

BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY JOHN HARRIS

EMPERESS DOWAGER CIXI: THE CONCUBINE WHO LAUNCHED MODERN CHINA

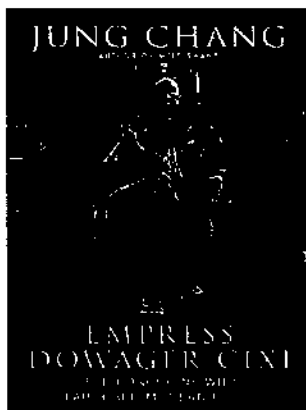
By Jung Chang

The last fifty years of the Chinese Empire is often assumed to have been a closed society, frozen in a time warp. This book demonstrates that to be only partially correct. While China's adoption of Western ways and technology was slow (railways were not commenced until 1889 for fear of disturbing the spirits of the dead), it is something of a revelation to find that the impetus for change came almost entirely from Cixi, the Dowager Empress, who was merely a concubine to her husband Xianfeng (who died in 1861), but the only one to produce a son. After his death, his widow, who bore the title Dowager as of right, and Cixi, on whom it was bestowed, ruled jointly, after neutralising the conservative eight man Regency ordained in the deceased emperor's will. Cixi was however by far the dominant partner and evidently a most diligent and perceptive ruler. She was also a great devotee of Chinese opera and although she enjoyed lavish food and wardrobe, was confined to the Forbidden City or the adjoining Sea Palace for most of her life.

The author, who has also written a biography of Mao Tse Tung, was born in China and now lives in London. She has had access to recently released Chinese records but is able to add her own insights. For example, in recording that the teenage widow of Cixi's son, who survived as Emperor only for three years, starved herself to death, she adds a footnote to the effect that as late as the 1930's a concubine of her own grandfather's had died from ingesting opium out of conjugal loyalty at his passing.

Despite the major setbacks of the war with Japan and the Boxer rebellion (the latter mishandled by the Dowager Empress), Cixi (who most of the time ruled through two emperors nominated by her as infants) continued with her Westernising policies into the twentieth century, to the ultimate advantage of China. She was responsible, directly or indirectly, for some loss of life, but not on the massive scale of her Communist successor, Mao Tse Tung. At her death a timetable for parliamentary elections was in place. Regrettably a century later this aspect of her reforms has yet to be implemented.

Reviewer: Ian Tonking
Library Ref: 920/CXI



LEGAL LIMITS

By Nicholas Hasluck

The Haslucks', father and son, have made major contributions to Australian literature: Paul as poet and historian, Nicholas as essayist, poet, and novelist. In this volume of essays, Nicholas's subjects are the law and literature and the connections between them. He notes that both professions demand the skilled use of language and yet few novelists write about the law and few lawyers write novels. Hasluck devotes a chapter to three outstanding exceptions: Dickens, Kafka and John Mortimer.

Hasluck served as part time President of the Equal Opportunity Tribunal (WA) for ten years after which he was appointed to the Supreme Court of WA. He writes about his experiences at the Tribunal. He is even-handed in that he discusses the pros and cons of individual cases without expressing a personal view. At no point does he discuss the need for or the effectiveness of discrimination and equal opportunity laws. I would have been interested in his views.

There are, in Australia, two lawyers who write novels; Ian Callinan, formerly of the High Court, and Hasluck himself. Hasluck devotes a chapter to Callinan. He describes his career in some detail and reviews his novels. He gives a lengthy description of Callinan's first novel *The Lawyer and the Libertine*, which I have not read. Can it be, I wonder, a coincidence that the plot is so similar to that used in Hasluck's novel *Dismissal*? The focal point of Callinan's novel is the Petrov Royal Commission while the focus of Hasluck's is Kerr's dismissal of Whitlam but the story lines are very similar. Both novels involve the San Francisco conference setting up the United Nations where Hasluck's father was Dr Evatt's assistant. Hasluck thinks well of *The Lawyer and the Libertine* and generously describes Callinan's novel *The Missing Masterpiece* as a scintillating gem. I disagree with the latter opinion. I found the plot rather clumsy and the dialogue wooden.

There is a chapter on the issues involved in writing *Dismissal* and the material in it, is clearly the basis of the presentation Hasluck made to our June 2013 Library Soiree.

Hasluck is an accomplished writer and he has written a fascinating book.

Reviewer: T E Young
Library Ref: 340.1/HAS

