GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In 1872 the Rev. Anthony Stocker Aglen arrived in the village of Alyth, Perthshire, to take up his post as the rector of St Ninian's Episcopal Church. He brought with him his wife Margaret Elizabeth, née Mackenzie and a young son Francis Arthur, born in 1869 when his father was curate in Scarborough. Young Francis must have played in the garden of the parsonage in Cambridge Street, Alyth, and explored the village as he got older. His holidays from Marlborough School (then a school for the sons of clergymen) were naturally spent in Alyth and when he came to look for work he had a stroke of luck. The Venerable Archdeacon Aglen (as he became) had been to a preparatory school with one Robert Hart. They had become friends and corresponded with each other all their lives. Hart had become the second Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs and is often regarded as one of the most influential figures in late nineteenth-century China. He was notorious for placing relatives and the sons of friends in that service. The Venerable Archdeacon must have written to him and Francis duly went to China in 1888 when he was barely nineteen. The younger Aglen's rise in the customs service was rapid. From 1897, still under thirty, he held the rank of Commissioner and was in charge of the major customs houses in Tientsin (Tianjin), Nanking (Nanjing) and Shanghai. During the Boxer siege of the legations in Peking (Beijing), he actually deputised for Hart while the latter was trapped (and like the others in the legation found himself reading his own *Times* obituary). Hart seems to have rewarded him by making him his chief secretary at the headquarters of the customs service in Beijing. Aglen duly succeeded Hart in 1910 and was appointed substantive Inspector General in 1911.

In 1906 Francis Aglen married Isabel Marion (generally known as Senga), the daughter of the distinguished Edinburgh botanist Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour. They had three sons and two daughters, but she prematurely died at sea travelling from China in 1925. Aglen subsequently married, in 1927, Anna Moore, the daughter of a Scottish shipping agent, Murray Ritchie of Leith, who worked in Santiago, Chile. She seems to have been the governess of the Aglen children for some years and regularly travelled back and forth between China and Britain with them. Aglen's period as Inspector General was a highly turbulent one, so much so that, after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the Chinese administration was in sufficient disarray that he began to bank the very considerable customs revenue in European banks under his own name.

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He then proceeded to service the Chinese foreign loans and occasionally doled out money to pay for the police or for building flood dykes. He was, by default, the treasurer of China. No wonder he himself referred to the customs service as an 'imperium in imperio'.¹ Moreover, according to the account of Paul King, one of the customs commissioners, Aglen seems to have been better liked than his predecessor.² He and his wife had been particularly concerned about members of the customs service fighting in the First World War. In addition, he made strenuous attempts to put recruitment and training on a more sound footing.

Aglen was dismissed from the service in 1927 because he had refused to follow the order of the Beiyang government to collect surtaxes which had not yet been approved by the Western powers.³ Many, including western representatives in Beijing, regretted his departure, although he was given the consolation prize of a year on full pay. After a period of living in London he returned to Alyth and bought a house called Burnside on the edge of the village. By now he was garlanded not only with British honours, including the GCMG, but also the highest orders of China, Japan, France, Italy, Denmark, Belgium and Norway. Many countries were grateful to him for struggling to keep the Chinese finances on some sort of even keel. The Aglens duly continued to interact socially with well-to-do local families such as the Kinlochs, the Rattrays, the Tennants and the Ramsays. Indeed one of his sons, Edward, married Persis Clerk-Rattray of Craighall, a few miles away. Paul Ramsay of Bamff, near Alyth, knew this aunt and uncle well and also remembers Aglen's widow, apparently known to all as Cheech, who moved from Burnside to a smaller house in that same Cambridge Street where her husband had spent his childhood. She was by all reports a highly colourful and eccentric, even fearsome, figure and used to recount tales of her time in China. She was surrounded by many Chinese memorabilia brought back from the Far East by Aglen and herself. Her former housekeeper still lives in Alyth.

Clearly this is relevant to this book, but the reason I relate this intriguing story is that I too live in that same Perthshire village of Alyth in retirement. I know the present owner of Burnside House and I am well acquainted with Sir Francis Aglen's distant relative by marriage, Paul Ramsay. It all reflects the ways in which micro- and macro-history can interact. The village of Alyth (which has other notable connections with empire that I have explored) acts as a sort of crossroads where the local and global intersect, where people move away into a wider world and become mixed up in remarkable events. Sometimes, as in the case of Francis Aglen, they even return to Alyth. Such local and personal connections (which can probably be found almost anywhere) open

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windows on that world and, by a curious coincidence, I had just begun to put all this story together at exactly the time that Catherine Ladds's notable book on the Chinese customs service arrived on my desk for inclusion in the MUP 'Studies in Imperialism' series.

As she recounts, the Chinese customs service was the means whereby the Western powers set about what they regarded as the necessary modernisation of China. It constituted the principal financial apparatus whereby the Chinese funds could be placed on a sound footing, such that western loans and indemnities could be safely serviced. It was thus the key pivot between Chinese and foreign interests. Although these events seem relatively recent, they all seem a far cry from Eurozone crises of today and from the vision of a Eurozone debt commissioner going to China cap in hand to attempt to secure the financial support of a country of vast wealth, the economy of which is in considerable surplus and seems to have experienced few of the checks suffered by those in the West. The transformation of China in just the past fifteen to twenty years has been truly staggering, even reflected in such statistics as the extent of car and mobile phone ownership. China is now the major player in a globalised world.

The Chinese customs service was highly significant in this process of globalisation. Its personnel was extraordinarily international in its composition – as reflected in the range of orders received by Francis Aglen – and led one commentator to refer to it as the Foreign Legion of the East. Its operations were staggeringly diverse, involving not only the raising of the customs revenue (the most secure and extensive revenue of China in the period) but also the organisation of coastal lighthouses, harbour maintenance, quarantine arrangements, anti-piracy patrols and aspects of the postal service, as well as the collection of both meteorological information and statistics. The service was thus in the business of knowledge collection, the process that underpins all power. Given its maritime business, the customs also had its own fleet of cruisers and lighthouse tenders.⁴ Its customs houses were to be found in no fewer than forty-six ports, the really significant ones being the treaty ports where western powers had taken from a weakened China not only trading rights but also aspects of legal and administrative extraterritoriality which made them in effect international imperial enclaves. In such ports, the very architecture of the customs office invariably reflected the intrusive power of the West (just as the grand customs houses of British ports seemed to reflect the grandeur of the state's presence).

This book strikingly complements the work of Brunero, which offered a political overview of the service and concentrated on the 1920s and 1930s. The author covers a longer period and is particularly

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interested in the personnel of the service, the large number of foreign officers who ran its affairs (there were also of course many Chinese). Using an impressive array of sources in China, Europe and America, she demonstrates that they were not always the supremely self-confident, romantic figures of imperial lore. They were often fallible and vulnerable. They sometimes became mixed up in corruption.⁵ They were invariably ill, suffering not only from physical diseases but also from the psychological problems of living in remote outposts and socially overheated contexts. Their social and working lives reflected the inviolable racial and class hierarchies of the imperial condition everywhere. She also examines the manner in which they were recruited (Aglen is a classic example), the qualities they were supposed to display and their working lives as well as their activities in sport, play and the clubs.⁶ She looks at their record of success and failure, their origins, their experiences, and the manner in which they departed. The service survived through strikingly turbulent times, but in the end was consumed in the joint fires of war and of Communist revolution. It all seems a far cry from a peaceful Perthshire village that was, nonetheless, distantly plugged into these global events.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in Donna Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854–1949* (Abingdon: Roneledge, 2006), p. 31.
- 2 Paul King, *In the Chinese Customs Service: A personal record of forty-seven years* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1924), pp. 232, 295, 303.
- 3 This incident is fully described in Brunero's book (note 1). The situation was further complicated by the splits in the Chinese administration between Beijing in the north and Guangdong in the south.
- 4 Some of these vessels are illustrated and all are listed in the Greenwich National Maritime Museum monograph by B. Foster Hall, *The Chinese Maritime Customs: An international service 1854–1950* (London: National Maritime Museum, 1977). Hall was himself Commissioner of Customs in Hankow and Canton (Guangdong) in the 1930s. His photograph of the staff at the latter in 1939 shows 82 men, ten of them Indoor (without uniforms) and the rest in uniform. This distinction is fully explained by Catherine Ladds in the course of this book. The customs ships were inevitably used for senior staff social events, as illustrated in Brunero's book.

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- 5 The probate of Aglen's will, indicating that he left £57,000 in 1932 seems to suggest that, although he had many opportunities for corruption, he avoided all such temptation. His salary was of course a considerable one.
- 6 These are reflected in the photographs that have come down to us. Cathy Ladds has herself arranged an exhibition of these photographs which was shown in Bristol. She was also involved in a project to digitise such images, showing customs officials, Aglen among them. These reveal them both in formal poses and settings and in more informal surroundings as at the Peking Club, at dinners, and at musical evenings. Some of these can be seen in the Hart collection deposited at Queen's University Belfast and in the Hedgeland collection at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, available on line at http://chp.vcea.net/Collection_China_Maritime_Content.php?CF=8. I am grateful to Cathy Ladds for this information and for transmitting those images in which Aglen appears.