'Silence of the sources: Women and the Siege of the Legations 1900'

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Introduction

Many people's introduction to the Boxer uprising and the siege of the foreign legations in Peking was, traditionally, Peter Fleming's *The Siege at Peking* (1959). It was certainly mine, and it aroused more than passing interest: not only was I then living in Hong Kong (1987-1997) and, from 1991, travelling frequently to Beijing, but I was already starting to research the history of Western women and their relations with China and the Chinese.[i][1]

Fleming's account, readable as it may be, has more than one obvious flaw: it neither tells the story of what the foreign women experienced, nor uses the records they left – prompting my title, 'Silence of the Sources: Women at the Siege of the Legations 1900'.

What makes Fleming's account doubly frustrating for the researcher into women's experience or, indeed, into the broader picture, is that he missed an almost miraculous opportunity regarding source material. He acknowledges the 1950s help of Stella Macdonald, the British Minister's daughter, three years old at the time of the siege; of Mrs Poole, widow of FG Poole who, with his brother, was also besieged; and of Violet Garnons Williams (née Tours), aged sixteen months in June 1900.

Following the publication of his book, however, he received a letter from Vienna, from Paula von Rosthorn, wife of the Austrian Chargé during the siege, and known to many who chose to stay in the more vulnerable French and German Legations and members of the relief force, as the 'Good Fairy of the Defence'. To compound his failure to track down all survivors, he did not then go and interview her, nor ascertain where her papers, and those of her husband, were, for the future use of scholars. He was even too discreet to follow up his unanswered reply to her letter, in which he had written:

> *What I wanted to ask you was the immediate cause of you leaving the British Legation. It is so long since I worked on the book that I cannot remember the details, but I do know that one or two sources indicated that you and your husband were involved in some kind of incident.*[ii][2]

The disagreement alluded to can be seen as integral to the split between the British Legation, in which most of the foreigners were besieged, and the French and German Legations and the Peking Hotel, from where the 'opposition' sniped not only at the Chinese besiegers, but also, metaphorically, at the British, and the American missionaries. This bad blood was a feature of international relations in China which, in turn, governed foreign relations with the Chinese. Paula von Rosthorn did not die until 1967.

The problem was, keen and intelligent though he was, and knowledgeable from personal experience about aspects of China, he was not committed long term to his subject.[iii][3] He

even turned down the chance, offered to him after the publication of his book by the publishers Constable, to read the siege manuscript (which they had already rejected) of Lucy Ker, wife of William Ker, Assistant Chinese Secretary at the British Legation.[iv][4] Lucy Ker lived on, in England, until 1969.

In his reply to Paula von Rosthorn, Fleming named the survivors known to him, but there were other women more important as oral sources: Maud von Ketteler, widow of the assassinated German minister, who did not die until 1960, and the American missionary Bessie Ewing who died in 1966.

As late as 1999, I held the hand of, and talked to Helen Hope Brazier Steedman, who had been six months old at the start of the siege, the daughter of (James) Russell Brazier (Chief Secretary in the Imperial Maritime Customs) and Helen Brazier (née Myers). Mrs Steedman, who died the day of her hundredth birthday, 17 December 1999, could not be expected to remember the siege, nor could she tell me anything she had been told, for her mother died in childbirth and from the effects of the siege in January 1902, and her father rarely mentioned the siege when she was old enough to comprehend what her family had been through; their suffering, and his wife's untimely death, were no doubt as much factors as customary reticence. I will come to how I found Mrs Steedman and subsequent research success shortly. But, first, my title needs to be set more firmly in a text.

To do so highlights a point which, although so obvious, always needs to be borne in mind when recreating the past: 'It is dangerous to draw conclusions either way from the silence of the sources which happen to have survived.'[v][5] That stands on its head Paula von Rosthorn's comment to Fleming, 'It seems quite a miracle to me that you, who have not taken part in the siege personally, have been able to conjure so vivid a picture of the situation, so unbiased and true.'[vi][6] What Fleming in fact wrote, in ignoring both the women's story and their sources, was not only sadly biased, but also one-eyed; his work has become valuable only as a prod and a stepping stone.

Having taken up this challenge, I plan now to show the rough workings of our craft – the mechanics of hunting down the sources; and they are more easily told anecdotally and rather personally (though I hope nonetheless scholarly for that).
What drives the personal involvement is not just the thrill of the hunt, of fitting jigsaw pieces together; I am also haunted by the image conjured up by Virginia Woolf: 'Those unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully lit.'[vii][7]

In response, not only do I strive, where possible, to make my historical work both accessible to general readers and scholars and in other ways practical but I find, too, that, in the search for sources, I become immersed in a network of relations with family members and others appealed to for help. Yet another aspect of writing women's history in a previous neglected area – foreign women in, to begin with Hongkong and Macau, later China – is the satisfaction of finding gold coins in often hitherto unturned soil, and of supplying answers to questions concerning the bigger picture which have previously proved elusive.

But recreating women's history full time also has its drawbacks: it is, for instance, a great conversation stopper. After a pause, a new acquaintance will ask, 'How do you do your

research?' or, 'Where do you get your material?' They suspect that material and information are not as readily available about women as about men.[viii][8] I propose, now, therefore, to elaborate on the hunt I undertook for previously neglected material on foreign women's part in the siege of Peking.

Fleming Papers

Since Peter Fleming was the spark, it seemed natural to search first for his papers, but, as Fleming himself was dead, how was I to go about it? I had earlier written about him in his own right; I had, therefore, not only copies of his travel writing (much of it about China), but also a biography by Duff Hart-Davis.[ix][9] His was an uncommon enough name to track down; he put me onto Fleming's son who told me that his father's papers were at Reading University and gave me permission to use them. (On his death I corresponded with his sister).

I had not expected the treasure trove that awaited me: dozens of letters, following the publication of his book, from family members of survivors of the siege, each with a snippet to tell, very often about women, including the letter from Paula von Rosthorn, the one about Lucy Ker's manuscript, and a correspondence with Stella Macdonald and several others about Fleming's suggestion that Lady Macdonald took part in looting following the Relief. Since looting, and women's alleged part in it, was so important an area of research, this was gold dust indeed.

Violet and Ada Tours

Meanwhile, I had begun to follow another thread of my research – tracking down papers through bibliographies, footnotes and acknowledgements. Fleming gave no hint of the whereabouts of Violet Garnons Williams (daughter of BG Tours, British Legation accountant, and his wife Ada (née Harwood) whose diary he had used only for the epigraph to a chapter). But PD Coates, author of *The China Consuls* (1988) also mentioned Ada's diary, and we shared a publisher.

Coates was delightfully receptive to a research letter of 29 December 1988 (the first in my files). To look back at such a correspondence is, itself, to relive history. So generous was Coates, that he had already done his best, through his own longstanding contacts, to track down Stella Macdonald for me. He had not earlier tried to find the family on his own account because, as he explained, 'I made a rule not to approach families for help if I saw that I was going to criticise a member of the family concerned...'[x][10] – a noble rule, but I usually find out that I am going to criticise after I have contacted the family and seen the papers. That can be tricky. As for Violet Garnons Williams, Coates was sure that he had seen a notice of her death, and that of her husband, in *The Times*.

A two-pronged attack sent a letter back to him asking where he had seen Ada Tours' diary some years before – perhaps the new owners of the house could pass a letter on to surviving family - and a delve into *Who's Who* (which, together with *Who Was Who,* the *DNB, Burke's* and *Debrett's* are essential tools for British research, worth having, as far as possible, on one's own shelves and used to feed into each other). At the same time as I discovered there

a brother-in-law of Violet, PD Coates wrote back with a Welsh address. On the telephone Basil Garnons Williams told me that his niece, Violet's daughter, still lived in the family house and she later provided not only the diary but also photographs, hospitality and a friendship that has lasted twelve years. PD Coates and I were prevented from meeting for a good gossip about the China Coast only by my absence abroad and, then, his death.

Lucy Ker

The hunt for Lucy Ker's manuscript took eleven years; indeed, I had finished the last draft of my own manuscript before I found it. Constable's chief executive, who had been there thirty years, arrived shortly after Fleming was offered, and refused, a look at Lucy Ker's manuscript, and there was no institutional memory. I even wrote to John Murray, in case he, too, had been offered the manuscript and could give me a lead. Lucy Ker, though married to an English consular official, was a Canadian and her father's name and place were in her husband's *Who Was Who*'s entry. A letter to the University of New Brunswick, in case her father's papers and a copy of her manuscript were there, was equally unsuccessful.

Then, one evening, I arrived at the Foreign Office in London for the launch of a book about Far East embassies, and got talking to a woman as we hung up our coats. Later, I found myself beside her and asked why she had been invited. 'Oh, my grandmother was besieged in Peking,' she replied. Quick swallow from me: 'What was her name?' 'Lucy Ker'. The rest, as they say, is history.

But, in addition to having her grandmother's manuscript in her bottom drawer, Kate Ker had more to offer. Some days after I visited her, she rang to apologise for forgetting something important: a neighbour was a descendant of Paula von Rosthorn.

Paula von Rosthorn

In 1992, I had sent a letter to Paula's 1960 address in Vienna, hoping her family still lived there; not surprisingly, there was no reply. In 1998, through an Australian diplomat friend previously posted in Vienna, I had written to an Austrian diplomat who introduced me to the State Archives. They had no von Rosthorn papers, but they did tell me of a recently published book, in German, incorporating the siege accounts of both von Rosthorns. The British Library had the book, but I wanted a copy of my own. It was still in print, but I do not read German. Another friend was doing a master's degree in Oxford with a German-Korean woman; she agreed to read the book for me (as a labour of love; I'm an independent scholar with no institutional funding), and later dictated to me in English the relevant passages. By happy chance, her next port of study was Vienna and there she tracked down the author of the book who was also in charge of the von Rosthorn archives.[xi][11] To her, and later to me on the telephone, he told some of the stories behind the text. Then Kate Ker's neighbour secured for me a von Rosthorn family tree that allowed many jigsaw pieces to find their place.

The Brazier Family

My search for Russell and Helen Brazier, their children (one of whom was Helen Hope Brazier Steedman), his sister Daisy Brazier and her sister Annie Myers was almost as long and

convoluted. Surely such a large besieged family had left a record. I even wrote to an MP called Brazier in the hopes that he was related; he regretted that he was not. Then, one afternoon, almost exactly two years ago, and here in the Brunei Gallery, tea was being served at the AGM of the Friends of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. I got talking to someone who had once written seeking a research answer from me.

I told him whose papers I was still looking for, and he remembered something about a contact at Sothebys telling him about the medals of the Brazier family (medals were his special interest). I wrote to the man at Sothebys; he wrote to Russell and Helen Brazier's granddaughter (by this time, her mother, baby at the siege, was in a retirement home), and she rang me. When next I was in East Sussex, I called on 99-year-old Helen Steedman with her daughter who had also thoughtfully brought along a small siege cannon ball - in a Harrods bag; it was heavy enough to break the handle and reeked of history.

Now, the extended family was prompted to search the house and there, lying forgotten for decades, they discovered Annie Myers' siege diary. Not only that but bound with it were several articles. One, typically self-deprecating, was by (Lady) Ethel Macdonald. (An account of her, referred to in the Fleming correspondence, that had eluded me through various Japanese leads in England was found eventually in a memorial service programme among papers in an Overseas Nursing Association file I had once opened idly, while waiting for papers to come up, in Rhodes House, Oxford. Such successes come under the heading 'serendipity', and are an essential research tool. But it does make you wonder what you have missed.)

Another article was a most disappointing one by Julia Bredon, in spite of her later admired writing about Peking, and one that told me that Paula von Rosthorn was pregnant and almost on her way back to Austria when she had intimations of trouble and returned to her husband's side in Peking; no other source confirms this, and she had no living children. The most welcome article was 'Besieged at Peking' by the artist Cecile Payen for I had searched for years by correspondence for a book of that title, once spotted in a bibliography, having failed to find it in the Bodleian or the British Library.

American Missionaries

Cecile Payen was an American, and, because of the proliferation of US missionary societies, so were many of the foreign women in China. The possible richness of their records was hinted at when Jane Elliot, another participant at this conference, rang me many years ago and generously – given that she discovered that we were both working in the same field - told me about the diary of Theodora Inglis. Through Theodora's papers I learnt that she had lost a baby daughter during the siege, one of the seven foreign babies to die;[xii][12] another, a week after the siege, was Lucy Ker's.

But it was the bibliography of Paul Cohen's *History in Three Keys* (1997) that really allowed me to get to grips with women missionary sources in US universities. Even approaching a family, through the university concerned, for permission to quote led to an earlier, and still relevant diary of Sara Goodrich in her granddaughter's care. Without Cohen's preparatory digging, my search would have been much more onerous.

Annie Chamot

I found US libraries endlessly helpful once we were in email contact, sending vast wadges of photocopied material at fees that varied considerably. Public libraries in places where American women might have left papers were also useful, but there you have to do your own digging. San Francisco yielded several articles about Annie Chamot, the valiant American wife of the Peking Hotel's Swiss proprietor. Although I have still found no personal papers, I did find the Chamots' country house at Tomales Bay, Marin County, and the local people, including the newspaper's librarian, were ready to help. I still keep an ear and an eye open for Annie's siege letters home, but fear that the 1906 earthquake may have buried them in rubble, as it did the Chamots' fortune of property and Chinese artefacts gained partly through siege loot.

Maud von Ketteler

The luckless Clemens von Ketteler's wife, Maud (née Ledyard), came from Detroit and, once I had negotiated with a researcher from its public library's recommended list, I came by not too bad a haul. And, from the State Archives in Munster, his home town, came some articles about his death and an account of his life by a former valet. A letter to Federico Fellini – whose autobiographical film *Tea with Mussolini* was based on episodes in 1930s and wartime Florence, where Maud von Ketteler lived in a German government villa until the war - went unanswered and was the only letter I did not follow up. I do not usually take no reply for an answer.

Charlotte Brent

Many of the besieged foreign women were young and resilient; Charlotte Brent was not only a mother with adult children, but had also gone to Peking to stay with her son for a nervous debility. A hint of her existence came in a letter from a Brent Hutton Williams to Fleming of 19 June 1959. 'I have,' he wrote, 'a great many siege of Peking papers and articles in my possession, including my grandmother's diary which was written at the time.' It took me some years to find those papers too. Finally, noting that AD Brent (Charlotte's son) worked for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in Peking, I wrote to the Bank's archivist in Hong Kong – she had for years been unfailingly responsive to research queries. She sent my letter to her opposite number in London who wrote to me giving the address of Hutton Williams's widow. It was her son who replied and now held the papers which not only included his great grandmother's diary, but also, as I discovered later, when I came upon Annie Myers' diary, an anonymous article published by her. I had guessed, by a process of elimination, that she was the author; now, by comparing the texts, I had proof. Charlotte Brent came safely through the siege, but her husband felt, as his own biographical paper shows, that her death in 1921 was hastened by the experience.

Among those papers, too, was an example of the siege medal specially struck for all those who had undergone the ordeal together. Several of the women, mainly British, also received the Royal Red Cross medal for service in the Siege Hospital; I saw Daisy Brazier's at Sotheby's where it was being appraised.

British Missionaries

The siege letters of British missionaries, such as the London Missionary Society doctor Lillie Saville (one of seven doctors who acted as nurses in the siege hospital), and Georgina Smith, are safely stored here at SOAS in the Special Collections. It took some time to find the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel papers at Rhodes House, Oxford, because of their change of name.

Non-English-Speaking Sources

I tracked down sufficient British and American material to satisfy me; French and Italian impressions depended on published first hand, male accounts, apart from some dates from the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. I was sorry not to find any diaries or letters of women (apart from the published Pei-t'ang siege diary of Sister Hélène de Jaurias). I am conscious, too, of the lack of both Japanese and Russian material. The Japanese military attaché left an account, sifted for me by a Japanese research scholar, which only once mentioned the Legation women but at least gave their names. Other approaches to institutions in Britain and Japan proved unsuccessful. A neighbour's Russian student went through an unrewarding secondary source Russian text; repeated letters to the Russian Red Cross, which might have provided a lead, went unanswered. The malicious diary of the Australian Peking correspondent of *The Times*, George Morrison, which Fleming had found in Sydney when his own manuscript was complete, gave me some typically nasty information about the Russian siege singer Mme Pokotilova – I have still to find out her true background.

Chinese Women

By now it will undoubtedly have been noticed that I have not mentioned Chinese women. There were hundreds of refugees within the legation area, many injured and bereaved, and their situation throughout the 55-day siege was parlous as a result of attack, disease and starvation. Including a full account of their experience has proved difficult for two reasons: first, I do not read or speak Chinese; second, it would appear from Western scholarship with access to Chinese sources, for example Paul Cohen's, that there is a dearth of women's written records.

I have, however, managed to create some sense of their plight from women missionary accounts, in particular, Luella Miner's attempt to record oral history from among the hundred or so schoolgirls in their care. In a similar way, I have created a narrative about the Red Lantern Sisters – the women's arm of the Boxers.

There was another moment of serendipity, this time with a Chinese family, one caught up in the related siege of Tientsin. Two stalwarts of that siege, who only missed the siege in Peking through illness, were Lou Henry Hoover and Herbert Hoover, later President of the United States. Their papers came to light through Cohen's bibliography, as did those of their friend Anna Drew.

Hoover's published memoirs tell the story of the night a shell fell on the shelter of the family of Tong Shao-yi, Director of Railways, and later Prime Minister in the Republican government. Hoover, hearing the explosion nearby, rushed to help his neighbours. Tong Shao-yi's wife and baby were dead but the rest, including a young girl, Tong Pao-yue, were carried to the Hoovers' house. Years later in Washington, Hoover met Madame Wellington Koo (grown-up Tong Pao-yue) by then wife of the Chinese Minister to the United States, and she reminded him of that night.

I recognised that name because Tong Pao-yue's granddaughter, Dr Linda Koo, was my friend in Hong Kong and I had already written about the family, mainly through the third Madame Wellington Koo.[xiii][13] Linda was now in New York and consultation with an aunt produced family details and photographs. So often in research, connections are all important, and previous writing is rarely ephemeral.

As for the Empress Dowager, the trail is much muddied but I have made some effort to draw a plausible picture of her actions and motives, particularly where foreign diplomatic wives were concerned. This attempt may not meet with acceptance, but I felt it an angle worth exploring.

Biographical Details

There were 149 foreign women – diplomatic and officials' wives, missionary doctors, teachers and wives, 'globe-trotters', wives (and one mother) of bankers, railway engineers, and tradesmen and their 79 children. I have succeeded in identifying the majority of them – this required perhaps the most time-consuming research, picking up the odd name and date here and there and making something of them. Annie Myers' and Daisy Brazier's dates, for example, came from different members of the family going to find their graves. I hope that the resulting biographical details can be regarded as a resource for others. I hope, too, that my decision to let the women speak, where possible, for themselves through their long-neglected records can be regarded in the same way.

Conclusion

What I wanted to do, through my book, *Women at the Siege, Peking 1900* (2000), was to change the perception of the besieged foreign women as an undifferentiated mass, parasites of imperial aggression, a nuisance or an inspiration to the men having to defend them. I have not sought to judge them; that would have been invidious for someone who has not only, perhaps, got too close to them but who, herself, comes from a colonial background. My intention was to give them a due that historical writing and use of sources have previously ignored. At least these sources are now less silent.

Notes

The bibliography that follows these notes is taken from *Women at the Siege, Peking 1900*; works that are not cited there are cited in full in the notes.

i[1] The result has been: *The Private Life of Old Hong Kong* (1991); *Chinese Footprints* (1996); *The Taking of Hong Kong* (1999); *Women at the Siege, Peking 1900* (2000) .

ii[2] Fleming Correspondence, letter of 10 January 1961 from Peter Fleming to Paula von Rosthorn.

iii[3] Peter Fleming, *One's* Company (London, Jonathan Cape, 1934); News *from Tartary* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1936); *Forgotten Journey* (London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952).

iv[4] Fleming Correspondence, letter of 13 July 1959 from Ralph Arnold, Constable, to Peter Fleming, and 15 July 1959, Fleming to Arnold.

v[5] Derek Roebuck, *Ancient Greek Arbitration* (Oxford, HOLO Books: The Arbitration Press, 2001) p. 214.

vi[6] Fleming Correspondence, letter of 24 November 1960 from Paula von Rosthorn to Peter Fleming.

vii[7] Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing* (London, The Women's Press, 1974) p.44.

viii[8] These same questions were used at the start of the introduction to *Chinese Footprints.*

ix[9] Hoe, 'Different Wavelengths: Ella Maillart and Peter Fleming, 1935' in *Chinese Footprints*, pp. 154-182; Duff Hart-Davis, *Peter Fleming* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1974).

x[10] Letter of 4 November 1988 from PD Coates to the author.

xi[11] Professor Kaminski is at the Boltzmann Institute, Vienna.

xii[12] The number of Chinese babies who died within the legation quarter was not recorded (at least in Western sources).

xiii[13] Hoe, 'Of Palaces and Jade: The Permanence of Things' in *Chinese Footprints*, pp. 82-91; Madame Wellington Koo (with Isabella Taves) *No Feast Lasts for Ever* (New York, Quadrangle, 1975).

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