SIR JOHN BOWRING AND THE CHINESE AND SIAMESE COMMERCIAL TREATIES

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THE Bowring Papers, now in the possession of the John Rylands Library,¹ contain the correspondence of Sir John Bowring with members of his family during the period of his administration in China. This is a correspondence which throws considerable light on Bowring's policy in the Far East and, together with his private letters to the Earl of Clarendon (now in the Clarendon Deposit at the Bodleian Library), enables us to trace its course in far greater detail than was possible when only the official dispatches were available. Undoubtedly the most important letters in this collection are those which cover the months following the famous Arrow incident at Canton in October 1856 and leading to the second China war. But the files for the earlier years are scarcely less interesting, as they make it clear that the arrogance and impulsiveness which accompanied Bowring's zeal and were to betray him into disastrous actions in 1856 had already got him into difficulties before that date. It is this period, extending from Bowring's arrival in China as British Plenipotentiary and Chief Superintendent of Trade in April 1854, until the eve of the crisis at Canton, which the present article examines.

It is not necessary here to describe Bowring's career as a radical politician in England, for this has already been done in an earlier article.² It may be recalled, however, that Bowring came out to the Far East full of zeal for the cause of Free Trade, which he had enthusiastically supported during his years as a member of parliament, and determined to open China to the benefits of western commercial civilization. This zeal had been frustrated during his first years in the East as Consul at Canton, for the Chinese authorities had rejected his advances with an

¹ Rylands English MSS. 1228-34.
arrogance which Bowring, a vain and conceited man, had been unable to forgive. But his ardour for opening up China had never declined and when, during a period of leave in England, he was appointed by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon, to succeed Sir George Bonham as H.M. Plenipotentiary in the Far East, he lost no time in informing his political and commercial acquaintances that he intended to pursue a much more energetic policy than his predecessor had done.

The situation which Bowring inherited in China was a difficult one. By the treaty of Nanking, concluded between the British Plenipotentiary and Chinese Imperial Commissioners after the first China war, five treaty ports, including Canton, which had previously held the monopoly of western trade, had been officially opened to European merchants. But in spite of this treaty, the local mandarins at Canton, who regarded all westerners as barbarians, had 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, by Bonham and his predecessors to improve the situation had failed and efforts to get into direct contact with the Emperor at Peking had been equally unsuccessful, as the Imperial authorities insisted that all communications with the Celestial Throne should be made through the Canton High Commissioner.1

The position of European merchants in China had been made even more precarious since 1851 by the outbreak of civil war. In that year an army of religious fanatics, calling themselves the Taipings after their leader, who claimed to be the Christian Holy Ghost, had risen against the Emperor and set up an independent government of their own. By 1854 these rebels had succeeded in gaining control over large parts of the country,

1 For the earlier 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 despatches in the Foreign Office records.
including the city of Nanking and the Chinese section of Shanghai, the most prosperous of the treaty ports. Some foreign observers looked to these rebels as the future rulers of a reformed China, in particular those Europeans whose enthusiasm for missionary work persuaded them to see in the Taipings the instruments of God’s will for Christianizing the East. Many others, like Bowring himself, who had no respect for the rebels, feared the breakdown of all ordered government, endangering the trade of Shanghai and the other treaty ports and making it impossible to improve relations with the Chinese.

But uncertainty about the future fortunes of China was not allowed to divert Bowring from his determination to carry out an energetic policy. A few days after his arrival at Hong Kong, where the Plenipotentiary had his headquarters, he held discussions with the American Commissioner, McLane, and with the French Commissioner, de Bourboulon, upon the means of achieving joint treaty revision. This policy had already been sanctioned by Lord Clarendon, who in his first dispatch to Bowring had drawn attention to the right of the British after twelve years to secure a revision of the Treaty of Nanking and had instructed him, in co-operation with the American and French Ministers, whose governments also possessed treaty rights, to press for general commercial access into China.¹ A week after these discussions, Bowring wrote to Yeh-Co-Ming, the Imperial Commissioner at Canton, reviewing past grievances and asking for an interview within the walls of the forbidden city. The long and unsatisfactory exchange of letters which followed this request need not be described here for Yeh showed himself completely intransigent in his attitude to the Plenipotentiary.² By the end of May Bowring, who had been instructed by Clarendon to act cautiously over Canton, decided to shelve the city question for the time being. He did not, however, forget Yeh’s unfriendly attitude; “it is hard to get on with these stubborn Mandarins”, he wrote to Edmund Hammond

¹ Clarendon to Bowring, 13 February 1854 (Foreign Office Papers 17/210, Public Record Office).
² See Correspondence relative to Entrance into Canton, 1850-1855. P. P. 1857, XII, 19 ff.
at the Foreign Office, "and though stiff they are as subtle as otters. Before we end I am afraid we shall have to employ something harder than brain bullets." 1

On 25 May Bowring, accompanied by Admiral Stirling, the naval commander in the Far East, set sail for the north on board H.M.S. Winchester. The outbreak of war with Russia had occurred whilst he was on his way to Hong-Kong and his imagination was filled with visions of swift and far reaching achievements. "Our first object", he wrote to his son Edgar, "is the capture of the Russian fleet, our second the mission to Japan." 2

Finding, however, that the Russian fleet was not in Chinese waters and that the need to keep ships close to the Chinese coast, in case the Russians should appear, took away all immediate prospects of a commercial treaty with the Japanese, he went ashore, early in June, at Shanghai, where he had made arrangements to meet McLane. There he was confronted with a scene of considerable confusion, for the capture of the city by the rebels in the previous September had seriously interfered with the progress of trade. For several months normal customs house arrangements had completely broken down and though the Consul, Rutherford Alcock, had on his own initiative taken provisional bonds from the British merchants in lieu of the duties they were normally obliged to pay to the Chinese, much smuggling still continued to take place. In addition to this, the proximity of the fighting to the European settlement had brought about an increase in tension between the merchants and the rival Chinese forces and the Europeans had been obliged to form a militia to safeguard their property from attack. Bowring, seriously concerned lest the season's exports of tea and silk should be interrupted by the disturbances, lost no time in trying to set things in order. Although he had no sympathy with the rebels, he was anxious to ascertain the future prospects of the Taiping rebellion and he therefore sent a small expedition, led by his "Chinese secretary" Medhurst, up the Yangtze-Kiang to report on the political situation inland as well as on the prospects of trade. He also attempted, though in vain, to mediate

between the Imperial troops and the rebels and made it clear that he would allow no infringement of the neutrality of the Shanghai foreign settlement. Finally, in order to impress the legitimate Chinese authorities with the good faith of the treaty powers, he and McLane promised to secure the payment of the arrear duties in lieu of which both British and American merchants had given bonds to their consuls during the previous winter. Reinforced in their bargaining power by this promise, Bowring and McLane held a series of discussions with the local Chinese mandarins during June and early July and secured their agreement to a new customs system whereby a Foreign Inspectorate of Customs, consisting of one representative of each of the three treaty powers, was to be established to assist the Chinese authorities in the fair settlement and collection of duties. This Foreign Inspectorate, whose detailed operation had already been worked out by Alcock, started work on 12 July and in spite of the suspicion of the Chinese and the prolonged hostility of many of the European merchants, soon showed itself a great improvement on previous methods of customs control.¹

The complicated matter of the future collection of customs duties having been settled, Bowring and McLane next turned to the wider purposes of their visit. On 27 July they held the first of two conferences with Keih, the new Governor of Kianseu province, and in return for undertaking to make the merchants pay their arrear duties, obtained Keih's promise to convey to Peking the desire of the three powers to secure a revision of their treaty rights. Bowring was delighted with his swift progress. "If I go on making no serious blunder", he informed Edgar, "my old age will be crowned with the glory of having rendered services more important in the field of peace than the conqueror can effect in war."² Shortly, however, before his departure from Shanghai, the situation was drastically changed when Keih suddenly withdrew his offer to mediate and instructed the European ministers to take their grievances once again to the legitimate Chinese authority, the Imperial Commissioner at

¹ For details of the Foreign Inspectorate system see J. K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), i. 439 ff.
² Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 12 July 1854 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
Canton, declaring that he himself had no power to deal with the matter. Faced with this infuriating reverse, Bowring urged his colleagues to proceed at once with as strong a force as possible to the Peiho river in the north, leading to Teintsin and Peking, and there demand an audience with the Emperor. Both McLane and Admiral Stirling, however, were in favour of making one more attempt to persuade Yeh to co-operate with the treaty powers and it was eventually agreed to postpone any expedition to the Peiho until the autumn, after a final appeal to the Imperial Commissioner.¹

In spite of his disappointment with Keih, Bowring was, on the whole, well pleased with his work at Shanghai, particularly with the establishment of the Benthamite device of the Foreign Inspectorate of Customs. This satisfaction, however, was certainly not shared by the Shanghai merchants, for Bowring's determination that they should pay their arrear duties, as well as the full amount of all future duties, had aroused considerable resentment. The Shanghai Chamber of Commerce had always disputed the right of the Consul to assist the Chinese in the collection of their duties and the merchants had handed over their bonds to Alcock with very bad grace, arguing, with some reason, that it was very doubtful, during the disturbances, whether the money could ever reach the Imperial exchequer and declaring also that the Chinese had broken their side of the arrangement by failing to provide adequate protection for the foreign settlement. Their indignation was all the greater because they knew that Bonham had referred the question of the validity of the bonds taken by Alcock to the government at home and they believed that Bowring, in ordering them to pay, was exceeding his superintendancy powers. Into the difficult question of the validity of these bonds, about which Bowring himself, before his departure from England, had been unable to make up his mind, it is unnecessary to go.² Suffice it to say that the dispute was made worse by the high moral tone adopted by Bowring, who lost no opportunity of asserting the importance of his new position during his visit to Shanghai. Of his

¹ For full details of the various negotiations with Keih see Costin, op. cit. pp. 186 ff. ² The matter is discussed in Fairbank, op. cit. pp. 416 ff.
unpopularity with the merchants, he was, indeed, well aware. But he made no attempt to modify his policy and declared himself indifferent to being "the most hated man this side the cape", so long as the back duties, which the Shanghai merchants had already charged to their customers, were paid up and the undertaking he had given to the Chinese was carried out. At the same time he was apprehensive lest the government, which had not decided its attitude to the question at the time he had left England, should allow itself to be influenced by commercial interests, such as the East India and China Association, and reject the bonds. As he wrote to the Foreign Secretary in June, "Mr. McLane thoroughly concurs and his countrymen have all surrendered and consent to pay their duties. The Admiral is with us most cordially—and now, my dear Lord Clarendon, I wait with no small anxiety for your approval." 2

On 7 August 1854 Bowring set out on the Rattler on his return journey back to Hong-Kong. On his way south he broke his voyage at the other treaty ports, notably at Foo-Chow, where he overcame an attempt to make him enter the city by a door of insufficient honour and was received by the local mandarin with great deference. His sense of importance much bolstered up by this flattery, he arrived back at Hong-Kong more confident than ever of the wisdom of his policy at Shanghai, only to hear reports that Bonham, who favoured the cancellation of the arrear duties, had persuaded the Foreign Secretary in London to accept his views. These reports were confirmed when on 25 August a dispatch arrived from Clarendon instructing Bowring to return the bonds to the merchants on the grounds that the Chinese were responsible for their failure to collect their own duties during the disturbances and had omitted to give proper protection to the merchants. 3 Bowring was appalled by this dispatch which, he declared, had fallen on him "like a sentence of death". As he put it to Lord Clarendon:

The back duties were the key with which we should have opened the Yangtze-Kiang and carried all the influence which distrust had for some time destroyed.

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1 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 26 July 1854 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
2 Bowring to Clarendon, 19 June 1854 (MSS. Clarendon Deposit, C 19).
3 Clarendon to Bowring, 25 August 1854 (F.O. 17/211).
No mandarin will now look upon British merchants in any other light than men who will cheat if they can and the government in their view will be involved in the successful fraud... Still I shall do my best to give effect to the engagement I have entered into with the Chinese authorities, we shall proceed to adjudicate what I know we cannot enforce unless you should decide on undoing what has been done, which is perhaps more than I ought to expect. If you disapprove of my conduct I shall be no stumbling block in your way. That disapproval involves my withdrawal from this field—where a few days ago all was bright and hopeful—and where now all is uncertainty—confusion—perplexity.

It was in this mood of defiant resentment that on 15 September, after one more fruitless attempt to obtain an interview with Yeh, Bowring set off again to Shanghai to discuss the situation with Keih and the French and American ministers. There he found the merchants “absolutely furious” at his refusal, in spite of the government’s decision, to release them from their arrear duties and strongly determined to resist his efforts to make them pay. Some of the great firms, such as Dent, Beale and Co., were particularly indignant for these had consented, in July, to accept Bowring’s arbitration in the matter, believing his assurance that the final decision lay with him and the news that the government had repudiated the bonds convinced them that he had deliberately tried to deceive them. “I am abused by every foul name”, he wrote to Edgar, “Not a single merchant (except for Jardine)—not one has called upon me—they proclaim loudly that they will obtain my dismissal...” Faced with this weight of ill feeling even Bowring began to waver in his self confidence and he tried to persuade Clarendon that he would never have agreed to arbitrate over the arrear duties, if the merchants had not “entreated” him to accept the office of mediator.

The quarrel was still at its height when on 30 September Bowring, McLane and de Bourboulon held the first of two new conferences with Keih. The three western representatives had again been instructed by their governments to act in close cooperation and they lost no time in making their attitude clear to the Chinese Governor. They had tried in vain, they declared, to get Yeh to co-operate with them over the matter of treaty revision and they were now determined to sail to the Peiho

2 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 26 September 1854 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
without delay. They could not, they added, discuss the matter of arrear duties at present for new complications had arisen. In his reply Keih admitted that Yeh’s letter to Bowring, discussing the subject of treaty revision, was “a vague and unsatisfactory document” and he once again offered to make representations to Peking himself now that the Imperial Commissioner had failed to act. But he warned the three ministers that their journey to the Peiho would be a useless one and pointed out that it would only embarrass his own efforts to communicate with the Imperial court. Bowring and McLane, however, were no longer willing to be put off by promises. On 3 October they informed Keih that they intended to adhere to their original programme, only agreeing to postpone their departure for a few days to give the Chinese Governor time to notify the Emperor of their impending arrival. Bowring, at any rate, was full of confidence in his ability to handle the Imperial authorities better than Bonham and his other predecessors had done. “I am not without hope that you will hear from me under the date of Peking”, he wrote to Edgar, “this is quite upon the cards and if we get there, be assured we shall do something.”

In spite of Bowring’s optimism, the expedition which finally set sail from Shanghai on 10 October was a mere shadow of what had originally been planned. First, Admiral Stirling refused to provide Bowring with more than one ship—the steamer Rattler—for the Peiho, declaring that the rest of his small fleet was required to keep watch for the Russians. Then de Bourboulon, whose dislike of Bowring was as great as Bowring’s contempt for him, withdrew from the expedition on the excuse that he was unable to obtain a ship for his personal use. Only McLane had an adequate force at his command and it was fortunate for Bowring that his opinions coincided so closely with his own, or the plan to visit the Peiho might have been completely thwarted. With this small force Bowring and McLane anchored off the Taku forts, which guarded the entrance to the Peiho river, leading to Peking, on 15 October. For nearly three weeks, they waited there whilst emissaries were dispatched to Teintsin to inform the Imperial authorities of their arrival and

1 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 7 October 1854 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
the nature of their demands. Eventually, on 3 November, Bowring and McLane were received by an Imperial Commissioner in tents specially erected on the river bank and there they presented eighteen heads of a new treaty, including the extension of trading facilities, the accrediting of a resident minister at Peking, the legalization of opium, and the settlement of outstanding grievances, including the Canton city question. It was all, however, of no avail. The Chinese commissioner behaved with marked civility but declared himself quite unable to present the demands of the ministers to the Emperor and appeared impervious to hints that the treaty powers might secure a better response from the Taiping rebels. With insufficient means to enforce their demands there was nothing for Bowring and McLane to do except to return empty handed to Shanghai, as devoid of success as Keih had foretold they would be. Naturally Bowring was crestfallen with his failure but he consoled himself by blaming the Chinese and Admiral Stirling rather than McLane and himself for the setback he had received. As he assured his son Edgar,

At all events I have cleared much rubbish away, and have enabled ‘my masters’ to see pretty clearly the state of things. They will, I hope, see that I have spared no personal exertions nor hesitated in incurring any personal risks. . . . So completely and harmoniously has everything been managed that we have been spared any real humiliation though I have not been able to bring my fair contribution to the common object. What I could have done without the assistance of the United States Commissioner I know not. . . .

After a brief stay at Shanghai, where Bowring and McLane gave Keih an account of their experiences at the Peiho, the former set off on his return to Hong-Kong and by 25 November he was back with his family at Government House. There he received confirmation of reports that during his absence at the Peiho Admiral Stirling had visited Japan and, following the precedent of the American Commodore Perry in the previous year, had signed a commercial treaty. Bowring was furious at this news, not only because Stirling had successfully invaded what he considered his own legitimate field of action but because he believed that the Admiral had deliberately planned to exclude him from the visit to Japan by pretending that his efforts were concentrated on the destruction of the Russian fleet. "Little

1 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 9 November 1854 (ibid.).
did I dream when I went to the Peiho so shabbily accompanied ", he complained to Clarendon, "that the fleet was slumbering and the Admiral diplomatising in Japan." Bitterly resentful at his treatment, Bowring now added Stirling to the list of those, such as Bonham and the Shanghai merchants, who were "stealing a march" upon him and undermining his efforts in the East. He is not "the sort of naval authority wanted in China", he wrote to Clarendon in one of his many outbursts against Stirling, assuring the Foreign Secretary that the terms of the agreement he himself would have obtained with Japan would have been far more advantageous to British commerce than the Admiral's "bad treaty".

After his failure at the Peiho, his humiliation by Stirling and his deadlock with the Shanghai merchants, Bowring was greatly in need of an opportunity to vindicate himself. It is not, therefore, surprising that he reacted with energy when, in December, there arrived an appeal from the proud Yeh, asking for assistance against the Taiping rebels, who were threatening Canton. Taking advantage of the presence of a number of Stirling's ships, Bowring set sail at once and by 15 December had arrived at the Canton factories, ostensibly to protect British interests but, at the same time, full of hope that a triumphant entry into the city was at last about to be made. Once again, however, his ambition to end the city question was thwarted, for Yeh showed himself as inflexible as ever and Bowring was obliged to return to Hong-Kong with no more effective means of salvaging his pride than by assuring the Imperial Commissioner that he could have forced his way into the city. "I am exhausting patience with these stubborn mandarins", he complained to Edgar, "pressed and perplexed as they are they had rather let the city be devastated and destroyed by their own savage people than meet the friendly hands I have stretched out to them—that being the hand of a 'foreign barbarian'."

Whilst Bowring was attempting, without much success, to carry out a forward policy in China, his conduct over the Shanghai

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3 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 25 December 1854 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
duties question was giving the government at home considerable embarrassment. His dispatches and private letters accusing Bonham of having misled the Foreign Office into cancelling the arrear duties had been very coldly received. "Bowring seems quite mad", wrote Hammond to the Foreign Secretary in November, "and he has taken the line of other madmen in fancying other people are his enemies. Would it not be as well that you should let him know that his abuse of Bonham is misplaced, insomuch as the Law Officers' opinion... was the ground on which the decision that the bonds should not be enforced was taken?" ¹ Even more exasperating than Bowring's attitude to Bonham was his declared intention of forcing the recalcitrant merchants to pay their arrear duties in direct defiance of the instructions of the government. The news of this decision aroused a considerable outcry against Bowring in commercial circles and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, which a year earlier had warmly praised his appointment, now joined with the East India and China Association in demanding his immediate recall. Faced with this storm of indignation, Clarendon sent Bowring a strongly worded dispatch, reprimanding his "wilful and ill advised conduct" in acting against his own government's instructions and expressly forbidding him to make any future promise to the Chinese or to the American Commissioner about the payment of arrear duties.² The Foreign Secretary, however, in spite of his astonishment at Bowring's disobedience, was unwilling to remove him from his post. Such action would not only offend the radicals, many of whom strongly supported Bowring's attempt to control the exploitation of the Chinese, it would also seriously interrupt the government's policy of securing a revision of the treaty of Nanking, a policy which Bowring had pursued with ardour, if not so far with success. Moreover Clarendon still possessed some personal affection for Bowring, whom he had known for over twenty years, and perhaps privately felt some sympathy with his views on the arrear duties question. As he admitted to Edward Ellice,

I ought, if I had done my duty to have recalled him immediately but, like yourself, I have a weakness for Bowring and I did not even notice a sort of hypothetical

² Clarendon to Bowring, 9 November 1854 (F.O. 97/100).
resignation he sent me. I wrote to him privately with much kindness pointing out the scrape I should be in if I abided by his foolish decision and suggesting to him to get out of his mess as quickly and as gracefully as he could, hoping that with a little less rashness and activity he might still fulfil the expectations that the government and his friends entertained when he left England.¹

The peremptory dispatch of November 1854 and the private letter, couched in friendly terms, which followed it, did not fail to make some impression upon Bowring. “I own that in my trouble, torment and anxiety—I may have been betrayed into expressions I should not be willing to justify”, he admitted to Clarendon, “your reference to ancient friendships is very touching to me and the sharpness of your reproof has fallen like acqua fortis upon a sore and sadly susceptible place.”² But it was, nevertheless, very grudgingly that he gave up his uncompromising policy at Shanghai, particularly as this involved so much personal loss of face before both the merchants and the Chinese authorities. He urged Clarendon, in vain, to allow the papers dealing with the arrear duties affair to be laid before Parliament (where, in fact, questions were asked on behalf of the merchants’ associations during the 1855 session)³ and warned the Foreign Secretary of the difficulties which would occur when the Chinese realized that they were never to receive their payments. He wrote indignant letters to Cobden, and other political friends, assuring them that the merchant associations in England had been “grossly misinformed as to the facts” and prophesying a serious setback to British trade in China unless “an honest assessment of the claims of the Chinese” was made.⁴ At the same time his sons Edgar and Lewin wrote letters to The Times and other newspapers, protesting against the attacks on their father’s honour and personal character by the supporters of the merchants and demanding a full enquiry into the whole arrear duties affair.⁵ It was all, however, of no

¹ Clarendon to Ellice, 17 December 1854. Ellice MSS. (National Library of Scotland), series No. 43.
³ Parliamentary Debates, 3rd ser., cxxvi, 1512-13 (Commons, 19 February 1855); cxxvii, 1243-7 (Commons, 27 March 1855).
⁴ Bowring to Cobden, 15 January and 26 February 1855 (Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 43669, fol. 11-14).
⁵ See Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 26 May 1855 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
avail for, whilst the war with Russia in the Crimea continued, public opinion was almost indifferent to events in the Far East and few political leaders were disposed to take Bowring's warnings about Chinese hostility very seriously when, by his own admission, trade at Shanghai continued to increase in spite of the duties dispute and the civil war. As Cobden pointed out in a frank letter to Bowring in April 1855,  

"You are, I fear, engaged in a struggle where the long odds are against you. For, independent of your immediate opponents, who are sharp and unscrupulous practitioners, you have to contend against the worse than vis inertia at home—the patriotic determination not to allow that Englishmen can be in the wrong when brought into collision with other nations... It may be a question whether the most chivalrous love of justice requires that you should resist the decision of your chief when the probable result may be your own martyrdom and nothing besides."  

These were hard words but they made it quite clear that it was impossible for Bowring to oppose the government's ruling without sacrificing himself. And this was a step, which, in spite of his threats of resignation, he was not prepared to take, particularly as he still regarded it as his chief mission to open the markets of China to British trade. Although his years at Canton and, more recently, his experience at Shanghai had given him abundant evidence of the unscrupulous practices frequently adopted by European merchants in dealing with oriental people, ignorant of the ways of the west, he never doubted that, properly regulated, this trade would yet be an immense benefit to the Chinese, as well as to British commercial interests in the Far East.  

The failure of Bowring's and McLane's attempt to persuade the Chinese to agree to a revision of the treaty of Nanking brought about a deadlock in Far Eastern affairs. It was clear that if the Chinese authorities were to be made to act, some show of force would again be necessary. In Bowring's opinion a naval demonstration at the mouth of the Peiho would induce the Emperor to grant the treaty powers a proper reception at Peking, and similar determination at Canton would force the Imperial Commissioner, Yeh, to come to terms.  

1 Cobden to Bowring, 8 April 1855 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1230).  
any rate whilst war with Russia continued. In November 1854 Clarendon instructed Bowring to “remain a quiet observer” of the events which were going on around him in China, abstaining, at all costs from raising questions which might make a recourse to violence necessary. ¹

Faced with the unwillingness of the government to provide him with the means of forcing treaty revision upon the Chinese, Bowring began to look around for fresh fields of action in which he might recover his lowered prestige and turned his attention to the prospects of obtaining commercial treaties with other Far Eastern lands. Since his arrival at Hong-Kong in April 1854, he had had no opportunity for such visits. The success of Admiral Stirling, however, in securing his treaty with Japan had made a considerable impression upon him and he was determined not to allow an “interloper”, like the Admiral, to invade his diplomatic provinces a second time. Moreover, he was impatient to see as many oriental countries as possible, not only in order to open them up to the commerce of the west but also to satisfy his own life-long passion for collecting information about little known parts of the world. After some hesitation, therefore, at leaving his headquarters at Hong-Kong, whilst the civil war was still raging on the nearby mainland, he decided to set out on a commercial mission to Siam, with which a treaty, granting very limited rights of trade, had existed since 1826. For several years he had been in regular correspondence with the English-speaking Siamese king, Mongkut, a remarkable man who had a considerable interest in all matters to do with the civilized western world, and in August 1854 he had received at Hong-Kong two Siamese envoys, bringing an invitation from the king to visit his country. ² Bowring was, indeed, well aware of the difficulties which might attend such a mission. There were many people in Siam, who regarded any contact with “western barbarians” with as much suspicion as did the Chinese and there was more evidence that these “hostile influences” were increasing. As recently as 1850, for example, Sir James

¹ Clarendon to Bowring, 24 January 1855 (F.O. 17/224).
² See Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 30 September 1854 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
Brooke, the Rajah of Sarawak, had been prevented from visiting Bangkok by a bar laid across the river. On the other hand, the recent occupation of Burma by the British had made a considerable impression upon the Siamese and the respect of the King of Siam for the learned men of Europe held out hopes that Bowring, with his literary reputation, might succeed where more experienced diplomatists had failed.

Bearing in mind, therefore, the hazards which confronted him, Bowring set sail for Siam on 15 March 1855 on board H.M.S. Rattler, escorted by H.M.S. Grecian. He was accompanied by his eldest son, John (who was a partner in the important commercial house of Jardine Matheson and Co.), and by the young Consul of Amoy, Harry Parkes, as secretary to the mission. Parkes had already had an astonishingly varied career in China. Whilst still in his teens he had been present at the signing of the treaty of Nanking in 1842 and he had since served in almost every one of the five treaty ports. As interpreter at Canton he had served briefly under Bowring during 1852–3 and had earned his high regard by his industry in preparing a report on the coolie emigration scandal for the Foreign Office. In 1853 he had been appointed vice-Consul at Canton on Clarendon's personal recommendation and a year later the Foreign Secretary had promoted him to the consulship at Amoy, where he had the best opportunity of observing the conditions of coolie emigration. A man of strong personality and iron determination, he was an ideal person to take on the Siamese expedition and was responsible for much of the hard work which awaited the mission at Bangkok.¹

The details of this mission are recorded in a diary, started by Bowring on 24 March, the day of his arrival in the Bay of Siam and included in an account of The Kingdom and People of Siam which he wrote after his return to China.² Sending Parkes and his son John to the mainland to ascertain the attitude of the Siamese, Bowring himself remained on board the Rattler, where

¹ For Parkes's career see S. Lane-Poole, Life of Sir Harry Parkes (London, 1894).
² J. Bowring, The Kingdom and People of Siam (London, 1857), ii. 248 ff. Parkes's account of the expedition to Bangkok is preserved in F.O. 17/229.
he received a letter of greeting from the king and several boatloads of provisions for the crews. Six days later Parkes and Bowring's son returned with the report that the Siamese government were prepared to allow the visitors to land but that some disagreement had arisen as to the exact manner in which they should be welcomed at court. Parkes, however, had insisted that H.M. Plenipotentiary and his suite should be allowed to wear their swords and should be received with no less dignity than had been accorded to the ambassadors of Louis XIV, two hundred years earlier, and the Siamese had finally agreed to accept these conditions. The matter of etiquette having been settled, Bowring came on shore at Paknam on 3 April and there he was welcomed by the king's chief Minister, the Phra Kalaham, to the accompaniment of a salute of twenty-one guns from the Rattler. After a short conversation "limited to generalia", Bowring and his suite boarded the royal barges and were conveyed up the river to the English factory at Bangkok, followed at a distance by the Rattler, which, to the alarm of the inhabitants, again insisted on firing a twenty-one gun salute. Next evening, after a day spent sight-seeing in the city, Bowring paid his first visit to the king. As he recorded in his diary:

His reception of me was very gracious and I sat opposite His Majesty only a table being between us. . . . An amicable conversation took place which lasted some time, after which Mr. Parkes and Mr. Bowring were sent for and seated in chairs opposite the King. He asked them questions about their own history and position . . . I urged the King that my public reception should take place without delay so that these gentlemen might be officially . . . allowed to discuss matters connected with the treaty. . . .

The preliminary courtesies over, Bowring and his staff got down to examining the details of the proposed new treaty with the Phra Kalaham, and other leading ministers. It soon became clear that, in spite of the constant professions of friendliness towards the English visitors, it was going to be difficult to get the Siamese to act. According to the Phra Kalaham, fear of hostile reaction by the people of Cochin-China, who would declare that the Siamese "had yielded to the British", was responsible for the delay. In Bowring's opinion, however, it was the unwillingness to sacrifice lucrative monopolies, from

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1 The Kingdom and People of Siam, ii. 270-1.
which the king and many of the nobles made great profits, which was the real motive behind the evasiveness of the Siamese Government. " I fear in all a system of do-little ", he confided to his diary, " if what I can obtain be not worth the visit, I shall put off the treaty altogether and consider this visit one of courtesy. . . . The King is a man, no doubt, wonderfully self-instructed but that he should appreciate the great truths of political science can hardly be expected." The crisis came on 11 April when after three days of inconclusive discussion Bowring refused to attend any more ceremonies until a settlement was reached and threatened to bring up the *Rattler* to the neighbourhood of the royal palace. The effect of this change of tone was instantaneous; the Siamese were well aware of the significance of the warship before their capital and wild rumours were already circulating in Bangkok that the sailors had seized a great many women and were holding them as hostages on board ship. By that same evening the main articles of the treaty had been arranged on terms extremely favourable to the British, even the smallest objection of the Siamese negotiators being overruled " lest the exhibition of want of firmness might prejudice the whole affair ". A week later, on 18 April, a comprehensive treaty of friendship and commerce between Great Britain and Siam was formally signed to the accompaniment of another twenty-one gun salute from the *Rattler*. Bowring was immensely relieved. " The day has to me been a delightful one ", he recorded in his diary, " and I hope it will prove pregnant with many blessings. " He might indeed feel pleased with his success, for the treaty, which had been signed, was a considerable improvement on its predecessor, permitting British subjects to trade in all the seaports of Siam, legalizing the duty free import of opium and setting up consular jurisdiction at Bangkok with wide extra-territorial powers—securing, in fact, most of those advantages, which the British found so difficult to obtain in China.

The main purpose of his mission achieved, Bowring was ready to participate fully in the ceremonies prepared in his honour and for several exhausting days his time was taken up with visiting the temples, attending sumptuous dinners and

1 Ibid. ii. 280. 2 Ibid. ii. 324.
watching performances of dancing and mime. The climax was reached on 16 April, when the visitors were received by the king and his whole court in a royal audience which lost nothing in barbaric splendour. The pillars of the great hall were decorated with portraits of the queens of England and Portugal, of the Pope, and of the Emperor of China, together with several lithographs of the Great Exhibition of 1851. As Bowring wrote to Lord Clarendon,

I felt proudly, I own, when amidst hundreds of nobles all in grand costume—all with their faces in the dust—I walked erect in the centre at the head of my suite—and had no degradation whatever imposed upon me—the representative of the Queen of England. Of the universal crawling prostration of everybody in the King's presence I can give you no idea—every man, woman and child—however exalted their rank—became a quadruped.¹

At last came the time for departure and on 24 April Bowring had a final audience with the king, at which, with many protests of mutual friendship, presents were given and received. For the king and his brother, the "second king", these included models and machines (brought out by Bowring from England and stored at Singapore), to add to their already vast collection of mechanical instruments. For Bowring and his wife there were "some specimens of silver ware of Siam ornamented with gold" together with hairs from the tail of the sacred white elephant and two live elephants, which Bowring was obliged to leave in Siam. The Queen of England received a gold box containing the king's royal letter "written in Siamese in sheets of gold and in English by his own hand".² A key to the box was delivered to Parkes, who was returning home immediately for the ratification of the treaty. Next day, after a final letter of farewell from the king, the Rattler, its deck crowded with presents and food, set sail from Paknam on the journey back to China.

The mission had been a triumphant success and Bowring was highly elated with his achievement. "I feel myself one of the happiest of men", he wrote to Clarendon, from the deck of the Rattler, "I most cordially anticipate immense benefits to my country and to mankind—and to the oppressed people of Siam especially—from the emancipation of so large, productive and

¹ Bowring to Clarendon, 19 April 1855 (MSS. Clar. Dep. C 37).
² The Kingdom and People of Siam, ii. 334,
promising a portion of the oriental world. And I am really amazed at my own success which once or twice seemed almost hopeless.” At the same time he was well aware that it was fear of the warship and apprehension lest Siam, like Burma, should be annexed to the British Crown, which had enabled him to overcome all obstacles. “I ascertained there was the greatest anxiety that the Rattler should leave Bangkok”, he assured the Foreign Secretary. “I told them she should leave instantly after the signature of the treaty but not a moment before and that a day’s delay would certainly keep her another fortnight, perhaps a month.”  

No less gratifying than the treaty itself was the good fortune which had placed the opportunity for making it in Bowring’s hands so soon after Stirling’s achievement in Japan and the unfortunate dispute over the Shanghai arrear duties. As he wrote to Edgar,

What war ever won a better Treaty than I have obtained at no expense and solely by peace? What will the Manchester Gentlemen and the East India and China Association now say, who have so violently demanded my recall as unfit to have charge of the commercial interests of my country? . . . I expect there will be an enormous trade with China. In fact the Treaty is so complete a revolution that people are amazed at my prompt success—but it was done by promptitude and energy.  

Bowring never returned to Siam, though he kept up a regular correspondence with King Mongkut and, after his retirement, acted as Envoy Extraordinary for the Siamese government in Europe. Parkes, however, revisited the country in the following year with the ratification of the treaty and authority to negotiate various supplementary articles connected with the trade. He brought with him a letter from the queen and a large number of presents but most of these were unfortunately lost when the ship carrying them to Bangkok sunk in a gale. The king, however, did not appear to be greatly disturbed by this disaster and the negotiations for the supplementary treaty proceeded smoothly, the final agreement being signed on 13 May 1856.  

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1 Bowring to Clarendon, 25 April 1855 (MSS. Clar. Dep. C 37). A Siamese called “Captain Dick” remarked to Bowring at Paknam, “Siamese country will belong to English some day.” This seems to have been the sentiment of most of the inhabitants of Siam from the king downwards.

2 Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 23 April 1855 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).

3 Lane-Poole, i. 210 ff. The treaty survived virtually unchanged until the end of the nineteenth century.
The Siamese treaty, like the Japanese treaty of the previous year, was welcomed by the British government and by the commercial interests in Britain. But the clauses facilitating the free importation of opium into Siam drew strong protests from Lord Shaftesbury and other leaders of the anti-opium movement, who accused Bowring of betraying his former principles on the subject. Of opium smuggling, Bowring at the time he was a member of parliament had indeed been a strong critic. Since his arrival in the Far East, however, he had considerably modified his views because he realized the extreme difficulty of controlling the traffic. "It is idle to think of stopping the trade", he wrote to Clarendon, a few months after his return from Siam, "even if three or four million of Indian revenue did not depend on it but I will, whenever I have the power, press the legalisation of opium as the only means of control. The question gives me infinite trouble—but I make it a rule to keep it out of the official field—and to minimize the evil which I cannot cure."  

The opium question was certainly one of peculiar embarrassment to Bowring because of his close connections with the great firm of Jardine Matheson and Co., who were the largest dealers in opium in the Far East. His eldest son, John, was a partner in Jardine Matheson's and Bowring himself had personal obligations to the firm, which acted as his bankers in China, advanced him loans during years of penury after 1848 and alone among the great merchant houses, supported his arrear duties policy at Shanghai. Bowring's enemies were well aware of the circumstances which obliged him, as he put it, to "deal daintily" with Jardine Matheson and Co. During the Shanghai duties dispute some of the younger merchants had written "a violent diatribe" to Palmerston accusing Bowring of being influenced by the attitude of Jardine Matheson's who, they declared, had interests hostile to the rest of the commercial community. The protests of Lord Shaftesbury now aroused Bowring to indignation; "the

1 See Shaftesbury to Clarendon, 1 August 1855 (MSS. Clar. Dep. C 37).
2 Bowring to Clarendon, 4 October 1855 (ibid.).
3 Bowring's business correspondence with Jardine Matheson and Co. is preserved in the Jardine Matheson Papers at the Cambridge University Library.
4 See Bowring to Frederick Bowring, 23 April 1853 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1229).
5 See Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 7 June 1855 (Rylands Eng. MS. 1228).
reiterated statement that the importation of opium is a breach of treaty he repeats with pertinacious violence”, he complained to Edgar, “and accuses me of inducing the King of Siam to admit it than which nothing can be more untrue. ‘Blasphemy’, ‘robbery’, ‘efforts to destroy both body and soul’ are among the accusations of this most religious peer.” ¹ Similar charges of having sold himself to opium merchants were again to be made against Bowring after the outbreak of war at Canton over the Arrow affair.

In spite of the controversy over the opium clauses, the commercial mission to Siam was undoubtedly the most successful of Bowring’s ventures during his administration in the Far East. The treaty, however, never obtained for him the acclaim which he considered his due, nor obliterated the unpopularity his arrear duties policy had earned him. The merchants at Shanghai and Hong-Kong had prophesied his failure in Siam and they were none too pleased when he returned with the treaty in his possession. Many people, indeed, observed that he arrived back at Hong-Kong more than ever full of the importance of his position and completely reassured that his forward policy in the Far East was correct. Whilst he was still at Bangkok he had, in fact, urged the Foreign Secretary to allow him to “open China”, as he had opened Siam, with “the instruments of peace” in his hand but with “a co-operative naval force” under his command.² Many people, moreover, believed that the success of the mission was due to the tact and determination of Parkes rather than to the diplomacy of Bowring. Thus Parkes’s wife, who accompanied her husband to Siam on his second visit, noted in her diary that “one of the Siamese said that they did not care for the rest, meaning Sir John Bowring and his suite, but that they feared Mr. Parkes”,³ and this was certainly the view of Parkes’s biographer, Lane-Poole. Yet it was undoubtedly Bowring himself who made the greatest impression on the King of Siam, with his admiration for the learned men of Europe. Even Parkes (who had little reason to think well of Bowring at

¹ Bowring to Edgar Bowring, 1 January 1856 (ibid.).
² Bowring to Clarendon, 16 April 1855 (MSS. Clar. Dep. C 37).
³ Lane-Poole, op. cit. i. 205.
the time), maintained in 1858 that the Siamese Treaty was "the best thing old Sir John ever did.".

Bowring had little opportunity to follow his success in Siam with enterprises of a similar nature. The cautious policy of the government, which was unwilling to risk a conflict in China so long as the war with Russia continued, made it impossible to seek treaty revision at Canton or the Peiho by the methods of gunboat diplomacy he had used at Bangkok and Admiral Stirling's refusal to provide ships for the voyage prevented him from undertaking commercial missions to less hostile parts of the Far East. Bowring, in fact, found himself virtually confined to Hong-Kong, where, with his usual energy, he turned his attention to reforming the internal affairs of the colony. After the conclusion of the Crimean War in 1856, however, the governments of Britain, France and the United States were willing to adopt a more aggressive policy in the Far East and preparations were made for a strong allied expedition to the Peiho in the Spring of 1857. But before these were completed a fresh quarrel between Bowring and Yeh at Canton had created an entirely new situation. With the Arrow affair and its aftermath, it is not the purpose of this article to deal. It is worth noting, however, that a conflict of this sort might well have occurred a year earlier, if clear instructions to avoid a clash with the Chinese had not then prevented Bowring from trying to settle accounts with the Canton High Commissioner by the threatening methods which had succeeded so well in Siam.