

6

The Voyage from Portsmouth to 'Hong Kong'

The three ships carrying the British embassy to China set out from Portsmouth on 8 February 1816 on the five-month voyage that sailed via Madeira, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town and Batavia. Lord Amherst; his 14-year-old son Jeffrey; Henry Ellis, Secretary to the Ambassador; Clarke Abel, Surgeon and Naturalist; and Henry Hayne, Private Secretary to the Ambassador, travelled on the man-of-war HMS *Alceste*.¹ Also on board, it has been noted, was the wife of the boatswain, whose presence was described by one of the *Alceste*'s crew as 'the Dammablest thing a man can be troubled with but she stood it like a Brittan'.² Charles Abbot, the son of the speaker, as well as Captain Maxwell's son were among the midshipmen. The *Alceste* was joined at Spithead by the naval brig HMS *Lyra* under the command of Captain Basil Hall. One of her midshipmen, William Hutcheon Hall (no relation), later commanded HMS *Nemesis* at the time of the First Opium War.³ The Company ship *General Hewitt*, commanded by Captain Walter Campbell, carried the presents sent by the Prince Regent to the Jiaqing emperor.

1 Henry Hayne (n.d., vol. 1, p. 3) listed the other members of the embassy on board the *Alceste*: Mr Griffith, Chaplain and Jeff's tutor; Doctor Lynn; and Havell, the embassy's draughtsman.

2 This was quoted in a 13-page manuscript written by the carpenter on board the *Alceste* to his father that was auctioned at Christies on 26–27 September 2007 (see *Christie's Sale 7470: Exploration and Travel 26-27 September 2007*, www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/china-lord-amhersts-embassy-to-china-4966662-details.aspx).

3 The HMS *Nemesis* was the world's first ironclad steam-powered warship. On 7 January 1841, the *Nemesis* engaged in action against Chinese forces in the Pearl River with other British warships and routed the Chinese war junks sent against them. The *Nemesis*'s shallow draught showed the utility of such vessels in shallow waters and 'demonstrated conclusively the enormous gap' between Chinese and British military might (Marshall, 2016, p. 89).

Life on board the *Alceste* on the outward voyage helped build an esprit de corps forging the members of the embassy into a close-knit group united in their mission. The spirit of camaraderie was enhanced further by the arrival of the men from the British Factory at Canton who joined the embassy when the ships arrived at the islands off Macao on 13 June 1816. Such high spirits were mostly due to Amherst's leadership derived from his civility, reasonableness and sense of humour. In modern management parlance, Amherst would be regarded as an inclusive leader and a team player who extensively consulted his commissioners and other members of his retinue to make decisions based on the fullest possible range of information and views.

Ellis and Clarke recognised the challenges of a long voyage to the other side of the world and the uncertainty of their reception once they reached China. Their views, no doubt, reflected those of the others in the mission. Ellis (1817) wrote:

The voyage must in fact occupy so many months, that the most sanguine cannot yet dwell upon the scene awaiting them at its termination with any degree of interest; and those who have perused the accounts of the former Embassy, commenced too as it was under better prospects, can scarcely anticipate either public success or private gratification from any events likely to occur during our progress through China. (p. 1)

Clarke Abel, the surgeon and naturalist, later lamented:

In passing the shores of the Isle of Wight, my imagination dwelt painfully on the white cliffs and verdant slopes, which but three days before I had visited with friends who gave the best value to my existence, and from whom I was separating, perhaps for ever. (1818, p. 1)

Amherst's initial thoughts concerned his personal wellbeing. His dislike of sea travel was revealed in a letter to his wife written at Dover in 1806:

Many people go from hence over to the French Coast, but you know I am no admirer of a sea voyage and shall content myself with seeing them from Terra firma. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 1806, in Letters from the Yale Collection of American Literature)

Suffering dreadfully from sea sickness during the first days of his voyage to China, Amherst complained of the 'rolling' of the ship making writing impossible and forcing him to retire to his 'cot for 5 days and ... sit out two dinners':

both my head and stomach are ... exceedingly confused ... [the] noise of the bulk heads ... [the] creaking of the wood is such as to intercept all conversation across the table ... [one has to] exert your lungs to the utmost to be heard by your next neighbour. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 16 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref 5562)⁴

Abel also suffered chronic sea sickness, but William Havell, the artist for the embassy, soon recovered and, after the first day, 'was the life and soul of the party' (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 4).⁵ Despite his indisposition, Amherst remained positive and wrote, 'Nothing can exceed the harmony and good humour that prevails amongst us' (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 16 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562). Jeffrey's presence, as predicted by Lord Boringdon, was a great comfort to his father:

Without him I should have been a very wretch ... From nine o'clock till three I do not see a human being in the ship except Jeff who comes from his French lesson and Captain Maxwell who brings the Chart to show me where we were at 12 o'clock. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 22 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562)

Amherst and Jeffrey spent a lot of time walking up and down the quarter deck looking out for the *Lyra* and the *General Hewitt*. Amherst wrote on 16 February, 'the Indiaman sailed along side us ... for 2 or 3 hours, near enough to nod to each other, but the weather was too rough to admit to conversation' (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 17 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref 5562). Amherst's optimism about his mission improved steadily after gaining his sea legs. He told Sarah:

4 Hayne (n.d., vol. 1, p. 4) noted that Amherst appeared on deck for the first time on the afternoon of 14 February.

5 William Havell, born in 1782, worked in his family's London-based engraving firm and was an established artist. He left the embassy at Manila on its return voyage in February 1817 after an altercation with one of *Alceste's* officers and travelled separately to India where he remained for eight years earning a living as a portrait artist. He returned to England in 1825, living in reduced circumstances and died in December 1857 (Owen, 1981).

I am so convinced that what we have done is right, and so confident, humbly confident, that we shall be rewarded for it, that hope was never so buoyant with me before. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 17 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref 5562)

He also felt well enough to inform her of some choice gossip regarding the details of Lord Buckinghamshire's will. Informed by Ellis that Buckinghamshire had 'not left a single shilling to the present lord' and only a 'small legacy to Mr Ellis and his elder brother', he added that 'Lady Buckinghamshire has a handsome provision [but] I dare say you have heard all this from Lady Macartney' (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 17 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref 5562).

Madeira

The ships reached Madeira on 18 February 1816 where they found two British men-of-war, recently arrived from Portsmouth, waiting in the Funchal Roads. On board the HMS *Niger* was Sir Charles Bagot, newly appointed British Ambassador to the United States on his way to Washington. Bagot knew Amherst and had commented earlier on his dire financial circumstances.⁶ Sir Hudson Lowe, on board the HMS *Phaeton*, was on his way to St Helena to take up the post of governor in charge of Napoleon's exile.⁷ Amherst, anxious to set sail and get underway, declined their invitations to visit Madeira as nothing 'shall interfere with the main object of our voyage' of a speedy passage to China (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 18 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562). Jeffrey recorded in his journal that the town of Funchal appeared 'very clean and large' from a distance, but learned from others that the reverse was true: 'like most Portuguese towns, it is excessively filthy' (Journal of Jeffrey Amherst, son of Lord Amherst, on his father's mission to China, n.d., n.p. in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/37, hereafter referred to as 'Jeffrey Amherst, n.d., n.p.'). Regardless of Amherst's immediate concerns and those of the Company Directors, time was found to load a store of Madeira wine on board the *Alceste* before sailing that evening for Rio de Janeiro.

⁶ Charles Bagot was later to enjoy a pension of £4,000, in contrast to Amherst who received a hereditary pension of £3,000 (Wade, 1835, pp. 510, 507).

⁷ Napoleon was taken to St Helena on board the HMS *Northumberland* under the command of Sir George Cockburn who was entrusted with his safe custody until the arrival of Sir Hudson Lowe. Lowe arrived at St Helena in April 1816 (Seaton, 1898, p. 37).

Sailing into fine weather, the squadron made good time. Dinner was heralded by the sound of a horn and the band playing the 'Roast Beef of Old England' (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 6). Embassy personnel were joined by two or three officers of the watch and evenings were spent playing backgammon (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 5). A festive mood was felt throughout the ship (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 25 March 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562). Amherst wrote:

For the last two evenings there has been dancing upon the deck from about 6 to 8, the gentlemen and officers on the quarter deck and the sailors on the gang-way and forecastle. I don't know which party enjoy it most, but the sailors are a little puzzled with the French country dance tune. One fellow last night amused himself with dancing upon his head. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 22 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562)

'Much mirth and humour' accompanied the crossing-the-line ceremony on 4 March (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 22 February 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562). Sounds symbolic of British power swept the waves as the embassy band played 'God Save the King' and 'Rule Britannia' when King Neptune came on board (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 17). Novices dressed up in women's clothes lent by Mrs Low (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 17) and were ordered to be smeared with an oatmeal paste that was shaved off 'with a rusty iron hoop, full of notches' followed by a ducking match (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 19). Amherst's exemption from the ceremony was bought at a cost of 'a double allowance of grog to the sailors for two days', much to the delight of the crew (Jeffrey Amherst, n.d., n.p.). The *Lyra* and *General Hewitt* left the *Alceste* soon after on 10 March and followed a course directly to the Cape of Good Hope, while the *Alceste* headed west to Brazil in order for Amherst to pay a courtesy call on the Portuguese royal family who were living in exile at Rio de Janeiro under British protection. Such a detour, it was felt, would not jeopardise the mission as the *Alceste's* speed and favourable southeast trade winds would ensure ample time for a rendezvous with the rest of the squadron at Cape Town (Ellis, 1817, p. 2).

The New World: Rio de Janeiro

British reactions to Rio de Janeiro, their first port of call in the New World, provides a useful touchstone against which to compare their later views on China. British responses to their alien environments need to be

placed within the framework of Regency values and assumptions. Visual reactions to scenery were important for classifying interest or otherwise in a country. Other sensory sensations, especially unpleasant odours, immediately indicated an uncivilised and coarse society deprived of order and civility. Appearances were especially important for determining people as respectable or otherwise. Henry Hayne, Amherst's private secretary, wrote of Rio de Janeiro, 'nothing reminded me more of the uncivilised country where I was than their appearance' (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 57). He added that the American minister met at Rio looked more 'like an English barber than a minister ... [of] the Corps Diplomatic' (Hayne, n.d., vol. 1, p. 55).

British reactions to the new environments they encountered, revealed especially in their later responses to and perceptions of China, were shaped also by other more pressing concerns. Amherst, for example, did not respond to the sights of Brazil in the same way as others in his mission due to his anxiety about reaching northern China before the onset of the typhoon season and his preoccupation with immediate official duties connected with meeting the exiled Portuguese royal family in Rio de Janeiro.

Rio de Janeiro's physical appearance, in particular the Sugar Loaf, was described by Ellis as 'indescribably sublime and beautiful': 'The eye wandered in rapturous observation over an endless variety of picturesque combinations, presenting a totality of wondrous scenery ... [which defied] pictorial and verbal description' (Ellis, 1817, p. 3). Hayne (n.d., vol. 1) referred to Barrow's experience when visiting Rio and, like him, was 'lost in admiration of the magnificent scenery' (p. 35). Hayne and Ellis were enchanted when they came across the wife of the Russian Consul reading a book with a small child in a jungle clearing. Ellis described:

On approaching the stream ... we observed an European lady, with her nurse and child, in a recess of the rock; her dress, appearance, and occupation (that of reading), presented, from their civilized combination, a most striking contrast to the uncultivated grandeur of the scene which surrounded us. (Ellis, 1817, p. 6)⁸

Ellis's response to the New World seen in this passage reveals early nineteenth-century British cultural predispositions for interpreting new sights that were later applied to China. Struck by the incongruous and contradictory sensory and Romantic image of an unexpected scene

8 The lady was Mrs Langsdorf, wife of the Russian Consul.

of a European mother and child reading in the wild Brazilian jungle, Ellis reverted to notions of civilisation, progress and sentimentality. For him, the European lady's presence imposed a sense of order on the uncultivated and wild landscape. The external appearance of fine dress and the refined occupation of reading further engaged Ellis's sensibilities, while the presence of the child suggested the finest values of familial love and affection.

While the *Lyra* did not visit Brazil (proceeding directly from Madeira to Cape Town), her captain, Basil Hall, clearly recognised the cultural insularity of the common British sailor when exposed to a foreign culture. He wrote as a general observation:

It is Jack's custom, wherever he goes, to call every one he encounters abroad a mere outlandish-man, forgetting that it is himself alone who is so ... Should the people he meets with happen to understand a word or two of English, he is satisfied, and they are set down for sensible people; otherwise he pities their ignorance, and laughs at the folly of their designating common things by names strange to their ears. I remember once overhearing the conversation of two of my sailors in the streets of Valparaiso, who had only been a few days in the country; one said to the other, 'What do you think of these people?'—'Why', replied his companion, with a look of thorough contempt, 'will you believe it—the infernal fools call a hat Sombrero!' (Hall, 1840/1865, p. 10)

Amherst had little time to contemplate Brazil's novelties. Cannon fire heard by those on board the *Alceste* as she approached the harbour was revealed as a salute announcing the death of the Queen of Portugal. The town of Rio de Janeiro was clouded in a 'character of noisy and luminous melancholy' as ships in the harbour fired their guns every five minutes as a mark of respect (Abel, 1818, p. 10). Amherst prepared himself for the Queen's funeral but was also taken by the British consul on a sightseeing tour of the area where he noted the splendour of the botanic gardens and made reference to a few 'Chinese gardeners' who were cultivating the 'Tea-plant' with great success (Abel, 1818, p. 18).

British reactions to Rio were affected specifically by the presence of numerous slave markets where vast numbers of slaves generated considerable moral outrage. The *Alceste's* physician, John M'Leod, thought slavery was contrary to 'reason and natural light'. He complained further

of Brazil's despotic government and the 'swarms' of Catholic priests who hung about the streets in clusters (M'Leod, 1818/1820, p. 8). The filth of Portuguese towns was also confirmed by Abel (1818):

The strongest efforts of the imagination cannot picture any thing so heavenly as the country, or so disgusting as the town ... I almost lamented that I had an organ of smell. [I can] give no idea of the stench which exhales from the accumulated odure [sic] of its streets. (p. 23)

Cape Town

The *Alceste* reached Table Bay, South Africa, in record time, arriving on 30 April 1816 (Jeffrey Amherst, n.d., n.p.). Cape Town's character as a 'completely European' settlement evoked little interest for Ellis (1817, p. 18). Amherst was entertained by Lord Charles Somerset, Governor of the Cape, and two sailors jumped ship from the *General Hewitt*. After the squadron left the Cape bound for Java on 11 May 1816, Amherst's anxiety grew as the *Alceste* drew closer to China. He wrote to Sarah:

I get exceedingly nervous as we approach the Straits of Sunda and advance towards Canton. I cannot feel confident that we shall be allowed to go up the Gulf of Pechelee. If we are required to land at Canton I know it was the opinion in England that it would be fatal to the success of the Embassy. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 11 May 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562)

Batavia

The Dutch East Indies were reached on 10 June 1816 and the ships anchored in the Anjere Roads. Amherst and some of his suite travelled overland to Batavia and were fascinated by scenes of rice fields, sugar and bamboo plantations and wild jungles. Arriving at Batavia, Amherst noted the port's Chinese 'middling classes', described by Ellis (1817, p. 25) as the descendants of 'Fo-kien province' who 'surpass[ed] the rest of the [Chinese] nation in enterprise' due to their willingness to travel and establish themselves in foreign countries. The children were of 'mixed race', as there were no Chinese women in Batavia, and were sent to China for their education (p. 26).

Despite Batavia's numerous novelties, the British were impressed primarily with the effect of good British governance on the Javanese population following their occupation of the East Indies between 1811 and 1816.⁹ Dutch rule was condemned for its mismanagement and exploitation of the native population and natural resources and for its indifference to the rights and happiness of their subjects (Ellis, 1817, p. 34). Ellis thought that the imminent departure of Sir Stamford Raffles and the British administration from the islands was a 'matter of mutual regret' because Raffles was 'idolised' by the Javanese who thought of the British not as their masters, but as their benefactors (p. 36).

Amherst's attention now focused on the arrangements for the secret rendezvous with the embassy's Canton-based contingent off the coast of Macao. He addressed a letter dated 9 June to the president of the Select Committee informing him of the impending arrival of the embassy. This was handed to the captain of an American ship bound for China. The *Lyra* was sent on ahead to meet up with the Indiaman *Orlando* in Chinese waters to confirm arrangements for rendezvousing with the two Company ships, the *Discovery* and *Investigator*, scheduled to join the embassy. The *Alceste* and the *General Hewitt* departed Java 10 days later bound for China.

Reaction to the Embassy at Canton

Early rumours of another embassy reached Canton in January 1816. Barrow had alerted Staunton that an embassy was 'still in contemplation' and it appears he suggested that Staunton would be its leader (*Staunton Letters*, Macao, 18 January 1816). Staunton had just been promoted to president of the Select Committee after Elphinstone's departure for England in early 1816. His new position, Staunton informed his mother, was one 'I never either coveted or expected', while his new responsibilities made it very difficult 'to leave this spot ... to form an Embassy' (*Staunton Letters*, Canton, 21 February 1816). British relations with the Cantonese authorities were currently very cordial in part due to the arrival of the son of Staunton's old friend Sungyun, the former governor-general at Canton, who in 1811 had bestowed extra favours on

9 Amherst had brought a duplicate set of dispatches ordering the evacuation of British troops from Java.

the British. Sungyun's son, whose rank was higher than the viceroy, was on a special assignment as the Imperial commissioner sent to try appeals against some provincial officials. He sent Staunton some small presents and invited him to visit his pleasure boat which Staunton refused on the grounds that this was 'unbecoming' to his status (*Staunton Letters*, Macao, 18 March 1816).

Official news that an embassy was on its way was received at Canton on 25 May 1816, only 45 days before Amherst arrived at the islands off Macao.¹⁰ The Select Committee, fearful of unofficial news of the embassy's imminent arrival coming to the notice of the Chinese authorities through Indian newspaper accounts arriving at Macao, immediately sprang into action.¹¹ The governor of Guangdong, called the 'acting viceroy' or 'Foo-yuen' by the British, was notified officially of the approach of the embassy.¹² It was assumed another British embassy was acceptable to the Chinese Government following the Qianlong emperor's edict of 1796 signifying his approval of such a mission. The embassy's aim was to inform the Jiaqing emperor of 'the happy restoration of peace among the nations of the West'.¹³ The Indiaman *Thomas Grenville* arrived from Bengal with Buckinghamshire's official letter to the viceroy two days later (Morse, 1926/1966, vol. 3, p. 258). Staunton, along with the other Factory members scheduled to join the embassy, travelled immediately to Macao to wait for Amherst's arrival.

Metcalfe's Meeting with the Fuyuan or Governor of Guangdong

Thomas Metcalfe, the second member of the Select Committee, arranged a meeting with the Fuyuan for the official handover of Buckinghamshire's letter. The Fuyuan was to be reminded of the superior status of the British

10 This news was brought by HIC *Orlando*. Amherst arrived at the Lemma Islands off Macao on 10 July 1816.

11 Newspapers from India with the news of the embassy arrived on 2 June 1816.

12 The Fuyuan is typically referred to as governor of Guangdong. It is unclear here whether the British made a mistake or whether this governor was acting as governor-general of the Liangguang at this time.

13 The Select Committee informed the 'Foo-yuen' of the Qianlong emperor's invitation, dated the 6th day of the 11th moon of the 58th year (December, 1793), where it was signified to Macartney that the court was agreeable to receiving another British ambassador (see Ellis, 1817, pp. 493–494, Note No. 1).

nation in contrast to the 'lesser respectability' of the traditional vassal states who regularly sent embassies to the imperial court (Metcalf to the Select Committee, Canton, 4 June 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/45). Metcalfe, accompanied by Morrison as interpreter, was met at the Canton city gates by the Hong merchants who, aware that this was the first time the Englishmen had entered the city, allowed extra time for sightseeing before proceeding to the governor's palace (Metcalf to the Select Committee, Canton, 4 June 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/45). The meeting with the Fuyuan was short, lasting only 20 minutes. The British were not offered chairs and remained standing while the five senior mandarins remained seated. After making a specific point of taking off their hats and bowing before replacing their hats, Metcalfe opened the box carrying Buckinghamshire's letter and delivered it to the Fuyuan who looked at it briefly before passing it to the Hoppo who passed it to another senior mandarin. Metcalfe recorded that the Fuyuan 'mentioned with seeming satisfaction the former Embassy' (Metcalf to the Select Committee, Canton, 4 June 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/45). After handing over a Chinese translation the British retired. Metcalfe was anxious to leave the palace as quickly as possible to dodge being questioned further about the embassy's purpose and to avoid giving the Chinese the impression that this was a Company initiative rather than one sent on behalf of the British Crown (Metcalf to the Select Committee, Canton, 4 June 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/45).¹⁴

The Hong merchants Howqua and Puankequa visited Metcalfe the following day with a list of questions regarding the embassy including some about the nature of the presents for the emperor and whether the ships planned to follow Macartney's itinerary by stopping at Zhoushan. Questions were then asked about the 'real object' of the mission (Metcalf Report of Meeting with Howqua and Puankequa, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/45). Metcalfe stuck to the party line and reiterated that its objective was to announce the peace in Europe and the Prince Regent's desire to preserve the bonds of friendship between Great Britain and China (Metcalf Report of Meeting with Howqua and Puankequa, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/45). Other private conversations between Metcalfe and the Hong merchants held later in the week, however, focused on Staunton's inclusion in the embassy. Metcalfe was informed

¹⁴ Morrison (1820) wrote that Metcalfe asked for questions to be sent to the Factory to 'afford more time to give suitable answers' (p. 11).

that the emperor did not approve of Staunton visiting Peking after his role in the recent altercations at Canton, but Metcalfe replied that Staunton's inclusion in the embassy was ordered by the British sovereign and could not be disobeyed (Morse, 1926/1966, vol. 3, p. 259). Metcalfe informed Amherst in a private letter that Chinese displeasure regarding Staunton's participation in the embassy originated with the Hong merchants and not from the government due to the 'merchants who have always a wish to lower the Company's Servants in the Eyes of the Mandarins' (Metcalfe to Amherst, 10 July 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/38 (a)).

Staunton was also visited by some senior Hong merchants at Macao who questioned the embassy's plan of travelling directly to Tianjin rather than calling first at Canton. They were informed that this was necessary due to the nature of the presents whose bulk and delicate nature required they travel by sea as they would be damaged if they proceeded overland. They were also informed that Buckinghamshire's letter ordered a direct route to Tianjin and could not be disobeyed.

Meanwhile, rumours at Macao began circulating while the Select Committee waited for official approval from Peking, which was expected around 15 July. Howqua became increasingly anxious over the inclusion of both Staunton and Morrison in the embassy and warned this could result in 'evil consequences' with 'something unpleasant' occurring as the emperor would not be pleased at learning that Staunton, in particular, was travelling to Peking (Metcalfe Report of Meeting with Howqua, 13 June 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 275). Staunton, however, read his concern as indicative of the desire of the merchants to protect themselves in the face of imperial displeasure.

Staunton's withdrawal from the embassy, the British thought, would only confirm Chinese suspicions and would be tantamount to labelling him as a traitor when in fact he was only doing his duty and following his sovereign's orders. The Hong merchants' attitude was interpreted as yet another example of Chinese interference in the internal affairs of the British Factory. Such 'low cunning and intrigues', the Select Committee felt, had to be defeated at all costs. It was imperative that 'Sir G. Staunton and suite should embark and proceed to some rendezvous to join the Ambassador; apprising the Mandarins of the circumstance, but to move out of reach of any reply' (Morse, 1926/1966, vol. 3, p. 260).

Staunton sent the Fuyuan an official letter informing him that he was proceeding immediately to join the embassy ships that were sailing directly to Tianjin. Their exact location was kept secret from the Chinese Government, which had taken the precautionary measure of sending Chinese troops to military posts in the area following rumours spread by the Portuguese at Macao of suspicious British intentions (Ellis, 1817, p. 55).¹⁵

Staunton's immediate reaction on learning that he was not to lead the embassy is not known. He informed his mother in a brief note dated 6 June 1816, 'I am at this moment full of business preparing for the expected Embassy—and likewise being chief of the Factory ... but [I am] in good health' (*Staunton Letters*, Macao, 6 June 1816). His next letter is dated 6 July. The gap in correspondence is uncharacteristic, especially given the importance of such a mission for the Staunton family. Nevertheless, he was delighted to receive a private letter from Amherst, delivered by the American ship sent from the Straits of Sunda, that reached him on 24 June, informing him that Amherst had visited his mother in London before departing on the mission: '[I am] well pleased at this mark of politeness and attention' (*Staunton Letters*, Macao, 6 July 1816). The embassy was due to arrive at any moment and it was important he 'should lose no time in this neighbourhood. I am going to embark tomorrow on board one of the Company's cruising ships stationed here, in order to proceed with his Lordship to his destination' (*Staunton Letters*, Macao, 6 July 1816). Staunton's earlier doubts about the prospects of the embassy had not changed, but his naiveté remained:

I do not flatter myself that much is to be gained at present by an Embassy, but I have little doubt of the Chinese receiving us handsomely—and with the proper attention due from one great nation to another. (*Staunton Letters*, Macao, 6 July 1816)

15 Dutch and Portuguese 'jealousy' at Macao was also detected at the time of the Macartney Embassy. Macartney commented on the Portuguese that 'we had to expect from them every ill office and counteraction in their power' (Cranmer-Byng, 1962, p. 64).

Staunton's position in the embassy had still to be determined. His role had not been approved by the Company due to fears of Chinese displeasure after the part he played in the recent altercations at Canton and Macao. Accordingly, it was left to Amherst to decide Staunton's position.¹⁶

Amherst Overnights in Coastal Waters off Hong Kong

Amherst's arrival in the South China Sea was shrouded in secrecy. The *Alceste* met up with the *Lyra* and *General Hewitt* and the two Company ships, the *Discovery* and *Investigator*, with the members of the British Factory on board at a prearranged location on 10 July 1816.¹⁷ The ships moved that evening to a small rocky island known as 'Hong Kong' for the purpose of watering. Staunton was due to visit Amherst on board the *Alceste* the following morning, but in the meantime Basil Hall wrote in a private capacity to his friend, Lord Sidmouth, on the prospects of the embassy based, no doubt, on information from the members of the Canton contingent who had joined the *Lyra* that day.¹⁸ He informed Sidmouth:

It would give me pleasure could I furnish your Lordship with any accurate information as to the probable success of our mission; but it is difficult to get this free from prejudiced views. Along with Sir George [Staunton], there have come several men of great acuteness, & local knowledge. I can readily observe that they have not any expectation of our succeeding. They seem to think it quite hopeless our even finding this government treating us on an equal footing with themselves; under a show of cordiality & good faith, they disguise the worst possible opinion of us, & all sorts of treachery; therefore, without some motive to induce them to

16 Only Toone and Davis had been officially instructed to attend the mission (Staunton, 1824, p. 8). Morse (1926/1966) stated that Buckinghamshire appointed Elphinstone second commissioner and Staunton third commissioner. On the departure of Elphinstone to England, the vacancy was to be filled by Ellis, originally secretary to the ambassador.

17 The Macartney Embassy arrived in Chinese waters on 20 June 1793 and anchored off Macao. In contrast to the secrecy surrounding the Amherst mission, the Qianlong court had ample warning of its arrival. Three members of the mission, including Sir G. L. Staunton, went ashore immediately and returned the following day with news that the Qianlong court planned to give it a most hospitable and honourable reception (Cranmer-Byng, 1962, p. 63).

18 Henry Addington, 1st Viscount Lord Sidmouth, had served as prime minister from 1801 to 1804, and was the home secretary at the time of the Amherst Embassy. He was a close friend of both Amherst and Basil Hall. Hall's letter was sent in a private capacity.

behave better, we perhaps lose ground by these acknowledgments of their right to treat us as inferior. The Portuguese of Macao appear to be guided by the wildest jealousy imaginable—their accounts of the object of this Embassy have produced strong apprehensions that it is merely the precursor of an invasion. (Hall to Sidmouth, HMS *Lyra* off Macao, 9 July 1816, in Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 152M/C1816/OF2)

This letter is important as it represents the only document reflecting the up-to-date and private views of the Englishmen based at Canton that were no doubt also relayed to Amherst. Amherst's task ahead in dealing with an arrogant and suspicious imperial court was considered daunting in spite of the inclusion of Britain's foremost sinologists and contradicts Staunton's view of an expected cordial, if fruitless, reception. Chinese suspicions of British motives were reinforced by the Select Committee's tactics of secrecy and evasion that provided no specific information on either the movements of embassy personnel or the ships transporting them. Further, the role of Portuguese propaganda and the presence of unusual British shipping activity in the waters of the Lemma islands near Hong Kong had alerted local authorities. The *Alceste*, *Lyra* and *General Hewitt*, as well as the Company ships *Discovery* and *Investigator*, were joined for a brief time by the Company ship *Thomas Grenville*, which was on its way to Europe. Jeffrey recorded in his journal, 'Such an assemblage of English ships had I suppose never before met together at Hong Kong' (Jeffrey Amherst, n.d., n.p.).

Staunton learned of Ellis's position as the second commissioner in the embassy upon the arrival of the *Alceste* on 10 July 1816. His disappointment, as well as his delay in visiting the *Alceste* and meeting Amherst until the following morning, has been interpreted by Platt (2018, p. 161) as a sign of great petulance where 'he initially refused even to speak' to Amherst. However, there is no evidence to support this assertion. Staunton (1824, p. 7) gives a more plausible and practical reason for his delayed arrival on board the *Alceste*. First, Amherst had just received reports and intelligence from Canton on 10 July and needed time to study these, especially regarding the expediency of including Staunton in the embassy. Second, Captain Maxwell was anxious for all the ships of the squadron to proceed as quickly as possible to 'Hong Kong' to re-water. Once on board the *Alceste*, Staunton proceeded to spend 'a considerable time in consultation with Lord Amherst and Mr. Ellis, relative to the future arrangements and constitution of the Embassy' (Staunton, 1824, p. 7). At issue was his rank

and position in the embassy. Staunton argued that the subordinate position of third commissioner would lower his status in the eyes of the Cantonese Government and he was especially concerned that Ellis was nominated with dormant credentials of minister plenipotentiary, meaning that he would be the ambassador in the event of Amherst's death. Fortunately, both Amherst and Ellis agreed readily with Staunton's wishes. He was delighted and told his mother in a letter, also quoted by Platt (2018, p. 161) who omitted the following three lines, thus changing the emphasis of Staunton's positive remarks about his first meeting with Amherst and Ellis:

The conduct of both these Gentlemen is everything I could properly wish—nothing could be more obliging and kind than Lord Amherst's reception—or more conciliatory than Mr. Ellis ... You will perceive that I am established the Second, and First of the Embassy—Lord Amherst also said verbally—'You are in a higher situation than your father was because you are actually ... in the Commissioners of Embassy ... whereas he was only Secretary of Legation'. (*Staunton Letters*, On board *Discovery*, 12 July 1816)

Staunton's emphasis on the importance of rank and his pride at surpassing the status of his father in the Macartney Embassy is made clear in this letter. He concluded by persisting in his belief that, while he was not sanguine about the embassy's prospects, he nevertheless remained confident that it would be 'received as well at least as the former Embassy' (*Staunton Letters*, On board *Discovery*, 12 July 1816). While Amherst's decision to appoint Staunton as his number two, in Tuck's (2000) view, may have 'doomed the Embassy from the start' (p. xxi), it needs to be noted that, contrary to the views of historians such as Platt (2018) and Gao (2016), the camaraderie that existed on the outward voyage continued to characterise the relations within the embassy suite, which would remain positive and professional throughout the remainder of their time in China.

However, Amherst had his doubts regarding the inclusion of Thomas Manning in the embassy. He was instructed to take only Toone and Davis on the mission and was concerned with Manning's 'peculiar costume and appearance' of a long beard and Chinese dress (Staunton, 1824, p. 9). Staunton reassured him that, although some Hong merchants had previously objected to Manning's appearance, the Chinese Government had taken no notice of him, either at Canton or during his time in Tibet. His knowledge of Mandarin, Staunton thought, would be a valuable asset in future dealings with the Chinese. Manning, however, acknowledged his 'insufficiencies' and referred to Morrison as the person possessing the

'most able of all' skills. He praised Morrison's fluency in Mandarin, as well as his 'peculiar attention' paid to the habits of the Chinese people and practical experience of current affairs at Canton (Manning to Staunton, *Accepting the Offer, Macao*, 25 May 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 229). Nevertheless, the embassy's importance required the inclusion of all available talent if it were to fulfil its mission and Manning was hired at a fee of \$2,000 (Manning to Staunton, *Accepting the Offer, Macao*, 25 May 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 229).

Watering in a 'Sheltered' Bay: Hong Kong, 11–13 July 1816

Hong Kong was the first Chinese territory seen by those who had come directly from England. Inhabited by only a few scattered fishing villages, the harbour impressed the British naval officers who thought that it afforded an 'admirable shelter for ships of any burden'. Its geographical topography of being 'land-locked on every side by lofty islands' was acknowledged as an ideal haunt for pirates (Hall, 1840/1865, p. 6). Reference to 'Hong Kong' at this time, as noted earlier, was its first citation in published English literature.¹⁹

Abel, in keeping with his earlier impressions of Rio de Janeiro, was impressed with the 'high conical mountains, rising in the centre, and ... a beautiful cascade [of water] which rolled over a fine blue rock into the sea' (1818, p. 60). The Chinese fishing boats that gathered around the British ships caught Jeffrey's attention; he described their curious shape and the large painted eye on their bows. Revealing British amusement at the use of pidgin English at Canton and the perceived superstitious mentality of the Chinese he wrote: 'When asking them the reason [for the eye] they answered in broken English, "How can see the rocks when no have got Eye?"' (Jeffrey Amherst, n.d., n.p.).

Several embassy members took the opportunity to go ashore while the crews were collecting fresh water from the waterfall. Abel gathered rock samples and plant specimens, including a variety of fern that gave a distant impression of a green and fertile island. Closer inspection,

19 Morse (1926/1966, vol. 3, p. 260) identified the spot where the ships of the Amherst Embassy moored as 'Malihoy Bay abreast the Waterfall at Hongkong in the Channel between Hongkong and the North end of Lemma Island'.

however, revealed a 'remarkabl[y] barren' place (Abel, 1818, p. 60). The heat and humidity were overwhelmingly oppressive and Abel recorded a temperature of 120 °F (48.8 °C) during a hike on the mountain. Hong Kong, on closer inspection, had none of the tropical wonders of Brazil or Java and, apart from the waterfall, had no other picturesque features.

Abel's first contact with native Chinese was also an anticlimax. The only inhabitants were 'some poor and weather-beaten fishermen, spreading their nets, and drying the produce of their toils on the rocks which supported their miserable mud-huts' (Abel, 1818, p. 62). Davis noted the good manners of the locals, which he thought were far more acceptable than those of the impertinent Cantonese. Their 'quiet and civil' behaviour, Davis (1841, p. 7) thought, was due to the island's isolation where a European visitor was a 'novel' occurrence.

Havell, meanwhile, had his sketchbook and tried to draw the local people who had gathered around him 'in all eagerness and insatiable curiosity' (Davis, 1841, p. 7). His task, according to Davis, proved difficult, as the subject being drawn immediately 'wheel[ed] round to the rear to look over the artist's shoulder and observe progress' (p. 7). Havell, described as 'not the most patient of his profession', became frustrated and the whole scene 'became rather ridiculous' (p. 7).

Wet and unsettled weather greeted the British the next morning. Imperial permission to proceed to the north of China had yet to arrive and the British were growing increasingly anxious that their location would be discovered by Cantonese authorities who would halt the embassy and divert it to Macao. Hall was concerned that the 'well-known practice of the Chinese, whose constant study it had been to render access to the court as difficult as possible' made their next move a total gamble. He added:

It was finally resolved, after much discussion, to put the most favourable construction on the matter; to take it for granted ... that the ambassador was to be favourably received, and to push on without delay for the Pei Ho river, the nearest to Peking of any part of the sea-coast of China. It was contested, that once fairly on the threshold of the celestial empire, we should be less exposed to the operation of those multifarious intrigues, through which ... everything must pass, if discussed at Canton. (Hall, 1840/1865, p. 6)

The British, concerned at the lateness of the season, decided to take their chances and set sail for the north of China despite having not received official permission to do so. The ships were about to depart when a fast sailing boat, sent by the British at Macao, approached them with news that the emperor's edict had been received granting permission for the embassy to proceed. Metcalfe's accompanying letter was optimistic. The Chinese at Canton, Amherst was informed, thought the emperor's response to the embassy was extremely favourable (Staunton, 1824, p. 10). Staunton read the emperor's edict before passing it to Morrison for translation and concluded it was expressed in the 'usual strain of arrogance and affected superiority' representative of all such correspondence. Dated 24 June 1816 the edict stated:

As the English nation offers presents, and tenders its sincere good will with feelings, and in language respectful and complaisant, it is doubtless proper to allow the Embassy and presents to enter China, and the ship bearing them to proceed to Teen-sing, that the ambassador and suite may disembark. (Abel, 1818, p. 380, Appendix C)

The British, understandably, were ecstatic and greatly relieved. Amherst wrote to Sarah:

In the midst of my anxiety what should burst upon me but a dispatch beginning Huzzu! Huzzu! [Hurrah! Hurrah!] with the intelligence that the Imperial answer ... had arrived at Canton on the 9th and expressed the Emperor's high gratification at the honor intended him by the Embassy - that three Mandarins were dispatched to the province of Pe-che-tee and particularly one to Tien-sing [Tianjin] on the White River to wait our arrival and to conduct the Ambassador with due honor to Peking. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, 'At Anchor off the Island of Hong-Kong', 12 July 1816, in BL Box 130 946c Ref. 5562)²⁰

The squadron departed Hong Kong for the north of China on 13 July 1816 in rain and unsettled weather. Staunton and Morrison had since joined Amherst and Ellis on board the *Alceste* where discussion soon turned to the strategies to be employed on the mission, in particular, the crucial issue of the kowtow.

²⁰ It would appear that this letter was placed with Captain Maxwell for dispatch with the first ship leaving China for England after the *Alceste* arrived back at Canton in early November 1816.

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