



CHARLES BOXER

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## Charles Ralph Boxer 1904–2000

CHARLES BOXER died on 27 April 2000 at the age of 96.<sup>1</sup> He was the most distinguished historian of seventeenth-century Portuguese and Dutch colonial history of his generation, but he also wrote widely on the history of Japan, China, Indonesia, India, Brazil, and Portugal itself. When he died he had 335 academic publications to his name including over thirty major books.<sup>2</sup> Boxer served in the army from 1924 to 1947 and was a prisoner of war in Hong Kong from 1941 until the end of the war. He held the Camões Chair of Portuguese at King's College London from 1947 to 1967, with a short interlude in 1951–2 when he occupied the chair of Far Eastern History at SOAS. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1957. After his retirement from King's he taught at Indiana University and was appointed to the chair of the Expansion of Europe Overseas at Yale which he held from 1969–72. In 1997, shortly before his death,

<sup>1</sup> Much of the information in this biographical note has already appeared in earlier pieces written by M. Newitt after Charles Boxer's death. *Charles Ralph Boxer 1904–2000* (2000); 'Charles R. Boxer', a memorial address given at King's College, 11 July 2000; 'Professor C. R. Boxer 1904–2000' for the *Journal of Renaissance Studies* (forthcoming); a review of D. Alden, *Charles R. Boxer: an Uncommon Life* for *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Compiling bibliographies of Boxer's writings has become a minor cottage industry. S. George West produced *A List of the Writings of Charles Ralph Boxer published between 1926 and 1984* (1984) to celebrate Boxer's eightieth birthday. In 1999 the Centro de Estudos do Mar and the Associação Fernão Mendes Pinto published *Homenagem ao Professor Charles Ralph Boxer* (Figueira do Foz, 1999); Alden, *Charles R. Boxer* added a bibliographical appendix 'The Writings of Charles Boxer, 1985–1996' pp. 581–5; an attempt to publish a comprehensive bibliography was made in 'The Charles Boxer Bibliography, *Portuguese Studies*, 17 (2001), 246–76.

King's College established a chair in history named after him. In 1947 he married the American author, Emily Hahn, and had two daughters, Carola and Amanda.

Boxer was a very public figure and at the same time a very private man. He left no memoirs or diaries and gave few interviews about his life, but his early life with Emily Hahn was the subject of two books written by her, one of which, *China to Me*, became something of a best seller. A lengthy and exhaustive biography was published by Dauril Alden in 2001 entitled *Charles R. Boxer: an Uncommon Life*.<sup>3</sup>

### Family and upbringing

Charles Boxer's family can be traced back only to the eighteenth century and may have been of Huguenot origin.<sup>4</sup> Three Boxers served in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, one rising to the rank of rear admiral. His grandfather was drowned when the experimental warship, *Captain*, on which he was an officer, capsized in a gale. His father, Hugh Boxer, was an officer in the Lincolnshire regiment. He served with his regiment in many imperial postings and took part in Kitchener's Sudan campaign of 1897–8 where he was wounded at the battle of Atbara. Although afflicted with a limp for the rest of his life, Hugh Boxer was able to return to regimental duties, and in 1892 married Jeannie Patterson who came from a family of wealthy Australian landowners. Their first son, Myles, was born in 1898 and, after a second son had died of meningitis, their third child, Charles Ralph, was born at Sandown in the Isle of Wight on 8 March 1904. Charles's sister Beryl, the last child of the family, was born in 1905.<sup>5</sup>

Charles's maternal grandmother owned a country estate in Dorset known as Conygar, and it is there that the Boxers spent much of their childhood, inevitably acquiring something of the tastes and values of the minor rural gentry of the period. Remarkably little is known about

<sup>3</sup> Emily Hahn's main autobiographical works which refer extensively to Charles Boxer are *China to Me* (New York, 1944); *England to Me* (1950); *Hong Kong Holiday* (New York, 1946); *Times and Places* (New York, 1970). A biography of Emily Hahn was written by Ken Cuthbertson, *No One Said Not to Go* (1998). See also Dauril Alden, *Charles R. Boxer: an Uncommon Life* (Lisbon, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> For information about Boxer's early life see Miles Clark, *High Endeavours. The Extraordinary Life and Adventures of Miles and Beryl Smeeton* (1991), chap. 1; Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, chaps. 1 & 2.

<sup>5</sup> For the life of Beryl see Clark, *High Endeavours*.

Charles Boxer's formative early years. He attended a catholic day school in Gibraltar where his father was stationed for four years, before being sent to Wellington College in 1918 at the age of 13. Wellington was a public school which made special provision for the sons of officers and prepared its pupils for Sandhurst and a career in the army. Charles passed through the College leaving few traces in its records, playing rugby, joining the OTC and winning a prize for recitation—apparently a typical and wholly unexceptional school career. In 1922, having been rejected by the navy because of poor eyesight, he went to Sandhurst. From there he was commissioned into his father's regiment, the Lincolnshires, in January 1924.

Some time during this period, this rather ordinary and unobtrusive younger son of an army officer had begun the study of the languages which were later to give him the basis for his remarkable scholarly career. He also began to study the history of the Far East, approaching it through an interest in maritime history, possibly derived from the exploits of his naval ancestors. While still only a second lieutenant, he used the long periods of peacetime leave to visit archives and learned societies in Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal making contacts with leading scholars including Edgar Prestage and Georg Schurhammer. He also began to collect books, which became a life long passion and led to the formation of one of the twentieth century's greatest private libraries. In 1926, at the age of 22, he published his first academic article 'O 24 de junho 1622: uma façanha dos Portugueses' in the *Boletim da Agencia das Colónias*.<sup>6</sup> He was meanwhile working on what would be his first two major publications, the editions in translation of the *Commentaries of Ruy Freyre de Andrada* and the *Journals of Maarten Harpertszoon Tromp*.<sup>7</sup>

By 1930, although still only 26 years old, Boxer's ties to his family had been loosened if not entirely severed. In 1915 his father had been killed in action at Ypres—the story being told that he had led his men over the top leaning on the arm of his batman, and in 1929, after suffering depression for many years, his mother committed suicide.<sup>8</sup> Although Boxer never

<sup>6</sup> 'O 24 de junho 1622: Uma Façanha dos Portugueses', *Boletim da Agencia das Colónias*, 2 (1926), 117–28.

<sup>7</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Commentaries of Ruy Freyre de Andrada* (1930) and the *The Journal of Maarten Harpertszoon Tromp* (1930).

<sup>8</sup> The fullest account of Hugh Boxer's death is to be found in Clark, *High Endeavours*, pp. 13–14 where it is made clear he was the victim of 'friendly fire' from British artillery. Cuthbertson, *No One Said Not to Go*, pp. 198–9 gives the story of the batman; Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, p. 33 studiously omits all detail about Hugh's death.

talked about these events, or the subsequent suicide of his mother's brother, their effect on a young man can be well imagined.

At this stage Charles showed no sign of wanting to depart from an orthodox military career and, as a second lieutenant, he served with his regiment in Northern Ireland and at Aldershot. In 1930, however, his career took a very distinctive turn when he was seconded as a language officer to the Far East to specialise in Japanese.

### The Far East

Charles Boxer's career in the Far East was to last until 1946, with one interlude between 1933 and 1935, and was to be the most adventurous period of his life. It was a period when he demonstrated to the full his ability to follow two wholly separate careers while at the same time travelling, leading a hectic social life and pursuing his all absorbing hobby of book collecting.

In 1930 Boxer sailed for Japan where, after a stay in Tokyo, he was seconded first to the 38<sup>th</sup> Nara regiment and then to the NCO School at Nagoya on which he wrote a report for the War Office. Boxer travelled widely throughout Japan and became an enthusiastic admirer of Japanese culture, meeting scholars and collectors like George Sansom, Jean Charles Pabst, and Okamoto Yoshitomo, becoming an expert in the Japanese martial art of Kendo and learning to speak Japanese 'like a Geisha'. He also made important contacts among the Japanese military and formed a healthy respect for their ability.

In July 1933 he returned to Britain via the Dutch East Indies and resumed his regimental duties with the Lincolnshires, as well as his book collecting and other scholarly pursuits. In 1935 after the suicide of his uncle, Myles, Boxer inherited the Conygar estate in Dorset and briefly established himself there as a member of the fox-hunting landed gentry. However, at the end of the year, after a spell at the War Office, he was promoted to the rank of captain and sent to Hong Kong as an intelligence officer. As usual Boxer combined business with scholarship and pleasure. He travelled in the company of his sister Beryl via Portugal, the Siberian railway, Manchuria, and Japan.

In January 1937 Boxer took up his duties as an officer in the intelligence gathering unit known as the Far Eastern Combined Bureau. During the following years he used his position to make frequent visits to Macao. He wrote extensively on the history of that small Portuguese

colony, and in 1937 published there *Biblioteca Boxeriana* the catalogue of his by now famous library.<sup>9</sup> However, scholarship was also a cover for intelligence activities and Macao provided him with some of his most important sources of information. In July 1939, after another visit to Japan, he sent a report to the War Office warning about the vulnerability of Hong Kong to a Japanese attack. He also made frequent visits to China and in August 1940 tried to establish an exchange of intelligence information between the Chinese and British. In May 1941 Boxer was promoted to the rank of major and became the senior intelligence officer in Hong Kong.

Military and intelligence responsibilities in no way interrupted Charles's scholarly work or his social life. In 1938 alone he published no fewer than eleven academic articles, while his personal life underwent radical changes. As he later admitted 'It always happens when one lives in Hong Kong, you know, more than four years, one either becomes a hopeless drunkard, or one marries. I did both'.<sup>10</sup> In June 1939 he had married a teacher, Ursula Tulloch, but the marriage was not a success and in April 1940 Ursula left for Australia and later settled in Sri Lanka. She eventually divorced Charles in July 1945. Boxer meanwhile had met and struck up a friendship with the American writer Emily Hahn (always known as Mickey) who was engaged in writing a book about the Soong sisters — the wives respectively of Sun Yat Sen and Chiang Kai Chek. In 1940 Mickey moved to Hong Kong and rented a flat next door to Charles. In February 1941 the couple announced that Mickey was expecting Charles's child. Their daughter, Carola, was born on 17 October 1941, just two months before the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese. In 1944 Mickey was to publish an amusing, but probably highly fictionalised, account of her affair with Charles Boxer in a volume entitled *China to Me*.

This period of Charles's life was deeply significant in other ways. Academically it was highly productive and the publications of those years laid the foundations for the important books on Far Eastern history that he was to produce after the war. However, his intelligence activity, and his meeting with leading political figures in the Far East, deeply influenced his political and moral outlook. Although he came from a family with a strong tradition of military service and shared many of the tastes of the public school educated gentry who were the mainstay of the empire, he

<sup>9</sup> *Biblioteca Boxeriana: Being a Short Title Catalogue of the Books and Manuscripts in the Library of Captain C. R. Boxer (March 1937)* (Macao, Tipografia Mercantil, 1937).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Cuthbertson, *No One Said Not to Go*, p. 172.

had always stood somewhat apart from his contemporaries, not least in his taste for book collecting and scholarship. Now he witnessed the rapid dissolution of the imperial system in the Far East. Boxer saw the hollowness of the racial arrogance on which the empire was built and predicted the inevitable triumph of Asian nationalism. He saw the Japanese as the Asiatic power which would inevitably supplant the British and, although all the evidence suggests that he fulfilled his military and intelligence duties with efficiency, he was deeply sceptical about the cause for which he was supposed to be fighting. Mickey remembered him saying on one occasion 'the day of the white man is done out here . . . we're finished and we know it. All this is exactly like the merriment of Rome before the great fall'.<sup>11</sup>

## War

Japan declared war on Britain on 7 December 1941.<sup>12</sup> When the attack on Hong Kong began a day later, Boxer was the British officer detailed to meet the Japanese and respond to their demands for surrender. On 20 December, while attempting to rally some troops who had lost their officers, he was hit in the back by a sniper. He lay for many hours, losing blood before being removed to the Queen Mary Hospital. As he later said to Mickey, 'I lay there wishing I would hurry up and die, because it was cold out there'.<sup>13</sup> He remained in hospital for nine months but in November 1942, having refused to sign a no escape pledge, he was sent to the Argyle Street Camp. There, as a senior intelligence officer, he was one of those who knew of the existence of various escape plans and of the secret radio receivers which provided the news which was disseminated through the camps. The Japanese began to discover the existence of a secret communications network in May 1943 and in September Boxer himself was arrested. When he was finally tried by a military court in December, a number of officers and men had already been executed and Charles believed that this was to be his fate also. In the event he received a five year sentence of imprisonment.

Until March 1944 Charles and his fellow prisoners were kept in severe

<sup>11</sup> Hahn, *China to Me*, p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> For Charles's role in war time Hong Kong see Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, Hahn, *China to Me* and *Hong Kong Holiday*. Also Oliver Lindsay, *The Lasting Honour; the Fall of Hong Kong 1941* (1982).

<sup>13</sup> Hahn, *China to Me*, p. 274.

solitary confinement—much of the time being made to sit on the floor and being fed starvation rations. When this ended, prison conditions somewhat improved and in December the sentences were cut to three and a half years. In June 1945 the prisoners were moved to Canton for the last two months of the war. Japan surrendered on 15 August and four days later Charles and a fellow officer were treated to a ceremonial reconciliation meal, dressed bizarrely in white uniforms and shoes specially made for the occasion, before being sent back to Hong Kong. On the way his train had to survive an attack by Chinese guerrillas.

Once back in Hong Kong, apparently little the worse for his experiences in prison, Charles resumed his duties as an intelligence officer, one of the first tasks being the location and then identification of the bodies of the officers and men executed in 1943. He also began the search for his library which had been stolen by the Japanese and which was to be a major preoccupation for the next two years.

The war, which did so much to destroy the British Empire and which proved physically and psychologically devastating for so many of those who experienced it, helped to turn Charles Boxer from an army officer of a slightly cynical disposition, who enjoyed the social life of the colony and who had a reputation as a gifted amateur scholar, into one of the most powerful historians and writers of the post war era. A close friend, Frank Lequin, wrote after his death that ‘perhaps his greatest talent, surpassing his many other talents, was his acceptance of the innate cruelty of man, his capacity to transform negative into positive energy without complaints and traumatic hatred’.<sup>14</sup> The need to survive starvation, solitary confinement, and the threat of imminent execution required great self-discipline and mental reserves. Boxer’s close friend J. S. Cummins recalled that Charles often quoted the Japanese proverb ‘Bees sting a crying face’.<sup>15</sup> Somehow Boxer obtained copies of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* and the poems of A. E. Housman. These works, together with the plays of Shakespeare, were the intellectual sustenance of these years. It is said that survival of solitary confinement requires the ability to inhabit a rich inner world of the mind and imagination, and this Boxer was able to do, with consequences that were to prove remarkably productive once he was released.

While enduring imprisonment Boxer continued to suffer from severe

<sup>14</sup> Frank Lequin, ‘Memorial address to Charles Ralph Boxer’, delivered at King’s College, 11 July 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Professor J. S. Cummins, ‘Professor Charles Boxer’, *The Times*, 1 May 2000.



disability as his left arm remained semi-paralysed and he received no treatment for it for the best part of two years. He was never to recover the use of this arm and, although he remained very sensitive about the disability and tried his best to hide it, it helped to ensure that his future would be in the intellectual world rather than on active service.

There is no doubt that in some respects Boxer received favourable treatment from the Japanese. He was well looked after in hospital and was allowed to remain there for the first nine months of the occupation. Subsequently he escaped the full consequences of his involvement in the reception of broadcasts from the secret radios. He certainly benefited from his ability to speak Japanese and from his pre-war acquaintance with many of the Japanese officers who admired and liked him. In some cases this was reciprocated and after the war Boxer refused to pursue Japanese war criminals in the way that some former prisoners did and even sent food parcels to Japanese guards who fell on hard times. It is also clear that on a number of occasions Boxer used his good relations with the Japanese officers to obtain better treatment for all the inmates of the camps. However, some fellow prisoners became bitterly jealous and allegations of collaboration were subsequently made against both Charles himself and Mickey—allegations, however, which were never substantiated by a shred of evidence.<sup>16</sup>

### Post War

Charles eventually left Hong Kong at the end of October 1945 having spent a month looking for his library. He arrived in the United States early in November and on 28 November he and Mickey, who until July had not even been sure that Charles was still alive, were married. The marriage attracted a lot of attention as Mickey was a well-known literary figure, and the pair of them featured with Carola in a full page photograph in *Life* on 5 December 1945.

At the end of December Charles returned to Japan as a member of the

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Mickey's relations with the Japanese see Cuthbertson, *No One Said Not to Go*, p. 96. A deliberately sensational accusation of collaboration was made against Charles Boxer in the *Guardian* by Hywel Williams on 24 Feb. 2001 but see the response by Dauril Alden in the *Guardian* on 10 Mar. 2001 and the article of Kenneth Maxwell, 'The C. R. Boxer affaire: Heroes, Traitors, and the *Manchester Guardian*', *Notícia e Opinião* [www.no.com.br](http://www.no.com.br)—March 2001. Williams's large and prominent article is chiefly remarkable for the complete absence of any evidence on which to base his allegations.

Far Eastern Commission. There he successfully traced his lost books to the imperial library in Tokyo and arranged for them to be transported to Britain. By February 1946 he was back in the US receiving medical treatment for his hand. It was only in July that he and Mickey sailed to Britain to reoccupy and restore the family house at Conygar.

Charles lived at his large country house until he persuaded himself he had to sell it in 1953. Mickey, who hoped their stay in Britain would be a brief one, described the opening up of Conygar, and the first cold and uninviting years they spent there, in a second volume of autobiography, *England to Me*, which was published in 1950. Like her earlier account of life in China and Hong Kong, this book is a lightly fictionalised work, but was far less likely to cause offence than *China to Me*. It provided an intimate, amusing and ultimately affectionate account of Charles Boxer who is referred to throughout as 'the Major'.

After his return to Britain, Charles's relations with the government as well as with the army began to become strained. In October 1946 he had been nominated for an MBE along with other former prisoners of the Japanese. Boxer refused to accept the honour, in spite of some pressure being put on him to do so, and in August 1947 the withdrawal of the award had to be officially announced. It appears that Boxer resented the fact that two Hong Kong Chinese, who he had recommended for a medal, were ignored, as he believed, solely on grounds of colour.

As a serving army officer Charles now had to wait for a new posting and in the mean time underwent fresh medical treatment. He was apparently still intent on pursuing a military career and hoped for some posting to the Far East. He even did his best to stop the publication of *China to Me* in Britain because he feared it would damage his career. Other options were beginning to present themselves. Even before he and Mickey had left the United States, he had been approached separately by King's College and the University of Hong Kong about the possibility of an academic appointment. However, it was the proposal by the army to make him commandant of a prisoner of war camp which finally persuaded him to resign his commission and take the chair that King's had offered him.

### The King's years 1947–1967

The Camões Chair of Portuguese at King's College, London, had been established in 1919. It had been filled by George Young between 1919 and 1923 and then, with great distinction, by Edgar Prestage from 1923 to

1936. Since that date it had remained vacant for lack of any suitably qualified occupant. Boxer had known Prestage before the war and Prestage had become one of his great admirers, famously relinquishing his own intention to edit the *Commentaries of Ruy Freyre de Andrada* when he heard that Boxer, then only twenty-six years old, was preparing an edition.<sup>17</sup> It was Prestage who suggested that Boxer be approached to fill the Camões Chair—an original and daring gesture as Boxer had no university degree and had never courted the academic establishment. The chair was formally offered and accepted in April 1947 and Charles gave his inaugural lecture on 31 October 1947. It was not until December 1947 that he finally resigned his commission in the army.

Boxer held the Camões Chair until he retired in 1967—though with one interlude. In April 1951 he accepted the Chair of Far Eastern History at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). The only reason to take this new appointment was that the salary offered was much higher than his salary at King's—and Boxer, saddled with a white elephant of country house, a London flat, the expense of his fast growing family (his second daughter Amanda was born in 1948) and still faster growing library was always seriously short of money. The move to SOAS proved an unfortunate experience and in May 1952 Charles resigned the chair and returned to King's. The following year he finally sold Conygar and moved to a house in Hertfordshire called Ringshall End, where he was to live for the rest of his life.

The years which followed his return to King's were astonishingly productive. He branched out from his original area of expertise in the history of the Portuguese and Dutch in the Far East, publishing three important works on Brazil and ranging over the whole field of Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch imperial history. The scope and quality of his work brought him widespread academic recognition. He received his first honorary degree from the University of Leiden in 1950 and in 1956 was offered, but declined, the Chair of Dutch Institutions at University College London. In 1957 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy.

While at King's Boxer had no responsibility for undergraduate teaching and supervised only a handful of postgraduates. His chair was almost exclusively a research post and he spent much of each year travelling to archives and building his unique network of international academic contacts which made him one of the best-known of all British academics. Every year he spent months abroad, visiting the United

<sup>17</sup> Boxer, *Commentaries of Ruy Freyre de Andrada*, p. xvii.

States, Brazil, India, and Africa. He not only accepted the usual invitations to conferences, where he was always very welcome because of his ability punctually to produce meticulously researched papers, but he undertook regular engagements as a visiting lecturer at American and South African universities. These lectures were published in a series of volumes which contained some of his most influential work—none more so than the lectures on race relations that he delivered at the University of Virginia in 1962 and which, when published the following year under the title *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire 1415–1825*, caused major political and academic controversy (see below).<sup>18</sup>

### Retirement years

While the controversy over *Race Relations* continued unabated, Charles Boxer was contemplating another major decision. Less than a decade after his financial worries had forced him to sell his country house, he began to contemplate the sale of his library and his departure from King's. In 1963 he agreed to be nominated to a chair at Harvard but the university declined to confirm the appointment. Undeterred he pushed ahead with his search for a new appointment and a purchaser for his books. By 1964 two major libraries were in negotiation with him—the Australian National Library in Canberra and the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana. The Australian offer seemed most attractive, but determined opposition from his family, who made it clear they would not relocate to Australia, and his realisation that it would be impossible to obtain domestic servants in Canberra, tipped the balance in favour of Indiana. The sale was finally agreed in October 1965. Charles resigned from King's and departed in June 1967, two years before he had reached the official retirement age.

During 1968 Charles took up residence at Bloomington and began his American academic career. No sooner was he there than he was approached by Yale to fill a newly created chair. The negotiations went on most of the year with Boxer reluctant to leave Indiana where he was well paid and, somewhat to his surprise, found himself very much at home. However in 1969, after Yale had also offered a position to

<sup>18</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825* (Oxford, 1963).

Mickey, he finally accepted the Chair of the Expansion of Europe Overseas, while retaining his consultancy position at the Lilly Library. It was the fourth chair he had been offered in a fourth different subject, and the third he had accepted. Charles remained at Yale for three years, in 1970 serving as acting Master of Saybrook College at a time when the Yale campus was torn by student demonstrations and radical upheavals. He finally retired in May 1972 having reached the statutory retirement age of 68.

Still very active mentally and physically, Charles was determined to continue his academic career. During his twenty years at King's he had done no undergraduate teaching but in the United States he found that teaching undergraduates became a large part of his duties. Already a distinguished researcher and writer now, very late in life, he had to develop the skills of a teacher as well. He returned to teach at Indiana in 1973 and then went with Mickey to teach a semester in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 1975 he taught at the University of Missouri. Between 1976 and 1979 he taught three more semesters at Indiana and one at Ann Arbor, Michigan—the final term at Bloomington being the last teaching that he undertook.

Boxer's outstanding academic achievement had been recognised as early as 1950 when he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Leiden. For many years this remained the only degree of any kind that he possessed. In 1959 he received an honorary degree from the University of Bahia (having been awarded the prestigious Southey Prize in 1956). In 1965 he was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Liverpool and in 1969 he was made a papal knight of the Order of St Gregory the Great. In 1971 he received an honorary doctorate from the Robinson University in Hong Kong and in 1974 he became an Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies. In 1980 he received a doctorate from Indiana University where he had taught, on and off, for ten years. In 1990 Portugal made peace with the great historian of its empire and awarded Boxer the Gold Cross of the Order of Santiago. He finally received appropriate recognition from King's College when that University established the Charles Boxer Chair in History in 1997.

However, while accepting and enjoying these and other tokens of recognition, he once again refused an honour from the British Government. In 1975 he declined to accept a CBE on the grounds that there was no longer an empire of which to be a commander. The British Government reciprocated by declining to recommend him for a knighthood.

### Charles Boxer in the eyes of those who knew him

In many ways Boxer was and remained an old fashioned figure who was most at home in a world where servants rather than machines ensured the smooth running of daily life. The Boxers always depended on domestic service of one kind or another. Conygar was run by a housekeeper and gardener and up to four additional staff; the Boxer girls always had a nanny and, when the family moved to Ringshall, they were looked after by a Dorset couple who moved with them. Boxer himself shunned technology of all kinds. He never drove and did not own a car until late in life; he always wrote with a fountain pen, having allegedly thrown the only typewriter he ever owned overboard in frustration at not being able to use it. Mickey wrote of him, 'He never broods about not being able to fix things . . . he not only doesn't like fooling around with tools, but he is quite frankly and honestly afraid of them . . . "All that sort of thing," he says vaguely, waiting for me to light the gas, for he is afraid of gas, "is woman's work."'<sup>19</sup>

After his return to England he lived something of the life of a country squire, attending hunt balls dressed in hunting pink, allowing the local hounds to meet at Conygar, taking long country walks and hosting regular house parties. However, this life style jarred increasingly with his convictions. He returned from Hong Kong with a contempt for the pretences which supported the Empire and, in particular, for the ingrained racism which he found in upper-class English society. In spite of having to pay heavy taxes, he was sympathetic to the ideals of the post war Labour government. After he sold Conygar in 1953 his life style changed to one of constant travel and of urban, or at any rate suburban, living.

Both the Boxers were very sociable. All their lives Charles and Mickey had a love of parties and of the liberating influence of alcohol, and both maintained a wide circle of friends. Both liked to dominate social gatherings and Charles in particular took pleasure in bringing together people of widely different interests to watch the reactions that would ensue. Although he always showed an old fashioned courtesy to strangers and casual acquaintances, Charles also took pleasure in being outrageous once a party was in full swing, a habit which sometimes took the disconcerting form of being publicly rude and insulting to his wife.<sup>20</sup> As Mickey herself was an ostentatiously unconventional figure—smoking cigars and

<sup>19</sup> Hahn, *England to Me*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> For example see Cutherbertson, *No One Said Not to Go*, p. 336.

opium, keeping gibbons as pets and posing nude for photographers—this was probably a form of self-protection on Charles's part. When they were not partying, however, the Boxers could be aloof and even cold. Both Charles and Mickey were enormously hard-working writers and spent long hours in their libraries—a pre-war acquaintance who came to live at Conygar subsequently wrote 'they lived in their own worlds, locked away in their respective libraries, writing away, all day, every day, and seemingly oblivious to anything happening around them'.<sup>21</sup>

Like so many Englishmen of his class and background, Boxer was a very private man. Although he wrote numerous letters to friends, he left no memoirs or diaries and, after twenty years' service, King's College found they had no information filed about him. The British Academy also found an empty file. However, this private man was married to someone who was an obsessive autobiographer and who described their life together in intimate and often embarrassing detail. Charles and Mickey lived extravagant lives, book collecting, travel, servants and entertaining swallowing up both their incomes and leaving them heavily in debt. Nevertheless it was a marriage which endured to the end, although after the unhappy experiences of trying to collaborate over writing the biography of Raffles and of living the country life at Conygar, Mickey and Charles went very separate ways, usually travelling alone, being apart for months on end and maintaining wholly separate financial arrangements. In 1974 Mickey finally decided to become resident in New York and, although she visited Ringshall End regularly, the couple 'shared a preference for intimacy built around absence' and lived apart.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of receiving six honorary degrees and numerous other honours which confirmed his reputation as one of the leading historians of the century, Boxer remained very insecure and uncomfortable in the academic world. He was sensitive about not having had a university education and believed, possibly correctly, that some colleagues at King's felt that his appointment was somehow inappropriate. He famously quipped that at formal academic occasions when others paraded in their purple robes he had to wear a lounge suit and the audience probably thought he was the man who had come about the gas. He resigned his chair at SOAS confessing that he felt out of his depth in that academic environment and that he had nothing to contribute even to his own seminars, and he also resigned his chair at King's before he reached retirement age. When he

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, p. 299.

<sup>22</sup> The phrase is that of Roger Angell and is quoted in Cuthbertson, *No One Said Not to Go*, p. 317.

hesitated to accept the chair he had been offered at Yale, his wife wrote to a friend 'he has the wild idea that he is not good enough for Yale, and if he goes he is sure to be Found Out'.<sup>23</sup> However, perhaps the most significant sign of Charles' feeling of insecurity was that he never tried to publish in leading academic journals. He seems to have felt that he was never completely accepted by the academic establishment and preferred to rule in his own private academic empire.

Those who knew Charles Boxer agreed to a remarkable extent in their estimation of him: his wit, which often verged on the ribald, his sociability, his meticulous attention to his correspondence, the smart dress, upright bearing and old fashioned good manners, his remarkable capacity for concentrated work, his linguistic ability, and his passion for travel and for book collecting. Ian Thomson, a colleague at Indiana described him as an

exceptionally smart man with an immense stock of wisdom based on experience of the world. He was not a closeted academician. Not everyone understood his wit, which could be a trifle mordant, and others were simply not capable of keeping up with him intellectually. If he sensed a fellow spirit, he was the soul of affability. If he sensed a phony, I'm afraid it showed.<sup>24</sup>

The feelings of his many friends were well summed up after his death by Professor Russell-Wood, who wrote of him in *The Independent*, 'His curiosity was unflagging, his knowledge encyclopaedic, his memory infallible. The most generous of scholars, he shared his time and his knowledge unselfishly and with enthusiasm.'<sup>25</sup>

### Critical Assessment

Charles Boxer began publishing academic articles in 1926 and his last publication appeared in 1996. In 70 years he published 335 books and academic articles with, in addition, numerous conference papers and reviews. His work covered almost all the genres of academic history—including biography, historical narrative, edited texts, bibliographical studies, textbooks, lecture series and monographs.

His major research based monographs include *Fidalgos in the Far East*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, p. 458.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, p. 445.

<sup>25</sup> A. J. R. Russell-Wood, 'Professor Charles Boxer', *The Independent*, 29 April 2000.

<sup>26</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Fidalgos in the Far East 1550–1770. Fact and Fancy in the history of Macao* (Den Haag, 1948).



*The Christian Century in Japan*,<sup>27</sup> *Salvador da Sá*,<sup>28</sup> *The Dutch in Brazil*,<sup>29</sup> *The Great Ship from Amacon*<sup>30</sup> and *The Golden Age of Brazil*.<sup>31</sup> These works were all based on numerous specialist academic papers, some of them bearing titles that he subsequently reused. They form a substantial body of research and academic narrative which covers the activities of the Dutch and the Portuguese in the Far East and Brazil in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Only the *Golden Age of Brazil* stands outside this period as it deals with the eighteenth century. In composing these largely narrative histories Boxer was probably the first historian to have been completely at ease with Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and Japanese sources, a scholarly equipment which few historians are ever likely to equal.

Boxer was always happy to acknowledge the work of those who had preceded him—for example the writings of Sir George Sanson on Japan—and often claimed that he was only making available to the English public work that already existed in Dutch or Portuguese. However, in all these books Boxer added significantly to the knowledge and understanding of the subject both through the application of fresh archival research and through his unrivalled knowledge of the published sources. Although most of the topics about which he wrote have been revisited subsequently by scholars with different perspectives, Boxer's monographs have stood the test of time and are still the essential point of departure for all serious scholars.

The first books that Boxer published in 1930, at the age of twenty-six, were translated editions of key Dutch and Portuguese texts. These set the precedent for a range of similar editions that he published while working on his monographs. Undoubtedly the most important of these translated editions were his Hakluyt Society publications, *South China in the Sixteenth Century*,<sup>32</sup> *The Tragic History of the Sea*<sup>33</sup> and *Further*

<sup>27</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan (1549–1650)* (Berkeley, 1951).

<sup>28</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Salvador Correia de Sá and the Struggle for Brazil and Angola (1602–1686)* (1952).

<sup>29</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch in Brazil 1624–1654* (Oxford, 1957).

<sup>30</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Great Ship from Amacon. Annals of Macao and the Old Japan Trade 1555–1640* (Lisbon, 1959).

<sup>31</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Golden Age of Brazil (1695–1750)* (Berkeley, 1962).

<sup>32</sup> C. R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century: being the Narratives of Galeote Pereira, Fr. Gaspar da Cruz, O.P., Fr. Martin Rada, O.E.S.A (1550–1575)* (Hakluyt Society, 1953).

<sup>33</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589–1622: Narratives of the Shipwrecks of the Portuguese East Indiamen São Thomé (1589), Santo Alberto (1593), São João Baptista (1622), and the Journeys of the Survivors in South East Africa* (Hakluyt Society, 1959).

*Selections from the "Tragic History of the Sea", 1559–1565*.<sup>34</sup> There were also minor examples of the genre, for example his discovery and publication of the very significant *Nova e Curiosa Relação*.<sup>35</sup> In these works Boxer always adopted the same format. The main part of the book consisted of his scholarly translation of some key text, usually of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. This would be supplemented by a lengthy introduction which sought to place the text in its historical context, and by an essay in which Boxer explored its bibliographical history. These essays were, of course, based on the research he had undertaken when building up his own library.

The third category of Boxer's published work were the textbooks. Between 1965 and 1969 he published two books in a series edited by J. H. Plumb—*The Dutch Seaborne Empire*<sup>36</sup> and the *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*.<sup>37</sup> Although he himself was not happy with the first of these, both books have become classics and have been reprinted many times. These volumes are excellent textbooks. They are lucidly and attractively written, they have introductory narrative chapters which make them accessible to the non-specialist, and they deal in a thematic way with important issues of contemporary concern to historians. Boxer has often been described as essentially a narrative historian, but neither of these books has a strictly narrative format. They are constructed from a series of thematic essays in which the institutional and economic history of the two empires is given full attention. In these books Boxer explored a favourite theme—that the struggle of the Dutch with the Iberian powers was in effect the first 'world war'. Both books grew out of previous work that Boxer had already published—for example many of the themes of *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire* had already been explored in published series of lectures like *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion*<sup>38</sup> and *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire*.

A number of Boxer's books had their origin in public lectures and throughout his life he was constantly invited by learned societies,

<sup>34</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Further Selections from "The Tragic History of the Sea, 1559–1565": Narratives of the Shipwrecks of the Portuguese East Indiamen "Águia" and "Garça" (1559) "São Paulo" (1561) and the Misadventures of the Brazil-ship "Santo António" (1565)* (Hakluyt Society, 1968).

<sup>35</sup> C. R. Boxer, 'Negro Slavery in Brazil', *Race*, 3 (1964), 38–47.

<sup>36</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* (1965).

<sup>37</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire* (1969).

<sup>38</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion, 1415–1825: a Succinct Survey* (Johannesburg, 1961).

conference organisers and universities to contribute to their programmes. The style of his lectures as well as their content account for their popularity—they seldom involved long and complex argument, jargon, or suffocating detail, and they were strewn with apt quotations, epigrams, and amusing asides. With great skill Boxer was able to pitch his lectures at a level which could be appreciated both by a specialist and a non-specialist audience. Some of these lectures were published as one-off articles (often in *History Today* where he published no less than twenty-six articles) but others were collected together and separately published as books, notably, *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion, Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, Portuguese Society in the Tropics*,<sup>39</sup> *Mary and Misogyny*,<sup>40</sup> *The Church Militant*<sup>41</sup> and *Portuguese India in the Mid-Seventeenth Century*.<sup>42</sup> These publications are among his most important because they address themes of topical importance to academic historians, invariably in an original and stimulating way.

A further distinct category of Boxer's work might be described as bibliographical and archival studies. All his life Boxer was a great collector of books and manuscripts—a practice that contributed in a major way to his continuing financial problems. As early as 1937 he published in Macao a catalogue of his library entitled *Biblioteca Boxeriana*. The collection had by this time acquired a certain amount of fame and it was subsequently seized and sent to Tokyo by the Japanese after Boxer was taken prisoner in 1941. Most of the books were recovered after the war and formed the core of an ever growing library. The size and quality of this collection allowed Boxer to do much of his work without leaving his own study and a number of his books contain the note 'This book has been written mainly from the resources of my own library.'<sup>43</sup> In 1963 he produced a short pamphlet on the Portuguese medical scientist Garcia d'Orta. The pamphlet was designed to popularise the work of this great sixteenth century Portuguese scientist but, at the back, was appended a note on the original edition of Garcia d'Orta's *Colóquios*. In this Boxer traced every single known copy of the book and listed their whereabouts—not surprisingly one of the twenty-four copies known to survive

<sup>39</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Portuguese Society in the Tropics. The Municipal Councils of Goa, Macao, Bahia and Luanda, 1510–1800* (Madison, 1965).

<sup>40</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Mary and Misogyny. Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas (1415–1815). Some Facts, Fancies and Personalities* (1975).

<sup>41</sup> C. R. Boxer, *The Church Militant and Iberian Expansion, 1449–1770* (Baltimore, 1978).

<sup>42</sup> C. R. Boxer, *Portuguese India in the Mid-Seventeenth Century* (Bombay, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> For example, C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* (1965), p. v.

was listed as being in the library of 'C. R. Boxer'.<sup>44</sup> In the course of forty years of systematic collecting Boxer acquired many rare and unique items. The most famous of these, perhaps, was the *Codex Boxer* which he bought in 1947. The rare items he had discovered or acquired were used to great effect in his writings which were always scrutinised by scholars interested in the latest bibliographical discovery.

Boxer was also a great traveller and made a point of visiting libraries and archives wherever he went. He provided advice to many libraries, including the Library of Congress, on their acquisition policy in areas where he had expertise. This passion for collecting and for visiting archives led to many publications of an almost exclusively bibliographical nature an example of which would be, 'A Glimpse of the Goa Archives'.<sup>45</sup>

Over an active career of sixty years Boxer's interests changed and widened. His early studies were in the maritime history of the Portuguese and Dutch in the Far East. This led on to the study of the history of Macao, China and Japan and to what turned out to be an unfortunate decision to take the chair of Far Eastern History at SOAS. From there his interests branched out to Brazil, another field of Iberian-Dutch conflict, which resulted in three important monographs. These studies then broadened to include the whole of Portuguese imperial history and the history of Portugal itself. He also wrote on British and Spanish history—though usually only where it intersected with the Dutch or the Portuguese. One subject which he largely avoided, however, was the early phase of the Discoveries. The chronological range of his work extended from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, with the year 1825 (the independence of Brazil) being established as the boundary beyond which he virtually never strayed.

Most of those who knew Charles Boxer or were familiar with his writings would have no difficulty in agreeing that his linguistic skills made him uniquely fitted for the work he undertook; that he had an unsurpassed knowledge of the published material in his field; and that he had a publishing record without rival for its quantity but also for its quality and range. However, there might be less agreement over the significance of Boxer's work within the wider context of twentieth-century historical scholarship.

It has sometimes been alleged that, for all his massive scholarship and

<sup>44</sup> *Two Pioneers of Tropical Medicine: Garcia d'Orta and Nicolás Monardes*, Diamante XIV, Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Councils (1963), p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> C. R. Boxer, 'A Glimpse of the Goa Archives', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 14 (1952), 299–324.

prolific record of publication, Boxer ultimately had little of importance to say. During the period that he was active, academic history was convulsed by a series of major debates and movements. There were the heated controversies between the various schools of Marxist history and their opponents; the rise to prominence of the *Annalists*; the development of feminist historiography, black studies, oral history, cultural history, and the debate over counterfactuals. In his own chosen field of the seventeenth-century debates ranged over the General Crisis, the Military Revolution, religion and protestantism, slavery and the slave trade, witchcraft, world systems theory and the origins of modern capitalism, and many more. Boxer seldom addressed any of these issues directly nor contributed to the debates, and it is significant that he seldom published in any of the major academic journals. He appeared to stand aloof from the concerns of academic history. This point can be illustrated from two of his most important works, his extracts from the *História Tragico Marítima*. While his introduction looks in considerable detail at the bibliographical history of these shipwreck accounts and at the development of the *carreira da Índia* and of ship construction, he hardly refers at all to the literary, symbolic, or sociological importance of the texts.

Boxer was aware that his work might be thought to lack theoretical underpinning. In 1970 he published a series of lectures on the subject of women in the Iberian empires entitled, *Mary and Misogyny: Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415–1815, Some Facts, Fancies and Personalities*. In the introduction to this he wrote

since the published documentation on women in the Iberian colonial world is sufficient neither in quantity nor in quality to provide adequate material for ‘structures’, ‘models’, and other fashionable inter-disciplinary paraphernalia, this tentative essay does not presume to be anything more than what is explicitly indicated in the subtitle.

Rather than indulge in arcane theoretical discussions, he preferred to amass illustrative quotations and to summarise his views in short and often pithy epigrams. His writings are full of ideas, judgements, and conclusions but not of detailed and sustained argument. It is difficult to tell whether this apparent shying away from controversy and debate arose from a conviction that he did not have the academic training to embark on theoretical discussions, or whether he thought this form of debate to be unproductive and ultimately pointless.

However, it can be argued that Boxer did fully engage in contemporary debate but on his own terms and in his own way. He was deeply suspicious of ideologies, whether these were the imperial ideologies of the

seventeenth or the twentieth centuries, the religious ideologies of the churches or the academic ideologies of his colleagues. It was not that he discounted the power of ideas in human affairs, and he always accepted that even at their most violent and rapacious the Portuguese of the seventeenth century were deeply moved by their faith and the desire to spread it throughout the world, but he preferred to see human beings as motivated by a confused, complex mixture of high ideals and more mundane considerations—God and Mammon.

Boxer was well aware of the political agendas with which many historians in the 1950s and 1960s approached their work. He himself did address the great themes of his time but deftly and often with a light touch that left the reader almost unaware of what he was doing. Take for example a short article entitled “‘Christians and Spices’; Portuguese Missionaries in Ceylon, 1515–1658’ which he wrote for *History Today* in 1958. This article was in many ways typical of Boxer, a light weight piece skating briefly over the history of Portuguese missionary enterprise and quoting in passing four or five less well known Portuguese writers. However, it was also a piece with a serious purpose. At the head of the article an unattributed text reads ‘The methods used, or alleged to have been used, by Portuguese proselytisers more than three hundred years ago, remain a living issue in Ceylon politics.’ The article suggests that, contrary to the claims of some Sri Lankan politicians,

the Portuguese did not seek to impose Christianity at the point of the sword . . . but they did seek to foster their religion through coercive and discriminatory legislation . . . since it is admittedly the evil rather than the good which men do that lives after them, this helps to account for the rather strident and nationalistic tone which is sometimes observable in the statements of contemporary Sinhalese Buddhists.<sup>46</sup>

Charles Boxer’s career coincided with the period of the *Estado Novo* in Portugal when history was a highly politicised activity, frequently called in evidence to underwrite the ideologies and policies of the regime. The great discoverers were routinely invoked as forefathers of the modern colonial state and in 1960 the celebrations of the five hundredth anniversary of the death of Prince Henry the Navigator took the form of a massive act of state homage to the man whom the *Estado Novo* had made into its culture hero.

<sup>46</sup> C. R. Boxer, “‘Christians and Spices’; Portuguese Missionaries in Ceylon, 1515–1658’, *History Today* (May 1958), 346–54.

It is perhaps significant that the year 1960 came and went with deafening silence from Charles Boxer. There was no publication and no comment by him on the Prince—an extraordinary omission from the greatest living scholar of Portuguese colonial history. This can partly be explained by the fact that Boxer never wrote much about the fifteenth century, but it is difficult not to see this silence as a studied snub to the regime in Portugal. That year he did give a series of lectures at the University of Witwatersrand which, he wrote, ‘would be appropriate in the year during which the Portuguese are commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the Infante Dom Henrique’, and he went on ‘I have dwelt less on the policies adumbrated at Lisbon than on what actually happened overseas’.<sup>47</sup>

However, less easy for him to ignore, and requiring a different type of response, were the writings of Gilberto Freyre with his widely propagated views about ‘Lusotropicalism’. Famous for his massive study of plantation society in Brazil, Freyre had been adopted by the Salazar regime and had written a number of books expounding the idea that the Portuguese had a unique affinity for the tropics and that their colonial tradition had avoided the polarisations of race seen in the British and Dutch and French empires. In the late 1950s this interpretation of Portuguese colonialism was intensely controversial and both supporters of the *Estado Novo* and its opponents eagerly sought endorsement or rejection from scholars working in this field.

It is not an exaggeration to say that all eyes turned on Charles Boxer to see how he would react to Freyre’s views on the topic of race. In 1962, when the dust had barely settled on the events commemorating Prince Henry the Navigator’s death, he delivered a series of lectures at the University of Virginia which were published the following year under the title, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire*. These essays were stripped bare of any theorising and avoided the windy generalisations and rhetoric which marked Freyre’s later work. Using only contemporary Portuguese sources Boxer set out to demonstrate that in every part of the world and at every period the Portuguese had been intensely conscious of racial distinctions and had frequently discriminated against people of colour. The evidence was massive, indisputable, and overwhelming and it struck at the heart of the political mythology being peddled by the Portuguese regime. In one lethal sentence Boxer delivered his political judgement.

<sup>47</sup> Boxer, *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion*, Introduction.

There were, of course, exceptions, but the prevailing social pattern was (and is) one of conscious white superiority. Captain António de Oliveira Cadornega, who lived for over forty years in Angola, is a safer guide in this respect than Dr António de Oliveira Salazar who has never set foot in Africa.

This barbed epigram, typical of Boxer's wit and the cutting edge of his scholarship, probably accounts for the decades of distrust that ensued between Boxer and the Portuguese. The public controversy that followed spilled over from the Lisbon Press into diplomatic channels and was partly responsible for the end of the meetings of the Luso-British Mixed Commission. Although Boxer was surprised and hurt by the bitterness this book caused in Portuguese circles, it is impossible not to conclude that such a careful scholar had chosen his words deliberately and that he was fully aware of the significance that his words would have in the existing international situation.<sup>48</sup>

In subsequent lecture series Boxer turned his attention to other areas of contemporary interest to historians. His essays on the town councils, on women, and on the church in the Iberian empires did much to define the debates on these topics. His writings on slavery related that issue to the wider question of race relations and to the story of the catholic missions. His writings on slavery, race and the church were designed to strip away the confusion which was often made worse by the impassioned pleading of those on each side of the debate. As always Boxer wanted common sense and realism to prevail. His focus was not on ideological positions but on the realities of colonial life.

He was aware that contempt for the Portuguese was deeply embedded in the English mentality, but having lived through the collapse of Britain's empire in the East he was less judgemental of the decline of Portugal's *Estado da Índia*. Indeed he often reflected on the courage and endurance of the Portuguese in the face of great adversity. For him both the traditional contempt of the British for Portuguese colonising efforts and the uncritical glorification of their achievements by the Portuguese were alike misguided. 'The truth' he wrote, 'was and is more complex. . . . The Portuguese were neither angels nor devils they were human beings and they acted as such; their conduct varying greatly according to time, place and circumstances.' In more than one of his works he contemplated the

<sup>48</sup> These views were first published in M. Newitt, *Charles Ralph Boxer 1904–2000* (2000). The controversy surrounding the publication of *Race Relations* is fully explored in Alden, *Charles R. Boxer*, chap. 12 and in J. S. Cummins and L. de Sousa Rebello, 'The Controversy over Charles Boxer's *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825*', *Portuguese Studies*, 17 (2001), 233–46.



apparently unequal struggle of the Portuguese and the Dutch and reflected on how the Portuguese in Brazil, Angola and East Africa were able not only to resist but to emerge victorious. Boxer believed that the strength of the Portuguese lay in their strong institutions, in the *Câmaras* and *Misericórdias*, in their strong family loyalties and above all in the catholic religious culture which gave a common identity to 'Portuguese' communities around the world.

The style of Boxer's writing was not the least significant part of his achievement as a historian. He tried to be accessible to the non-specialist and he set out to be concise, clear, amusing, and above all readable. Boxer loved epigram and always sought out some concise and witty phrase or quotation to introduce his work or to summarise his conclusions. There are many memorable lines, for example his description of the Lisbon mob as 'fanatical, filthy and ferocious' or his description of the Portuguese in East Africa as 'alternately fighting, trading and fornicating with the local inhabitants'. Some of his epigrams came to acquire a definitive quality. Few historians of the Portuguese overseas, for example, would quarrel with his famous description of the *Estado da Índia* as 'a commercial and maritime empire cast in a military and ecclesiastical mould'. Frequently, however, his search for an epigram led him to resort to clichés. For example, 'If trade followed the flag in the development of the British Empire, the missionary was close behind the merchant in the expansion of the Portuguese Empire'<sup>49</sup> or 'the close connection between God and Mammon which characterised the trade of Macao and Japan from its romantic inception to its tragic end' or 'the search for 'Christians and Spices' rather than new worlds to conquer was what brought the Portuguese to India'.<sup>50</sup> However, clichéd writing of this kind was a stylistic device which served to link Boxer's more esoteric researches into a mainstream of popular historical knowledge and thought.

## Conclusion

Charles Boxer remained an active scholar almost to the last when failing eyesight eventually put an end to his remarkable career. He faced the prospect of ending his life with characteristic stoicism. A passage he

<sup>49</sup> Introduction to *Portuguese Merchants and Missionaries in Feudal Japan* (1986).

<sup>50</sup> C. R. Boxer, 'The Portuguese in the East 1500–1800', in H. V. Livermore, ed., *Portugal and Brazil* (Oxford, 1953), p. 185.

marked in his personal copy of the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* reads ‘It is the part of a man endowed with a good understanding faculty, to consider . . . what it is to die and how . . . he can conceive of it no otherwise, than as of a work of nature, and he that fears any work of nature, is a very child.’ ‘It is significant that, after contemplating for sixty years the desperate struggles of Iberians and Dutch in all parts of the world, his best remembered remark should be, “nothing matters much, most things don’t matter at all”.’<sup>51</sup>

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*Note.* I am most grateful for the help given to me by Charles Boxer’s daughter, Amanda, including the loan of some of her precious family books.

<sup>51</sup> From Newitt, *Charles Ralph Boxer*, p. 14. See also Professor J. S. Cummins ‘Professor Charles Boxer’ *The Times*, 1 May 2000.



