

Interview with Lloyd Lofthouse, Dec. 2015

IC: You describe a local bathhouse in Ningbo circa 1850s as decked out with numerous fascinating features, such as: "A tiger stove that heated the water for tea also heated water for the bathhouse. They just opened the water taps and let the water pour into the grated traps....A burly, older woman with the arms of a wrestler and stumps for legs stepped forward, demanded that Robert take off his clothes, and hand them to her...." Other features you mention, such as the steam room and the skin-cleansing massage with coarse towel, can still be found in Chinese bathhouses today. Are the period details authentic, or did you extrapolate from actual bathhouses in present-day China? And likewise with many other details in the novel (the shops in Ningbo, the teahouses, meals and snacks, etc.), were they researched or inferred?

LL: I worked on this novel for nine years and along the way found the information about the history of bathhouses in China. In addition to collecting a small library on China and its history, I have two, two-inch thick binders full of research I found through Google and printed out. And of course, my wife edited the first rough draft and made suggestions based on her research of the time period for her *Empress Orchid* novel. I never actually visited any present-day bathhouses in China.

IC: I'm intrigued by the female character of Nee-Nee, niece of Prince Gong, who tries to seduce Hart at a party celebrating Hart's promotion to Inspector General, a match which would have secured extraordinary advantages for Hart. Their encounter is pregnant with possibility but Nee-Nee is never returned to. I almost feel that she could be the subject of a purely fictionalized Volume 3 of your novel, covering Hart's later life. Did Nee-Nee actually exist and is there any historical evidence of her meeting with Hart?

LL: Nee-Nee, as a character, was fiction but from my research, I discovered that Prince Gong did offer to arrange a marriage for Hart with a young female member of his family — probably a teenager, and it made Hart nervous. Maybe he didn't want to be that close to the ruling family of China. Who knows? I think that nervousness explains why he was in such a rush to get married after he lost Ayaou and took the children to Ireland where he left them with foster parents. Before Hart returned to China, he found a young Irish wife through an arranged and hasty marriage. I think he liked women young, and once they aged and lost that bloom of youth, Hart lost interest in them. In fact, after his Irish wife had three children, he convinced her to return to England where she lived most of her life on the estate near London that Hart bought through his agent in the UK. The one time she returned to China years later, he complained in his journal about the distractions she was causing him and hoped she'd leave soon, and she did.

Ayaou was barely an adolescent when Hart was in his early 20s, and his Irish bride was 18 when he was in his 30s. I have no idea who Prince Gong had in mind for Hart to marry, but it was someone from the royal Manchu family.

IC: There is a fair amount of frank and erotic (but not pornographic) sex in the novel. I guess all these details must have been fictionalized. Do you have any advice for budding

novelists on what balance to strike between vividness and taste in sexual depictions? Sex, as is well known, is one of the most difficult things to pull off in writing.

LL: Yes, the sex in the novel was fictionalized. Hart didn't go into that much detail in his journals, although it was obvious he was lonely and horny as most young men are. My advice for budding novelists is to write sex scenes they feel comfortable with. It has to come naturally. Don't force it because you think it will sell books. As for me, I had fun writing sex scenes. I think sex is part of life, and if sex is part of the plot and linked to the theme of the story, why avoid it just because some prude might be offended and write a 1-star review? After all, according to the Harvard scholars, Hart's relationship with Ayaou gave him his "fill of romance," and I wanted to explore what that meant.

IC: The timeframe of your novel concentrates on the decade between Hart's arrival in China in 1854 and Ayaou's untimely death. During these years the Taiping Rebellion was raging (and finally defeated) and the Second Opium War launched and concluded (with the destruction of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing in 1860). What other possible novels do you suppose could be set in this rich and dramatic period? Any favorite books of yours from this time?

LL: I can only think of one book that comes to mind, and it isn't a novel. It's non-fiction since I read only non-fiction when I was researching Hart's life. The book was called *For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World's Favorite Drink and Changed History*, by Sarah Rose. Fascinating book.

However, there are two novels I'm tempted to write, but they both take place before the 19th century. One would be about Matteo Ricci set in the 16th century, and the second would be about the only female emperor of China, Wu Zetian in the 7th century.

I have this suspicion that Ricci was a pedophile, and that would make an interesting and scandalous story, and from what I've read of Wu Zetian's life, she had a healthy sexual appetite and kept her own male concubines around when she was the emperor. I read that when Ricci lived in the imperial court, he surrounded himself with young orphan boys — children. I don't think Catholic Priests started to molest young children only in the 20th century. I think it's been going on for millennia.

The Catholic Church wouldn't approve of that story since there is a campaign to turn Ricci into a saint. The Church is already thinking of beatifying him, and I understand that usually comes first before the Church cooks up the miracle needed to turn someone into a saint.

IC: Specifically on the subject of historical fiction set in China, why do you think there appears to be such a large readership out there? Is the interest primarily in historical fiction (of any exotic or Asian country) or specifically in China?

LL: I think interest in China rises and falls depending on how much the U.S. media prints stories about China. After all, the United States has to justify spending its huge annual military budgets to make sure the weapons industry in the U.S. keeps making profits. The

U.S. accounts for almost 40% of total military spending in the world. That can't be sustained unless most of the citizens fear that there is a boogeyman out to get them, and the corporate media is making sure there will always be one or more. Right now, banging the media war drums to make China the bad guy has quieted down, because ISIS is the current big-bad-wolf that wants to eat America. Stirring up fear through the media is an industry, by itself, in the United States, and that fear leads to profits and wealth for the few who never have enough.

IC: You've published *My Splendid Concubine* independently. Was this the original intention or did you approach any literary agents or publishing houses with your manuscript?

LL: With *My Splendid Concubine*, I did find an agent who managed to gain the interest of an editor at Random House, who read the manuscript and then said no. I have been down this road before, and I'm not getting any younger. That's why I went back and did another revision of the book adding more detail to the story and then decided to publish independently. I wanted readers to be the judge of my work instead of an agent or editor gatekeeper in the traditional publishing industry. And now, eight years after the 1st edition was published in late 2007, 81% of 274 Amazon reader reviews (on December 16, 2015) for the 3rd edition are positive. I think the reader's voices are more powerful than an agent or editor.

IC: For an independently published novel that has thrived primarily through word of mouth (the gold standard of success) and sold thousands of copies, do you have any words of advice for authors who are considering publishing independently?

LL: My initial advice for indie authors is to stay away from publishers that charge a fee to publish their work. That can be expensive with no guarantee readers will buy, read or enjoy the story. Instead, indie authors should buy their own ISBNs through R. R. Bowker and then learn how to do all the work. If an author wants to subcontract work out for the cover, editing and formatting, there are plenty of sub-contractors and the fees are all over the place. In addition, there's a lot of free advice on the Internet. I find a lot of it through Twitter.

But, before publishing that first book, start a blog and build a social media network online. If you don't know how to blog, there's plenty of free advice out there. For starters, check YouTube and watch a few how to videos. When you are ready, I suggest publishing through Amazon kdp for the e-book, Create Space or Lightning Source (LSI Ingram) for the paperback, and Draft2Digital or Smashwords also for the e-book for extended distribution beyond Amazon kdp. If an author does all the work, then the only additional cost will be the ISBN numbers. Amazon kdp, Create Space, Draft2Digital and Smashwords are all free. They earn their money from a portion of the sale of your work after it's published.

IC: Finally, if you were a Western expat like Hart living in 19th-century China, would you have a concubine?

LL: Yes. In fact, if I had the money, I'd probably have several concubines, but like Hart, I'd have to deal with and overcome my Christian guilt for being a human male with a healthy libido.



Lloyd Lofthouse

Lloyd Lofthouse, a former U.S. Marine and Vietnam Vet, was first introduced to Robert Hart's journals and letters in 1999, and that led to a decade long journey of discovery. After several trips to China to learn more about Sir Robert Hart's hidden love story, he returned to the United States and spent several years writing *My Splendid Concubine*. After serving in the Marines, Lofthouse went to college on the G.I. Bill and graduated with a BA in journalism. He then taught in the public schools for 30 years. He is the award winning author of three novels and one memoir, *Crazy is Normal: A classroom exposé*.

My Splendid Concubine is available at:

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