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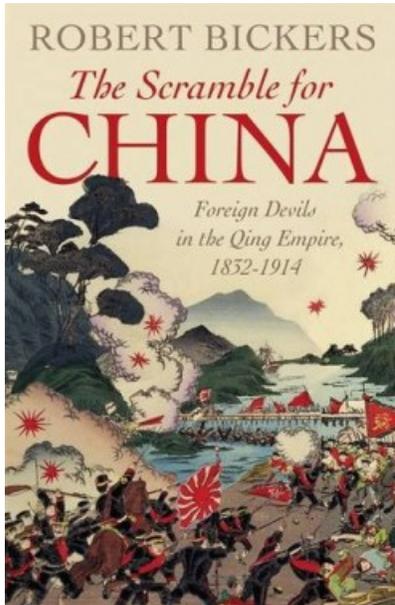
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## Q&A: Robert Bickers, Author of *The Scramble for China*

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June 1, 2011 in [Books](#), [Interview](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)  
By Jeffrey Wasserstrom



Several months ago, I was lucky enough to get my hands on an advance copy of *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1852-1914*, Robert Bickers' fascinating new book. Published in the United Kingdom and most other parts of the world in February, this work will be released in the United States later this month. In anticipation, I caught up with Robert (an old friend and sometime [co-author](#) of mine, as well as a past contributor to [China Beat](#)) and asked him some questions about the book. A stylishly written and carefully researched work, it contains everything from lively accounts of battles to insightful ruminations on the very different ways some pivotal events and incidents (e.g., the looting of artifacts from Beijing palaces) are remembered inside and outside of China. It also includes an illuminating discussion of the origins and spread of the treaty-port system. This makes it fitting that he sent his answers to the questions I emailed him (I only caught up with him virtually, as he was across the Pacific from me during our interview) while gazing out at the Huangpu River, the most important waterway in Shanghai, the most celebrated and notorious of China's onetime treaty ports.

**JW:** Your last [solo-authored book](#) was an innovative contribution to the "biography of a nobody" or micro-history genre, whereas *The Scramble for China* is quite a different sort of venture. What was the biggest challenge of moving away from the history of a life toward a more event-driven work?

**RB:** Up to a point it's not too radical a shift — people and lived experience lie at the heart of what I wanted to do here, and do in general, and I hope that comes through. And both books are similar in that they're in the narrative mode. Stories are what interest me. I did have to rein myself in from making this a different book, focusing entirely on Hugh Hamilton Lindsay and his world. At one stage it was an option I contemplated. But I'll return to Lindsay in a different way later this year and try and do him more justice, given how interesting he is. Writing about Maurice Tinkler in *Empire Made Me* was its own challenge, given the haphazard and incomplete sources, but surveying 80 years of the history of the foreign presence in China obviously presents its own difficulties.

**JW:** Do you see your three individually written books to date as constituting a trilogy of sorts? There's a logic to seeing them this way, with [the first](#) focusing in large part on a community (Britons in China), the second on an individual, and this one dealing much more with nations,

or rather empires. But perhaps you think of this book as more akin to one of your edited or co-edited books. Any thoughts?

**RB:** I hadn't thought of it like that, but they do inter-relate, as you say, though each has a very different structure and style.

**JW:** What was the hardest part of the new book to write — and which the easiest?

**RB:** Getting started, unusually for me. I was stuck for months — I got happily lost in 1830s Canton until Lindsay showed me a way out, and showed me that I should of course start in Shanghai, on what became the Bund. Easiest: it's never easy. But I most enjoyed the wild and transformative 1860s: Robert Hart enters the fray, the Taiping are rolling around Jiangnan, Europeans are mad for China, and the Zongli Yamen drives reform. It's a fascinating decade.

**JW:** Which part of your argument do you see as most original, as going against the grain most of how an issue tends to be treated in English language works, Chinese language works, or both?

**RB:** Perhaps that the humiliation narrative worked both ways, and always did. The 'era of our degradation' Lindsay called the British position in early 1830s Canton. Lindsay, Harry Parkes and many others talked and acted upon a sense of their humiliation, as individuals, as Britons — and as China Britons — and as agents of the British state. Driven by this they sought concessions from the Qing, or in Parkes's case sought war. Presenting Parkes as a war-monger isn't new: presenting him as an Old China Hand, who had nowhere else to go, and a man acutely conscious of his dignity and place as such possibly is.