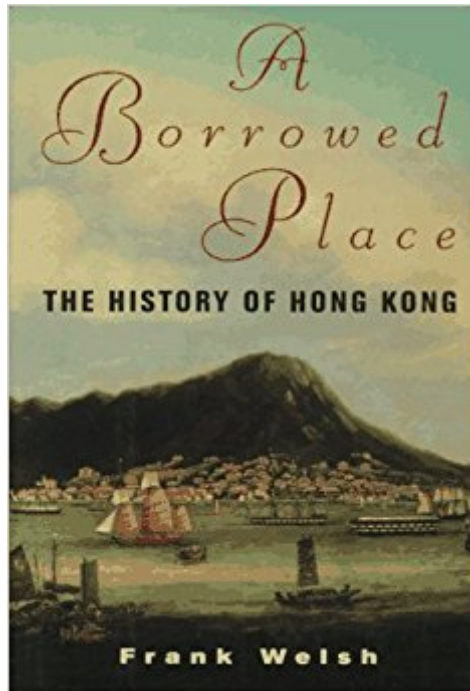




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# A Borrowed Place: The History Of Hong Kong



## Synopsis

A sweeping history of Hong Kong, Britain's last colony, documents court intrigues of London and Peking, the heyday of the British Empire, economic development, its role as a refuge from mainland Chinese communism, and the 1997 return to Chinese sovereignty.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this deeply researched but sterile history of the British crown colony, Welsh describes how Hong Kong became a trading and commercial center after its inception during the 1839-1842 Opium War and gives a straightforward account of the British entrepreneurs and their accumulation of wealth. The narrative is focused almost entirely on British rather than Chinese interests. Welsh chronicles periodic scandals involving the opium trade, prostitution, gambling and corruption that often led to quarrels between colonial governors, civil servants, government departments and the community. He describes conditions in the colony during the WW II Japanese military occupation and the postwar effect of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the 1989 massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Welsh predicts that the handover of Hong Kong to Beijing in 1997 will be accomplished without a serious hitch. "To any British government," he concludes, "Hong Kong will remain a peripheral concern." A former international banker, Welsh is the author of *Building a Trireme*. Photos. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Scholarly, understated, massive history of the Crown Colony, from Britisher and former international banker Welsh. Hong Kong has been a source of embarrassment to both Britain and China from the

outset. British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston sacked the envoy who negotiated the island's cession- -and, ever since, the colony has irritated Whitehall with scandals over drugs, prostitution, corruption, and, now, this dreary hand- over business. On China's end, it's the principle of the thing, a scar symbolic of a great wound. Here, Welsh covers events large and small. In 1854, he tells us, Hong Kong Governor Sir John Bowring precipitated a second Anglo-Chinese war, and, through his efforts, China was opened up to European travelers, missionaries, and traders. In 1894, plague struck, causing Governor Sir William Robinson to observe that the Chinese died ``like sheep," since they were ``educated to unsanitary habits...accustomed from infancy to herd together"--but Hong Kong survived to see the British accept a 99-year lease in 1898. The 1960's were the golden years of economic freedom, but, even though the populace prospered, hundreds of thousands suffered wretched temporary living conditions--such as sleeping in cardboard boxes near the Star Ferry terminal and even in wire cages at Mongkok. The events of 1972--when Hong Kong's future was decided by Britain and China--are still shrouded in a secrecy that Welsh doesn't dispel, stating only that some feel that if Britain hadn't approached China, China would have let matters lie because Hong Kong was too valuable a trading partner to lose. Welsh doesn't bring history to life so much as recite details, and even the fascinating characters and events that stipple his pages don't add much color. (For a livelier look at the island- colony, see Gerald Segal's *The Fate of Hong Kong*, p. 921.) (Sixteen pages of b&w illustrations--not seen) -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

On the recommendation of readers, I picked up Welsh's history of Hong Kong. It is dense and detailed, but it has a number of features that make parts of it worth reading. The first several chapters on the Opium War were excellent - the mutual cultural misunderstandings between the Chinese and British and the resulting conflict alone are worth the price of the book. His discussion of the Japanese occupation was also fascinating. I found the intervening chapters, however, to be a little dull; the details of internal politics in London and how they played out in Asia, was a little much for me, although it was interesting to get an up-close look at the mechanisms of empire - it was much less insidious and much more happenstance than one would imagine. For those who have been (or are going) to Hong Kong, I absolutely recommend the book; the detail of events give a sense of scope and scale. For the lay reader, the opening chapters are most worthwhile.

Some of us remember that the Chinese city of Hongkong (Chinese name Xianggang, `fragrant harbor') was for a brief spell of time a British colony. The city would certainly not be what it is now,

had it not been temporarily British. It is still a great place. It was barely populated when Britain took it in 1841. The Brits returned a substantial metropolis to China, roughly one and a half century later. This is a readable history of Hongkong, written in 1993 from the British perspective, before the place was handed back to China. The author is a former banker, who turned into a productive historian. Main elements of the story are the opium wars and subsequent treaties, leading to Hongkong becoming a temporary British territory, the trial and error process of developing a viable colony in the face of China's changes, later the Japanese occupation, then the tiger years and the return negotiations. It becomes a double history of China and Britain and their interfaces. The most interesting parts are the early period and then the period of WW2 and the next 30 years. The early decades of the new system on the mainland, with the prodigal island next door and big brother USA at cross purposes with Britain's pragmatic attitude towards 'Red China', were a time of particular uncertainty. Things settled down to more normal procedures once the US had recognized the PRC. Welsh does come up with occasional odd statements which make the book a little provocative at times. I had thought of mentioning a few examples but decided against it, in the interest of brevity. If you want to know what I mean, ask me. Maybe these problems of unclear writing have been weeded out in later editions. Mine is from 1994. Some of the lessons that one can take away from this book: Empire building was a more haphazard process than simplistic histories on imperialism tend to tell us. At the time of Hongkong's 'rise' into colonial status, nobody in the government actually wanted it. The man who won it got demoted for the deed. The acquisition was considered unprofitable for a long time. It was certainly at times in the way of foreign policy, disturbing the bilateral relations with China. The negotiations about returning the territory to Chinese sovereignty seem to have been a nice mess, with the Iron Lady in a somewhat less than sovereign role. Her brief 1982 visit has been compared to a typhoon visiting the island with the normal damage. For a long time, Hongkong was just a colonial backwater, until Shanghai stopped being the center of Chinese commerce. Then Shanghai's capitalists moved South, and Hongkong suddenly had a role to play. It discovered light industries, then service industries, and became one of the 'tigers' of Asia, with South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. My generation knew Hongkong as a glittering place. This book taught me that the glitter phase was relatively brief.

Frank Welsh has written a magnificent history of Hong Kong: His account of nearly two centuries of British rule is comprehensive, spirited, fair and funny. Welsh obviously enjoyed writing this book, and his energy and enthusiasm are contagious. I loved his concise, blunt and often hilarious assessments of the rogues, eccentrics, incompetents and occasional heroes who governed or

otherwise played major roles in Hong Kong: Gov. John Bowring "possessed almost every gift but that of common sense." "It might have been possible to find a man more unsuited to be a Colonial Governor than John Pope Hennessey," Welsh writes, "but it would not have been easy." Welsh admits that he writes from an Anglo perspective, and he is sympathetic to Hong Kong's British colonial rulers. But he is not blind to their snobbish, condescending and sometimes plainly racist attitudes toward the ethnic Chinese they ruled. To this reader, Welsh's argument that the Opium War wasn't really about opium isn't convincing, but his defense of the so-called "unequal treaties" between China and Britain is. Welsh sometimes wades too far into the minutiae of diplomacy and politics, and he too readily assumes the reader's familiarity with 18th century British history and personalities. But these are quibbles; in fact, the weaknesses are the flipside of one of the book's great strengths: It strives to put events in Hong Kong in a broader historical perspective, explaining the political backdrop in Britain or mainland China. One of Welsh's recurring themes struck this reader as particularly timely: the shameful degree to which Hong Kong's business elites, be they British or Chinese, put their narrow interest in profit above the public interest. In the 19th century, Hong Kong money men, worried about losing tenants and facing higher costs, opposed efforts to improve public sanitation and fight disease by tearing down squalid, congested tenement buildings. Today, they argue alongside the communist leadership in Beijing against any expansion of democracy in Hong Kong - fearful no doubt that a democratically accountable government might look twice at their privileges and dodgy business practices. Overall, this is a fine book and belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in the history of Hong Kong or indeed of Great Britain.

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