Part I
Making a Departure

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From Whampoa to Hong Kong

The story of caring for the social and spiritual welfare of western sailors, whose ships were temporarily in the Pearl River Delta waters that include Hong Kong, formally begins in either November or December 1822. Robert Morrison's own version, written quite close to the actual occasion, reads:[1]

> On Sunday, 10 November 1822, a Bethel flag, prepared by Mr Oliphant [sic], a pious American Gentleman of the Presbyterian Church at New York, was hoisted at Whampoa, at the mast-head of the ship *Pacific*, of Philadelphia, belonging to Mr Ralston, a veteran foreign Director of the London Missionary Society.[2]

A later version by Mrs Eliza Morrison written in around 1839, transcribing a letter from the good reverend two days after the above event and probably resulting in a copyist's or typesetter's muddle, places the event almost a month later on 8 December 1822.[3]

Just to muddy the waters comprehensively, in the first issue of the *Sailor's Magazine* published by the newly founded American Seamen's Friend Society in 1829, a letter from Robert Morrison states that the Bethel flag was hoisted in the year 1826.[4] Although it has been the later, 1826, date that has come down to us, the earlier, probably November, date is correct for the commencement of a mission to seafarers in the Pearl River Delta.

But however we date that first raising of the Bethel flag in our waters, that Robert Morrison was the prime mover of mission work

amongst seafarers in China is attested by the American Seamen's Friend Society's recollection in 1908 of the first 80 years' of its mission.[5] No doubt sailors had been reached out to before Robert Morrison first helped raise the Bethel flag, but no institutions existed that ensured their social and spiritual needs were cared for.

Western sailors were not in general allowed to go ashore in Canton, which meant that they could not attend the church services in the foreign factories. Runs ashore for recreation were strictly limited to once in the two or three months ships spent discharging and loading, and their results were often anarchic; drunkenness on *samshoo* featuring large.[6] Medical care was entirely dependent on whether a sick seaman's ship had an embarked doctor or if not, whether he had access to a ship that did have one. And for social and spiritual care, for the most part they had to shift for themselves. As Morrison put the matter in his brief "Proposal" of 1826,

> The assistance that sailors in China require, is medical attendance for many of them; and for all of them instruction concerning their duties as moral and religious beings.[7]

To meet those needs, after he got back to Britain in 1824, Morrison put together a book, *A Parting Memorial Consisting of Miscellaneous Discourses Written and Preached in China; at Singapore; on Board Ship at Sea, in the Indian Ocean; at the Cape of Good Hope; and in England* that was published two years later. In one of its articles he proposed a floating seaman's hospital and a floating seaman's church, explicitly linking them to the provision of similar facilities that were being planned in London.[8] Robert Morrison's "Proposal" can therefore quite reasonably be called the foundation document of a mission to seafarers in the Pearl River Delta area. It accordingly becomes by extension the founding document of the mission in Hong Kong, since all that it commends was in time instituted.

As our story unfolds we shall see that not long after the British annexed Hong Kong, the first establishment to be founded for the

care of seafarers, in September 1843, was a seamen's hospital, not floating as Morrison had suggested, but solidly built above the Wan Chai waterfront.[9] The second of the commended institutions for caring for the welfare of seafarers was established in 1865 and was a sailors' home.[10] The third, which came about in two phases, was St Peter's, the Seamen's Church. It was consecrated in 1873, but only received its first Missions to Seamen chaplain in 1885 and thus only at that point did it complete the third element of Morrison's hoped for institutional structure for meeting the material, moral, educational, and spiritual needs of seafarers.

It is interesting how the order in which the welfare of sailors was catered for in Hong Kong is an echo with variations of what took place in Whampoa. In Whampoa the first step was hoisting the Bethel flag aboard a host ship. Second came a seamen's hospital.[11] Last came a church and welfare establishment — a floating Bethel-cum-reading/relaxation room.

However, Morrison's "Proposal" can be seen as far more than a simple programme for caring for the welfare of seafarers, whether in Whampoa or in a newly founded, colonial Hong Kong. For in its fewer than four short pages, if unwittingly, Morrison effectively outlined not only what in his view the welfare of sailors demanded, but also revealed every problem, explicit and implicit, which the Mission to Seafarers has, one way or another, found itself having to come to terms with over the last 150 years.

One route to understanding this nexus of problems is to begin with the companion piece to the "Proposal". It is the next piece in the book and entitled "Tract, addressed to Sailors".[12] The sailors he addresses here are "the crews of those English and American ships" and he speaks at some length about the dangers of "the rascally Chinamen" and the various threats, both spiritual and physical, that plague the sailors. He goes on to argue in favour of a floating Bethel on the grounds that whilst looking after a sailor's health is an undoubted

good, the improvement of his mind is equally important. To that end, Morrison offers a single solution, namely the provision not of prayers, which might well be on offer aboard their own ships, but of general religious and moral instruction, the two in his mind being inseparable.

The function of a floating Bethel is therefore clear. With "sermons twice a day", it is to "…furnish the means of rational occupation, and of religious and moral instruction to as many of the seamen as chose to avail themselves of it…".

However, although it would appear to be the Scotsman Robert Morrison, who was the first mover of active mission work amongst visiting British and American seafarers in China, it was the Americans who took up the baton for the next 30 years.

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It was in 1829, two years after Robert Morrison had raised the Bethel flag for the second time, that the Reverend David Abeel arrived in Canton to establish the first formal seaman's mission on behalf of the American Seamen's Friend Society founded only a year previously in New York.[13] The history of the mission after David Abeel's departure for Southeast Asia in 1830 is poorly documented. We know that the Reverend Edwin Stevens, another American Seamen's Friend Society missionary, succeeded him two years later. What happened to seamen's mission work after the Reverend Stevens' departure from Canton is not clear. However, by the late 1830s devout Americans in the spirit of the Second Great Awakening, and British traders influenced by such Christian social reformers as the Clapham Sect, were an influential presence in Canton.[14] Piety and a concern for the ordinary seaman, though never before complete strangers in the western trading community in China, were in the ascendant.

One result was that on 3 January 1839 the first formal seamen's welfare — and in practice mission — society was founded in China. It called itself the Seamen's Friend Association in China. An announcement to this effect appeared in the *Sailors' Magazine* and full

details appeared in the *Chinese Repository*,[15] including the constitution of the new organization. The fuller report also indicated that the new organization had been established following the foundation of such homes in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, and Penang.

If the "parent" society was in Whampoa, based in American No. 2 Factory,[16] it nonetheless recognized the wider area in which western ships operated in Guangdong waters and established agencies in Macao and at Lintin. The third gathering of this protracted meeting then agreed a constitution, the first article of which stated explicitly that its object was "to promote the welfare of foreign seamen of all nations coming within the [sic] Chinese waters." Reading between the lines therefore, and given the leading role in this organization of the Reverend Elijah Coleman Bridgeman, who was not a seamen's chaplain, no one had followed Edwin Stevens and the seafarers' side of the China missions was being neglected, hence the initiative being taken by Bridgeman and the private merchants supporting him.[17] But the initiative was being taken at precisely the wrong moment. Within two months Commissioner Lin Zexu would arrive and his campaign to eradicate the opium trade would begin. In short order that would lead to war and by the time the guns finally fell silent, the annexation of Hong Kong by the British and the establishment of the five treaty ports would have founded a wholly different context for missions to western seamen.[18]

For the next six or seven years the record is silent until, in 1847–48, the American Seamen's Friend Society's mission in Whampoa was revived with the arrival of the Reverend George Loomis in the ship *Candace* from New York.[19] By 1849 he had raised the funds to have a floating Bethel built, at last fulfilling the plans that Robert Morrison had spelled out a generation previously. The new vessel, believed to be modelled on the chop boat that carried cargoes up and down the Pearl River and built locally in Whampoa, was launched on 7 February 1850.[20] It was moored at Whampoa the better to serve the western ships berthed there while discharging and loading. On 19 March it

was dedicated in a service taken by the Reverend Peter Parker and the Reverend Dr Legge, and attended by Sir John Davis and other worthies amongst western traders.[21]

The Reverend Loomis returned to America in late 1851 or early 1852. There was then either an interregnum or a new chaplain whose name has been lost, an interregnum being most likely.[22] The next chaplain whose name we know, the Reverend James Chaplin Beecher, only arrived in 1856. Under James Beecher the floating Bethel carried on its missionary work until 21 January 1857 when, during the Second Opium War, the position of a western missionary in Whampoa became untenable and he and his wife left for Hong Kong. Although a contemporary report claimed that Chinese forces had captured the Bethel, Beecher attested it was sunk by gunfire after he and Mrs Beecher had left for Hong Kong.[23]

With the Beechers' mission relocated to Hong Kong, a local shipyard built a new floating Bethel to replace the lost vessel. It is said to have stayed in Victoria Harbour, though we do not know where it was moored, until it returned to Whampoa in 1860 or, according to other reports, the winter of 1861. At least, that is one story.[24] In support of this view of things is a very clear affirmation of the existence of a floating Bethel in Hong Kong in 1859. This appears in *The Hong Kong Directory with List of Foreign Residents in China* for that year. Under the listings for "Hospitals and receiving ships at Hong Kong" is listed "Seamen's Chapel". The personnel of this beacon of hope are listed as Reverend Jas Beecher, Dr G. Brice, and C. Brunstedt.[25]

Backing up that version of events and what is evidently Beecher family and American Seamen's Friend Society lore, there is a naïve watercolour of the new Bethel, that from topographical clues would seem to be in Victoria Harbour.[26] Certainly the hills in the left background, and the trading junk and auxiliary steam vessel in the right background could suggest Victoria Harbour, although it is just as probably a generic Chinese coastal hill.

And yet despite what would appear to be the evidence, what

happened may have been quite different. For a story appeared in *The China Mail* on 15 March 1862 that casts considerable doubt on anecdote, directory, and image:[27]

> It may perhaps be in the recollection of our readers that the Floating Bethel at Whampoa was destroyed by the Chinese soldiers in January 1857. […] The claim upon the Chinese government for its destruction has recently been paid in full, and the Trustees of the Fund have purchased a hulk at Whampoa, which has been fitted up in a suitable manner for holding divine service, with adjoining rooms for the accommodation of the resident Chaplain. […] The Trustees have also engaged the services of the Reverend J. Griffith Schilling, one of the American missionaries, who will live on board, and take temporary charge of the Bethel in connection with his labours among the Chinese.

How do we explain this? The probability is that both accounts may be true. There may have been a Hong Kong-built floating Bethel that proved either short-lived or inadequate. One way or another, however, what this episode offers us is the first concrete, if ambiguous evidence of missionary activity exclusively for seafarers in Hong Kong.[28]

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Meantime in Britain there was a spreading movement to tend the spiritual needs of seafarers that dated back to the founding of the Naval and Military Bible Society in 1779.[29] There was not a lot of progress beyond the more or less energetic distribution of Bibles and other religious literature until the first decade of the 19th century and the emergence onto the scene of the "father" of the modern seamen's mission movement, George Charles "Boatswain" Smith (1782–1863), who wrote letters to Royal Navy sailors he heard were practising Christians and thus established a Naval Correspondence Mission.

These early stirrings prepared the way for what was to come next; the founding of the first missions to seamen in general, something that seems to have happened more or less simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. The first stirrings in America had been felt in New

York in 1816. A year later in Britain the first Bethel flag was hoisted on the brig *Zephyr* on the Thames; an inspiration for what some have styled a subsequent "Bethel Movement".[30] This was the beginning of a plethora of initiatives amounting to almost one or two every year in Britain and on the European continent, on both sides of the Atlantic and in Asia, from 1816 through until 1849. Most of them sprang from roots in Methodism, Presbyterianism, and other strictly Protestant denominations.[31]

Smith's own work carried on until his death in harness, though latterly to one side of a national seamen's mission following the collapse of his British and Foreign Seamen's Friend Society in 1845. What took up the running on its founding in 1833 was what Smith saw as a rival institution, the resolutely nondenominational British and Foreign Sailors' Society. Its approach to its mission work provided a model that was to have a partial echo in what happened in Hong Kong. For on the one hand, it vigorously continued the creation of specific seamen's churches in ports. On the other, it created a more lay-orientated, albeit Christian principled, locus for the "intellectual and social improvement" of seafarers. It was a "duel fuel" model of wide appeal.[32]

While all that was going on, the Anglican Church was, if slowly, also moving into the field.[33] Its first efforts had borne fruit with the founding of the Liverpool Mariners' Church Society in 1825. But the Anglican Church was the United Kingdom's established church with, amongst its hierarchy, a rather top-lofty attitude to "low church", potentially radical evangelism. This meant a more coordinated, nationwide approach to maritime mission was not taken. Much the same was still the case a decade or so later when, in 1835, the Reverend John Ashley began his pioneering work in Bristol, visiting sailors aboard their ships. Two years later he founded the Bristol Channel Mission following guidance from the archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1841 he had the cutter *Eirene* built specifically for this purpose. With that move, John Ashley had begun what is felt by

many to be a defining characteristic of what became the Missions to Seamen some 15 years later: the ship visit.[34] That is, the taking of the mission directly to the seamen on their ships afloat where they may be stuck, unable to come to a church or sailors' home ashore.

Due to ill health and faltering financial support, Ashley's mission ceased in 1850. However Ashley's influence had been great and within five years the Bristol Missions to Seamen was not only up and running, but was expanding its reach to the English Channel. Under the energetic leadership of William Kingston a national seamen's mission organization was rapidly forged. On 11 April 1856, the first all-embracing Anglican seamen's mission organization, The Mission to Seamen Afloat, at Home and Abroad was founded.[35] With that work done, Kingston resigned,[36] by which time he had recruited a full-time secretary, Reverend Theodore Augustus Walrond (c.1814–73) who, supported by a strongly Royal Naval committee, set about turning the promise of a coordinated, national mission to seamen into a fact.[37]

The key to the nature of the new body is to be found in that first, prolix version of the Mission's name — a mission to seamen afloat. Although as Kverndal reminds us, the Missions to Seamen was neither the first nor the only organization to stress the ship visit, it is this aspect of the organization's work that retains its importance to this day.[38] In 1858, at the behest of Kingston, when the new London society finally merged with its Bristol-based predecessor, the earlier organization's name was adopted as "shorter, more free and open…",[39] and three years later adopted the flying angel flag and symbol.[40]

Although to begin with the Missions to Seamen's efforts were mostly in British home waters, it soon stretched its wings. Chaplaincies overseas tended to follow where Bethel union societies had been established.[41] That many of these had been in ports of the seemingly ever-widening British Empire left it open whether the nondenominational British and Foreign Sailors' Society (BFSS) or the Missions to Seamen would gain a foothold in Hong Kong. Exactly why the former organization did not establish itself in Hong Kong instead

of its rival is not clear. The most likely explanation is probably that the non-Anglican BFSS had no patrons in early Hong Kong's commercial, ecclesiastical-cum-missionary, or government leadership. But whatever the reason, it was the Missions to Seamen that was to take the lead in mission work to seafarers in Hong Kong as of 1885.

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The reasons for Britain and Europe being the early locus of missionary effort are not hard to seek. A brief description of the most prominent of them will help establish what orientated mission work amongst seafarers in this formative period, what remained the key foci at the time the Mission to Seafarers sent its first chaplain to Hong Kong, and what remained a permanent but vital subtext to maritime mission work thereafter. All will help us understand the trajectory that the work of the Mission to Seafarers followed in Hong Kong in the subsequent decades.

Kverndal's helpful discussion neatly breaks the broader issue into a number of salient elements of the mid 19th century western sailor's lot that excited the compassion and interest of those concerned with his material and spiritual welfare. He points out that they lacked any means of self-improvement through education or recreation either when aboard ship and off watch or when their ship was in port. There was therefore a need for the provision of libraries and reading rooms to provide beneficial and "healthy" occupation for sailors whether ashore or afloat. There should be efforts to establish formalized seamen's educational institutions to improve literacy and numeracy, as well as professional knowledge and skills. There should be welfare initiatives to care for distressed and injured seamen, or for those otherwise down on their luck as well as for any dependents they may have, or may have left in need. And there should be much effort aimed at offering the seafarer ashore in port resorts other than "prostitution, intemperance, profanity, sabbath breaking" for his entertainment. From this sprang various initiatives we shall see recurring in the story of Hong Kong's mission.

In the western context there were also great efforts made to ameliorate the often-shocking systems of recruitment and service — if they can properly be so described — that prevailed. These included the notorious practice of "crimping",[42] but also touched on the conditions of life afloat — especially the extraordinary brutality of much shipboard discipline — and the lack of legal protection the sailor enjoyed. As much to the point,

> It is the only form of service stipulated to be rendered by a free man of full age, known to the common law, in which the employer, by his own act, can directly inflict a punishment on the employed, for neglect of duty or breach of obligation.[43]

The results in Britain were two kinds of institution with a more-or-less official third running in harness. On the one hand, there was the more or less secular, or at least lay, sailors' home that, even if run with "Christian discipline",[44] was not itself a religious institution, though one might be attached or nearby. On the other was the mariners' (or seamen's) church, afloat or ashore; a specifically targeted religious institution where the seaman of the (usually narrowly denominationally identified) Christian faith could worship or, if he did not belong to a church, could find religious instruction. Somewhat to one side, and initially a private enterprise endeavour that was first begun in the Scottish port of Leith, was a Seamen's Register Office, at which a sailor could register his particulars, and to which a ship's master or a shipowner could turn when looking for crew. This in turn was connected to a growing government involvement in the organization and regulation of shipping in British and British colonial waters emanating from the increasingly important work of the Board of Trade.[45]

The resulting missionary effort, precisely because in contemporary eyes it rested indivisibly in a broadly religious concern for spiritual enlightenment and nourishment conjoined to secular betterment (the one begat the other begat the one), inhered in it an essential tension

that we shall see being played out, sometimes prominent, sometimes dormant, in the story of the Mission to Seafarers in Hong Kong.