Searching for Billie

A journalist's quest to understand his mother's past leads him to discover a vanished China

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BLACKSMITH BOOKS

For my mother Billie, my wife Jean, and our children Brian and Sabrina

Searching for Billie
ISBN 978-988-75546-6-0

Published by Blacksmith Books
Unit 26, 19/F, Block B, Wah Lok Industrial Centre,
37-41 Shan Mei Street, Fo Tan, Hong Kong
Tel: (+852) 2877 7899
www.blacksmithbooks.com

Edited by Paul Christensen

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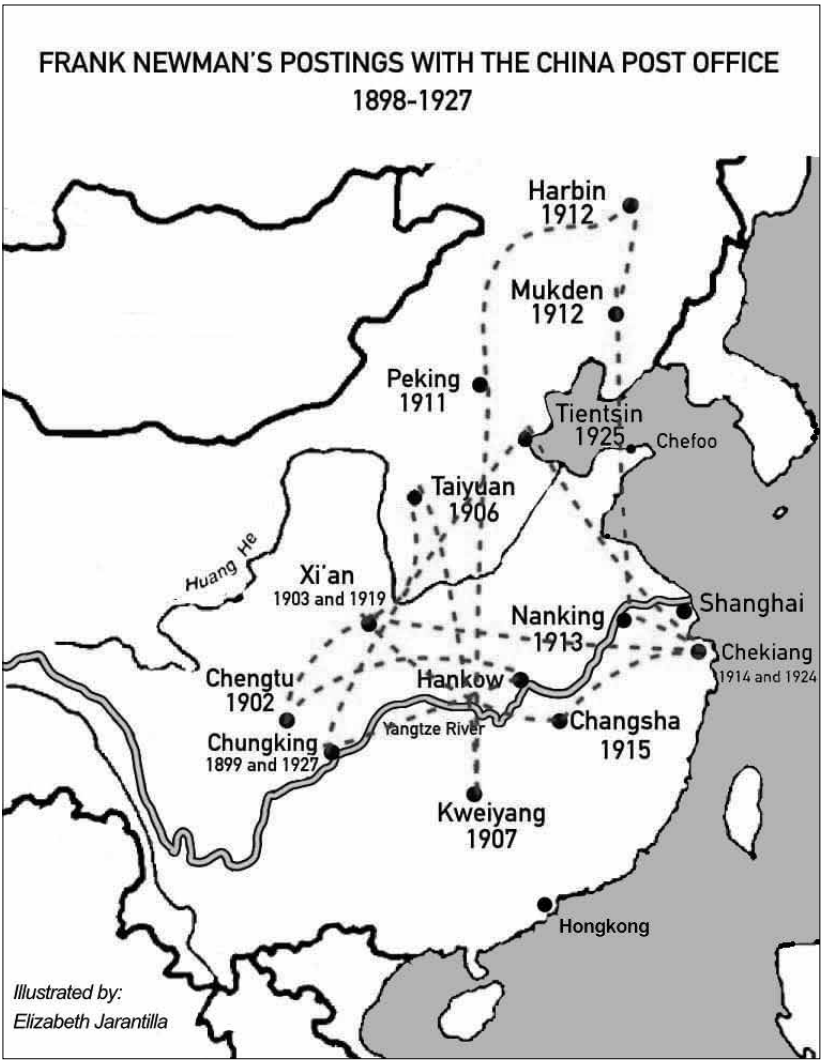
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Illustrated by:
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Author's Note

This book began with an almost surreal holiday with my mother Billie in 1975.

We met in Hong Kong that summer, when I was 29 and had been working as a journalist in Wellington for four years and she was 59 and about to retire from her job of running the Secretariat of the United Nations Disarmament Conference in Geneva.

My earliest memories were of an idyllic childhood in Bangkok from the early 1950s – just as, it turned out, her decade of turmoil and tragedy had ended.

During our reunion, she lifted the curtain on her early life in China – then shuttered from the outside world – and introduced me to a cast of extraordinary characters who had shared it with her. In Hong Kong, I met two elegantly dressed Eurasian women, 'Auntie Lois' and 'Auntie Mackie', who had been her best friends at school in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Billie also took me to Taipei to meet her erstwhile colleagues from Shanghai and Hong Kong who had fled across the Taiwan Strait as the Communists advanced to power in 1949.

They included journalist Spencer Moosa from her Reuters days and scholars Wen Yuan-ning and John Wu from the cultural magazine, *T'ien Hsia*, that she had helped to launch as office manager in 1935. Japan's war on China in 1937 had forced them to escape to Hong Kong, where they regrouped as a magazine and added an important function as an information office for the Chinese government. This arrangement lasted until Japan attacked Hong Kong in late 1941, leading to Billie being interned as a prisoner of war.

It was my first visit to Hong Kong and Taipei and I was struck by Billie's ease in environments that were strange to me, and especially by the warmth and respect people who had been senior members of the

Nationalist government showed her. Wen, though paralysed from a stroke, insisted on being dressed in a suit to meet the woman he had called his "right-hand assistant." It dawned on me that Billie was far more than a fiercely protective mother.

Before we left Hong Kong, she took me to the still-existing buildings of Stanley Internment Camp where she had spent nearly four years, experiencing starvation, the loss of her first son and an unlikely romance. We stood before the grave of my half-brother, Brian, where she told me, "You were two sons rolled into one," a remark I would not fully understand until years later.

During those 10 days, she gave me a tantalizing glimpse of her gilded childhood and her darkest years. When she suggested we work on an account of her life, I accepted readily, though not without apprehension. It was a unique opportunity to explore her rich and terrible heritage, which was mine, too. But I knew there would be challenges in writing such a book, not least because of the conflicts that had arisen between us since I reached adolescence, as well as the physical distances between us.

Nonetheless, Billie began dictating her memories into a recorder in Geneva and we would expand on these whenever we met, whether it was Hong Kong, where I got a job on a news magazine in 1978, or Singapore and Manila, where I subsequently lived.

Over the next decades, I met several more of her friends, including the American writer Emily Hahn and her husband, British intelligence officer-turned-historian Charles Boxer, and many of the women she had befriended in prison camp. In 1993, after China had reopened its doors, we returned to Shanghai together to recapture a world that, in the areas where she had lived, had changed almost beyond recognition.

Billie was desperate to learn more about her family – Frank Newman, an English postmaster, and Mei-lan, his Chinese wife – who had given her a cosseted upbringing and a privileged education in Shanghai's British schools. But they were of a reticent generation that spoke little of their past. Moreover, our search was confined mainly to the Births, Deaths and

Marriages records then at St Catherine's House, London. We finished a draft of our book in 2002, but shelved it for further improvement.

It was fortunate that we did so because it was only after Billie's death in 2006 that the exponential growth of the internet, plus some old-fashioned foot-slogging, led to the uncovering of much more of the history that had eluded her.

The online discovery of a card under the name Edward Newman, Frank's father, from the Carl Smith Collection in the Hong Kong Public Records, for example, yielded the strong connections the Newmans had for two decades with Chefoo, a small treaty port in northern China that Billie never once heard mentioned in the family home.

It was only through the digitized *North-China Herald* and China directories that one could piece together the amazing 30-year career of Frank Newman who had served the imperial Qing and, after the 1911 revolution, the Peking government, first in the customs and then helping to start China's first nationwide postal service in remote and often hazardous regions. It was a record all the more remarkable given that he flouted British social conventions, at risk to his career, by marrying a Chinese woman.

Billie would have been stunned to read of the court cases that revealed the fuller story behind Frank's separation from his family that had forced Billie to drop out of school and become a breadwinner. She would have been amazed at the exploits of Frank's parents, an iron-willed Malvern farmer's daughter and an intrepid London-raised seafarer, who had sailed to Hong Kong in the mid-19th century and ended up owning one of the best-known hotels on the China coast.

Research would also shed new light, though too late for Billie, on her husband and her lovers, revealing how their hidden sides had contributed to abrupt and puzzling break-ups that had aggravated her distress through the lack of closure.

It was both unsettling and liberating to discover that the reality was often different from what my mother – and I – had been led to believe.

The search ends with my meeting my father George – Billie's wartime lover – for the first time on a remote Canadian island and the impact this would have on Billie and me.

The family story, bookended by two strong women, portrays the evolving attitudes of society towards race, class and gender, as well as issues such as adoption and illegitimacy against the backdrop of China's turbulent century from the Anglo-Chinese wars to the advent of communism.

I must give thanks to those who provided breakthroughs at critical junctures. They include Tony Banham, Robert Bickers, Kingsley Bolton, Jeff Caine, John Charles, Henry Ching, Duncan Clark, Frances and Graeme Clark, Philip Cracknell, Brian Edgar, Geoff Emerson, Jenny Hall, Lane Harris, Robin Hutcheon, Siaoman and Richard Horsburgh, Nick Kitto, Robert Nield, Heather Nield, Victor Wei Chunyang and Jason Wordie.

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Love Triangle

In 1861, Mary Ann Warner, a farmer's daughter from England's West Country, was trying to make it on her own as assistant manager of the Dock Hotel on Southampton's waterfront. Stepping out of the front door and crossing Canute Road, she looked out on two huge harbours, the Outer Dock and the Inner Dock, massive investments on which the town was gambling its future.

Mary Ann, 25 and single, was also taking a big chance. No longer in the first flush of youth, she had fled from her dominating father, a ruthless, philandering tenant farmer who, as was customary, was trying to marry off his daughters to much older men of means, rather than younger spouses of their choice.

A comely woman with dark eyes and shoulder-length tresses, Mary Ann had arrived by stagecoach from her village of Malvern Link, Worcestershire, alighted on the High Street, and crossed Porters Meadow (now Queen's Park), making her way between men in flat caps and jackets with leather elbows who were waiting hopefully to be hired to load and unload ships.

Southampton was bidding to transition from a sleepy spa resort into a bustling port and, as she approached Canute Road, Mary Ann saw on the right the customs house, which looked far too elegant for its prosaic purpose. Indeed, it had recently been converted from the Grecian-styled Royal Gloucester Baths, which had been built on the beach so that the ladies of society could bask in baths filled by incoming tides and reap the vaunted medicinal benefits of sea bathing.

On her left, she could see the source of Southampton's hoped-for prosperity – the terminus for the railway line from London, completed in

1840, which was bringing a steady stream of visitors from the metropolis in smoke-belching locomotives.

Mary Ann reached the corner of Royal Crescent Road where the Canute Castle Hotel still stands (though it is now a real estate business), with its octagon-shaped viewing tower on the roof.

Across the road were the grand offices, with arched entrances and Corinthian columns, of the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company that was leading Britain into a new era of shipping, replacing wind-powered clippers with more reliable and faster iron hulks powered by steam engines.

Since winning its first major government contract in 1837 to carry mail to the Iberian peninsula of Spain and Portugal, P&O steamers were now making money carrying passengers and cargo as well. The company dominated the eastward routes and extended services to Alexandria in 1840, India in 1842, and Ceylon, Calcutta, Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong in 1845.

The new rail link had prompted the P&O to move its headquarters from London to Southampton, where it invested in offices, wharves and warehouses, as well as a school and housing for its employees and their families, and a laundry for the fleet's linen.

In response to the anticipated shipping boom, the port inaugurated the outer dock in 1843, which was immediately used by P&O steamships, and opened the inner dock in 1851.

It was undoubtedly the hope of becoming rich that enticed Harry Morgan into moving his family south in the 1850s from the pleasant market town of Stourbridge, Worcestershire, to run the Dock Hotel in this grimy dockland.

Handily for business, the hotel was right next door to the P&O Buildings. It was a stolid three-storey establishment, as tall as the P&O Buildings, and it confidently proclaimed its purpose by splashing "Dock Hotel" and "Morgan Family Hotel" in large letters across its stylish bay windows.

The Dock Hotel where Mary Ann worked. The P&O Buildings are on the left.

An 1859 advertisement shows prosperous-looking men in top hats and women in long dresses promenading in front of the Dock Hotel.

Unfortunately, Morgan made a big miscalculation. The elite preferred to stroll a few hundred yards and stay in hotels along the far more salubrious High Street, while the rougher trade headed for cheaper accommodation in the red-light district on the other side of the High Street.

And the bigger picture was not hopeful. Southampton, which had built its affluence on trading wool and wine across the Channel, could not match the industrial might of Manchester and the northern port of Liverpool.

Business was not taking off as Harry had hoped. On April 7, 1861, the national census taken that evening shows the Dock Hotel had only two boarders – a 23-year-old merchant from Hamburg, Germany and a 57-year-old man of independent means from Cheshire.

In fact, the staff easily outnumbered the guests. The Dock Hotel had five servants and two Morgan family members who managed the hotel –

Harry and his wife's brother, Alexander Barlow, 29, who, like Mary Ann, was an assistant manager. The other residents were Harry's wife Mary and their teenage sons George and William.

On top of lack-lustre business, disaster struck two weeks later when Harry died on April 19 at the age of 49. The loss would also increase the responsibilities thrust upon the capable Mary Ann.

Meanwhile, as one of the few personable women in a district of transient men, Mary Ann was catching the eye of suitors, including two who worked for the prestigious P&O.

One was Edwin Sait who, like Mary Ann, came from a farming village, South Bersted, but was making something of himself as a P&O engineer. He was showing the same potential as his enterprising father, who rose from agricultural labourer to coal trader and finally a farmer with 27 acres of land.

Mary Ann's other admirer was P&O steward Ted Newman, a London lad from the wrong side of fashionable Bloomsbury. Ted was one of 10 children born and raised next to the Rookery, a notorious slum depicted in stories by Charles Dickens and graphic drawings by William Hogarth.

Unlike Edwin, Ted had a rather ineffectual father. A daguerreotype of John Newman shows a man who looks quite distinguished, with an aquiline nose and bushy mutton chops, but he had never been much of a success as a maker of musical instruments, a brass worker or gas fitter and his final career as a licensed victualler at the Wheatsheaf pub near Clare Market had ended in disaster. After allowing a son to run the pub into debt, John Newman was declared bankrupt in 1861, a big disgrace. Adding insult to injury, the same son, Henry, also lost a well-publicized court case brought by a young woman claiming that he was the father of her child.

Ted Newman's father John, who died bankrupt

John Newman's strong and well-connected wife kept the family afloat, but the double public humiliation of financial ruin and moral shame drove the Newmans out of a neighbourhood where they had lived for decades – all 10 of the Newman children were baptized in their parish church of St Giles-in-the-Field. Ted's oldest sister Ann led the exodus, moving to Southampton after marrying a sailmaker the year her father's business failed. She would live only a few hundred yards from Mary Ann in the Dock Hotel and, later, she was followed to Southampton by two brothers, including Ted, two sisters and, eventually, her mother.

According to a cousin with knowledge of the situation, Edwin Sait and Ted Newman were best friends. Edwin, who became a chief cook, would have interacted with Ted the steward on their long voyages. It is clear from subsequent developments that both were very fond of Mary Ann, though it is not known how or if this love triangle affected their friendship.

What is evident is that Ted Newman was away a lot – one reliable source places him in Hong Kong as an administrative officer for a trading company, Margesson, in 1863, which indicates that he was plying the Far East route and sometimes took an onshore job, a common pattern of behaviour for mariners.

In any event, Edwin Sait, possibly because he was more home-based, was the first to win Mary Ann's affection and the two married in her home village at St Matthias' Church on November 1, 1864. Mary Ann's father, James, had been a church warden of St Matthias since its foundation 20 years earlier, but people in that tiny community knew that he was a hypocrite and a bully.

Even as he was giving away his daughter in church, James Warner, in his 60s, was having an illicit relationship with Rachel Ann Tudge, the 17-year-old daughter of a carter who rented a property on Warner's land. Furthermore, when young Rachel became pregnant, Warner sent her away to Claines, 10 miles away, where she delivered a baby son, who died soon afterwards.

Somehow, the spirited Rachel Ann managed to persuade Warner to marry her secretly at St Peter's Church in Birmingham but, when this became known, it caused a huge rift between the children of Warner's first and second families.

Nor did Warner's eyebrow-raising conduct end there. A self-made man who farmed land for the local squires and made sure they had pheasants to shoot in the hunting season, Warner proved so ruthless in protecting his land that he inspired both fear and scorn among the farm hands drinking in the local pub.

In 1837, the *Worcester Journal* reported that Warner had seen James Tyler, a labourer, carrying a withy pole (a frame to support crops) and, believing Tyler had stolen it from his hop yard, took him to court. Tyler challenged Warner to produce a witness who had seen him take the pole, which looked like any other withy stick. To Warner's embarrassment, the magistrates said they had no power to inflict a punishment on the offender as the price of the pole was under two shillings. In later years, Warner brought offenders to court for trespassing or stealing an apple or fish from a stream. He must have been a strong man, too, for in 1840 he reportedly hid under a hedge one Saturday evening and, after catching two men removing turnips from his land, hauled them off to court, where they were fined.

Back in Southampton, Mary Ann and Edwin set up home not far from the Dock Hotel, where she continued to work. When their son was born on January 17, 1867, Mary Ann broke with tradition by having the boy baptized Edwin George William, deliberately leaving out her father's name.

Later that year, Ted Newman – and possibly Edwin as well – took part in a highly publicized and costly adventure, the Napier Expedition. A conflict had broken out after Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia captured a handful of missionaries and British government representatives and held them hostage at his mountain fortress of Magdala. On August 21, 1867, Queen Victoria announced the decision to send a military expedition

to rescue the captives. The task went to the Bombay Army under the leadership of Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Napier.

The mission involved transporting 13,000 British and Indian soldiers, 26,000 camp followers and over 40,000 animals, including 44 elephants to pull the heavy guns, from Bombay to the east coast of Abyssinia. Some of the P&O fleet and dozens of other vessels played their part. If Ted Newman was in Hong Kong, it is plausible that he took part in an expedition that was launched from India. If Edwin also took part, it could explain why he developed heart and liver trouble that would keep him confined to home for months.

Later that year, another misfortune struck the Dock Hotel with the death of Harry Morgan's widow, Mary, on October 23, 1867. This left her son George Morgan, now in his mid-20s, in charge.

Mary Ann's younger sister Jane was spending time in Southampton, possibly helping to look after Mary Ann's baby. Jane began a relationship with George Morgan and on March 10, 1868, the couple married at St Matthias, with the bride again given away by her father, James Warner.

With her sister now married to the hotel owner, Mary Ann's future appeared bright.

But, within months, everything fell apart.

After months of illness, Edwin died on August 26, 1868, at the age of 34, of vascular and hepatic disease. He left effects of under 200 pounds.

Mary Ann, already cut off from her father, now faced a bleak prospect. A single woman had few rights – she could not access bank credit, nor own a property – and now she had to hold down a busy job and raise a son alone.

In Hong Kong, Ted Newman heard of his friend Edwin's demise. A bachelor approaching 40, Ted had also recently attended the wedding of his good friend and P&O colleague, John Southan, and may well have thought of settling down.

He now did something that shattered Victorian decorum. Though the ground had hardly settled over his friend's grave, he proposed marriage to Mary Ann.

It is unlikely that Mary Ann, now approaching her mid-thirties, was swept off her feet by passion. She was by now versed in business and was adept at gathering intelligence through travellers at the hotel or ships' crews at the Dock Hotel's tap room on nearby Albert Road.

She knew that storm clouds were appearing over the Solent. She heard the rumours that P&O was harbouring serious doubts about its commitment to Southampton. The company was eyeing Liverpool, with its growing cotton exports to India, and also London, which was drawing increasing volumes of trade. It was becoming harder for P&O to be competitive in Southampton after adding the time and cost of moving goods back and forth to London.

Widows were supposed to mourn for two years, but Mary Ann made a quick decision.

Just as she knew Southampton was in trouble, Mary Ann would have been aware of the opportunities awaiting the bold on the other side of the world. She heard that Hong Kong, with its endless supply of labour from China, was doing well enough to open more hotels and boarding houses, including the new luxury Hongkong Hotel.

With her enterprising nature, Mary Ann would likely have earned her passage to Hong Kong as a stewardess. P&O was crying out for skilled women to service its growing number of female passengers in first class and Mary Ann would have been a godsend.

The Suez Canal was under construction but would not open until November 1869, so Mary Ann had a choice of taking the Mediterranean route to Alexandria, going overland to Suez and taking a ship from there to the Far East – or she could take the more hazardous route around the Cape of Good Hope with its notoriously stormy weather.

If Mary Ann worked her passage, she could not take her son. She left Edwin with Jane, who was now pregnant, probably with the intention of bringing him out later.

Though steamships were safer than clippers, hazards were not uncommon. She might have left Southampton on the SS *Travancore* on September 13 or on the SS *Carnatic* on October 10, 1868. A year later,

the SS *Carnatic* ran aground on a coral reef in the Red Sea and broke up with the loss of 31 lives.

Mary Ann was also aware of the mysterious disease in Hong Kong that was killing many young soldiers in Happy Valley.

But, as she left from the same port as the Pilgrim Fathers when they set off for the New World in 1620, she sailed with hope and, to judge from what she would do, probably even had a business plan.