

Sir Robert Ho Tung

Public Figure, Private Man

May Holdsworth

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(Front cover)

A portrait of Sir Robert Ho Tung was painted by Sir Oswald Birley in 1949 for presentation to Jardine Matheson & Co. Eric Hotung subsequently commissioned a copy, which is reproduced on the cover of this book. The copy diverges from the original in its use of a different colour for the background. Photograph courtesy of Andrew Tse.

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Contents

Romanisation	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	viii
1. Longevity	1
2. A Beginning in the East	8
3. Compradore	27
4. Family	45
5. The Public Man	66
6. In Search of a Cause	89
7. Sons and Heirs	110
8. Riding the Storm	132
9. Link between East and West	152
Family Trees	175
Glossary of Chinese Names	177
Notes	180
Sources and Bibliography	194
Index	200

Preface

Sir Robert Ho Tung is a towering figure to many people in Hong Kong, invoked frequently in the press and on television as the first Chinese to live on the Peak, as the greatest philanthropist and the wealthiest man in Hong Kong in his day, the 'J.P. Morgan of the East', and, towards the end of his life, the 'Colony's Grand Old Man'.

When we speak of Hong Kong's birth and development as a marvel of British enterprise and Chinese industry we often forget that something else was created: a community of Eurasians who, as interpreters, compradores, and merchants, participated just as—if not more—keenly in that extraordinary journey from fishing village to gleaming city. Sir Robert, no less than several of his peers, owed his prosperity partly to the conjunction of historical moment, place, and opportunity,



Ho Tung as a young man

but also to his being Eurasian. Like many of his Eurasian peers, he had a good command of both Chinese and English. Of course he was identified—and he identified himself—as Chinese for most of his life; ‘no man amongst the Chinese has borne his part in local, commercial and social life with more conspicuous ability, or with greater credit to himself and his nationality than Mr. Ho Tung, J.P.’, as his entry in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hongkong, Shanghai, and Other Treaty Ports of China* claimed. Yet there is no doubt of the ease with which he straddled Chinese and European commercial traditions, or that he profited brilliantly from this facility. Today, of all the old Hong Kong Eurasian families from Anderson to Zimmern, the Ho and Hotung family remains the most renowned and the most compelling.

In his last will, Sir Robert entreated his children to be ‘diligent, do good and exhibit modesty and willingness and public spiritedness’, in short to follow ‘in the ways that have enabled me to establish my reputation and to build up my financial position from nothing’. His rags-to-riches story has often been told—in books and articles, and indeed by himself. Several memoirs were written and published by members of his family. A fuller picture is provided by Zheng Hongtai and Wong Siu Lun in their book *Xianggang dalao: He Dong*. Scrupulously researched from public sources and narrated in Chinese, this is the most comprehensive coverage of the life so far; it examines, in particular, Sir Robert’s spectacular commercial successes through the lens of Chinese family business networks and structures. What I offer here shifts the balance a little: if thin on business dealings and public benefactions, my account tries not merely to locate Sir Robert in his place and time but also to show glimpses of him within a social world of family, friends, and the mercantile and political elites of colonial Hong Kong, Great Britain, and China. He encountered a vast number of people in his long life; it became second nature to him to maintain links to most of them.

I believe this will be the first full-length biography in English. To write it I was privileged to have been given the run—all too brief, unfortunately—of a cache of letters and notes left by Sir Robert Ho Tung and then in the possession of his grandson Eric Hotung. When Eric commissioned me in 1997 to write a life of his grandfather, the initial sight of some of those papers made his offer utterly irresistible: at the time the higgledy-piggledy records were mouldering in tea chests in an unfurnished and damp though air-conditioned tenement storeroom in Hong Kong’s Wanchai; in a battered suitcase in one of Eric’s Mid-Levels apartments; and in a number of files in the basement of his house in McLean, Virginia, near Washington DC.

Sir Robert Ho Tung was nothing if not meticulous, and it is highly likely that business records and copies of correspondence were all carefully maintained. In

the pre-digital age, there was no question for Sir Robert's clerks and secretaries that original handwritten letters received would be kept, and carbon copies of outbound letters filed. The attrition of time and war has inevitably eroded many of these. I was not alone among researchers to find frustrating instances of missing pages in paper trails that simply petered out. However, what remained still ran to three or four chests of account books and about fifty standard-size files of letters and notes. While those papers consist mainly of business correspondence, minutes of board meetings, deeds and promissory notes, enough letters have survived to provide illuminating glimpses of the broad directions of Sir Robert's financial, political, and social ambitions; his relations with the colonial authorities of Hong Kong and London; his fastidious care of his own health; and the rather formal contacts between him and some of his children. These uncatalogued papers are referenced in the endnotes as 'Hotung Papers'.

There is, in addition, several years' correspondence between Sir Robert and his son Edward Sai-kim (known in the family circle as 'Eddie'). Through the 1930s and early 1940s, when Eddie looked after Sir Robert's business interests in Shanghai, father and son wrote to each other about property and financial matters nearly every day; at the end of each week a list of all the cables sent was typed out for the record.

A few diaries covering the years 1941, 1942, 1948, 1949, 1952, 1954, and 1956 have been saved. Written in Chinese and English, and frustrating for the biographer (though perhaps revealing of the subject), they are no more than records of appointments, sleeping patterns, diet, medication, and the performance of bodily functions; they give no hint of his emotions or state of mind. In fact, he rarely committed private feelings to paper; what he did express about his experiences or acquaintances were usually perfunctory remarks which added little to what was generally known.

Sometime after the late 1960s, Sir William Teeling made a start on a biography, probably invited to do so by Eric Hotung. According to his Wikipedia entry, Sir William (1903–1975) was an Irish writer, traveller, and Conservative member of parliament for Brighton. A strong supporter of Taiwan and friend of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, he was in Asia for extended periods and very likely visited Hong Kong. A fragment of his typescript remains among what I reference as 'Hotung Papers'. Sir William Teeling's account is marked by fluent writing and wit of presentation, but he clearly used only the material Eric had to hand at the time; it is journalistic in tone and far from finished.

Sir Robert himself made an attempt at writing his memoirs while waiting out the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in Macau; some of his typed notes are extant. He left details of his early schooling—before he enrolled in the Central

School—and the first years of what he called his ‘business career’. Had he completed the memoir, it would have been almost entirely about his public life, with a veil drawn over most personal details, including his parentage.

A biographer’s dearest wish, on the other hand, is to unearth more of the subject’s personal life than the public one (which would, in any case, be broadly known to anyone who cares to search for it), to excavate something surprising, intimate, dramatic, and perhaps even embarrassing or scandalous—provided, of course, that sources denied to previous biographers became available. My research has been less arduous, since Eric Hotung made free to me all the documents and family papers that have been preserved.

In 2010, the late Eric Peter Ho, Sir Robert Ho Tung’s great-nephew, said in the course of what he called his own ‘delving’ into his family’s past that it was a matter for regret that no one had yet published an authoritative biography of Sir Robert’s life and work:

This all the more so as two of his daughters, Irene Cheng and Jean Gittins, were no mean authors with the ability and the inclination to write. Furthermore, as he had been served by secretaries for a long time up until his death in 1956, and his own children’s accounts that their requests of, and proposals to, him had to be put in writing, there must be a wealth of material for a biographer to work on, especially as his principal residence, Idlewild, was not looted during the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong, from 1942 to 1945. His papers must be largely intact. Although I am most grateful to Sir Joseph Hotung [Sir Robert Ho Tung’s grandson; Edward Sai-kim’s younger son; Eric Hotung’s brother] for sharing with me the file he has assembled about his grandfather, we both realise this is only a minute part of the whole archive. Thus this pithy coverage of the most distinguished member of our clan is no more than the cobbling together of such available information, personal knowledge, and other bits and pieces I have been able to collect in the course of my family research.¹

I make no claim to having produced an authoritative biography, but I did have access to the ‘archive’ which, if not as intact or voluminous as E. P. Ho suspected, was still indispensable to me in my attempt to liberate Sir Robert Ho Tung out of the legend, so to speak, and, without diminishing him, to reveal the private man, with all his human frailties and contradictions, behind the public figure.

1

Longevity

A group photograph recalls the event. It is Monday 22 December 1952.¹ Seventy faces, including four of babes in arms, are caught in the frame. Here, seated in the centre, resplendent in silk robe and jacket, is the patriarch Sir Robert Ho Tung. He is undoubtedly of a great age, but the eyes peering out of the pale, emaciated face are still wonderfully bright. Around him are his sons, daughters, in-laws, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He is flanked by his two sons (Edward Sai-kim and Robert Shai-lai), two daughters-in-law (Hesta and Kitty), his eldest daughter Victoria, to his far right, and her husband, Lo Man-kam, to his far left.



This photograph commemorates Sir Robert Ho Tung's ninetieth birthday. As he recounted afterwards, those of his children and grandchildren who were not already in Hong Kong flew back from all over the world specially for the occasion: seven from England, three from New York, four from Los Angeles, four from Melbourne, and one from Taipei.

In preparation for this occasion, Victoria had counted a total of seventy-five family members. Five were missing from the family reunion and from the photograph, including his grandsons Eric and Joseph, unavoidably detained in the United States.

When the photographer had finished, the family group reassembled opposite the seated patriarch and bowed deeply before him. They should perhaps have dropped to their knees, on this his ninetieth birthday, but he had not wished for that. For days beforehand, an unceasing stream of congratulatory messages was delivered to his house, Idlewild, at 8 Seymour Road on Hong Kong Island—from Governor and Lady Grantham, the bishop of Hong Kong, the colonial secretary, Sir Arthur Morse of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, the Chinese members of the Executive and Legislative Councils, the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Po Leung Kuk, and hundreds of others. If he thought this the crowning moment of his life—a moment to savour the culmination of his efforts and achievements—he did not show it. Those luminous eyes merely lingered benignly on the gathering as a warm wave of affection and reverence washed over him.

People had been coming and going all day. Idlewild was decked with flowers, bunting, and fairy lights. In anticipation, his staff had alerted police traffic control of possible jams along Seymour Road. There were onlookers enough, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of Hong Kong's elite as callers arrived to offer their good wishes or leave their cards. As each car stopped at the gate, musicians stationed at the entrance struck up a tune to announce the new arrival. Nobody was allowed to leave without sampling the traditional refreshments of longevity buns, noodles, sweet soup, lotus seeds, and nuts. Servants, including several extra ones engaged for the day, hovered at the entrance and busied themselves in the kitchen. Guests milled about the covered garden at the back. It was such a crowd that two sittings for each meal had to be provided just for those in the house. To add to the hubbub and clatter, staccato bursts of firecrackers occasionally filled the air, as was only proper on a grand and auspicious occasion such as this.

Shadows were deepening on the flowers in their earthen pots before Sir Robert could leave the garden to go to his room for a rest. There was to be a great, festive Chinese dinner in the evening, though he himself would have none of the roast meats and suckling pig. For the good of his health, he rarely deviated from his diet of sour milk and boiled rice or noodles. That he had been spared death for so long was a wonder to him, for he never expected to reach his tenth decade. There was a time in his late forties when ill health confined him to bed for three whole years and his doctors gave him up for lost. His telegraphic address had been 'Longevity'

(later changed to 'Hotung Hongkong'), but he really thought the attainment of venerable old age, a blessing cherished by all Chinese, would elude him.

For such a notable occasion as the ninetieth birthday of Sir Robert Ho Tung, the initial preparations had been signally restrained. He wished to keep the event as quiet as possible, with no ostentatious display, and no expensive presents. So he informed his daughter-in-law Hesta by letter as early as September 1952 and all his children by a memo circulated in October. He would mark it only with his family, he said, and offered to pay passage for those members who were abroad.

This generous offer was warmly welcomed by his children. Victoria Lo, his eldest daughter, immediately telephoned her husband, Sir Man-kam Lo or M. K., as he was informally known, to tell him the splendid news. M. K. (then fifty-nine years old) sent a long letter of thanks the following day:

To my father-in-law who is one generation older than myself, I know that according to any Chinese standard of decorum it is improper for me to talk about my own old age, but I hope you will forgive me if I say that I have attained an age when to me there can be no greater joy than to be able to be with my children . . . Your generosity will enable Vic and myself to have a family reunion of our children and grandchildren in December, an event which was utterly beyond my dreams and expectations.²

Sir Robert's hope of a modest celebration was, however, a vain one; he was too prominent a figure in Hong Kong for his anniversary to pass without commemoration. In fact, the many public organisations which he supported had been collecting subscriptions for weeks. It was all his children could do to decline or return those laudatory scrolls, embroidered banners, carved ivory images, silver tripods, and other engraved objects that threatened to flow in to do him honour.

There was a beautiful scroll from three old friends from Jardine, Matheson & Company, however, which he did not have the heart to send back. It was addressed to him by 'David Keswick, W. J. Keswick and John Keswick, the three sons of the late Henry Keswick, the grandsons of the late William Keswick.' 'The association of Sir Robert with the Keswick family stretches over three generations,' the scroll reads, 'through the amazingly active life of a young man to the peaceful serenity of old age . . . It is the privilege of good friends to pay tribute to the sagacity, wisdom, understanding, energy and spirit which carried him and his family to distinction, fortune, benevolence, and high regard among his fellow men.'

Sir Robert wrote to John Keswick in grateful acknowledgement of this tribute:

I am deeply touched at this further demonstration of affectionate regard from your family—a regard which, I am proud to repeat, it has been my privilege to enjoy for over 60 years. To you in particular, I owe an old man's gratitude for a brimming cup of happiness.³

Indeed his cup was about to overflow, for Jardines wished to do more—marking his anniversary with the establishment of a 'Sir Robert Ho Tung Bursary' at the University of Hong Kong. John Keswick, on behalf of the 'Princely House,' wrote:

The members of Jardine Matheson & Co. Ltd are anxious to mark the auspicious occasion of your ninetieth birthday, and to offer some expression of the high regard and sincere esteem in which you are held by all of us.

To this end it is proposed, and we hope you will signify your assent, that a Bursary shall be established by the Firm in the Hongkong University to be known as 'The Sir Robert Ho Tung Bursary'.⁴

All these expressions of esteem could not go unacknowledged. He had already begun the tradition of making large charitable donations to mark his major anniversaries; in the next few days cheques would be sent to the Young Women's Christian Association, St John's Ambulance Brigade, and the Welfare League. And since it was hardly possible to ask all his well-wishers to dinner, they must be thanked by the presentation of a souvenir. Good Chinese manners required no less. The souvenir, Victoria proposed, could be a gold ornament in the shape of a peach—a Chinese symbol of longevity. It could be ordered in two sizes: a large one (five grams) for family members, and a smaller one (1.5 grams) for friends and acquaintances. A quotation from the goldsmith, she reported, would be based on the price for pure gold on the day of the order, plus a standard charge for the engraving. Sir Robert was happy to agree to this, and more than 500 gold ornaments in the form of pendants were struck. One side carried the Chinese character for 'longevity', the other was inscribed with the dates '1852–1952' and four words (*qiyi jinian*) which translated as 'souvenir of a century'. Sir Robert explained their significance to L. N. Shaw, an American friend who was presented with one:

According to old Chinese custom, when a person is over 80, ten years will be added to his age. Therefore, although I was only celebrating my 90th birthday, it meant that I was celebrating my 100th birthday.⁵

Nor did he forget Sir Winston Churchill, met in 1924, when he and Lady Ho Tung represented Hong Kong at the Wembley Empire Exhibition. Sir Winston's accumulation of honours and medals surpassed his own. When news that the queen had made Sir Winston a Knight of the Garter reached him in the spring of 1953,

Family

Some time before December 1894 Margaret Ho Tung came to a remarkable decision. She would give her blessing to a marriage between her husband and her cousin Clara Cheung Ching-yung. We cannot tell if there had been a struggle in Margaret's mind before; all we know is that by then she was no longer in any doubt. Too many barren years had elapsed and her husband should have a second wife. What was more, she had a suitable candidate in mind. How fortunate it was that Clara had come to Hong Kong, had been invited to visit, and had caught Ho Tung's eye! She was, indeed, very pretty and well mannered, and there was a look of intelligence about her fine eyes. Her antecedents, too, were unexceptionable. Also a Eurasian, Clara was born on 19 December 1875 the eldest of four children. Her father was Cheung Tak-fai, an employee of the Imperial Maritime Customs, first in Shanghai and later in Jiujiang, and her mother, surnamed Yeung, was the daughter of an American, G. B. Glover. According to Ho Tung's youngest daughter Florence Yeo, Clara's 'European blood was English and Scottish,' there having been an English grandfather, Thomas Lane, on her father's side to account for the genetic mix. Although Thomas Lane is known to have been in Hong Kong between 1843 and 1866, the line of descent is unclear. He might have had a Chinese mistress before marrying Maria Reynell, the daughter of an English mariner in Macau, in 1862. His legacy in Hong Kong—besides a mixed-race child and a son and daughter by Maria—is the general store Lane, Crawford & Co., which he established with a Scottish trader, Ninian Crawford, in 1850. Clara was thus a second-generation Eurasian. She might even have been a third-generation Eurasian, for, based on Eric Hotung's research into his family's 'blood ancestry,' one great-grandfather is said to have been 'Spanish-Portuguese'.¹

Clara was with her parents in both Shanghai and Jiujiang. Two of her siblings had died young. When she was eighteen, death struck again—this time it was her father. And it was because they were bringing his coffin back for burial in Hong Kong, his native place, that the Cheung family—Clara, her mother, and younger

brother—returned to the colony. There they called on their relations, including Margaret, who saw at once that Clara would make her husband an excellent second wife. In the circumstances, Margaret was all for being magnanimous, so when she canvassed the match with Clara's mother, she offered to welcome Clara not as her husband's concubine but as an 'equal wife', one with an implied higher status than a concubine. Margaret did not concern herself with the fact that, in China, a second wife brought into an existing marriage—even if deemed equal to the first wife by the family—was still a concubine in the eyes of the law. She wrote to her aunt to confirm this unusual arrangement:

Although we have not seen each other for a long time, you are often in my thoughts. I am now presuming on your affection and kindness to make my importunate and foolish request.

The institution of marriage has been considered important since antiquity. Empresses selected consorts for emperors from respectable women whose honour sprang from their observance of the Three Dependences and the Four Virtues. To the superior man, establishing his virtue is one of the Three Imperishable Qualities he cherishes. When virtue prevails, the family is harmonious and all things prosper.

Since ancient times, and in accordance with precedent, parents have been in charge of their children's marriages. A mother's right to choose her daughter's mate arises from her love of her offspring and her wish to ensure that her child is not ill-treated or forsaken. The dearest hope of parents is to see their children well settled in life.

We have countless historical examples of marriage being a reward for virtue. The *Yijing* compares the perfect union between man and woman with the auspicious harmony of the heavenly and earthly principles. Felicity in marriage is a providential gift, and it is Providence that directs us to our partners in life. We very much hope that your daughter will agree to become such a partner to my husband. In doing so, she will enjoy equal honours, without any distinction of status between us: she will be looked upon as a sister, and may Providence strike me down if she suffers any slight. I hope this vow convinces you of my good faith.

Yesterday we received news of your willingness to give your daughter in marriage to my husband. In case she is still uncertain, I write this letter to assure your daughter further of my earnestness and sincerity. I look forward to receiving good news from you soon, so that we may select an auspicious date for the wedding without delay.²

Margaret Mak Sau-ying herself had not long reached child-bearing age when she married Ho Tung thirteen years earlier. As one of a small circle of Eurasians, she had known the Ho family since she was quite young and it is highly probable that the two mothers made the match. Less socially integrated in those days

than now, Eurasians tended to marry among themselves. Sze evidently looked with favour upon the marriage, for with the untimely death of Margaret's mother, when Margaret was no more than twelve years old, Sze took the girl under her wing and into her house until the wedding.

Ho Tung and Margaret held a conventional ceremony and celebrated afterwards with a suitably elaborate banquet the cost of which was found somehow, despite Sze's losing streak at mah-jong two weeks before the event. The bride and bridegroom in their embroidered robes went down on their knees to serve tea to the older generation and performed enough kowtows 'to give them housemaid's knees,' as Sir Robert Ho Tung quipped at their golden wedding anniversary fifty years later.³ They had no expectations of romantic love—how could they have?—but they respected the obligations imposed by marriage.

They did, of course, expect to have children; no traditionally minded Chinese would have thought otherwise. Yet the years passed and Margaret did not become a mother. Still, failure to have a son need not be an irretrievable calamity, as convention had devised a solution. Ho Tung's younger brother, Ho Fook, duly fulfilled his part and gave his first son, five-year-old Ho Sai-wing (or Ho Wing), for adoption into the childless family. Tradition also sanctioned the practice of taking a concubine; in the Ho family the choice fell on a Chinese girl, Chau Yee-man, of whom little is known except that for several years she, too, proved infertile.

Ho Wing was sent to his father's alma mater, the Central School, and later served as compradore to the merchant house E. D. Sassoon & Company. Afterwards, guaranteed by his adoptive father to the tune of \$300,000, he became the compradore of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. But Margaret would make one more attempt, as we noted above, to satisfy what she regarded as the profoundest of human instincts and to help her husband have offspring of his own. She succeeded beyond her hopes, for Clara would produce no fewer than ten children.

It would not be quite accurate to say that Ho Tung took his new wife on honeymoon, but as a letter of reference from the consul-general of the United States indicates, he did make plans to travel a few months after his marriage:

I hereby certify that Mr Ho Tung is personally known to me and to be a merchant of high financial standing and good repute in the Colony of Hong Kong . . . he is desirous of making a tour through the United States . . . taking along with him his wife and his wife's cousin, Miss Cheung Ching-yung, who has in the past been a member of his family and who is to travel in the capacity of his wife's lady companion. I have to further state that I am also personally acquainted with Mrs Ho Tung and Miss Cheung Ching-yung and I am fully satisfied that this party of three are genuine tourists proceeding to Canada via the United States having no other interest whatever in view but a pleasure trip.⁴

Ho Tung was understandably sheepish about revealing Cheung Ching-yung's relationship to himself: they were, after all, embarking on a visit to a country where polygamy was banned. Yet he was to remain reticent for years, even though concubinage was not abolished in Hong Kong until 1971. In a will drawn up in 1913, Margaret was named as his 'widow' and Clara only his 'cousin-in-law'.

On return this *ménage à trois* lived in an atmosphere, as far as one can tell, that was calm and congenial. The Ho Tungs had long moved from their rooms above the office and now had a house at 1 Seymour Road, in a select district known as the Mid-Levels. This was at a time in Hong Kong when a man's social standing was directly correlated with the altitude of his house. Ho Tung (and his brothers) had now reached the halfway mark; by the turn of the century he would aspire to live on an even higher level, in the exclusive environs of the Peak.

There was no appearance of friction between the two wives, who addressed each other as 'cousin,' although Clara was always careful to give Margaret precedence. The marriage was not of her choosing, but it never occurred to Clara to do anything else but make the best of it. She had returned to Hong Kong from Jiujiang with her widowed mother and younger brother. Sad as their mission was—to bury her father in his native place—their prospects had been even more wretched. Without her father Cheung Tak-fai's salary from the Imperial Maritime Customs, they were at the mercy of their own wits and their relatives. Of all those who might have helped them, Ho Tung was by far the most notable. He was the chief com-pradore of Jardines, a justice of the peace, and a man of considerable means. There would have been no question of Clara resisting the marriage.

Within a year of the wedding, Sze died in Guangzhou while on a visit there. She had endured much in her fifty-four years. Filial as he was, Ho Tung was with her to the last. His daughter Irene has given us this picture of his devotion: 'Long after his mother had died he carried a miniature photograph of her on his travels and set it in a place of honour in his bedroom. He said that she liked roast chicken and when she visited them on Sundays after his first marriage they always had it for her. So every Sunday after her death, roast chicken was offered at her shrine.'²⁵ The dutiful daughters-in-law, for their part, ordered prayers to be said in her memory at a Guangdong monastery.

The next year brought another great change. On 22 June 1897 Queen Victoria celebrated her diamond jubilee. The pomp and circumstance which marked this event in London were echoed in her imperial possessions; a message from the queen was telegraphed to them all: 'From my heart I thank my beloved people. God Bless them.' Tributes poured in from all four corners of the world, including her colony of Hong Kong, where, on Sunday 21 June, the celebrations began with thanksgiving services in all the churches. The one at St John's Cathedral was

the most splendid, attended not only by the governor, Sir William Robinson, but all the bigwigs of the colony. They marched to the cathedral through a guard of smartly turned-out policemen; Ho Tung was near the head of the procession, a few steps behind the choir and the clergy. On the day of the anniversary itself, a choir of 300 voices belted out the famous *Hallelujah* chorus from Handel's *Messiah* in Happy Valley, and at nightfall brilliant fireworks discharged by fifty illuminated launches lit up the harbour, to the immense delight of the pressing crowds. At 1 Seymour Road, it was a time of private celebration as well, for in the same month Clara gave birth to Ho Tung's first child. She was named Victoria Jubilee Kam-chee (though she would soon become 'Vic' to her family).

The cycle of joy, grief, and revived hope was to continue. Within fifteen months of Victoria's birth, the longed-for son was born. To judge from a portrait, Henry Sai-kan's most obvious inheritance was the good looks of his parents. Perhaps the presence of babies had something to do with it; at any rate, before long Ho Tung's concubine, Chau Yee-man, also became pregnant. Her daughter, Mary Patricia Shun-chee, was born within a few months of Clara's third child, Daisy Wai-chee, who arrived on the last day of the century. If the parents found Daisy slow to develop, they had little time to worry about it, for soon an even darker shadow fell on the household. At six months she contracted pneumonia; Henry caught it as well, but, unlike Daisy, he did not recover and died before his second birthday. Clara was devastated. Going into deepest mourning, she would not lessen the vehemence of her grief until her doctor became alarmed. Eventually, afraid that she would succumb either to tuberculosis or a nervous breakdown, she pulled herself together.

Henry had died at Idlewild, a house at 8 Seymour Road to which the Ho family had moved after the birth of Vic; it would be kept in the family for the next fifty years. A high-rise block of flats now stands in its place, but scores of photographs have preserved for us the lineaments of its famous entrance: the solid pillars framing the extravagantly carved porch; above them, in relief, the white letters 'IDLEWILD', complete with the full stop that somehow lent the name a touch of stateliness; finally the wide stone stairs flanked by balustrades and two beautiful lanterns at the bottom. The outer walls were painted an auspicious red, a startling colour to cover a building of such gigantic proportions. One could easily get lost in such a house, and, from a description by Clara's fourth daughter Irene, it appears to have been awkwardly designed.⁶ In spite of its size, there were few rooms in which its residents could be private and quiet, although in a large family attended by many servants, life was inevitably somewhat communal.

When one entered the house, having passed through the teakwood doors inlaid with stained-glass panels and down the corridor lined with blackwood

The Public Man

By the time he was thirty-two Ho Tung had attained not only considerable wealth and property but distinction, too: he had been made a justice of the peace in 1891 and appointed Jardines' chief compradore in 1894. Through the 1880s and early 1890s, he had been single-minded in his pursuit of material success. Although this continued, other preoccupations were beginning to burgeon. He started taking an interest in the social world and the way he and others like him lived in it. He realised he could no longer remain impervious to the demand of some of his peers for change, for a setting which was more just, flexible, and free.

For most Chinese in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hong Kong the social distance between a bungalow on the Peak and a room above the office was the difference between heaven and earth. It could not have been crossed without a marked amelioration of rigid racist attitudes, and that could hardly be achieved without antagonisms and desires erupting to change the way things were.

Until then, segregation between the Europeans and the Chinese was all but absolute. An anonymous resident did not mince his words in a letter to a newspaper in 1878:

That we Chinese in this Colony are despised individually, collectively, and socially, and that we are ignored as a community (except in a few instances) there cannot be the least doubt. Individually we have imposed on us certain burdens peculiar to our nationality and we receive uncivility and indignity even at the hands of the police, to whom we contribute to pay largely for our protection. In European society we particularly have no status. To correspond socially with Europeans with whom we are daily brought into contact, to be admitted as favoured guests at their dinner table, to have the privilege of counting them as personal friends, are things which no Chinese, however ambitious he may be in other respects, would ever aspire to obtain. As a political body we are unknown. We are unrepresented, and it would be easier to find a fish climbing up a tree, as

our adage says, than to see a Chinese Justice of the Peace, or a Chinese member of the Legislative or Executive Council in Hongkong.¹

Of all the manifestations of official discrimination, the light and night pass regulations were thought to be the most pernicious. An ordinance in 1857 imposed a curfew on Chinese inhabitants should they be 'at large in the City of Victoria' between eight o'clock and sunrise unless they obtained a night pass from the superintendent of police. In 1870 they were further required to carry lanterns at night; in 1888 these provisions were confirmed in a new ordinance entitled 'Regulation of the Chinese'. When caught, offenders were fined or summarily locked up for the night. The regulations were harshly enforced in times of insecurity, though less frequently invoked when crime rates were down. Not surprisingly calls for the abolition of these repugnant rules became a recurrent theme in dealings between Chinese community leaders and the government. The colonial control system extended at the same time to brutal punishment of criminals who, if they were not deported or imprisoned, would be publicly flogged. Since the gaol was often crowded, sentences were sometimes remitted by banishing the prisoner after branding to discourage his return to the colony, or by whipping, with up to a hundred lashes by rattan cane or the cat-o'-nine-tails.

John Pope Hennessy, the same governor who expressed disquiet about the standard of English among Central School pupils, was appalled by such treatment of Chinese inhabitants. Intent on promoting racial equality, he suspended public flogging and looked about for other abuses to abolish. None of this endeared him to the foreign merchants, who believed only that his pro-Chinese and over-liberal attitude was encouraging crime and damaging British imperial interests. In response to several cases of barefaced burglary, robbery, and murder during 1878, the merchants, led by Jardines taipan William Keswick, called a meeting. Ostensibly to discuss 'public insecurity', the meeting was in reality to protest in the strongest terms against the governor's 'undue leniency towards the criminal class'—by implication, the Chinese.

What happened on 7 October 1878 was the first significant confrontation between the races. The Chinese reaction took Keswick and his fellow merchants totally by surprise: they had advertised the meeting at the City Hall, turned up at the appointed hour, and found the place already filled with Chinese—not (as one of the leaders Ho A-mei later pointed out) 'shop coolies and the like', but men who 'belonged to the better classes' holding 'large stakes in the welfare of the colony'.²

In the commotion that broke out, such distinctions were lost on the gentlemen who shouted, 'D . . . d Chinamen, turn them out!' and 'Let us have the meeting

elsewhere to prevent the Chinese coming.' Appropriately, the meeting was reconvened at a place close to British hearts—the cricket ground. Forming themselves into a tight circle, the foreign merchants succeeded in shutting out the Chinese who had followed; when Ng Choy, a Chinese barrister, asked for an interpreter to be present so that the other Chinese would understand what was being said, they paid no attention. This was not a snub that could be borne; Ng Choy led his group off the pitch, leaving the meeting to pass its several resolutions, one of which asserted, 'what is needed is firm and unfettered administration. Flogging in public is the only means of deterrent. It should be reinstated.'³

The most vociferous Chinese participants at this confrontation were, predictably enough, Ho A-mei and Ng Choy, who stood at the very top of 'the better classes'. The former, who had spent some ten years in Australia, was at the time secretary of the On Tai Insurance Company and a community leader of some consequence.⁴ The latter had recently been admitted to the bar and was to be appointed by Hennessy as a temporary legislative councillor in 1880, the first Chinese to be so honoured; he was also the first Chinese magistrate and would later offer his services to the Chinese imperial government and be sent, under his other name, Wu Tingfang, as envoy to the United States. Ho Tung's and Wu Tingfang's paths would cross in 1901 (see Chapter 6). Where Ng Choy and Ho A-mei led, the younger Ho Tung would follow in due course.

Despite their efforts, however, the light and pass regulations were not repealed, though they were enforced with a lighter hand. Then, in 1895, again in response to an outbreak of robberies, they were once more invoked and applied by the police in a most offensive manner. 'To force respectable Chinese to go to the Police Station and stop there until bailed out is unpleasant enough, but it makes the ordeal ten thousand times more exasperating when half-a-dozen or more of these alleged law-breakers are tied together by their queues and driven like a flock of sheep to the nearest lock-up', ran an editorial in the *Hongkong Telegraph*.⁵

From the crusade of words launched by the press over this issue we may infer that Ho Tung had been so treated by the police. But he reacted with characteristic moderation. Conscious as he must have been of the authorities' discriminatory practices, he was nevertheless a realist, not a revolutionary. He believed that more could be achieved for his compatriots by negotiation than by confrontation. He first solicited the views of other merchants like himself; then, armed with their signatures, he presented a petition to the government. Still in this circumspect vein, he joined forces with Ho A-mei and invited the Chinese community to a meeting so that others might air their views. The meeting took place at the Tung Wah Hospital on 22 December 1895. Nominated to the chair by Ho Tung, Ho A-mei began by reviewing the operation of the light and pass ordinance, reminding

Indeed, Ho Tung sounded admirably temperate when he rose to address the meeting. Allowing for the possibility that perhaps Chinese were too passive, he said, 'If a thing is unreasonable we can always appeal to the Government to have it modified or repealed, otherwise the Government is not in a position to know our hardships.' Young as he was, he was too shrewd not to grasp the difficulty of getting Chinese to unite over any matter of public concern. It was as well to realise, he reminded his audience, that the light and pass legislation affected only the Chinese. Citing the case of Chinese theatres, which had to be closed at 11 p.m., he said, 'If the play goes on after that time a policeman steps on the stage and puts a stop to it. In the City Hall, however, they are allowed to go on until one o'clock in the morning. That shows the distinction between Chinese and Europeans. The Government encourages all sorts of recreation for the European community. What have they done for the Chinese? They gave them a recreation ground in Taipingshan. What kind of a place is that for recreation, while latrines and urinals are there? We are the principal ratepayers in Hongkong; we pay more taxes than the Europeans, and derive the least advantage.' He then urged his audience to express their views without having been 'influenced in any degree by Mr Ho A-mei or by myself, and you must not think you have been influenced by wealth or position.' The meeting ended on a vote by a show of hands; for once it seemed the Chinese were unanimous, for no one opposed the motion.⁶

A furore in the press followed this meeting. Ho Tung's stand was so outrageous, claimed the *China Mail*, that he should be removed from the roster of justices of the peace forthwith. 'Apart from the absurdities in which he wallowed, he gave utterance to sentiments which can have no other effect than that of inciting his hearers to defy any law in the Colony,' wrote the editor in affronted and pompous tones. It was a privilege for the likes of Ho A-mei and Ho Tung to live in Hong Kong, he continued, for 'they would not be allowed to talk such screeching rubbish in any other country . . . Let Mr Ho Tung go to Canton and try to hold a public meeting and say what he thinks of the officials of his own country and state his reasons for not trusting himself and his business in their grasp . . . and if he does not care to go, it would do this Colony no harm to send him there.'

A milder contributor—who signed himself 'Brownie'—mitigated the picture of Ho Tung as a rabble-rouser by giving him the benefit of the doubt: 'I am inclined to exonerate that gentleman from any seditious leanings, and can only marvel at his appearance and attitude at the Tung Wah's meeting.'⁷ The *Telegraph*, too, weighed in on Ho Tung's side, making a mockery of the ineptitude of the governor, who had

got out of his depth in a perfect torrent of assumed righteous indignation, because forsooth, a Chinaman had dared to speak in public against a galling ill-considered

Riding the Storm

One of the most frequently published photographs (see next chapter) of Sir Robert shows him posing with George Bernard Shaw in July 1949 at Ayot St Lawrence in Hertfordshire, both of them dressed in what the playwright called ‘celestial garments.’¹ With their full white beards and exceptionally thin figures, they looked remarkably alike and quite the ‘sages’ of Shaw’s characterisation.²

Their acquaintance was made sixteen years earlier, in 1933, when the Shaws, calling at Hong Kong on their world tour, had asked if Sir Robert might receive them. Sir Robert was only too delighted; not only did he invite them to Idlewild but he also took them up the Peak to The Falls.

No expense had been spared in fitting out The Falls, with its nine bedrooms and half a dozen bathrooms, when it was built for Clara in the late 1920s. Teak panelled the walls, and the brilliance of chandeliers (which Clara had bought in London) was nightly reflected in the polished parquet of the floors. A wide staircase wound from the porticoed entrance to Clara’s own private shrine for worship and meditation on an upper floor. A Buddhist since childhood, Clara was perhaps not the only woman facing an empty nest to be consumed by religion in middle age. She would recount her religious journey in an autobiographical publication, *Mingshan youji* (‘Travelogue on Famous Mountains’), in 1934, and found a temple and school, the Tung Lin Kok Yuen, the following year. Shaw later described Clara’s shrine in The Falls in an essay:

a radiant miniature temple with an altar of Chinese vermilion and gold, and cushioned divan seats round the walls for the worshippers. Everything was in such perfect Chinese taste that to sit there and look was a quiet delight. A robed priest and his acolyte stole in and went through a service. When it was over I told Sir Robert that I had found it extraordinarily soothing and happy though I had not understood a word of it. ‘Neither have I,’ he said, ‘but it soothes me too.’ It was part of the art of life for Chinaman and Irishman alike, and was purely esthetic.³

Clara's shrine also inspired a scene in *Buoyant Billions: A Comedy of No Manners*, a play Shaw completed in 1948. Its plot hinges on how the elderly Mr Buoyant (said to be based on Sir Robert) plans to dispose of his wealth after his death. In Act III the billionaire finds serenity in observing the ritual conducted by a robed Chinese priest:

His soul needs refreshment. He is a mighty man of business: in his hands all things turn into money. Souls perish under such burdens. He comes here and sits for half an hour while I go through my act of worship, of which he does not understand a single word. But he goes out a new man, soothed and serene.⁴

Whatever impression Sir Robert created that day in 1933, he cannot have been feeling his best, for shortly after the encounter we find him undergoing treatment at a London hospital.

Generally he never found illness a bore, often imagining himself indisposed when he was perfectly fit. He made a habit of consulting one doctor after another about trifling symptoms, and occasionally—somewhat perversely—disparaging their treatment or prescriptions. Once, after seeing a Japanese doctor in Mukden, he confided to his daughter Eva, 'To tell you the truth I have not much faith in doctors, not because I do not believe in their skilfulness, but my case is so exceptional it requires most careful handling'⁵—this to a daughter whose profession was medicine! However, in the spring of 1933, within a month or so of entertaining Bernard Shaw, he was genuinely laid low by a severe bladder infection. After being treated in London, he was found to have a prostatic obstruction; an operation to remove the tumour was performed in a private clinic in Berne, Switzerland. For much of that year, he really did become an invalid. Not that his life was ever in any danger, but his brother Ho Fook, dead of cancer seven years before, must still have been frequently in his thoughts.

The best of doctors attended him in London and Berne. He was now over seventy, and though the tumour proved benign, he did not recover as quickly as expected from his operation. It was when he was still recuperating in Europe and at his lowest ebb that the news of his nephew's suicide reached him.

Sir Robert and his nephew Ho Leung were related by a web of kinship that covered nearly the entire Eurasian community in Hong Kong. Ho Leung was Ho Fook's fourth son and, as the husband of Lo Cheung-shiu's daughter Edna, brother-in-law to M. K. and Vic. Well connected and a Jardines compradore backed by Sir Robert, he found trading without security all too easy. This proved the ruin of him, for it encouraged him to over-extend himself in a number of highly speculative ventures. He was especially reckless in the conduct of his import business at Jardines, leaving a trail of defaults and losses. One venture which unravelled involved dealing



Ho Leung

in luxury goods; when economic conditions declined they became a drug on the market, leading to more grievous losses.⁶ Actually the warning signs were there if anybody had paid attention: writing to Jardines in the previous summer he had referred to his ‘abnormal losses . . . in respect of your Import business.’⁷ But Jardines, though sympathetic, apparently took no action. Nor was anyone aware at the time that Ho Leung was also engaged in the extremely hazardous practice of ‘kite-flying’, meeting obligations by writing cheques on a bank account in London which held funds that were already committed, in the hope (vain as it transpired) that the time lag in clearing the cheques would give him a chance to replenish the account. The outstanding cheques eventually amounted to more than HK\$100,000.

On 21 December 1933 Ho Leung gave no hint of his desperation when he agreed to meet his wife for lunch at his sports club. When her husband did not appear, Edna made a number of telephone calls to find him. By seven o’clock that evening she was frantic. According to a statement later made by her brother M. K., it was nearly ten o’clock when she rang him again, to say that a police inspector had just called with the horrifying news that a body dressed in European clothes and found off Taitam Tuk Road (on the south side of Hong Kong Island) was suspected to be that of her husband. An amah and a coolie sent to make the identification confirmed that the dead man was indeed Ho Leung; he had apparently shot himself twice in the chest with his own revolver at a secluded spot on a hillside near his home. He was forty-two years old.

The family now galvanised itself to pull every string available to quash the scandal, beginning with an appeal to the police to report the case as a straightforward case of suicide so that a public coroner's inquest might be dispensed with. No time was lost in arranging for Ho Leung's burial at the Chiu Yuen Cemetery, which took place only a day later. Newspaper reportage was respectful and reticent, but what could not be hushed up was the depth of his recklessness and the extent of the financial calamity.⁸ Sir Robert, as Ho Leung's guarantor, had to be told, though no one relished the prospect of passing on the news. In the end it was Lady Margaret who grasped the nettle.

Moments after the fact of the suicide had sunk in, Sir Robert was informed that Jardines was making a claim against him. Only then did it burst upon him how perilously exposed he had been all along. Ho Leung had succeeded his father-in-law, Lo Cheung-shiu, as *compradore* in 1920. When Sir Robert signed the new guarantee agreement, it never occurred to him that its terms had been altered in any fundamental sense. He was unguarded enough not to have it examined with a fine-tooth comb by his lawyer son-in-law M. K. In fact the clause relating to his liability was no longer precise but ambiguously phrased or, as a lawyer later characterised it, 'not free of difficulties': instead of limiting his liability to \$50,000, as he thought, it allowed Jardines to argue that every failed contract could be treated as a claim against him, up to \$50,000 for *each* claim. Counsel put it to him this way: 'Suppose a certain firm had concluded three separate contracts and then it went bankrupt. Would there be one claim comprising all three contracts or three separate claims against that firm? You will see the importance of this . . . each contract is about \$50,000 in this hypothetical case . . . your liability would be \$50,000 or \$150,000 depending on what is the meaning of "a claim".'⁹

Sir Robert was aghast, but should he fight the claim? The opinion he obtained from counsel in London was not reassuring. Whatever his own understanding of the agreement—and he was adamant that Ho Leung had shared it, too—a court might find Jardines' contention more compelling. Letters and telegrams went to and fro between England and Hong Kong as auditors unwound Ho Leung's affairs. All Sir Robert's instincts were against litigation; under the auditors' scrutiny, however, the sum of his liability appeared to be escalating daily. He could not bring himself to pay up without a fight.

It was all very distressing and the worry of it was retarding his recovery. By May 1934 he was convalescing in his house at Kew and making plans to return to the clinic at Berne.¹⁰ Perhaps because of its associations with an unpleasant period in his life, Sir Robert was never to spend much time in this house and would put its lease up for sale two years later.

would be no fitting way to end 50 continuous years of very honourable and pleasant association between you [Sir Robert] and the firm. In fact it would be intolerable, especially to me, a member of a family which has been intimately connected with you for three generations . . .

The other day you suggested that as the firm had indicated when Ho Leung was alive that we might consider bearing half the losses in import trading to help him out it would be equitable for the firm now to bear half of such losses claimed for under your guarantee. Although the guarantee statement . . . specifically states that the firm may make concessions to the compradore 'without discharging or impairing the liability of the mortgager under the guarantee', I wonder whether it is not possible to arrive at some basis of compromise along these lines?¹²

And indeed it was on this basis that the case was finally settled, with Sir Robert compensating Jardines to the tune of \$600,000. He might have remembered Confucius' saying—'The superior man is dignified, but does not wrangle'—when he decided to pay up; his sense of injury, however, could not be so easily appeased. It was only after a concerted effort on the part of Tony and his brother John Keswick to make amends that the rift was eventually healed. Meanwhile, in the few years following the case, Sir Robert resigned from the boards of seven Jardines companies in favour of M. K., including the Indo-China Steam Navigation Company, Canton Insurance, and Hongkong and Kowloon Wharf.

A postscript to this sorry saga is lodged in Sir Robert's correspondence with David Fortune Landale, chairman and managing director of Jardine Matheson from 1945 to 1951.¹³ For the background to this correspondence, we must scroll back to 1938, when a portrait of Sir Robert by Oswald Birley was commissioned and presented to Jardines. After the war, Sir Robert's attempt to locate this portrait was met with a less than prompt response. Irritated, he reminded Landale in a letter towards the end of 1948 that he still harboured a grievance against Jardines:

when Ho Leung approached me with the Agreement [naming Ho Tung as his guarantor], he told me that I had only to give your firm a further \$50,000 as personal security; and accepting his word I signed the Agreement without referring it to a lawyer, not knowing that the \$50,000 was only for each claim. This unfortunate Agreement proved beneficial to your firm to the extent of \$500,000, at my expense; in other words, I paid \$600,000.- to Jardine Matheson & Co. for the losses which Ho Leung incurred, although I had no interest in the benefits which accrued. As a matter of fact, at that time, my solicitors in London were of the opinion that I should contest the case in Court and I was given to understand that I would win, but because of my long connection with your firm, and because of my rather delicate health at the time owing to my two operations in London and Switzerland, I refrained from proceeding with the case.¹⁴

Link between East and West

Re-established at Idlewild in early 1942, Eddie must often have slipped into despair; he had little time, though, to evade the realities of his situation. As a cripple his first thoughts must have been on various remedies to restore mobility. His wounds were not healing well enough, however, 'even to try on a temporary stump'.¹ And although Sir Robert suggested engaging a special nurse for him, Eddie wished more than anything to go back to Shanghai, where help would be more readily available than in Hong Kong. If only one had the fortune, he said, or, even better, influential friends in the Japanese army or navy, to gain seats on a flight via Canton! He was anxious to see 'what can be done to save something from the wreckage as things in Shanghai do not appear to be normal'.² There had been an interval of acute anxiety about how Mordia was coping, especially as communications between Hong Kong and Shanghai broke down for a while. To his relief, a letter reached their son Eric which had been posted to the Catholic mission in Guangzhou and forwarded by the fathers, in which she imparted no news to raise undue alarm.

The Catholic priests were supportive in more ways than one. They propped up his spirits and it is likely that under their encouragement Eddie found a meaning to his suffering through the devotional discipline of confession, mass, and prayer. Father Albert Cooney SJ, who visited him at 8 Seymour Road during his recuperation, would later describe how he 'marvelled at his [Eddie's] courage and fortitude and his deep resignation to God's will. It was edifying to see how he looked forward to the future with such hope. Another man would have considered his life's work finished'.³

Another of Eddie's spiritual advisers was Father George Byrne at Hong Kong University, who was instrumental in bringing about help when it was needed. A cleric with a practical streak, Father Byrne knew that, with Florence Webb's death, the burden of running the Shanghai office with only a skeleton staff of inexperienced employees lay too heavily on Eddie's shoulders. Florence Webb needed to be replaced, and soon. The priest was not the person who first introduced Mary

Cheung to Eddie, but when consulted he found he could think of no one more suitable. Mary, a Chinese immigrant from British Guiana, was the cleverest scholarship student Father Byrne had taught at the university. Her father was a Protestant minister, but she had converted to Catholicism about two years before she came to Eddie's notice. She had been teaching at the Italian convent and supporting her parents for some time; a change in the parents' circumstances then freed her to look for work elsewhere. Guided by Father Byrne on the one hand, and urgently in need of support on the other, Eddie became convinced that Mary Cheung was the answer to his prayers. Her theoretical knowledge, he assured his father, 'can easily be put to practical usefulness, because she has had a thorough grounding of advanced accountancy and mathematics besides having a perfect command of the language. The fact that she has been a teacher should not prevent her from going into business and becoming an accountant. Her frugality, her efficiency, and her character, coupled with her knowledge, are just the right qualities I have been seeking to find.'⁴

Mary Cheung became indispensable as a trusted assistant and comrade in the daily fray of keeping the office functioning under the arduous conditions of occupied Shanghai. In April Eddie was issued with permits to return. Mary Cheung either travelled up with the family then or followed later.

The Shanghai Eddie returned to in the spring of 1942 was a war zone. Japanese soldiers, previously a menacing presence on the fringes of the International Settlement, were everywhere. On the very same day as the attack on Pearl Harbor, proclamations had appeared all over the foreign enclave announcing that a state of war existed between the imperial government of Japan and the governments of Great Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands. For all the reassurances that civilians—friend and foe alike—should go about their business as usual, within twenty-four hours the Japanese had taken over the police and raised their flag over the Shanghai Municipal Building. American, British, and other enemy offices were seized and sealed under guard, while the utilities companies found themselves placed under Japanese direction. The city crawled with collaborators whose eyes and ears were picking up every hint of resistance or trouble. Sandbags and barbed-wire barricades sprang up seemingly overnight to check the traffic and clog the roads. Once a glittering scene of neon-lit clubs and bars, the city's famous nightlife faded from the streets as electricity consumption came under restriction. The rapid depletion of rice, cooking oil, and coal was swiftly followed by that inevitable wartime phenomenon, the black market. Over the ensuing months foreign banks such as Chase, Hongkong and Shanghai, and Chartered were systematically stripped of their assets and liquidated.

Through the summer and autumn American and British diplomatic officials were repatriated, assets belonging to enemy aliens were frozen, and the neutrality of the International Settlement became a distant memory. The French Concession was thought to be a safe haven for a time, and there had been a rush to transfer ownership of American and British properties to a Vichy registration to prevent their seizure as enemy assets, but the Japanese military soon exerted its authority there, too.

There was no uniform treatment of Chinese British subjects like Eddie (better known by his Chinese name, Ho Sai-kim, in Shanghai). For a time he and his children had to wear the red armbands issued to enemy aliens. This mark of differentiation became redundant in early 1943 when the Nanjing puppet regime, prodded by Japan, declared war on the Allies. Enemy nationals were rounded up for internment. The very equivocality of Eddie's nationality was in his favour. While foreign assets were appropriated, properties belonging to Ho Tung were not confiscated (Sir Victor Sassoon, whose portfolio spanned hotels, apartment blocks, and office buildings, did not escape so lightly). Eddie and his family were exempt from internment, although they were not entirely immune from the actions of the Japanese military, who periodically descended on 457 Seymour Road and searched the house; Eddie was sure they coveted the property. The Japanese did eventually commandeer most of the house, while Eddie and his family were forced to squeeze into only one corner of it.

Night after night during the bitterly cold winter of 1942 Eddie would be jolted by agonising cramps in his left arm and the stumps of his legs, waking to bouts of giddiness or the eerie silence of a bruised and debilitated city. Shrapnel still lay embedded in his body. He walked with difficulty, and only 'about two blocks each time', he later told his father, as 'any excess would bring about an abrasion of the skin; and if I continue to wear the artificial legs, not only is the first layer of skin broken but also the second layer, and this is very painful. When this happens it takes two to three weeks of rest from wearing the limbs to allow the wound to heal.'⁵ Somehow Eddie's iron will held firm through all these tribulations. He is caught in a photograph from those twilight years, before he left Shanghai for good. Despite its pathos, there is a touch of grim humour in the pose—wrapped up in a Chinese padded robe against the cold, he is pictured with his prosthetic legs, all webbing and straps at the top, and fitted with socks and shoes at the 'feet', propped up beside his garden chair. Being 'under Japanese supervision' he ceased doing any business and worked in the garden as often as he could.⁶ Anyone lucky enough to have a bit of earth used it to grow food, contriving and improvising, fighting to survive.

For Sir Robert, once the shock of the invasion and his tussle with Japanese officialdom were over, the war years became a test of endurance. As ever, his tactic was to wear people down by his own tenacity and will. Whether it was to squeeze a little more rice for his household from the rationing authorities, or extra oil, kerosene, sugar, and coal from the Macau government, or a higher quota of electricity to run a fan for himself, he waged his own war of attrition on hardship and want.⁷ Not that food shortages bothered him as much as the people around him—malnutrition was, after all, his way of life—but he occasionally missed the things he was partial to (once he rather pathetically asked Katie if she had any tins of Quaker oats left). At one point his weight dropped alarmingly to seventy-five pounds. None of the five doctors he consulted over the summer of 1943 and the spring of 1944 agreed on a diagnosis, he noted dismissively, so ‘what shall the patient do?’ In the autumn he was stricken with dysentery.

He had to take the bad with the good. In Macau there was leisure to put down his reminiscences for a future autobiography (which did not get written), and we hear of him learning Mandarin three times a week in the afternoons. He may have spent time on religious instruction as well, for one day he informed George She, his former secretary and an ordained minister, that he wished to be baptised into the Protestant Church. Whether this interest had anything to do with intimations of mortality and his wish to be buried with Margaret in the Colonial Cemetery can only be surmised. There is certainly no evidence of a dramatic conversion; nor, on the other hand, any indication that he was motivated by purely pragmatic reasons. When questioning Eddie about Catholicism in his letters, he appeared as intrigued by its doctrines as by the outward forms of worship. Perhaps the sight of the Santo Agostinho nearby and the serenity of Christian services, as opposed to Buddhist or Taoist rites, appealed to him.

Reflections on religion did not engross him for long, however. What exercised him particularly through 1944 was the lack of funds to maintain his staff. He sold what he could (a diamond ring, a diamond bracelet, and his only property on Hong Kong’s Queen’s Road Central, which fetched 110,000 Japanese military yen, as he carefully recorded). It was not enough. His attempts to have funds released from frozen overseas accounts were unavailing.⁸ The British government for one ignored his appeals for remittances from his bank in London. It was ironic that he who had made an interest-free loan of £10,000 to the war chest of Britain should now be limited to a paltry £20 a month for his expenses in Macau and Hong Kong. As he complained to the British consul in Macau, he had been put in an impossible position by the high-handed attitude of the authorities in London, ‘and I cannot refrain from contrasting the continued proffers of help from the Japanese—which

Index

Sir Robert Ho Tung is indexed as Ho Tung throughout.

- Addis, Sir Charles, 42
Alford, Edward, 21, 34, 35, 37, 183n10
Alice Memorial Hospital, *see* Nethersole and Alice Memorial Hospital
Archee, Katie, 60, 117, 137, 156, 171
Arnhold Karberg, 36
Au Choi, 159, 192n16
Au-Yeung Pak-cheong, 112, 113
- Baldwin, Lucy, 116
Baldwin, Stanley, 116
Baohuanghui (Protecting-Emperor Society), 92, 94
Beijing (Peking), 91, 100, 105, 129;
Charles Addis in, 42; Boxer rebellion in, 94, 96; falls to Communists, 162; Convention of, 10; government in, 98, 99, 102, 103, 106, 107, 117, 123, 126; Robert Hart posted to, 25; Ho Tung in, 104, 117, 119; Marco Polo Bridge near, 140; protests in, 85
Bell-Irving, James Jardine (J. J.), 44
Bell-Irving, John, 38, 39, 40, 54, 183n16
Birley, Oswald Sir, 85, 138, 139, 164
Blake, Sir Henry, 74–75, 98, 187n12
Blake, Lady, 57, 75, 78
Bosman, Alec, 18, 167, 193n31
Bosman, Charles Henry Maurice, 13–16, 17, 18, 167, 181n16
Bosman, Mary Agnes (*née* Forbes), 167
Bosman, Walter (*also* Ho Kai-gai): 16, 54–56, 57, 97; in South Africa, 54–55; attempts to raise funds to buy arms for China, 56; death, 56
Boxer rebellion and indemnity, 54, 94, 96
Braga, J. M., 43
Braga, J. P., 84, 189n32
bubonic plague, 73
Byrne, Father George, 152, 153
- Canton, *see* Guangzhou
Canton Insurance Office, 29, 36, 44, 138, 169
Cao Kun, 106
Central School (*later* Queen's College), x–xi, 19, 32, 64, 67; Walter Bosman at, 54, 97; Ho Fook at, 22, 40; and Ho Kai, 73; Ho Kom-tong at, 41; and Ho Tung 20–22, 63; Ho Wing at, 48; Sun Yat-sen at, 97; Tse Tsan-tai at, 80
Chamberlain, Neville, 116
Chan Kai-ming, 83
Chan Pak-choi, 95
Chater, Catchick Paul (*later* Sir Catchick Paul Chater), 39, 40, 42, 83, 169
Chau Yee-man, 48, 51, 60
Chen, Eugene, 103
Cheng Hsiang-hsien, 147
Cheng, Irene (*née* Ho Tung), 49, 62, 82, 84, 113, 120, 124, 141; birth,

- 58; and Daisy, 113; on Ho Tung's English name, 84; on Ho Tung's filial devotion, 49; and Ho Tung's omission from Legislative Council, 82; on Idlewild, 51–53; during Japanese occupation, 147, 148; at Kailuan Mining Administration, 159; and Robbie, 124; writing about her family, xi, 16, 44, 112, 120, 142, 167
- Cheung, Clara Ching-yung, *see* Ho Tung, Clara
- Cheung, Elsie, 170, 171
- Cheung, Mary, 152–53, 158, 164
- Cheung Tak-fai, 45, 49
- Chiang Kai-shek, 56, 126, 131, 140, 143; establishes Nanjing stronghold, 108; northern campaign of, 126, 127, 130, 131; and Robbie, 131, 139, 151; and shelling of Shanghai, 141; and Zhang Xueliang, 140, 141
- Chiang Kai-shek, Madame, x
- China Sugar Refinery, 37, 38
- Chinese Club, 78, 79
- Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, *see* Imperial Maritime Customs
- Chinese Recreation Club, 79
- Chinese Seamen's Union, 85
- Chiu Yuen Eurasian Cemetery, 8, 9, 41, 136, 141
- Choa Chee-bee, 38
- Choa Leep-chee, 40
- Chongming, 11, 12
- Chow Shouson, 79, 151
- Chung, John Yan Laap, 169
- Churchill, Sir Winston, 5–6, 116
- Cixi, Dowager Empress, 91, 93, 94
- Cohen, Morris 'Two-gun', 103
- Colonial Cemetery, 23, 32, 141, 156, 169, 172
- compradore system, 32–33
- Cooney, Father Albert, 152
- Crawford, Ninian, 45
- Davenport, Louise, 55
- Des Voeux, Sir William, 43
- Diocesan Girls' School, 64, 126
- District Watch Committee, 76
- Douglas Lapraik & Co., 36
- E. D. Sassoon & Company, 48, 108
- Edwards, Henry F., 13
- Eitel, E. J., 20
- Eurasian(s), viii, ix, 17, 19, 20, 28, 32, 40, 46; attacks against, 81; marrying other Eurasians, 48, 119; social position of, 130
- Ezra, Edward Isaac, 121, 161
- Falconer, Alexander, 21, 23, 54, 76
- Falls, The, 121, 132, 142, 147, 148, 159
- Feng Yuxiang, 127, 141
- Festing, Major-General Francis, 157
- Ford, Charles, 6, 180n8
- Gittins, Billy, 119, 146, 158
- Gittins, Jean (née Ho Tung), 62, 82, 116, 126, 146; birth and childhood, 58, 62, 63; marriage, 119, 158; on her parents, 60, 63, 112; interned in Stanley, 149, 158; travels, 116; writing about her family, xi, 58–60, 82, 112, 149
- Glover, G. B., 45
- Government Civil Hospital, 74, 76
- Grantham, Sir Alexander, 2
- Guangxu Emperor, 8, 91, 92, 93
- Guangzhou (Canton): 8, 23, 25, 49, 83, 92; Japanese surrender in, 157; Jardines founded in, 28, 29; as Kuomintang base, 97, 99, 102, 103, 107, 108; Office of Foreign Affairs in, 86; as refuge for strikers, 85; revolutionary coup in, 97–98

- Guo Songtao, 21, 22
- Hall, Alfred, 55
- Harcourt, Sir Cecil, 157
- Harston, Dr George, 111
- Hart, Robert, 10, 25, 89
- Hartshorn, Catherine, 111
- Hazeland, Francis Arthur, 21
- Hecht, Miss, 63
- Helena May Institute for Women, 76
- Hennessy, John Pope (*later* Sir John Pope Hennessy), 22, 37, 67, 68, 72
- Ho A-mei, 36, 67–71
- Ho, Catherine (*née* Hung, *later* Catherine or Kitty Anderson), 1, 57, 151, 185n16
- Ho, Edna, 134, 135
- Ho, Eric Peter, xi
- Ho Fook (*also* Ho Kai-fook), 22, 41, 53, 61, 64, 79, 111, 134; birth and childhood, 16, 17; business and career, 40, 41, 43, 53; death, 134; and Ho Cheuk, 117, 118; and Ho Wing's adoption, 40, 48; and Legislative Council, 82; and opium farm, 43; philanthropy, 76; public service, 76; schooling, 22; wife, 41, 58, 61
- Ho, George, 60, 137
- Ho, Hesta (*née* Hung), 1, 3, 117, 128, 129, 139; on the brothers' differences in character, 161; in Kunming, 157; marriage, 125–26; and birth of son, 129, 130
- Ho Kai, 73, 79
- Ho Kai-gai, *see* Bosman, Walter
- Ho Kai-mun, 16
- Ho Kom-tong (*also* Ho Kai-tong), 53, 79, 157, 169; birth, 16; business and career, 40, 41; and Cantonese opera, 76; children of, 61; and Chinese Club, 79; concubines of, 61; funeral and burial plot in Chiu Yuen, 41, 76; and Kom Tong Hall, 41; and opium farm, 43; philanthropy, 76; schooling, 41; wife, 61
- Holden, William, 165
- Ho Leung, 138, 139; speculation and financial ruin of, 134–37; suicide of, 134, 135
- Holmes, Barbara, 167
- Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company, 40, 42–43, 138
- Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (*also* Hongkong and Shanghai Bank), 2, 42, 48, 117, 129; Eddie at, 120, 121; as Ho Tung's executor and trustee, 169; in Shanghai, 153
- Hongkong and Whampoa Dock Company, 14
- Hongkong, Canton and Macao Steamboat Company, 159
- Hongkong Club, 79
- Hongkong College of Medicine for Chinese, 75, 97
- Hong Kong Fire Insurance Company, 36, 42, 169; founded, 29; Ho Tung as Native Agent of, 44; and property, 39, 40, 74
- Hong Kong Hotel, 14, 150, 158, 181n16
- Hongkong Ice Co., 43
- Hongkong Land Investment and Agency Co., 42, 83
- Hong Kong, University of, 5, 75, 76, 103, 111, 152, 153
- Ho Pak-ngan, 15, 17, 32
- Ho, Robert (Robbie) Shai-lai, 1, 62, 112, 142, 146; birth and childhood, 58, 111–12; renounces British nationality, 124; career, 129, 130, 131, 149, 160; allegiance to China, 122; death, 130; at The Falls, 147; relationship with father, 110, 121, 122, 131; at Fort Leavenworth, 130, 131, 139;

- fraternal rivalry, 110, 120, 161; and *Kung Sheung Yat Po*, 129–30; at Larkhill, 123, 124; marriage, 125–26; at Military College, Woolwich, 122–23; at Military Staff College, Fontainebleau, 123, 129; schooling, 64; newborn son, 129, 130; in wartime, 131, 151, 157; and Zhang Xueliang, 127, 129
- Ho Tung (*also* Ho Kai-tung, Ho Hiu-sang, and Ho A-tung, *later* Sir Robert Ho Tung): ix, 8, 51, 77, 90, 168; and Katie Archee, 60, 117, 137, 156; belief in Hong Kong, 42; birth, 15, 16; as H. T. Bosman, 54, 82, 96; and his brother Walter Bosman, 54–55; business and share-dealing, 36, 42, 53, 83, 130, 139, 143, 158; at Central School, x–xi, 20, 21, 22, 63; childhood, 17–18; and Chinese Club, 79; and Chinese identity, 81–82, 119–20, 130, 168; and Winston Churchill, 5–6, 116; as compradore (*later* chief compradore) of Jardines, 32, 33, 43, 44, 49, 66, 94, 98, 130; daughters of, 51, 63, 64, 112, 113; death and funeral instructions, 156, 167, 169, 171–73; deportation from the USA, 82; diamond wedding anniversary, 144, 146; diaries, x, 167; diet, x, 2, 53, 144, 149, 162, 170; as a Eurasian, ix, 17, 29, 80–81, 119–20, 130, 134; and The Eyrie, 63, 79, 80; and his father, 18; golden wedding anniversary, 48, 139; ‘Grand Old Man’, viii, 171; and George Ho, 60, 137; and Ho Leung’s suicide, 134–38; Hotung Baugesellschaft, 83; adoption of Ho Wing, 48; illnesses and concern with health, 19, 44, 60, 94, 134, 156, 157, 167, 171, 193n30; and Imperial Maritime Customs, 23–24, 108; during Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, x, xi, 6, 23, 44, 139, 146, 149–51; and Jardines, 3–5, 32, 38, 44, 49, 66, 94, 169–70; and Jardines’ insurance business, 34–35; as justice of the peace, 49, 66, 70, 96; and Kang Youwei, 90, 91–92, 94; knighthoods, decorations, and awards, 84, 102, 130–31, 170–71; and Legislative Council, 80, 82, 98; and Li Hongzhang, 53, 94, 95; loan to Guangzhou government, 107–8; in Macau, x, 57, 139, 146, 149, 150, 151, 156, 166, 169; marriages and wedding of, 29, 31, 44, 48; memoirs, x, xi, 98, 156; and his mother, 49; ninetieth birthday, 1–5, 166, 167; and opium, 43, 44; living on the Peak, x, 60–61, 80, 121, 132, 159, 172; and Peak School, 63–64, 76; philanthropy, 5, 75, 83, 165–66, 169, 172, 192n26; portrait by Sir Oswald Birley, 85, 138, 139, 164, 170; and Prince of Wales, 116; property acquisitions and sales by, 39–40, 83, 126, 144, 156, 166–67; public activities and politics: in China, 98, 99, 104–9; in Hong Kong, 68–75; and seamen’s strike, 86–88; early schooling, 19, 20; funding school in Kowloon, 76, 78; and Shanghai properties, 99, 128, 143; and Bernard Shaw, 132–34, 162–64, 165; relations with sons: Eddie, x, 56, 111, 112, 120–21, 130, 139–40, 161, 166; Robbie, 110, 112, 122, 124; sugar broking and sales, 37, 38, 44; and Sun Yat-sen, 98, 103, 105; and Tai Yau Bank, 83, 97; travels: in China, 64, 65, 99, 100–102, 126, 141; to England and continental Europe, 54, 113–17, 162–64; to USA 53, 54, 82, 89–90, 94–97; and warlords, 99,

- 104–9, 123, 127, 129; and Wembley Empire Exhibition, 5, 113–17, 170; wills, ix, 12, 17, 49, 60, 112, 130, 167, 169, 181n7; and Wu Tingfang, 68, 94–95, 99–103, 104; Yokohama visit, 37
- Ho Tung, Clara (*née* Cheung), 44, 47, 52, 60, 93, 129; aspirations for her children, 60, 63–64, 65, 112; background, 45–46, 113; and Buddhism, 111, 120, 127–28, 132, 134, 142; children of, 48, 51, 56, 58, 61, 84, 117, 169; death, 141–42; and Edward, 43, 56, 58, 111, 112, 117, 120; marriage as ‘equal wife’, 46, 49, 84; on the Peak, 61, 80, 121, 132; travels: in China, 65, 105, 119, 126, 127, 128; to Europe, 53–54, 121, 124, 132; to USA, 48–49, 82; and Tung Lin Kok Yuen, 132, 139, 142
- Ho Tung, Daisy Wai-kee, 51, 62, 112, 113
- Hotung, Edward (Eddie) Sai-kim, x, xi, 1, 59, 62, 110, 144, 152; birth, 56; and Catholicism, 152; and Chiang Kai-shek, 141; children of, 121; as assistant compradore, 121; death, 172; relations with father, 130, 131, 140, 166; fraternal rivalry, 112, 161; at Hong Kong University, 103, 111; ill health, 57–58, 61, 111; in London, 116–18; marriage, 110–11, 117–18, 120, 126; separates from Mordia, 160; at mother’s funeral, 142; in Shanghai, 142, 153–55, 159–62; and Shanghai business and properties, 121, 128, 130, 139, 162; and Sun Yat-sen, 103, 111; in USA, 162, 164, 171; wounds and amputation, 147–48, 154, 155, 160, 161
- Hotung, Eric, ix, x, xi, 2, 110, 121, 128, 148, 149
- Ho Tung, Eva, 62, 120, 134, 149, 159; birth, 58; marriage proposal from Manchu prince, 117, 119
- Ho Tung, Florence, *see* Yeo, Florence
- Ho Tung, Grace, *see* Lo, Grace
- Ho Tung, Henry Sai-kan, 51, 53, 139, 141
- Ho Tung, Irene, *see* Cheng, Irene
- Ho Tung, Jean, *see* Gittins, Jean
- Hotung, Sir Joseph, xi, 2, 121
- Ho Tung, Margaret, (*later* Lady Ho Tung), 30, 32, 33, 49, 111, 136, 145, 168; and Au Choi, 159, 192n16; birth, 28, 29; death and burial plans, 141, 151, 156, 167, 169, 172; diamond wedding anniversary, 144; golden wedding anniversary, 48, 139; arranges Ho Tung’s second marriage, 45–46, 48; adopts Ho Wing, 40–41, 48; at Idlewild, 52, 61, 129, 148; infertility, 53, 191n25; and Japanese occupation, 144, 148; becomes Lady Ho Tung, 84; visits Macau, 151; marriage and wedding, 29–31, 48, 57; opposition to Mordia, 117, 119, 144; addressed as ‘mother’, 58; and Robbie, 112, 129; and Tianzuhui, 78, 93; travels, 37, 53, 82, 94; at the Tung Wah, 75; attends Wembley Empire Exhibition, 113, 116
- Ho Tung, Mary Patricia Shun-kee, 51, 113, 114, 116
- Ho Tung, Mordia (*née* O’Shea or Newman), 110, 111, 117–21, 141, 152, 160
- Hotung Papers, x, xi, 18, 19, 24
- Ho Wing (*also* Ho Sai-wing), 53, 112, 117, 151, 159; adopted, 40, 48, 61; marriage, 57
- Ho Yow, 94, 95, 187n8
- Hughes, W. Kerfoot, 40
- Hung Kam-ning (*later* Henry Graham Anderson), 57, 185n16

- Idlewild, xi, 2, 51–52, 57, 61, 120, 129, 141, 146, 166, 167, 171; family moves from, 60–61; during Japanese occupation, 148, 149, 150, 152, 159; Kang Youwei at, 92, 93; Robbie's wedding at, 126; and Bernard Shaw, 132–33; ancestral shrines at, 58; visited by Sun Yat-sen, 103; Vic's wedding at, 112
- Imperial Maritime Customs, 10, 23, 24, 27, 35, 36, 45, 49, 108
- Indo-China Steam Navigation Company, 34, 138
- Isaki, Mr (Japanese officer), 150
- Japanese invasion and occupation: of Hong Kong, 146, 147, 148; of Shanghai, 143, 153–54
- Jardine, Matheson and Company (*also* Jardines), 21, 32, 37, 40, 41, 67, 80, 121; birthday tribute to Ho Tung, 3–4; and C. H. M. Bosman, 14; China Sugar Refinery Company, 37–38; and compradores, 32, 33, 40, 41, 43, 49, 66, 121; founding and activities in China, 27, 28, 29, 34; and Ho Leung's debt, 134–38; and Hongkong Land Investment and Agency Co., 42, 83; association with Ho Tung, 32–34, 43, 44, 94, 98, 169–70; and Ho Tung's portrait, 85, 138, 139; and insurance, 34–37, 44; and Hector MacLean, 27, 28; and property, 39–40, 42; and James Whittall, 16
- Jardine, William, 28, 29
- Johnston, Reginald, 117, 190n10
- Kadoorie, Sir Elly, 143
- Kang Youwei, 90–94, 102, 103
- Kennedy, Sir Arthur, 21
- Keswick, David, 3, 4
- Keswick, Henry, 3, 4
- Keswick, James Johnstone, 42
- Keswick, John, 3, 5, 138, 170
- Keswick, William, 3, 28, 38, 67, 182n3
- Keswick, William Johnstone (W. J., *also* Tony), 3, 137–38
- King George V, 84, 114, 168
- Knatchbull-Hugessen, Sir Hughe and Lady, 141
- Koopmanschap, Cornelius, 13, 15, 34
- Koo, Wellington, 105
- Kung Sheung Yat Po*, 129, 130, 131, 146, 161, 189n32
- Kuomintang (Guomindang), 99, 107, 108
- Kwok Hing-yin (*alias* Kwok Chung), 16, 18
- Kwok Sui-ting, 17–18
- Lai Sum Woon, 19
- Lampson, Sir Miles, 107
- Landale, David Fortune, 138, 139, 190n13
- Lane, Crawford & Co., 45
- Lane, Thomas, 45
- Lau Chu-pak, 79, 83, 97, 98, 187n12
- Lay, Horatio Nelson, 25
- Lee, Bruce, 61
- Lee Hoi-chuen, 61
- Legislative Council, 2, 28, 67, 80–82, 98
- light and pass regulations, 67, 68
- Li Ho Huen Man, 43
- Li Hongzhang, 53, 94, 95, 101
- Li Jishen, 107, 108
- Li King Chow, 19
- Little, Alicia, 78, 79
- Li Yuanhong, 99, 105, 106, 107
- Lloyd George, David, 116
- Lo Cheung-ip, 43, 184n27
- Lo Cheung-shiu, 40, 43, 83, 112, 134, 136, 184n27
- Lockhart, Stewart, 54
- Lo, Grace, 58, 63, 146, 159
- Lo Hok-pang, 42

- Lo, Horace, 146, 159
 Lo, Lucy Sui-choi, 40, 61
 Lo Man-kam (*also* M. K.), 1, 3, 112–13, 138; wedding, 112; and Ho Leung's affairs, 134–36; during Japanese occupation, 149–50
 Lo, Victoria Jubilee Kam-chee (*née* Ho Tung), 62, 64, 65, 113, 134: birth, 51; and Ho Tung's ninetieth birthday, 1, 2, 3, 5; during Japanese occupation, 149, 157, 159; marriage and wedding, 112
 Lugard, Sir Frederick, 79–80
 Luk King Fo, 86
 Lum Sin-sang, 43
 Luoyang, 105, 106, 113
 Lu Yongxiang, 105
- MacDonald, Ramsay, 116
 MacDonnell, Sir Richard, 14
 MacLean, Hector Coll, 27–29, 31, 32, 80, 167
 Mak, Margaret Sau-ying, *see* Ho Tung, Margaret
 Marsh, Sir William, 72
 May, Sir Henry, 64, 92, 112
 Moncreiff, Rev. E. T., 11
 Morse, Sir Arthur, 2
mui tsai, 10, 71
 Mukden (*now* Shenyang), 37, 123, 126, 127, 128, 129, 134; arsenal, 127
 Mukden Incident, 127, 128
- Nanjing (Nanking), 98, 105, 141, 150, 154, 162; Treaty of, 8, 9; as seat of national government, 108, 126, 127
 Nationalist Party, *see* Kuomintang
 Natural Feet Society, *see* Tianzuhui
 Nethersole and Alice Memorial Hospital, 73, 97
 New Territories, 6, 65, 83, 146, 148, 159
 Ng Choy, *see* Wu Tingfang
- Ng Wei (*also* Ng A-wei), 32, 39
 Northcote, Sir Geoffrey, 170
- opium farm, 43
 opium trade, 9, 28, 29, 35, 121
- Paris Peace Conference, 85, 102
 Peak District Reservation Ordinance, 60, 79
 Peel Street, 12, 13, 19
 Piggott, Sir Francis, 79
 Po Leung Kuk, 2, 71, 72, 76
 'protected women', 10, 18
 Protecting Emperor Society, *see* Baohuanghui
 Puyi, 117
- Qingdao, 65, 91, 99, 102
 Qi Xieyuan, 105
 Queen Elizabeth, 170
 Queen Mary, 114, 115, 116, 168
 Queen Victoria, 16, 49
- Revive China Society, *see* Xingzhonghui
 Reynell, Maria, 45
 Robinson, Sir William, 51, 71
- St John's Ambulance Brigade, 5, 76
 Samshui (Sanshui), 24
 Sang Kee, 149
 Sassoon, Sir Victor, 143, 154
 Sawa, Colonel, 150
 seamen's strike, 85–87
 Shanghai, 11, 12, 45, 56, 61, 80, 94, 105; Daisy's wedding in, 113; disturbances in, 24, 85, 129, 140, 141, 142, 143; Eddie in, x, 139, 144, 152, 153–55, 158, 159; Ho Tung's properties in, 12, 99, 121, 128–29, 143, 144, 158, 161, 167; Kang Youwei in, 103; as a port, 8, 25, 35–36, 38, 53, 91, 94; post-war,

- 159, 160, 161, 162; Stock Exchange, 130, 143
- Shanhaiguan, 65, 99, 100
- Shaw, George Bernard, 132–34, 162–64, 165
- Shaw, L. N., 5, 6
- She, George, 113, 146, 156, 167, 169
- Sin Tak-fan, 79
- Stewart, Frederick, 20, 23, 40, 76, 167
- Steyn, Gladys, 56
- Stubbs, Sir Reginald, 86, 99, 102, 103, 170
- Sun Fo, 141
- Sun Yat-sen, 73, 92, 97, 101, 141; at Central School, 97; death, 108, 126; and Guangzhou government, 99, 103, 107; in Hong Kong, 103, 111; and Ho Tung, 98, 103, 105; forms Kuomintang, 99, 107; and revolution, 98
- Su Zhaozheng, 87
- Sze Tai, 50, 52; and C. H. M. Bosman, 13, 15, 16, 17; children of, 16, 17, 54; from Chongming, 11, 12; death, 49; and gambling, 31; grave of, 8, 9; as Kwok Hing-yin's concubine, 16, 18; takes Margaret as daughter-in-law, 29, 48
- Tai Yau Bank, 83, 84, 97
- Tang Caichang, 93, 94
- Tang Jiyao, 105
- Teeling, Sir William, x
- Thomas, J. H., 170
- Tianjin (Tientsin), 53, 85, 94; Hotung Baugesellschaft in, 83; Kailuan Mining Administration near, 159; Kang Youwei in, 91; Li Yuanhong in, 105; Hector MacLean in, 27, 29; Treaty of, 10
- Tianzuhui, 78, 93
- Tse, Francisco, 61
- Tse Ka-po, Simon, 61
- Tse Tsan-tai, 80, 81, 82, 98
- Tsoi Sing-nam, 32, 33
- Tung Lin Kok Yuen, 132, 139, 142, 169
- Tung Wah Hospital, 2, 68, 70, 73, 76, 80; and bubonic plague, 73–74; Eddie's amputation at, 148; as a forum for Chinese, 71, 72; and Ho Tung, 72, 74, 75, 76
- Versailles, Treaty of, 85
- Wang Jingwei, 150
- Washington Conference, 102
- Webb, Florence, 144, 147, 148, 152
- Wei Yuk, 79, 80
- Welfare League, 5
- Wembley Empire Exhibition, 5, 113, 114; Ho Tung at, 113, 114–17, 170
- Whittall, James, 16
- Wong Sik-lam, 113
- Wright, Bateson, 54
- Wu Dingchang (Wu Tingchang), 141
- Wu Peifu, 105–7, 123, 127
- Wu Tingfang (Ng Choy), 68, 80, 94, 96, 101–2; and Ho Tung, 68, 95, 99–103, 104
- Xingzhonghui, 97
- Xu Shichang (Hsu Shih-ch'ang), 99, 100–101, 102, 107
- Yan Xishan, 127
- Yeo, Florence, 45, 65, 146, 147, 148
- Yeo Kok-cheang, 146, 191n29
- Yeung Yung Chuen, 19
- Young, William, 23, 72
- Young Women's Christian Association, 5
- Yuan Shikai, 42, 84, 98
- Zhang Xueliang, 126, 127, 140, 141; and Ho Tung, 127

Zhang Zuolin (Chang Tso-lin), 99, 105,
106, 126, 127; and Ho Tung, 105;
and Robbie, 123, 124

Zhu Pu, 12, 181n6