

O'Regan, J. P. (2009). Hercules George Robert Robinson, first Baron Rosmead, P.C., G.C.M.G. (1824-1897). *Friends of Brompton Cemetery Newsletter*, 32, 14-19.

Hercules George Robert Robinson, first Baron Rosmead, P.C., G.C.M.G. (1824-1897)

By John O'Regan

If you take a stroll along the path adjacent to the east wall, leaving the South Lodge behind you, after about 200 yards you will come to a headstone which is marked 'OSMEA', followed by the names 'NEA', 'NEVA' and 'NELLIE'. Set before this is a handsomely cut granite slab incised further with the names of the family members who are interred beneath. The grave is directly under marker 1550 on the east wall. Closer inspection of the headstone reveals that the letters 'R' and 'D' have fallen away and that the name should read 'ROSMEAD'. Pause for a moment, because you have found the family grave of Sir Hercules Robinson (1824-1897), as in life he was most well known. In the nineteenth century Robinson was one of the British Imperial Government's more illustrious colonial administrators. He was the youngest Governor of Hong Kong (1859-65), and followed this with governorships of Ceylon (1865-72), New South Wales (1872-79) and New Zealand (1879-80). While in New South Wales he also temporarily took the role of Governor of Fiji (1874-75) and oversaw the cession of these islands to Britain. In 1880 he took up the dual and complex functions of Governor of the Cape and High Commissioner of South Africa. If that were not enough, during the next nine years he was also variously President of the Royal Commission for the settlement of the Affairs of the Transvaal (1881) and Governor of Bechuanaland (1885). He resigned office in 1889 and settled in London, but his efforts finally to enjoy life in the Imperial homeland were interrupted in 1895 when at the behest of Lord Rosebury's Cabinet he agreed to return to South Africa to deal with the mounting British 'Uitlander' crisis in the Transvaal, and which despite his best efforts would eventually explode into the second Boer War (1899-1902). In recognition of his efforts he was raised to the peerage in 1896. Already a septuagenarian, and not in the best of health, he felt obliged to step down in April 1897. In the meantime the situation in South Africa moved steadily towards war. Robinson did not live to witness the denouement. Back in London his ill health overtook him and he died at his home in Prince's Gardens on 28 October.

Hercules Robinson was of Irish descent, being born in Rosmead in the County of Westmeath in 1824. His father, after whom he was named, was an Admiral in the navy. Robinson was educated in England and passed through Sandhurst, taking up a commission with the 86th Regiment. He held this for three years before resigning and accepting government appointments under the Irish Commissioners of Public Works and the Poor Law Board, and in 1846 assisted in the distribution of emergency relief during the Irish famine. He married Nea Arthur Ada Rose d'Amour the same year, the daughter of the Irish peer the 10th Viscount Valentia. In 1854, at the age of 30, Robinson secured the appointment of President of Montserrat in the West Indies, and the following year became the Lieutenant-Governor of St. Christopher and Governor-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands. He spent the next 35 years in almost continual service overseas. Certainly, by the end of his life Robinson and his wife had spent more time in the furthest outposts of the Empire than they had in the isles in which they had been born.

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There is a good deal which is interesting about Robinson the man, apart from the fact of his varied career. He came to the governorship of Hong Kong at a time of great political turmoil as well as historic moment for the colony, and with a sound reputation as a skilled administrator. He was accompanied by his wife Nea and his nine-year-old daughter Nea Eva ('Neva'). Robinson inherited an administration in a state of war with itself – if he had wandered into a nest of vipers, he could have done no worse. He also had to contend with a restless local populace containing Chinese Imperial fifth columnists who were deeply resentful of the British presence in China, an emotion exacerbated by Britain's ongoing conduct of the Second Anglo-Chinese War of 1856-60. Within the administration writs were flying between senior officials, corruption was rife and scandalous rumour abounded. Amongst the foreign population the malevolent effects of a mass poisoning of the colony's bread supply in 1857 were still being felt amongst those who had dined on the loaves. These had been purposely adulterated with arsenic on the more or less correct assumption that only the 'foreign devils' ate bread. Hundreds of foreigners duly fell ill, and several died. Amongst those fatally affected was Lady Bowring, the wife of Robinson's predecessor as Governor, Sir John Bowring.

Robinson brought great skill to a reform of the administration, weeding out the recalcitrant elements and neutralising them. He made inroads against corruption by means of the enlightened conclusion that an effective administration required a well-trained, Cantonese-competent and properly remunerated staff. The civil service cadet scheme which he introduced to the colony survived into the 1960s. On the local front Robinson made himself popular with the Chinese by seeking out their views and by seeing to it that his were understood. For example, the *Government Gazette*, which published government ordinances and official notifications, was henceforth published in Chinese as well as English with an accurate translation.

The second war with China was concluded by means of the Convention of Peking in October 1860, which finally ratified the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin. The Convention had a significant effect on Hong Kong by geographically expanding its territory across the water to the promontory of land known as Tsim Sha Tsui on the Chinese mainland. A shoppers paradise today, it was a site for weekend cricket matches prior to its acquisition. It is not often appreciated that Hong Kong developed in three distinct stages. Following the Opium War of 1839-41 Britain had first acquired Hong Kong Island, and by the Convention of Peking it gained Tsim Sha Tsui. It was not until 1898 that Hong Kong as it is now known came into being when the area known as the 'New Territories' was leased from China for ninety-nine years. This further extension took in the whole of mainland Kowloon, of which Tsim Sha Tsui was a part, and more than 200 outlying islands. Robinson was therefore the Governor who oversaw the intermediate stage of the expansion of the colony to the Chinese mainland proper. The army had coveted Tsim Sha Tsui for barracks and training grounds, but Robinson resisted their attempts to turn the area into a military cantonment and insisted that a good portion of the newly-acquired territory be put to public use – an argument on which he won the day. The Imperial authorities in Britain were suitably

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impressed with Robinson's administrative zeal and vigour, and saw fit to promote him next to the post of Governor of Ceylon – a greater colonial jewel than ever the fledgling Hong Kong was at the time. From here he went to New South Wales, his happiest posting, and thence twice to South Africa, probably his most difficult. In each of these places he made his mark, and there are streets and buildings to be found in these places which still bear his name.

Robinson's experience of colonial administration was to be sorely tested in South Africa, which at the time of his first taking office in 1880 consisted of four semi-autonomous regions: The Cape Colony, Natal, Transvaal and The Orange Free State. Relations between the Boers and the British were fractious in the extreme and within months of arriving Robinson was faced by a declaration of independence in the Transvaal, where the Boers declared their own republic. Thus began the first Boer War (1880-81) in which the overconfident British were outmanoeuvred and defeated in three successive battles, most humiliatingly at Majuba Hill in February, 1881. Despite the Boer victory, and the antagonism of British Uitlanders towards a deal, the war ended in a negotiated settlement due in large part to the skill and tenacity of Robinson, who led the British side. During the next nine years Robinson held in check the often excessive anti-Dutch sentiments of the British Cape community and kept the peace with the Boers. He also encouraged the efforts of Cecil Rhodes to establish a conciliatory political union of the Boers and the Uitlanders under the dominion of the British Empire, seeing this as being the only legitimate ground for Imperial expansion. He did so in the face of often bitter opposition from his own side. Nevertheless, by the time of his departure in 1889 progress had been made. The Boers and the British were cooperating and the Empire in this part of the world seemed more secure.

It was Robinson's ability to bring order to even the most intractable situations which earned him a recall in 1895 when it appeared that the Transvaal was again about to erupt. But on this occasion it was not the Boers, but the Uitlanders who were to be the source of the convulsion. Impatient with their lot, and resentful of the Boer's apparent ascendancy, a determined group of 400-500 men under the leadership of a British doctor, Leander Starr Jameson, crossed from Bechuanaland into the Transvaal with the intent of fomenting a Uitlander uprising. The group aimed to march through to Johannesburg, but were quickly surrounded by the Transvaal Boers and forced to surrender. The Jameson raid was unexpected, but Robinson found himself facing Boer accusations that he was party to the plan, while his British detractors complained that had he taken a firmer stand, the Uitlanders' grievances could have been met and the Jameson debacle avoided. The Imperial government was placed in a bad light as a result of the ensuing controversy and Robinson was forced to bear the brunt of the recriminations. His response, having denounced Jameson, was to put even greater efforts into his policy of conciliation. But his health was not with him and in the spring of 1897 he was obliged to ask for permission to return home. The experience cast a pall over the twilight of his career and must have been painful to him.

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He lived only a few more months, dying between 8 and 9 o'clock in the evening on 28 October, 1897, at his London residence. His funeral took place at the All Saints' Church in Ennismore Gardens and a procession of suitably grand Victorian proportions attended him to the Brompton. The hearse was festooned with flowers, amongst them a wreath in the shape of an anchor with the words, 'From the Cape of Good Hope. In memory of Lord Rosmead. Twice her Governor'. The choice of the anchor, being a symbol of hope, was most apposite in the circumstances. The flowers of his close relatives were interred with him, the rest being placed upon the grave. Robinson's tomb is surprisingly modest and carries no mention of him beyond his name. Poignant is the fact that he and Nea outlived two of their children, Neva (1850-69) and Nellie (1858-93), so that theirs are the last names to be recorded upon it.

The grave has seen better days. What was probably a cross has been reduced to a stump, its remnants lying in broken ruin on the ground. The slab on the other hand is of the highest order, and wonderfully inscribed in an eternal font. The spot was totally obscured by ivy for many years, but has recently been the object of a concerted project of clearance such that the inscription can now be admired and the Robinson family names read and remembered. Nea's inscription was the last to be added, and this itself is also an object of beauty being in the form of a brass plate, lovingly inscribed. It is a cliché that behind every great man there is great woman, but in Robinson's case the description fits. E. J. Eitel, Hong Kong senior civil servant, Robinson contemporary, and the colony's first historian, wrote in 1895 that, 'Lady Robinson exercised in private society a most extensive and beneficial influence which went a long way to atone for the Governor's social shortcomings'. Robinson in his official capacity could appear obstinate, pedantic and aloof, although away from the pressures of office he seems to have been an affable and loving husband and father. Having accompanied him in all his peregrinations overseas and seen him to his grave, Nea died in 1904, aged 80. Lord and Lady Rosmead were survived by their son, Hercules Arthur Robinson, who was born in 1856. A lieutenant in the Royal Irish Fusiliers, he succeeded to the title upon his father's death.