

***A Young Englishman in Victorian Hong Kong: The Diaries of Chaloner Alabaster, 1855-1856* ed. Benjamin Penny. Canberra: ANU Press, 2023. xii + 222 pp. ISBN 97871760465919**

This is a wonderful little book, a forgotten diary by Chaloner Alabaster, a very young trainee official in British Hong Kong in 1855, brought to light by Benjamin Penny, a professor of Chinese history and religion at the Australian National University. Penny came across the diary while exploring the archives of the London Missionary Society; he calls it “archival gold” (xi), and he may be right.

There are of course many diaries surviving from this period, as Anne-Marie Millim notes in her study of *The Victorian Diary* (8), which examines the diaries of such notables as George Eliot, John Ruskin, and George Gissing. Chaloner Alabaster is not in that class, but just as an earlier diary scholar, Robert Fothergill, said he would prefer the diary of a lady-in-waiting to what we have of George Eliot because Eliot confines herself to barebones accounts of her reading and her health (11-12), in Chaloner Alabaster we get much more than a surface account. His diary, as he says himself in one of his entries, is meant to describe “my actions, exterior relations & inward feelings” (144) – and so it does.

Alabaster arrived in Hong Kong in the fall of 1855 to take up a position as a “student interpreter” in the consular service. He began the diary even earlier on the voyage out, but it really only gets going once he arrives; and even then its beginnings are unpromising. Fothergill says that to a casual reader a diary may seem a tedious catalogue of “nonentities and non-events” (8) and at first Alabaster’s diary seems like that. But, says Fothergill, to the diary devotee, the “coral-like aggregations of minimal deposits become addictive” (8) – and that is what Alabaster’s diary becomes, perhaps because as he settles into life in a strange new land he is able to add texture to his observations, and dig deeper into his own responses.

Things perhaps first take off in February when he describes a fire that sweeps through the colony. It was a tremendous fire, he says, causing immense confusion, which he captures by producing a sort of stream of consciousness presentation of events, including houses on fire, a roof falling in, a house being pulled down (he helped with that), plundering going on “like blazes,” sheep on the loose, soldiers and engineers: “Send the water in!” he quotes someone as saying in the commotion: “‘Pump! Pump!’ ‘Smash that glass’ ... ‘I can’t stand this. It’s awful’” (110-12).

So much for events. Diaries sometimes discuss events. Pepys described the Great Fire of London, but mostly we read him for his internal revelations. Similarly, though the description of the fire is one of the most exciting moments in this diary, overall what holds our attention is the internal development of young Chaloner Alabaster, only 17 when he arrives. It is a coming-of-age document, a sort of Bildungsroman, though true of course rather than fictional.

We see Alabaster struggling at first, feeling homesick, proposing even to walk home to England, and reproaching himself for not working well. He works but “unsatisfactorily,” he says, using one of his favourite words. His most favourite word, though, is “jolly,” used 196 times in little more than a year of entries. He does have some good times, jolly times, exploring ravines,

collecting grasses and insects, thinking of becoming a botanist, going on walks with his friends (when he's not fighting with them), playing cards – but he does too much of that, he decides, and makes a resolution to stop card playing, or at least playing for money. The trouble is, he says, he often makes resolutions and just as often breaks them: he develops self-awareness in the course of the diary.

He also waxes philosophical at times: watching a collection of insects, he says they are just like human beings, struggling to get to the top, fighting each other, and then falling. Some fall while fighting. Some seek to escape, but where will they go (134)?

Other times he waxes literary, apostrophizing his diary, “Oh! Diary or journal,” why are you so “dull & uninteresting”? (161). The odd thing is that by this time, in June, his diary does not seem dull or uninteresting at all. One time he bursts into doggerel verse about a schooner (152), another time, perhaps recognizing how much he uses the term “jolly” (or “semi-unjolly”) he bursts into an ode to Jollity, which he then dismisses as “unmitigated bosh” (121, 181).

But his unmitigated bosh is just a way of trying things out, exploring, finding himself. That is what this diary is mostly about. It does also give you a picture of life for a budding colonial administrator in Victorian Hong Kong, but mostly it is a picture of adolescent development, of a very young man learning to be himself, to fit himself into a career, and adjust to being an adult.

And then it just stops or trails off. Penny quotes a diary theorist as saying “Keeping a diary is a way of living before it is a way of writing” (45): Alabaster lives through his diary until he no longer needs it: he progresses past self-reproach and settling in, and goes on to have a long career in the consular service in China, during which he no longer keeps a diary. One might conclude from this that a diary is a way of finding your way, especially in new circumstances, and once one has found one's way, it is like a compass that you can live without.

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Works Cited

- Fothergill, Robert A. *Private Chronicles: A Study of English Diaries*. London: Oxford UP, 1974.
- Millim, Anne-Marie. *The Victorian Diary: Authorship and Emotional Labour*. London: Routledge, 2013.