



Bickers, RA. (2006). Purloined letters: history and the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. *Modern Asian Studies*, 40(3), 691 - 723. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06002083>

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1017/S0026749X06002083](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X06002083)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

Copyright Cambridge University Press.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

*Purloined letters: History and the Chinese Maritime Customs Service*¹

ROBERT BICKERS

University of Bristol

For John King Fairbank the establishment of the foreign inspectorate of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service was a key symbolic moment in modern Chinese history. His landmark 1953 volume *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* culminates with the 1854 Inspectorate agreement, which, he argued, ‘foreshadowed the eventual compromise between China and the West—a joint Chinese and Western administration of the modern centers of Chinese life and trade in the treaty ports’. Without the CMCS, he implied, there could be no modern China. It was the ‘the institution most thoroughly representative of the whole period’ after the opening of the treaty ports down to 1943, he wrote.² By 1986 he was arguing that it was the ‘central core’ of the system. ‘Modernity, however defined, was a Western, not a Chinese, invention’, he claimed, and Sir Robert Hart’s Customs Service was its mediator.³

Sino-Western administration in the treaty port world—‘synarchy’ as Fairbank dubbed it—became a key strand in Western historical writing about modern China and its foreign relations. Fairbank and others located it in a long tradition of joint administration practised by successive rulers of China. Younger, politically radical scholars such as Joseph Esherick in the late 1960s argued that the idea of synarchy obscured the reality of a Western assault on China, of foreign

¹ This research stems from a collaborative project on the history of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service involving the author, Hans van de Ven, and colleagues at the Second Historical Archives of China at Nanjing. It is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange.

² John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: the Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 462–3.

³ Katherine Frost Bruner, John King Fairbank, Richard J. Smith (eds), *Entering China’s Service: Robert Hart’s Journals, 1854–1863* (Cambridge MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 1986), p. 1.

hegemony rooted in violence, and Chinese humiliation.⁴ In 1968 Fairbank, in response to such challenges, stated that his thesis might be ‘full of holes’, and suggested that future work should encompass more sociological approaches to the study of the treaty ports. He noted that Sino-Foreign relations might seem ‘unpromising’ as a subject, compared to the thrilling worlds of Chinese domestic history, of rebellion and secret society, topics better suiting the enthusiasms of the period.⁵ For the best part of the following two decades, the politics of the academy, the turn to social history, and the vulgarisation of Paul Cohen’s call for a ‘China-centered’ history—interpreted by many as an injunction to avoid, if not exclude, foreign actors, themes and encounters—led to the falling out of favour of the history of China’s foreign relations.⁶

Fairbank, however, continued to work on at Hart throughout his life. He directed research teams that co-edited two volumes of Hart’s letters from China to his London-based secretary James Duncan Campbell (and helped to organise publication of a memoir of Campbell by his son), as well as two volumes of the early part of Hart’s journals.⁷ He had for decades before his death also been preparing an act of homage to his mentor—his ‘spiritual father’—H. B. Morse, late Commissioner of Customs and scholar of modern China’s relations with the world.⁸ The Chinese Maritime Customs, its personnel, role in modern Chinese history, and archived memorials, formed a central

⁴ Joseph Esherick, ‘Harvard on China: The Apologetics of Imperialism’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 4 (1972), pp. 9–16.

⁵ Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*, pp. xi–xii.

⁶ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: Recent American Historical Writing on the Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); see also his ‘Revisiting *Discovering History in China*’, in Paul A. Cohen, *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 185–99. Significant exceptions to this trend included, for example, William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

⁷ Robert Ronald Campbell, *James Duncan Campbell: A Memoir by his Son* (Cambridge MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 1970); John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost Bruner, and Elizabeth Matheson (eds), *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart. Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868–1907*, 2 volumes (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); Bruner, Fairbank, Smith (eds), *Entering China’s Service: Robert Hart’s Journals, 1854–1863*; Richard J. Smith, John King Fairbank, and Katherine Frost Bruner (eds), *Robert Hart and China’s Modernization: His Journals, 1863–1866* (Cambridge MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 1991).

⁸ John King Fairbank, *Chinabound* (New York, 1982), p. 22. This was published as John King Fairbank, Martha Henderson Coolidge and Richard J. Smith, *H. B. Morse: Customs Commissioner and Historian of China* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

theme in Fairbank's career. Morse's portrait decorated his studies in Harvard's Widener Library and Coolidge Hall.⁹ But if Morse guided Fairbank, it was Morse's own mentor, Hart, whose presence dominates Fairbank's work. And it was Hart's latter-day successor L. K. Little, the American I.G. from 1943–50, who facilitated Fairbank's Hart industry.

The relationship between the Customs, its chiefs, and its historians—including its own service historians—is the subject of this essay. Analysing the production of Customs history provides insight in the politics of late colonial history, the processes by which the institutions of informal empire lobbied for recognition, and the incorporation of their sagas into the contemporary and historical record. Sir Robert Hart has to date provided a focus for most of this work, although there is as yet no real biography of him.¹⁰ Stanley Wright came closest in his survey of Hart's career but there is much that he knew which he purposely did not relate.¹¹ Wright was too close to later actors in the Customs drama, who sponsored—and watched—his work, warning him off when he came too close. Hart has nevertheless dominated the picture of the Chinese state's engagement with the overseas powers after 1863. This essay explores how this happened. It examines, first, the question of the uses and abuses of archives and history in the Customs Service after Hart's death, and principally it outlines the historical and archival projects instituted by Sir Frederick Maze, Hart's nephew and latter-day successor (1929–43), and the close attention he paid to the available records of his uncle.

⁹ Cohen and Goldman (eds), *Fairbank Remembered*, p. 114.

¹⁰ There are exceptions to the Hart focus in English, such as Donna Maree Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854–1949* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, forthcoming 2006), but most are discrete histories of issues or personalities, eg: Jean Aitchison, 'The Chinese Maritime Customs service in the Transition from the Ch'ing to the Nationalist Era: An Examination of the Relationship between a Western-style Fiscal Institution and Chinese Government in the Period before the Manchurian Incident' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1981); Martyn Atkins, *Informal Empire in Crisis: British Diplomacy and the Chinese Customs Succession, 1927–1929* (Cornell East Asia Series: Ithaca, New York, 1995); Eugene Byrne, 'The Dismissal of Sir Francis Aglen as Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1927' *Leeds East Asia Papers* No.30 (1995); Nicholas R. Clifford, 'Sir Frederick Maze and the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1937–1941', *Journal of Modern History* 37:1 (1965), pp. 18–34. Although there are many gazetteers and histories of individual customs stations, the standard overall history of the service in Chinese is now Chen Shiqi, *Zhongguo jindai haiguan shi* (History of the modern Chinese Customs) (Peking: Renmin chubanshe, 2002).

¹¹ Stanley F. Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs* (Belfast: Published for The Queen's University, Belfast, 1950).

Second, it looks at the question of the writing of Hart's 'Life' and the genesis of Fairbank's Hart project. The core of this paper lies in the Inspectorate archives held in the Second Historical Archives of China. But the trail has led into the posthumous Customs diaspora, to those papers dispersed with their creators after service in China. The re-connection of the Inspectorate archives with the private papers of its personnel is fundamental to an understanding of the generation of Customs history and the politics behind it.

The full story requires putting Hart, and putting his journals and letters to Campbell into the broader perspective of the tenuous position of the foreign Inspector General, a non-Chinese director of an agency of the Chinese state. Hart and his successors were part of Britain's informal empire, which involved the exercise of power through a varied, constantly evolving repertoire of techniques which stopped short of state-directed settled military and administrative conquest. The free-lance agents of this empire—the China coast hongcs (Jardines, Dodwells, Dent, Butterfield and Swire), the treaty port administrations, Hart—operated with the backing of the imperial states, but outside the recognisable structures of those states. The Colonial Office did not communicate with them, diplomats did. They were accorded recognition of sorts—honours, para-colonial institutions such as a British Supreme Court in Shanghai, military support (gunboats, marines, weapons and training for their militia)—but they had planted their communities and companies on uncertain ground. State support and recognition was ever contingent on their usefulness more broadly conceived. So they were mindful of the need to publicise their loyalties, to articulate commitment to the wider world of British empire and to insinuate their China story into the imperial epic.¹² For the Customs, as for advisors, residents and officials in similar positions elsewhere, this was awkward indeed. The Service was always first and foremost an agency of the Qing and then of successive Republican governments who were increasingly dedicated to first limiting and then eradicating foreign influence. During the Maze inspectorate this tension between attachments to the British empire (whether ideological, pragmatic, emotional, or merely habitual) and

¹² How they did so is explored in Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900–49* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999). For a pertinent theoretical overview see: Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis', in W. J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds), *Imperialism and After Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp. 290–314.

to the Customs as a Chinese state bureaucracy assisting it in its state-building efforts came to a breaking point, and shaped the efforts to construct a positive image of the Customs and the foreign role in its development. Hart was to be accorded a key role in these efforts. Hart's death in September 1911, coincided almost too neatly with the fall of his masters, and the business of memorialising him began as his service, and the broader world of treaty port empire, entered uncharted waters.

Sir Robert Hart, RIP

Robert Hart had been able to read his own obituary in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion when premature news of his death was published in London.¹³ He also read the encomiums published to mark his final departure from China in 1908. These have plenty of praise, but also criticisms: autocracy, nepotism, 'love of power, and—repeatedly—his allegedly too-Chinese a perspective after so many years in Peking.¹⁴ 'Even before his death', noted the *North China Herald*, he 'had to undergo some of that reaction of feeling which, transiently yet inevitably, seems to assail the memory of the greatest'.¹⁵ This pattern of qualified praise led Juliet Bredon, Hart's niece, to pen her 1910 biography, *Sir Robert Hart: The Romance of a Great Career*, a sickly-sweet act of homage.¹⁶ All were agreed, however, that the Customs Service stood testament to Hart's 'genius'. It was 'one of the most striking monuments ever produced by the genius and labour of any individual Englishman'.¹⁷

Hart routinely featured in broader works on Britain in China. In one 1908 survey, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hongkong, Shanghai, and other Treaty Ports of China*, portraits of Hong Kong governor Sir Frederick Lugard and British Minister Sir John Jordan open the volume, but Hart got a longer write-up than the Minister. The British presence in

¹³ *The Times*, 17 July 1900, p. 4; 21 September 1911, p. 3.

¹⁴ He 'had become over-proficient in the art of yielding' remarked the editorial marking his departure in *The Times*, 23 April 1908, p. 7.

¹⁵ *NCH*, 23 September 1911, p. 737.

¹⁶ Juliet Bredon, *Sir Robert Hart: The Romance of a Great Career* (London: Hutchinson, 1909).

¹⁷ *NCH*, 23 September 1911, p. 737; *The Times*, 17 July 1900, p. 4, quoting an 1899 report The 'Englishman' was of course an Ulsterman: see Richard O'Leary's paper in this issue.

China was represented by a trinity: formal colonial Governor, informal diplomatic proconsul, and Hart, one of those Britons 'beyond the seas', the diffusion of greater knowledge about whom was the chief object of the book's publishers.¹⁸ Hart, 'Chinese' Gordon (of later Khartoum fame) and Sir Richard Dane (Chief Inspector of the Salt Gabelle, 1913–18) had been highlighted by C. A. Middleton Smith in his 1920 survey *The British in China*. The portrait of Hart is not entirely affable, but concludes that 'no Briton had ever exercised so much personal influence in China', and that he did a service to China and the world 'difficult to estimate in value'.¹⁹ When former *North China Daily News* editor O. M. Green, a tireless propagandist for the British settler position in China, came to 'praise famous men' in his 1943 defence of *The Foreigner in China* he too singled out Dane, Gordon and Hart, dealing with Hart first, as his career was 'really the diplomatic history of China'.²⁰ In the literature on the British presence in China, Hart was a key figure, ambiguous sometimes in his leanings, but 'while he was ever the devoted and loyal servant of the Chinese Government there never was the least suggestion of his being untrue to his allegiance as a British subject'.²¹

With his death, also, the men of the service began to assess him. On his 70th birthday personnel in Peking had gathered in the 'spirit of filial piety' to offer him a congratulatory address 'with affectionate regard, as a . . . family towards their revered chief'.²² But a different view of the *pater familias* was offered later. In ex-Commissioner Paul King's 1924 'pen portrait' Hart was 'not a polished man of the world': '*favorita* succeeded *favorita*' at his court (without scandal, though), he was a 'small, slender, iron clad autocrat', held grudges, and treated his British employees 'well or badly just as he pleased'.²³ Former Coast-Inspector W. F. Tyler's portrait was restrained, but acknowledged the existence of what was a semi-public squabble that had developed

¹⁸ Arnold Wright (chief ed.), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Other Treaty Ports of China* (London: Lloyds Greater Britain Publishing Company, 1908), preface.

¹⁹ C. A. Middleton Smith, *The British in China and Far Eastern Trade* (London: Constable, 1920 [1927 edition]), p. 95–6.

²⁰ O. M. Green, *The Foreigner in China* (London: 1943), pp. 111–14.

²¹ *NCH*, 23 September 1911, p. 737.

²² Second Historical Archives of China, Class 679, Chinese Maritime Customs Service archives, Series 1 (hereafter CSA, 679(1)), 11043, 'Mr. Robert Hart's Career', J. F. Oiesen [Chief Secretary] to Commissioners, 1 March 1905.

²³ Paul King, *In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Years* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924), quotations from pp. 238, 246, 22.

about Hart amongst his former subordinates.²⁴ In his unpublished memoirs J. O. P. Bland, who spent 13 years in the Service (two of them as Hart's private secretary), described his former chief as 'an autocrat and a martinet', with 'nepotic tendencies' which were 'almost Oriental'. Bland claimed that China was 'a spiritual home in which [Hart] found increasing comfort', and noted that he was 'much less stiff with Chinese than with Europeans'.²⁵ Such reactions, natural with any public figure, and likely to be more extreme given Hart's own strength of character, were all the more reason for Hart's defenders and champions to fix his virtues in the public eye. They needed to do this for the sake of the service, for Britain in China, and for the British empire story into which they were keen to insert the latter.

Those coming later and wishing to tell the Hart story, amongst them those for whom this was the quintessential story of a 'true friend of the Chinese people', as one plaque on his Bund-side statue in Shanghai had it, had three major sources to work with. Firstly there was that obvious 'striking monument', the Service. A history of Hart the administrator could be developed from the evidence of the history of the Service, its ethos, principles, and procedures. But it was the private Hart, so much debated at his death, which needed understanding. For this two further sources were to emerge, the private journals, whose existence was well-known by 1900, and his correspondence over almost 40 years with Campbell. While there was a semi-public debate over the virtues or otherwise of Sir Robert in the 1920s, there was also a semi-private debate over access to these other materials, which lasted well into the 1940s, and echoed down into the 1970s, and which very much revolved around Sir Frederick Maze, and the preservation of his own reputation in the dying days of the treaty port system.

Hart's Archive and the Maze Project

In 1968 former I.G. L.K. Little lent John Fairbank a red-bound volume containing copies of correspondence between himself, Maze, and Non-Resident Secretaries in 1944-45.²⁶ 'The Case of the Purloined

²⁴ W. F. Tyler; *Pulling Strings in China* (London: Constable and Co., 1929).

²⁵ University of Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, J. O. P. Bland papers, Unpublished memoir, chapter 5, ff. 10-11; chapter 7, ff. 9-11.

²⁶ Harvard University Archives, HUG (FP) 12.28, Papers of John K. Fairbank, Correspondence and other papers relating to Robert Hart and Chinese Maritime

Letters', as Little called the volume, contained letters documenting Sir Frederick Maze's donation to Queen's University Belfast in 1943 of the central Hart archive then known definitively to have survived: the letters to Campbell. Reading these exchanges in isolation Fairbank thought the 'Case' 'fascinating' but not necessarily of wider import. In fact it was, because Maze tried to use the letters as part of his efforts to control the generation and dissemination of historical research into the Customs. These activities took three forms: a propaganda drive Maze undertook when consolidating his control of the Service (when he was not the British Legation's preferred candidate); his sponsorship of historical research on the Customs, and his handling of the correspondence. The 'purloined letters' episode was the culmination of Maze's project, and at the same time marked his personal and professional downfall.

The succession to the position of Inspector General (I.G.) was always fraught. The controversy about Hart's successor lasted for years. Aglen's dismissal in 1927 was so sudden that there was no obvious successor in attendance.²⁷ Appointed in 1929, Maze had successfully competed (or 'intrigued') for the position against the Officiating I.G., A. H. F. Edwardes, the candidate supported by British diplomats in China and especially by the Minister, Sir Miles Lampson.²⁸ Lampson strongly lobbied for Edwardes, and fought off a Japanese challenge, which backed Kishimoto Hirokichi for the job. The decision of course rested with the Chinese state, and the issue was further entangled in the messy British reaction to the establishment of the Guomindang's National Government. Victor Wellesley, chief of the Far Eastern Department at the Foreign Office, was later to characterise the Legation's campaign against Maze as consisting of 'unmeasured vituperation'.²⁹ Maze was snubbed in the clubs of Shanghai, and the treaty port press ridiculed his ritual acts of loyalty to the Guomindang.³⁰

Customs Service, (1900) 1968–1986 [hereafter 'HUA, HUG(FP) 12.28, Fairbank papers'], Box 4, 'Hart Letters, L.K. Little correspondence 1968–69' folder, J. K. Fairbank to L. K. Little, 7 October 1968.

²⁷ On Hart see Chan Lau Kit-Ching, 'The Succession of Sir Robert Hart at the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs Service', *Journal of Asian History* 9:1 (1975), 1–33; on Aglen see Byrne, 'The Dismissal of Sir Francis Aglen'.

²⁸ A guide to the story is Atkins, *Informal Empire in Crisis*.

²⁹ TNA: PRO, FO 228/3740, Miles Lampson, Memorandum, 24 January 1928; Minute of 11 March 1929 quoted in Atkins, *Informal Empire in Crisis*, p. 109.

³⁰ 'The Chinese Customs. Installation of Mr. Maze. Extraordinary Oath.', *The Times*, 11 January 1911, p. 12; see also Bickers, *Britain in China*, pp. 120–1. The

In reply, Maze insinuated his claim to the post into the record through correspondence with former members of the Service and opinion formers internationally. He made much of the supposed key to Hart's success: his 'unparalleled knowledge of Chinese psychology', and positioned himself as a modern successor with the same intuitive understanding of the Chinese (Edwardes was damned for his 'utter failure to appreciate modern Chinese psychology').³¹ Maze's reforms after 1929, he told Non-Resident Secretary, J. W. Stephenson, were 'based on Hart's system...broadened its foundations and strengthened the prestige and influence of the foreign element in the service'.³² Stephenson was a backdoor channel to the Foreign Office and elsewhere, and this was a message for them. To foreigners, Maze claimed to be preserving foreign influence in the Service. How refreshing it must have been to hear from H. B. Morse in 1930, that 'I detect in you the Hart touch'.³³ In his 'valedictory message' to a much-depleted Customs staff in May 1943, Maze again linked his reforms directly with Hart's system, although now changing politics and a different audience led him to reverse his previous emphasis on its impact on the foreign staff and their influence.³⁴

John Fairbank had actually met Maze in the autumn of 1932, as he reported in a letter at the time:

Sir F. took me into his study tête-à-tête to be sure that History would understand his actions: he had lowered the flag of foreign supremacy only to be sure that his uncle's great institution would survive in the new age. We talked about 'what a grand man Robert Hart was and how the present I.G. is much like him.'

Maze was so obviously politically motivated that, without really knowing anything, I had vague suspicions about him, probably unjustified.³⁵

echoes of the kowtow, of Lord Macartney, Qianlong and the long debates about the limits of British acquiescence in Qing ceremonial were of course resonant: James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

³¹ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters, Vol. III, 'Chinese Maritime Customs: Erroneous Reports circulated by foreign press agents, etc, refuted', Memorandum by Maze, 10 January 1929; Maze to Sir Charles Addis, 22 February 1929.

³² SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters, Vol. IV, Maze to Stephenson, 13 February 1930.

³³ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters, Vol. III, H. B. Morse to Maze, 27 June 1930.

³⁴ CSA, 679(1), 11614, 'Sir F. W. Maze's Career', Draft of Circular No. 8485, 29 May 1943.

³⁵ Quoted in Fairbank, *Chinabound*, p. 63.

Probably justified, of course: as Maze set out to influence opinion formers, so he also aimed to influence the historian. He was deeply concerned about History. British diplomats soon forgot the palavers over his appointment. Maze did not. His own archive at London's School of Oriental and African Studies is structured around a presentation of his case for succeeding to the post, and incriminates Edwardes. Like other members of the British China establishment displaced by Nationalism, Edwardes went into opposition, and dammed himself utterly by accepting an appointment as an advisor to the puppet state of Manchukuo.³⁶

Maze used his office to reconstruct his own career from the archives, ordering copies to be made of his correspondence when Commissioner. Annotations on various files in Nanjing show that he browsed through the archive.³⁷ He kept close watch on what he left on record as I.G. When J. W. Stephenson left the London Office in 1930 the I.G. instructed him to 'remove everything, and leave no record whatever behind in the office' of Maze's confidential and private letters. At the same time Stephenson was to send copies of 'all semi-official letters and telegrams sent to the London Office by Edwardes on the same or on similar subjects during the years 1927-28'. 'Many of them,' Maze claimed, 'have been expunged from our records here, and I wish to restore the completeness of the latter'. In fact he placed some of them amongst his own papers.³⁸ The usefulness of the 'completeness of the latter' is also indicated in a confidential note on policy prepared for use while Maze was on home leave in 1934, which included evidence damning the '*imperium in imperio*' which the Service had developed into

³⁶ On Edwardes and Manchuko see Antony Best, "'That loyal British subject'?" Arthur Edwardes and Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1932-41', in J. E. Hoare (ed.), *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits, III* (Richmond: Japan Library, 1999), pp. 227-39. Edwardes died in 1951: *The Times*, 24 July 1951, p. 4. For the bitter flavour of opposition to Nationalism see R. F. Johnston's *Twilight in the Forbidden City* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1934), a loyal paean to Manchurian empire, and J. O. P. Bland's vituperative *China: The Pity of It* (London: William Heinemann, 1932).

³⁷ See, for example, his rejection of comments made about him by Sir John Jordan to Francis Aglen in 1915. Maze left his compliments slip here as a bookmark: CSA, 679(9) 32767, 'Letters from British Legation', Jordan to Aglen, 8 November 1915.

³⁸ See the correspondence in SOAS, Maze papers, Vol. V regarding the salary Edwardes drew as OIG; his instructions to Stephenson on leaving the NRS post are in SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters, Vol. V, Maze to Stephenson, 20 October 1930.

after Hart, which came from 'Sir Francis Aglen's own admission *on record in the Inspectorate archives*' [my emphasis].³⁹

While Aglen and Edwardes were damned by their official papers, the bulk of Hart's no longer existed. The archives of the Inspectorate General were destroyed in 1900 during the Boxer-war siege of the Legations. However, Hart's letters to Campell survived in London. As shown below, Maze used various, and at times conflicting, arguments to keep control over them. Like the I.G.'s son, Bruce Hart, before him, and Maze and Little later, Francis Aglen too had been keen to keep a copy of the letters. Bruce Hart acquired them for the London Office archive from Campbell's widow in 1907. They 'are obsolete as regards the future so far as utility is concerned', he claimed in 1912, but it was in his opinion—although it was not in Counsel's—service property.⁴⁰ In 1925, Aglen had instructed C. A. V. Bowra, the Non-Resident Secretary (who ran the London Office of the Customs), to have two typed copies made of the letters, and had one set sent to him in Peking. The other was lodged with the originals in the London Office archives. Aglen took the Peking copy back to Britain with him in 1927 when he left office. He had been planning to sponsor and oversee the composition of a biography of Hart, and this correspondence was to underpin that work. So the archive was far from obsolete: it was a valuable source of historical evidence, and as we shall see, it had other uses.

'It never occurred to me either to accuse Sir Francis Aglen of *malafides*, or to invoke Ministerial intervention', but Maze did consider legal proceedings to compel their return (and to 'restrain [Aglen] from making use of them in any manner whatsoever'). He was 'astonished to learn' that Aglen had taken the set with him. The former I.G. affably admitted that the typescript was not his, that he had indeed 'purposefully' taken it with him from Peking, and returned it immediately. These 12 volumes were shipped to Shanghai in the late

³⁹ *Docs. Illust.*, Vol. V, Semi-Official Circular No. 106, 1 May 1934, and enclosure, 'Maritime Customs Service: Note Concerning Principles of Administration', 17 March 1934, p. 364. This phrase of Aglen's came from a section of a letter of his to the N.R.S. of 28 Feb 1922, which Maze made wide use of, bundling it up, for example, in documents provided to Little when he attended the Geneva discussions about the Lytton Commission report in 1932: see the copies in SHAC: 679(9) 169.

⁴⁰ CSA, 679(1), 24670, 'History of The "Hart-Campbell" Correspondence', E. B. Hart to Aglen, 26 January 1912, enclosed in C. A. Bowra to F. Aglen, 21 September, 1926.

autumn of 1929.⁴¹ The point had been made: this correspondence, even a copy of it, was service property, although Aglen suggested that as ‘family matters predominate’ the proper repository for much of the correspondence ought to be the Hart family.⁴² Maze evidently perused the set sent to Peking, and in October 1930 instructed Stephenson to deposit the originals with the remaining copy in the London branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. Stephenson was to place them in a deed box and send him the keys.⁴³

This odd episode has a wider context. His own records aside, the Customs archive generally was a priority issue for Maze, and archival reorganisation was high on the agenda in the early years of his administration. Two major initiatives mark the history of the Service archives as a result. Firstly, all pre- 1902 correspondence was transferred from stations to the Inspectorate, forming the archival hub of the newly-established Customs Reference Library. Secondly, a variety of historical projects was launched which made use of these records in publicly or semi-publicly available volumes. Most importantly, a major new series of documents was prepared for publication by Stanley Wright as the seven-volume *Documents Illustrative of the Origin, Development and Activities of the Chinese Customs Service* (1936–40). Wright played a key role in these early archival initiatives, and his work was very much based on his access to—and as we shall see control of access to—the Customs archives. He was also to play two parts, one open, one very much behind the scenes, in the tale of the purloined letters.

Development of the Customs Reference Library paralleled the modernisation of the Service’s record-keeping systems after 1929. Reform separated out the mass of historical material from the documents that constituted the working records of the contemporary service. The Library, part of the archive now held in Nanjing, was formed from the merger of the Inspectorate Library—itsself recreated after 1900—and the Statistical Department’s holdings, when the Inspectorate transferred to Nanjing and Shanghai in 1928–29.

⁴¹ CSA, 679(1), 31747, ‘Confidential and Personal Correspondence among L. K. Little, Sir. F. W. Maze, Cubbon and F. Hall’, Maze to L. K. Little, 5 May 1944; the return of Aglen’s typescript is documented in: CSA, 679(1), 24670, ‘History of The “Hart–Campbell” Correspondence’

⁴² CSA, 679(1), 31757, ‘I. G. miscellaneous correspondence, 1947’, copy of Aglen to Stephenson, 12 October 1929.

⁴³ This instruction survives in SOAS, Maze papers, Vol. V, Maze to Stephenson, 20 October 1930, Stephenson to Maze, 25 November 1930.

Opening on Sinza Road, Shanghai, in June 1931, it was open to the public, and a room was set aside for archives. In June 1933 Semi-Official Circular No. 91 required all correspondence up to the end of 1901 held in Customs stations to be transferred to the Library.⁴⁴ This freed up space at Station archives and filled in the documentary gap left by the Boxer war. As a result there are presently some 2,100 of these nineteenth-century files in the Inspectorate archives. This transfer also served to facilitate the work of Maze's historians. Wright had initiated and driven the library proposal, suggesting that it be known as the 'Hart Memorial Library', although the National Government decided on 'Customs Reference Library of the Republic of China' as the name.⁴⁵

Memorialising Hart, however, remained a key function. The first of the historians was T. R. Banister, detached from active service to research 'a survey of China's foreign trade during the past hundred years' to preface *Decennial Reports, 1922-31*. To facilitate the work, Maze instructed Commissioners to 'look exhaustively through your archives' for materials. He had in mind local correspondence and documents, old newspapers, and other ephemera.⁴⁶ Maze also sponsored the research of former Deputy River Inspector George Worcester into Chinese junks, by detaching him from active service. Three books resulted, as well as a number of scale-models of junks which Maze donated to British museums.⁴⁷ Chief among the historians, however, was Stanley Wright, Personal Secretary to all three I.G.s from 1924-1933. Due to retire at 60 in 1933 he was kept on by Maze for another 5 years to complete various research projects, notably *China's Customs Revenue Since the Revolution of 1911* (1936), a privately published volume, *The Origin and Development of the Chinese Customs Service: 1845-1911* (1938), the compilation of *Documents Illustrative*, and much of the research for *Hart and the Chinese Customs*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Docs Illust.*, Vol. IV, pp. 507-20; Vol. V, p. 118.

⁴⁵ 'A Report on the Customs Reference Library for the Information of the New Library Committee, 1946' CSA, 679(1), 17966, 'Customs Reference Library'.

⁴⁶ Semi-official Circular No. 71, 30 January 1930, in *Docs Illust.*, Vol. IV, pp. 385-6.

⁴⁷ Worcester went on to edit *Mariner's Mirror*, write a successful memoir (*The Junkman Smiles* (1959)) and retain his involvement with Maze's junks: see obituary in *The Times*, 11 January 1969, p. 10.

⁴⁸ CSA, 679(1), 12526, 'Mr S. F. Wright's Career'. It should not be forgotten, however, that the work of the Customs Librarian, Yuan Shourong (阮寿荣) underpinned all these initiatives. Yuan was later keen to develop the research activity of the library

Documents Illustrative was the most comprehensive of the works published by the Statistical Department's press in Shanghai. I.G. Circular 5474 of 31 March 1937 outlined the rationale underpinning the compilation: early circulars were out of print, but senior staff should be provided with access to them. Wright had already been selecting 'key circulars, a knowledge of which is essential to an understanding of the origin, development and activities of the Service'. In addition, he was also collating from the British Public Record Office and other sources, further documents which 'will facilitate a clearer comprehension of what the Service is and stands for, and of what it has been able to accomplish'.⁴⁹ As well as being sent a copy for their official libraries, senior personnel were permitted, under strict conditions, to purchase a copy themselves. It was not to be 'shown, lent, sold or given to any member of the general public, or to any member of the Service not entitled by his rank to acquire such publication'. On the death of a purchaser, the Service moved to reclaim volumes in family hands.⁵⁰

Alert to History, however, Maze ordered the offering of presentation sets to a number of libraries internationally, as long as they provided written assurance that 'while consultation of the book will be made available to *bona fide* students of history, such consultation is to be permitted only on the distinct understanding that the book is not to be quoted or referred to by name in any public document or in any public address'.⁵¹ Volumes 1–3 of the series include early circulars up to 1923, but volumes 4 and 5 tell the Maze story down to 1939. These were hardly likely to be 'out of print'. This series is as much propaganda as *vade mecum*. It reprints various documents singing the praises of the present I.G., a note on his principles of administration, and notes on Aglen's usurpation of Chinese sovereignty over Customs revenues. *Documents Illustrative* illustrates the Maze version, and that version was now lodged in European and North American libraries.

by establishing a Research and Information Office within it: see the various documents in CSA, 679(1), 17966, 'Customs Reference Library'.

⁴⁹ CSA, 679(1), 21482, 'Customs Publication: "Documents Illustrative of the Origin, Development and Activities of the Chinese Customs Service"'.
⁵⁰ 'If possible recall volumes I and II from the family' was the reaction to one death: CSA, 679(1), 21482, Statistical Secretary to Chief Secretary, 11 January 1939.

⁵¹ Only the British Library refused to provide the required assurance: CSA, 679(9), 679(9) 8727, 'Documents illustrative . . . I Jan. 1938–1939', W. A. Marsden, Keeper, Dept of Printed Books, British Library, to NRS, 8 March 1938.

European, Dominions, and Colonial foreign ministries were also given copies, as well as the League of Nations.⁵²

There was more to this than archival housekeeping or the modernisation of record keeping. History was, of a sudden, of greater importance to Maze and his circle. The sponsorship of work into the activities of the Customs was not new, and the bibliography of formal Customs publications had also long included some quixotic titles—such as van Aalst's *Chinese Music* (1884). Former personnel proved themselves impressive historians (Morse), or effective popular chroniclers (Bland, 'Putnam Weale' [Bertram Lenox Simpson]). But history acquired urgency after 1927 when recruitment of foreign staff ceased for reasons of economy and after 1929, when cessation became fixed policy.⁵³ The days of the foreign Inspectorate were obviously numbered, and Maze was quite possibly the last foreign I.G., and quite likely the last to have any investment in the full history of the foreign Inspectorate. He would then be the last able to use his authority to sponsor the preservation of documents and publication of research into Customs history. He made his position explicit in a 1939 letter to Wright:

As you are aware, the cardinal idea underlying the compilation and the privileged circulation of *Documents Illustrative of the Origin, Development and Activities of the Chinese Customs Service* (and also the *Coastwise Lights of China*) was to place the deeds of the Administration (including the Marine Department) on the map for future historians: otherwise the history of the great work performed by the Service for China and the world may not be kept alive by the chief beneficiary. It was fitting, therefore, for us to devise means to place our past achievements on permanent record in the Chancelleries, Admiralties, and National Libraries of the world, and to illustrate as far as possible the variety and importance of our activities during the past 8 decades. It is clear that if we fail to do so now our successors (whoever they may be) may (and probably will) neglect to do so in the future . . .⁵⁴

Preserving the history of the treaty port world was a key element in the adaptation to nationalism that British diplomats, concession authorities and missions undertook in what Maze himself termed

⁵² Japanese institutions are conspicuously absent from these lists; so are Chinese ones.

⁵³ Semi-official Circular No. 54, 24 February 1927, Circular No. 3873, 14 March 1929; *Docs. Illust.* Vol. IV, pp. 126–7, 174–90.

⁵⁴ CSA, 679(1), 31476, 'IGS and Confidential Letters to N.R.S', IGS No. 4, 24 September 1939 enclosing copy of Maze to Wright, 24 September 1939.

'post May-30th days'.⁵⁵ Consuls and others fussed over cemeteries and memorials as the smaller treaty ports and concessions, or the leased territory of Weihaiwei were retroceded as Britain came to terms with China's successful revolutionary nationalism.⁵⁶ But there was a further element that makes the Maze initiatives stand out. His coming to the Inspector General's position had been so hard-fought, the publicity in 1928–29 so bad, that whereas in other sectors history might characterise transition as adaptation to nationalist reality, as regards the Customs it might be remembered as betrayal, as abject surrender by Hart's own kowtowing nephew. Maze was already 60 years old when he took over and so had already reached the Service's formal retirement age. He didn't have much time.

Maze's inspectorate oversaw sweeping changes in the remit, structure and priorities of the Customs, and a steady subordination to National Government authority.⁵⁷ There was in practice no remaining hint of the *imperium in imperio*. It is not easy to isolate Maze's own attitudes towards the reform which took place on his watch. For the first time in decades the I.G. was dealing with strong Chinese masters, and pragmatism suggested flexibility. Events also moved fast during his Inspectorate. By the end of 1932 the Manchurian stations had been seized by the Manchukuo authorities and the Service was split.⁵⁸ The outbreak of full-scale warfare in 1937 dramatically changed the political context of customs work. Maze kept the Inspectorate in Shanghai until Pearl Harbor led to the Japanese/Nanjing Reformed Government seizure of the Service. Through all this he remained concerned about its history even as it unfolded. Maze explicitly kept the head of the London Office, J. H. Cubbon, informed about his relationship with embassies in China partly to ensure that the 'correct version' of his actions should be known, should the Wang Jingwei collaborationist government take over the Customs. These were to be shown to Wright. 'Your prospective history of the Service', he wrote to Wright in September 1939, should come up to the present: surely

⁵⁵ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters and reports, Vol. V, Maze to W. F. Tyler, 4 February 1931.

⁵⁶ See Bickers, *Britain in China*.

⁵⁷ For a survey see Donna Maree Brunero, 'Through turbulent waters: Foreign administration of the CMCS, 1923–1937' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 2000), and *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone*.

⁵⁸ Semi-official Circular No. 95, 20 April 1933, collects the various official reports: *Docs. Illust.* Vol. IV, pp. 148–259.

it 'might be desirable to have some reference to [these contemporary events] included'.⁵⁹

Given Maze's attention to the circulation of official documentation, and to his predecessor's records, it comes as no surprise to find him intensely worried, as the Pacific war approached, about his semi-official and 'private' papers. His correspondence with diplomats and the London Office of the Customs might certainly compromise him, either with the Japanese, with his Nationalist superiors, or even with the British and Americans.⁶⁰ In 1941 he started despatching to Hong Kong, for onward shipment to Singapore, a series of documents from his own private office and the formal Inspectorate archives, including those that might damage his standing on the outbreak of war. Parcel 11, sent on 2 December included, for example, autumn 1941 I.G. correspondence with the British and US embassies, and Nationalist Finance Minister Kong Xiangxi, as well as what was styled the 'IG Personal Series': correspondence with the British embassy, the London Office, and others.

But Maze's concerns even in the face of the growing crisis stretched beyond the contemporary. Case 9 included the receipt, with key, for the deed box lodged at the London branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank containing the Hart Correspondence. Various aspects of the Singapore deposits—which survived pretty much intact—were to cause irritation and anger amongst senior personnel after the war. Maze's definition of what was private differed at this point from that of Lester Knox Little, who later also kept a copy of Hart's correspondence.⁶¹ 'I smell a rat!' scribbled Little on a letter from Basil Foster Hall, at the London Office, which communicated Maze's explanation for this transfer. But the Hart–Campbell Correspondence became the subject of a bitter debate. Little was to characterise this transfer as nothing less than 'an attempt to steal the [London Office] archives'. His fellow senior staff in the much-reduced Service came to share this view. And by the time the Singapore deposits came to light, the Correspondence had already been removed from the bank at Maze's orders and lodged elsewhere.⁶²

⁵⁹ CSA, 679(1), 31476, 'IGS and Confidential Letters to N.R.S.' IGS No. 4, 24 September 1939 enclosing copy of Maze to Wright, 24 September 1939.

⁶⁰ On the CMCS in this period see: Clifford, 'Sir Frederick Maze and the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1937–1941'.

⁶¹ Little's own 'IG Personal Series' forms the bulk of his papers at Harvard University's Houghton Library.

⁶² CSA, 679(1), 31486, 'I.G.'s correspondence with N.R.S., 1946–48', copy of Maze to Cubbon, IGS No. 242, 3 December 1941; Foster Hall to Little, IGS No. 199,

After leaving Shanghai on 17 August 1942, as part of a limited exchange of Allied and Japanese civilians, Maze had made his way from South Africa to Chongqing. Arriving on 3 December he attempted to resume charge of the Service from C. B. Joly, who had established a Chongqing office of the Inspectorate. Thwarted by his outraged superiors in the Ministry of Finance, Maze was not formally permitted to resume charge until 1 March 1943. Meanwhile if there was little by way of a Service to run, he had a reputation to protect and explanations to offer about his actions up to Pearl Harbor and his activities thereafter.⁶³ He also set about arranging positive press coverage in Britain, which was to be fed back to China.⁶⁴ Despite his unclear position, Maze also exercised authority again over the Inspectorate archives, such as they were. In February 1943, he instructed NRS J. H. Cubbon to deposit the typescript copy of the correspondence in the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank in London, under his own name as was Customs habit, but to present the original letters to Queen's University, Belfast. Stanley Wright facilitated the donation. Queen's was most gratified, although Maze never clarified the terms under which the donation was made, despite being asked to in March 1943.⁶⁵ The Vice-Chancellor, D. Lindsay Keir, writing to Maze in June that year offered thanks for the deposit of 'such valuable materials both for Hart's life and for the history of the great institution which he created'.⁶⁶

Little, Commissioner in Canton at Pearl Harbor, had also been repatriated after internment, briefly taking up a post in the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA, before being asked to return to run the Service. Maze's handling of the Hart correspondence came to light quickly, largely because of Little's irritation that on succeeding to Maze on 16 August 1943 he had found that his predecessor had removed all confidential correspondence with the NRS, and ('at the last moment')

8 March 1946, enclosures and minutes; 679(1) 24663, 'General Questions Concerning Inspectorate Archives', correspondence relating to Singapore archives, 1946.

⁶³ CSA, 679(6) 250, 'Despatch from Sir F. Maze, Inspector General, to the Minister of Finance, dated 30th December 1942'.

⁶⁴ CSA, 679(1), 31684, 'Personal and Confidential Letters with N.R.S., 1939-48', Cubbon to Maze, 4 March 1943 provides a text-book example of how this was attempted.

⁶⁵ CSA, 679(1), 31747, 'Confidential and Personal Correspondence among L. K. Little, Sir F. W. Maze, Cubbon and Foster Hall', Cubbon to Maze, 28 June 1943.

⁶⁶ CSA, 679(1), 31747, Cubbon to Maze, 28 June 1943, including copy of Lindsay Keir to Maze, 24 June 1943.

correspondence with Kong and other officials. 'I cannot understand why he acted in this manner', noted Little in a letter to Foster Hall, 'and it has not made things easier for me'. He asked Foster Hall to go through the correspondence in London and send him copies or summaries.⁶⁷ The Service was operating after Pearl Harbor with no archival resources.⁶⁸ The Inspectorate archives were in Shanghai, as were the archives of the Statistical Department and the Marine Department. Service personnel were asked to send to the Inspectorate copies of their Memos of Service if they had them, or full personal details. Customs stations in unoccupied China were asked to transfer their libraries to Chongqing.⁶⁹ The Inspectorate, and its records, were recreated from scratch. For an institution which had run on the basis of a system of information transmission, storage and retrieval, the lack of such resources was a shock. And while asking for copies of documents from London, Little at the same time asked for details of the whereabouts of Hart–Campbell Correspondence.

Their surprising whereabouts quickly became apparent, although it turned out that much of the London Office correspondence was more routinely lodged in the London branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, under Sir Frederick's name, as were the letter books containing Campbell's side of the correspondence with Hart. Foster Hall was just about to deposit the remainder of the 1942–43 documents when Little first contacted him. There began an ill-tempered process whereby Maze restored the title to the bank deposits, and access to the service files, and Queen's restored the Hart–Campbell correspondence. The latter was far from easy. The University was 'affronted' at the position it found itself in. It had never been intimated that the donation of the papers 'was to be regarded merely as a temporary and convenient transfer of valuable documents' to spare them the mishaps of war.⁷⁰ After some weeks of correspondence it decided that, having accepted the letters from Sir Frederick Maze, I.G., acting as such, it could

⁶⁷ Extract from private letter from L. K. Little to B. E. F. Hall, 23 October 1943, in *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ No resources at all: 'no staff, no archives, no accommodation, no accounts, and no office equipment existed' for the Inspectorate established at Chongqing on 26 December 1941. CSA, 679(1), 25572, 'Organisation of new Inspectorate General of Customs at Chungking', OIG C. H. B. Joly to H. H. Kung, undated [May 1942].

⁶⁹ CSA, 679(1), 25586, 'Library', documents this process, which took place in early 1944.

⁷⁰ CSA, 679(1), 31747, 'Confidential and Personal Correspondence among L. K. Little, Sir F. W. Maze, Cubbon and Foster Hall': quotations from Lindsay-Keir to Foster Hall, 16 January 1945.

not very well return them on the instruction of Sir Fredrick Maze, retired. It asked for, and eventually received, a letter from the Chinese Minister of Finance, explaining the situation, stating that Maze had acted beyond his authority, and asking for the letters to be transferred. This was a singular rebuke to Sir Frederick, and as shall be shown below, archives at Queen's reveal a further twist in this tale by revealing the active behind the scenes role of Stanley Wright himself in the obstructive manoeuvres of the University. This was almost wholly an in-service struggle. Only after the receipt of this letter from the highest levels of the Chinese Government were the papers released and restored to the London Office on 18 July 1945.

In his defence (and he felt on the defensive) Maze offered different explanations to different audiences for the transfer to Queen's, and he offered conflicting explanations on the same day. It was safer to have them in the University, rather than the Bank, 'at the possible call of the Chinese Government, who have still less interest in them [than Sir Bruce Hart], and no legal standing, so far as I know'.⁷¹ He worried about their security in wartime London, so it was merely a 'temporary re-arrangement of the location of the archives'; it was 'merely a precautionary measure justified by the exigencies of the times'.⁷² They were essentially private materials, so it was by no means merely a temporary expedient—'ultimately the documents in question might find a final resting-place within the precincts of the British Museum'.⁷³

Maze certainly had a genuine concern about the writing of Hart's life, and a particular worry was the almost complete lack of interest shown in the Correspondence by Hart's son, Sir Bruce. Lady Hart had died in 1928.⁷⁴ Bruce Hart 'has evinced little or no interest in anything connected with the Service', Maze wrote to Cubbon in May 1943. Transfer to Queen's would presumably not 'invalidate his prerogative to claim or exercise whatever rights he may possess', but it would have secured the safety of the papers. He had good reason to worry

⁷¹ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters and reports Vol. XV, Maze to Cubbon, 7 May 1943.

⁷² CSA, 679(1), 31747, 'Confidential and Personal Correspondence among L. K. Little, Sir F. W. Maze, Cubbon and Foster Hall', various, quotations from Maze to Little, 5 May 1944, and Maze to Kung, 5 May 1944.

⁷³ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters and reports Vol. XVI, Maze to Stanley Hornbeck, 5 May 1944.

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 20 June 1928, p. 21. Resident in The Imperial Hotel, Bournemouth, she had died on 20 April 1928.

about Bruce. 'Retain, dispose, destroy; not wanted by me' scribbled Sir E. Bruce Hart on a later letter offering the return of Hart's manuscript of *These from the Land of Sinim*.⁷⁵ Maze was also still guided by the philosophy outlined to Wright in 1939. As he saw it he was protecting Customs history, and facilitating its research by keeping documents out of the hands of those who might not, in his eyes, value them. He was also, incidentally, placing himself at the centre of that process.

But Sir Frederick was also clearly intending to use the correspondence as a marker for an honour. Maze's exercise of patronage over the circulation of documents, his sponsorship of historical research into the Lights Service amongst other projects, and his public and private circulation of information about his own achievements, situation, principles, etcetera, constituted a coherent, long-term strategy. Honours were particularly very much on his mind in 1943. Sir Anthony Eden wondered if a KCMG would be 'agreeable', he was informed indirectly in December 1943. 'I replied', he later commented, "Would be *acceptable*". 'In view', he continued, 'of precedents, it was by no means agreeable—as Eden knew full well'.⁷⁶ It was a calculated snub, he seems to imply. After thinking for a week he wrote at length to Sir Alexander Cadogan, British Ambassador at Chongqing. He was grateful for the honour, but would like 'to make the following observations for the record'. The KCMG was not 'commensurate with the value of the services rendered to British Trade, Shipping, Finance in the Far East'. Moreover, Aglen had been offered the choice of a GCMG or a Baronetcy, and accepted for former.⁷⁷ (Hart had acquired both). If there was a reply, he did not think it suitable for inclusion in his record. He made the point four months later to O. M. Green: Aglen 'nearly wrecked the Inspectorate System', but got a GCMG. He, Maze, restored 'Hart's system' and stability—and all he got was a KCMG.⁷⁸

Foster Hall suggested early in the controversy that Maze was attempting to store up good will at Queen's for conversion into an Honorary Degree. 'Belfast University conferred a degree on Sir Robert

⁷⁵ CSA, 679(1), 31486, I.G.'s correspondence with N.R.S., 1946–48', IGS No. 238, Pouncey to Little 8 January 1948. Bruce, by then 75, had already lost his only son—at the age of 36—in 1933, and his wife in 1938. *The Times*, 19 July 1933, p. 1, 5 February 1963, p. 12

⁷⁶ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters and reports, Vol. XVI, note on High Commissioner, Pretoria to C-in-C, South Africa, 14 December 1943.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Maze to Cadogan, 21 December 1943.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Maze to Green, 6 April 1944.

Hart', he noted, 'an honour which has not yet been bestowed on any of his successors'. Foster Hall thought that Maze might well decline to write to Queen's himself to request their return lest he 'should create an impression that such an honour is out of place at the present time'.⁷⁹ And the University's evident unhappiness with the affair certainly saw to that. Maze had bargained for honours before, explicitly in February 1928 when in discussion with the British Shanghai Consul-General Sidney Barton, he had allegedly named his price for deferring to the nomination of Edwardes as 'an adequate pension and . . . an adequate decoration'. What really lay behind this suggestion is not exactly clear, as it was quite obviously very dangerous for all the parties concerned, but it rings true.⁸⁰

Maze's sponsorship of historical research in the Customs was linked to his strategy for recognition. Banister's *The Coastwise Lights of China* (1933) was a history of the Customs Lights Service. During Banister's detachment to the Inspectorate from 1931–33 for historical work he was instructed to prepare 'a short historical and descriptive review of the coast and riverine lights of China'.⁸¹ Maze had one set of readers for this book very much in mind: Trinity House in London, which is responsible for the provision of all maritime aids in United Kingdom waters. Trinity House was, and is, governed by a Court of Elder Brethren, usually led by a senior member of the royal family. In April 1943 Cubbon lobbied on Maze's behalf—and at his explicit suggestion—for him to be made an Honorary Elder Brother, 'in recognition of your great interest in and responsibility for the very efficient lights service'.⁸² Maze's interest and responsibility was explicitly laid out in Banister's book, which had—presumably—been donated to Trinity House. Such an association of Maze with the Lights service was the clear intention of this strand of the Customs research programme. To no avail: honorary elder brethren were usually British royals.

But the Maze project—all that research by Banister, Wright, Worcester, the assembling of the archive and Library, almost two decades of lobbying—had been undone. The goodwill painstakingly

⁷⁹ CSA, 679(1), 31747, 'Confidential and Personal Correspondence among L. K. Little, Sir F. W. Maze, Cubbon and Foster Hall', Foster Hall to Little, 21 January 1944.

⁸⁰ Atkins, *Informal Empire in Crisis*, pp. 70–2.

⁸¹ Semi-official Circular No. 71, 30 January 1931, *Docs. Illustr.*, IV, p. 385.

⁸² SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters and reports Vol. XVI, Cubbon to Maze, 2 April 1943 and CSA, 679(9) 8588, 'Sir Frederick Maze'.

nurtured at Queen's, at the Ministry of Finance (who remained his nominal employers until 1945/6), at the museums, through *The Times* and the Foreign Office, mostly melted away. The Ministry had bought Maze's goodwill—and silence—and kept his face with a large pension and an empty (but profitable) advisorship. His old service viewed him with suspicion. For British diplomats Maze was an irrelevance, representative of the old world of British informal empire terminated with the 1943 Sino-British treaty. Maze had worked to make that old world, and his work, known to a wider British and international public. He talked to the British Empire Society in 1934, worked hard on Green, authorised the employment of Customs staff to write its history, ordered the distribution of that history far and wide. But his identification with the project of making informal empire respectable had floundered through the transparency of his own ambition, political misjudgements after 1937, and through the fact that informal empire was always an exotic outside the British mainstream. He was left with his own papers—after another argument over the Singapore deposits—and moved to Canada. There he was to sort and extensively weed his archive, scribbling in the bound volumes his later ruminations on personalities and events.

Hart's 'Life' and the Fairbank Project

The irony, of course, is that it was Lester Little, not Maze, who has become most closely associated with the Hart legacy, and with the writing of the Customs history. Stanley Wright's volume remains the sole informed biographical study, but Sir Robert Hart became historiographically entrenched not because of Maze, but as a result of the various Harvard projects. The key to these lay in the materials which Little had brought with him out of China, and in his relationship with John Fairbank. The two men had first met in 1935 when Little was Commissioner at Canton, and where Aglen and Maze failed, Little had succeeded—his strictures on Sir Frederick notwithstanding—in taking into retirement with him one copy of the Hart Correspondence. He also 'omitted'—as Maze had in 1943—to cancel his nominal ownership of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank deposit in which the original letters sat from 1948.

Maze kept quiet after 1945, but Little tried to keep the Customs record in the public eye, especially after 1949. In particular he badgered the Inspector General in Taipei to commemorate the

centenary of the foreign inspectorate in 1954 (although they did not), and he contributed articles and letters to the press.⁸³ And it was Little who was to pen the introduction to *The IG in Peking* which outlined the history of the Service. So it was Little who penned the short section within this on 'The Customs Service After Hart' which accorded more space to his own 7-year tenure in charge of the Inspectorate, than to Maze, and which refutes the picture Maze had developed of himself as the great reformer of the service.⁸⁴

The writing or the presentation of the life of Hart in fact exercised the minds of three Inspectors General, and signally informed their approach to the Hart–Campbell correspondence. Where both Maze and Aglen failed was in either finding their historian or keeping him on side. A biography needs materials, and both tried to consolidate a grasp on these after leaving office. Initially, those pondering the writing of a life were stuck with the potential riches of Hart's journals, which were widely known about. In 1902 Hart joked that they were 'the only thing which gives me any worry—unfinished work and family griefs apart', and they were—if he died in China—to be made over 'to Bruce to keep as a *family curio*—and not to be either published or lent to writers of any kind'.⁸⁵ But he did apparently give permission to Morse to use them for *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, although the family 'blocked access'.⁸⁶ The journals were already a matter of public record, and were even mentioned in the obituaries.⁸⁷

Aglen and Maze were discussing the writing of a life in March 1923, when Aglen wrote to Maze to report that he had looked at Hart's will, noting that the journals were not explicitly mentioned. They were then, with all other effects, left to Lady Hart in trust for Sir Bruce at her death. 'On the other hand she may have already handed the diary over to Bruce', Aglen continued. The following month J. O. P. Bland reported to Maze that he had written to Aglen 'to say that I shall be glad to collaborate with him in the matter of a life of Hart,

⁸³ See various papers in Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1999, Lester Knox Little papers, folder (5), Correspondence with the Chinese Inspectorate of Customs, Taiwan . . . 1954.

⁸⁴ Little, 'Introduction', in Fairbank *et al.* (eds), *IG in Peking*, vol. I, pp. 31–2.

⁸⁵ Hart to Campbell, 6 April 1902 in *The IG in Peking*, Vol. 2, p. 1308.

⁸⁶ Fairbank, Coolidge, Smith, *H. B. Morse*, p. 193. Edward LeFevour thought that marks in the journals suggested that Hart had possibly marked out passages for a biographer or a memoir: 'A Report on the Robert Hart Papers at Queen's University, Belfast, N. I.', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 33:3 (1974), p. 437.

⁸⁷ *The Times*, 21 September 1911, p. 3.

with or without the diary'. Bland doubted that they would get access to it, 'and I would rather do so than write with Her Ladyship and Bruce "shroffing" every line'. Morse and Drew could help with materials. In April after speaking with Aglen, Bland had discounted the possibility of using the diary for good, 'so that's that'. But the life could be written anyway, and 'might, and should be done' regardless of the lack of this one source. But Aglen 'wants to supervise the job himself', and would not be free until he retired, so Bland concluded that the project would come to nothing.⁸⁸ Aglen, however, was still pursuing the idea the following year, but he had turned his attention to a new and much more accessible source: the correspondence with Campbell. 'I shall go very slow in the matter', he wrote to Bowra in August 1924, 'I should not dream of publishing anything really private without the consent of the family'⁸⁹ However, he continued, '*The correspondence is official enough for me to retain it in my possession*'. In 1926 he sent Bowra a note saying that 'I shall be glad to have the Hart–Campbell Correspondence in a complete form'. That year he was preparing to meet in Peking Lewis Stanton Palen, a former Customs officer, who was now a professional writer who had worked on a number of collaborative projects, 'If I could write I believe I could do it myself', he added to Bowra, but not 'while I am still in office'. Possibly Palen 'would be a good man to undertake it'⁹⁰ But there the record trails off. There is no more of Palen. Aglen was dismissed in February 1927, and died in Scotland in May 1932. He left no other papers.⁹¹

If 1924 was the last time we hear from Aglen about the Life, we do know that Maze authorised Stephenson to restrain the former I.G., if necessary, from 'making use of [the Hart–Campbell correspondence] in any manner whatsoever'. Maze knew why Aglen had taken the letters with him. The astonishment he professed was pure theatre for the record. And there is another letter in this Maze–Bland correspondence which might suggest a new strand. Bland was replying

⁸⁸ SOAS, Maze papers, Confidential letters and reports, Vol. XIX, Aglen to Maze, 3 March 1927, Bland to Maze, 6 April 1923, 24 April 1924.

⁸⁹ SOAS, Aglen papers, Ms. English.211355, Confidential Letters from IG, 1921–25, Aglen to Bowra, 21 August 1924.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Aglen to Bowra 20 April 1926. Palen served first from 1900–1902, then rejoined in 1905, serving 8 years before resigning: *Service List 1914*, p. 239.

⁹¹ *The Times*, 27 May 1932, p. 16. Wright also confirms that I.G. Aglen had 'the intention of tackling, in his spare time, the writing of the life of Hart, an undertaking which unfortunately he never even started': QUB, Wright papers, C5, Wright to Foster Hall, 23 November 1943.

in December 1924 to a letter from Maze (itself missing from the archive). 'I don't know what to say about your proposal re: Life of Hart' he begins, going on to ask if Aglen had suggested 'or would he welcome the idea of collaboration'. Had Maze in fact suggested broadening the collaboration to include himself? This seems to me to be a fair reading of Bland's question. Bland had gone on to again discuss the diary and the family. Perhaps, he suggested, Aglen should just go and tell them that he was going to write the life anyway, and then they might acquiesce. Prefixing this section in the volume, and this in a very pointedly designed archive, is a manuscript of 'The Early Life of Robert Hart'; the author anonymous. It surely isn't by Maze, but it perhaps reflects his intention, first mooted to Bland, to collaborate as sponsor in the writing of a life.

The biographer Maze sponsored was Wright, who was given access to the Hart–Campbell correspondence. Indeed, he brought back the typescript copy that was in China in 1938, and deposited it in the London Office archives, which was part of the unfolding strategy of securing the Inspectorate archives that Maze was co-ordinating as the Sino-Japanese war developed.⁹² Marooned in wartime Sweden and Norway, before he managed to make his way to Eire, Wright had finished the manuscript of *Hart and the Chinese Customs* in early 1945.⁹³ By this point, however, relations between Maze and Wright had certainly cooled. Wright had extensive notes, if not text, for a second volume which would take him to the end of the Aglen inspectorate, but 'he does not propose to go any further!' wrote Foster Hall in March 1945, and indeed he did not.⁹⁴

'We all know Stanley's little ways' remarked former Non-Resident Secretary E. N. Ensor to Little in 1949, but they did not actually know all of them.⁹⁵ Wright's own papers at Belfast offer further layers of intrigue about the Hart correspondence. The various sets of the

⁹² QUB, Wright papers, C5, Wright to Foster Hall, 23 November 1943.

⁹³ CSA, 679(1), 12526, 'Mr S. F. Wright's career', Wright to K. T. Ting, 20 October 1945.

⁹⁴ CSA, 679(1), 31747, 'Confidential and Personal Correspondence among L. K. Little, Sir F. W. Maze, Cubbon and Foster Hall', Foster Hall to Little, 7 March 1945. In an earlier letter Foster Hall had written that Wright had actually written up the text for this volume, but this might have been a misunderstanding: CSA, 679(1), 31684, 'Personal and Confidential Letters with N.R.S., 1939–48', Foster Hall to Little, 27 June 1944.

⁹⁵ Houghton Library, Harvard University, fMS Am 1999.13, Lester Knox Little papers, 'IG Correspondence with Customs Commissioners and Staff May-December 1949', E.N. Ensor to Little, 18 August 1949.

'purloined letters' contain the formal exchanges between the London Office and Lindsay Keir, Vice-Chancellor at QUB. In fact, Lindsay Keir simply passed on Foster Hall's letters to Wright, who provided much of the text for the replies. 'We are in possession', he even wrote in one note, 'and it is up to the other side to prove that our possession is not legal'.⁹⁶ Wright thought that the root of the idea of depositing the papers at Queen's lay in suggestions he had made to Maze in 1938. The deposit when it was first mentioned to him he described as 'an object I have had in mind for some years'. Once they had arrived he informed the University Librarian that he now intended to go after Campbell's side of the correspondence.⁹⁷ Wright was an energetic donor to Queen's. He provided sums for new commemorative windows, negotiated for years for a Robert Hart Memorial Scholarship, and commissioned and presented to the University in November 1943 a portrait of Hart. The letters themselves were the best of his coups. He played a full role in the rearguard action to retain the correspondence, and he offered Foster Hall in London his strong suspicions about who was really behind the whole affair:

Ps: Strictly Confidential

... I venture the suggestion that Dr John Fairbank is after the Hart Campbell correspondence. Fairbank is a Harvard man, who took postgraduate work at Oxford, and becoming acquainted with Morse, took up as his subject the early history of the Customs Service. Morse was very kind to him and lent him all of his private letters. In spite of repeated requests Fairbank refused to return the letters claiming that they were a gift. Mrs Morse wrote to Maze a letter of bitter complaint about the affair, and in consequence we closed down on supplying Fairbank with any more inside information. He subsequently got a doctor's degree at Oxford for his thesis on the early history of the Service, and I have been told that he is still working on the subject. Incidentally, too, I have been told that he is now at Chungking, and has got some post there with the government. In view of all this I think my suggestion is quite a reasonable one.

It was wholly erroneous, replied Foster-Hall, but for Wright the suspicion obviously had deeper roots, and played to deeper fears.⁹⁸ Mrs Morse was by all accounts a difficult if not disturbed personality,

⁹⁶ QUB, Wright papers, C5, SFW to RH Hunter, 21 July 1944.

⁹⁷ QUB, Wright papers, C5, SFW to Cubbon, 25 March 1943; SFW to G. Woledge, [June 1943].

⁹⁸ QUB, Wright papers, C5, SFW to Foster Hall, 23 November 1943, Foster Hall to SFW, 29 November 1943.

and had certainly launched what Fairbank later described as a ‘campaign . . . to prove that I had misused materials he gave me’. But either way, Wright and Maze had obviously frozen John Fairbank out of the Customs archives in Shanghai.⁹⁹ *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* contains no references to Customs archives, and the Service defeated this first attempt by an outsider to write its history.

Now Wright feared that Fairbank was back. He was wrong, but in the longer term of course, the history of the Customs passed beyond the control of its own service historians, and it broadened as it did so. Control over the archive too had passed from the Britons who had controlled the service (and who had also kept family in mind), to a generation of Americans led by Little (which also included Marine Commissioner Fred Sabel). Wright fixed Hart and the Customs in his Ulster and his Chinese contexts. Fairbank was to tease out this American history in the Customs story—if not a Harvard history. US relations with China, and getting that relationship right, were issues of key importance to him, and underpinned his first successful book, *The United States and China* (1948). In one aside there Fairbank pointed to the recruitment from Harvard in 1874 of C. C. Clarke, Morse, Merrill and W. F. Spinney as fully indicative of the ‘private American participation in British policy’ that underscored the partnership of the American people with the British in China. This partnership was characterised by ‘an American pattern of individualism’, and so, he claimed, was obscured in US archives.¹⁰⁰ For Fairbank there was indeed a history of an US imperialism in nineteenth-century China. The Customs provided just one of its many faces, but a significant one.

How fitting then, that it was the American Little, and Harvard, which rescued the Customs story from the London vaults of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, and from Little’s personal archive. The last foreign I.G. certainly had the history of the Service on his mind after 1950, but he drew a different lesson from its multinational composition to Fairbank. From retirement in Rhode Island Little penned a lengthy letter to *The Times*, to mark the centenary of the

⁹⁹ See also Paul. M. Evans, *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). Evans describes Wright as ‘guarded’ in his reception of Fairbank in Shanghai, and ‘encouraging this potential competitor to examine’ the pre-Hart era, which would not conflict with his own work on Hart (p. 29). On Nan Morse and Fairbank see Fairbank, Coolidge, Smith, *H. B. Morse*, p. 281, note 16.

¹⁰⁰ John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), pp. 314–16.

establishment of the Shanghai Inspectorate on 12 July 1854. The bulk of the text sketches the broad range of activities in which the Service was involved. Adopting a line that was constant amongst its enthusiasts after 1941, Little pointed to the cosmopolitanism of the service, which predated the League of Nations or the UN in its demonstration that ‘men of all nationalities, with the most varied racial, religious, and social backgrounds, could work together harmoniously and efficiently’.¹⁰¹ Little returned to the point later, criticising comments which lauded the UN and the League as the first international civil services.¹⁰² This was a common theme also in the writings of those defending the treaty port settlements and concessions during the Pacific war, and in history.

Little resigned as I.G. in Taiwan in January 1950, the last of the foreign staff to leave the service, remaining an advisor on customs matters for another five years. In 1965, Foster Hall reminded his former chief about the London deposit, and suggested that the letters be transferred to the PRO.¹⁰³ Little sought authorisation to remove them, but as SOAS already had significant holdings of Customs-related publications they were directed there.¹⁰⁴ Three years later Little approached Fairbank with his copy of the typed transcription, which had been worked on by those who knew Hart or his handwriting, and so might be of additional value. Fairbank was keen to do something with the material. ‘The record influences history’, he wrote to Little.

Great events and great persons who leave no record are more easily passed over and lost, whereas the well-documented activities, like the foreign policy of the British government, receive full attention. I should like to feel that we owe something to Robert Hart in this venture.¹⁰⁵

Fairbank assembled a curious but effective team of scholars and former Service personnel (Little, H. G. Lowder, and Foster Hall, who was kept busy in libraries and archives in London). This team then spent eight years working to prepare the letters for publication,

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 12 July 1954, p. 9.

¹⁰² In his introduction to *The IG in Peking*, pp. 12, 34.

¹⁰³ The full correspondence is enclosed with Little to Max Hall, 28 July 1968: Harvard University Archives, HUG(FP) 12.28, Fairbank papers, Box 4, folder: ‘Hart Letters, publication, Harvard University Press, memos, etc’.

¹⁰⁴ See the file ‘Letters of Sir Robert Hart, Inspector-General of Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868–1906’, The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO): 57/974.

¹⁰⁵ Harvard University Archives, HUG(FP) 12.28, Fairbank papers, Box 4, ‘Hart Letters, LKL correspondence 1968–69’, folder: Fairbank to Little, 19 June 1968.

with Little's introduction.¹⁰⁶ This was the Little version, and the one scholars have worked with until now, until the opening of the archives in Nanjing, and the return to the archives in Belfast.

For Fairbank the project was primarily a scholarly one. Here, as he explained in his forward to *The IG in Peking* was 'a principal source for the last half-century of the Ch'ing dynasty and its relations with the West'. Their 'precise value to historians' would shift as academic interests and fashions shifted, but they would remain an important resource.¹⁰⁷ The emergence of the letters was a scholarly coup. But there were other concerns as well, and they were articulated most fully by Fairbank in December 1970, when news of the survival of the journals and their proposed donation to Queen's was first relayed by Foster Hall. Little had immediately urged Foster Hall to draw the attention of the lawyers handling the estate to Hart's statement in 1902 that they were 'not to be either published or lent to writers of any kind'.¹⁰⁸ Fairbank moved to head off needless legal complication, devoting the bulk of his letter to a different rationale for the entire Harvard project which is worth quoting in full:

I am very much aware of the importance the Chinese have generally attached to the historical record. Rebels who have been defeated are not only exterminated in person, but also in the record. Although the Taiping Rebellion lasted 15 years and ravaged half the county, the main record of it was found in British and French libraries where foreigners had deposited a few documents. The Ching government had so thoroughly destroyed everything in writing put out by the rebels in China.

In the same fashion the current mainland government has put out six volumes in Chinese of materials drawn from the Customs archives or translated from English language sources with a view to blackening the Western name. The series is called 'Imperialism and the Maritime Customs' and serves their propaganda needs. From their point of view, the less said about the good points of the Customs Service, the better. We can expect this condition to last into the foreseeable future, because of the vigor of Chinese patriotic feeling. Although the Nationalist government took many archives to Taiwan, the Customs archives remained intact in Shanghai. Thus, we cannot expect access to them nor publication from them in any objective way for probably many decades.

This means that the journals of Robert Hart have not only an antiquarian interest to you and me, but actually an importance in keeping the record straight and doing justice to the great work performed by several generations

¹⁰⁶ On the process itself see Katherine Frost Bruner, 'On editing a series of letters', *Scholarly Publishing* 9:1 (1977), pp. 41–53.

¹⁰⁷ Fairbank, *et al.* (eds), *The I.G. in Peking*, p. xi.

¹⁰⁸ Hart to Campbell, 6 April 1902 in *The IG in Peking*, Vol. 2, p. 1308.

of Westerners in China. If the journals turn out to be as interesting in as we can expect, they should become a major source for research and writing by a few competent people who prove their qualifications. This is the best way not only to preserve the memory of Hart and the Customs, but to keep an even balance and objective appreciation of modern Chinese history.¹⁰⁹

So if the project was not ‘an apologetics of imperialism’, it was certainly intended to underpin ‘objective appreciation’. The politics of history-making which Maze had discussed with Wright in 1939 were now to the fore. The making of an alternative Customs history had begun in the P.R.C. The Research Office of the General Administration of Chinese Customs was established in 1953, and the projected 10-volume series which Fairbank referred to, ‘Imperialism and the Maritime Customs’, started to appear in the later 1950s, providing themed selections from archival materials held in the Inspectorate archives which had been moved to Peking.¹¹⁰ Customs staff had been involved in this historical work, which sought to use the material to provide source materials on modern Chinese history, while at the same time recasting the Customs its place as an agency of foreign imperialism. At the same time, as Little knew, there was little enthusiasm for commemoration in Taiwan. His successors had spiked a celebratory article he sent through them to the English-language *China Post* in 1954, while former Minister of Finance C. K. Yen had politely written that ‘we all regarded the centenary of the Chinese customs service as a memorable occasion, but no formal ceremony was held for its observance’.¹¹¹

Conclusion

Informal empire was a process, and its institutions and practices always in flux. The Foreign Inspectorate of the Chinese Maritime Customs always had a finite life-span. The Customs would inevitably have both a

¹⁰⁹ Harvard University Archives, HUG(FP) 12.28, Fairbank papers, Box 2, folder ‘Hart journals’, Fairbank to Foster Hall, 14 December 1970.

¹¹⁰ The project—which was never fully completed—and its rationale are outlined in China Customs Society, ‘Preface II’, Chen Xiafei and Han Rongfang (Chief eds), *Archives of China’s Imperial Maritime Customs: Confidential Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell 1874–1907*, Volume 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990), pp. viii–ix.

¹¹¹ Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1999, Lester Knox Little papers, folder (5), ‘Correspondence with the Chinese Inspectorate of Customs, Taiwan . . . 1954’, L.K. Little to Lo Ching Hsiang and Fang Tu, 5th October 1954, Lo ching Hsiang and Fang Tu to L.K. Little, 16 Oct. 1954.

Chinese Inspector General, and a cadre of senior staff. Customs service philosophy placed this at the core of the principles underpinning the beneficent work undertaken by the foreign Inspectorate. But as Maze noted in his 1939 letter to Stanley Wright, and as any observer of the Chinese nationalism of the 1920s onwards would have pointed out, the foreign story would as a result be obliterated from the record, by neglect, if nothing else. Statues were already being pulled down, cemeteries desecrated, street names changed. He was mostly right, although the Inspectorate archives were in fact initially far from neglected, and were used to recast the Customs story in a darker light, and Robert Hart as an imperialist agent.¹¹² In Nationalist China on Taiwan the Customs story became an embarrassment.

The histories of the institutions of informal empire in China were, where written at all, almost by default mostly written from a diplomatic standpoint using overseas diplomatic archives. Very little access at all was granted to the large archives which survived in China, such as the records of the International Settlement or French Concession at Shanghai, or the Customs. In the 1990s, however, access began to be granted and histories which examine these institutions in and for themselves can now be written.¹¹³ The new material may, obviously, reveal much that will reinforce assumptions about the closeness of their links with foreign power, but other materials will also demonstrate their semi-autonomy and their roles as local actors in Chinese history. The exceptions to this rule were those collections, purloined or otherwise, which found their way to libraries and archives abroad, such as the Hart papers.

Despite the Fairbank projects, however, the Maze version held sway in many ways. The writing of Customs history became dependent on the fruits of the 1930s research programme, not least on *Documents Illustrative*. The Inspectorate archives were closed. No run of I.G. circulars existed outside the PRC. Foreign diplomatic archives were a key source for material on the Customs, especially for the twentieth century, alongside Maze's court histories, and his own edited, annotated and far from innocently archival papers. Little's, by contrast, seem to have been unused by scholars. Hart's journals were

¹¹² The process continued with Chen Xiafei and Han Rongfang (Chief eds), *Archives of China's Imperial Maritime Customs*. Here, it was claimed in the preface, was the 'clear proof' of the charge, p. ix.

¹¹³ The Secretariat files of the Shanghai Municipal Council alone contain 4558 files covering the period c. 1930–43: author's notes on Shanghai Municipal Archives, Series U 1–4.

partially published, but the bulk of them remain unused. No other significant holdings of the papers of senior staff have found their way into public archives. Maze might have had that satisfaction at least, although the reopening of the archives in Nanjing now enables scholars to revisit his administration, and the history of the service more generally.

The study of colonialism and imperialism has only recently been revived as an urgent historical project after decades in which it was unfashionable, if not suspect. Newly independent states in Asia and Africa created new nationalist histories, giving voice to moods and movements often smothered by colonial-era writing. At the same time they created narratives which often smothered in their turn the voices and actions of the colonialist, the missionary, the settler, the Customs I.G.—voices which had been strident, actions which had often been violent—in their projection of the colonial state's narrative. Maze saw this coming. There were certainly long traditions of scholarship in many of the formal arms of empire. There was much sound need to build up banks of information too, and a long enough history to tempt the amateur with time on his hands to revisit empire as history even as it still held sway. Perhaps uniquely amongst the agencies operating within the broader world of British formal and informal empire, however, Sir Frederick Maze decided to get his story, and the Customs story, written in time and for History, lodged away 'on permanent record in the Chancelleries, Admiralties, and National Libraries of the world'.