

# Historians, Authors and Lovers

## The 60-Year Partnership of Charles Boxer and Emily Hahn

RICHARD PFLEDERER\*

*He a dashing British army officer, she an adventurous St. Louis-born writer living on her own in pre-WWII Asia.  
How did they meet, fall in love and combine their efforts to publish scores of books and hundreds of articles?  
His interests centred on the Portuguese and Dutch explorations in Brazil, Africa and Asia;  
hers on a wide range of historical biographies, wildlife stories and human interest books.  
Though very different in temperament, writing style and nationality,  
they lived as man and wife for over 50 years until her death in 1997 at the age of 92.  
From her travels in Africa and Asia, to their love affair in wartime Hong Kong,  
to their life together in Britain where he became a scholar and historian,  
they led a life extraordinary by any standards.*



DECEMBER 19, 1941.

It was a dark day for the British colonial administration in Hong Kong and for the British Army units garrisoned there. The Japanese army was on the beaches and the smart money that had not already fled the colony was betting on a swift takeover of the territory.

That morning, a British intelligence officer, travelling by staff car near Shouson Hill on the south side of the island spotted a British platoon engaged with a Japanese force. The platoon had no officer, so the Captain jumped out of the car and attempted to organise the defenders and was promptly wounded in the left side of his chest. After the fighting had moved

on, he lay there in a ditch and was found nearly dead the next day. He was taken to Queen Mary hospital, and his life hung in the balance. Meanwhile, his American mistress was scouring the midlevels of the island for powdered milk and other essentials to keep their newborn daughter alive.

Who were these two people, and where did the fortunes of the war and its aftermath take them?

She was Emily Hahn and he Charles Boxer, and their lives were intertwined in a fascinating way. She was to become the biographer of Stamford Raffles and the Soong sisters, as well as the author of numerous novels and non-fiction works. He became Professor of Portuguese history and author of hundreds of books and articles on the period of European discoveries.

In this story, we will meet these two people whose lives have spanned nearly the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century and whose works have helped us understand not only these times but also the history of European discovery interaction with indigenous peoples in Asia, Africa and the Americas.

Charles came to meet Emily, Mickey to her friends, on the China coast through a circuitous route that began with his assignment to a Japanese regiment

\* He is a retired executive whose career provided several long term residential assignments in Asia and South America. While in Hong Kong, he made several visits to Macao where he began a study of the Portuguese overseas expansion. This study became a second career and he has authored several books and articles, with a particular emphasis on the navigational aspects of the expansion, most recently *Finding their Way at Sea* (Houten: Hes De Graaf, 2013).

É um executivo aposentado cuja carreira lhe proporcionou várias comissões de serviço na Ásia e na América do Sul. Enquanto em Hong Kong, realizou inúmeras visitas a Macau, onde se interessou pelo estudo da Expansão Portuguesa. Esta motivação tornou-se uma segunda carreira. Publicou vários livros e artigos, com especial ênfase nos aspectos da navegação nas descobertas, sendo o mais recente, *Finding their Way at Sea* (Houten: Hes De Graaf, 2013).

EM MEMÓRIA DE CHARLES R. BOXER

IN MEMORY OF CHARLES R. BOXER



in Nara, near Kyoto, in 1931. This posting, part of a British/Japanese officer exchange program, was to arouse his interest in the East and all things Asian. He became fluent in Japanese language and made a number of friends in the Japanese army.

His assignment in 1936 to British Army Intelligence in Hong Kong allowed him to broaden his informal studies of Portuguese discoveries in Macao and China. As well, he made trips to Southeast Asia, where he began to study the successors to the Portuguese explorers and colonisers of East Asia, mainly the Dutch.

At the end of 1937, as war grew imminent, Captain Boxer was sent to Shanghai to observe the Japanese who occupied the territories surrounding Shanghai but whose army had not yet invaded the city. There he was to meet a charming and adventurous young American woman, Emily Hahn.

Emily was born in 1905 in St. Louis. The atmosphere in her family was a liberal, modern, intellectual one, and she learned her lessons well. She grew up to be the prototypical liberated woman, decades before this became the norm. For example, she became the first woman to graduate in Engineering from the University of Wisconsin, and the story of how this came about is instructive of her unconventional approach to life.

She had no special interest in engineering and was enrolled in the Arts and Sciences. In her sophomore year, she learned that a well-known professor was offering a chemistry course. She decided to take the course, but she was told this course was reserved for engineering students. Undeterred, she said she would change her major just to take the course, with the intent of returning to Arts and Sciences after the course. The registrar explained that there were no women in engineering – this program was for men only. This attitude engaged her feminist instincts, and she promptly insisted on a transfer to engineering. Once in the School of Engineering, she encountered so much resistance from her fellow (male) students that she decided to continue, finally graduating in 1924 as the first woman from that school.

But her true love was writing and adventure, so she moved to New York, where she led the life of a struggling young writer. At one point she made a driving trip across the US by motorcar with her sister, quite a feat in those days of unreliable cars and poor roads.

A few years later, when her writing was not selling, she decided to go to darkest Africa, not a coastal city, but upcountry in the Congo, not on a tour or even accompanied – but totally alone. There she lived for some time, writing and experiencing life in the bush.

By this time, she began writing for a new magazine, the *New Yorker*, and she was to maintain a relationship with the magazine until she died. She had also written a couple of novels and was well on her way to supporting herself by her writing. She had not married, but had had a number of romantic affairs, mostly, it turned out, with married men.

In 1935, she and her sister decided to make a round the world tour by ship. After Yokohama, the next stop was Shanghai, where the sisters had planned to spend about two weeks. When it was time for them to depart, Emily told her sister to go on without her: she intended to stay on and write about the East.

Her writing was the main focus of her life and her source of income, but she would try anything: On a lark, she decided to work as a taxi dancer in a bar near the port for one night. Sadly, during this period, she began experimenting with opium, to which she was to become addicted.

There in Shanghai, she met an interesting Chinese man, Sinmay Zau, an intellectual and a writer, who eventually became her lover. He was known for his anti-Japanese sentiments, and he owned a printing press on which he printed political pieces. He was constantly in fear of the press being confiscated, so he and Emily decided to marry, hoping that the Japanese would not harass a printing press belonging at least in part to an American. That decision to make a marriage of convenience was to have interesting consequences for her in 1943 in occupied Hong Kong, as we shall see.

During his visit to Shanghai, Captain Boxer made arrangements to meet Emily, whose reputation as an intellectual writer and Bohemian had travelled as far as Hong Kong. From the beginning, there was a mutual admiration, but as she was living with Sinmay, there was no romance. The next year, Emily had occasion to sail down to Hong Kong where she again met Boxer. Their attraction, based partly on similar intellectual interests, began to grow, even though Charles in the meantime had married an English girl, Ursula. But Emily was off to Chunking, China, where she was to write an authorised biography of the Soong sisters. Entering Chaing Kai-shek's China required Emily to

be free of her opium habit, and she accomplished her own private drug rehab prior to flying to Chunking.

In 1940, by the time she returned to Hong Kong after completing her on-site research for the Soong book, she and Charles were very much in love. She postponed (again) her planned visit to her family in the US and rented a flat on May Road in the Hong Kong midlevels, conveniently near to the Boxers.

War with Japan was now considered to be inevitable, Boxer's wife, Ursula, had been evacuated by government order to the apparent safety of Singapore. Late that year Charles and Emily decided to have a child together so that he would have an heir if he didn't survive the war. By early 1941 they had succeeded, and as Emily's pregnancy began to show the British tongues began to wag. After all, he was an officer in the regular army, married, and she was a notorious free-living American!

During this time, Ernest Hemmingway, now in his 40's, was visiting Hong Kong. When he heard Emily was pregnant, he gallantly offered to claim to be the father of her child if she wanted. She of course declined, and to this day we don't know if this offer was serious and if it was made to protect her reputation or enhance his!

In May 1941, Charles visited Singapore on military business, and during the trip met Ursula. He hoped to get her to agree to a divorce, but she was having none of that. Returning to Hong Kong with no resolution of his private situation, difficult times for the couple ensued. Eventually all was settled, and he changed his will to be sure Emily's child would be taken care of in the event of his demise in the war.

Carola Militia Boxer was born 17 October 1941, just two months before the arrival of the war. Even today, she agrees her timing could have been better. Once the relatively brief fighting was over, the danger of immediate physical harm was reduced, but the threat of starvation and disease was very real and continued throughout the war years.

By now Charles was in a Japanese POW hospital, but Emily was allowed to see him from time to time. Both Emily and Charles had useful contacts in the Japanese administration from their earlier days in Nara, Japan and Shanghai, and they were able to get a fair hearing when they needed something. Such a situation arose in 1943 when a civilian exchange for non-combatant countries was announced. With a straight face, Emily applied for herself and daughter. The officer patiently explained that American civilians

Emily Hahn with her pet monkey (1920's).



were not eligible. ‘But I’m not American, I’m Chinese’, she said. The incredulous officer asked her to explain. She told of her 1938 marriage to Sinmay in Shanghai. When asked for documentation, she said that the documents were lost during the bombing, but she offered to find Japanese officers who knew her and Sinmay in Shanghai before the war. Amazingly this worked and she and Carola were soon on a ship out of Hong Kong, destination New York.

She arrived on 1 December 1943, and her family was there to meet her, but she had another reception party as well. Not surprisingly, the FBI had a few questions for her about her contacts with Japanese military and civilian officials during her days in Shanghai and Hong Kong. She was detained overnight, repeating her claim of being absolutely apolitical and innocent of providing any assistance to the enemy. In the end she was released and there were no more questions about espionage or collaboration.

In New York, she wrote several books: *China to Me*, *Raffles of Singapore*, and *The Soong Sisters*. Advances and royalties from these books supported the baby and her. The war finally ended, and Charles was reunited with Emily and Carola in New York. Soon after, Ursula changed her mind about her marriage. The divorce came through, and the newlyweds and daughter moved to his family home in Dorset.

Here, their life was not as exciting as their time in the Orient, but no less eventful. A second daughter, Amanda, was born, Charles retired from the army, and they both contemplated their post-war careers. Emily seemed set with her writing, and the *New Yorker* continued to publish her. Even though Charles had no credentials in the academic world, his writing and studies in Portuguese and Dutch discoveries earned him an unexpected opportunity in academia. A chair in Portuguese history at the University of London was offered him, and he went on to enjoy a long and illustrious career as *the* premier world authority in these subjects.

Over the ensuing 40 years he wrote several landmark books recognised by scholars around the world. Among the best known are: *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415-1825*; *The Christian Century in Japan*; *The Golden Age of Brazil*; *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800*.

In these and other books as well as innumerable articles, Boxer treated European discovery, colonisation

and missionary work across a variety of dimensions, and scholars in many fields including cartography and seamanship as well as historians and social scientists studied his works were. Over forty years ago, he addressed the role of women and the non-European races in Portuguese colonial society in an objective manner not typical for that period of scholarly study.

After the unconventional lives they had lived to that point, the love affairs she had had, their differing temperaments, many people were very interested to see what kind of a marriage they would have once they settled down in England. The answer was that it was a long lasting, loving marriage, but not a constraining one. She had a set of interests different from his, including a love of New York City and the *New Yorker* magazine. She also had a healthy dislike of the British Inland Revenue Service, so she spent half the year in New York and half the time with Charles in Britain. He, in turn, travelled and lectured around the world. But their mutual love was visible to everyone, especially their daughters. Carola was trained as a teacher, spent most of her time in the US, and lived in New York where she has worked for the American Cancer Society. Amanda, an actress, lives in London. Both grieved the loss of their mother in 1997 in New York and their father who passed away this year after celebrating his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday at his country home outside London.

The literary and historical legacy of this couple is truly astounding. Emily has had published dozens of books and scores of articles, biographies, novels, non-fictions on a wide range of subjects.

A bibliography of Charles’ work published in the 1990’s listed 324 articles and books from 1926 to 1990. Each required intensive research and in many cases, translating of ancient documents in Portuguese and Dutch language. By any standard, this is a huge body of work, and anyone truly committed to the History of Discoveries must strive to understand and appreciate his work.

Together, Emily and Charles set a timeless example of success in their professions, their personal relations, in life. Their story would be remarkable in any generation. It combined the best of an active life of adventure, hardship and danger with a studious commitment to disseminating challenging ideas to a world audience. The story also manifested an undying mutual love for almost 60 years. **RC**



# Charles Ralph Boxer (1904-2000)

## The Remarkable Career of a Master Historian

ANTHONY DISNEY\*

Charles Ralph Boxer, whose life nearly spanned the 20<sup>th</sup> century almost from its start to its finish, was the most productive and widely respected non-Portuguese historian ever to have written about the role played by Portugal in European overseas expansion and empire. Charles was born in 1904 into a British naval and military service family. His father, Hugh Boxer, an officer in the Lincolnshire Regiment, was killed on the Western Front in the First World War. Charles was therefore brought up from an early age by his Australian mother and by other members of his family circle. One of the latter, his paternal grandmother, happened to possess a collection of *netsuke* ivories. It seems these fascinated Charles in boyhood, helping to

create in him a life-long interest in Japanese culture and history.

As a result of pursuing his Japanese interests Charles quickly came to appreciate that the Portuguese had been the first Europeans to establish physical contact with Japan. Soon he began to exercise an intense curiosity about Portugal per se, and about its role in bringing Europe and Asia together – and in 1924 he started to learn the Portuguese language, so he could read the original sources. In the mid-1920s he joined the Japan Society and began learning Japanese. Then, in about 1927, he began too to learn Dutch seriously, the Dutch being the European successors in Japan to the Portuguese when the latter were expelled in the early to mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Also at about this time Charles began two life-long scholarly pursuits. The first was the task of assembling what would eventually become one of the world’s greatest private libraries of manuscripts and books concerning the histories of the Portuguese and Dutch empires. The second, which he seems to have begun in earnest about the time of his first trip to Portugal in 1925, was the construction of an extensive network of Portuguese and Dutch scholarly contacts.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in 1924, at the age of just nineteen, he completed officer training at Sandhurst and was duly

\* He is a Scholar Emeritus of La Trobe University (Australia). He has written extensively about Portugal and the Portuguese overseas, especially in maritime Asia during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. His first book – *Twilight of the Pepper Empire* – appeared in 1978, and his two volume *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire* in 2009. Anthony is currently writing the biography of Dom Miguel de Noronha, fourth Count of Linhares.

Académico Emérito da Universidade de La Trobe (Austrália). Tem escrito extensivamente sobre Portugal e os Portugueses além-mar, especialmente na Ásia marítima durante os finais do século XVI e inícios do século XVII. O seu primeiro livro, *A Decadência do Império da Pimenta*, surgiu em 1978 e o segundo, em dois volumes, *História de Portugal e do Império Português*, em 2009. Prepara, no momento, a biografia de D. Miguel de Noronha, 4.º conde de Linhares.