SIR JOHN BOWRING AND THE ARROW WAR IN CHINA

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THE purchase of some of the Papers of Sir John Bowring by the John Rylands' Library in 1958 and the preservation of large numbers of his private letters in several other manuscript collections, which have recently been made available, such as the Clarendon Deposit at the Bodleian Library, have drawn attention to one of the most neglected of early Victorian radical politicians, whose significance has been largely missed by students of the period. There is in fact at present no adequate biography of Bowring, though a collection of his Papers was carelessly put together after his death in 1872 by one of his sons under the title of The Autobiographical Recollections of Sir John Bowring. The Dictionary of National Biography, indeed, devotes several pages to an outline of his career but the account is incomplete and somewhat misleading. Such references to Bowring as have appeared in other works are frequently inaccurate—even in matters of fact—and he has usually been portrayed in an entirely unfavourable light.

This is unfortunate, for if Bowring was indeed something of the busybody and jobber that his enemies have made him out to be, he was yet a person of considerable ability and astonishing versatility, whose career is worthy of some attention. The eldest son of a Unitarian cloth merchant at Exeter, he started life as an unsuccessful wine and herring merchant in the City of London but soon succeeded in making something of a reputation for himself as a linguist and traveller. This reputation was increased when in 1820 he obtained an introduction to the aged philosopher Bentham, and quickly secured a hold over Bentham's affections, which lasted until the philosopher's death. For six years, whilst

1Now Rylands English MSS. 1228-34.
his intimacy with Bentham grew, he played an energetic part in radical politics, first in connection with liberal movements in Spain and France and then as Secretary of the London Greek Committee—as important phase of his career which ended disastrously when he became involved in the Greek Loan scandals of 1826. A year later business difficulties obliged him to seek fresh means of employment and he attempted, unsuccessfully, to obtain an appointment first at London University and then in government service, as a Commissioner of Public Accounts. He managed, however, in spite of opposition from the Mills, to retain the editorship of the *Westminster Review*, to which Bentham had appointed him, and his editorial salary, supplemented by literary earnings, enabled him to provide for his large family for several years.

In 1830 a fresh stage of his career opened, when the new Whig government appointed him first as secretary of the Public Accounts Committee and then as commercial investigator on behalf of the Board of Trade. This work was particularly suited to his talents and for ten years he carried out investigations in many parts of western Europe and the Levant, publishing the results of his enquiries in government Blue Books. He also attempted, though without much success, to obtain commercial agreements favourable to Britain in France, Belgium, Egypt and Prussia. The failure of his efforts to persuade these foreign governments to lower their duties on British manufactured goods convinced him of the need to abolish the tariffs on corn and other foreign imports into Britain and he became a zealous advocate of Free Trade. In 1841 he secured election to Parliament as Member for Bolton, one of the most radical factory towns in the north (he had already for a short period been Member for Kilmarnock) and at Westminster he devoted much of his time to advocating the aims of the Anti-Corn Law League, though he also supported many other liberal causes, both at home and abroad. With the return of the Whigs to power in 1846, following the repeal of the Corn Laws, he again attempted to secure public employment, particularly after the economic depression of the following year had involved him in considerable financial loss, as the result of immoderate speculation in railway and industrial shares. In
1848, therefore, he was selected by Palmerston as Consul at Canton and he sailed to China early in the following year. Five years later, after a period of leave in England, he was appointed H.M. Plenipotentiary and Chief Superintendent of Trade in the Far East and granted a knighthood. He was also made Governor of Hong-Kong.

It is not the purpose of this study to examine in detail Bowring’s career as a radical politician before his arrival in China, unjustly neglected though this part of his political career has been. But it is worth recalling that the serious faults of character which were to become so apparent in his dealings with the Chinese had already revealed themselves on many occasions before his appointment to the Far East. For Bowring, if he reflected many of the virtues of the radical non-conformist middle-class from which he came, also exhibited some of its worst defects. Somewhat unscrupulous in his methods, as his part in the Greek Loan Scandals of 1826 had testified, and showing, in spite of his zeal for liberal causes, little real understanding of human nature, he had succeeded by his vanity, tactlessness and intolerance in involving himself in disputes in almost every activity with which he had been concerned. Even in his most useful rôle as commercial investigator and Free Trade propagandist—and the several volumes of commercial reports which he produced between 1834 and 1840 were amongst the most valuable public documents of their time—his impetuosity had led him to commit indiscretions which had contributed to the failure of his foreign missions and enabled steadier agents to achieve greater success in negotiation. It should have been clear, therefore, as his political opponents frequently asserted, that, for all his intelligent interest in the

1 A detailed study of Bowring’s political career down to 1849 has been made in G. F. Bartle, “The Political Career of Sir John Bowring (1792-1872) between 1820 and 1849”, an unpublished London M.A. Thesis in the University of London Library. This work contains a full bibliography of Bowring’s career down to 1849.

2 For Bowring’s activities as a speculator during the Greek Loan Scandals, see Cobbett’s Political Register, vol. lx (1826), quoting The Times and other newspapers of the day.

3 A recent assessment of Bowring’s rôle as commercial investigator is to be found in L. M. Brown, The Board of Trade and the Free Trade Movement (Oxford, 1958).
Chinese way of life, he was ill equipped to provide the tact, patience and moderation which were essential if British officials were to be successful in their dealings with Chinese Mandarins.

The situation in China, and particularly at Canton, at the time Bowring arrived in the Far East was, indeed, a very difficult one. By the Treaty of Nanking, concluded between the British Plenipotentiary, Sir Henry Pottinger, and Chinese Imperial Commissioners after the first China war, five treaty ports, including Canton, which had formerly had the monopoly of western trade, had been officially opened to European merchants. In spite of this Treaty, however, the local Mandarins at Canton, who regarded all westerners as barbarians and particularly resented the loss of their former privileges, made every effort to hedge around the European merchants with restrictions, denying the right of even Consular officials to enter the old city and refusing to have any dealings with them on equal terms. Inevitably these restrictions led to frequent protests from the British authorities, who accused the Chinese of failing to observe the terms of the Treaty of 1842. All attempts, however, to solve the "city question" by peaceful negotiations failed and when Bowring came out as Consul in 1849 he, too, found himself restricted to the narrow limits of the European factory area, where, ignored by the Chinese Mandarins and little noticed even by his own superior, the British Plenipotentiary at Hong-Kong, who distrusted his zeal for reform, he passed three lonely and ineffective years.

When Bowring himself, however, became Plenipotentiary and Chief Superintendent of Trade in 1854, the situation rapidly began to change. As an ardent exponent of the benefits of Free Trade, he was determined not only to solve the city question at Canton but to secure a general extension of commercial and diplomatic facilities in China including direct representation at the Imperial capital, Peking. In this policy he was supported

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1 For the long negotiations between the British Plenipotentiaries and the Chinese authorities see W. C. Costin, Great Britain and China, 1833-1860 (Oxford, 1937). This study is mainly based on the official dispatches in the Foreign Office records.

2 Bowring's correspondence with his sons Edgar and Frederick, preserved in Rylands Eng. MSS. 1228-9, vividly illustrates his loneliness and frustration at Canton.
both by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon (who as George Villiers had, years earlier, accompanied Bowring on his commercial missions to France and had recently been responsible for his appointment as Plenipotentiary), and by various commercial interests in Britain, such as the East India and China Association, who saw in the development of trade with China a vast market for British goods. The high hopes of Bowring and his supporters, however, were soon disappointed, for the outbreak of the Crimean War made it impossible for the government to provide the new Plenipotentiary with sufficient ships to make any impression on the Chinese authorities, much less secure a revision of the Treaty of Nanking. Consequently Bowring's efforts to obtain an interview inside Canton with the Chinese Imperial Commissioner, Yeh, were once again a complete failure and his expedition, in company with the American Commissioner, to the Peiho river leading to Peking, was equally barren of success. 1 To make matters worse, he managed, during this first year, to arouse the hostility of the British merchants both at Shanghai and at Hong-Kong by his tactless and overbearing methods of administration and he also earned himself a severe reprimand from Lord Clarendon for failing to carry out the instructions of the government over the collection of certain arrear customs duties at Shanghai. 2

In 1855, however, Bowring's ill fortune at last changed when he succeeded, by a policy of threats thinly disguised under a veneer of benevolence, in extorting an advantageous commercial treaty from the government of Siam. 3 The methods which he used on this occasion finally convinced him that it was only by using the threat of force that he could persuade orientals to come to terms. Whilst still at Bangkok he had urged Clarendon to allow him to "open China" as he had opened Siam, with the

1 For Bowring and McLane's visit to the Peiho in 1854, see Costin, op. cit. pp. 186 ff. The expedition is also described in Bowring's private correspondence with Lord Clarendon (MSS. Clar. Dep. C.19) and with his son, Edgar Bowring (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).

2 See Bowring's private correspondence with Lord Clarendon and with his son, Edgar Bowring, during 1854-5.

3 Bowring's expedition to Siam as described in his book The Kingdom and People of Siam (1857), ii. 248 ff.; see also his private correspondence with Clarendon (MSS. Clar. Dep. C.37), and with Edgar Bowring (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
"instruments of peace" in his hand but with "a co-operative naval force" under his command and after his return to Hong-Kong his demands for a forceful policy became more and more insistent. Two years later, after this policy had got Bowring into trouble, he went to considerable lengths to declare his entire disapproval of "strong language and a sloop of war to support it", reminding the public of his services to the cause of Free Trade and his lifelong membership of the Peace Society. In 1855 and 1856, however, there was nothing either in his dispatches or in his private letters to suggest that he ever hesitated to recommend violent means if these would help to secure the great objective of opening China to European commerce. "We have been trifled with—tantalized too long", he wrote to Clarendon late in 1855, "a natural result of our temporizing and hesitations—to suppose that our motives have been understood... is to be ignorant of the oriental mind—that mind never distinguishes between the will to do—and the power of doing—never attributes forbearance to anything but impotence or dreams that hesitations can have any source but a sense of infirmity...".

"I hope the three governments [that is, the three Treaty powers, Britain, France and the United States] will see that if they seriously intend to extend our relations they must be prepared for very strong measures", he urged the Foreign Secretary more boldly in July 1856, "not that there will be any necessity for resorting to them—but the Chinese must believe that we mean to have a change".

Bowring's demands for strong measures were not lost upon the British Government. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon, shared his conviction that only joint action by the three western powers backed by a sufficient naval force would persuade the Chinese to grant the concessions they desired. Their determination to provide this force, once the Crimean war was over, was strengthened by the promise of co-operation from France and the United States, both of which

1 Bowring to Clarendon, 16 April 1855 (MSS. Clar. Dep. C.37).
2 See "Lammer Moor", Bowring, Cobden and China, 1857.
3 Bowring to Clarendon, 27 November 1855 (C. 37).
5 Costin, op. cit. p. 201.
had grievances of their own against the Chinese Mandarins. Before, however, their plans for a strong allied expedition to the Peiho in the spring of 1857 could be completed, the situation was drastically transformed by events which occurred at Canton. There, relations with the Chinese authorities had remained as unsatisfactory as ever, as all attempts to secure admittance into the city had been frustrated by the obstinacy of Yeh. Bowring had become increasingly impatient with the Imperial Commissioner's attitude, which he described as "absolutely intolerable" and he was determined, if possible, before the allied expedition to the north, to bring the dispute with Yeh to a settlement. As he wrote to Clarendon in September 1856,

I am convinced there is no course so safe nor so wise as to demand an official, personal and becoming reception at his Yamun within the city for the purpose of discussing face to face the grievances of which we have to complain. The demand for such a reception must be made in the presence of ships of war which shall be instructed to accompany and protect the envoy. . . . I do not believe access would finally be denied—though a show of resistance there would undoubtedly be. Such a measure would exhaust our efforts with the Imperial Commissioner . . . no doubt this would be excellent groundwork for a movement upon Peking. . . .

The opportunity to intervene at Canton in the manner Bowring recommended was dramatically presented on 8 October 1856. On the morning of that day, a lorch, the Arrow, owned by a Chinese merchant resident at Hong-Kong and manned by Chinese but captained by an Englishman and registered at the colony under an ordinance issued by Bowring in 1856, was boarded as it was about to sail from Canton by a party of Chinese soldiers, who carried off twelve of the crew on a charge of piracy. Whether, as the master of the Arrow asserted, the British ensign was hauled down by the Chinese, or whether as the Chinese declared, the

1 Several extracts from Bowring's official correspondence with Yeh in 1854-5 are included in Correspondence relative to Entrance into Canton, 1850-1855. Parliamentary Papers (1857), xii. 19 ff.
2 Bowring to Clarendon, 9 September 1856 (C. 57).
3 An account of the Arrow incident and its aftermath, based on official dispatches, is given in Costin, op. cit. pp. 206 ff.; see also the published extracts from dispatches included in Proceedings of H.M. Naval Forces at Canton, Parliamentary Papers (1857), xii. 51 ff. Many of these dispatches have recently been reproduced in D. B. Smith and E. W. R. Lumby, The Second China War (Navy Records Society Publications, vol. xcv), London, 1954.
flag had not been flying at the time, has never been definitely established. But it is difficult to believe that the Chinese were not aware that the Arrow, which was well known at the port, at least claimed to be entitled to British protection. The incident was at once reported to the British Consul at Canton, Harry Parkes, a young official of exceptional energy and assurance, who had accompanied Bowring to Siam in 1855, and he reacted with characteristic determination. After attempting, in vain, to persuade the officers in charge of the boarding party to set the prisoners free, he wrote to Yeh demanding the immediate return of the whole crew of the lorcha, promising that if any crime had been committed he would himself conduct a full investigation. At the same time he wrote to Bowring giving an account of the incident. Two days later, nine of the men were brought to the Consulate, accompanied by a letter from Yeh, in which the Imperial Commissioner denied that the Arrow was a British vessel, entitled to British protection, and reasserted the charge of piracy against the remaining three of the crew. Parkes, however, refused to receive the nine men on the grounds that they had not been delivered to him in the manner he had stipulated. He admitted that the charge of piracy might be true but argued that this was beside the point, which was whether British ships were to be free from Chinese interference, as laid down in supplementary clauses to the Treaty of Nanking, or whether, as he wrote to Bowring, they were to be "boarded by Chinese military, without any communication being made to the Consul, to have their national flag hauled down, and their crews carried away as prisoners".  

Parkes account of the Arrow incident made a considerable impression upon Bowring and he lost no time in assuring the Consul of his full support. He informed Parkes that the licence of the Arrow had expired on 27 September and that the vessel was, strictly speaking, not entitled to British protection. But he added that the Chinese had no knowledge of this fact and consequently no right to violate the supplementary Treaty of Nanking. He instructed Parkes to demand a written apology from Yeh as well as to insist on the immediate return of all twelve men from the

1 Parkes to Bowring, 11 October 1856 (P.P. 1857, xii. 61).
lorcha and authorized him, in the event of the Imperial Commissioner not complying within forty days, to "call upon the naval authorities" to assist him in gaining redress. Privately Bowring was delighted by the opportunity which the incident presented of bringing to a head the long unresolved deadlock at Canton, particularly as naval reinforcements had at last begun to reach Hong-Kong. "I am not sorry this affair of the Arrow has occurred," he wrote to Clarendon, "the lesson will be a very useful one and may lead to many practical results. I think this is a more efficient and becoming intervention than the stoppage of duties and interruption of trade". "I think this mode of action more worthy of a Great Nation than the stoppage of duties and disturbance of trade", he assured Edgar Bowring the same day, "out of these troubled waters I expect to extract some healing food".

Meanwhile, at Canton events were beginning to move to a climax. On 14 October, Parkes, who had received an unsatisfactory reply to his ultimatum demanding an apology, ordered the seizure by naval personnel of a Chinese junk. This reprisal, however, made no impression upon Yeh, who continued to insist that the Arrow was a Chinese vessel, not entitled to British protection and that his officers had acted correctly in arresting its crew on a charge of piracy. Six days later Parkes came to Hong-Kong, where he conferred with Bowring and Admiral Seymour, Commander of the Naval Forces in the Far East, on the next measures to be adopted. It was agreed, on Parkes's recommendation, that operations should be directed by the navy against forts between Whampoa (where the large merchant ships normally lay at anchor) and Canton, and then if Yeh still remained obdurate, that similar action should be taken against the forts and Imperial residence itself. It was also agreed, on Bowring's insistence, that the grounds of dispute should be widened and the opportunity taken to compel Yeh to receive H.M. Plenipotentiary at his Yamun in the city. "... We must write a bright page in our history", he exhorted Parkes next day, in one of the constant

1 Bowring to Parkes, 11 October 1856 (ibid. p. 65).
2 Bowring to Clarendon, 16 October 1856 (C. 57).
3 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 16 October 1856 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
messages he dispatched to the Consul at this time, "I hope you will not lose sight of the city question. You will not demand it, of course,—but you will have an opportunity of saying what will help its settlement. . . . I trust to your sagacity to get all that is to be got out of this movement—I will appear in the field whenever my presence may seem desirable." ¹

Victory, however, was far from being as swift as Bowring and Parkes anticipated. On 22 October Yeh responded to Parkes's latest ultimatum by sending all twelve men of the Arrow's crew to the Consulate. But he refused to supply a written apology for his actions and this, together with his failure to comply with Parkes's exact instructions for the return of the men, persuaded the Consul once more to reject the prisoners. Next day Admiral Seymour opened fire on the Whampoa forts and four days later, having received no satisfactory reply from Yeh to a peremptory demand for free admittance into Canton, he began a steady bombardment of the city itself. To this the Imperial Commissioner replied by issuing a proclamation commanding all Chinese citizens to exterminate the barbarians and offering a reward of thirty dollars for each English life. Nevertheless, on 29 October, the naval forces breached the city wall and in the afternoon Parkes and Seymour, accompanied by a small party, entered Canton and made their way to the Imperial Yamun. Yeh, however, had left shortly before their arrival and in spite of all their efforts to trace him, the party were obliged to leave the city and return to their ships at dusk, without discovering his hiding-place. During the next few days, whilst Admiral Seymour continued his attacks on forts and junks in the neighbourhood of Canton, Bowring and Parkes dispatched further ultimatums to the Imperial Commissioner and his subjects threatening "more sudden and terrible things" if they refused to receive H.M. Plenipotentiary within the city.² The bombardment of Canton, however, far from breaking Yeh's resistance, only strengthened his determination to repel the invaders.

The refusal of Yeh to submit placed Bowring in something of a dilemma. The dispute had assumed such large proportions,

¹ Bowring to Parkes, 21 October 1856. Quoted in S. Lane-Poole, The Life of Sir Harry Parkes (1894), i. 245.
² Bowring to the People of Canton, 6 November 1856 (P.P. 1857, xii. 122).
involving the whole question of British relations at Canton and no longer just the small affair of the Arrow, that it was impossible for him to withdraw from his position. On the other hand, the limited naval forces at his disposal and the lack of authority to employ military forces from the Hong-Kong garrison, without express approval from London, made any permanent occupation of Canton out of the question. In these circumstances it is not surprising that he should have become somewhat alarmed at the consequences of his action. The complete breakdown of trade which had followed Admiral Seymour's attack on Canton had aroused protests not only from the Chinese but from some western merchants and though Bowring had the support of the whole British commercial community, he was uncertain how far his policy would obtain the approval of public opinion at home and in the United States. "I hope it will be my good fortune to terminate this work of war at Canton as satisfactorily as the work of peace in Siam", he wrote to Clarendon on 14 November, "the demonstration must have the very best effect upon our future negotiations. I believe there never was so much unanimity as in the approval of the course we have taken. The conduct of the Admiral has been most admirable... Parkes and indeed all the officials have behaved most satisfactorily. All has been auspicious—an increased force in the garrison—a fine season of the year—before all I hope for your approval and I do not believe it will be wanting." ¹ Three days after this letter, Bowring himself paid a visit to the Canton factories in one more belated attempt to persuade the Imperial Commissioner to receive him within the city. But again his efforts were completely unsuccessful, for neither threats nor appeals for a settlement on grounds of "world order and harmony" (which came strangely from one who had already authorized the bombardment of the city), succeeded in turning Yeh from his "headstrong course". ²

The situation was still unchanged when in December, after a month of desultory skirmishing around the city suburbs and more destruction of forts along the river, the struggle entered a new and more alarming phase. On 14 December Chinese

¹ Bowring to Clarendon, 14 November 1856 (C. 57).
² Bowring to Yeh, 14 November 1856 (P.P. 1857, xii. 90).
braves" set on fire and almost completely destroyed the European quarter of the factories, gutting the Consulate and causing the death of a young nephew of Bowring's whom he had appointed as a Consular assistant at Canton. 1 Most of the other residents had already left the European settlement and there was no further loss of human life. But the burning of the warehouses of the hated westerners made a considerable impression upon the Chinese and stimulated them to further acts of daring. During the next weeks, frequent raids were made by war junks and fire ships, carrying "stinkbombs", on vessels lying in the river and these attacks culminated on 29 December in the capture and complete massacre of all Europeans on board the postal steamer Thistle, which was on its way from Canton to Hong-Kong. 2

The emergency reached its climax on 11 January 1857 when, a few days after a proclamation by Yeh ordering all Chinese merchants and servants to leave the colony, an attempt was made to poison the whole European population of Hong-Kong, by putting arsenic in their bread. Fortunately for Bowring and his family and for the other members of the community, the poisoners made the mistake of overdosing the arsenic and their victims suffered nothing worse than severe attacks of sickness and headache. 3 But the incident caused the greatest alarm and together with the appearance of threatening placards, offering rewards for the heads of Europeans, scared the colonial administration into taking repressive measures against the Chinese. Eventually after Bowring, to his credit, had "peremptorily refused" martial law and insisted on a proper trial, the baker of the poisoned bread and other suspects were acquitted for lack of evidence and allowed to leave the colony. But their sufferings in jail, where they had been confined for several weeks under shockingly inadequate conditions, must have been considerable. 4 Meanwhile Bowring, seriously concerned about the dangerous situation at Hong-Kong, sent out belated appeals for military reinforcements from India and Singapore.

1 Bowring to Clarendon (official dispatch), 16 December 1856 (ibid. p. 194).
2 Bowring to Clarendon (official dispatch), 31 December 1856 (ibid. p. 305).
4 The Treatment of Chinese Prisoners at Hong-Kong after the Poison Plot (P.P. 1857-8, xliii. 519 ff.).
He also insisted on greater naval protection from Admiral Seymour who, in order to strengthen his communications with Hong-Kong, was forced to withdraw some miles downstream from the Canton factory area, leaving the Chinese to destroy such European installations as had survived their previous incendiaryism and his own bombardments. By February 1857 the British were on the defensive throughout the whole of the Canton area. At the height of these misfortunes, Bowring still claimed to remain optimistic about the future. As he wrote to Clarendon late in January,

I cannot but think the character of the hostilities directed against us will excite much indignation against their authors. I shall personally look with satisfaction on the doubts and darkness of our present position if beyond it I—or those who may more worthily represent their country—are able to look to the dawning of a better day. I have endeavoured at every stage to carry with me the concurring sympathies of the other powers and if their governments respond to their communications, China will find the whole of the western world arraigned against her and to such an opposing influence she cannot but yield.

At the same time he was somewhat apprehensive lest Yeh's successful defiance should have unpleasant repercussions elsewhere in China and he informed the Foreign Secretary that he had done his best to assure the Imperial Government that he had no quarrel with anybody but Yeh and no intention of resorting to forceful measures in other parts of the country. As he put it:

I have not the ambition which some attribute to me of being the Lord Clive of China—I do not contemplate territorial dominion—but I do anticipate the establishment of an influence which shall not only secure the vast interests now compromised but vastly extend them. . . . The destinies of China some generations hence I desire not to predict—I doubt if any oriental nation can stand against the pressure of the western world—but I think it will be enough to open China and adjacent countries to the enterprise of our merchants, the influence of our diplomacy and the action of our civilisation.¹

Whilst Bowring was assuring the Foreign Secretary of his determination to continue his forward policy in China, in spite of temporary setbacks, developments were taking place in England which were destined to take control of that policy out of his hands. The first reports of the Arrow incident and of the attack on Canton had reached London in December but it was not until early in the New Year that full accounts appeared in The Times and other

¹ Bowring to Clarendon, 27 January 1857 (C. 71).
Public reaction to the news was immediate and varied from enthusiasm for war with China to strong indignation over Bowring’s conduct. Most members of the Government, whatever their private reservations on the way in which the conflict had come about, shared Palmerston and Clarendon’s view that Bowring’s actions at Canton were legally justified and that Yeh needed a firm lesson. This attitude was also adopted by The Times and by the various commercial organizations. But many of the radicals, and also many supporters of Lord Shaftesbury’s anti-opium campaign, were loud on their denunciation of Bowring and Parkes. To these reformers the attack on a weaker people like the Chinese was a crime, all the more culpable because it had been carried out in spite of Bowring’s knowledge that the register of the Arrow had expired and the lorcha was no longer legally entitled to protection.

The indignation over the Arrow incident came to a head when Parliament reassembled on 3 February. Almost immediately Palmerston’s government was urged by several speakers to publish the official correspondence dealing with the situation at Canton. On 24 February, after various Papers, including one collection of correspondence boldly entitled Insults in China, had been laid before Parliament, a full debate on the Far Eastern crisis opened in the Lords and this was followed two days later by a similar debate in the Lower House. The tone of these debates was set at once by the Tory leader, Lord Derby, who launched a bitter attack against both Bowring and Parkes. Bowring, he declared, had “a perfect monomania” on the subject of his own admission into Canton, which he thought about day and night, and he was prepared to go to any lengths to obtain it. Consequently, in contrast to Yeh, his letters had been “menacing disrespectful, irritating and arrogant” and he had made no attempt to come to an agreement. These accusations were repeated by many other speakers in both Houses, notably by Bowring’s old friend Cobden, who in a fervent appeal to the national conscience drew attention to the selfishness and violence which had frequently

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1 The Times, 2 January 1857.
2 Clarendon to Bowring, 10 January 1857 (Costin, op. cit. p. 217).
3 Parliamentary Debates, 3rd ser. cxliv. 196-7 and 332.
characterized British policy in the Far East. There had existed, he declared, “a preconceived design to pick a quarrel with the Chinese” and Bowring and Parkes had made up their minds not to be satisfied. Like Lord Derby he denied that the Arrow was a British vessel and he deplored Bowring’s dishonesty over the matter of the lorcha’s outdated register. Over the city question, he pointed out that there were excellent reasons for not persevering in the demand to enter Canton, since the people were “fierce, ungovernable and hostile to England”. In taking measures, nevertheless, to enforce this demand, Bowring had violated the principles of international law and had acted contrary to his instructions from the Government.

Cobden’s speech was one of the most forceful of his career and it made a considerable impression upon the House. In the debate, which continued over the next four days, members as different in their opinions as Lord John Russell, Sir James Graham, Gladstone and Disraeli united in condemning the attack on Canton, characterizing Bowring as “a man more remarkable for his self-confidence than for the soundness of his judgement”. It fell to the Prime Minister, Palmerston, to make the final defence of the events in China and it is clear that, although the Government had managed to obtain a small majority in the Lords, he fully realized that “the temper of the House was disagreeable” and his defeat probable. Nevertheless he maintained his position with characteristic pugnacity, taunting Cobden with his “anti-English spirit”, praising Bowring as “a man of great talents and of varied attainments, eminently fitted for his situation”, and reminding the House that it was the Government’s first duty to protect British subjects in China against a “merciless barbarian” such as Yeh. It was not, however, one of Palmerston’s best speeches—the diarist Greville, who believed that most members of the Government privately considered Bowring’s conduct indefensible, described it as “dull in its first half hour and very bow-wow in its second” and it failed to produce a change in

2 Graham’s speech (ibid. pp. 1552 ff.).
the feelings of the House. When the division was taken, the Government was defeated by sixteen votes and their numbers would have been even lower if some Tory Members had not voted with Palmerston against the "unholy alliance" of Whigs, radicals, "Peelites" and the remainder of the Tory Party.

Two days later, after an interview with the queen, Palmerston announced his intention of appealing to the country. He also informed the House that there would be "no change in the policy of the Government with respect to events in China". In response, however, to widespread demands that a new Plenipotentiary should be dispatched immediately to the Far East, he declared that the Government did intend to send out a new emissary though he gave no details of this appointment. Even before the debates on China had taken place, Palmerston and Clarendon had realized the necessity of replacing Bowring by a new Plenipotentiary with the confidence of the country behind him and the verbal instructions of the Government in his mind. This appointment was settled when, a few days after the Government's defeat in Parliament, the Earl of Elgin, a man of wide diplomatic experience in Canada and elsewhere, agreed to go out to the Far East to restore peace and conclude a new commercial treaty with China.

Two weeks after Elgin's appointment the General Election took place after a short campaign in which the situation in China almost monopolized the public's attention. It was the heyday of mid-Victorian confidence and prosperity and Cobden's ironical catch-phrase, "Palmerston for ever, no reform and a Chinese war" made little impression upon the electorate. Much more effective was the mail from China bringing details of the arsenic plot at Hong-Kong and of Yeh's proclamation offering rewards for the heads of Englishmen. Such reports appeared to confirm Palmerston's description of Yeh as "an insolent barbarian" who had "violated the British flag, broken the engagement of treaties" and planned the destruction of H.M. subjects "by murder assassination and poisons". In the face of such insults to British
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prestige it was difficult for the supporters of Cobden and Lord Shaftesbury to convince electors that the Chinese were a peace-loving people, who were being bullied into submission by Palmerston’s gunboat diplomacy. When polling was held at the end of March, Palmerston’s supporters were returned with the largest majority of any Government since 1832 and Cobden, Bright and other “peace radicals” lost their seats in those very northern cities which had been the main stronghold of the Manchester school since 1846. It was a great triumph for Palmerston and his policy of commercial imperialism and a bitter defeat for those reformers whose enthusiasm for international trade was balanced by their devotion to the ideal of world peace.

During the election campaign which led to Palmerston’s victory, the allegations which had been made against Bowring in Parliament were repeated by his opponents on political platforms and in the press. Bowring’s own absence in China made it impossible for him to defend himself against charges of whose existence he was, indeed, yet unaware, though his son, Edgar, took up his father’s defence with energy.1 During the latter part of March and April, however, full reports of the political storm in England began to reach the Far East. Naturally these drew from Bowring a vigorous defence of his conduct. “The Arrow is a very small affair in the general question”, he assured Clarendon in April, “though it may have been the drop which caused the overflow of the vase. And I think the Canton events providential—they have not injured the general trade—they were necessary for the revision of treaties—they have not involved any question of war with China.”2 It was only in early May, however, when news of Elgin’s appointment as Plenipotentiary reached Hong-Kong that the full implications of the crisis at home became clear. The news was greatly welcomed by the merchants, who believed that the new Plenipotentiary would bring with him large reinforcements to renew the attack on Canton. It was also applauded by Parkes who discerned in it “the finger of One who

1 See Edgar Bowring’s letter to The Times on 14 March 1857; see also Edgar Bowring’s letter to Lord Granville, urging the Government to vindicate his father’s honour (E. Bowring to Granville, 11 March 1857, Granville MSS., P.R.O., 30/29/23).

2 Bowring to Clarendon, 12 April 1857 (C. 69).
rules the destinies of nations"). For Bowring, however, the suspension of his Plenipotentiary powers was a terrible, if not entirely unexpected, blow, which even Clarendon’s private assurance that he thought Bowring’s treatment by Parliament had been most unjust, could not alleviate. It meant the frustration of his ambition to play a leading part in the opening up of China and brought to an untimely end his personal struggle with Yeh. Outwardly he pretended to display a magnanimous attitude to his successor, promising Clarendon that he would lend every assistance to the new Plenipotentiary and assuring Elgin himself of his “heartiest co-operation”. But he could not avoid feeling bitterly resentful over the treatment he had received both from the Government and Parliament. Thus he complained to his son Edgar,

The way in which I have been personally marked out as the target... is characteristic of the animus displayed, for there was no step on which the Admiral was not consulted—none which he did not cordially approve and he was the actor—not I, who had no power whatever to control that action if I departed from it—which indeed I never did. He is too honourable a man to refuse his share of the responsibility—and has expressed to me his great disgust with the character of the debate.

News of the defeat of his critics in the General Election filled Bowring with a grim satisfaction, in spite of his own former close relations with the peace party. As he observed to Edgar,

Cobden has certainly toppled his own house about his ears in his attempt to sacrifice me. He is smitten by the thunderbolt he invoked on my head—he has injured himself, his cause and his allies and my joy is that the movement against us has benefitted not damaged my friends.

An even greater blow, however, to Bowring than the loss of his Plenipotentiary powers was a dispatch which arrived from the Foreign Office early in June informing him that during Elgin’s mission to China, he was not to leave Hong-Kong nor even to communicate with the mandarins. This was particularly distressing for he had long set his heart on a mission to Japan, where he

1 Lane-Poole, op. cit. i. 262.
2 Quoted in Autobiographical Recollections, p. 25. For Clarendon’s earlier private letter to Bowring, warning him that public approval of his conduct would depend on its swift success, see Clarendon to Bowring, 10 February 1857, in Rylands Eng. MS. 1230.
3 Bowring to Clarendon, 21 May 1857 (C. 69).
4 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 8 May 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
5 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 25 May 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
hoped to obtain a treaty as favourable as the one he had concluded in Siam, and he had already been authorized by Clarendon to make such a visit as soon as a ship became available.\textsuperscript{1} Full of indignation at the withdrawal of authority to visit Japan (where, indeed, he would have had reasonable chances of a friendly reception),\textsuperscript{2} Bowring wrote a long and angry letter to the Foreign Secretary but finally decided not to send this and vented his feelings on his son Edgar instead, to whom he confessed,

\ldots I was certainly unprepared for the bitter humiliation of having the Japanese mission taken out of my hands. This is "the unkindest cut of all" and has inflicted a deeper wound on me than anything that has occurred. This is the reward of my success in Siam—where I created a trade that is become enormous—employing several thousand vessels. I have been devoting myself for years to the study of the Japanese question \ldots and now (without a word of explanation) I am superceded. I bent my head resignedly to what was represented to be a Parliamentary necessity in the China affair—but this Japanese wrong is a very cruel and needless injustice—and I assure you is very very hard to bear. \ldots My first impulse was to throw up the whole business—as I have no hope of fair treatment from the Foreign Office—where some malignant influence seems to follow me in all my doings—but on reflection—I cannot afford to do what first impulses dictated—and I will bear all—battered and broken as I am—wounded—wearied—wasted—a man whose conduct his masters profess to have approved—but these very masters—these approving masters—give me cups of bitterness and gall to drink.\textsuperscript{3}

In the depths of his self-pity and disappointment Bowring looked around for scapegoats to whom to attribute the "malignant influence" which had persuaded the Foreign Secretary to withdraw the Japanese mission and found the first of these in Edmund Hammond, the Under Secretary at the Foreign Office and an old enemy of Bowring’s. With considerably less justice he also attributed his humiliation to the influence of Parkes. During the early months of 1857, when the Consul had been obliged to reside at Hong-Kong after the destruction of the Canton factories, a rapid deterioration of the relationship between Bowring and Parkes had taken place, attributable mainly to Bowring’s tendency to blame the Consul as well as Admiral Seymour for the situation which had got him into such trouble at Canton. Only the personal intervention of Seymour, who had a low opinion

\textsuperscript{1} See Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 6 April 1856 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
\textsuperscript{2} See \textit{Camb. Mod. Hist.}, xi (1909), 831.
\textsuperscript{3} Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 11 June 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
of Bowring and warned him that it would be madness to get rid of the most able member of his staff at the juncture, prevented Parkes being sent to Amoy. Parkes, indeed, would have been quite willing to leave Hong-Kong, for, as he wrote to a friend, "little else but a sycophant's part" would now satisfy Bowring and that he was not prepared to play. By the summer of 1857, Bowring had convinced himself that Parkes, as well as his enemies among the merchants, was in league with Hammond and was providing the Foreign Office with information which was being used to secure his own complete humiliation. As he confided to Edgar Bowring in June,

I believe much is attributable to Hammond (who once told me he did not mean I should be Plenipotentiary in China), and something perhaps to H.S.P., who owes to me his advancement—but whom I have detected in more than one act of faithlessness. He is Hammond's prompter I know—then the merchants . . . some of whom have publicly said they would not rest till they had overthrown me. Lord Palmerston has nobly supported me—Lord Clarendon very lukewarmly—but when the country reversed the vote of the House of Commons—I think it was not a moment to add bitterness to the bitterness that had gone before. However I try to get rid of the bile within me—and proudly to bow to the hurricane.

Early in July, Lord Elgin arrived in China and Bowring tried to concentrate his attention on colonial problems and particularly on the relief of the unpleasant situation at Hong-Kong. That same month, however, news of yet another attack on his reputation from an entirely unexpected quarter fully revived all his feelings of indignation. This news concerned the publication of George Borrow's novel The Romany Rye, which contained a bitter attack on Bowring, describing him as earning a false literary reputation at the expense of his collaborators in foreign verse translations (of whom, years earlier, Borrow had been a representative), and also as tricking the author out of the appointment of Consul at Canton in 1849. After reading this sequel to Lavengro, Bowring found it impossible to remain calm and wrote angrily to Edgar,

1 Lane-Poole, op. cit. p. 260.
2 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 11 June 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
I have been reading George Borrow's most mendacious libels in Romany Rye. I hunted down Lavengro—I cheated him of an appointment and secured it for myself—and then the way in which he has introduced my family (even your mother and sisters) is one of the most impertinent pieces of low rascality I have ever met with. He has carried into the literary field the spirit which other ancient allies have brought into the political. Was ever a man pelted from all sides as I have been? —I hope I shall survive it all.¹

The attack in *The Romany Rye* did little further harm to Bowring's already tarnished reputation—indeed, most of the press in England reviewed Borrow's book very critically. But the shock of reading "The Old Radical" may have been the last straw which brought Bowring to his bed with a serious attack of fever at the end of July. By then his fortunes seemed to have reached their lowest ebb, for, in addition to his political disappointments and the many assaults on his reputation, his wife was still seriously ill from the arsenic attack in January and his family at Government House were suffering from the constant nervous strain caused by the fierce hostility of the Chinese. Even Elgin's arrival brought him little but further humiliation, for the new Plenipotentiary treated him with contempt and refused to allow him to take any part in future plans for Canton. As he wrote to Edgar Bowring in August, after Elgin had left Hong-Kong on a brief visit to Calcutta,

My position is painful enough—all power taken from me—and nobody to do anything in China. I have not heard from Lord Clarendon for many months and am persuaded he is under Hammond's thumb and has little regard for me and (but for Lord Palmerston) would willingly have abandoned me. . . . I had rather have been recalled—or appointed to some other post than have been left here as I am. They have taken from me the Japanese mission without a shadow of reason—they have ordered me not to quit Hong-Kong tho' that may cost me my life—they have prohibited my correspondence with the High Mandarins in any of the ports—and this—and this when the Prime Minister declares I have deserved well of my country—and that country has endorsed my opinion and beyond all estimate strengthened his hands. It is very disgusting—and somewhat hard to bear and I often wish I were away from these scenes where I am only a surplusage and an incumbrance. . . . I have been throughout the victim whom every man turns upon—even that coarse liar George Borrow—for what have I got by the defence of the government and their avowed approval?—nothing but practical abandonment—heavy losses—cruel discouragement—associated with broken health—miserable anxiety—and hopeless dreamings.²

¹ Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 24 July 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS.1228).
² Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 1 August 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
It is difficult not to feel some sympathy with Bowring at the height of his misfortunes. Nevertheless it must be admitted that he had brought most of these misfortunes upon himself. As so often in past life, he had allowed his zeal and impetuousness to betray him into ill-considered actions which had involved him in serious trouble. He had been censored, publicly by his political opponents and privately even by most of those who supported the Government, for the unscrupulous use he had made of the *Arrow* incident and for the indiscretion of his attack on Canton. He had vigorously defended himself against these charges and had pointed to the result of the General Election as public justification for what he had done. But he had soon been forced to realize that it was Palmerston's popularity and not his own conduct which had brought about the Government's success. When Elgin replaced him as Plenipotentiary there was hardly a person in England or China who failed to welcome the decision.

For the rest of his life, Bowring and several of his sons—though by no means all of these, for his son Frederick thoroughly disapproved of Bowring's conduct¹—were to try to justify what had happened at Canton, putting the blame on the obstinacy and wrongheadedness of Yeh. But these efforts made little impression on public opinion. Later liberal writers who described the *Arrow* incident, such as John Morley, condemned Bowring in as strong terms as Cobden had done.² Even Parkes's biographer Lane-Poole, who looked at the incident from an Imperialist standpoint, found little good to say of Bowring himself, scorning him for the vacillations in his policy of firmness and for his unworthy attempts to shift the blame on to Parkes and Seymour. Several recent students of Far Eastern affairs at this period, such as W. C. Costin, have, indeed, reminded us that Bowring's "gun-boat diplomacy" had already been adopted by several of his predecessors, such as Pottinger and Davis, and that the decision to use force in China, as the only way to secure treaty revision, had the approval not only of the British Government but of the governments of the other two treaty powers, which were prepared to take part in the projected naval expedition to Peking early in

¹ See Bowring to Frederick Bowring, 4 October 1857 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1229).
1857. They have shown, moreover, that Bowring’s attitude to the Chinese was usually far more enlightened than that of most of his contemporaries in the Far East and have provided evidence that his conduct as Chief Superintendent of Trade and as Governor of Hong-Kong, if sometimes ill-advised and indiscreet, was in general worthy of one who professed liberal opinions. All this, indeed, is to his credit. But Bowring claimed to be guided by higher principles than expediency in his dealings with peoples of other lands. When Member for Bolton he had protested against the unscrupulous use of British power both in China and in India. By his own high standards, therefore, his conduct over the Arrow affair fell far short of what it ought to have been, just as his conduct in Greek Committee affairs had done many years earlier. In his private letters, as well as in his official dispatches, there is nothing to suggest that, peaceful methods having failed, he ever hesitated to use violent means if this would further the greater ends he had in view. Even his constant protests to Clarendon and Elgin that he did not want to see war in China, came only after events at Canton had gone wrong.

If the attack on Canton had succeeded, if Yeh had surrendered and Bowring had entered the city in triumph, there is no reason to doubt that he would have regarded this as a great achievement—greater than the Treaty at Bangkok—and he would have gone on to the Peiho and Japan even less likely to question the moral justification of the methods of “gunboat diplomacy” he had adopted, conscious only that the great purpose of opening up the Far East to European trade justified methods which his fellow members of the Peace Society condemned. Unfortunately for Bowring, Yeh proved a much more resolute opponent than he had bargained for, and the actions he authorized after the Arrow incident led not to the fall of the Imperial Commissioner but to the replacement of Bowring himself.

On the return of Lord Elgin to the Far East from Calcutta in September 1857, Bowring’s duties as Plenipotentiary finally came to their end. But he remained in China for two more years as Governor of Hong-Kong and was a spectator of the many

1 See the account of Bowring’s colonial administration in G. B. Endacott, A History of Hong-Kong (London, 1958).
important events which took place during that period, including Elgin's final capture of Canton in December 1857 and the conclusion, six months later, of the Treaty of Tientsin, which obtained many of the commercial and diplomatic advances Bowring had advocated. In these events he was allowed to take no part, though he lost no opportunity of criticizing the many details of Elgin's policy of which he disapproved. His letters to Clarendon and to his son Edgar during this period, are full of jeremiads about the situation in China accompanied by constant bemoanings of his own "condemnation to uselessness" and frequent self-pitying references to his "heavy burden of domestic affliction and public adversity". "I scarcely knew", he wrote to Clarendon in December 1858, after a severe attack of fever, "whether I was not about to close my worldly accounts and follow my poor wife to the dark passages of death." 1

After his retirement on a pension and return to England in 1859, however, an astonishing change took place in Bowring's outlook on life, illustrated most graphically by his remarriage, in the following year, at the age of sixty-eight. Almost as if the Arrow affair and its aftermath had never happened, he resumed a lively interest in the many political and literary activities which had occupied his youth. He pursued such liberal measures as the enlargement of the suffrage, the reform of prison conditions and the extension of commercial treaties with as much energy as he had displayed before 1849 and he even attempted, though in vain, to regain a seat in Parliament. He travelled extensively on the continent and devoted considerable time to the development of commercial relations between various European governments and the remote kingdoms of the East, such as Siam and Hawaii. As late as the General Election of 1868, when his son Edgar successfully stood as liberal candidate for Exeter, he appeared on political platforms to uphold the radical causes for which he had campaigned during his life; and he continued, until his death in 1872, at the age of eighty, to take a keen interest in the events of the day. 2

1 Bowring to Clarendon, 9 December 1858 (MSS. Clar. Dep. C. 559).
2 For Bowring's last years, see L. B. Bowring, The Autobiographical Recollections of Sir John Bowring, 1877.