A Tale of Two Diaries:
Robert Hart’s Encounter with “Mont Blanc Albert” in Canton, Sept. 1858

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Abstract
When still a junior official in the British Consular Service in Canton, Robert Hart (1835-1911), who would later achieve fame as the Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, met Albert Richard Smith (1816-60), the mid-Victorian comic writer and diorama presenter, who was traveling in China to collect material for a stage show. Though both reported on Smith’s visit to Canton in their respective diaries, Hart’s brief interlude with Smith has never been discussed and the relevant passages in their diaries have not been cross-examined. Yet, close reading the respective diary entries next to one another for the first time some one hundred and fifty years after they were composed can achieve several objectives. First, the diaries provide some raw material for the biographical understanding of the young Robert Hart, which is important considering that more than a hundred years following his death there is as of yet no complete biography of “the most powerful Westerner in China” (Jonathan Spence). Second, they illustrate the generic and stylistic differences between a diary which is meant to be published and one which is conceived as a purely private “closed book” diary. Third, they shed light on two different modes of seeing/narrating China—the sightseeing tourist Smith and the long-term expatriate resident Hart—and, thus, contribute to our understanding of the British imaginary of China during the heyday of empire.

Keywords
Robert Hart, Albert Smith, diaries, life writing, China, dioramas
The name of Robert Hart (1835-1911) forever evokes his historically significant career as the Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS) from 1863 to 1911, a position in which he became, in the words of historian Jonathan Spence, “the most powerful Westerner in China” (93). Many years earlier, however, when he was still a junior official in the British Consular Service in Canton, he once met an important Victorian who, though now largely forgotten, at that time seemed to have a much more solid claim to fame than the twenty-three-year-old Hart might ever expect to have; viz., Albert Richard Smith. Smith (1816-60) was a comic writer and public entertainer who enjoyed tremendous popular success in mid-Victorian England with a panorama show about his mountain-climbing adventures in Switzerland entitled “Mr. Albert Smith’s Ascent of Mont Blanc.” This show, which a recent study of panorama shows describes as “arguably the most successful moving panorama show of all times” (Huhtamo 19), ran for many years in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly and saw 2,000 performances, making its creator a wealthy man and inspiring a vogue for climbing the Mont Blanc among English gentlemen which continued for years.1 Following the show’s closure in July 1858, Smith journeyed to China for a six-week visit to Hong Kong and Canton to collect material for a new stage entertainment, and it is during the course of these travels that he met Hart. That he met Hart is beyond doubt as both Hart and Smith reported on the visit in their respective diaries, and while Smith does not mention Hart in To China and Back: Being a Diary Kept, Out and Home, which was published in 1859 as a handbook to the entertainment at the Egyptian Hall; Hart explicitly mentions Smith twice and there are obvious correspondences between their diary entries for the relevant days. The meeting between these two eminent Victorians could not be surmised till recently, however, as the Hart diary was only donated to his alma mater Queen’s University Belfast in 1970, and the scholarly edition of diary volume three, in which Hart records his meeting with Smith in Canton in 1858, was not published till 1986. Though both texts, therefore, date back to the same time and place, Hart’s role in Smith’s visit to Canton was not known and the relevant passages have never been cross-referenced.

* I would like to thank the Concentric reviewers for their careful reading and insightful suggestions.

Yet, several objectives can be achieved when close reading these diaries next to one another some one hundred and fifty years after they were created. First, the two diaries provide raw material for the biographical understanding of the young Robert Hart, which is important considering that more than a hundred years following his death there is as of yet no complete biography of this remarkable historical figure.\textsuperscript{2} Second, the two texts illustrate the generic and stylistic differences between a diary which is meant to be published and one which is conceived as a purely private “closed book” undertaking. Smith, viz., was a popular entertainer who produced a short travel diary in the context of an entertainment venture, whereas Hart was a devoted life writer who zealously guarded his diary and saw to it that this intimate record of his life did not immediately become public following his death. Third, this contrastive study sheds light on two different modes of seeing/narrating China represented by the celebrity tourist Smith, who commodified China and approached it as if it were a diorama spectacle, and the long-term expatriate resident Hart, who engaged in a more open-ended and multi-faceted heuristic project to understand late Qing Dynasty China. In his Die Entzauberung Asiens (1998), Jürgen Osterhammel argues that the exotic and mysterious China of the age of discovery and exploration was “disenchanted” over the course of the eighteenth century and that this then led to a much more diverse range of responses, including negative and imperialistic responses. The meeting of Hart and Smith in Canton, I claim, though in itself a chance encounter that did not have significant historical consequences, represents a valuable case study of some of the interpretive stances that developed in the wake of this debunking of China.

For Smith, China was a stage China and Chinese alterity, though still real, offered

him some of the same storylines as a comic writer which he had found in Switzerland and Constantinople. It was, in other words, a place where adventuring Englishmen could have a jolly time and occasionally make a bit of a fool of themselves. Hart’s understanding of China, however, though essentially also rooted in the same semi-colonial treaty port China which Smith briefly visited, was complex and still evolving, and kindled the passion for research into and writing about China/East Asia which would characterize his leadership of the CMCS and various publications by CMCS staff members.

A caveat needs to be added at this point, though, concerning the very different status of the two works involved in this study and the manner in which they will be juxtaposed. Smith’s diary, *To China and Back: Being a Diary Kept, Out and Home*, is sixty pages long and was published in 1859 as a companion to the China show which the entertainer staged following his return to London. Hart’s diary, however, which was composed over a period of fifty-four years and runs to a total of seventy-seven journal volumes, remained the private property of his family following his death in 1911 and did not become accessible to scholars till 1970 when it was donated to his alma mater Queens University Belfast. There the diary still resides today as the core holding in a considerable Hart archive which also includes photos, letters and other documents related to Hart’s life and career in China. These two diaries, therefore, have a very different status as historical artifacts and any thorough study of the Hart diary has to take into account a much wider range of factors, including the unique vantage point of its author as one of the primary go betweens in the nineteenth century Sino-Western encounter, the continuing importance of Hart to the CMCS hierarchy which tried to build on his legacy during the decades following his death, the attention devoted to the figure of Hart and his diary by the influential Harvard historian John King Fairbank, Hart’s standing as an eminent Irishman/Briton, and—last but not least—the precarious transmission history of the diary, which was almost lost when Hart’s house burned down during the Boxer Uprising in 1900. In view of the very different nature of the diaries, therefore, the current study does not propose a comprehensive comparison on the basis of all seventy-seven volumes of the Hart diary, nor would that be appropriate. The aim, rather, is to focus narrowly on the encounter between Smith and Hart in Canton in Sept. 1858 and juxtapose their diary entries from those days to highlight the different textual strategies and politics of vision which these foreign visitors brought to the intercultural encounter.  

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3 For more analysis of the Hart diary and its transmission history, see Henk Vynckier and Chihyun Chang, “The Life Writing of Hart, Inspector-General of the Imperial Maritime Customs
A brief review of Hart’s career in China is necessary to understand the background of Smith’s visit to Canton in Sept. 1858. Hart’s first assignment after arriving in China from his native Ireland in 1854 was a post as student-interpreter at Ningpo, a commercial town in Chekiang with a small foreign community of not more than twenty-five consular officials, merchants, and missionaries. He resided there from Oct. 1854 to March 1858, at which point he was transferred to Canton and appointed to the position of the 2nd Assistant at the British Consulate. Hart, whose Chinese language skills and understanding of Chinese culture had progressed during his time in Ningpo, welcomed the promotion, but also understood that this was going to be a much more difficult assignment. Canton had been brutally fought over following the outbreak of the Second Opium War in 1856 and was still ruled as an occupied city by an Allied Commission backed up by British and French expeditionary forces. Within months, the young 2nd Assistant was delegated to this Allied Commission and served mainly as the secretary to the British Commissioner Harry Parkes, the hotheaded diplomat who had played an important role in the Arrow incident of Oct. 1856 at the beginning of the hostilities. Years later, British merchants grateful for Parkes’ role in opening China would honor him with a statue in the International Settlement in Shanghai, just as several decades after that Hart would have his statue erected on the Bund not far from Parkes’ in memory of his rather different contribution to China’s affairs.4 Hart’s service as Secretary to the Allied Commission lasted till June 1859, at which time he resigned from the British Consular Service to take up an appointment in the new customs administration which was being established in cooperation between the Chinese government and the foreign powers. His time in Canton, therefore, marks a significant turning point in his life as he then entered upon the career path which led to his spectacular appointment as CMCS Inspector General in 1863.

Albert Smith, the other agent in this encounter, was an extraordinary character in his own right. Though he may be largely forgotten today, a look at the facts of his life takes one deep into Victorian culture and makes clear why he was welcomed so warmly by his compatriots in Canton and wherever he went in China. Smith’s father was a surgeon, and as a young man Albert Smith planned to follow in his Service.” CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 14.5 (2012): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss5/10>.

father’s footsteps and pursued medical studies in England and France. As he was also a talented writer and public speaker, he became interested in a literary career and “soon decided to lay down the lancet to try his hand with the pen” (Hansen). He then became a contributor to various magazines such as *Bentley’s Magazine* and *Punch* and published collections of sketches and comic novels, some of which became bestsellers. He achieved his biggest successes, however, with illustrated lectures about his travels in Europe and Turkey which included magic lantern slides, diorama paintings, poems, music, and songs. His masterpiece in this genre, the famous “The Ascent of Mont Blanc,” was performed on a stage which resembled an elaborate Swiss chalet, featured spectacular diorama paintings by William Beverley, the foremost diorama painter of his time; and as a bonus had St. Bernard dogs, a famous breed of Swiss dogs, mix with the spectators during intermission (Hansen). The venue for this show was the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, which proved to be an ideal location for Smith’s stage shows as it had been in existence for close to half a century and had hosted an extraordinary range of spectacles and exhibits. John Timbs (1801-75), the Victorian antiquarian and historian of London, describes the Egyptian Hall in his *Curiosities of London: Exhibiting the Most Rare and Remarkable Objects of Interest in the Metropolis*, first published in 1855, as a sort of “Ark of Exhibitions,” and offers a chronological catalogue of the many “Curiosities” (320) which had been shown there. Among them are:

1816: “Napoleon’s Travelling Chariot, built for his Russian campaign, and adapted for a bed-room, dressing-room, pantry, kitchen, &c.; captured at Waterloo”;
1821: a “Fac-simile of the Tomb of Psammuthis, King of Thebes”;
1837: a “Living Male Child, with four hands, four arms, four legs, four feet, and two bodies, born at Staleybridge, Manchester”;
1844: “Nine Ojibbeway Indians, from lake Huron, in their native costumes, exhibiting their war-dances and sports”;
1846: “Prof. Faber’s Euphonia, or speaking automaton, enunciating sounds and words”; and
1850: “Panorama of Fremont’s Overland Route to California” as well as “Bonomi’s Panorama of the Nile, 800 feet long: representing 1720 miles distance, closing with the Pyramids and Sphinx.” (320-21)
Such was the popular culture tradition which Smith inherited when he bought the Egyptian Hall and the antiquarian Timbs duly included him in his survey of the Hall’s roll of fame: “March 15 1851: Mr. Albert Smith first gave the narrative of his Ascent of Mont Blanc in 1851, accompanying the exhibition of cleverly-painted moving dioramic pictures of its perils and sublimities. Mr. Smith continued to give, at the Egyptian Hall, his popular representations until within a few days of his lamented death, May 23, 1860, the day before he attained the age of 44” (321).

Before it got to this, however, and Smith passed away in mid-career, he came to the Middle Kingdom to look for the same mixture of comedy and adventure which he had found in Switzerland and Turkey. Over the years, Smith had developed an effective modus operandi as a traveler and the persona which he habitually projected during his journeys was that of a younger and more robust version of Mr. Pickwick, the protagonist of Charles Dickens’ bestselling The Pickwick Papers of 1836. Unlike Mr. Pickwick, however, the kind old gentleman who limited himself to purely domestic travels around England and reported his findings to a small club of fellow eccentrics, the so called Pickwick Club, Smith pursued adventures on an international scale and targeted a much larger audience of metropolitan pleasure seekers who patronized music halls and the comic stage. To be sure, as is evident from To China and Back, Smith seems to have been his usual wisecracking self during his travels in China and thoroughly enjoyed his six-week journey. Yet, the timing of his visit was awkward. In 1858, Canton was a city scarred by fighting and tense with the expectation of further bloodshed as Chinese irregular troops, patriotic citizens, and opportunistic bandits launched frequent attacks on Europeans in and around the city and the British and French responded with shootings, arrests and other punitive measures. The young Hart lived in the midst of it all and his diary entries from those days make for sober reading as he catalogues the kidnappings, ambushes, beheadings, shootings and other acts of violence which he witnessed or was informed of. The celebrity traveler Smith, however, does not seem to have suffered any major inconveniences during his stay in Canton from Sept. 9 to 19 as he was well provided for by British diplomatic and military personnel, including Hart himself. By the end of his six-week journey in and around Hong Kong and Canton, he had acquired a sufficient store of anecdotes, jokes, curiosities, incidents, character sketches, and local color, and returned to

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England to set to work on his new China entertainment at the Egyptian Hall. In addition, he also collected prints, photos, household items, furniture, weapons, curiosities, works of art, and other artifacts, which he exhibited in a “Chinese Museum” in the anterooms to his theater.

As noted, Smith arrived in Canton on Sept. 9, but he did not begin to explore the city till the next day, when Hart reports meeting him for the first time. Smith, however, does not mention Hart, still a junior official at that time and as such perhaps of little interest to him, but rather devotes his two and a half page diary entry for that day to an “expedition” which he undertook in the company of Commissioner Parkes. The latter’s strong man tactics are in evidence in the way in which the party got started as Parkes, says Smith, “collected four police, and some more friends, and then off on an expedition, all armed to the teeth. We may have been 14 or 15 in all” (Smith 38). As will be seen from his diary entry for that day, Hart, though not identified by name by Smith, was a member of this party of fourteen or fifteen armed companions. Meanwhile, the fact that an armed cavalcade of this size was necessary before they could go sightseeing in the Chinese city does not seem to have troubled Smith and he announces the launch of the expedition with evident relish: “And now through Canton. The western city and suburb was first taken” (38). As they tour the commercial district in the western part of the city, Smith begins to notice aspects of Chinese culture which strike him as peculiar, such as, e.g., the fact that in China tradesmen in the same line of business are concentrated in specific streets: “The trades appeared to get together in different streets. As Mr. Parkes observed, with us it is all opposition—with them, all combination” (38). Next up are several temples or, as Smith says, “joss houses,” in the first of which; viz. the Temple of Longevity; the priests strike him as “the most villainous-looking set of hope-abandoned thieves I ever saw” (38). As for the garden of this “joss,” “with its pavilions and trees, and bridges, [it] struck everyone ‘very like the old willow-pattern plate’” (39). Moving on through many streets “each so exactly like the last, that it was difficult to remember one from the other,” (39) they reach another temple, the Temple of the Five Hundred Gods, where he observes: “And there were five hundred: all in rows, like the sculpture at the Royal Academy” (39). He also reports on a mysterious sense of dread which this temple occasioned in him as he was overcome by a strange sensation that he had seen this temple years ago in a dream and could indicate the location of doors exactly as he remembered from his dream. Departing from this temple, Smith comments for the second time on the many streets through which the journey continues, “Still on, through streets and streets, and streets again” (39). Finally, as was often the case in
traveler’s tales in the China of that time, they reach the city’s execution grounds, which struck him as being rather unremarkable, as it is “a place very like the yards at warehouses, seen on leaving town by the Greenwich railway. It was a potter’s bit of waste ground, but at executions things were cleared away” (39). A brief conversation with Parkes adds a bit more interest to the occasion, however, as Parkes alludes to a rumor that the bodies of the poorer class of criminals have been known to be left for pigs to feed on, whereas the friends of the superior criminals pay to have the heads and bodies taken away. Then, as it begins to get dark, they turn home and Smith concludes his entry with a vigorous sentence which illustrates Michael Kowaleski’s view that “travel literature promises both adventure and return, escape and homecoming” (14): “It was now getting dark: so we rode quickly up the street of Benevolence and Love, under triumphal arches, and between rows of ruins, to the parade ground, which we all crossed at full gallop—parted at the bottom of the hill, and then home after a wonderful day of surprise and interest” (39).

That Smith should travel through a city full of ruins with an armed escort and yet sum up the experience as “a wonderful day of surprise and interest” is striking and raises questions about his agenda as a traveler. On the one hand, Smith suggests that China is a dangerous and perplexing land where streets cannot be recognized one from the other and pigs feed on corpses. On the other hand, he also makes light of this cultural unease with the help of familiar tropes from what David Spurr calls “the rhetoric of empire,” including appropriation (“The western city and suburb was first taken”), debasement (“villainous-looking,” “hope-abandoned thieves”), insubstantialization (the temple is seen as in a dream), and aestheticization (“very like the old willow-pattern plate,” “like the sculpture at the Royal Academy”). Especially the latter trope is significant as it implies that China can be cut down to size and toyed with as if it were the postcard and pantomime China known to Englishmen back home: temple gardens look like the Chinese gardens depicted on Victorian chinaware; statues of divinities are lined up in rows like sculptures at the Royal Academy; and the execution grounds resembles the warehouse yards seen around English railway stations. The narrative presentation of his day-trip, thus, becomes purely sequential and China seems to pass by as a series of pictures or visual exhibits (chinaware, exhibits at the Royal Academy, scenes seen through the windows of railway carriages), which he responds to with snappy phrases and comic observations, and at no point does he seek a deeper thematic or intellectual reading of the society he encounters. It is “Chinarama,” i.e., China as diorama, and
that was probably his intention as this diary served as a “handbook” to a stage spectacle.

Ross Forman comments in his *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (2013) that representations of the Chinese on the Victorian and Edwardian stage “all have one thing in common: whether they depict the Chinese as Christians in waiting or ‘queer’ creatures who inhabit the orbit of plates, farces, musical extravaganzas, and ‘pyro-spectacular’ dramas, they all conceive of the Middle Kingdom as a site on which to project fantasies about Britain’s role in the world. In so doing, they present a dramatic tableau of how the spectator at home got swept up in the theater of empire” (28). Forman’s analysis not only confirms my understanding of Smith’s project as fantasy-fueled pleasure seeking, but his reference to images of Chinese “who inhabit the orbit of plates” also evokes Smith’s “old willow-pattern plate” simile and suggests the continuity between the contemporary stagecraft of Smith and other Victorian entertainers and the older tradition of cross-cultural representation encoded in chinoiserie. In her study of the visual impact of China on Britain, *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2010), Elizabeth Hope Chang analyzes the chinoiserie tradition in British design and notes another example of the willow-pattern theme in English literature, viz. in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72). There, the presence of willow-pattern plates on the lunch table of Dr. Wrench “conveys, in a way that no other design reference could, an assessment of a character that is both middlebrow and unimaginative. Wrench’s use of willow pattern makes the design, once sought after and utterly exotic, into a foreignness that is resolutely drab and familiar” (17).  

Much of what Smith did, I argue, whether in his writing or in the stage performances in the Egyptian Hall, also expresses this sense of a “foreignness that is resolutely drab and familiar,” and his “Chinese Museum” in the ante-rooms to the theater further illustrates the contradiction. As *The Spectator* reported in its March 26, 1859 issue, the museum formed “a feature worthy to be noticed, independently of the entertainment and its own particular attractions.” The antiquarian Timbs, discussed above, documented the history of the Egyptian Hall as a sort of artistic, ethnographic, zoological, and scientific cabinet of curiosities, and the Chinese Museum clearly extended this tradition of popular display. Some of the items in

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Smith’s museum: e.g., a painting of a “joss-house” and the picture of Puntinqua’s garden, which also served as frontispiece in his diary and was used as a backdrop on stage; illustrated topics which were touched upon in To China and Back. As for the major theme of the exhibition, the reporter understood it to be a collection of “objects of art and curiosity illustrative of Chinese manners” (“Albert Smith’s Chinese Museum”). The artistic objects mainly seem to have been of a kind that viewers familiar with chinoiserie would have recognized: e.g., ornaments, bamboo furniture, a washstand, and kites; whereas the curiosities tended toward the spectacular and included various weapons taken from pirate ships, an opium pipe, and objects and images illustrating different ways of executing prisoners and revolutionaries. Added to these artistic objects and curiosities were a number of other items that evoked aspects of Chinese civilization which had traditionally intrigued Europeans: e.g., Chinese money and pictures of “the procession of furniture and gifts of a Chinese Bride on the day of her wedding,” as well as of “the staple pursuits of tea-packing, [and] cultivating rice” (“Albert Smith’s Chinese Museum”). The entire assemblage, in sum, seems to have proposed familiar narratives regarding China as a land of pirates, coolies, brides, farmers, coldblooded judges, and opium smokers. That Smith was effective as a showman, however, is evident from the reaction of the reporter from The Spectator, who wondered out loud whether “this gentleman should not gradually create a separate and distinct museum which shall lead his visitors and the general public to appreciate the social conditions—in its whims, eccentricities, excellence, or defects—of this peculiar and vast division of the human race” (“Albert Smith’s Chinese Museum”).

Before turning to Hart’s diary entry regarding the expedition, it is useful to note that other visitors to late Qing Dynasty China who toured major metropolitan centers in China brought a very different sensitivity to the experience and probed a bit deeper than Smith. One example may be found in the prose poem “City at Night” (“Ville la nuit” 1896) by the French poet Paul Claudel. Claudel narrates an excursion not unlike the one undertaken by Smith as he describes how some European visitors exit from the French Concession in Shanghai under the guidance of a policeman and proceed into the Chinese city. Yet, while Claudel’s cityscape superficially resembles Smith’s, Claudel’s traveler is more fully engaged in the journey and envisions the presence of a labyrinthine, possibly Dantesque, city in this Shanghai with its many narrow roads, ancient temples, and poor people who swarm around fires in a dried-out riverbed “like the infernal spirits” (“mânes infernaux” 92). This vision of an underworldly city stretched out below the bright
lights of the French Concession does not provoke negative feelings, however, but rather awakens in the poet a sharpened sense of cultural otherness and fascination for the past and pre-modern cities and lifestyles. Smith’s narrative, with its vision of innumerable streets and exotic temples, for a brief moment seems to allow for a similar vision of a complex labyrinthine city, but his gaze quickly passes on to further acts of touristic consumption and the potential for a more intense encounter with the non-Western cultural domain is not exploited. Claudel and, indeed, Hart, it is to be remembered, were career public officials and acculturated foreign residents of East Asia, whereas Smith was just passing by and did not have any personal incentives to go beyond the anecdotal aspects of his sightseeing expeditions.7

Turning now to Hart’s diary, it is clear that Hart met Smith as he mentions him twice, viz., on Friday Sept. 10 and Monday Sept. 13, and says he “rode out” with him on Sept. 10. Hart, therefore, must have been among the fourteen or fifteen participants in the armed expedition, but unlike Smith he does not give any information regarding its destination, duration or other relevant details. Instead, he reviews three unrelated aspects of his day and only one of these involves Smith. First, he states that he had caught a cold and was not feeling well; then he says that he rode out with Albert Smith and records his impression of the famous entertainer; and lastly he takes note of the visit of an important Chinese guest:

Friday, 10 September 1858: I’ve got a nasty cold: chilling hot weather thus: cold perspiration, warm skin, and cool air at night: sore throat and running nose! Rode out with Albert Smith—Mont Blanc Albert! Just fancy meeting him in Canton. Visited Chang-chow in Hwa-lin sze. He is a little fat round-shouldered man: of the Winchester shape and Tarrant voice, with a hooked Jewish nose and a face not unlike the Col.’s orderly Banton. I always thought of him with a kind of Carlyle Hero Worship: now my romantic ideas about him are dissipated, “distance lends—[[fades out into a scrawl]].”

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Howqua came today. (Bruner et al, eds., *Entering China’s Service* 217)

Not all of the comments in the mid section beginning with the phrase “Rode out with Albert Smith—” can be readily understood and some close reading is useful. What is more, examination of the manuscript in the QUB web archive suggests that several emendations in the Harvard text edition may be in order, viz. “Chang-chow in Hwa-lin sze” should be “Chang-chow and Hwa-lin sze,” (emphasis added) thus making clear that Hart is listing two places here (with “Chang-chow” possibly also having to be spelled “Chang-show”). At the end of the sentence, moreover, where the Harvard edition has “distance lends—[[fades out into a scrawl]],” it is possible to read the scrawl as “enchantment” as it begins with the letters “encha” and ends with a “t” (Sir Robert Hart Collection). This reading, moreover, is valid as it evokes the classic expression “Distance lends enchantment to the view.” “Mont Blanc Albert” evidently refers to Albert Smith and the show which had made his reputation, whereas Chang-show and Hwa-lin sze are the two temples visited by the Parkes-Smith expedition and discussed by Smith in some detail in his diary. The expression “Winchester shape” in “a little fat round-shouldered man: of the Winchester shape” refers to a particular ceramic shape seen in ceramics manufactured in the region of Winchester. As for the “Tarrant voice,” it is not clear who the Tarrant in this expression is as the one Victorian Tarrant who might possibly be considered, viz., the Unitarian minister and hymn-writer William George Tarrant (1853-1928) was only five at the time when Hart wrote this entry. It is also possible that the Harvard text may need to be emended here as well, and “Tarrant” read as “torrent.” Hart’s scribble is not clear, but the latter reading would evoke Smith’s reputation as a masterful public performer and is also consistent with Victorian notions regarding emotion, voice control and the powers of elocution.\(^8\) We further note the use of a racial stereotype regarding Smith’s nose and, while no portraits of the orderly Banton are available, there are several portraits of Smith in the National Portrait Gallery in London which show what the entertainer looked like. Hart then refers to Thomas Carlyle, the author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, a collection of six lectures published in 1841, in order to qualify his earlier admiration for Albert Smith. The concluding comment clearly calls for the word “enchantment,” as the young Hart, speaking without reserve in

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the private pages of his diary, expresses his disillusionment regarding the famous entertainer now that he has met him in person. Howqua, finally, was a wealthy Chinese merchant who controlled much of the trade with foreign businessmen in Canton and often acted as an intermediary in negotiations with European officials.

Two days later, on Sept. 13, Smith reports another excursion when he visits Pih Kwei, the governor of Canton, “in a small procession with Mr. Parkes, the French commissioner, marins, soldiers, police, etc.” (41). Guns were fired to announce the arrival of the honorable guests and they were admitted to the governor and offered tea. Then, as Parkes and the governor began to talk pidgin; or as Smith writes, “‘pigeon’—but Chinese pigeon” (42); the governor invited him to visit his house and gardens with a servant. This tour being concluded, the visit ended and they departed. Hart, however, in contrast to Smith, summarizes the occasion in one factual sentence and gives the impression the affair was routine and uneventful: “Went to Pih Kwei’s this morning; introduced Albert Smith to him and then showed the latter round the yamun” (217). There may be two possible explanations as to why the respective versions are so different. Perhaps Smith’s claim to have visited the governor in grand style in the company of the chief British and French representatives is exaggerated and nothing as fancy ever took place. This would then mean that Hart’s much more modest version hews closer to the facts and one may, indeed, wonder about some details in Smith’s story, i.e., why the French Commissioner and marines should have accompanied an Englishman on this visit when the English Commissioner and his military escort were on the scene.

Yet, ultimately, there is no corroborating evidence to determine who got it right, the purveyor of popular culture Smith or the consular secretary Hart, and a second possibility may be considered. Hart’s dry summary of the visit in essence agrees on the basic facts with Smith’s story (they went to Pih Kwei, Smith was introduced to him, and then visited the yamen) and does not preclude some of the more formal aspects of the event from having occurred. Smith was writing for a well defined audience, but Hart was writing for himself and often summarized or passed over details which others might consider important. His phrase regarding the visit, moreover, includes three verbs, but all have implied personal pronouns, which could be either singular “I” or plural “we”: “Went to Pih Kwei’s this morning; introduced Albert Smith to him and then showed the latter round the yamun.” As to the question why the French Commissioner should have been involved in taking Smith on a visit to the Chinese governor, it is possible that rather than organizing the visit in honor of Smith, the French and British Commissioners had some official business to conduct and brought Smith along. Smith, meanwhile, seems to have
been impressed with the ceremonial aspects of the visit and comments that guns were fired to announce their arrival and that tea was served, whereas Hart does not mention any of these details. This does not necessarily mean that Smith was dashing on some extra color, as these were routine procedures, which, though new to him, probably were old hat to Hart. Hart also writes “then showed the latter [i.e., Smith] round the yamun,” whereas Smith reports that the governor instructed one of his servants to show him around and does not mention that other Englishmen accompanied him on this tour. Yet, Hart, to Smith just a junior official, may obviously have trailed along. In essence, then, the visit may very well have been a formal one, involving much ceremony and face giving, but while Smith seems to have been entranced and excited by this contact with Chinese culture and the presence of senior officials, Hart had witnessed such scenes before and may not have felt compelled to record the details.

What these instances of Sept. 10 and 13 suggest, then, is that rather than one or the other not telling the truth, this may have been more a case of two people with very different personalities and life circumstances briefly finding themselves traveling down the same road and not seeing any need to synchronize their personal convictions and operational methods. Smith was visiting China to collect material for a commercial entertainment, whereas Hart lived and worked in China and life in Canton, China at that time was serious business. In sum, it is probable that Smith may sometimes have embellished or exaggerated what he saw and may also have misunderstood or misrepresented certain things. Yet, there is no evidence that he did so specifically in these instances. For Smith, life was a diorama and his audience was in London; for Hart it was an unfinished diary and he had many more years to go.

Similar questions arise regarding the events of the next two days. On the 14th, e.g., Smith records a trip up river by boat to visit the gardens of the merchant Puntinqua, but, as it got dark and they were not able to enter, he recommended that they leave and travel back to the city. They returned the next day, again by boat, and visited Puntinqua’s gardens, which disappointed terribly as they were completely neglected after having been looted by the French at the beginning of the war. Smith, never missing an opportunity to joke, surveys the rot and comments: “I really believe that the reason for the Chinese having kept Canton jealously shut up for centuries was, that they were ashamed of it” (42). And later, after inspecting some decayed buildings with collapsed roofs, he reaches for some images from contemporary English poets and suggests: “The place altogether might have
belonged to Tennyson’s Moated Grange and Hood’s Haunted House” (43). They then proceed to Howqua’s gardens on the other side of the river, which was “not so bad in its dilapidation as Puntinqua’s—a little care would have put it decently to rights,” (43) and he concludes regarding the gardens of the two merchants that “both would be charming places, kept in the style of Dropmore” (43). Smith, thus, once again familiarizes the exotic; Dropmore referring to Dropmore Park in Buckinghamshire, which was known for its extensive collection of trees. Howqua’s garden, moreover, makes another appearance in Smith’s To China and Back, as the book contains a rather fanciful frontispiece illustration entitled “Howqua’s Garden, Near Canton,” which shows a well-kept garden with a pond, terraces, pavilions and several young upper class Chinese ladies facing the viewer near the front of the garden. The illustration seems improbable as the garden is in much better condition than what Smith reported in his diary, nor was it customary for well-to-do Chinese women to stroll about in the presence of Western visitors.

As for Hart, on Sept. 14 he reports a conversation with a young boy who had been forced to work for a group of “braves,” i.e., irregular Chinese fighters who continued to resist the foreign troops, and who had seen the decapitated heads of five foreigners brought in. After that, he says, he rode out in the afternoon “with about 25 others to Puntinqua’s Garden” (218). Smith, as stated, reports making his way up river to Puntinqua’s garden by boat some time in the afternoon and this may mean that Parkes, who had extended a similar courtesy to Smith two days earlier, arranged for a large escort to meet with Smith once the latter reached the garden and left the relative safety of the boat to do some sightseeing on land. In any event, while it seems likely that Hart spent some time with Smith that afternoon, the latter completely disappears from Hart’s diary as of the next day.

There are, indeed, no further references to Smith in Hart’s diary entries for the period from Sept. 15 to 19, which is when Smith departed from Canton. Hart’s entry for Sept. 15, e.g., when Smith made his second, more successful trip up river to visit the gardens of Puntinqua and Howqua, is entirely devoted to serious business in the city of Canton. Hart mentions, among other things, that an English soldier had disappeared the previous afternoon and had not been found yet. He then visits governor Pih Kwei and learns that the latter has arrested a certain “Kwo peaou,” “a man with but one ear, the leader of one of the bands of braves that were on the lookout for straggling foreigners, and sd he wd ‘Ta sze tha’” (218). As is seen throughout his diary, Hart used contractions such as “sd” and “wd” and created his own romanizations for Chinese words. Here “Ta sze tha” literally means “beat
him to death,” but can also be understood as “give him a good thrashing.” Later that day, Hart records the following accidental meeting:

This evening rode out with Evans through New City. When coming home up East Street met Luckwa and some soldiers escorting Kwopeau to the Pwanyu Prison. He was carried in a basket, was covered with blood and seemed half dead. He had been examined by Pih Kwei and had received 600 täng teaou on the back: 200 on the thigh: 200 tsung pa-tsze on cheek: and 200 Koo Kwei on each ankle. He confessed that he had taken part in the murder of one English man and one Sepoy. He is again to be interrogated tomorrow. In the copy of his confession sent to me, no mention of his having killed foreigners. (218)

Brief though it may be, this anecdote about a chance meeting which took place during a trip into the city communicates more information about life in Canton than Smith’s much longer narrative about his armed expedition. The first thing which seems worthy of notice is the documentary quality of this passage, which comes across as being entirely authentic and not staged or premeditated. Hart and his companion went for a ride and accidentally ran into this party; they knew the man Luckwa who led the group; and engaged in conversation with him about the half-dead prisoner. One also notices the precision of Hart’s summary of the conversation; Hart, after all, was a consular official and knew how to record the essential facts of a case. First, the prisoner was interrogated by governor Pih Kwei and given a total of 1200 “Täng teaou,” “tsung pa-tsze” and “Koo Kwei,” which, as the editors explain in a footnote, are “technical terms for blows, slaps and squeezes” (369). Hart’s use of the Chinese words here and elsewhere in the diary indicates his preference for directness and authenticity. Second, the prisoner confessed that he took part in the killing of one Englishman and one Indian soldier. Third, he will be questioned again the next day. The most crucial piece of information, however, comes in the final sentence when Hart states that in the copy of the written report of the “confession,” which he received later that day, there is in fact “no mention of his having killed foreigners.” In other words, though beaten half dead and unable to speak when Hart saw him in the street, the alleged killer had in fact not confessed under prolonged questioning. Hart does not comment here, but he must have grasped the inconsistency. If the prisoner had confessed, why did the report not
contain this essential information? And, if he had confessed, why did he need to be interrogated again the next day? It is in moments such as this, when the discourse of the state apparatus begins to show cracks, that, however faintly, the voice of the disciplined subject is heard. Yet, as chilling as this incidental encounter in the streets of the city may seem, it represents but a snapshot of a fairly routine day in the occupied city of Canton. As for Smith, there is no evidence in either his or Hart’s diary that he was ever informed regarding this sequence of events which took place while he was visiting the nearby gardens.

The next couple of days, while Smith continued his sightseeing in and around Canton, Hart remained focused on his own business and Smith is not heard from again, confirming the impression that Hart soon turned his gaze away from the visitor as other professional and personal preoccupations demanded his attention. On Sept. 16, e.g., in addition to some office business, he mentions that his Chinese concubine Ayaou, whom he had taken to the much safer Macao when they left Ningpo, had come to town to visit him. Such relationships were common for many expatriate residents of China at that time, but there could be complications and Hart notes: Ayaou “Demands $200. I must cut the connection” (218). Later that day, he receives word that the brave he had seen the previous day had died from the flogging he had received at the hands of the governor’s henchmen and it is interesting that he does not recall his earlier phrase that there was “no mention of his having killed foreigners” in the so called confession. Rather than concluding that this may, therefore, well have been an extrajudicial killing, he avails himself of an Old China Hand cliché and comments: “Pih Kwei has the reputation of being very severe. It is necessary in China to be so” (219). Then on Sept. 17, in addition to reporting on some official business such as he does almost every day, he mentions that he started reading “Confessions of a Thug” (219). As we know from his diary and letters, Hart was an enthusiastic reader who enjoyed reading books on a wide variety of subjects, but this was an interesting choice. *Confessions of a Thug* is a bestselling novel from 1839 by Philip Meadows Taylor about the Thuggee criminal gangs in India which specialized in killing and robbing travelers. Considering its content, one wonders if Hart read it in the occupied Canton as a fable of British colonial achievement? In India, the British had made excellent progress in their efforts to suppress the Thugs and would soon eradicate them completely, but in 1858 the streets of Canton were not safe for Europeans. Just the previous day an English soldier had gone missing and exactly one week earlier Hart himself had been among those providing an armed escort for a celebrity visitor from London. In fact, later that month, on Sept. 28, Hart would see eight braves accused
of anti-foreigner violence executed in public and there would be more such executions in October. Hart does not comment, however, and we will never know what he thought of *Confessions of a Thug*, but it does seem likely that he enjoyed it and finished it as he reports two days later that he was still reading Taylor’s novel. Meanwhile, he was also still preoccupied with keeping at bay another source of instability in his life, viz. his concubine Ayaou. On Sept. 19, e.g., which is when Smith departed from Canton, he reports: “Paid Ayaou $125: I understand this closes the connection” (219). In fact, Hart was wrong about this. Ayaou did return to Macao on the 20th, as he reports, but the connection would not be closed for several more years and Ayaou would give birth to three children, whom Hart in due time would accept as his wards and send to England to be educated (Lan Li and Deirdre Wildy).

As for Smith, in early 1859 he was hard at work on his new show and was ready to give his first performance in the Spring. Yet, while being well received, “Mr. Albert Smith’s China,” as the show was called, did not become the kind of box office success that Smith had enjoyed with his “Ascent of Mont Blanc.” One high point, nevertheless, occurred when he performed his show before Queen Victoria and the Royal Family and, understanding the publicity value of royal patronage, Smith added to his *To China and Back* an advertisement for “Mr. Albert Smith’s China” in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly “delivered by Mr. Albert Smith, before her Royal Majesty and the Royal Family, on Thursday Evening, April 14th, 1859.” As for the question what Hart may have been doing in China that Thursday when Smith enjoyed his moment of glory before the Royals, it will never be answered. Nor do we know if he ever got his hands on a copy of *To China and Back* and, if he did, how he felt about it. Or if he read any reviews, announcements or ads about the show in any of the English newspapers and magazines which regularly reached English residents in China. Hart, viz., did not leave any diary entries for the period from 6 Dec. 1858 to 9 May 1863, thus creating a gap of four and half years, a period covering “probably the most crucial period in his life” (Bruner, Fairbank, and Smith 230). The Canton diary, indeed, would only run on for another two months or so following Smith’s departure and there would be no more diary entries till 9 May 1863, when Hart had already resigned from the British Consular Service and resided in Shanghai as deputy to Horatio N. Lay, the first CMCS Inspector General. It is not because the young consular official discontinued his diary during these years, but rather because in all likelihood he destroyed several volumes once he retired from the Service and returned to England in 1908. Edward LeFevour, one
of the first scholars who examined the entire set of seventy-seven volumes after the diary had been donated to Queens University Belfast in 1970, reported: “Two volumes are missing, one in the 1850’s, and one in the 1860’s” (437). And he also surmised: “The missing volumes must have contained references to his Chinese marriage” (438). More than a decade later, the Harvard research team which prepared the scholarly edition of volumes 1 to 8, followed up and stated more decisively:

Undoubtedly this gap marks Hart’s destruction of this portion of his journal because it recorded *inter alia* his relations with Ayaou and the birth of their three children, for whom Hart later assumed responsibility as his “wards.” References already published indicate that the three children, Anna, Herbert, and Arthur, must have been born in late 1858 or early 1859, 1862, and 1865. At the end of his career in the 1900’s, when the destruction of the journals for 1859 to mid-1863 presumably occurred, the great I. G. evidently did not want to embarrass his family with the record of a liaison that had preceded his marriage of 1866, some forty years before. (230-31)

Considering the information offered here regarding the birth of a child in late 1858 or early 1859, it appears that, in addition to all the official business which preoccupied Hart in Canton in Sept. 1858, there was also this private matter of a pregnancy and the prospect of fatherhood.

The diary editors’ conclusion that Hart destroyed some volumes certainly matches what we know about the I. G.’s apprehensions regarding his diary’s afterlife. In a letter from Peking dated 6 April 1902, e.g., he told his London Secretary James Duncan Campbell that he regretted that the diary had made it through the Boxer Uprising unharmed and wished that “it had gone to the flames with my other belongings” as “it may get into the wrong hands and possibly its pages contain some things that would be better let fall into oblivion, . . .” (*The I.G. in Peking*, Vol. 2, Letter 1236, 1308). He further instructed Campbell that in case of his death he wanted his diary to be made over to his son Bruce to be kept “as a family curio—and not to be either published or lent to writers of any kind: note this, please—‘R.I.P!’” (1308) Such is, indeed, what happened as the diary was left to his wife and son following his death in 1911 and it remained the property of his descendants till his great-grandson, the last Sir Robert Hart passed away in 1970. While this effort of Hart to relegate his diary to the status of a mere family curio
impeded historical research for well over half a century, it is consistent with his conception of diary writing as a purely private undertaking going back to its very beginnings. When he first arrived in Hong Kong to take up his appointment as student-interpreter in the British Consular Service, he wrote “My Journal Narrative, descriptive, conjectural; semi-opinionative and critical” (Bruner, Fairbank, and Smith 12) at the top of its first page, a fanciful title which suggests a youthful abandon to subjectivity and intellectual freedom. This youthful dynamic was much tempered in later years of course, but throughout the fifty-four years during which he wrote his diary he never wavered from his intention to keep his diary private and always took up his pen unfettered with thoughts of publication and free from the need to impose any kind of formal literary conventions on his writing. This stance, moreover, is common to many diary writers. As life writing scholar Rachel Cottam comments: “Often, the diary is written in an attempt to master experience, and to contain the self—as a closed book” (268). She further reflects: “[It] is a communication-that-is-not-to-be-communicated. Secrecy defines the diary as both text and practice” (268). Hart’s diary was very much such an ongoing “closed book” project and, while the delay in making it accessible has been much regretted by scholars, it is this very sense of secrecy and authenticity which makes it such a valuable storehouse of the expatriate experience in late Qing Dynasty China.

One other important dimension of the diary as a secret and uncensored communication is that diaries sometimes incorporate moments of alterity whereby the presence of others is acknowledged and parallel lives begin to be evoked—even if only incidentally and within the context of the dominant perspective of the diary writer. The diary in this respect resembles travel writing, which, as Eric Leed argues, serves a “need for escape and self-definition through detachments from the familiar. . . .” In Leed’s view, this need is then catered for by means of an “ideology requiring a wilderness, a domain of alternative realities, in which the self can assume its uniqueness and recover its freedom, in the climate of the new and the unexpected . . .” (51). Diaries, it may be argued, offer similar opportunities to pursue self-definition by making it possible for writers to turn inward and plunge into an entirely private domain where, released from his/her public persona, the diarist can practice an unrestrained doubling of selves and subjectivities and explore marginality, otherness and nonconformity. In the brief passages from Hart’s diary discussed above, this exploration of alternative lives/stories centered on two cross-cultural others, one admittedly much more important than the other, viz., an alleged enemy whose so-called confession was extracted under torture and offers no real
proof of his guilt, and a concubine who would remain an important but hidden part of his life for years to come.

Years later following the events in Canton, Hart would assume yet another identity and become, in the words of his superior Prince Kung and others in the Tsungli Yamen (the Bureau of Foreign Affairs in Peking), “Our Hart.” Smith’s visit, therefore, shines a light on Hart at a time when he had not yet put on the mantle of high office and acquired the public persona that would remain with him till the end of his life. In this moment of exposure side by side with the showman Smith, we see that he was ambitious, driven, not easily impressed, kept a concubine and thought about getting rid of her, read *Confessions of a Thug*, watched executions without cringing, and believed that in China it is necessary for powerful men to be severe. He was also cautious, thoughtful, introspective, capable of judging himself severely, and a hard worker who was continually gaining experience and fine-tuning his methods.

It is interesting to note, in conclusion, that now that the “closed book” of Hart’s life story has been opened thanks to the efforts of the Harvard historians and other scholars, it is generating more literary and scholarly responses than could ever have been anticipated in Canton in Sept. 1858. The contemporary American novelist Lloyd Lofthouse, e.g., wrote two historical novels: *My Splendid Concubine* (2008) and a sequel entitled *Our Hart: Elegy for a Concubine* (2010), both of which feature Hart’s relationship with his concubine. There is also new scholarship, such as, e.g., Mary Tiffin’s *Friends of Sir Robert Hart: Three Generations of Carrall Women in China* (2012), which covers new ground in the study of Hart’s biography and constructs a detailed picture of life in the CMCS with the help of extracts from the Hart diary, letters, and photographs. On 22 Feb. 2013, finally, a Sir Robert Hart Commemorative Event was held in Bisham, Berkshire, the small town where Hart and his wife Lady Hester Jane Hart are buried in the churchyard of All Saints’ Church alongside the Thames. Their tombstone had been badly decayed, but was restored with the support of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and rededicated in a short service attended by some sixty guests, including descendants of Robert Hart and other foreign employees of the Chinese Maritime Customs, British historians and Asian Studies scholars, former British diplomats who had served in Peking, and scholars from China and Taiwan (Tsai). The next day, some of the same guests proceeded to Royal Holloway University for a Sino-British Roundtable on historical research about the CMCS (Connections). I personally participated in the events in Bisham and London in Feb. 2013 and observed how a century following his death Chinese and British academics and public funding
agencies remain interested in the Hart story and its still relevant, though not yet fully decoded, narrative of East-West commerce and politics. Yet, when the now-forgotten Smith visited Canton one hundred and fifty years ago and met Hart, he did not even mention him. Such are the different fates which awaited Hart and the man he once hailed as “Mont Blanc Albert” at the end of their respective journeys “to China and back.”

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About the Author

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