

Rewi Alley

An Autobiography

GUNG HO

"Working Together"

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REWI ALLEY

AN

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路易·艾黎自传

作 者 (新西兰) 艾黎 (Alley, R.)

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PREFACE

Huang Hua

It is a great honor for me to write a preface for the new, PFS (China Society for People's Friendship Studies) 50-book series under the general title of *Light on China*. All these books were written in English by journalistic and other eyewitnesses of the events described. I have read many of them over the seven decades since my student days at Yenching University. With some of the outstanding authors in this series I have ties of personal friendship, mutual regard, and warm memories dating from before the Chinese people's Liberation in 1949.

Looking back and forward, I am convinced that China is pursuing the right course in building a strong and prosperous country in a rapidly changing world with its complex and sometimes volatile developments.

The books in this series cover a span of some 150 years, from the mid 19th to the early 21st century. The numerous events in China, the sufferings and struggles of the Chinese people, their history and culture, and their dreams and aspirations were written by

foreign observers animated by the spirit of friendship, equality and cooperation. Owing to copyright matters and other difficulties, not all eligible books have as yet been included.

The founder of the first Chinese republic, Dr. Sun Yat-sen wrote in his Testament in 1925, "For forty years I have devoted myself to the cause of the people's revolution with but one end in view: the elevation of China to a position of freedom and equality among the nations. My experiences during those forty years have convinced me that to attain this goal we must bring about an awakening of our own people and ally ourselves in common struggle with those people of the world who regard us as equals."

Chairman Mao Zedong declared, at the triumphal founding of the People's Republic in 1949, "The Chinese people have stood up." Today, having passed its 53rd anniversary, we see the vast forward strides that have been taken, and note that many more remain to be made.

Many foreign observers have traced and reported the real historical movement of modern China, that is: from humiliation — through struggle — to victory. Seeking understanding and friendship with the Chinese people, their insight and perspective were in basic harmony with the real developments in China. But there have been others who viewed China and the Chinese people through glasses tinted by hostile prejudice or ignorance and have invariably made irrelevant observations that could not stand the test of time. This needs to be better understood by young people and students, at home and abroad. The PFS series *Light on China* can help them gain an overview of what went before, is happening now, and will

emerge in the future.

Young students in China can additionally benefit from these works by seeing how foreign journalists and authors use fluent English to record and present historical, philosophical, and socio-political issues and choices in China. For millions of students in China, English has become a compulsory second language. These texts will also have many-sided usefulness in conveying knowledge of our country to other peoples.

Students abroad, on their part, may be helped by the example of warm, direct accounts and impressions of China presented by their elders in the language that most readily reaches them.

Above all, this timely and needed series should help build bridges of friendship and mutual understanding. Good books long out of print will be brought back to strengthen the edifice.

My hearty thanks and congratulations go first to ex-Premier Zhu Rongji, who has been an effective supporter of this new, PFS series. They go to all engaged in this worthy project, the Foreign Languages Press, our China Society for People's Friendship Studies, and others who have given their efforts and cooperation.

Chairman Mao Zedong has written: "So many deeds cry out to be done, and always urgently. The world rolls on, time presses. Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour."

The hour has come for making these books available to young people in China and abroad whose destiny is to build a better world together. Let this series add a small brick to that structure.

Beijing, Autumn 2003

PREFACE

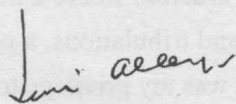
It was on the eve of my departure for Beidaihe in the summer of 1982 that the ever helpful Lu Wanru of the Friendship Association suggested I take some time off during my holidays to bring my biographical record up-to-date and to make it as correct as possible, this was seemingly necessary because of other press reportage. Although not very enthusiastic about the project, I dutifully filled up quite a few blank tapes. The office typed them out, so that Lu Wanru could itemise them in chronological order. Wang Xiaobo helped edit the manuscript, which set out the main points but avoided unnecessary details. Completed chapters were then passed on to me for any necessary revisions. It is my hope that the story will carry with it some of my faith in the Chinese people and their role in the world of today and of tomorrow.

For the past fifty-nine years I have watched the efforts of the Chinese people to throw off their shackles, stand up and order their own destiny, ever fighting their way through. I knew little when I first arrived from New Zealand, but I have since come to learn something of the greatness of the Chinese civilization and of its potential for the future. I realized, China was a crucible where a new kind of people was being forged through ten thousand tribulations, a people who could build up a strong organized country. It was my privilege to have close contact with the working folk, to live with them and join in their struggle. It has been my hope, too, to help unleash the

creativeness held down for so long. In trying to do my best, I have been grateful for the understanding and comradeship of those whose opinions and character I valued most.

One of the most satisfying period of my life was certainly that spent among the peasant youth at Shandan in Gansu Province. China has an immense treasure in its vast hinterland, especially in the North west. There can be found the huge army of builders needed for development work, exploiting its natural resources, improving communications and particularly overcoming land erosion, desertification and flood, that are basic to modernization. Chinese youth, both urban and rural, compare well with the best in the world. I am confident that as the way opens out in front of them, they will take on their responsibilities in the spirit of the Long March whose victory brought about such tremendous changes. If a young man can so work that at the end of his life he can look back and truthfully say: "Because of me, two blades of grass grow where but one grew before!" then he has succeeded.

As modernization moves forward, a whole mass of new problems present themselves. In the age of the micro-chip, to hold to the basic needs of a billion people and to be one with a changing world, rendering each change to be one for the better, means much to China, now a bulwark of peace in Asia and the world. In this connection to forge people's friendship between this quarter of mankind and the other three quarters is indeed a challenging cause. I feel privileged to be one of the earliest bridge-builders of friendship between New Zealand — my homeland, and China — the land I have made my working home. As one who has travelled so often across the country, and has lived and worked in both the old society and the new, I find close ties with advancing China, ever grateful to have been able to share in its grand endeavour.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jim Allen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Beijing, September 1986

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I

MY EARLY YEARS

I Was Fortunate in My Parents

People owe a good deal to their parents and to their early formative years. I was certainly fortunate with my parents. My father, Frederick James Alley, was a schoolmaster. The son of an early Irish immigrant to New Zealand, he grew up the hard way and became a pupil-teacher at the age of fourteen, when there were not many teachers there. Later he was made the headmaster of the four-teacher Amberley District High School. After forty years of service he was only fifty-four, so he could retire and produce the pamphlets he wished to write, and try to educate people about the necessity for a new division of land, changes in education and other social problems. He passed judgement on the school system, advocating more storytelling and discussion, and more outdoor lessons on nature. He was conscious of the land problems in New Zealand, that had arisen by the 1900s, and found an answer in state-owned industrial farm units, which was a pretty progressive idea for his day. He was a great believer in social progress, a socialist before his time. He had been brought up to respect the church but he threw it over and adopted the Unitarian position in religion. He did not allow his children to go to Sunday school, because, as he explained, he did not want them to have beliefs forced upon them before they were able to make decisions for themselves or understand their own lives. "I believe there is a universal god

that orders life and evolution, but I do not believe in Christ as a physical son of God, only as a great leader of mankind. I love to go to church to sing and listen to the beautiful poetry of the service but cannot say the creed, although I believe in Christ's teachings."

My mother, Clara Maria Buckingham, was a woman of great ability, balanced and thoughtful. She was from a Norfolk family in England, which emigrated to New Zealand in 1884. When my father met and married her, she was a governess in a Canterbury farm family. She was also one of the group of women who fought for and obtained women's suffrage in the early days in New Zealand. New Zealand in 1893 was the first country in the world to approve women's suffrage. In those days, the purpose of the agitation by women was to use the vote against the spread of liquor and other social evils. She was a very wide reader, and went to the library of Christchurch once a week, coming back with a pile of magazines and books. She was very efficient in looking after our home, and loved flowers, roses especially. I dug a rose garden for her on one of my trips home and she enjoyed that. She loved ducks, bees, roses, cats, tramps and all kids.

On my short visit home in 1937, she was already old, but still had a household of youngsters around, for my elder sister and younger brothers had gone abroad and had left their children with her. She would sit in her armchair beside the big open fire reading until the children raced in naked after their bath, and crowded around the blaze, which threw a ruddy light over their bodies. She would look over the top of her spectacles at them, a smile of satisfaction deepening on her face as she saw them in all their beauty. She was a woman ahead of her time, always as young and progressive as the youngest. She had a breadth of understanding of international issues remarkable in our New Zealand society. As I got into one or another tough situation, I would think of her smile — her way of turning a thing until the funny side came up — and then laugh. She was intensely practical, with a great belief in the future of mankind — a truly wonderful person in every way. She was a part of me. I would have told her anything she asked, but she was not inquisitive. To have such a mother was my great good fortune.

Memories from Childhood

I was born December 2, 1897, at Springfield, about sixty-five kilometres west of Christchurch on the Canterbury plains, the third in the seven-child family. My mother never wanted to have so many children, but Dad was the wife-possessive kind of man of the old style that allowed the woman no say. My big brother Eric was five years older than I, and Gwen, the first girl in the family, was three years older. I was only one month old when the family moved from Springfield to Amberley. Miss Pengelly, a young woman, helped Mother with the children. She really dominated our lives in those early years. She had lived in Springfield, from which village her father had gone into town one Saturday and never returned. Perhaps he left to seek a fortune in the United States. So she had decided early in life that "all men are pigs, using women for their pleasure." "Pen," as we called her, grew up to be a woman who could excuse no error and pass over no fault, however trivial. A loyal family friend, she had charge while Mother was busy with the baby or visitors.

My name, Rewi, was chosen by Aunt Amy — my father's sister — after a Maori chief, Rewi Maniapoto, who was a legend for his role in resisting the British forces during the Maori land wars of the 1860s. According to my father, Aunt Amy was "too good for anyone" so had never married, although she loved children. Mother therefore suggested that she might like to choose a name for the new baby. So I, a little blonde Anglo-Saxon, was given a Maori name.

As I moved out of babyhood, I became a playmate of Eric and Gwen, though Eric did not like me tagging along when they had a special game on. To get rid of me, Eric might say, "Let's play Stoics." This meant torture, to see how much pain we could bear. Gwen recalled how I would shout and she tried to explain to Eric that this was how I learned, but he wouldn't listen, and I would wander away to make up my own games, or to talk to trees and stones. Eric did not like that either. "You must stop that talking to yourself," he said,

“or I will spank you!”

When I was a small boy of four I got hold of a hammer and nails and started to hammer holes into the tank in which we kept rainwater. We had summer droughts quite often in North Canterbury and rainwater was the only house water supply. Each house would have a couple of big tanks in which was collected rainwater. The tanks were a bit old. It was not so difficult for me to hammer holes through the metal. The sight of the water spurting out seemed to amuse me very much indeed. So I made more and more holes until the family all came rushing out with pieces of wood and cotton wool to plug the holes. Suddenly I realized something was going to happen to me. I went across the back lawn under the trees as they were all working, shouting, “I don’t care. I don’t care.” That slogan has been a great use to me in my life. If I found myself in an unpleasant situation, perhaps a health problem such as a terrible toothache or being in a truck accident in later Gung Ho days, I would simply say, “I don’t care.” Just let it be. It is not a good slogan. I would not advise anyone to use it. But it certainly helped me in various tough spots of my life to simply say, “Well, if that’s it, I don’t care.”

Amberley was a small country town of about 250 people some 40 kilometres north of Christchurch. Our house was in Church Street, which branched off from the centre of the township and was lined with marcocarpa hedges and willow trees. It had deep ruts made by tracks and the horses’ feet, but was never hot and dusty. Our little Dock Creek crossed it three times as it meandered through the school playground, our garden, then the vicarage and the doctor’s grounds, and under wooden bridges or concrete culverts. It became a torrent in stormy seasons, raging between its high banks, but a quiet little brook bubbling over stones during summer and autumn, a home for bullies, tadpoles and sometimes even freshwater crayfish. It was where we played.

Amberley remains in my mind as a wonderful place, with my father away on Saturdays to attend lectures at Canterbury College, and the Kowhai riverbed to play in during summer. Perhaps there was more water then, for it seems broad in memory. There was the swimming hole where Dad took us on Sundays. It was just a bit of a back pool, but good enough for the three of us to play