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June 2, 2009 in Coming Distractions, Watching the China Watchers by The China Beat | 1 comment

When we first saw the Shanghai Daily’s headline on "Covering the China Beat,” we thought it might be a piece about us, instead it was a review of (lively and acerbic Access Asia’s) Paul French’s new book, Through the Looking Glass: China’s Foreign Journalists from Opium Wars to Mao. During June, French will be on the road in China flogging the book (check out the schedule of appearances here). French also keeps a personal blog at China Rhyming.

(Also, it should be noted that, in the spirit of headlines with multiple references, we chose this piece’s headline from this book.)

By Paul French

Five foreign correspondents of the past I never tired of reading while doing my research for this book:

1) **JOP Bland** – the man who (about 1906) complained there were too many books on China being written and then promptly wrote about half a dozen himself (can’t not feel a kindred spirit there).

2) **BL Putnam Weale** – who decided mocking the pompous was not enough and dedicated his life to getting involved in one warlord intrigue after another until he got himself butchered and assassinated in Tianjin in some dodgy deal.

3) **Aleko Lilius** – who came to China with no other ambition than to find the most ruthless, cutthroat and down and dirty pirates of the South China Seas and hang out with them, did and wrote some great reports and a book about it.

4) **Edna Lee Booker** – the first “girl reporter” on the China Press who famously disregarded the advice of the old China Hands and got the first interview ever given to a woman by the Old Marshal Zhang Zuolin, at the time China’s most feared Warlord before doing it again securing an interview with Wu “Jade Marshal” Peifu.

5) **Peter Fleming** – for the sheer gall of writing a book called One’s Company when he was never alone and went everywhere immaculately attired and for creating the image in his books of travelling light while always carrying with him a typewriter, a box of books, a gramophone, multiple bottles of brandy and his essential supplies of potted grouse and Stilton from Fortnum and Mason.

Five foreign correspondents I found myself wishing had written less:

1) **G.E Morrison** – a nasty and vicious man at heart who used people, stole their thunder and employed gossip and rumour to destroy careers.

2) **George Bronson Rea** – a notorious, vindictive and nasty right winger – wrote a book called The Case for Manchoukuo – ‘nough said I hope.

3) **Freda Utley** – basically Utley divided everyone she worked with in the foreign press corps into two groups – those that she claims fancied her and those that refused to flirt with her. If you refused to flirt you got trashed pure and simple. She was a total narcissist.

4) **Issachar Jacox Roberts** – the Southern Baptist missionary preacher from Tennessee who had originally taught Hong Xiouquan, the leader of the Taiping, Christianity in Guangzhou. Roberts wrote in the Chinese Missionary Gleaner: “Behold, what God hath wrought! Not only opened China externally for the reception of the teachers of the gospel, but now one has risen up among themselves, who presents the true God for their adoration, and casts down idols with a mighty hand, to whom thousands and tens of thousands of people are collecting!” If he’d stayed at home and kept quiet it could have saved everyone a lot of trouble.
5) **The entire Japanese Press Corps in Nanjing in 1937** – who virtually all to a man denied any atrocities had taken place until a few grudgingly changed their tune in the 1970s and 1980s and admitted what they had seen.

*Five of the best by now totally forgotten China books from the early-to-mid 1900s:*

1) **Jay Denby**, (1910) *Letters of a Shanghai Griffin*, Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh – China books are all so horrendously serious and self-important these days – Denby just made fun of taipans, pompous Shanghailanders and stupid diplomats, venal businessmen, etc. – we need a bit more of that.

2) **Jacques Marcuse**, (1968) *The Peking Papers: Leaves from the Notebook of a China Correspondent*, London: Arthur Barker. – a lot of memoirs these days are written by people who spent a year or three in China. Marcuse originally arrived in Shanghai in the 1930s to work for *Le Monde* and was still representing AFP in Peking in the 1960s. He was a member of the Chunking Contingent during the war but never became a fellow-traveller; though he was not slow to comment on those who did, describing Rewi Alley as "eminently useable rather than eminently useful", the best description of him to date I think.

3) **Ralph Shaw**, (1973) *Sin City*, London: Everest Books – they’ll never be another memoir of Shanghai like Shaw’s – he switches from some useful analysis of the Japan invasion of Shanghai to his wild nightlife and sexual shenanigans in the space of a couple of paragraphs. This really should be reprinted to show all those hacks that write about Shanghai returning to the riotous thirties why they’re talking nonsense.

4) **Ilona Ralf Sues**, (1944) *Shark’s Fin and Millet*, New York: Garden City Publishing. – her politics went a bit dodgy towards the end but she has some great stories – interviewing Big Eared Du for instance and getting down among the opium smugglers.

5) **Teddy White and Annalee Jacoby**, (1946), *Thunder Out of China*, New York: William Sloane. – *Thunder out of China* sold by the bucket-load when it was published – over half a million copies at its first printing. White and Jacoby were under intense pressure throughout the war from Henry Luce to big up the Generalissimo and ignore the corruption – after the war they wrote what they’d really seen.