



An Australian in China

CAROLINE STOK, ARCHIVIST

A recent trawl through the College Archives uncovered a book by one of the first China correspondents, George E. Morrison.

An Australian in China: Being the Narrative of a Quiet Journey Across China to Burma signals the beginning of his role in sharing China to the world. The book, published in 1895, chronicles Morrison's journey from Shanghai, China to Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar).

George Ernest Morrison (1862-1920, OGC 1870-1878) was the son of The Geelong College's first principal George, and Rebecca (née Greenwood, [whose name is inscribed at the front of Morrison's book]). His desire for travel from a young age was encouraged by his mother. Morrison had a history of exploring and making surprising journeys, for his own enjoyment. After finishing at the College and before commencing Medicine at the University of Melbourne, Morrison would have spent a summer at home. His mother, expecting

some trouble with her energetic son encouraged him to find a summer project.

After some planning and the family Christmas festivities, Morrison set out to walk from Queenscliff to Adelaide. He recorded the 1200km journey in a diary which was then sold and published in the *Leader* newspaper. This was just the beginning of his journalism career.

In the following years, despite his studies at university, Morrison embarked on a series of journeys. He trekked and

canoed 2000km of the Murray River; after sailing aboard the blackbirder 'Lavinia' he exposed the slave trade in a letter to *The Age*; trailing Burke and Wills' planned expedition he walked the 3200km from Normanton, Qld to Melbourne. In 1883 he set out on a perilous journey to explore New Guinea. His 160km walk was cut short when he was nearly killed, having been speared.

Morrison's injuries led him to Edinburgh and surgery to remove a spearhead. Once recovered, he decided to complete his medical studies in Edinburgh.

“I cannot speak more highly of the pleasure of my journey than to declare that I felt great regret when it finished than I ever felt leaving any other country.”

Armed with his qualifications Morrison continued to travel the world. He then attempted to settle in Ballarat for a time before deciding to head overseas again, to the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan.

In Japan Morrison ran out of money. His plan was to travel to China, going from Shanghai to Rangoon. He estimated the modest cost of the trip and with his mother’s support (from Geelong she wired him the money needed) he embarked on his journey through China.

It is his mother Rebecca’s copy of Morrison’s book about this journey that sits in the College Archives.

“The journey was, of course, in no sense an exploration; it consisted simply of a voyage of 1500 miles up the Yangtse River, followed by a quiet, though extended, excursion of another 1500 miles along the great overland highway into Burma, taken by one who spoke no Chinese, who had no interpreter or companion, who was unarmed, but who trusted implicitly in the good faith of the Chinese.”

An Australian in China chronicles Morrison’s trip. While being a record infused with 20th century values, Morrison also maintained a somewhat unique lens, wanting to share his experience of a different way of life.

Morrison stayed in local inns and dealt directly with the locals. His approach varied wildly from the usual travel style of a British subject at the time and relied on the Chinese precept to “deal gently with strangers from afar.”

“I shall always look back with pleasure to this journey during which I experienced [...] uniform kindness and hospitality, and the most charming courtesy.”

This book would signal the beginning of Morrison’s international journalism career. Published in 1895, the book caught the eye of editors at The Times in London, and he was soon employed as their China correspondent. Before long he would become known as “Morrison of Peking”.

At becoming The Times’ China correspondent, Morrison reported on China affairs at a tumultuous time

in its history. He reported on the Boxer uprising, the final days of the Qing dynasty, and the new Chinese Republic. In 1912 he became political advisor to President Yuan Shikai.

After his death in 1920, Morrison was remembered as “the greatest of our Old Collegians” having attained worldwide fame. Today Morrison is held up as a pioneer correspondent, revealing China to the western world. He was an adventurer who wanted to experience the world, from his home country and across the oceans.

In 2021 the G.E. Morrison Institute was founded in his name for Australian businesspeople in China. The ANU host an annual Morrison Lecture in Ethnology, founded in 1932 to recognise Morrison’s contribution to Australia-China cultural relations.

Rebecca Morrison’s copy of An Australian in China in the College Archives speaks to her investment in her son’s journey across Australia and the world. It is an introduction to George Ernest Morrison’s personal dedication to China which would be with him to the end of his life.

