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Abstract
This paper looks at the impact of various strands and contradictions of western liberalism and imperialism through the career of Sir John Bowring, 1792-1892. Bowring was a hyperactive poloyglot and polymath, a liberal writer, trader and entrepreneur who was deeply engaged with democratic reform movements in Europe, a radical member of parliament in Britain and supporter of Chartism, a pioneering advocate of free trade, became consul in Canton and then governor of Hongkong, a peace advocate who started a war with China but also negotiated the Bowring Treaty with King Mongkut which proved a crucial event in Southeast Asian history. His career not only spanned the 60 years of Britain's global pre-eminence from the defeat of Napoleon to the rise of the US and of united Germany but was engaged with several of its key issues in Britain, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The paper will place his roles in China and Hongkong in a wider context than normally viewed by historians of Hongkong.

Short bio
Philip Bowring is a journalist resident in Hongkong since 1973 when he became Business Editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER). He was regional correspondent for the Financial Times for two years then returned to the FEER as deputy editor and later editor. He left the magazine in 1992 following it takeover by Dow Jones and became an independent columnist, mainly for the International Herald Tribune, and consultant on regional economic and political issues. He now writes fortnightly columns for the South China Morning Post (SCMP) and occasional ones for the Wall Street Journal. He is also a contributor to www.asiasentinel.com, of which he was a founder. Prior to moving to
Hongkong, Bowring worked as a financial journalist in Australia and before that in London. He has also freelanced in Africa. He has a history degree from Cambridge University and held a one-year research scholarship at the University of Khartoum. Bowring is distantly related to the subject of his paper.

This paper aims to show, through the career of one man, John Bowring, the inter-relationship of ideas and politics during the period between the defeat of Napoleon and the rise of Germany and the US when British global influence was at its height. Bowring was a secondary figure but he influenced many of the facets of his era, intellectual, religious, literary, political, economic, commercial and imperial.

I have written a biography of Bowring partly because none has been done before. There is a lot of writing about him, but on specific aspects of his extraordinarily disparate career and impact. By bringing these and some additional research together into a biography I hope to cast some light on the forces which shaped the 19th century and whose legacy is still with us today, including in Asia. Bowring’s ten years in Asia are mostly viewed as a failure but his legacy is visible today for reasons good and bad.

His era stood in the middle of what has sometimes been termed “the long 19th century” – from the American and French revolutions to the start of World War I in 1914. It was the early part of this long century that generated many of the fundamental western concepts that are still the leading, if no longer dominant, force in global affairs. Liberal democracy, rule of law, freedom of religion, open trade, the nation state, the equality of women, the pursuit of progress through science and technology. Bowring was committed to all of these and his career reflected the contradictions which could – and still do – arise between them.

In the early 19th century they were also radical ideas and Bowring was, and remained, a radical even as later in life he played out his role as a servant of empire in Asia. That radicalism was inherited. He was from a family wool and cloth traders which for
generations had been religious dissenters, meaning they did not accept the principles of
the established Church of England and hence lacked some civil rights. They were
Unitarians, at the extreme left of the dissenting movement by rejecting the Christian
doctrine of the trinity. Unitarians were a small but tight-knit mostly traders and craftsmen
with economic interests in conflict with those of the landed ruling class. Thus at the time
of the American revolution his grandfather was a supporter of the American revolution –
and hung in effigy as a result. They were later viewed as sympathizing with the French
revolutionaries.

Unitarians were also keen on education, and scientific education in particular. The
leading Unitarian preacher, Joseph Priestley, was also the scientist who, among other
things, discovered oxygen, and an advocate of the equality of women. Likewise many of
the inventor/businessmen who created the industrial revolution in Britain such as were
Unitarians. Bowring was a believer and wrote hymns, two of which are still sung in
churches. But he associated with many non-believers, and in particular Jeremy Bentham,
leader of the Utilitarian philosophy – summed up by the principle of “the greatest good
for the greatest number”. Bentham was also an advocate of law and political reform
Bowring’s early career advancement owed much to the patronage of the then aging
Bentham while Bowring helped write Bentham’s 1821 Observations on the Restrictive
and Prohibitory Commercial System, an seminal advocacy of open trade. Bentham also
made Bowring editor of the Westminster Review, an influential political and literary
journal which he founded. This brought Bowring into a circle including such luminaries
as John Stuart Mill, Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, William Wordsworth and Walter
Scott.

Unitarians also had an international outlook not only having a strong presence in America
but establishing links with Hindu reformers in India, notably Ram Mohan Roy, a theist
and leader of the so-called Bengali Renaissance. Bowring knew Roy, who died in
England in 1833, and wrote an essay “Ram Mohan Roy and Hindoo Theism” for a
Unitarian publication. This was at a time when English radicals hoped that British rule in
Bengal could, in alliance with educated Bengalis, bring about social reform and economic
improvement under enlightened British auspices. In practice, alienation between ruler and ruled grew as British racial attitudes hardened and modernizing administrative practices clashed with traditional local interests.

Bowring’s internationalism was the outcome of his facility with languages, learning French, Spanish Dutch etc from visiting merchants on the Exeter quayside. Working for a London trading house he was sent to Spain to as an agent delivering supplies to the British army in the Peninsula War. Prolonged stays as a trader in Spain made him an expert in Spanish literature and saw his engagement in radical politics there at a time of short lived constitutional reform and liberalism before monarchy and church regained control. He similarly developed radical links in France at a time of conservative reaction. He made a name as translator of Spanish, Russian, Dutch and other poetry as well as a link to European radicalism. He became secretary of the London Greek Committee, a body headed by the exiled poet Lord Byron supporting the Greek struggle for independence. More broadly he supported other efforts to create nation states out crumbling empires and monarchies including the independence of Belgium and attempts at Italian unification.

In 1828 after a financial scandal stemming from the Greek Committee’s work and the failure of his trading business due to neglect Bowring was in dire straits and for while survived mainly on Bentham’s patronage. But with prodigious energy he partly reinvented himself, leaving poetry for expertise in public accounts. He wrote reports on the public accounts of Netherlands and then France for government and parliament as a result of which he became secretary to a parliamentary enquiry which led to radical reform of Britain’s accounting system. All the while he was engaged in radical causes such as Catholic emancipation and electoral reform. Following the extension of the franchise in 1832 he stood for parliament but lost at the first attempt.

By now his political focus was shifting from the franchise to free trade. He had, as earlier noted, been co-author of Bentham’s and the Westminster Review became a free trade platform, particularly after it was acquired by Perronet Thompsom, a radical former
military man, Arabist, advocate of universal suffrage and author of “A Catechism on the Corn Laws”, which in 1831 launched free trade and the end of protection for local agriculture as a defining issue in British politics.

Freer trade was also soon to become a key aspect of British policy globally. And for that Bowring was the first missionary. Though viewed by some as a dangerous radical, Bowring also had admirers in high places who respected his knowledge, energy and command of languages. He was employed on several occasions by the British government to argue the merits of bringing down trade barriers. He made two tours of France in company with George Villiers, later Lord Clarendon, a future Foreign Secretary, and made a huge impact both in the media and with chambers of commerce – though with modest impact on the government. He extolled the virtues of Switzerland’s focus on free trade and education in a much quoted – even now -- report to parliament on the Commerce and Manufactures of Switzerland.

In 1836 he was sent by Lord Palmerston, the foreign secretary, on a major mission to Egypt which resulted in a very lengthy report “Egypt Under Mohamed Ali” – the modernising khedive whose ambitions roiled the eastern Mediterranean which resulted not only in a trade agreement but the foundation of Egypt’s Department of Antiquities to explore for and protect its ancient sites and artifacts. Bowring also wrote a paper for the British Association of Science on the futility of quarantines as a means of preventing the spread of the “oriental plague” which periodically rampaged through the cities of the eastern Mediterranean.

A more difficult mission was to Berlin in 1839. He received huge attention but failed to make progress convincing Prussia to reduce its tariffs on manufactures. This was at a time when the Zollverein had emerged as a Prussia-led customs union linking the various German states, a zone protected by high barriers in an attempt to develop local industries. Bowring was suitably alarmed by the challenges this placed now and in the future for Britain.
He was now facing two very different German economists who were highly critical of his free trade views. One was Karl Marx who viewed the anti-corn law moves as a device to enable factory owners to lower wages. Until Bowring’s departure for Asia, Marx viewed Bowring as Britain’s leading advocate of free trade, and of liberal economic policies which hurt industrial workers. He attacked Bowring’s comments on the causes of distress to weavers displaced by mechanization and his opposition to limits on working hours. The other opponent was Friedrich List, the intellectual force behind the Zollverein. Bowring knew and personally liked List but his National System of Political Economy arguing for the use of tariffs to develop local industries was directly at odds with Bowring’s ideas and posed a threat to Britain. Indeed, Prussia’s push for industrialisation and a railway system was to bring it rapid victory in its war with France in 1870.

The debate between free traders and followers of List has continued to this day with List influencing South Korea’s industrialisation policies and being echoed in the import substitution theories of Raul Prebisch, the Argentinian economist who was influential in the 1960s and 70s. In contrast the US and World Bank consensus on the advantages of open markets has generally prevailed recently – ironically given that List borrowed some his ideas from America’s early protectionist first Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton.

Bowring’s experience in Germany convinced him that the Corn Laws, the system of protection of British grain producers, was damaging to British commercial and foreign policy interests as well as opposed to his principles of free trade. So he determined to return to parliament and press the case. He had been elected for Kircaldy, near Glasgow, in 1835 but lost his seat two years later. He was one of the founders of the Anti-Corn Law League set up in Manchester in 1838, headed a local radical and textile industrialist Richard Cobden. In 1841 he was elected a Radical member for Bolton, a cotton town near Manchester which was symbol of both the poverty and progress of the industrial revolution.
He supported the Chartist movement demanding universal suffrage, the secret ballot and other political reforms but in parliament was as much concerned with other “progressive” issues of which free trade was one but included opposition to flogging and to capital punishment, reform of government of Ireland, parliamentary accountability of public spending, the promotion of education, then anti-slavery movement, racial equality etc. Perhaps his biggest achievement as an MP was however to invent the Florin, the coin which was to be the first step in the decimalisation of the British currency – a subject on which he wrote a book. It took more than 100 years to complete the process!

At the same time as pursuing a radical political agenda he was also a capitalist, investing in and being chairman of two significant companies – an iron works in South Wales which prospered during the 1840s railways building boom and was regarded as a model employer. He was also chairman of the London and Blackwall Railway, London’s first urban railway which still carries part of London’s Docklands Light Railway linking the City to the news financial district, Canary Wharf. Unfortunately 1848 saw a financial crisis as the rail and iron boom turned to bust. Bowring was broke and needed a job. Resigning as an MP, he was rescued by prime minister Palmerston, who had admired his trade promotion efforts and foreign secretary, Lord Clarendon, his companion of his missions in France. He was offered the position of Consul in Canton and Superintendant of Trade in China.

Ironically, given his subsequent career, he had been a virulent critic of the First Anglo-Chinese War (so-called Opium war) which led to the treaty of Nanjing and British acquisition of Hongkong island. Trade could not be promoted by war, he insisted.

Not long afterwards, his eldest son, also John, joined Jardine Matheson in Hongkong. He also asked questions in parliament about Hongkong, being especially concerned that relatively mild British rather than Chinese methods be used to punish criminals. This was a reflection of what would remain his kind of imperialism – not the acquisition of territory but the advancement of what he saw as more advanced, more civilized ideas, be they about science, trade, free thinking or penal systems. Arrogant as that surely was it has been normal for leading societies, as China has shown in the past. Most of his version
of progress and advanced civilization is regarded as the norm today. Likewise his views that trade was crucial in spreading science and prosperity tended to override its negative aspects such as the opium trade.

For him trade in opium was much the same as trade in alcohol – at the time the temperance movement was in full swing in Britain. Around 1850 Britain was consuming about as much opium per head as China – but mostly as laudanum or in patent medicines rather than smoked. It was mostly imported from Turkey while opium from British-run Bengal went to China – Chinese imports from India, which had begun before the British East India Company acquired control of Bengal and the opium monopoly, were huge and a serious drain on silver, but perhaps half China’s opium was home-grown or contiguous states in the southwest. But for China it was simultaneously a financial matter (export of silver) politics (control of foreigners and of border regions) and public health (ready supply led to price drop, increased use not longer confined to wealthier classes, and opium was now smoked not ingested).

Bowring arrived in Canton in early 1849. He quickly discovered it was no dream job. Boring and often boorish merchants as companions cooped up in the foreign enclave; isolation from a family (other than son John) left in England; refusal of the Viceroy to engage in useful dialogue; disdain for the brutality and corruption he saw everywhere. The frustrations of years in Canton and the Viceroy’s refusal to carry out the Treaty of Nanjing in respect of that city were to affect his later judgment. The boredom did give him an opportunity to learn to Chinese (how much is uncertain but he also read widely about Chinese civilization and wrote an essay on Confucius for a Unitarian publication). His interest in Chinese contrasted with that of his superior, the Governor of Hong Kong and Plenipotentiary in China, George Bonham who believed that knowledge of the Chinese language was a disadvantage! He also used the time to write much of his book on decimalization – *The Decimal System in Numbers, Coins and Accounts*, published in 1854.
Bowring’s correspondence with Palmerston and others including Richard Cobden and his own sons, reflect a man torn between admiration of Chinese civilization and desire to see China prosperous and well-governed and his belief that trade and an acceptance of the outside world were essential for the well-being of ill-governed Chinese people. At some point, he indicated, force might be the only way to persuade the viceroy to carry out the Nanjing treaty.

Not that he was unaware of Chinese sentiments. He wrote “The Pottinger treaties inflicted a deep wound upon the pride, but by no means altered the policy, of the Chinese government. They were submitted to as hard necessity”. On another occasion he expressed the view that Commissioner Lin, the man who had tried to suppress the opium trade, thus sparking the first Opium war, was “an object of as much veneration to the Chinese as Washington is to Americans”.

Nonetheless, he saw the immediate issue as specific to Canton. In his role he also visited the other treaty ports, finding the situation in Shanghai very different, a fast growing city where there was cooperation between Chinese officials and foreign consular representatives. The British consul there for almost ten years was Stewart Alcock who was later transferred to Canton and found himself as frustrated as Bowring had been.

Between them, Bowring and Alcock made two important contributions to relations with China. First was Bowring’s successful urging on London the importance of training consular officials in Chinese language before being sent to posts. This was strongly backed by Alcock in evidence to a British parliamentary inquiry into the consular service. One of the first products of this programme was Robert Hart who was to become the much admired head of China’s Imperial Customs Service from 1863 to 1910. Hart later expressed appreciation for Bowring’s personal advice on learning language and culture through listening.

The Customs Service originated with a suggestion by Alcock, agreed by Bowring and negotiated with Qing officials in Shanghai for a board of local and foreign consular
officials to oversee assessment and payment of customs duties. It was aimed at regularising payments and ending corruption and collusion between Chinese officials and foreign merchants.

Begun as an experiment opposed by foreign merchants and viewed with skepticism in London it proved a success and became the foundation of the eventually very large service which did much to promote China’s trade and revenues, managing ports, building lighthouses etc. It was to prove an import factor in the huge development of China which took place in the last 50 years of the Qing dynasty despite internal rebellion and foreign domination.

Bowring’s third contribution to better government during his time at Canton was an attempt to alleviate some of the worst aspects of the coolie trade – the shipment of Chinese people, sometimes against their will, to labour-short places from Hawaii to Peru. Amoy was the largest departure point and some British merchants and their ships deeply involved in a hugely profitable trade which often, in Bowring’s words, involved “iniquities scarcely exceeded by those practiced on the African coast” and damaged relations between Chinese and foreigners. He issued a Proclamation banning British ships from transporting migrants to certain notoriously nasty destinations from anywhere in China and enforcing rules providing minimum food and amenities for coolie shipments from Treaty ports. None of this stopped Chinese coolie-merchants and non-British shipowners from continuing their abuses but it did have some positive impact.

Despite Bowring’s frustrations at Canton, he did find some outlets for his belief in the value of trade as a means of progress and of his commitment to liberal values and good government. But the Qing government, at least at Canton and Beijing, had yet to be convinced of the superiority, if any, of western ideas.

He also used his time to visit Java and Bengal. The latter was especially interesting given his future role. In Bengal he saw trade and economic progress, the building of railways and irrigation systems and admired how English law was being applied mostly by Indian
lawyers. But he was equally horrified by the oppression of the caste system and white attitudes to coloured people.

Twenty years after meeting Ram Mohan Roy in England, Bowring met his son Rampussand Roy then a leading lawyer in Calcutta. While noting the Bengali elite’s positive role in British administration and the progress of economic development he was appalled by “the deep abyss which we have established between the whites, who are the ruling few, and the coloured races who are the subject many” the former being “in the habit of treating the Indians with contumely and using expressions in their presence deeply wounding to their pride and self-respect”

Thus it seemed that the intellectual social and economic progress that Bowring believed an enlightened Britain could bring to India could not be separated from the racial arrogance and assumptions of superiority of the foreign rulers. Indeed, one of his sons, Lewin, joined the Indian civil service and ended as Commissioner for Mysore. In his memoirs, Lewin, who was fluent in Hindi, Persian and Arabic deplored the lack of language skills and attitudes of the later generation of administrators. (Lewin incidentally is memorialized in the Bowring Institute in Bangalore, now a social and sporting club for the local elite). The latter was soon to boil over into the rebellion which the British called the Indian Mutiny. Bowring was committed to economic progress and social liberalism – ideas coming from Britain. But in practice the two were proving incompatible, at least in a situation of British political dominance.

Bowring filled in for Bonham in 1852 when the latter was on leave. His performance enhanced his claim on the job when Bonham retired. He got it, again thanks to Palmerston though one official had doubts about his suitability remarking: “Of his talent and intellectual vivacity, there can be no doubt but there might possibly be a question of his carrying sufficient ballast to countervail his superfluity of sail”. He also got a knighthood.
The first two years in this dual role as governor and plenipotentiary were generally successful and showed his commitment to trade, good government and liberal ideas. He resisted attempts, particularly on the part of Christian missionaries, to see the Taiping rebels in a favourable light as proto-Christians. Indeed, he would have preferred to offer help to the Qing and one occasion in late 1854 did took the navy to a beleaguered Canton with an implied hint to Commissioner Ye of military support in return for progress of the entry issue. But Ye, ever suspicious of the foreigners, did not respond.

He was more concerned to bolster Qing authority as a way of increasing stability and fostering trade than in using China’s weakness to promote Christianity etc. But London demanded strict neutrality. Following a Taiping occupation of Shanghai, he insisted that merchants pay dues to the Qing government on goods trade during that period – but London over-ruled him.

Abroad, he achieved a singular triumph negotiating the historically important Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with King Mongkut of Siam (see below). On his watch too, though he was not directly involved, his naval commander Sir James Stirling negotiated Britain’s first Treaty of Friendship with Japan in the wake of US Commodore Perry’s ground breaking visit. Stirling was recalled on the grounds that his Japan goal distracted from his main one of finding and destroying Russian vessels – the Crimean War was in full swing. Bowring most likely approved of Stirling’s trade priority. Meanwhile a Franco-British attempt to seize the Russian Pacific port of Petropavlovsk was a costly failure.

In Hongkong itself, after a struggle to get control over domestic policy run by the Lieutenant-Governor he unveiled a series of forward looking reforms to raise money, build infrastructure, encourage Chinese traders to settle – even recommending to London (which rebuffed him) that land-owning Chinese be given rights to vote for membership of the Legislative Council. A decision to allow Chinese with land leased in Hongkong to register their vessels under the British flag fostered trade – but was to lead to tragedy.
The Arrow War, which eventually became the Second Anglo-Chinese war (the Second Opium war though it had little to do with opium) was an indirect outcome of Chinese owners registering vessels in Hongkong. One such vessel, the Arrow, was seized by the authorities in Canton allegedly for smuggling. Parkes, the British consul in Canton, demanded its release and an apology. In fact the vessel’s British registration had expired a few days earlier but that was not known by Commissioner Ye at the time. Ye had always been implacably opposed to the foreign presence, had rejected all Bowring’s efforts to engage him in dialogue and move towards the opening of Canton as agreed in the Nanjing treaty. Bowring meanwhile was infuriated by the Arrow seizure and, pressed by Parkes and the then naval commander, Admiral Seymour linked this incident to Ye’s refusal to open Canton. The result was a decision to shell Canton to force Ye to change his mind. But Ye was made of sterner stuff than predecessors who had yielded to force. Instead he launched what was intended as a guerrilla war against the British, expelling them from Canton and attempting to turn Chinese in Hongkong against them. That led to the attempted poisoning of Europeans in Hongkong, some draconian security laws which went against Bowring’s liberal instincts – though these remained strong enough to resist demands from Europeans and his own Attorney General for summary justice for the baker accused. A normal trial was held and the baker acquitted.

The Arrow war completely undermined Bowring’s reputation among his liberal colleagues in England and, for different reasons by many in the London government. But Palmerston, while doubting Bowring’s judgment in using the small Arrow affair to address the bigger issue of access, saw no alternative to the policy and easily won an election prompted by his defeat in parliament on the issue. But Bowring was replaced as Plenipotentiary by Lord Elgin, viewed as suitably aristocratic and more diplomatic – though one who having taken an army to Canton also then took the war to Beijing, something that Bowring had wanted to avoid.

I won’t dwell on Bowring’s governorship of Hongkong, of which much has been written other than note that he consistently upheld his free trade principles, and endeavoured to promote education and liberal ideas. He largely failed due to a combination of his own
lack of management skills, the low quality of the officials with whom he had been landed and the power of the big merchant houses. Suffice to say that he left Hongkong despised by the leaders of the European community who had urged war with China and respected by the Chinese ones for his support for them in Hongkong.

But now let us go back to that singular achievement, the treaty with Siam. Far from being an inevitable outcome British power and demands for trade, it owed much to Bowring’s liberal instincts as well as belief in the importance of trade as a force for progress. His success in his journey to Bangkok even seemed to surprise him, let alone a British government long used to failed missions in the past. Success owed most to King Mongkut, old enough (47) and educated enough by the time he became king to understand the need to modernize and engage with European power. But Bowring had the advantage of having corresponded with Mongkut long before embarking on this visit, with Mongkut, who had acquired a good knowledge of English, appreciating that Bowring was a learned and literary man.

For sure, arriving with two small screw driven warships was a statement of power. But the importance of the personal rapport and the flexibility Bowring showed in the dealings over the treaty, and his respect for Siamese ways – regardless of the condemnations of American Christian missionaries – certainly helped Mongkut overcome resistance to the treaty in royal circles.

At one level the deal could be considered as one of so-called “unequal treaties” between big and small powers with, a norm at the time, rights for foreigners to be tried by their own laws people rather than those of the sovereign state. But more significant for all was the opening of Siamese trade -- in particular, rice – and abolition of some trading monopolies. The result of creating an export market was to raise the price. In consequence the king issued a decree noting that lazy people wanted to price of rice to be low but to help the farmers he had allowed export to encourage production. Soon Siam was the main source of supply for Hong Kong and access to this and other export markets resulted in investment in modern milling and transport technology.
On a wider level, the very existence of a treaty between two sovereigns treating each other at least nominally as equals gave Siam a status not enjoyed elsewhere in southeast Asia. Britain was engaged in its Burma expansion, France in Vietnam and Cambodia while the Malay sultanates to the south were more inclined to be friends with a powerful Britain than their nominal sovereign in Bangkok. It came to suit the Europeans, Britain in particular to see Siam as a buffer state which was more accepting of western-style modernization than its neighbours. Indeed independence encouraged the old elites to embrace modernization.

The rapport between Bowring and Mongkut was such that after retirement he was appointed Siam’s ambassador in Europe and signed treaties on its behalf with lesser European nations. He also wrote warmly of the knowledge, humanity and accomplishments of Mongkut and the Second King – an important but little quoted contrast to the image so well known in the west presented by Anna Leonowens, a woman who had taught English at the court and later made good money fantasizing about in books which became the source of the play/movie The King and I. What is clear from the writing of both Bowring and Mongkut, who revived Buddhist studies in Siam, is that both had a strong ethical sense but accepted religious and social differences as normal with tolerance as the overriding virtue. Christian missionaries were allowed to operate, though they could be irritatingly moralizing, which proved annoying to Bowring as well as the king. The level of learning shown by Mongkut and his brother the Second King, who was a keen student of technology, was itself an illustration of their recognition of the value of the intellectual as well as merchandise commerce to which Bowring had been committed since his days in Spain forty years previously.

In his latter days in Hongkong Bowring also took a holiday the Philippines, travelling to Zamboanga and the Visayas as well as the Manila and its environs. His interesting account of the country, “A Visit to the Philippines Isles” has with references to the church, music, cock-fighting, the role of Chinese, and attitudes to sex which ring true today.
In retirement Bowring also acted as representative of another king, that of the Sandwich islands, ie Hawaii, then maintaining a semblance of independence. Retirement also included visiting at the request of the British foreign secretary the newly unified Italy where he met his old radical associate Count Cavour, prime minister of the new nation. Cavour was a Benthamite devoted to political and economic reform as much as to nationalism. But Bowring’s hopes of negotiating a commercial treaty with Italy faded when Cavour died suddenly.

Back in England, for the last decade of his life he continued to promote radical causes, doubtless partly impelled by a new wife who was to become an early advocate of women’s rights, particularly for education and the vote.

In the public eye his reputation never recovered from the Arrow war. Rejected by many of his old liberal colleagues, he remained too much the radical ever to be liked by conservatives. Yet he left a legacy of promoting both trade and liberal ideas on a global stage. He was a man ahead of his time. Though the war left him with an image of imperialism and gunboat diplomacy, this was in contrast to most of what he stood for throughout his career, whether in writings, in parliament, on the hustings, on trade missions, in his dealings with Mongkut and in his (thwarted) aspirations as governor of Hongkong. His conflict with the Qing in no way undermined his respect for Chinese civilization as reflected in his efforts to learn the language and in his 5,000 word essay on Confucius who he saw representing “the highest type of ethical and intellectual thought”, a pure system shorn of idols characterizing most religions.

He was an imperialist in the sense that he believed that the world should benefit from the latest western ideas on liberty, trade, science and government. But he was an internationalist in believing all could and should benefit from the spread of these ideas and removal of backward systems of government and religion. In practice it was of course hard to separate modern ideas from the military firepower that modern science brought to bear on international affairs. It was a small step from believing in freedom and
progress to imposing it when national interests demanded. He got caught in that dilemma. But from the perspective of 150 years one can see that his ideas triumphed in almost every sphere and his legacy is still apparent in Asia and Europe.