

Boris Pasco – 'one of the nameless ones'

Adapted from "The Dark World's Fire: Tom and Lena Edgar in War", December 20, 2012

Few readers of Hong Kong newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s would have expected Boris Pasco to play any part in the highly dangerous job of providing relief to Allied prisoners during WWII, let alone to have anything to do with the resistance. The news stories don't suggest a man willing to risk everything to help others and, after the Japanese invasion, as a 'third national', he could have stayed away from any activity that could be labelled 'pro-British' and thus spared himself the risk of imprisonment, torture and death. But, although the full story of his contribution during the occupation will probably never be known, enough is visible to suggest that when called upon to show his courage and his humanitarian commitment he responded magnificently.

Boris Pasco was a Russian bookseller. He first appears on the Jurors' List for 1921. The name of the shop is given as Brewer and Co.^[1] On October 25, 1922, he married Kathleen Josephine Harris at St. Joseph's Church. After a reception at the Hong Kong Hotel, the couple left for a honeymoon in Canton and Macao.^[2]

But according to his own account, his involvement with Brewer and Co. goes back to at least 1920: he claimed in court to have been a partner in that year, buying the business later on.^[3] In 1924, the company was accused of breaches of copyright by a 'rival' bookshop^[4] (Kelly and Walsh) and Mr. Brewer, who was either then or later became a barrister, represented the company in court and stated that he himself no longer sold books. In 1926, Brewer took his former company to court in a case that hinged on his continuing liabilities as a 'retiring partner', and two statements made at the trial established that he was involved with the firm until 1925, which was presumably the year Pasco bought him out.

The next time Pasco makes the news occurs in October 1928 when the Kowloon Football Club presents him with a chiming clock in oak with a silver plate attached to mark his long association with the club, and his services as a player of 'no mean merit'. The reason for the presentation is that an accident had brought his playing career to an end.^[5]

The next month, a Chinese 'public car driver' accused Pasco of striking him, something which he admitted, while cross-summoning the driver for behaving in a disorderly manner that might have led to a breach of the peace by abusing and spitting at him. Mr. Lindsell, presiding, adjourned the case for a week, in spite of Pasco's pleading that this was the busy season for him and that he'd gathered all his witnesses. Lindsell made his decision in the hope that the case might be settled out of court. Perhaps it was, as there was no further report in the press.^[6]

It seems that in late 1928, the bookshop was in Pedder Street, as that's the address given in the report.^[7] In the 1930 Jurors' List, Pasco is given as living 'on premises', although this was almost certainly a postal address.^[8] In the 1936 Jurors' List, he's given as living in Causeway Bay. It was on a journey in that part of Hong Kong that the incident that was to lead to his next appearance before Mr. Lindsell took place. This time his attendance in court was at his own instigation.

In July 1938, he sued the Tramway Company on behalf of his daughter, who'd been injured at about 8 pm on November 28, 1937, by an 'emergency stop' as she preparing to leave the tram with her father and mother. All three were thrown downstairs, Miss Pasco suffering

concussion.^[9] The driver claimed that Pasco himself did not fall down, as he'd claimed: rather he shouted at and hit him [the driver] in the chest and chased him from the first class compartment.^[10]

It seems like Pasco's attempt to win \$10,000 dollars in compensation might have been a last ditch effort to solve his financial problems, but it actually made them worse: the Pascos lost the case, and had to pay costs.^[11] Before 1938 had arrived, Pasco was filing for bankruptcy. Two creditors opposed his application and the resulting court case gives us a glimpse of his business affairs in the 1930s:

It seems that in 1931, Pasco bought exchange to the value of £2,500 and, when Britain went off the Gold Standard in May, he incurred losses of \$15,000. The *China Mail* report makes it sound like financial speculation, but that the *Hong Kong Daily Press* suggests that Pasco chose an unlucky moment to finance a large book order. To pay off his debt to the Chase Bank, he had to borrow money, which was lent on the condition that Brewer's Bookshop become a limited concern.^[12] Pasco was appointed manager but his salary was gradually decreased and he was dismissed on December 31, 1934. He was unemployed for three months and then became manager of Harris's bookshop, which was set up by his wife, using capital obtained from her mother. He was accused of withholding details of debts from John Dickinson and Co, who had lent him the money to pay off the Chase Bank, and even of having taken books from Brewer's to stock Harris's, which he denied. Mr. Justice Liddell, who'd tried to get his assault case settled out of court and later found against him in the Tramways suit, refused to make the bankruptcy order, which had been opposed by Mr. Hong Sling and Mr. Tobias, a former partner of Pasco.^[13] Both these men said they had lost money as a result of guaranteeing loans for the would-be bankrupt who, it was claimed, in 1933 had begged Hong Sling with tears in his eyes to save his business.^[14]

The *Hong Kong Daily Press* put the story on its front page, and led off by detailing the 'serious allegations' made against Pasco – 'not only of fraud, or of misconduct amounting to fraud, but that he had been guilty of criminal actions in obtaining property and money by false pretences'.^[15] Pasco denied these charges, but he did admit in the witness box that he'd concealed liabilities while obtaining the Dickinson loan. The representatives of the two men opposing the grant of bankruptcy attempted to make Pasco sound thoroughly dishonest and self-serving, a man 'who had been living in the past five years on creditors'. Evidence and debate focused on Pasco's cars, his lunching habits and his enjoyment of the best seats at the cinema. Whatever the truth of the matter, Mr. Lindsell refused his bankruptcy application, although Pasco could console himself with the fact that although criminal actions had been alleged, no charges were brought.

We must, of course, remember that no one appears at their best when judged by newspaper accounts of their court appearances alone. Whatever the truth, war has the potential to change everything and everybody, and Pasco was to be drawn into relief work by one of the greatest figures of the Hong Kong conflict, the Japanese interpreter, Kiyoshi Watanabe.

The Rev. Watanabe – he was a Lutheran pastor who had trained in the US – came to Hong Kong to work for the occupation forces in February 1942^[16] and was still present at the surrender. He carried out countless acts of highly dangerous humanitarian smuggling and other relief work on behalf of the defeated, without ever for one moment betraying the interests of his country.

According to Watanabe's biographer, Liam Nolan, the Japanese took over the Gloucester Hotel during the occupation, so Pasco was forced to move his business to nearby Ice House Street.^[17] Mr. Pasco, although naturally wary at first, gradually came to trust the Rev. Watanabe ('Uncle John') and accept him as a friend.^[18] When the interpreter wanted to help sending parcels to Canadian soldiers in Bowen Road Hospital, he turned to the bookseller. Watanabe asked him to get his friends to send parcels to men on a list he provided:

Pasco was hesitant at first. Could this not be a trick, subtly led up to, to land him and his family and friends into the hands of the Kempeitai? Perhaps this Watanabe was a cunning agent of the secret police.^[19]

As should be evident, Nolan's narrative is presented in semi-fictional form, but it seems to be basically accurate, and I suspect it is based on contact by letter with Pasco after he (Nolan) had met Watanabe in London in 1960 and decided to write a book. The account continues with Pasco deciding to trust the Japanese interpreter and arranging for everyone on his list to receive a parcel.^[20] Nolan goes on to mention a Sunday morning visit to the bookshop^[21] and describes an important occasion on which Watanabe goes to Ice House Street on 'business':

While he was in Pasco's shop, a Chinese girl came in. Pasco called her over and introduced her to Uncle John.

'This is Miss Helen Ho,' Pasco said. 'She is one of the – eh – nameless ones who have been helping.'^[22]

I think the two recorded visits, one for 'business', suggest that Pasco continued to help Watanabe in his humanitarian activities, and the form of his introduction to Helen Ho leads to the almost inevitable conclusion that he was himself 'one of the nameless ones'. This meeting took place after the arrest of Dr. Selwyn-Clarke, the organiser of much of the legal and illegal relief activity in occupied Hong Kong, on May 2, 1943. Helen Ho was one of the two 'Chinese ladies whom I knew that [if arrested] I could trust to carry on [my work] at any sacrifice'.^[23] It seems that as well as whatever work he continued to do with Rev. Watanabe, Pasco was helping Helen Ho to carry on Selwyn-Clarke's campaign. Of the three who met in the shop in Ice House Street that morning, only Watanabe would avoid arrest (in Helen Ho's case, on more than one occasion). Pasco was taken by the Kempeitai in the course of their crackdown on the resistance, which reached its height in the spring of 1943.

According to a report that reached the British Army Aid Group (BAAG), Pasco was arrested and taken to the Kempeitai Headquarters at the Supreme Court at about the same time as the Jesuit Fathers Joy and Casey, the Canadian Thomas Monaghan, and the British banker David Edmondston.^[24] He was taken in because he was suspected of allowing his bookshop to be used as a meeting place for Charles Hyde, Chester Bennett, Marcus da Silva and other BAAG agents. On preliminary questioning, the Japanese could not find anything to substantiate this charge and he was released about a fortnight after being sent to Stanley Prison. When the BAAG's informant left Hong Kong in October 1943, Pasco was back at his bookshop.^[25]

This is American journalist Hal Boyle's account of Marcus da Silva's and Chester Bennett's work:

Da Silva would collect the money [raised illegally to provide relief for Stanley Camp] and put it in a small basket swinging from his arm – [figure illegible - perhaps 40,] to 50,000 dollars

at a time – and walk boldly past Jap [sic] soldiers to a bookstore around the corner. Bennett would be waiting in the rear of the bookstore. He would take the money to another rendezvous and they'd smuggle it into Stanley by putting it in the bottom of lard cans. This went on for several months. They got hundreds of thousands of yen in to helpless internees – money that was translated into food and kept them going.^[26]

During the war, Marcus da Silva lived at 11 Ice House Street^[27] and he was using that as his professional address in 1941.^[28] I strongly suspect that Pasco's was the bookshop that is referred to in Boyle's account, and that the owner, as well as his relief work, gave at least this much help to the resistance.

Pasco's last appearance in the Hong Kong press is as a witness in the trial of Mohammed Yusuf Shah, a former policeman charged with collaboration. Shah had indeed worked for the Kempeitai – like everyone else in occupied Hong Kong he had few choices as to how to earn a living – and been present at the arrest of Dr. Selwyn-Clarke. However, his trial in 1947 provided ample proof that he'd used his position to render great aid to those being held at the Supreme Court. Frederick Tyndall, one of many witnesses in Shah's favour, said he saw the accused helping people, including Pasco. Pasco himself said that Shah had helped many prisoners, including Chinese ones, without thought of reward, by bringing in and out messages and smuggling in food and medicines. He added that he often saw the policeman on the street after his release and was given warnings of impending trouble.^[29] In spite of this, and much similar testimony, Shah was given the shocking sentence of seven years hard labour.

That's all I've found out so far about Boris Pasco. He died aged 65 on March, 8, 1966 and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery, Happy Valley. Perhaps this lifetime bookseller was able to hold in his hands Liam Nolan's book on Kiyoshi Watanabe, which was published in the year he died - the only one to give a hint of his own service in the dark world's fire of occupied Hong Kong.

[1] <http://gwulo.com/node/8575>

[2] China Mail, October 26, 1922, page 8.

[3] China Mail, December 8, 1938, page 12.

[4] The headline is "Rival Book Shops", but it seems that Kelly and Walsh were a Shanghai-based publishing company at the time – <http://gwulo.com/node/9606>

[5] Hongkong Telegraph, October 13, 1928, page 12.

[6] China Mail, November 21, 1928, page 1.

[7] China Mail, November 28, page 1.

[8] <http://gwulo.com/node/8575>

[9] China Mail, July 5, 1938, page 4.

[10] China Mail, July 6, 1938, page 4.

[11] China Mail, July 14, 1938, page 6. A week or so before the accident Miss Pasco had been praised by the Hong Kong Sunday Herald for a brilliant display in goal on the hockey pitch – November 20, 1938, page 19.

[12] China Mail, December 8, 1938, page 12.

[13] China Mail, December 8, 1938, page 12 (mis-numbered 16 in index).

[14] Hongkong Daily Press, December 9, 1938, page 9.

[15] Hongkong Daily Press, December 9, 1938, page 1.

[16] Liam Nolan, Small Man of Nanataki, 1966, page 21.

[17] Nolan, page 84.

[18] Nolan, pages 84-85.

[19] Nolan, page 85.

- [20] Nolan, page 86.
- [21] Nolan, page 103.
- [22] Nolan, page 106.
- [23] Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke, *Footprints*, 1975, page 83. The other was Dr. Po-chuen Lai, and both she and Helen Ho were awarded the OBE after the war.
- [24] Ride Papers, KWIZ 41/4.
- [25] Ride Papers, KWIZ, 41/4/ continued.
- [26] <http://newspaperarchive.com/indiana-evening-gazette/1946-01-30/page-9/>
- [27] China Mail, March 8, 1946, page 1.
- [28] <http://hkgro.lib.hku.hk/archive/files/76661aadea0d989d2b932e0edaf81c33.pdf>
- [29] China Mail, February 26, 1947, page 3.