notice of his friends, whose reactions varied according to their own complexion; they brought him some new admirers (but must have annoyed as many others) and have sometimes been quoted in anthologies. The last of the 'Myra Buttle' series, *Aere Perennius*, privately circulated two months before his death, was a passionate plea for action to preserve the best in our cultural heritage from erosion by the mass media, pop culture, and the threat of mass destruction.

It was his firm belief that in the twentieth century as in the eighteenth, clear English prose should be immediately intelligible to anyone who could read at all. And he took pains to achieve this in his own writing. (It was his habit to read aloud whatever he had just written to a selected listener, chosen often for the sake of getting the reaction of an ordinary member of the non-scholarly world—so that he could be sure that he had conveyed his meaning unmistakably.) This insistence, valuable as it may have been in his own work, was responsible for one gap in his scholarly armoury. Reluctance to allow that technical advance in a subject might require a vocabulary and style that was not immediately comprehensible to the lay public (in this he differed from Bertrand Russell, with whom he was in agreement on most other subjects) prevented him from appreciating the work of scholars

[1] See List, p. 403.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13374-6 - Studies in the Social History of China and South-East Asia: Essays in Memory of Victor Purcell
Edited by Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling
Excerpt
More information

working in disciplines he had not made his own—notably of those in the social sciences.

His interest in China and the Chinese endured to the end of his life. Few Westerners have had the opportunities Purcell enjoyed for observing China itself at first hand over five decades, from the twenties to the sixties of this century, which gave him knowledge of it in depth. In the twenties he spent three years as a language student in Canton (1921–4), during which time it was the seat of Sun Yat-sen's government, and for a time he had Sun's Russian adviser, Michael Borodin, as his next-door neighbour. He first visited Peking and the Great Wall in the autumn of 1923. 'If I were asked to say which of my experiences in the Far East had made the greatest impact on my imagination,' he later wrote, 'I would without hesitation give Peking the position of honour.'[1] In 1937 he went to China again, this time as a member of a Chinese government committee and, cut off by the Japanese advance, he made the journey across south China which is recorded in his very readable travel book, *Chinese Evergreen*.[2] Wartime missions took him to Chungking in the forties, and later, as a U.N. consultant, he spent some weeks in Shanghai in June 1947, a witness of the inflation and the utter demoralization of the Kuomintang. Twice after 1949—in 1956 and 1962—he visited the People's Republic of China as a self-financed private observer of the transformation going on there.

He came early to an appreciation of Chinese poetry and art, and he did much to introduce these enjoyments to the English-speaking world. The list of his writings characteristically reflects his growing preoccupation with Chinese language, poetry and education. He invented an original system for identifying Chinese characters using a numerical code[3] which though it was never widely adopted was found useful by no less a scholar than Lionel Giles. A Chinese vase of ox-blood porcelain, his most treasured possession, inspired what he himself considered one of his best poems. The practical sense and rational temper of much of Chinese thinking was congenial to him: his own life as meritocratic scholar-official ran parallel to the Confucian ideal—

[1] *Memoirs*, p. 150.

[2] This would deserve attention if, for no other reason, for the thinly veiled—and very lifelike—portraits of William Empson and I. A. Richards in whose company he travelled.

[3] Published as *An Index to the Chinese written language on a new non-radical system with reference to the dictionaries of Kanghsi and Giles*, Singapore Government Printing Office, 1929.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org