

Edited Oct 30, 1993

CHAPTER 7

"Far Eastern Review" (1943-46)

I. The Resplendent Land

Twenty million Soviet people died in World War II but for us in Britain's X Service in the Far East it was, as the song says "a lovely war". This arose from the high security rating of our work; none of our documents or equipment must ever fall into the hands of the enemy. So we had been assured before leaving England that, as far as front line duty was concerned, our slogan was "last in, first out".

Thus our next move was to Colombo, Ceylon, then known as "The Resplendent Land", not as a scene of internecine strife. Our station, code-named "Andrews" was surrounded by bougainvillea, a colourful shrub, and papaya and palm trees. It was further beautified by bevy's of WRENS (Womens' Royal Auxiliary Naval Service) in snappy blue and white, well-cut uniforms. It was a great life if you weakened, as I did, especially with an attractive girl named Phyl. Phyl was not a particularly political person, though she had undertones of a working-class outlook on life and we both enjoyed swimming at nearby beaches where the surf broke over the coral reefs. She was a woman of independent mind - and body - capable of fending for herself without resorting to the common WREN strategy of "my fiancé is a boxing instructor". I wonder whether I might have thrown myself more wholeheartedly into my work if she had not been around.

Soon after our unit reached Ceylon, we four longer "Sprog" P/Os, were promoted to the rank of Flying Officer. Though our unit was once more on a combined operations station, this time we were guests of the Senior Service, the Royal Navy. But despite this we were no longer subjected to the individual bearer and tea-service routine imposed on us by the British Army in India, at Abbotabad. Almost immediately we were sent out with a party of our "Wops" (Wireless Operators) on an aircraft carrier. We were to make a strike at Japanese-occupied Sumatra in what was then Netherlands East Indies. The trip was uneventful so far as our RAF unit was concerned. We fed our intelligence findings to the Fleet Air Arm planes and watched them being catapulted off the flight-deck and returning to it. It looked exciting and dangerous. But the young pilots had never been promised a life

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

of safety and they took it cheerfully in their stride, reminding me of those crazy gremlin types at Rugby. Our X work was commended by the fleet commandant and the pilots reported a successful strike at Japanese targets, after which the captain issued an order to "splice the mainbrace". This meant a double tot of the daily issue of rich navy rum, one of the world's better drinks. On other occasions, when things were quiet, the captain invited us lowly RAF types to mingle with naval officers for drinks before dinner. He had elegant quarters and I was almost inclined to believe the quartermaster's story that the list of naval supplies contained the following item: "Pots, chamber, gold-embossed, Admirals, for the use of." Again the disparity of conditions of officers and men struck me, so that I was less surprised than shocked to learn that the ratings normally referred to officers as "pigs". Not that our own quarters were luxurious. I was assigned the fourth storey of a five storey bunk where the air was far from fresh. To escape from the heat and the height I took a camp bed on deck, lying on which I could gaze up at brilliantly starlit tropical skies such as I had never seen before.

Mission accomplished, we put into Trincomalee on the north-east coast of Ceylon, 150 odd miles as the crow flies from Colombo on the south-west coast. There would be no more work for us R.A.F. landlubbers until we returned to our base at "Andrews" and it would take some days for the carrier to steam round Ceylon and get there, so I obtained leave to travel overland. This was the first of a series of hitch-hiking expeditions to see something of Sri Lanka, "The Resplendent Land". It proved worthy of the name.

The road ran through the jungle against which the people of Sri Lanka have fought for centuries. After getting lifts from service vehicles, mostly of the navy, I got stuck in an out of the way spot towards the end of the day and had to take a public bus to the nearest town, somewhere in the Central Province. I struck up a conversation with an elderly man, wizened, nut brown, lithe and lively, with quite good English. He turned out to be a retired forester. I explained that I was heading for Colombo, in no great hurry, and when he discovered that I was interested in his country and his people he spontaneously invited me to break my journey and spend the night at his little hideout in the woods. I jumped at the chance. We left the bus at his town, where he had parked his old jalopy and drove, despite a missing cylinder or two, to his cabin. It was in a clearing, surrounded by palm trees, papayas and breadfruit trees, with a patch of vegetable garden. I was graciously entertained. First a bath at the well, pouring buckets of water over myself, still wearing my underpants in the modest Eastern style, then

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

dressing in a borrowed lungæ, a chequered cotton sarong. We dined on curried wild boar cooked in coconut oil and talked: of Hanuman the legendary King of the monkeys, who, my host said, symbolised the aboriginal people, the Veddas. At last it was time to sleep and my host insisted on my taking his bed. Next morning before breakfast he took me to the riverside, assuring me there were no alligators in these parts, for an early morning swim, in which we were joined downstream by an elephant or two. This brief interlude in my trip from Trinco to Colombo was one of many examples of gracious friendliness from a people from whom one might well have expected suspicion if not hatred. - After all I was in the uniform of the armed forces of a country which had seized and occupied this land for a century and a half.

I found this frequently during my 10 months in Ceylon. At Andrews we worked on a system of three watches of eight hours each, doing two days from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., two evenings from 4 p.m. to midnight and then two from midnight to 8 a.m. On coming off the second of the last two watches we had 48 hours off. I did not go to bed but spruced up and hitch-hiked to historic or scenic parts of the island, whose history I had been swotting up.

I was eager to join a tennis club, preferably a Singalese one, so as to meet local people. One day I happened to cycle past such a place and went in to make enquiries about membership. I was kept waiting a few minutes at the steps of the clubhouse until an imposing looking Ceylonese gentleman emerged. He looked down at me from the top of the steps, whisky and soda in hand, and explained in excellent English that Englishmen were not admitted to membership. Ceylonese only. This was a type of exclusivism I could understand and did not object to. We talked. I made clear that tennis was not the only aim I had in mind. In the end the gentleman handed me his card. He was a lawyer. He suggested that we might continue our conversation at a more appropriate place and invited me to dinner at his home. There I learnt something of the history of the country and its traditions, with no punches pulled about British colonialism. We moved on to other matters including an upcoming birthday: that of no one less than the Buddha himself. This was the festival of Wesak, on which occasion pious Buddhists, if they could, made the pilgrimage to Adam's Peak, in the centre of Ceylon and south-east of Colombo. I expressed an interest and my host put his car, a luxurious chauffeur-driven Daimler at my disposal.

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

I was called for late at night, for the ascent of the 7,350 foot mountain was to be made by the light of the full moon so that the summit should be reached at dawn, which of course was the time at which the Buddha was born. It was a steep climb, but there were iron railings to grip at the most precipitous part near the summit. In front and behind me on the narrow mountain path were white-clad figures in flowing robes and I felt improperly dressed in my khaki shorts. Every now and then the clang of a bell sounded down the mountainside. I learnt later that pious pilgrims struck the bell on the summit once for each pilgrimage they had made. Gradually it grew light and all round one could see conical peaks thrusting their heads through cotton wool clouds. I reached the top, rested and clambered down to meet the car and the chauffeur again. He was mechanically-minded and did not believe in this Buddhist nonsense, he said. My friendship with the lawyer continued. Respect for other cultures does not cancel out colonialism, but it often made my stay in the East rewarding.

My contacts were not limited to Daimler owners. One day I was cycling along and saw the signboard of a trade union office. I went in and once more was amazed at the unsuspecting openness with which I was greeted once I made my sympathies clear. In fact it was not very long before I was introduced to Peter Keuneman, the Cambridge-educated General Secretary of the Communist Party. Our relations soon became political. When on the night shift I recklessly smuggled out from the office intelligence reports on the political situation on the Indian sub-continent, secretly replacing them after he had read them.

Keuneman was a Burger, a Eurasian descendant of mixed Singalese and Dutch origin. He came from a prominent family, a brother being a Chief Justice. Keuneman told me of the hazardous life of the coconut plantation workers. Though they could swarm with astonishing agility up to the top of palm trees, as I had seen, it would have been too tiring and time consuming for them to climb up and down each tree separately. So parallel ropes, one three feet above the other were stretched from the top of one tree to the top of the next, forming an aerial tight-rope with a hand rail. Sometimes a rope broke or a man slipped and crashed dozens of feet to the ground. Protection of the plantation workers was one of the main tasks of the trade unions organized by the Communist Party.

I also got a glimpse of the life of the rubber plantation workers. This was on a weekend visit to an estate. The local British planters, like the old clubman in Bimli, craved more social life in their hilltop houses

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

and offered hospitality to British officers. And I craved a chance to see something of their lives and that of their workers. There was no lack of material comfort in the well-appointed house, overrun with servants supervised by the planter's ladylike wife. But a guided tour of the estate was spiritually sickening. Rubber for tires was at a premium in wartime and the planters resorted to "slaughter tapping". Instead of limiting the frequency of the tapping and the quantity of latex extracted, as in peacetime, they drained every drop they could. This produced much rubber in little time, but it soon killed the trees. It seemed a wonder that it did not kill the tappers, too. "They're all Tamils," the planter explained. "The Sinhalese are too damned lazy. Once they have a patch of ground and a breadfruit and a papaya tree, they won't do a lick of work. But these Tamils leave India because they have no land. And here we've got them where we want them." Where he wanted them was in the "coolie lines," living in miserable shacks forming rural slums, and working long hours for a pittance. I had put myself in the false position of a guest, so I held my peace. I did not accept the lady's pressing invitation to come again.

Of course my purpose in being in Ceylon was not to see the sights. It was to gather air intelligence. I believe I did my job with average competence, probably not much more, though the political pep-talk I had been given before leaving U.K. by old Bob of the Communist Party, had called for going all out in the war against fascism. Looking back I feel I might have done better work if not so intrigued by the people and history of Ceylon - to say nothing of distractions from the sister service.

Other officers had other interests, such as buying jewels to smuggle home at the end of their three year tour overseas. And the unit adjutant, who had official business in India did a little private business on the side. He discovered that Ceylon was suffering from a serious shortage of sewing needles. On a trip to Madras he bought a caseful. On his return the Ceylon customs officer asked him suspiciously what was in his extraordinarily heavy wooden crate. He whispered in the officer's ear: "You've heard of radar, haven't you?" Radar was very hush-hush at the time and the customs man may or may not have heard of it. But he nodded knowingly and put his mysterious chalk mark on the case. It went through unopened and duty-free - and the Adj. made a killing on the Ceylon needle market.

The unit C.O., on the other hand, was honest to a fault. I played a bit of field hockey in those days and occasionally put my byke on a service lorry going close to the field and then cycled the rest of the way. The C.O.

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

heard of this and suspected that I was taking the lorry off its route and wasting precious petrol. He called me in and asked me about it. To put me at my ease he invited me to sit down, not address him as "Sir" but have a heart-to-heart chat. I assured him that the lorry had never departed from its route at my order or request. To clinch the point I told him of having worked my way across the Atlantic on an oil tanker in order to get home and join up. The C.O. was a regular who had seen service in the Navy; he believed me and we parted on the best of terms. He commanded respect, as did my next C.O., unlike the "goolie chit" type at Bimli.

II. The Road to Mandalay

After some ten months in Ceylon I was once more assigned to a sea voyage with a party of "wops". This time on a cruiser. We were sent on a sweep of the Straits of Malacca. About halfway to the entrance to the straits we sighted a small blob on the ocean. Was it a Japanese submarine? No, it turned out to be a tiny wooden boat containing three men, blackened by the sun, thin as skeletons. We picked them up and took them on board. They were so weak from exposure and starvation they could hardly clamber up the rope ladder. They had evidently come from the nearby Andaman Islands, which I knew to be a penal colony. Probably prisoners trying to escape. My heart went out to them but there was nothing I could do. I can still see them in my mind's eye. We passed uneventfully up and down the Straits, peering through glasses at the beautiful rocky islands and sandy beaches. Then suddenly we received orders to proceed to Rangoon.

First we steamed to Akyab on the Arakan coast. The miles of golden sands, with 10,000 foot mountains rising from them, were swarming with the new amphibious vehicles on which we hitched joy rides, if joy can be associated with such monsters. Then on to Rangoon now reported to be quiet, the Japanese having evacuated the city and moved far south down the "beard" of Burma. The city was different from what I had expected, its population being one third Chinese, one third Indian and only one third Burmese. There was also, of course, considerable British influence visible in the more well-to-do parts. And our unit, with others of the same R.A.F. Wing, was stationed on the golf course, while the officers' mess was in a nearby vacant British-owned private hotel. Japanese resistance in this theatre was now virtually ended, thanks mainly to the drive from Assam of

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

African troops from the British colonies and to uprisings in the Japanese rear led by Burmese guerillas. So while the Wops kept an ear on the airwaves the main task of the officers seemed to be to make their mess as comfortable and elegant as possible. Local Buddhists sought Nirvana, attainment of joy through absence of desire, but our R.A.F. officers had a different approach to joy. The idea was to seek it and satisfy it, mainly in the form of wine, women and song.

Wine was no problem, and for other ranks there was beer. It was my duty as Officer in charge of Welfare and Education to supervise the unloading of beer at the docks. It was good Australian stuff of higher alcoholic content than the present legal maximum of four and a half percent. My task was to see that the number of bottles delivered to stores did not fall unreasonably short of that listed; a few "breakages", of course, were unavoidable, and every now and then I also had to check the number of men unloading. Those missing in action were always to be found sleeping it off under the trucks. Such goings on were mere peccadillos compared with those of the officers.

There were no Wrens, in Rangoon, but there were plenty of "Wosbies", an acronym derived from Women's Auxiliary Service - Burma. They were Anglo-Burmese girls, petite, dainty and golden brown. But sex is colour-blind and it was decided that we needed a dance floor. The upper floor of the hotel had evidently been a large lounge, which must once have been covered with carpets. But when we arrived the floor was of bare boards, good solid wood, in which Burma abounds, but not smooth enough for dancing. An "old Burma hand" came up with the answer. Hire a dozen coolies, give each one a beer bottle (empty) and have him scrape the boards with the bottom edge of the bottle, tilted at 45 degrees. The Indians (Burmese and Chinese would not do such work) squatted on the floor from morning till night, rubbing the glass edge back and forth, from one end of the vast room to the other. After days of such labour, at camp-followers' rate of pay, the rough boards had a surface as smooth as parquet. Then the necessary soft lights were installed by unit electricians, a bar was built in one corner and small tables and chairs were set around the edge of the floor. The result was a regular palais de danse with none of the usual licensing restrictions. The Wosby nurses, typists and secretaries were contacted through their British matrons and officers and the paradise of the western pagans was within reach. Some minor problems remained. A piano was needed. "Easy," said our "old Burma hand". "Liberate one." The extended meaning of

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

the word liberation, it turned out, meant go and steal one from the empty house of a wealthy evacuee. Service transport and a working party of Indian airmen were provided and I soon found myself engaged in a new type of welfare work - looting.

I had no compunctions at the time, for the owners of these elegant lakeside villas were directors of the big Burma shipping, oil, jewel mining and timber companies. In fact I myself was guilty of vandalism when it came to timber. Our sleeping quarters on the ground floor of the hotel were furnished with massive sideboards running the length of a room. They were made of the wonderful wood for which Burma is famous, teak. Finding some of the sideboards too long we thought it would be a good idea to divide them into sections, one for each room, and we tried to saw them up. Fortunately we found the wood unyielding to our blades and we could do no more than dent it.

In addition to my self-imposed duties as Education and Welfare Officer I got saddled with the job of Mess Officer. But my term of office did not last long because of a series of faux pas. First there was always too much money in the cash box. I pored over the books but could not find where the extra money came from. I consulted the Wing Accountant, but he, too failed to clear up the mystery. Finally we took the question to the Wing Commander. Like the C.O. at Colombo he was a Regular who had risen from the ranks after many years of service. He was a trifle dour and not altogether at ease with the long-haired intellectuals who were assigned to intelligence during the war. Still he was a decent, upright man, sympathised with my financial predicament, but was unable to put his finger on the problem. Somehow I solved it myself in a flash of inspiration during the middle of a sleepless night. Some item of regular income or expenditure was either not entered or entered in the wrong column. Another gaffe concerned the purchase of vegetables in the local market, to which I occasionally accompanied the quartermaster. There I noticed certain vegetables I had eaten in China, such as aubergines (egg-plant or, as they were known in Burma, brinjals) and bean-sprouts. I thought these would enrich the conventional British repast of meat and potatoes. An erroneous assumption. "What's this bloody stuff?" was the reaction. In those days before Chinese restaurants existed in every town in Britain, these outlandish vegetables were unknown except among vegetarians and such cranks. Back to potatoes we went, two or three times a day.

But my final blunder was the biggest. In town at the bookshop, where I discovered a treasure trove of

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

Trollope and Henry James, I got talking to a couple of Americans. They turned out to be congenial characters and as their uniforms were decorated with a variety of multi-coloured badges and flashes I thought they must be of suitable rank to be invited back to the mess for a meal. Next morning I was on the carpet, not before the Wing Commander, who was a technical officer, but the Squadron Leader in charge of Wing Intelligence. "What do you mean by bringing those Yankee N.C.O.s into a British officers' mess?" he asked in the righteous indignation of a High Priest finding the Holy of Holies desecrated. It seemed that my American friends were technical sergeants. I was soon relieved of the burden of a mess officer's duties.

Underlying the squadron-leader's fury lay anti-Americanism, which was widespread in the British forces. I, having lived in the US for years was free from it. In fact some of my best friends are Americans. But I was an exception. During convivial evenings in the mess, when the whisky and beer had been flowing a while and there were no ladies present, there was singing. A favourite song, to the tune, oddly enough, of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic", was one boasting of the heroism of the British bomber crews - and the cowardice of the American.

It ran:

We're flying Flying Fortresses at 40,000 feet
(sung three times for good measure, then)
We've bags of ammunition and a teeny weeny bomb.

And the true blue British riposte:

We're flying Avro-Lancasters at zero zero feet
(again three times)
We've fuck-all ammunition but a bloody big bomb.

This was an outrageous slander. I repeat it not to give it credence. It deserves none. But it says something of the temper of the times - and of the squadron leader who dressed me down. There were other songs about other nations. The South Africans, for instance, who, it was sung, were safely at home while the British defeated the Italians in North Africa. It ran:

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

"There's 40,000 Springboks in the Old Transvaal
But fuck all in Mersa Matruh."

But this was sung almost affectionately to the old Boer melody Sari Maré and the Afrikaner major attached to the wing was accepted as one of us. I had no time for crude anti-Americanism and invited personnel of the O.S.S. (Office of Strategic Services) to meetings of the East and West Association which some of us left-wingers set up. That is a complicated story.

Being landed so suddenly in Rangoon I was without contact with local people. But I read in the locally published newsheet of the British Military Government, about the A.F.P.F.L. - the Anti-fascist People's Freedom League. It was evidently a broad united front against the Japanese invaders of Burma and the fact that it was mentioned in such a publication meant that it must be important. How was I to get in touch with it and learn something more about Burmese resistance than could be learned in our mess or on the golf course? I had an ancient Rolleicord box-camera and on the pretext of photographing scenes of "native life" I ventured into the market places and poorer sections of Rangoon. I knew not a word of Burmese but went on the assumption that Burmese intellectuals would know English - and wear glasses. After approaching half a dozen be-spectacled young men I struck lucky. The young man looked at me suspiciously when I spoke innocently of having heard about the A.F.P.F.L. but he finally gave me an address. There I was given another address and ended up meeting Thakin Than Tun.

Thakin in Burmese means master and the Thakins were a nationalist party who used the word ironically to indicate that they, Burmese nationalists, were really the masters of their country, even though it was a colony of Britain. Than Tun had by then outgrown his nationalism and become leader of one group of Burmese communists. He and a friend had married sisters, the friend being Aung San, popular leader of Burmese anti-Japanese guerrillas who played a key role in wrecking the Japanese war-machine as the British-led African troops advanced into Burma from the north. At this time Mountbatten had sent Aung San a congratulatory telegram addressing him as "Your excellency." Than Tun told me this and much more. It was an heroic story and I asked him if he would be willing to tell it to the airmen of our Wing, his English being quite good. In fact he had studied for a year at a normal school with the intention of becoming a teacher. Than Tun agreed enthusiastically,

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

saying it was urgently necessary to let members of the British forces know of the existence of their Burmese allies. I broached the matter casually to the Wing Commander, telling him I had run into a "Burmese school teacher", which was stretching the truth a bit, and he'd be willing to "give the lads a lecture on Burmese guerrilla operations." "Wouldn't say anything anti-British, would he?" "Oh, no Sir."

So I rounded up a liberal-minded army major and a leftish army sergeant to form an ad hoc committee, with the major agreeing to take the chair. This was at the time of a democratic upsurge in the British forces overseas following the formation of a Labour government in Britain in July 1945. A "Forces Parliament" had been convened in Cairo and an "East and West Association" been formed in the forces in Calcutta. Still, only twenty-five people came to hear Than Tun speak in the club house on the golf course. But he spoke well and after staying in the background throughout I concluded a little thank you speech with the suggestion that we should do this sort of thing again, along the lines of the Calcutta East and West Association. Carried unanimously. An organising group was formed - and three weeks later we had a meeting addressed by Than Tun's brother-in-law, Aung San. Thirteen hundred people turned up in the hall of the Rangoon Y.M.C.A. In accordance with the name East and West, publicity had been done among the local Burmese, Indians and Chinese as well as all ranks of the British forces. I had also invited the American O.S.S., (then engaged in military intelligence and sabotage against the Axis powers), whose sign-board I had passed while out cycling one day. Aung San was deservedly famous among the local people and he soon became known to the western element of the Association, which flourished in the political climate of the times. We had meetings every other week in the YMCA, addressed alternately by Eastern and Western speakers, the subjects ranging from Burmese history and drama to the political situation in Britain. This last was dealt with by the Labour M.P. Tom Driberg, on a visit to Rangoon. After each talk there were questions and discussion from the floor. This enabled kindred spirits to spot each other and I actually met three former members of the International Brigade then serving in the army. The Eastern part of the audience, besides Burmese, Indians and Chinese, included members of Minority Nationalities, such as Kachins and Karens. The latter were mostly Christians and spoke English well, having been educated in mission schools. They invited some of us to a village a few miles outside the city, where the wooden houses, some on stilts, were surrounded by a high thicket wall of impenetrable brambles. They entertained us with British songs, including "A

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

Hundred Pipes and All", which to their delight and mystification we recorded on a cumbersome wire-recorder - the gadget which had rendered obsolete us graduates of Firth's Japanese phonetics course at S.O.A.S. On another occasion we invited to our golf course station the choir of a Chinese Girls High School, which appeared dressed in pure white and stole the hearts of our airmen.

The Association enriched our lives socially and culturally more effectively than the Officers' Mess night club could, especially as it involved mainly other ranks. But it had undertones which were not to the liking of all, particularly the political arm of the military police. This was especially so after the appearance of a couple of pamphlets on the Burmese resistance movement, written and printed with the aid of Than Tun and his friends and circulated at East and West meetings.

Meanwhile, on expectedly offered leave, I went to Burmese friends for advice and introductions, then set off for Mandalay. Mandalay was a disappointment despite its hundreds of pagodas. It had been badly battered in the war, though the battlemented citadel still stood. But I enjoyed meeting the left-wing Buddhist magazine editor, a member of the A.F.P.F.L. His delicate-looking wife smoked a cigar as fat as a corn cob, the ash of which burnt a hole in my trousers the size of a silver dollar. To atone for this arson the family took me in a boat on the Irrawaddy where long paddle boats raced and hurled water and insults at each other in celebration of some festival.

Among other trivia I recall that at a delicious home-cooked lunch there was one spoon for the soup which family members and guests alike put in their mouths. I puzzled over how it was that despite such unhygienic practices the Burmese lived and laughed. They have, in fact, the reputation of being "the Irish of the East". I found them delightful in many ways, one being the apparent equality of the sexes. The women certainly controlled the family purse and were not prudish. At sundown they sluiced themselves down at wells in the street, the bucketsful of water making their sarongs cling to the skin and giving their bodies the effect of slim statues. Then they gracefully slid out of the wet garment and into a clean dry one.

But my memories of Mandalay are not all visions of beauty. My new found friend the editor took me to visit a prison. Prison, in fact, is too good a word for it. Human zoo would be closer to the mark. The inmates were in cages built of iron bars, a couple of dozen in a twenty foot square. Some of them stood holding the bars looking as if they were waiting for food. Others squatted or lay on the thin straw covering the ground. Their hair

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

was long and matted; they must have lacked the most elementary means of keeping clean. I walked around this cage unfit for monkeys let alone men, ashamed to meet the eyes of those inside. After returning to Rangoon I sent a letter to the new Labour Party Premier, Clement Attlee, about these inhuman conditions in what was then still a British colony. There was no reply.

From Mandalay I went to another, far more ancient capital, Pagan, a hundred miles to the south-west. Founded in the 9th century as a holy Buddhist city of temples and palaces, it was occupied in the 13th by Kublai Khan and burned by the Shans, a mountain people of Burma, a hundred years later. But it was water, not fire that brought about the final downfall of Pagan. For the Irrawaddy River, on whose banks it had originally been built shifted its course and left the city high and dry. But its palaces and temples, visible from miles off, gleam like white marble in the sun. That is an optical illusion, for they are made of brick thickly coated with whitewash of such enamel-like texture that they shine with a brilliant glaze.

From Pagan I returned to Mandalay. While there a few days before, I had met members of the Youth Section of the A.F.P.F.L. and had given a donation to the commune in which they lived a frugal life, while organizing the young people of the area for patriotic activity. Their leaders had been guerrilla fighters against the Japanese. To my embarrassment they had spent most of my money on a feast at which I was the unwilling guest of honour. Now, back in Mandalay I went to the local R.A.F. Accounts office to draw the money needed to buy my train ticket back to Rangoon. For some reason I cannot recall I simply could not get a penny. What was I to do? I must be back on time. I went to the left-wing editor for a loan but he, like all honest left-wing editors, was broke. There was nothing for it but to subdue my shame and ask the poverty-stricken Youth Section for part of my money back, promising to return it the moment I got back to Rangoon. It was a most mortifying experience - though I did of course return the money with interest as soon as I could.

Soon after returning to Rangoon I was transferred to Hong Kong.

Why this sudden move? Was it routine or did it have political implications? I would soon know.

III. Hong Kong - The Fragrant Port

My transfer was to another, smaller unit of the same wing in Hong Kong. The operations room and airmen's billets were in one house and the officers' mess in another, nearby. Both were on The Peak, the hill dominating Victoria, the most exclusive residential area of the colony. At that time no Chinese were allowed to live there, except as servants. Our mess was a luxuriously appointed private house. The lavatory seats were upholstered in green baize, material too itchy for comfort in a tropical climate where prickly heat was prevalent without any such stimulus.

The war with Japan was over, but there was still a trickle of traffic to monitor in outlying parts. But the work load was light. So I called on the Christian-socialist Bishop of Hong Kong, who had helped me find a temporary teaching job in 1941. When I told him of my interest in meeting progressive and patriotic Chinese he put me in touch with the local representatives of the New China News Agency, known as Xinhua. Xinhua was not only tolerated by the British authorities, and allowed to operate, it was looked on with some favour and respect, because of its head, Raymond Wong. During the anti-Japanese war Wong had been a guerrilla leader of the East River Column, which had saved a number of shot-down British fliers from falling into Japanese hands, guiding them to safety through enemy lines. He proved to be a lively, intelligent, quick-witted, humorous young man and he happily introduced me to people very different from those on the Peak. So I was saved from the limited life of the unit, with its light work load and not too congenial company in the mess, though the C.O. a junior technical officer, a Scot, was not only pleasant but highly competent in his field.

One day, a few weeks after my arrival in Hong Kong, he called me in. "I've had a signal about you, Crook," he said. "I don't know what it's all about. Here," and he handed it across his desk. It read: "Flight Lieutenant Crook" (I had, like my mates, been promoted from Flying Officer, while in Rangoon) "will report at once, without fail, by air to A.H.Q. Singapore." I was always amused by the military use of that future tense, "will". When the upper echelons said something would happen, like a divine prophecy, there was no doubt about it. It was a statement of fact before the fact. I smiled. But this was no laughing matter. The C.O. said he didn't know what it was all about, but I thought I did.

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

There were two aspects to the matter, closely connected. One was that the military political police in Rangoon must have been investigating the East and West Association, particularly its relationship with such "subversive" elements as Than Tun and Aung San. The other, that the Hong Kong unit had recently switched to monitoring not Japanese but Soviet radio communications. Churchill had just made his Fulton speech, in which he said: "A shadow has fallen upon the scenes so lately lighted by the Allied victory... an Iron Curtain has descended across the Continent" (of Europe). "Our valiant ally" had become the enemy of a future war. Somebody somewhere up there had evidently concluded that I could not be relied on to change sides.

IV. Singapore - Whisky Galore

So I set off for Singapore. The signal was terse and peremptory, with its "at once, without fail and by air." But it did not take into account that a mere Flight Lieutenant (Acting, Temporary) did not have much clout with overworked Air Traffic Control and overloaded aircraft. So I somehow found myself delayed for ten days en route, at Saigon.

After putting my name down for the next available flight to Singapore I registered at the hotel assigned to R.A.F. officers in transit. It was full of French businessmen and their ladies and others who claimed, to be Swiss. The European atmosphere and food was a pleasant change from cuisine a la R.A.F. Exploring Saigon I was surprised and delighted to find that it was really two cities, one of them, Cholon, being Chinese. For some reason I wished to buy an alarm clock there and discovered that what the shopkeepers considered hard currency was cigarettes. Wandering around the streets of Saigon proper the sight of French soldiers suddenly reminded me that Britain was not the only colonial power in the East. I was all the more surprised, after this to see a company of soldiers marching with Prussian precision and talking German. They were ex-P.O.W.s, once members of Rommel's Afrika Korps, now enrolled in the French Foreign Legion. What did the poilus think and feel about that, I wondered. Our former allies the Soviets were to be regarded as enemies and France's enemies were to be allies against the Vietnamese. The world was indeed in a state of flux and re-alignment. So, I was soon to discover, was my personal position.

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

Arriving in Singapore I reported to A.H.Q. I was ushered into an office and was politely invited to sit down. The Wing Commander behind the desk looked me up and down and riffled the papers in a folder in front of him. Then he looked at me again, "What have you done, Crook, blotted your copy book?" "No idea, sir." It reminded me of those scenes in Chinese opera. Two characters are lying to each other. Each one knows that the other is lying and knows that his opposite number knows that he knows he is lying. But they go through with the charade to save face. East and West do occasionally meet, and the West goes in for a bit of face saving and even Chinese opera once in a while. "Well, you've only got a few more weeks to complete your three years tour overseas," said the Wing Commander. "Take this over to the Officers Reception Centre," he scribbled a note, "and they'll give you something to do until you go home. Of course it won't be in intelligence, so you'll come down to your actual rank of F/O." As so often happens, the real point came in parentheses. I thanked him, saluted and went over to the O.R.C. There I was put in charge of incoming supplies of beer and spirits. A responsible position, in command of liquor for A.H.Q., Singapore. I was more relieved than aggrieved. The confusion and ups and downs in my thinking about Trotsky and Stalin had not affected my admiration for the Soviet Red Army. It grew as the Red Army advanced from Stalingrad to Berlin. Unlike Churchill I could not swiftly switch from seeing the Soviet Union as "our noble ally" to regarding it as an enemy. To spy on it would have struck me as treachery. Monitoring beer and spirits struck me as more honourable.

My first job of work was to supervise the unloading of a shipment of beer by Japanese prisoners. I looked at them curiously: short, stocky, stolid, peasant-looking types. Were these the monsters of the "Rape of Nanjing" in 1937 and the slave-drivers of the building of the "Death Railway" in Burma on which my friend Pomeroy had died? "Social being determines social consciousness" said Marx, which might be sacrilegiously paraphrased, in this case as 'decent people in peacetime can do devilish things in war.' As I mused the P.O.W.s unloaded the beer with occasional grunts.

Though safely out of anti-Soviet intelligence, I was not left to myself. I found myself sharing a room at the O.R.C. with a middle-aged man called Featherstone, who was surprisingly well-informed on local life, knew his way around the markets, where he introduced me to the tasty Malayan dish of satay, and spoke Cantonese. Obviously not the average wartime soldier. I soon realised that he was keeping an eye on me. So while learning

HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)

what I could from him about local life I took pains not to have him around when I went on my own private business, or rather pleasure.

First I hunted up friends in the forces who had been transferred from Rangoon to Singapore. They had set up a branch of the East and West Association, and put me in touch with liberal-minded Malayans and gave me the address of the M.P.A.J.A. - the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army. Like the Burmese guerillas led by Aung San they had fought the Japanese in the jungles after the "whisky swilling planters" had fled or been captured. (The epithet is not mine; it is Winston Churchill's, who was no teetotaler.) Being no longer an Education Officer but only a glorified bartender, I could not arrange for a lecture on guerilla operations as at Rangoon. But I learnt a little from my Malaysian friends.¹

Meanwhile the local East and Westers had discovered that the British Labour Government was sending out a trade union expert called Brazier. He was to offer his expert advice on how trade unions should really be run, in the true Transport House style; the Singapore unions were far too militant. The East and West branch decided to give Brazier a warm welcome by inviting him to address a meeting of the Association. It was packed with English-speaking local trade unionists, Malayan, Chinese and Indian as well as members of the British forces. I was nominated to chair the meeting, my task being to control the time of Brazier's opening speech and to allow plenty of scope for questions and discussion. For that part of the meeting I had been briefed to call on those in the audience, when they raised their hands, who would present the left-wing case against Brazier's reformist approach. Our friends were well prepared and gave the main speaker a hot time. He must have been happy to return to the more temperate climate of Transport House.

So my weeks at Singapore passed pleasantly and interestingly until there was a troopship leaving, "bound for old Blighty's shore". My three years tour was over. More important, so was World War II, in the West as well as the East. In a few weeks I would be home, I thought, with Isabel.

My three years in the Far East may seem more like a pleasure trip than a tour of duty in a bloody war against fascism which included the dropping of two atom-bombs on Japan. The American General Sherman said: "War is hell". So it always has been for the majority of mankind. But I have told my own story and 'told it like it was'.

**HAMPSTEAD HEATH TO TIAN AN MEN
(AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID CROOK. CHINA)**

Notes

1. I saw them months later in London, when they marched in the Victory Parade. They were later killed by the British in anti-guerrilla campaigns in the Malayan jungle.