Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand

The transfer of T. T. Meadows from Shanghai to Newchwang in 1861

J. S. Gregory

University of Melbourne

Published online: 29 Sep 2008.

To cite this article: J. S. Gregory (1966) The transfer of T. T. Meadows from Shanghai to Newchwang in 1861, Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand, 12:47, 435-439, DOI: 10.1080/10314616608595340

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10314616608595340

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Almost alone among British consular officials in China in the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Taylor Meadows was a consistent sympathizer with the Taiping rebellion and an advocate of a policy of benevolent neutrality towards it. He argued this case publicly in his book *The Chinese and their Rebellions* in 1856, and officially in several reports and despatches, first as Interpreter at Canton in 1851, then as Interpreter at Shanghai in 1853, and finally as Consul there during the critical years of 1860-61, when the rebels first attempted to capture the port and when British policy began its shift from neutrality to intervention, not for but against the rebellion. In April 1861 Meadows was sent from Shanghai to Newchwang, a newly opened treaty port in Manchuria, about as far from the scene of the rebellion and the chance of influencing official policy towards it as it was possible to go while remaining in the China consular service. The question naturally arises whether there was any connection between these facts. Was Meadows, in contemporary terms, regarded as a bad security risk and deliberately sent to a distant and inferior post because of his unorthodox views on the rebellion still raging in Central China?

Writers holding very different views, both of the rebellion and of Meadows himself, have presented the matter in this light. Colonel Sykes, chief spokesman for the rebels in the House of Commons, claimed that Meadows was ‘got rid of by accepting a post in Manchuria’, while A. F. Lindley in his *Ti-ping Tien-kwoh* (1866) argued that, because of his superior knowledge and disinterestedness, Meadows’ presence at Shanghai ‘became an inconvenience’, especially after his despatch to Russell of 19 February 1861, but the difficulty ‘was soon surmounted by the removal of Mr. Meadows from Shanghai to Newchwang’. Another contemporary writer, A. E. Wilson, less sympathetic to the rebellion than either Sykes or Lindley but also with a high regard for Meadows, wrote in 1868 that he had been ‘banished to the unimportant consulship at Newchwang’.

Later writers have repeated this view. Montalto de Jesus, an historian of Shanghai who was very hostile to the rebellion and devoted to the memory of General Gordon, suggested that Meadows was ‘relegated to a sphere where his blind Taiping partisanship could not be a source of misunderstanding as to the attitude of his own government at Shanghai’. More recently, the Hong Kong historian Jen Yu-wen, basing himself mainly upon Lindley,

---

said that Meadows was 'sacrificed' to the interests of those British officials who wanted to extend aid to the Manchu government, and remarks that the manoeuvres of official cliques are the same the world over.²

There is certainly some strong evidence to support this view of the matter. At the end of August 1860, just after the first Taiping attack on Shanghai, Frederick Bruce, designated British minister to China and then residing at the treaty port, wrote to his elder brother Lord Elgin, then in North China with the Anglo-French expedition which had been sent out to enforce ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin, as follows:

It is amusing to see the implicit faith reposed by Meadows &c. in these men. One would suppose a Chinaman with long hair incapable of telling a lie. Meadows as usual has been a great difficulty, and it was very fortunate, if the rebels were to be kept out of that town, that I was on the spot. He told Wyndham that he should have no hesitation in admitting them, and he certainly did everything he could to paralyze the measures necessary for defence... I hope that you will give me a pretext for sending him at once to the north, where he will be out of the way... I never had to deal with so impracticable and mischievous a subordinate.³

If this were all the evidence available the case would seem clearly proved. Bruce did not get on with Meadows, thought his attitude to the rebellion positively dangerous, and was anxious to get him out of the way—so Meadows went to Manchuria.

There is, however, a good deal of other relevant evidence which blurs, if it does not quite obliterate this simple picture of bureaucratic victimization. In the first place, Meadows' appointment to the Shanghai consulship, made in July 1859 was temporary, his gazetted appointment even at that time being Newchwang. In January 1859, there had been a general reshuffling of China appointments by the Foreign Office in anticipation of the ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin. As part of this general reorganization Meadows was to go to the Manchurian port; the then Consul at Shanghai, Robertson, was to go to Canton; Parkes, who had been Allied Commissioner at Canton during its occupation by French and English forces since January 1858, was to take over the Shanghai post, while W. H. Medhurst was to move from Foochow to Tangchow on the Shantung peninsula.⁴

With the renewal of hostilities after Bruce's repulse at the Taku forts in June 1859, on his way to exchange ratifications of the treaty, these arrangements were of course upset. Robertson did go to Canton, but Parkes joined Elgin's 1860 mission and it was temporarily impossible to open the new

⁴ Malmesbury to Bruce, 2 Mar. 1859, (No. 6) in General Correspondence (China), F.O. 17/311 in P.R.O.; also Foreign Office List, 1859.
ports in the north. Medhurst therefore remained at Foochow, while Meadows, who had been re-appointed to Shanghai as Interpreter at the end of 1858 after a term as Vice-Consul at Ningpo, was given 'temporary charge' of the consulate after Robertson's departure, despite the vehement protests of Medhurst. At the time Bruce probably thought Parkes would soon take up his duties at Shanghai and that it was not worth disturbing arrangements at other consulates to fill a temporary gap there. In the event, Meadows stayed for nearly two years and, despite Bruce's strictures of August 1860 just quoted, did not actually move before his long appointed post at Newchwang became available nine months later. Thus, one could quite satisfactorily explain Meadows' transfer from Shanghai to Newchwang in April 1861 without reference to his views on the rebellion or his disagreements with Bruce. It was a long-anticipated move which was made at the first practical opportunity. This is not to deny that other considerations were present, but the case for saying he was 'got rid of' from Shanghai because of his sympathy for the rebels would certainly be stronger had he been moved somewhere else immediately after the events of August 1860, even before his post at Newchwang was available.

In any case, Newchwang was certainly not regarded as an 'unimportant consulship' in 1859 or in 1861, even though it later proved to be something of a backwater. It was hoped that it would become a major port for the development of trade with Manchuria, its potential importance being indicated by the fact that Meadows went there on a salary of £1,300 per annum, equal to that for Tangchow and considerably higher than those for the other new treaty ports (e.g. Swatow £800; Chinkiang £900). It was inferior only to the major consulates of Shanghai (£1,500) and Canton (£1,600). Meadows' appointment therefore cannot be regarded as in any sense 'relegation'. He was being moved from a temporary to a permanent consulship at a good salary. Moreover he was certainly quite ready to go there, and for health reasons preferred it even to staying at Shanghai. As early as August 1858, he had written asking for an appointment in the north and in January 1861 his preference for that area was still strong. On the latter occasion he wrote to the Foreign Secretary, Russell, in what appears to have been quite gratuitous alarm lest Bruce should suddenly order him, 'not to my proper post at Newchwang, but to some port south of this, at none of which can I possibly live'. He went on to write hopefully of the prospects of a considerable trade developing at his new post, and begged to repeat

---

5 For Meadows' temporary appointment see Bruce to Russell, 22 Aug. 1859 in F.O. 17/313. Medhurst protested so strongly that Bruce asked him to withdraw his original letter and present his case in more moderate terms. Bruce nevertheless advised Russell that Medhurst's protests were unreasonable—see Bruce to Russell, 19 Sept. 1859, in F.O. 17/314.

6 For salary scale see F.O. to Treasury, 24 Feb. 1859, in F.O. 17/322; also Malmesbury to Bruce as above, note 4.
that I think that in that cold region I could remain in active employ for the next three or four years, that I am not only willing but desirous of remaining there, with occasional leaves of a year and a half, for the next twenty years . . . Should, however, the hon. Mr. Bruce, in making his arrangements, deem it best that I should be permanently appointed to this Shanghai Consulate I will not assert that I should not be able to pass one or two years here without leave, though I should have many misgivings about the first summer, and would certainly have to retire definitely from China long before twenty years more had elapsed.\footnote{Meadows to Russell, 24 Jan. 1860, in F.O. 17/360. For his original request for a northern post see enclosure in Bowring to Malmesbury 6 Aug. 1858, in F.O. 17/298.}

Meadows himself certainly did not feel that in going to Newchwang he was being banished to a remote frontier post, like some degraded Chinese official.

There was unconscious irony in his fear that Bruce, ‘in making his arrangements’, might deem it best to leave him permanently at Shanghai, for Bruce assured Russell that he was ‘just as anxious to send him to Newchwang as he is to go there’.\footnote{Bruce to Russell, 10 Mar. 1861, in F.O. 17/319.}

More than Meadows’ dangerous thoughts on the rebellion were behind this continuing desire on Bruce’s part to get him out of Shanghai, however. It had been Meadows’ opposition to the Foreign Inspectorate of Customs and his readiness to express this at length and in public which first prompted Bruce, in July 1860 to wish him heartily somewhere else. He then wrote to Elgin, ‘Meadows has succeeded in stirring up the community against the Customs House on the confiscation question, and has indulged in observations for which Davies and Fitzroy (Customs House officials) have asked, and been refused, explanations. I wish you could send him to Newchwang, or take him away’.\footnote{Bruce to Elgin, 11 July 1860, in Elgin Papers at Dunfermline, Scotland.}

Meadows might well have been moved from Shanghai because of his views on customs administration before the Taiping crisis ever became acute at Shanghai.

Again, in March 1861, Bruce complained to an official in the Foreign Office that Meadows ‘has made it a rule to thwart me in everything because I don’t fall in with his theories about Customs houses’. This seemingly petulant complaint was prompted by Meadows’ remarkable behaviour in the matter of the resignation of his brother, J. A. T. Meadows, from the consular service in January 1861, an affair in which he also incurred Foreign Office disapproval.\footnote{Bruce on more than one occasion also complained of Meadows’ readiness to let the routine business of the consular office slide: while he occupies the time of himself and his assistants on despatches, many of which}

while he occupies the time of himself and his assistants on despatches, many of which
are unnecessary and most of which are too long. Much labor would be avoided, were he to confine himself to the work of his office. But he has a very speculative turn of mind, and is anxious to conform his practice to what he considers sound principle, rather than follow in the steps of his predecessors, or be guided by positive instructions. He does not sufficiently consider that amidst the anomalies of every kind that surround us in China the safe principle is to depart as little as possible from what is the received usage.

The modern historian is, of course, most impressed by just this characteristic in Meadows' approach to China, as revealed especially in his book The Chinese and their Rebellions. Yet from the administrative point of view he was certainly a troublesome if brilliant subordinate, much given to tedious word spinning. This fault, and his role (or suspected role) in the resignation of his brother, are not directly relevant to the question of his remaining or not at Shanghai, though they were significant contributory causes of Bruce's impatience with him. His attitude to the customs was certainly relevant, however, for the presence of a consul opposed to the Foreign Inspectorate principle at that key port was all too likely to encourage that merchant opposition which Bruce and the Foreign Office wished to allay.

Thus there was much more behind Meadows' transfer from Shanghai to Newchwang in April 1861 than simply his attitude to the Taipings, and it is certainly an exaggeration to talk of him being 'sacrificed' on this account. He was happy to go north and worked enthusiastically at his new post until his sudden death there on 14 November 1868, at the age of forty-nine. Yet it would be equally false to suggest that his views on the rebellion had nothing to do with his transfer at all. It is noteworthy that when Meadows left Shanghai it was not to make room for Parkes, but for other temporary consuls, the first of whom was Medhurst. This indicates that the fact that the northern ports were, by April 1861, ready to be opened was no compelling reason for actually sending Meadows to Newchwang, since Medhurst did not go to Tangchow. Had Bruce been thoroughly satisfied with Meadows he could, presumably, have left him at Shanghai and sent Medhurst to his post. That he did not do so but was, on the contrary, anxious to see Meadows out of Shanghai was partly, but only partly, because of the consul's views on the rebellion.

University of Melbourne

J. S. Gregory

---

11 Bruce to Russell, 10 Mar. 1861, in F.O. 17/350; cf. also Bruce to Alston, 31 Dec. 1860, in F.O. 17/339—'The vice of the consular service in China is that the Consuls are much more apt to pass their time in writing speculative despatches on general questions which may figure in a bluebook, than in carrying out the routine business of the Ports . . . They have been misled by Alcock's example. The man least bitten with the mania is Parkes—he throws all his energies into practical questions—the worst of all is Meadows, who by raising difficulties and objections, makes practical improvement impossible. For positions so anomalous as ours in China, an international pedant is a bore and an obstacle'. Bruce went on to complain especially of Meadows' attitude to the customs service.


13 For obituary article on Meadows see North China Herald, 28 Nov. 1868.
学霸图书馆（www.xuebalib.com）是一个“整合众多图书馆数据库资源，提供一站式文献检索和下载服务”的24小时在线不限IP图书馆。

图书馆致力于便利、促进学习与科研，提供最强文献下载服务。

图书馆导航：
图书馆首页 文献云下载 图书馆入口 外文数据库大全 疑难文献辅助工具