



John Pownell Reeves, His Majesty's Consul in Macao 1941-1946.

The John Reeves Memoir, “The Lone Flag” Lifting the Veil on Wartime Macao

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Alone in a hostile world, keeping the Union Jack flying in the turbulent years of Macao during World War II was the nigh-unsung hero, John Pownell Reeves, British Consul from 1941-1946. Thousands of people who sought refuge in Portuguese Macao while Hong Kong was under Japanese occupation owed their care and indeed their survival to the efforts of this compassionate and dutiful civil servant.

Macao? Macao? Where the devil's Macao?
We're bothered by telegrams all the time now.
By Golly; it's true we did send a Consul
But forgot him as we would a lost tonsil.

There he is cocooned like the smallest of larva
The only one left from Siberia to Java,
And, look again, from Chungking to Chile.
It's really absurd; the position too silly.

But in they kept coming, these bothersome cables
They are filling the pigeon-holes, piling the tables.
Then give him routine, this solitary fellow
Alone in the East so fast turning yellow.

When did you say was his telegram one?
January 1st? Well, it's got to be done
It's only March now; we'll send him a word.
What? Answer his question? Don't be absurd.

Surely by now we've learnt to use phrases
Which leave every question in primeval hazes.
Remember our motto, now how does it go?
“A fig for all Consuls. God bless the F.O.”¹

John Reeves astride one of the stone guardians of the Ming tombs in Nankou, Hebei Province in the early 1930's.

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"I think we all miss Macao now we are no longer there, and the friends we made there. We all had much to be thankful for in its mere existence."²

These words set the tone in John Reeves' memoir "The Lone Flag", a remarkable document that has surfaced in Cape Town, South Africa, where Reeves retired after an eventful life in the Far East and Rome. The memoir—which is now in the care of Cape Town businessman David Calthorpe, who was a close friend of the Reeves family—provides an invaluable record of and insight into Macao during those dark days when, despite the neutrality of the Portuguese enclave, the threat of Japanese occupation was ever-present. With Japan's might in the region so overwhelming at the time, there was no room for complacency; the menacing mood of the era colours every page of the memoir.

Besides the tales of heroism and betrayal, the memoir is that much more a valuable document in that it gives a first-hand account by a person in an official position who had a keen human and political sensibility and was observant of all that went on around him. As a diplomat, Reeves was aware both of the local situation and of the wider ramifications of his role in the beleaguered enclave. Far from being a mere observer, though, he intervened and took initiatives that saved the lives of many, and ensured the well-being of thousands of bewildered and destitute refugees whom he took into his care.

As can be gleaned from reading the remarkable document, Reeves does not talk about himself; rather, he describes what had to be done primarily to alleviate the plight of the refugees—especially those who held British papers—who effectively became his responsibility. He tells us about the intrigues, espionage and the rich panoply of characters with whom he had dealings in trying to do what he could with limited resources to help those in his care. Throughout, the reader is struck by the humility and sincerity of John Reeves, his sense of irony and his ability not to take himself too seriously, while still drawing his reader into his world: Macao during World War II.

The *London Gazette* tells us that Reeves was "appointed after open competition to the Foreign Office as a Student Interpreter in the Far Eastern Consular Service, on October 31, 1932."³ He was appointed a Vice-Consul in His Majesty's Consular

Service in China in 1935.⁴ Reeves was promoted and appointed to be His Majesty's Consul at Macao in 1941.⁵ He was then appointed to be His Majesty's Consul for the Compartimenti of Latium, the Abruzzi, Molise and Sardinia and the Sardinian Islands, to reside at Rome (with effect from September 15, 1947).⁶ Later, he was appointed to be His Majesty's Consul for the Province of East Java, to reside at Surabaya (with effect from October 1, 1949). In his capacity as HM Consul in Macao, he was made Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year Honours of January 1, 1946.⁷ He also received a Cross of Merit from the Portuguese Red Cross.⁸

The Macau Tribune of September 16, 1945,⁹ reported: "On March 13th 1945 an acknowledgment of Mr Reeves's invaluable service came from his government. The British Foreign Office conferred upon him a double honour: they upgraded his post to the status of full consul, notwithstanding the rule that there should be no promotion in the Consular Service during the war. Telegrams of congratulations on this promotion from H.B.M. embassies at Lisbon and Chungking, greetings both official and unofficial poured into H.B.M. Consulate, Macau, from all parts of the city. Mr Reeves's indefatigable efforts on behalf of the refugees under his charge will never be forgotten by the refugee community and all others who have known him. That he may long be spared to continue his splendid work and be blessed with many years of good health and happiness are the sincere wishes of all sections of the community." The article also refers to a "free school for the poorer children, a milk supply for needy children as long as it was possible to maintain this service, cheap rice when prices in the local market rose to exorbitant rates, were a few of the most obvious of the services which Mr Reeves established in Macau."¹⁰

Reeves's birth was registered in the Registration District of Lewisham (Greater London) in the quarter ending June 1909, and he died of pneumonia at the Swartland Hospital on May 28, 1978, at Malmesbury, Cape Province, in South Africa (death certificate No B567812). These are the perfunctory details of the man's life, but they hardly reflect his exotic career in tumultuous times. The memoir—which he started aboard *H.M.S. Ranee* in August 1946 and completed in Rome in 1949—shows us, on one level,

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a diplomat writing for other diplomats. While the details of protocol and procedure of diplomatic life are presented with an easy familiarity, the memoir has the added advantage that with the many people it refers to, Reeves can tell us what happened to certain individuals after the war, whether they got their comeuppance or were suitably rewarded for their efforts. War, as the adage goes, brings out the best and the worst in people. Pirates, pimps, black-market profiteers, secret agents, double agents, and opportunists of every sort were the kind of people Reeves describes, as well as those who lived up to the highest ideals of self-sacrifice. Reeves reveals, too, that often his judgement proved to be sound. At other times—as he admits—he had misplaced his trust in people who challenged his abiding faith in human nature.

The value of the memoir as an historical document is underscored in a footnote in Dauril Alden's recently published biography of the famed historian of the Lusophone world, Charles R. Boxer.¹¹ Alden devotes virtually an entire appendix in his Boxer book to Reeves, inasmuch as Reeves was among the important public figures at the time when Boxer himself was in Hong Kong. In one of the few published references to Reeves, Alden says the following, which the memoir subsequently corroborates.

"The care of the Anglos and the Americans became one of the burdens of Hong Kong's hardworking British consul, Mr John P. Reeves, a remarkably cool and resourceful official who deserves to be resurrected from the oblivion to which he has seemingly been confined."¹²

Some of Alden's information on Reeves, gleaned from various sources, is corroborated by the memoir, such as his espionage activities. Citing Edwin Ride's *BAAG: Hong Kong Resistance 1942-1945*,¹³ Alden writes, in a footnote: "What Reeves did not reveal was that one of his most important intelligence sources was a network operated and paid for by Jack Braga (whose father is referred to by Reeves in his memoir as "one of the grand old men of Hong Kong"), who was never even thanked by the British government after the war for his efforts to aid downed fliers and to provide the BAAG [British Army Aid Group] with information concerning conditions within Hong Kong."¹⁴ Reeves discreetly makes no precise mention of the help he received in acquiring essential intelligence. However,

Reeves did receive the following acknowledgement from the Governor of Hong Kong:

26 July 1946 Government House,
Hong Kong

My Dear Reeves

Before you go on leave I want to express on behalf of this government and of the people of this colony our very sincere gratitude for all that you did on behalf of the Hong Kong refugees who were dependent on you in Macao during nearly four years of war. I have heard from many quarters the most appreciative accounts of the pains you took to meet the manifold needs and distresses of the refugees and all who were in Macao during those hard years have spoken most warmly of your kindness and understanding as well as your untiring energy.

The difficulties of building up within a consulate a charitable organisation of such magnitude must have been immense, and I have no doubt that erratic communications, shortage of commodities and political uncertainties added greatly to your formidable task.

Your achievements in the face of such obstacles were quite remarkable and, in addition to thanking you, I should like to congratulate you most cordially on the success of your efforts.

I wish you a pleasant journey home and a very enjoyable leave.

When you come back to the East, as we all hope you will some day, you may be assured that you will always receive a very warm welcome in this colony.

Yours very sincerely

Governor

Mark Young¹⁵

However, Reeves seldom mentions his wife, and then only in passing, even though Alden's sources do. She was a Miss Rhoda Murray-Kidd, of a well-known family in Shanghai. They were married in Hankow in 1936 and their daughter was born a year after the marriage.¹⁶

Alden goes on to say that "Reeves, his wife and their young daughter came to Macao in June

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1941 after a six-year stint in Mukden. He was sent down for a rest, but five days after his arrival he was instructed to take charge of the consulate. Reeves's wife, reputedly a source of comfort to the refugees, though she maintained a much lower profile than did her husband, was caught by the war in Hong Kong and was not permitted to rejoin her husband and their six-year-old daughter for several months.¹⁷

Alden makes further reference to Reeves, emphasising the important role he played, a role dictated not by the daily routine of a consul in peacetime, but by clearly understanding the duties and obligations imposed on him by the particular circumstances of being in neutral territory lying adjacent to British territory occupied by the enemy. This is borne out by a number of diverse sources published shortly after the war that refer to Reeves and his efforts on behalf of the refugees.

As Reeves himself observes: "The situation was now not a little interesting. My flag, floating next door

to the Japanese Consul's, was the only allied flag, apart from Chinese, for some distance, west to Yunnan and Chungking over 700 miles, north to Vladivostok 1800, east into the Pacific some 4000 miles, south east to Port Moresby over 3000 and south to Australia 2700. It was to remain the only one constantly floating until the end of the war, when it was described by the press as 'The Lone Flag.' It is possible that no other British flag has ever been so alone from the point of view of distance to the next."¹⁸

Reeves certainly was keenly appreciative of the moment in history he was living through. But more than that, we see in the memoir that Reeves acted out of a sense of humanity, implicitly understanding that the circumstances required more of him, of his qualities as a compassionate human being as well as those of efficient administrator and diplomat. "By cable and short-wave Reeves kept London informed concerning the success of the Japanese attack on Hong Kong, the conditions that obtained within the bastion after

Mrs. Rhoda Reeves, nee Murray-Kidd, with John Reeves holding their first-born child, Letitia, at the nursing home in Mukden in 1937.



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its fall, including the state of the inhabitants' morale and the effectiveness of Allied bombing raids, and continued Japanese pressure on the Macao government. Part of his information came from Allied refugees, whom he always interrogated and actively assisted. One of the first was Phyllis Harrop who arrived in Macao at the end of January 1942. For her, Macao was only the first stage of a long journey home. She reported that Reeves came to her hotel to see her but insisted that she accompany him to the consulate to continue their discussion. He contended that the hotel was not secure and she later discovered that he was quite correct. Like James Bond, she left strands of wool arrayed across the locks of her suitcases. When she returned to her room she found them strewn about the floor. Subsequently when Mrs. Harrop resumed her journey, she did so with funds and letters of introduction that Reeves provided, for which she later expressed her gratitude. So did another grateful escapee, Mr A. W. ("Fred") da Roza, a formerly affluent merchant in Kowloon who later left Macao the next year with his wife and youngest son in a sampan on a flight that would eventually take them to Australia."^{19,20}

Reeves in his memoir sees the assistance he offered refugees as part of his duties, but it becomes clear from the above that it was left to others to pay tribute to him. Typically, he himself never boasts of deeds he performed, which were obviously vital to the survival of others.

Alden goes on to mention further that the well-known figure of Lindsay Ride, "organiser of the BAAG, established contact with Reeves. He arranged for one of his agents, Mrs Joy Wilson, wife of Geoff Wilson, former chief of police in Hong Kong's New Territories and then, of course, interned at Stanley camp, to work in the consulate. Reeves sent reports to the BAAG via its couriers and by radio. He did so, fully appreciative of the risks that he was taking, for the Japanese consulate was situated next door to his residence and the two properties were separated by a low wall. There were always observers in the Japanese consulate who watched the coming and going of visitors to its neighbour's office. Beginning in 1943, the Japanese posted eight guards on the street conspicuously near the British consulate. Whenever Reeves himself left the consulate by car, he was always tailed by several Japanese vehicles. He claimed that he was usually able to evade his pursuers because he knew the streets better than

they did. On the other hand, when he went to the bar on one occasion a group of Japanese thugs appeared menacingly and occupied a nearby table to keep watch on him as he drank. Rather than become party to an incident, Reeves left."^{21, 22}

Of course, Reeves's relationship with his Japanese colleague is of particular interest, and he devotes a significant part of the memoir to his dealings, directly and otherwise, with him. A major fear he had was of being captured and forced under torture to reveal the secret cyphers he used in his communications with London and via the British Embassy in Lisbon. In the memoir Reeves says the following about memorising the cypher: "Clever as it was it gave me endless anxiety; what you have in your head can be forced out of it by the delirium of torture, and I was under no illusions as to the sort of treatment I could expect if the Nips laid their hands on me." Reeves goes on to say, rather enigmatically: "I tried therefore to drive into my subconscious a story about the cypher which I hoped would form the basis of my "confession" which might be forced from me. I was once accused of that truly frightful thing, compromising the cipher; but I believe the blame was not ultimately mine, and [was] put where it belonged."²³

Under the subheading "Thrills, More or Less," Reeves deals with the espionage aspect of his work in Macao in a characteristically euphemistic fashion: "Let me make the position clear, however; I do not think that what I was up to could be regarded as espionage. My main objective was to collect information about individuals which might, after the war, be useful to the British authorities, particularly in Hong Kong. I was neither spying on the Portuguese nor on the Japanese when I collected information on a Eurasian British subject who later appeared in court on grave charges of assisting the King's enemies..." Reeves concludes this excerpt on his "non-spying" activities by saying: "Finally I consider that gathering information as a result of which my own existence was prolonged hardly struck me as espionage but rather as common sense."²⁴

When it comes to the physical dangers he faced, real or imagined, Reeves tells us the following: "How much the Japanese really wanted me removed I have never known. I know the reward for me once went up to £4000 and one immediately asks why it was not earned. The answer is not too far to seek; in this sort

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of job the Japanese were working through Chinese gangsters and these somewhat low types were aware that they were unlikely to live to collect in view of the way I was armed, of the fact that my bodyguard was always with me and that I was normally shadowed by one or two Chungking gunmen. And the Japanese could certainly not be trusted to pay a widow.”

Reeves goes on to describe three attempts made on his life, including an abortive attempt to place a time bomb at his house. The explosion, he says, “was heard half a mile away,” but only a quarter of the charge actually exploded, hence damage was limited and Reeves unhurt. Reeves mentions a further attempt that was supposed to have been made upon his return from the funeral of Mr Rodrigues, president of the Portuguese Red Cross. Mr Rodrigues had been shot returning from a funeral, and that seems to have been a pattern. The assassins would have quite correctly guessed that Reeves would have been at the funeral of an official personage such as Rodrigues, someone with whom Reeves would have had ample dealings in view of his responsibilities vis-à-vis the refugees. Reeves recounts: “I was already dressed for this when I was telephoned to the effect that the idea was to get me on the way back from Rodrigues’ funeral. I did not go. This spoiled a succession of similar events as the further idea was to get the chief of police on the way back from my funeral and so on. I interrupted this sequence, a typical product of the Japanese mind.”²⁵

While Reeves makes some awkward observations about the Japanese which would be deemed prejudiced, such as this one immediately preceding, and referring to the Japanese as “Nips,” one cannot be too surprised in light of the circumstances and the time of writing, so soon after the war, with the feelings still running high because of the animosity engendered by the war.

However, this attitude did not persist on an individual level, Reeves being, it seems clear, primarily a keen observer of people as individuals before the political circumstances prevailed: “Mr Fukui, my Japanese colleague, was a fine man. The Governor once remarked of him that he ought to be promoted to another nationality. Even after hostilities had started he did all he could to assist, from a humane point of view, activities which could not hurt his country. He was known to have put all his weight into the return of my wife from Hong Kong; he was known to have facilitated the despatch of food parcels to prisoners

in Hong Kong and he was known to have personally brought letters from prisoners to their families in Macao. He was killed by an assassin hired by the Japanese Gendarmerie.”²⁶

This is quite a moving tribute to any man, let alone the official representative from a country with which one is at war. Reeves’s observation is of course all the more interesting in that it would seem to corroborate what Alden mentions regarding Sergeant Major Honda Isumu.²⁷

Reeves goes on to mention the other members of the Consular Corps, most notably one Mr Nolasco, who was in charge of Dutch interests in Macao, and a Mr Fernandes, who represented Thailand. He mentions one French family: “there was one French family, the Fays. Jean was Commissioner of Chinese Maritime Customs. . . I had no doubt of Jean’s sympathies; he was definitely Free French and I had pleasure in putting that opinion in writing; I am convinced that the fact that some Customs equipment went to the Japanese was not his fault, but rather of a doubtful Chinese doctor, who was convinced that he, and he alone, could arrange the peace of the world. He went so far as to ask me to get him appointed as a delegate to the peace conference, but I had to tell him I was not quite that powerful.”²⁸

Reeves goes on to say that “there were citizens of quite a number of Allied nations in the town and all came to me, as I had the only allied brass plate up; but I could do very little for them.”

Of the Malay and Indian community, he says “the two merged into one while in Macao, developed a high sense of community life and even, from their meagre resources, started a welfare centre where the children of the communities could, once or twice a week, get a scientifically arranged meal of high vitamin content.”²⁹

Reeves also speaks fondly of a Norwegian, nicknamed Trigger (real name Trygve Jorgensen), who was captain of the *Masbate*. As well as having a personal affection for its captain, Reeves had another reason for remembering the ship, besides the fact that she was hit in a subsequent American air raid. As he recalls: “The *Masbate* figured in one other adventure

The staff of the British Consulate in Macao, photographed on the day that Hong Kong fell to the Japanese. J. P. Reeves is seen top right wearing a blazer.

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when she went to Indo-China under Portuguese charter and colours to bring back coal for the Colony. She had Allied and Japanese safe-conducts and carried out her mission slowly but surely. When she was about to leave for the second time, the safe-conduct was withdrawn and I believe I know why. I found out later that the Portuguese had signed on two Japanese as signallers under Chinese names, knowing perfectly well they were Japanese. This rather childish piece of deception was evidently discovered by our people and she did not sail again until after the Japanese surrender.” Reeves goes on to point out that “the beneficiary owner, a Chinese, could have sold the ship a dozen times over to the Japanese and it is very much to the credit of his loyalty that he never contemplated doing such a thing though he could easily have made out that he had been forced to do so.”³⁰

As to the Portuguese attitude towards the war, Reeves makes the following observation: “Some were completely in favour of Germany, though not of the Japanese. I remember one in particular, whose moustaches had earned him the soubriquet of ‘Handlebars’ though it might as well have been ‘Kaiser Bill,’ had been pro-German in 1914, pro-German in 1918 and was still pro-German; he probably still is. For a person with such unwavering views one had genuine respect.” This view is consistent with Reeves’s general tendency to look beyond partisan considerations, so tempting at a time of war, and look instead at the person behind the social and political masks by which people would under the circumstances be more readily judged. Reeves goes on to say that “some were genuinely pro-Allied or pro-British; amongst these I remember unhesitatingly the Governor [Gabriel Maurício Teixeira, governor from October 20, 1940 through August 31, 1947], the then Secretary for Chinese Affairs who on VE day disclosed beneath his waistcoat a portrait of Churchill.” Reeves doesn’t reveal his name, but mentions the well-known figure of Mr Pedro José Lobo, of whom he says: “Mr Lobo may certainly be mentioned as a friend of Britain, all the more valuable a friend for the appearance of strict neutrality he managed to maintain vis-à-vis the Japanese who also regarded him as friendly. Perhaps the finest compliment ever paid to him was by a Japanese: Lobo is a very good friend of ours but nothing could buy his loyalty to Portugal.”^{31,32}

Reeves’s observations about Governor Teixeira would seem to be borne out by the following report,

which appeared in *The Macau Tribune* of September 12, 1945, reporting on VJ Day in an article headlined “Consul Cheered, Chaired—VJ Day Celebrations at Melco Club.” In his address, Reeves said the following:

“Your Excellency, our guests, ladies and gentleman. On behalf of the committee I thank you and all our guests for the honour they have done us by coming here this afternoon. By miraculous statesmanship, Sir, you have kept Macau neutral to the great benefit of us all. But we have sensed where your personal sympathies lay: you have felt for us in our black days and now you rejoice with us in our victory. The flags of the United Nations have gone a long way since those black days but now are planted firmly in Berlin and in Tokyo where they will remain till the lesson is learnt that aggression simply does not pay. But victory means more to most of us than that. It means return to our homes and to our lives. On behalf my diminishing refugee family, I thank the government of Macau for all it has done for the citizens of the United Nations. And for myself I wish each and every one prosperity and peace.”

The article goes on to report the Governor’s reply as follows:

“In reply, His Excellency the Governor expressed his thanks for all the kind references to him. He stated that from the beginning his heart was always with the Allies (loud cheers), but his duty was to maintain the neutrality of the colony at all costs. In conclusion His Excellency wished all the refugees a speedy return to their homes and reunion with their families. He wished them all luck and expressed the hope that they will remember Macau, where they will always find friends.”³³

Typically, Reeves’ speech was short, sincere and to the point. There is of course the added irony that the VJ celebrations took place in the Melco Club, from which Reeves earlier had withdrawn due to the use made of it by local Japanese, as we read below. He recounts how the Melco Club’s race track was used “between rounds” for golf by the Japanese – the principal golfers in the territory—who thus became regular frequenters of the club. Reeves reluctantly resigned and pointed out to the president “my displeasure that a Club run on

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British money should be open to the Japanese.” Another incident he recalls gives some idea of the tensions which were bound to arise under the circumstances: “at a Charity dance when a drunken Japanese tried to force the Portuguese-Philippino band to play nothing but Japanese tunes. He got more and more threatening till he remarked ‘we have thirty armed men in the Hotel; you had better do as I say.’ At that moment he was tapped on the shoulder by a Chinese who said, ‘Our Consul is here, we have forty.’ The Japanese left, but our guns were loosened in their holsters; we did not know for certain that the drunk would not bring reinforcements. We were always on the edge of trouble like that; how it never came to a shooting war I have exactly no idea.”³⁴

Reeves elsewhere states that “it was believed that an actual armed attack on the Consulate was possible or probable. Do not be surprised that we considered such a thing as possible or probable...But when we really mobilized the Consulate became an arsenal of fifteen or twenty Chungking strong-arm boys from the roof down. Every half-hour I went my rounds which meant not more than ten minutes sleep at a time and might go on for two or three nights.”³⁵

Refugees and their care remained Reeves’s main day-to-day concern, along with the provision of food, medicine and money. Reeves points out that the British Consulate handled HK\$25,000,000 during the course of the war, and that all but three cents were unaccounted for at the end of it. The money included that spent on intelligence, salaries, rents, telephone and stationery, which accounted for

“HK\$330,000, less than two percent of the total. He dealt with 4118 [but various estimates put the figure at over 9,000] cases and up to 70 to 100 people knocked on his door daily for payment.”³⁶

Of course the major headache was deciding who was eligible to receive help and who not. Reeves also took responsibility for 940 US citizens, as a courtesy to an ally.³⁷ The monies received by the refugees were in theory loans from H.M. Government, and that repayment could be claimed.³⁸

However, in his memoir Reeves gives exact details of the criteria used for aiding refugees. Among these, such as a refugee’s capacity to earn, the number of dependents, record of service during the war in Hong Kong, length of service of government officials, he adds: “date of arrival; this again seems a queer thing to take

into consideration but there was good reason for doing so, namely that many remained in Hong Kong, making a good or at least a fair living under Japanese occupation for quite a time, and only came over [to Macao] when persuaded to do so by the collapse of their business, the increasing unpleasantness of the Japanese or allied bombing of Hong Kong. On the other hand, many, in the early months, abandoned all that they had and came to Macao some at least with the intention of volunteering for further service. The latter plainly deserved more sympathy. My graphs of refugees coming under my care showed, incidentally, a marked increase after each allied bombing of Hong Kong.”

Reeves also tells of a racket by which would-be refugees would invent fictitious families, just so as to cash in on the relief funds. The racket was broken with the help of his staff and the Portuguese police, but the organisers of the racket, Reeves regrets to add, were subsequently re-employed by the Hong Kong authorities.³⁹

But on the whole the Reeves is very positive about his work co-ordinating refugee relief and says, albeit in a rather fatherly tone: “As a matter of fact I think the general moral standard of the refugees was very high indeed though there were bad examples; you will find them in every community of ten thousand.”⁴⁰ In fact, Reeves often refers to the refugees as his “family.”

Clearly a constant concern for Reeves was sorting out the provision of medical services. He says: “It was obvious from the beginning that the Government medical service could not possibly cope with the problem with the best will in the world. It must be remembered that there were not many doctors and these were only part time Government officials; when they were not on duty they had to earn their livings by private practice and one period or the other would have been swamped by the refugee clientele who had not normal health on the whole.”⁴¹ Reeves goes on to praise the Portuguese medical authorities, while adding that “very many drugs were in terrifyingly short supply” and the word “esgotado” (“run out” in Reeves’s translation) was frequently heard. But there was much to be grateful for: “What would have happened if a real cholera epidemic had broken out I hesitate to think; in those crowded streets half the population would have been swept away. It was owing to the vigilance of the Macao Medical authorities that this did not happen, and they deserve credit for this fact.”⁴² Reeves says

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rather dryly: "We did our little bit about epidemics by insisting on regular inoculations of the refugees; no compulsion was used, but a refugee could not get his subsidy until he produced his immunization certificate; this worked well!"⁴³

Regarding the dealings Reeves was forced to have with a variety of operators and agents in order to ensure supplies of medicines and food, a lengthy memorandum⁴⁴ was submitted to Sir Horace Seymour, the British Ambassador in Nationalist Chungking. The memorandum was signed by one Ernest Heenan. All we know about Heenan is that he was (according to Seymour's letter of June 3, 1942, to Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden) the Far Eastern Representative of the Royal Insurance Company based in Liverpool. Further details about him we have thus far not been able to obtain. His memorandum covering the period December 1, 1941, to May 24, 1942, is entitled: "Information About Macau and the Macau Area," and was written in Chungking upon its author's return from Macao, around June 11, 1942. He makes extensive mention of the smuggling activities in Macao and gives a lengthy description of the difficulties faced by Reeves. He says the following about Reeves:

"The Consul, Mr. John Reeves, had at first some difficulty in obtaining funds through the delay in telegraphic communications with the F.O., but Mr. Reeves gave me to understand this situation has in some measure been remedied, although his monthly consular bill must necessarily be heavy."

Reeves even goes into detail about dental problems and with his usual euphemism mentions that "there were practitioners in Macao some good, some not so good, amongst the latter to be included the gentleman who was using lead fillings in teeth." It is interesting to note at this juncture that, as a token of gratitude, a group of refugees had the gold extracted from their teeth, had a miniature aeroplane made with it, and presented the aeroplane to Reeves.⁴⁵

Among the various incidents mentioned in the memoir are mine-laying activities and the American air raid on January 15, 1945. Reeves describes the event as follows: "Another exciting day was had by all when the Americans started raiding us. One lone plane, unidentified, had laid mines by night in the channel and three small Japanese craft went up without noticeable regret being shown in the Colony; the last

victim unfortunately was the Portuguese water-boat and roused a certain amount of indignation."^{46,47} But on January 15th 1945 we had our first real air raid. Let us confess immediately that the reclaimed land with the Portuguese Naval Air Service hangar and slip-way looked like an aerodrome; on the other side it must be acknowledged that, as we learnt first-hand, the pilots had not been told there was any neutral territory around, and did not know the Portuguese colours or badge.... The Governor's car was burnt out and ...the hangar caught it and some 1500 gallons of petrol went up in a nice black cloud of smoke."

Reeves goes on to mention that the air raid did nothing for the popularity of the Allies, and Reeves's hockey team, the "Valentes", were greeted by cries of "yellow spies" when they took the hockey field.⁴⁸

Reeves mentions a few unnamed individuals of whom he was clearly suspicious: "One never knew in this part of the game who was saint or sinner, who was friend or foe. There was for instance a mysterious German doctor who was always on the verge of producing the most terrific bit of news if a little cash was forthcoming; but the news never came. There was the proprietor of a restaurant who suddenly disappeared from Macao and went into free China where I believe he was arrested as a spy. There was the curiously helpful Portuguese policeman who definitely was arrested by the Chinese and who is still, in 1949, in detention on a charge of spying for the Japanese. People like these raise the further question of how much one should use people who are possibly working for both sides. I was frankly frightened by this type and did my best to avoid them." Significantly, Reeves balances his account by saying: "On the edge of my knowledge were a very different type, that devoted band, chiefly of Chinese and Eurasians who worked for others than me in Hongkong and the French port of Kwangchow. They would not like their names to be mentioned but they will know who I mean; more than one went through torture and came out to risk the same thing all over again; such cold blooded heroism is a thing I wish I would have in similar circumstances."

One significant figure whom Reeves mentions dealing with, and to whom Alden also refers, is the Hong Kong magnate Jack Braga. Both Reeves and Braga shared their concern for the welfare of Macao and its citizens; and, as Alden pointed out earlier, Braga funded anti-Japanese activities. Both men, according

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to Reeves, were concerned with “rehabilitating” Hongkong after the war. Reeves says of Braga: “The idea was that of Mr J. P. Braga, one of the grand old men of Hong Kong; on his death the legacy fell to me to try and translate his idea into action with the constant aid of his son Jack Braga. A Committee was formed of Senior Chinese, Portuguese, Indian and Eurasian representatives then in Macao of the Hongkong community and we did our best to prepare plans for the renaissance of that colony.”⁴⁹

Curiously, Heenan’s memorandum to the British Embassy in Chungking, referred to earlier, in which he describes his attempts to escape into free China, casts doubt—perhaps maliciously—upon Braga’s integrity: “According to many people in Macau Braga and [Warren H.] Wong are not to be trusted and have dealings with the Japanese. Wong has made many business ventures and none has been very successful; Braga has interests in some of these ventures I believe; they were considering a scheme to get rice into Macau at the price at which the government was selling (the government was at that time selling rice at a loss) but in return they expected a free hand to export goods into the interior.”⁵⁰

While Heenan’s claims are unsubstantiated, and Reeves certainly does not seem to share his views, it could also be true that Heenan was annoyed at the difficulties he describes in getting out of Macao, and in obtaining Braga’s and Wong’s help to do so. However, the extract does shed light on the kind of difficulties Reeves had to face to ensure food supplies to the refugees. One can also better evaluate Reeves’ role in the inflationary and corrupt context of the times and the attempts by the British to keep the flag flying in a disgruntled free China, frustrated and appalled at Britain’s imperial collapse at the hands of the Japanese.

Reeves’ valiant work in Macao could also be seen as diluting, in some way at least, the loss of British prestige in the Far East.⁵¹

Besides the decorations he earned, Reeves received recognition for his valiant activities in Macao, of which the following letters sent to Sir Anthony Eden are examples. Seymour’s letter to Eden, which is referred to above and which accompanies Heenan’s memorandum, mentions Reeves in the following context: “Supplies of all sorts are running short, are difficult to obtain and are expensive and this creates special problems

The Macao Hockey team, the “Valentes”, in which J. P. Reeves appears wearing his Cambridge colours. Reeves was very involved with the team which he mentions in his memoir.



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in view of the large influx of refugees into Macao in recent months. His Majesty's Consul, Mr. J. P. Reeves, however, is clearly handling the problems he has to contend with marked efficiency."⁵²

Further evidence that the powers-that-be knew of Reeves' daunting task in Macao takes the form of a letter from Sir Reginald Campbell, H.M. Ambassador to Lisbon. Of course, Lisbon was pivotal in the Reeves story because it was only through the Lisbon Embassy that he could communicate with London. As we can see from various sources, communications were expensive and often took weeks to get through to the Foreign Office.

In a letter to Sir Anthony Eden, dated July 28, 1944, Campbell says the following, after having interviewed Luiz da Camara Menezes Alves, who had been, until shortly before, colonial secretary to the Government of Macao, and who had gone to the Lisbon Embassy to express his gratitude for the assistance given him by the Royal Air Force and B.O.A.C. to return to Portugal: "Snr Alves said that his Majesty's Consul had done magnificent work for British interests. He himself had always maintained friendly relations with Mr Reeves and in spite of occasional disagreements the latter got on well with the Governor." Campbell's letter also sheds some light as to why the Japanese did not make an outright attempt to invade Macao. In his summary of the conversation, Campbell remarks that Alves was of the opinion that "if the pressure of international events forced Portugal to take up an attitude in regard to Timor, the Japanese would at once seize Macao, probably not directly but by employing puppet Chinese and disclaiming all responsibility. He thought the results in the colony would be horrible. [...] Asked why he thought the Japanese had not up till now gone so far as to seize Macao, he said he thought there were many reasons. Partly the Japanese Government attached for reasons of their own some importance to the attitude of the Portuguese Government. Secondly, for propaganda purposes they liked to be able to refute the charge that they were making war against the white race as such." Also in this letter Campbell suggests that there were between 10,000 and 15,000 British subjects among the refugees in Reeves' care.⁵³

Why exactly Reeves moved to South Africa in the early 1950s remains unclear, but his intention was to do some small-scale farming in Africa. It was a romantic idea, though, alas, unsuccessful. South Africa at that

time, with the apartheid government having come to power in 1948, was beginning to acquire its status as a pariah state, and seems a strange choice for Reeves to make; but there may have been undisclosed personal reasons for his choice. He curtailed his diplomatic career by going to South Africa, where he started a successful career in broadcasting. In 1957, he was already working for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, and became a well-known and much-admired announcer.

An earlier attempt to publish the memoir was met by the following response from the Foreign Office in a letter dated October 15, 1949,⁵⁴ addressed to Reeves while was stationed in Surabaya:

Dear Reeves

The account of your experiences in Macao during the Pacific War, which you sent to Fone on 22nd August, has been carefully examined by the departments of the Foreign Office concerned. I regret, however, to have to tell you that there does not appear to be any justification for waiving in your favour the general rule that serving members of the Foreign Service are not permitted to publish accounts of their official experiences.

I return the typescript herewith

Yours ever (signed)

F. Tomlinson

Reeves's affection for Macao did not end when he left his posting and went on to Rome. In a letter sent to the editor of the *Notícias de Macau*, dated March 7, 1967,⁵⁵ Reeves sent the following letter from Cape Town:

To the Editor

In view of my association with Macau during previous times of trouble I should be very grateful if you would convey my best wishes for the future of Macau to my old friends, among whom I count Macau itself. I would be glad to receive, at the above address, any news of those who may remember me. In the meantime, Saudades.

John Reeves

British Consul Macau

1941-1946

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In an article dated September 16, 1945, and headlined “High tradition of the consular service maintained by Mr J. P. Reeves – unceasing labour for the welfare of refugees will not be forgotten,” *The Macau Tribune* reported the following:

“Of all the members of this service during the war just ended, it is more than likely that few of his colleagues were called upon to face such problems as John Pownell Reeves, the genial British Consul in Macao. Few have tackled these problems with such enthusiasm and with so much interest in the welfare of those who looked to him for guidance and help.”⁵⁶

In another article in *The Macau Tribune*, published during the week preceding the governor’s birthday on September 22, 1945,⁵⁷ the following comments were included in a tribute to Reeves by the British Eurasian community of Macao, which was chaired by Mr C. G. Anderson. “Sir, the time has now arrived for us to part, and, before we part, I beg of you to tender the gratitude of my community to our government for its help without which the lot of many of us would have been simply unthinkable. In the name of the committee and members of the associations of British Eurasians of Macao, and of our children, I have the honour to ask you to accept this souvenir of our great respect for you as our consul and our kind regards for you as a man; our gift is both humble and inadequate, but if only a small part of our good wishes accompanying it comes true, this screen, wherever it may be—in the home or in the *yamen* in Macao or elsewhere—will serve as a sure shield against the slings and arrows of misfortune that may afflict one who, though young in years, has by his remarkable achievements as a wartime British Consul in a neutral colony endeared himself to thousands of different nationalities and who is justly entitled to be considered to his family, to his university and to his country.”

The *Los Angeles Times*, in an article headlined “Chinese Want British Rule for Hong Kong,” mentions Reeves in the following context: “Then, too, Britain enjoyed considerable goodwill, standing by the native population as best it could during the period of Japanese conquest. Several thousand Chinese who made their way to nearby Portuguese Macao during the war were given subsistence allowances by the British Consul on no other proof of British citizenship

than sworn statements that they were born in Hong Kong.”⁵⁸

In the *China Mail*, reference was made to “the untiring work by the British Consul—all who spent any time at all in Macao owe a big debt of gratitude to Mr. J. P. Reeves, the British Consul, who worked untiringly to improve conditions for all.”⁵⁹

The Portuguese press paid tribute to Reeves in an article headlined “Festa de Homenagem”:

“Com numerosa assistência, onde predominaram os membros das Comunidades filipina e sino-americana, realizou-se ontem à tarde, no Club Melco, a anunciada festa de homenagem e de gratidão das duas citadas comunidades ao Cônsul da Inglaterra sr. J. P. Reeves pelos serviços e protecção prestados durante os críticos anos da guerra.

*Foi uma festa extremamente simpática e mais uma a ajuntar às outras em homenagem ao simpático Cônsul que vê agora recompensados os seus esforços e os seus trabalhos particularmente árduos e difíceis com que teve de arcar durante quâsi quatro anos.”*⁶⁰

David Divine, *The Manchester Daily Sketch*’s correspondent in Macao, captured well the significance of Reeves’s achievement in Macao, which he wrote about shortly after the war in an article headlined “He kept the Flag Flying for 4 years”: “The Union Jack has flown unchallenged in the Far East throughout the years of war beneath the balcony on which we sat yesterday when I heard the story of the British Consulate of Macao. Cut off from the world in this tiny two-mile square fragment of Portuguese territory at the mouth of the great Pearl River, from the moment of the capture of Hong Kong, the Consulate has maintained its tiny fragment of British territory intact. More it has performed a magnificent work for refugees of British, Portuguese, Chinese, and other nationalities from Hong Kong.” The article ends by saying “the Union Jack of Macao should be given an honoured place among the treasures of the Foreign Office.”⁶¹

David Calthorpe gives the following moving tribute to John Reeves:

“For some of us memories, especially of difficult childhoods, are subconsciously hidden in a veil of mist; very often there are moments that evoke warm reminiscences and some that even change our lives in a most wonderful way.

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Of John Reeves, the latter is most certainly the case. He taught me at a young age to play mah-jong (the clatter of tiles certainly reminds one of the twitter of sparrows) and to drink red wine and to appreciate the art of conversation, even if one found it difficult to follow a patter of high English mixed with Mandarin and Malay about subjects and people that really were a part of history.

But more often than not, about China and Macao: China of the warlord period and its infancy as an emerging republic, and Macao as the last bastion of hope in a sea of the Rising Sun. I came to hear about people and events in Macao, as yet to me an unknown part of an empire struggling to survive the destruction that mankind so often imposes on itself in its lust for power and dominance. Macao gathered itself like an old Portuguese dowager whose faded gown of Chinese silk held stories of secrecy and mystery.

I came to know the streets, sounds and smells of the East, that, once tasted, one will always crave! On the tip of Africa beneath the shadows of our great Table Mountain I dreamed and conjured up images of dusty temples, rickshaws and cool echoing churches. John's home was always filled with books, animals and strange exotic furniture, each with its own tale to tell; cabinets filled with porcelain and riches of the East gathered in that

land of mystery and enchantment—China. The smells from their kitchen, where John practised his culinary creations garnered in the East under the all-seeing eyes of the kitchen god, mixed with the fragrance of incense always wafting silently in front of Buddha, whose lacquered smile and hooded eyes epitomised all those things I had read and come to love of John's former homes, Macao and China.

The ruins of St. Paul, St. Dominic's Church, Father Teixeira, the honourable East India Company, Chinnery and Smirnoff were strange names that I mulled over like a good wine. John always said that if you wish to know the history of a city, then visit its graveyards, for there you will find resting the names of those who helped forge, for better or worse, the dreams of their children. The Protestant and Catholic cemeteries did not disappoint me when finally I visited them, and John's words came so clearly over the decades to the fore of my memory that it was as if he stood there once again viewing Churchill, Chinnery and Morrison, and I wept in the early morning light as flocks of tiny Macao sparrows flitted through the damp, dappled stones, bringing life to those whose memories helped build a most remarkable and wondrous place—the City of the Name of God.” **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Reeves 1949: 1.
- 2 Reeves 1949: 31.
- 3 *London Gazette*, Issue 33880, 4 November 1932.
- 4 Notification dated Foreign Office, 3 February 1935, *London Gazette*, Issue 34159, 10 May 1935.
- 5 Notification dated Foreign Office, 9 June 1941, *London Gazette*, Issue 35251, 19 August 1941.
- 6 Notification dated Foreign Office, 29 January 1948, *London Gazette*, Issue 38192, 30 January 1948.
- 7 Notification dated Foreign Office, 9 January, 1950, *London Gazette*, Issue 38810, 10 January 1950.
- 8 *The Cape Times*, 3 October 1961.
- 9 *The Macau Tribune*, 16 September 1945, Vol 1, no 19.
- 10 Reeves 1949: 63. Reeves refers to the school as “an M.S.” school or “minimum subsistence” school. He reports that it grew to 471 pupils of all races, and that freedom of religion was a guiding principle. “The school was extremely well run by a board, largely of my staff and a very devoted band of teachers who produced an astounding scholastic standard.”
- 11 Alden 2001.
- 12 Alden 2001: 545. According to the *London Gazette*, Reeves held no post in Hong Kong, but was officially appointed to serve in Macao.
- 13 Alden 2001.
- 14 Alden 2001.
- 15 Letter in the Calthorpe Collection, Cape Town.
- 16 See notes 3 & 4 above.
- 17 Alden 2001: 546.
- 18 Reeves 1949: 10.
- 19 For this information, Alden refers to Phyllis Harrop's *The Hong Kong Incident*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1943, pp. 137 & 139.
- 20 Reeves 1949: 15. Reeves refers to a Pam Harrop who he writes had “written of her experiences.” It is possible that Reeves may have meant Phyllis Harrop, (referred to by Alden above), since, having written his memoir years later he may well have mistaken the name. He could also be referring to a different individual entirely.
- 21 Alden 2001: 546.
- 22 Reeves' account corroborates the incidents Alden refers to. Reeves 1949: 70-74.

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23. Reeves 1949: 70.
24. Reeves 1949: 73.
25. Reeves 1949: 74.
26. Reeves 1949: 11.
27. Alden 2001: 548. Footnote 11 on this page says: "Sergeant Major Honda Isamu asserted during his war crimes trial that he had defied orders to facilitate Mrs Reeves to return to Macao in March or April of 1942." Alden goes on to point out, this time quoting from the *South China Morning Post & Hong Kong Telegraph* of September 15, 1945, that "Mrs Reeves was described as 'a friend to all, and her charming disposition and understanding nature made her a welcome guest everywhere. She received from all the high respect due to her position.'"
28. Reeves 1949: 56.
29. Reeves 1949: 63-64.
30. Reeves 1949: 80.
31. Reeves 1949: 13-14.
32. Reeves 1949: 106. Reeves at times even acted as deputy at official functions for the Governor – highly irregular under normal circumstances, but an indication of the mutual esteem that existed between the two men. Reeves recalls one occasion after the war when he had to receive the French Navy's Admiral d'Aubignan: "He arrived just as H.E. and I were on the cathedral steps waiting to go in for some celebration. So the strange solution was made of H.M. Consul deputising on the wharf for the Governor of Macao. Looking back on it perhaps H.E. will not mind my saying that this incident reflected the close personal relations between us. My deputising for him did not seem incongruous."
33. *The Macau Tribune*, September 12, 1945.
34. Reeves 1949: 82.
35. Reeves 1949: 74.
36. Reeves 1949: 41.
37. Reeves 1949: 52.
38. Reeves 1949: 39.
39. Reeves 1949: 60.
40. Reeves 1949: 42.
41. Reeves 1949: 43.
42. Reeves 1949: 43.
43. Heenan, Ernest. *Memorandum to H.M. Embassy, Chungking*, 11.6.42 PRO (FO 371/41620).
44. This miniature aeroplane is now in the possession of Mr David Calthorpe of Cape Town, who owns the memoir and who is in possession of Reeves's ceremonial uniform as well as all the decorations bestowed on Reeves by the British and the Portuguese Red Cross. The memoir came into Mr. Calthorpe's possession via his mother, Marjorie, a friend of Reeves's second wife, the latter whom Reeves met en poste in Surabaya.
45. Reeves 1949: 76. It should be mentioned that Reeves was a keen hockey player and was "largely responsible for the reorganisation of the Macau Hockey Club and he represented Hong Kong in the inter-port hockey matches" (*The Macau Tribune*, September 16, 1945). According to an unpublished missive in the Calthorpe Collection sent from Chungking and dated August 13, 1942, an evacuee from Macao said that "Reeves plays hockey with a revolver strapped to his body and ignores Japanese spectators on the touch line."
46. Correspondence R. B. Legget-Mr Ashley Clarke, PRO (F/O 371/41619). In a letter dated 22nd January 1944, addressed to Mr Ashley Clarke of the Foreign Office and designated "Secret". R. B. Leggett, of the Intelligence Division of the Admiralty, says the following: "I think we must dismiss any idea that the Japanese themselves could have laid mines as they are the only people, apart from the Portuguese, who would be likely to suffer by such action. I think the explanation is that six U.S. aircraft who were supposed to have laid mines off Hongkong on the night of 16th/17th November actually laid them nearer Macao. This would make the incident an American responsibility and perhaps enable Sir Reginald Campbell [H.M. Ambassador in Lisbon] to say that the British were not concerned". This might well be the incident Reeves refers to on page 76, which elicited the Portuguese hostility which he describes.
47. Reeves 1949: 76.
48. Reeves 1949: 79-80.
49. Reeves 1949: 24
50. Heenan, Ernest. *Memorandum to H.M. Embassy, Chungking*, 11.6.42 PRO (FO 371/41620).
51. Bickers 2001: 11-37. On page 17 of this illuminating study, Bickers makes reference to the "Nationalist rage at the collapse of British imperial interests in the face of the Japanese assault."
52. Correspondence between Sir Horace Seymour and Sir Anthony Eden, PRO (FO 371/41620).
53. Correspondence between Sir Reginald Campbell and Sir Anthony Eden, PRO (FO 371/41620).
54. Foreign Office reference number F12557/1676/10. Calthorpe Collection, Cape Town.
55. *Notícias de Macau*, March 7, 1967. Calthorpe Collection, Cape Town.
56. *The Macau Tribune*, September 16, 1945.
57. *The Macau Tribune*, October 17-22 (?), 1945.
58. *Los Angeles Times* Part 1, December 30, 1945, p. 4.
59. *China Mail*, September 13, 1945.
60. *A Voz de Macau*, October 22, 1945.
61. *The Manchester Daily Sketch*, 1945 (exact date illegible).

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