

The Journey Of Pearl S. Buck

By George Fetherling

In 1938, Pearl S. Buck, the author of *The Good Earth*, became the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature. This simple statement, however, obscures what's probably a more important one in terms of explaining her career. If you agree that T.S. Eliot, though born in the United States, was actually British, as his passport and domicile affirmed, then you can say that Buck was the first American writer of either gender to win the award without being an alcoholic. The distinction still held true at the time of her death in 1973 (and for three years after that, until Saul Bellow won the medal).

Why mention this? Because it speaks to the fact that her many books — the “good” ones and all the others — arose out of her being the child of Americans who spent virtually their entire lives in China as members of the Southern Presbyterian Mission. To say the least, hers was the sort of rigidly Christian upbringing in which teetotalism was simply a given.

The S in Pearl S. Buck stood for Sydenstricker. Her mother, Caroline Sydenstricker, was a caring and determined woman who, all her life, kept swallowing hardships and tragedies one after another. Pearl was born in the U.S. in 1892 but was taken to China while still an infant. Her father, Absalom Sydenstricker, was already a dozen years into his life's work there: evangelizing Chinese who either ignored or despised him. But he was not a man easily discouraged. He was assigned to the countryside in Jiangsu (Kiangsu was the romanization in use back then). He made only 10 converts in his first 10 years in an area that was equal in size to Texas and had a limitless abundance “of souls who had never heard the Gospel.”

The quotation is from a generally excellent new biography, *Pearl Buck in China: Journey to the Good Earth* by Hilary Spurling (Simon & Schuster, \$27). The London edition (Profile, £15) goes by a different name — *Burying the Bones: Pearl Buck's Life in China*. The British title is a reference to the fact that there was a cemetery behind the mission station that was Pearl's first home. As a pre-schooler, she sometimes “found bones lying in the grass, mutilated



Pearl S. Buck, in the 1960s, hugging one of the children helped by Pearl S. Buck International

hands, once a head and shoulder with parts of an arm still attached ... They were so tiny she knew they belonged to dead babies, nearly always girls suffocated or strangled at birth and left out for dogs to devour.”

The Protestant and Catholic missions set up throughout China in the latter part of the 19th Century typically included schools and hospitals as well as places of Christian worship. The differences between Western and Chinese education were just as profound as those between Western and Chinese medicine, for the missionaries stressed empirical knowledge, teaching mathematics and science. Some of them also led reform campaigns in such areas as flood and famine relief.

A number of them even “actively campaigned for less oppressive treatment of women.” Absalom Sydenstricker presumably was not one of these, given that, as Ms Spurling tells us, his “distrust of women meant that he could not bring himself to believe they had souls....”

Pearl was two years old when the First Sino-Japanese War broke out: another of the humiliating defeats for China that characterised the 19th Century. In confusion, the people being invaded didn't maintain much distinction between the encroaching Japanese and foreigners generally, including westerners — especially westerners. This was one of the periods in his career when Absalom was attacked, beaten and threatened with execution.

PEARL S. BUCK INTERNATIONAL

Once, when tied up and forced to watch the agony of one of his converts who had been condemned to death, his reaction was envy that she would be getting to Heaven before him.

To his superiors, who were certainly no less devout but perhaps a bit more practical in their obsessions, Absalom was an incessant troublemaker. In 1896, with the war ended, he was relieved of his rural duties and reassigned to the bustling city of Zhenjiang (Chinkiang). It already had a base of 10 converts on which to build. The family lived overlooking the Yangzi River in three rooms that Pearl's mother "scrubbed with carbolic acid, all utensils dipped in boiling water at table, all fresh food either thoroughly cooked or disinfected with potassium permanganate before being touched." Even so, everyone seemed to take turns with illness and disease. Ms Spurling writes: "Absalom's indiscriminate preaching embarrassed Pearl ... She said she could never bring Chinese friends home in case he set about saving their souls."

With the outbreak a few years later of the Boxer Rebellion, that imperially sanctioned revolt against Western influence, a reign of terror in which thousands of missionaries and others were killed, Pearl's father resolutely continued to allow his beliefs to direct his actions. In Ms Spurling's words: "Buoyed by the prospect of martyrdom himself, Absalom refused even to consider evacuation long after most of the white population had left Zhenjiang." In time, though, the family had to go to Shanghai and the safety of the foreign military and naval forces there. It was in Shanghai that Pearl, age eight or nine, first saw water come out of a tap.

Understandably, she felt herself an outcast when she was sent back to the U.S. for a college education. As she later put it: "When I was in the Chinese world, I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese and behaved as a Chinese and ate as the Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings. When I was in the American world, I shut the door between." To which the author adds: "Keeping that door closed was the price of survival for Pearl as a child, but she spent the greater part of her life trying to open it, and keep it open."

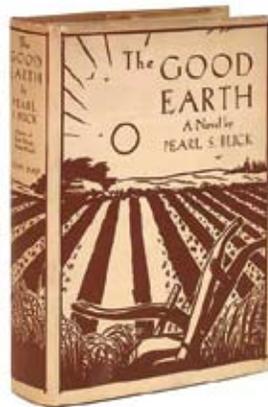
In 1914, Pearl Sydenstricker returned to China to teach. Later, she married John Lossing Buck, an American economist who became the leading foreign expert on Chinese agriculture. She remained there throughout the warlord period. At one point in the book, we see her burying fam-



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From the top: The Pearl S. Buck Birthplace in Hillsboro, West Virginia; Buck in 1932, age 40; the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel from 1932.

ily valuables in the garden to keep them out of the hands of marauding soldiers — while remembering her mother's stories of doing the same in Confederate Virginia when the Yankees were coming. (A quibble: In another place, Spurling, who is British — and also, by the way, the author

of a wonderful biography of Henri Matisse — seems confused about which side was which in the American Civil War.)

All this while, Pearl was writing essays and stories about the daily lives of ordinary Chinese. She was one of those naturals who wrote fluently and constantly. The ultimate result, *The Good Earth*, "borrowed techniques from the Chinese novel in episodic sagas covering vast territories and spanning several generations, preoccupied less with individual characterization than with the expressive power of a broad filmic vision and harsh Dickensian imagery, to penetrate the deep underlife of Chinese people and to draw Western readers in after her."

The book's success was so all-encompassing that, in retrospect, it seems a precursor to that of *Gone with the Wind* but with more important ramifications. In this period, Ms Spurling reminds us, needlessly, the West as a whole "and America in particular, operated an unspoken cultural veto against China," a place most Americans still saw in terms of Fu Manchu stereotypes. The massive novel about the inner lives of a completely oppressed and anonymous Chinese family sounded a new chord, particularly as its publication came at the same time as the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Suddenly China was a hot topic in the West. It continued to be, as the country lapsed into civil war, interrupted only by the Second World War when Mao Zedong's Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists formed an uneasy temporary coalition against the Japanese, thus becoming, for the moment, allies of the U.S., Britain, Canada and the other anti-fascist powers: allies-of-convenience, one might say.

Pearl Buck, who never returned to China after 1934, emerged as a figure of great moral authority. By then she had come to understand how her father's religious zeal had cut him off from (the author's words) "even the most intractable reality" of human suffering. She renounced her ties to the church and with them the Calvinist doctrines of sin, guilt and damnation, arriving at a brand of humanitarian activism not unlike that of Eleanor Roosevelt (who became her friend). She worked hard for the rights of women, African-Americans, the disabled, and others, and for repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Under strict Communism, her works were banned in China (whereas today they are studied there but not widely read). In post-war America, her progressive views



ERIC ENNO TAMM

A century ago, Gustaf Mannerheim and Paul Pelliot took a portait with Kurmanjan Datka, the Queen of Alai, near Chigirchiq Pass. A century later, author Eric Enno Tamm (far left) posed for a photograph with Sardarbek Ismailov (second from left), the great-grandson of Kurmanjan Datka, and his relatives, in a yurt atop Chigirchiq Pass.

were tarred as sympathy for Communism. In fact, as Ms Spurling writes, the former Pearl Sydenstricker “had known too much too young about ideological campaigns to re-educate other people for their own good, and all such attempts filled her with revulsion.”

Sad to say that her later years became a trifle messy. She left John Lossing Buck and ran off with (and later married) the New York publisher of *The Good Earth* and most of her subsequent books. Suddenly wealthy, she grew to have quasi-imperial delusions, playing the role of grand dame for all it was worth. Following her second husband’s death, she took up with a teacher of ballroom dancing who turned out to be a male gold-digger and muddied her name with his dubious financial dealings. In brief, the story of a long useful life with an unhappy ending.

There’s a connection to be made between Pearl Buck in China and *The Horse That Leaps through Clouds* (Douglas & McIntyre, \$34.95), a wonderfully fat new work of travel and history by Eric Enno Tamm, of Ottawa. As the 19th Century melted into the 20th, writes the author, “Western technology and imported consumer goods — along with radical political ideas, democracy and Christianity — were spreading to every corner of the Chinese Empire,” eliciting not joy but fear in Western capitals. One result was the so-called Great Game (the

term popularized by Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim*) in which Imperial Russia and Britain, along with France and some other European players, tried to out-spy one another to get control of Central Asia’s oil and other resources (a story well told in *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* and other works by Peter Hopkirk).

Just as this tomfoolery was winding down, Russia sent Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim on a two-year espionage mission from St. Petersburg to the farthest reaches of northern and western China. In later life, Mannerheim (1867–1951) became a controversial national hero in his native Finland and, for a time, its prime minister. But, in 1906, he was a colonel in the tsar’s service, posing as an ethnographer and travelling with 16 steamer trunks on a mission that would last two years. Mr. Tamm sets out to retrace his famous predecessor’s steps, following the same path across, for example, Eurasia, that “vast continent ruled by a bizarre patchwork of oil-soaked aristocrats, one outlandishly ruthless crackpot and the world’s last major Communist regime and rising superpower.”

A sophisticated journalist indeed, Mr. Tamm gathers observations like gemstones as he crosses “a gauntlet of political and geographical extremes, including some of the world’s hottest deserts, highest mountains and cruellest dictatorships” stretching 17,000 kilometres. He is too

clever to pretend he can intuit the future, but he clearly sees the present reflected in the past. For example, he notes while crossing Uzbekistan that “Khanates of blended races and tongues traditionally ruled Inner Asia. People identified themselves according to their local oases, their ruling dynasties and their allegiance to Islam. That didn’t quite fit the Soviet concept of nationality.”

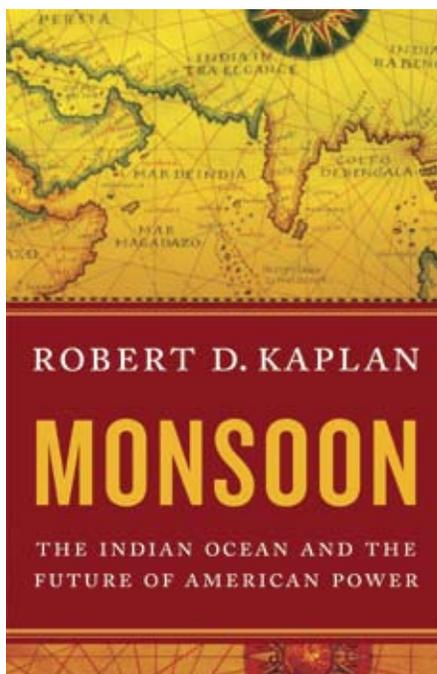
A mere glance at his biography might suggest that the admirable Robert D. Kaplan, familiar to many for his writing in *The Atlantic* as much as for his books, must have some scary friends. He sits on the Pentagon’s defense policy board and is a senior fellow of the Center for a New American Security (whose office, according to its website, “is conveniently located directly across from the Ronald Reagan International Trade Center” in Washington). In fact he’s never been a hawkish inward-looking American exceptionalist but something of a foreign policy freethinker. Part global political analyst, part historian, part travel journalist extraordinaire, he produces books such as *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (1993) and *The End of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century* (1996) that are lively with speculative ideas. In the latter work, for example, he postulates (I paraphrase) that civil wars in West Africa are inevitable because national borders mimic the rivers of

the region, which run east to west, while tribal loyalties run north-south.

His new book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House of Canada, \$33) deals with what the late C.R. Boxer, the British historian of Dutch and Portuguese colonialism, called Monsoon Asia: the cultures that run south from China and India between the African continent and the Australian. In Mr. Kaplan's emphatic view, this is where the action has shifted to, now that Washington is faced with having to share economic and political power with Beijing and New Delhi. "The Indian Ocean region is more than just a stimulating geography," he writes. "It is an *idea* because it provides an insightful visual impression of Islam, and combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the importance of world navies, in order to show us a multi-layered, multi-polar world above and beyond the headlines in Iraq and Afghanistan; it is also an idea because it allows us to see the world whole, within a very new and yet very old framework, complete with its own traditions and characteristics, without having to drift into bland nostrums about globalization." His belief in naval power, like his belief in a world neatly compartmentalized in maps, is daringly retro and hence quite fashionable.

One of the reasons his books are so useful is that the military and intelligence side of his brain exceeds the think tank part. That is to say, he understands the concept of war games — what would happen if this took place instead of that, or vice-versa, in endless permutations — and has mastered a literary form in which to express such exercises: a very different matter from simply writing to promote one policy or another.

In this respect, he is worth quoting at length in a typical moment: "While China seeks to expand its influence vertically, that is, reaching southward down to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, India seeks to expand its influence horizontally, reaching eastward and westward to the borders of Victorian age British India, parallel to the Indian Ocean. Chinese president Hu Jintao, according to one report, has bemoaned China's sea-lane vulnerability, referring to it as his country's 'Malacca dilemma,' a dependence on the narrow and vulnerable Strait of Malacca for oil imports from which China must somehow escape. It is an old fear, for Ming China's world was disrupted in 1511 when the Portuguese conquered Malacca. In the



Robert Kaplan's new book, *Monsoon*, deals with the cultures that exist south of China and India between the African continent and the Australian.

21st Century an escape from the Malacca dilemma means, among other things, eventually using Indian Ocean ports to transport oil and other energy products via roads and pipelines northward into the heart of China, so that tankers do not all have to sail through the Strait of Malacca to reach their destination. This is just one reason why China wants desperately to integrate Taiwan into its dominion, so that it can redirect its naval energies to the Indian Ocean."

The modern history of China is decorated — littered, some might say — with

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the sort of shady westerners politely called soldiers of fortune. For example, an American, Frederick Townsend Ward (1831–62), trained the Ever Victorious Army that defeated the quasi-Christian rebels in the Taiping Rebellion, the bloodiest civil war in world history. But the richest period for those looking to make a fortune as western advisers began with the republican overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and continued through the 1920s and beyond, when warlordism created a new market for imported military know-how.

That was the era of such figures as Frank (One-Arm) Sutton (1884–1944), an Old Etonian who carried his golf clubs into battle at Gallipoli in the First World War and died a prisoner of the Japanese in the Second. In between, he made a fortune selling arms to Chinese bandits and then went broke in Vancouver real estate. He was a contemporary (one thinks of them together, like Keats and Shelley or Burke and Hare) of General Morris Abraham (Two-Gun) Cohen (1889–1970), who at various times was a cowboy and ward-heeler on the Prairies, Sun Yat-sen’s bodyguard, an arms dealer, a deal-maker, a fixer and a spy — not to mention a salesman for Rolls-Royce in China. Some have

said that only his thorough grounding in Alberta politics enabled him to survive serving more than one Chinese faction at a time. And none of these people who freelanced to warlords was more intrinsically slippery and preposterous than Trebitsch Lincoln (1879–1943), a former Montreal missionary and eventual Buddhist monk.

Now comes a full biography of a much less successful and hence much lesser known example of a western military dreamer with grand designs for China. *In Homer Lea: American Soldier of Fortune* (University Press of Kentucky, US\$40), Lawrence M. Kaplan, a staff historian with the U.S. military, tells the tale of someone who, like General Cohen, became involved in anti-imperial politics within the Chinese diaspora in North America. Mr. Lea, who was quite young (he was born in 1876), was in sympathy with K’ang Yu-wei, an adviser to the Emperor Kwang-hsu, who had proposed a set of liberal reforms in the 1890s. This was followed by a palace coup by the Dowager Empress Tzu Hsi. In response, K’ang Yu-wei organized a secret resistance movement called the Pao Huang Hui to restore the emperor to the throne.

Lea was not physically prepossessing.

He was five feet three inches tall and was a hunchback. What’s more, he suffered from chronic nephritis (then called Bright’s disease) and may have been a diabetic as well. Yet he had great personal magnetism — and abundant chutzpah. As Mr. Kaplan writes, “Lea recognized a great opportunity for adventure with the Chinese and promoted himself among the reformers as a military expert, claiming to be a relative, which he was not, of the famous Confederate general Robert E. Lee.” He dropped out of Stanford University in California and arrived in China in time to train troops during the Boxer Rebellion. That over with, he proposed using 20 colleges and universities round the United States as fronts for raising a Chinese-American army to be sent into battle across the Pacific. The federal government shut him down under the neutrality laws. So he went back to China on his own. There, like Morris Cohen, he became associated with Sun Yat-sen and was made a general: General Kam Ma Li. He finally succumbed to his various ailments in 1912, the year the Qing Dynasty fell. He was 35.

George Fetherling is author of the novel *Walt Whitman’s Secret* (Random House).



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