

# Book Review: Friends of Sir Robert Hart: Three Generations of Carrall Women in China

by Blog Admin

September 22, 2012

*Providing insightful descriptions of society and relationships in China in the late 1800s, Mary Tiffen's recent book brings together archive sources and family records to document the intersecting lives of notable and minor subjects of empire. **Valentina Boretti** would like to have seen more critical engagement with the material, but recommends the book to anyone with an interest in Victorian-era class and gender relations.*



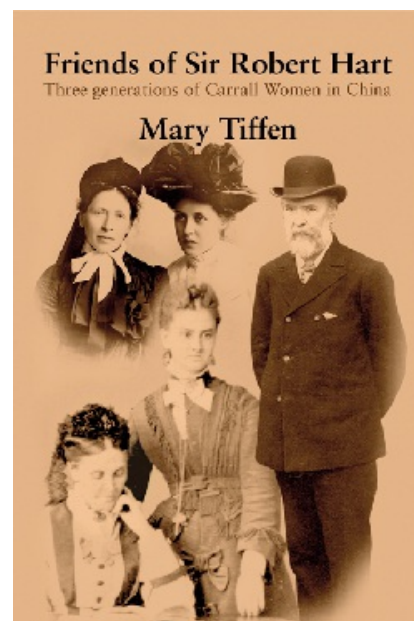
**Friends of Sir Robert Hart: Three Generations of Carrall Women in China. Mary Tiffen. Tiffania Books. April 2012.**

In the last few decades, the boundary between public and private has increasingly been shown to be quite porous: gender history as well as family history have contributed to underscore the close linkages between the so-called inner and outer spheres. Likewise, [Mary Tiffen](#) moves from her own family's friendship with Sir Robert Hart, long-serving inspector general of the Chinese imperial customs, to provide an engaging account of Victorian gender and class issues; treaty port existence in China; and the parallel – or rather intersecting – lives of notable and minor subjects of empire.

This well researched work, based on a variety of sources that include family materials and Hart papers held at Queen's University Belfast, is centred on two main interwoven themes: the figure of Robert Hart, and the Victorian family; indeed, the author's mother was born in China to a father who served under Hart.

Robert Hart is not examined here in his capacity of noteworthy player in the political and social scene of late nineteenth century China, although this is of course part of the story, as are his attempts at fostering mutual respect and understanding between China and Europe. Instead, Tiffen focuses on the man: exploring his attitudes to work, morality, status, duty, family and friendship, she describes the performance of his masculinity, defined constrained and acted mainly by achieving distinction, at the expense of his emotional life. His strong drive to succeed, also in order to rise above his middle class origins, implied for instance marrying to advance and blend in, and prior to that quietly concealing his "inconvenient" Chinese partner and offspring, whom he did continue to support. Hart's struggles with his conscience, as well as his loneliness, are especially relevant, since they make for a telling counterpoint, and a driving motive, to his illustrious career. His views on women and his friendship with three generations of Carrall women, tinged with both appreciative and patronizing attitudes, dictated by genuine interest mixed with solitude and sentimentalism, provide valuable insights on Victorian gender notions and relations – as enacted, however, mostly away from Britain.

If the figure of Hart is not studied, as once would have been the case, within the "history of great men" framework, Tiffen's treatment of the Victorian family in between Britain and China is quite effectual in using "intimate" history as a lens to highlight issues related to the wider, outer world. Matters of illegitimacy, and social-cum-financial hardships at home and overseas, provide a view of life on the edge of genteel society; and at the edge of empire, where "blemishes" could be overcome also through the connection with major



figures like Hart – a connection which the more rigid class structure in Britain may not have rendered possible. Yet, while meritorious service and influential encouragement could allow a former constable to remould himself into a gentleman and a provider of China-related knowledge (cf. the case of Theo Sampson, chapter 3), attending a school in China rather than being sent home for education still might mar one's chances to succeed, or to marry well. Expatriate and family life in China are compellingly sketched, particularly in what concerns the oft-contradictory interaction between upholding English-ness and the consequences that living abroad entailed – last but not least a perception of unfamiliarity when in Britain. The position of women does elicit several interesting observations: if treaty port gossip was to be feared, being brought up in China could foster a sense of independence (and lack of domestic skills) in middle class females, thus making it harder to conform to gender expectations back home.

While, as shown so far, this book's strength lies in its insightful and sensitive description of liminal lives and their environment, some of the many strands that it weaves together are sketched rather than analysed in depth. For instance, the influence of the Carrall women on Hart's work, as well as the ways in which China impinged on their attitudes, are both very promising topics which might have been expanded upon. Also, Hart's gender views would have deserved a deeper scrutiny: for one, might his seemingly easier liking for women than men have implied condescension? Or was it related to his necessity to try the men he would employ, given that he would have been responsible for them to his Chinese superiors? As for his female friendships, Tiffen argues that they may appear unusual to us (in itself a debatable point), living as we do in "sex-fixated times" (p. 111 and 306): this seems to suggest that Victorian times were not sex-obsessed, which appears not to have been exactly the case. Finally, Tiffen often lets her subjects speak for themselves, quoting at length from their writings: if this is certainly commendable, also given the richness of her sources, some more critical engagement with their voices – besides, that is, the contextualization that she does provide, and perhaps at the expense of some details – might have benefited the book.

This does not, however, diminish the significance of this convincing account, which will appeal to those interested in the making of multifaceted lives in between different environments – not necessarily in Victorian times only.

---

**Valentina Boretti** acquired her PhD in History at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where she was eventually a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow and is now a Research Associate. She works on the cultural history of modern China: her research interests include gender, material culture and childhood. [Read more reviews by Valentina.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: Modern Women in China and Japan: Gender, Feminism and Global Modernity Between the Wars \(13.3\)](#)
2. [Book Review: How Women Represent Women: Political Parties, Gender and Representation in the State Legislatures \(9.5\)](#)
3. [Book Review: Borderless Economics: Chinese Sea Turtles, Indian Fridges and the New Fruits of Global Capitalism, by Robert Guest. \(9.4\)](#)
4. [Book Review: Women in British Politics, c. 1689-1979 by Krista Cowman \(9.3\)](#)
5. [Book Review: Greening Aid? Understanding the Environmental Impact of Development Assistance by Robert L. Hicks et al. \(8.9\)](#)