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Morrison Oration

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GEORGE ERNEST MORRISON

SUMMARY OF MORRISON ORATION BY DR. H.V. EVATT

From his early manhood Morrison seemed destined to play an important part in the field of exploration, the field of letters and the field of public affairs.

Morrison and the Great Explorer Stanley

There is evidence that he was conscious of such a destiny even from his school days. A written account of one of his earliest exploits was dedicated to H.M. Stanley. Young Morrison acclaimed Stanley as a man whom before all others in this world he admired the most. But the point of his boyish dedication was that Stanley, although described as the discoverer of Livingstone, and as the greatest traveller "of this or any other age," was in Morrison's opinion, to be regarded primarily as "special correspondent to the New York "Herald." In the same dedication, Morrison stated his "fixed determination to do something great some day."

Morrison's Career Up to 1895

The first part of Morrison's career ended in 1895, when, at the age of 33, he published his book "An Australian in China." Already he had become famous as an explorer and traveller. He had written special articles for the Melbourne "Age" describing his adventures in New Guinea and the Pacific Islands. He was an outstanding writer whose boyhood habit of keeping a diary proving supremely valuable.

Opposition to Kanaka Traffic

His condemnation of the traffic in kanakas between the Pacific Islands and Queensland showed both his love for Australia and a consciousness of the future destiny of a Queensland which should be developed by European labor. That was the theme of his article for David Syme of the Melbourne "Age."

Travels in Australia

The record of his early travels in Australia was amazing. It won him fame at a very early age. One of the wounds he received in New Guinea was extremely serious but his passion for travel and adventure was never assuaged. Proceeding to Edinburgh for a surgical operation he stayed on and graduated in medicine. He pursued his travels extensively, and, in 1895, his remarkable journey across China to Burma was accomplished.

A Great Book of Travel

The book "An Australian in China" shows Morrison already to be a mature, skilful and a fascinating craftsman in the divine art of writing. His book led to his engagement by the "Times" as one of its Far Eastern Correspondents. His boyhood dream of emulating Stanley was coming true.

Morrison's Career as London "Times" Correspondent

The second part of Morrison's career covers the period from his engagement with the "Times" in 1895 until 1912 when he became political adviser to the Government of China.

He became "Times" Peking correspondent in 1897. The part he played during those 17 years of crisis in the Far East was one of accurate reporting and wise and courageous criticism.

Superb Courage in Boxer Rebellion

In keeping with his record was the supreme courage he displayed during the siege of the Peking Legations during the Boxer rising in 1900.

His regular messages to the "Times" during these critical years showed Morrison at his very best. Even before 1900 his fame as a newspaper man and writer was established. An eloquent tribute was made to him in 1900 when an extraordinary obituary notice was published. This partly described the difficulties of Morrison's post in the thick atmosphere of intrigue and suspicion which pervaded the China of 1897-1900. His reporting was always accurate, always fearless and showed the eloquence always possessed by direct and truthful narrative of great events -- history in the making.

Morrison's work from 1900-1912

Had Morrison died in the Boxer attacks of 1900, he would have done enough for glory. But his service between 1900 and 1912 reached an even higher level. The "Times" of London then occupied, as it still does, a very special position among the newspapers of the world.

The "Times" and the Foreign Office

The "Times" then had very close links with the makers of the foreign policy of Britain. This added to his prestige but also to his difficulties and anxieties. At times he was furious when his frank despatches were held back or even altered lest they should interfere with the "Times" policy as controlled by outstanding men like Bell, Buckle and Chirol.

The Far Eastern Policy

To the "Times" the Far East was important of course: but nearer home was Europe and Africa and the Middle East. And for a very long time Britain was in no position to support with strength the habitual United States policy of the "open door" for trade with China or the equally important policy that there should be no further territorial aggrandisement against China on the part of European powers. Britain sympathised and did its best. **But the threats from Russia or from Germany were more immediate and the Far East had to wait.**

Morrison's Personal Views

Morrison himself was becoming convinced that the best policy for Britain and the United States as well as for China was to oppose aggression whether by open force or by economic infiltration.

The unconcealed aggression of Russia Morrison utterly condemned. Equally he condemned the open aggression of Imperial Germany. He had been critical of France but his view softened as Britain embraced the new doctrine of the Entente Cordiale and France came face to face with Imperialist Russia in Europe. Although Morrison strongly supported the Anglo-Japanese alliance and his despatches to the "Times" almost derided Russia's effort in the war against Japan, he was equally quick to observe the Japanese policy of aggression especially where it operated against China or against long term British Empire interests in Asia or the Pacific. If, on any of these great matters, Morrison's opinions were prejudiced, it was at any rate an open prejudice which could be easily discerned from his published writings.

Morrison's Sympathies with Chinese People.

During the whole of Morrison's service for the "Times", which ended in 1912, his increasing influence was measured by the special importance attached to his messages. But his own personal sphere of influence in China and the Far East was very great. He was frankness personified. More and more he came to sympathise actively with the impoverished and oppressed condition of the Chinese and his opinion of 1895 that the tyrannical Manchu dynasty had to be removed was confirmed again and again.

Morrison's Relationship to the "Times".

As his own influence increased and the words "Morrison of Peking" came to convey their own special magic, Morrison naturally supposed that he would exert a more direct influence on the policy of the "Times" and through it on the British government itself. Indeed this expectation seemed about to be realised in 1911. But at a critical moment the somewhat wayward genius of Lord Northcliffe interposed and in the re-distribution of "Times" authority no place was found for Morrison. Simultaneously the European crisis caused Britain's interest in the Far East to be regarded as secondary. As a result Morrison accepted the opportunity of becoming a direct Political Adviser to the new Republic of China. He found himself more and more concerned with the future of the Chinese people and he thought he could participate with effect in the great experiment of establishing a democratic government to replace the Manchu dynasty he had condemned.

When he left the "Times" his reputation was permanently established not only as a traveller and explorer; not only as a writer of renown but as one of the world's great Experts on Far Eastern Affairs.

Morrison as Political Adviser of the Republic.

The third period of Morrison's career concerns his activities as Political Adviser to the New Republic. From the very first this adventurous undertaking brought with it prestige and excitement but also frustration and disappointment. Yuan Shih-kai quickly supplanted Sun Yat-Sen as President of the Republic. The latter and the Kuomintang Party had provided the chief animating spirit of the Chinese Revolution. But Yuan with supreme skill, not to say cunning, gradually revealed his desire for dictatorship. From the very first the chief supporters of the new China in the south, and especially in Canton, were gradually displaced. The result was dismay as Japan sought to take advantage of the changing situation.

Japan and the First World War.

For Japan the door of expansion seemed to open in August, 1914, when the European War commenced. Yuan the arch intriguer was still President. All Japan's rivals in the Far East were either engaged in the European war or, as in the case of the United States, insulated from the effects of the war by the strictest neutrality.

Through this period 1914-18 Morrison continued as political adviser to the Republic. In 1918 he was appointed as an adviser to the Chinese Delegation at the Versailles Conference of 1919.

China and the Crisis of 1914-18.

For China the war crisis was caused by Japanese policy of expansion and aggression. First came the intervention of Japan against Germany supposedly under the terms of the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902. But the real object of Japan was to replace Germany in Shantung and indeed gradually to eliminate from the Asian continent the weight of the influence of all the European powers. Further the Japanese policy covered Pacific expansion as well. Britain, France and Russia were opposed to Japan's manoeuvres but they were for the time being almost helpless because of the successes of Prussian militarism in Europe. An acute situation was caused by Japan's Twenty-One demands on China in January, 1915. Morrison's reaction was one of deep hostility to Japan yet he appreciated Britain's difficulties. The miracle was not that China fared badly but that so much was salvaged out of an apparently hopeless situation.

China's Intervention in European War.

Morrison was firmly convinced that China should intervene in the European war on the side of Britain and her allies. Japan resisted this policy just as deliberately as she limited her own contribution to the war effort against Germany. The key to the problem was to be found in the attitude of President Wilson and the United States. The traditional United States attitude to China was one of deep friendliness. But neutrality was still the watchword and for a long time there was no inclination to intervene in a way which would embarrass Japan.

Neutral Attitude of U.S. Towards Japan's Expansion

For a time Bryan and Lansing seemed to show an indifference to China approaching encouragement to Japan. But gradually, under Woodrow Wilson, the naval strength of the United States increased. So did the diplomatic activities of China. Morrison influenced these events though often indirectly. His attitude to Japan over the Pacific was extremely critical. He especially resented moves by which Japan got a secret undertaking from Britain, France and Russia to support its post-war claim to German islands north of the equator. Morrison repeatedly denied the significance of any contribution by Japan to victory over Germany. To a large extent his views paralleled those of Allied leaders.

The active entry of the United States into World War I made the forthcoming peace conference (1919) of crucial importance to China. At that conference Japan produced not only the treaty of 1915 (covering Shantung and other matters) but also the confirmatory treaty of 1918. In the result, however, China while appearing to lose its case at Versailles (where Japan retained "face" over Shantung) was subsequently vindicated over Shantung following the Washington Pacific Conference of 1920. Morrison, I believe, had foreseen a good deal of this development. He died in May, 1920.

Unarmed China Succeeded Diplomatically

Throughout all these difficult war years China, while almost completely unarmed was, through a policy of apparent non-resistance, able to thwart many of Japan's expansionist ambitions. Morrison in this played a part despite his many disappointments and frustrations.

Morrison and W.H. Donald

We must note the close connection from 1903 onwards between Morrison and W.H. Donald. Donald, also an Australian, was not only a great newspaper man and reporter but, like Morrison himself, became devoted to the development and welfare of the people of China. Donald too became Political Adviser of the Chinese Government led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek.

These two Australians occupied very prominent positions in China, one in World War I and the other in World War II. But Morrison was fated not to survive the developments of Versailles and the vindication of his courageous policies, both as "Times" correspondent and Political Adviser to China. During the war he was depressed because of his apparent lack of direct influence on the Government. Nonetheless his influence was important. He was disinterested and altruistic. Everybody knew it.

Donald and Morrison Greatly Helped China.

Morrison's contribution to the Government of China from 1914 to 1919 resembles Donald's contribution during the undeclared war with Japan which finished in 1945. By 1945 Chiang Kai-Shek's success seemed permanent. W.H. Donald had a great share in it and unfortunately for China, he died in 1946 after attending the San Francisco Conference just as Morrison died in 1920 after attending the Peace Conference at Versailles.

In 1919 Japan seemed destined to become the supreme power both in East Asia and the Pacific. But by 1945 the position was reversed. The German Islands north of the equator which Morrison thought Japan should never have acquired were in effect, acquired by the United States as Morrison and Donald would both have wished.

United States and Britain in China

Morrison was a true friend of China. He visualised a China closely attached both to Britain and the United States. The record of the United States in China was one of proved friendliness. It is equally true that Britain struggled valiantly to protect Chinese interests throughout World War I and that active aggression against China had proceeded from Germany or from Russia or from Japan.

Australia's Relationships with China

Morrison must be regarded as one of the very greatest of Australians. He always remained devoted to Australia despite his deep affection for the people of China. Indeed, so long as 1917, he tried to arrange for Australia to have separate diplomatic representation in the Far East. In this respect he was a generation before his time. It would have gladdened his heart to know that official representatives of Australia had served as Ambassadors in troubled times both in China and Japan and the names of men like Eggleston, Officer and Copland will have a specially honoured place in the history of Australia's relationships with China.