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# 'He Has Given up an Immense Deal for his Wife'

## A Case Study of Intermarriage in Early Colonial Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper is a case study of the public marriage between an English gentleman and his Chinese wife in 1860s Hong Kong and China, examining its impact on the career of the man involved and on the social circles in which both husband and wife moved. It argues that the colonial government in Hong Kong was not in a position to reject a highly qualified man for a position in the senior civil service, and that many colonial residents, and the bride's family, were surprisingly willing to tolerate their unconventional relationship.

Keywords

Early Hong Kong, Eurasian, Godfrey Bird, Ding Richang, Matilda Sharp

# 「他為妻子放棄了優厚的待遇」— 香港殖民初期一個異族通婚的個案研究

Naomi Ridout

Naomi Ridout（多倫多大學文學碩士，1972 年）在從事商業工作以前，曾於多倫多大學和劍橋紐納姆學院研習社會歷史。她於退休後重拾歷史研究，專注探究其曾曾祖父母謝爾曼 • 戈弗雷 • 伯德中尉 (Lieutenant Shearman Godfrey Bird) 與秦艾美 • 伯德 (Amy Chun Bird) 非凡的一生。

## 摘要

本文研究 1860 年代一位英國紳士與其中國籍妻子在香港和中國大陸公開婚姻的個案，探討其婚姻對這位男士的職業生涯，以及對夫婦雙方所處的社交圈子的影響。研究認為，香港殖民政府並未拒絕讓一位有才華、素質高的人出任高級公務員之職，而且不少殖民地居民和新娘的家人都出乎意料地願意寬容他們這份非常規的關係。

**關鍵詞**
早期香港、歐亞混血兒、戈弗雷 • 伯德（Godfrey Bird）、丁日昌、瑪蒂爾達 • 夏普（Matilda Sharp）

In early 1863, 25-year-old Shearman Godfrey Bird, a former Lieutenant of the Royal Engineers, wrote to his sister in England from his residence in Canton, China:

> My dearest Clara—I am going to tell you what I had for dinner a few days ago with a Mandarin who invited me—and which I think will amuse you. First, the table (a very small one, for 2 Mandarins, 1 Chinese doctor and 1 Barbarian) was covered with little plates and saucers full of preserved fruits, almonds, beech nuts or something like them, and one of cold gizzard, pickled eggs and another that I can't tell you the name of. The host took up his chopsticks and begged us all to help ourselves to what tempted us—I was accommodated with a fork and spoon—as being a Barbarian, and tried a piece of pickled egg and a very good cumquat—they didn't seem to agree very well together, but being at Rome I did as the Romans do.[1]

Four years later, Lucilla Sharp, a young English resident of Hong Kong, wrote one of her long, gossipy letters home to her sister, devoting part of it to a description of Shearman's wife Amy:

> I dare say you remember the romance Mattie has often mentioned to us, this nice young fellow, the son of a clergyman near Colchester, becoming entangled with a Chinawoman and finally marrying her. …Mrs. Bird really dresses with very good taste. I suppose her husband directs her toilette a little, but the other day when she called to say goodbye, she had a white hat brimmed with black velvet and a scarlet feather, a ponjee dress and jacket very prettily embroidered with narrow black braid, white kid gloves, and save for her face you would quite think her an Englishwoman. But this poor woman gets more and more Chinesey [sic] every month. Her eyes seem to get daily longer and narrower and her complexion more and more dark. …[2]

The most striking aspect of these passages is not the writers' descriptions of Chinese cuisine and table manners, or English fashion on the body of a Chinese woman. Rather, it is that they are evidence of a range of European attitudes among residents of Hong Kong in the 1860s towards the Chinese with whom they came into contact.

This paper is a case study of one Englishman's life in China and Hong Kong in the decade between 1858, when Shearman Godfrey Bird arrived as a young lieutenant in the British Army, and 1867, when he and his Chinese wife Amy, the couple described in Lucilla Sharp's letter, left Hong Kong for England. It hopes to contribute to recent reassessments of race and gender in the British imperial venture by examining the consequences to Shearman's career and personal life of his public relationship with Amy.

Figure 1. Amy Chun Bird (undated); collection of Naomi Ridout

Primary sources for glimpses into the Birds' lives include family documents written by or about them. Shearman Bird's laconic entries in his Lett's Diary for 1863, along with a small number of letters to his sisters in England, and fragments of his diaries for 1859 and 1864, have been used to document his social and business relationships with Chinese and Europeans.[3] Lucilla Sharp's 1867 letter to her sister is the only known description of Shearman and Amy as a couple. The 'facts' of Shearman's career have been retrieved from school records, official announcements in British and Hong Kong government *Gazettes* and Colonial Office correspondence. The missionary Carl Smith's exhaustive index of prominent European and Chinese residents of Hong Kong, and city directories have been helpful in identifying individuals named in the diaries.

It is unfortunate, although not unusual in narratives of intimate relations between colonists and the colonised, that the voice of the woman who

was one half of the story is silent. For this paper, the imbalance of reliable primary sources between those for Shearman and ones for his wife confines its scope largely to an examination of his career rather than the lived experience of Shearman and Amy as a married couple. There are no Chinese-character documents that might identify her father, although Amy's certificate for her baptism, which took place on Christmas Day 1863 in the Consular Church at Canton, identifies her parents as Chun Akow, gentleman, and Kwok Yun Kow.[4] In fact, few details of any aspect of Amy's early life can be known with certainty, due in part to the mythology she constructed for her children following her husband's early death, in which she was a 'princess' who had been presented at the court of Peking and was, with her family, under the protection of the British forces when she met Shearman.

The true story of Amy's background is likely to be much more prosaic. DNA samples from several descendants show markers currently associated with people from southern China, in the border area with modern Vietnam. It is plausible that Shearman, at the start of their relationship had no intention of marrying Amy, intending to take the more usual path of keeping her as a 'protected woman'; she might even have been a prostitute in a brothel that catered to foreign military officers.[5] Charles May, the first police magistrate, claimed that in 1870s Hong Kong only one in six women lived with one man either in marriage or concubinage, while a Chinese doctor who treated prostitutes for venereal disease estimated that only 25 percent of the female population were respectable women. Elizabeth Sinn believes that while both assessments might have been exaggerated, they 'assure us of the prevalence of prostitution in nineteenth century Hong Kong'.[6] However, while there is no definitive evidence for Amy's status prior to meeting Shearman, there are also indications that she may have been the daughter of a poor family, newly enriched by supplying the needs of the rapidly growing Hong Kong population as shopkeepers, builders or suppliers to the British armed forces and merchant trading ships. The ability of poor migrants to establish themselves rapidly in the new colony is described by Carl Smith and Jung-Fang Tsai.[7]

From the many valuable pieces of solid gold and jade jewelry, and perhaps most importantly a lovely silk costume properly belonging to the wife or daughter of a mandarin, Amy's origin as the daughter of a member of the *nouveau riche* is a plausible explanation. The use of mandarin costume by the new Chinese élite in Hong Kong to display wealth, power and authority was increasingly common from the 1850s. Since the early entrepreneurial

leaders had often come from marginal groups, they sought to acquire prestige in the eyes of their fellow Chinese by acquiring the trappings of the gentry.[8]

Amy's family did not disown or lose contact with her, also suggesting that she had not been trafficked into prostitution. Her mother continued to write to her after her move to Canada, via letters dictated to and translated by writers with little facility in the English language. In January 1868, her mother tells her, 'We and my son was live in Hong Kong', while in a touching passage from a later letter, she informs Amy of her father's death:

> I am sorry that I say your father, he has died in the Chinese last year of the Chinese month of the 18 of 12 month two days more of the Chinese new year—he had buried in Canton. I beg to inform to you please you will not Crying and must without sorry with it—it is he was old cannot sake him not die as long as he life. But I hope the God safe your father to a good and happy place, I am wish is so.[9]

From her efforts to communicate with her daughter in English, a reasonable guess would be that neither Amy nor her children could read Chinese, and that these letters were meant to be read to her. Amy's daughter Ruth (1865–1960) acted as her mother's amanuensis in Canada, living with her until Amy's death in 1923. The stories of Amy and her children in Canada are regrettably beyond the scope of this paper. However, her position in Hong Kong as the recognised wife of a former army officer and colonial senior public servant, when most Chinese women in relationships with Europeans were eventually replaced by European wives, makes her story unusual and a worthy, if elusive, subject for this paper.

In a country highly defined by social class and its accompanying values and conventions, Shearman Godfrey Bird's birth and upbringing in England were those of a 'gentleman'—a vaguely defined but important concept that was confirmed more by correct descent and education than wealth.[10] He was the eldest son and one of fifteen children of an Anglican rector and 'rural dean' in Essex. His grandfather and closest uncle were also rural clergymen. Another uncle was an admiral in the Royal Navy, while other siblings and cousins also became senior naval officers. A younger brother, Sotheby Godfrey Bird, followed Shearman to Hong Kong, becoming a successful architect and co-founder of the firm that became Palmer and Turner.[11] Shearman's early schooling was at Twyford near Winchester and in July 1852 he entered Winchester College, one of England's ancient public school foundations.[12] The Winchester College curriculum at the time was heavily classical, offering no courses in physical sciences.[13]

Shearman's education diverged significantly from most other sons of minor gentry when, following Winchester, he entered the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich; most young men leaving Winchester for the armed forces would have entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst or purchased a commission. At Woolwich, which trained officers for the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers, tuition fees were based on parental income, and first commissions were free of charge, a 'positive advantage to country clergymen or doctors with several sons to provide for'.[14] Shearman's career path may have been determined by his family's financial circumstances (his father had ten living children at the time, including five other sons to raise), but it was a fortunate one: Woolwich offered a technical and scientific curriculum superior to that available elsewhere.[15] As will be suggested later in this paper, it was the valuable professional skills acquired at Woolwich that persuaded the governing elite of Hong Kong to hire Shearman for senior positions, perhaps overcoming any prejudice from his unconventional marriage.

Figure 2. Lt. Shearman Godfrey Bird in Royal Engineer's undress uniform; undated, c. 1857; collection of Naomi Ridout

The Woolwich *Register* records that cadet Shearman Bird passed his final theoretical and practical exams in 1856 and was commissioned a Lieutenant in the Royal Engineers.[16] In late 1857, he was deployed to China.

The only significant source for Shearman's military activities in China prior to 1860 are fragments of a diary for 1859 and an 1858 letter to his childhood 'nurse', in which he wrote

that he had hoped to 'follow the Ambassadors towards Pekin [*sic*]', but made it only as far as a 'camp on the mud of the Peiho River', returning to Canton three months later.[17] There, he found 'matters considerably worse than before. …The Braves have got more plucky, from our leniency towards them I suppose, and amuse themselves by firing rockets and gingals into our positions at night but we take very little notice of them.'[18] From January to early March 1859, Shearman was attached to the Quarter Master General's department; January diary entries describe military manoeuvres, bridge building, and the odd skirmish with Chinese 'Braves', but as the month wore on they often seem to reflect his boredom; manoeuvres are replaced by a theatrical performance, or shopping for items to send back to England.[19]

On 6 March however, Shearman entered an upper-case 'A', followed by scrawled lines that at first appear to be code, but are possibly his attempt to write Chinese in a Romanised script. There are several more entries made in a similar fashion, but the diary ends completely with the 19 July entry.

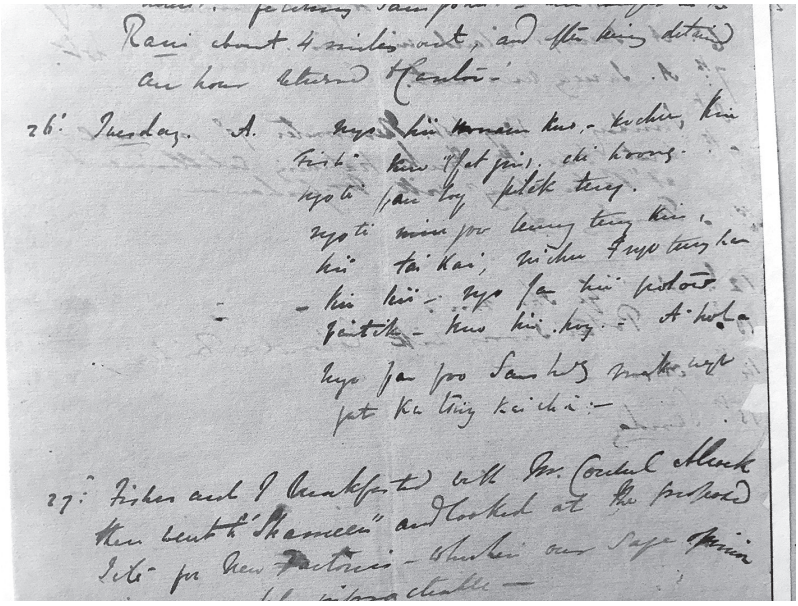

Figure 3. An 1859 entry from Shearman's diary containing transliterated Chinese and the letter A; collection of Derek Bird

The mysterious letter 'A's may have marked Shearman's meetings with Amy. Although this early journal makes no mention of her by name, the 4 June entry in his 1863 diary, which notes their fourth wedding anniversary, makes it clear that he dated his marriage to 1859, when he was 21 and Amy eighteen years old. In 1859 Shearman was a junior officer, suggesting that his commanding officer was not asked to provide his approval for a marriage that would have been recognised in England. While there was no official ban on the marriage of officers in the Victorian British army, the oft-quoted saying 'subalterns may not marry, captains may marry, majors should marry, colonels must marry', gives a sense of the prevailing wisdom.[20] Although Shearman was a practising Anglican and regular church goer, Amy was not yet a Christian, so it is more likely that the marriage was according to Chinese rite, as was the first marriage of Daniel Caldwell, the former Registrar General of the colony.[21] Lucilla Sharp's remark about Shearman 'becoming entangled with a China woman and finally marrying her' also supports this.[22] Regardless, Shearman and Amy's relationship would soon have become reasonably public, since their first-born son, James Godfrey Bird, was baptised in St John's Cathedral in September 1860, with both parents named in the baptismal register as Shearman Godfrey Bird and 'A-Mooy Bird'.[23]

Shearman's relationship with Amy did not excite official comment when, in 1860, while still an army officer, he was appointed Assistant Engineer in the Surveyor General's department. Colonial Office documents show that the dual appointment was due to the scarcity of engineering and technical skills in the colony: 'The difficulty of finding a competent person to replace him [F.L. Walker, Assistant Surveyor General], and the necessity of providing the Surveyor General with efficient assistance induced me to apply to the Military Authorities, and the services of Lieutenant Bird, Royal Engineers, were placed at the disposal of Government.'[24]

During the same period, Shearman's fellow Royal Engineer and friend S.B. Rawling was similarly appointed to a position of Clerk of the Works in the Surveyor General's department.[25] In 1859, Rawling and Bird had come to the attention of the government when they each submitted plans for the provision of water to the island of Victoria, in a competition that Rawling won.[26] Shearman's appointment was temporary, but the realisation that his skills were highly valued in the young colony may have given him the confidence to leave the army and to defy conventional norms of behaviour by baptising his son in the Cathedral.

At some point in early 1862, Shearman returned to England for nine

months on leave, without his wife and baby son; while still in England, he resigned his commission and informed his family of his relationship.[27] On his return later that year, having left the army and without permanent employment, he was contracted by the civilian administration of Hong Kong to complete a detailed survey of the newly acquired territory of Kowloon. The correspondence between the Hong Kong administration and the Colonial Office again illustrates how the shortage of men with competent technical skills supported the appointment:

> The season of the year having arrived when it is practicable to make surveys and it being of considerable importance that no time be lost in the Survey of Kowloon by triangulation in an efficient and detailed manner, not only for the future service of this Department in the development of the area for sale, the formation of lines of road, drainage, etc., but for the perfect measurement of the several holdings for which compensation is to be paid, or leases granted.… With my staff as now constituted I am unable to execute the work, Mr. Storey not being a surveyor….Mr. Bird knowing the land and having notes of former surveys, and by being able to avail of work already done would be by far the fittest person to undertake the work, and as I am led to believe he is willing to do so for the sum of $1,200 I beg to advise his employment for the work in question…[28]

At this point, Shearman, Amy and young James were living in Canton. The reason for their move is not known but could have been due to the employment possibilities arising from the start of development on Shamian Island (沙面), leased from the Chinese government as an offshore enclave for Europeans. It is also possible that Amy and her son had moved during Shearman's time in England to the mainland in order to be closer to her family.[29]

For the next two years, Shearman worked in both Canton and Hong Kong as an engineer and surveyor, travelling frequently between the two by steamer. In March 1864, he was appointed acting (and then permanent) Assistant Surveyor General for Hong Kong, with a comfortable annual salary of £700.[30] He had a home in the residential 'mid-levels' of Shelley Street and a second government appointment as an auditor for the accounts of St John's Cathedral, where his children born during this period were baptised.[31] However, in August 1867, Shearman was granted sick leave of one year, and the family journeyed to England; it is not known if they intended to return to Hong Kong. Two years later, the family emigrated to Canada, where

Shearman died following an accident in 1873 at the age of 35, leaving his wife and eight young children.

There are no known diaries by Shearman that cover his years in Hong Kong. However, the diary for 1863, when the family lived in Canton, despite its terse entries and absence of opinion, provides a tantalising glimpse into Shearman's network of friends, colleagues and associates, along with occasional details of Amy's participation in events. The diary also demonstrates the close involvement of colonial officials in Hong Kong in the plans for development of Shamian Island in the Pearl River as an enclave for foreigners.

From the diary, 1863 started on a promising note, with Shearman receiving income from the survey of Kowloon and his supervisory work on the construction of the sea wall around the sand bar that was 'Shameen'. He was also at least partly involved in dealings with the Chinese contractor constructing the Anglican church on the island, working with the Chinese construction supervisors and the European architect and committee members. The building of Christ Church was financed by war indemnities from the Chinese government for replacement of the destroyed church, which was on the former factory site in Canton. Architectural historian Johnathan Andrew Ferris notes that the church was supposed to be finished in early 1863, but that the building was not completed until at least a year later.[32] From Shearman's diary, the delay appears to have been due to the collapse of the tower on 7 May; the contractor Wongstay had reported cracks in the tower to Shearman shortly before the collapse. Throughout 1863, Shearman also corresponded with Charles St George Cleverly, Surveyor General of Hong Kong, on the retaining wall, and on tenders by Chinese contractors for houses on the island. In March, for example, Cleverly sent him his plans for 'Dent and Jardine's houses for Shameen' and Shearman put their construction out for tender; Wongstay submitted one, for Jardine's house, and Shearman forwarded it to Cleverly in Hong Kong. Although we cannot know for certain that Shearman spoke Cantonese well, his work with local Chinese on these projects suggest that he probably could speak with some fluency.

On 5 March Dr Wong Fun (Huang Kuan, 黃寬) called on Shearman with a proposal for a new project. Dr Wong, a former Morrison Society student and the first Chinese to graduate from the Edinburgh University medical school, was physician to both Shearman and Amy. But on this occasion, he was acting as a representative of the Chinese government in the form of the Taotai of Shanghai, Ding Richang (丁日昌). Ding, whom Shearman called 'Mandarin Ting', was one of China's foremost proponents of military modernisation. On

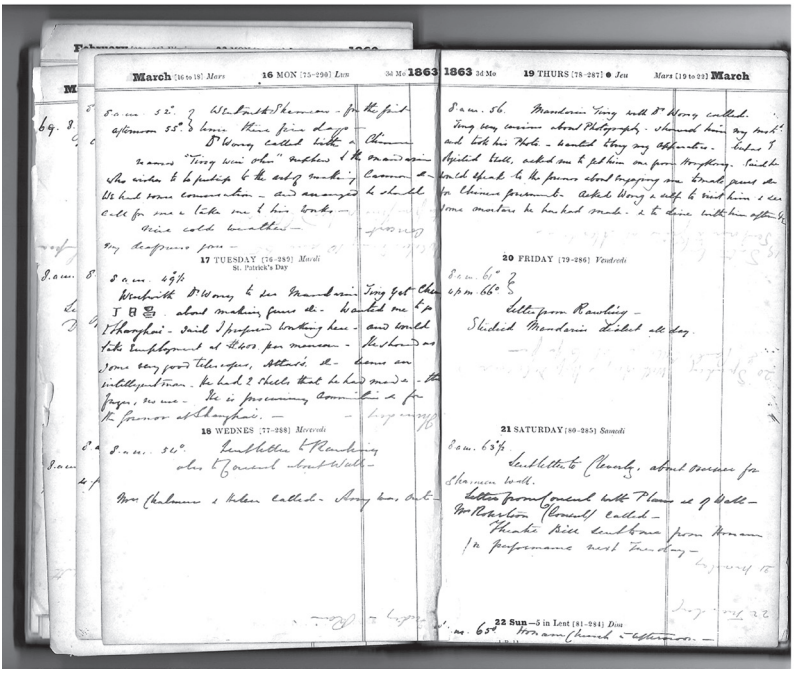


Figure 4. Pages from Shearman's diary, March 1863, with first mention of Ding Richang; collection of Naomi Ridout

13 March Dr Wong brought 'Ting Wan Ohn', named by Shearman as Ding's nephew, for a conversation on 'the art of making cannon, etc.' On 17 March Dr Wong took Shearman to meet Ding, who suggested that he consider moving to Shanghai to work on producing guns and ammunition. Ding 'showed us some very good telescopes, atlases, etc. He seems an intelligent man. He had 2 shells that he had made—the fuzes no use—he is procuring ammunition for the Governor at Shanghai.' Seemingly eager to pursue Ding's proposal that he move to Shanghai, Shearman 'studied Mandarin dialect all day'. On 23 March Wong and Shearman visited Ding again to 'see some mortars and shells he has made, fired—of course, everything very inferior and absurd—Dinner with Ting and 2 or 3 other Mandarins afterwards—took about 2 hours, and consisted of a curious mixture of grease and preserved fruits'. The banquet is likely to be the one that Shearman described in greater detail to his sister in the letter that opens this article.

The next day, Shearman, at dinner in Hong Kong with his friend Fred Clements, himself an officer in the Royal Engineers and classmate of Shearman's at Woolwich, suggested that the two of them try to arrange positions as 'Ordnance Superintendents' to the Chinese Government; 'we both liked the plan and intend to try it'. They asked Robert Hart, who had joined the customs service as an employee of the Chinese in 1859, what he thought of their plans.[33]

Ultimately nothing came of the proposed venture, perhaps because Shearman decided that he was unwilling to move to Shanghai. But over the course of the next few months, he and Ding, who along with his nephew was apparently detained in Canton preparing to fight Hakka rebels, experimented with designing and building 'rockets' in Canton.[34] Even Amy was enlisted in the project, being sent to buy 'rocket powder' (she came back with gun powder instead) and helping to purify saltpetre. The ever-present Wongstay and another Chinese named Aling tried their best to provide 'rockets' that would fire consistently, but they failed; frustrated with the efforts of the local tradesmen, Shearman persuaded Ding to provide a blacksmith of his own choosing. Ding complied and a small smithy was erected behind Shearman's residence. Ding and his nephew were also very keen to learn photography, so Shearman gave them lessons and helped them acquire equipment from Hong Kong. However, over time, many of the experiments with rockets failed, and the relationship cooled; on 11 September the entry notes that Shearman received a 'letter from Ting saying he did not want any rockets—sent him a polite (?) [Shearman's mark] answer'. Ding went on to develop the Jiangnan Arsenal in Shanghai.[35] Any income that Shearman enjoyed from his work for Ding would have ended at that point and in October the diary records that Shearman gave up the front part of his premises to save $10 a month in rent.[36]

It is difficult to assess the depth of friendships from Shearman's diary; the entries are little more than *aide-memoires* for the activities of the day, and he was not given to self-reflection or to expressing emotion. Lucilla Sharp, who had noted the 'horror' felt by the wife of Shearman's cousin, ship captain James Whatman Disney Bird, upon meeting Amy and discovering that Shearman expected her 'to take a good deal of notice of his wife', obviously believed that his marriage had damaged both his military career and his social life. She claimed that Shearman 'has given up an immense deal for this wife, even so far as giving up his appointment in the Engineers, because he felt he could not ask his brother officers to his table'.[37] While Lucilla may have been generally correct in her assessment of his ability to move with his wife in the

leading European social circles in Hong Kong, the diary shows that Shearman himself maintained social and business relationships with many of his former army officer colleagues, staying with them while he was in Hong Kong and often dining at the Engineers' Mess. When his friends visited Canton, they would explore the old city, or go bird shooting.

The contacts who could have been considered friends (rather than mere acquaintances) of both Shearman and Amy were mainly missionary members of the non-conformist London Missionary Society, along with the (Anglican) Consular Chaplain and Dr Wong. In Canton the Birds lived, as did other Europeans, in the western suburbs outside the old walled city, immediately north of Shamian Island; their neighbours were the Rev. John and Mrs Turner of the LMS.[38] While the missionaries may have had ulterior motives for befriending Amy, they were quite prepared to be seen in public with her on picnics and outings to the tourist spots mentioned in the diary. Amy adopted the British practice of 'calling' on Mrs. Turner, Mrs Happer and Mrs Chalmers; in January, she called on Matilda Sharp, who was visiting the Turners. These calls were reciprocated. Together, Shearman and Amy called on the Turners and Chalmers, went out for walks, and visited popular tourist sights. When Dr Carmichael, a medical missionary with the LMS came for dinner in February 1863, he brought with him his fashionable 'Galvanic battery', and everyone, including Amy, the cook and the 'coolie' had fun giving themselves shocks with it.[39]

While Shearman and Amy's daughter Edith was christened soon after her birth in the summer of 1863, Amy herself was baptised later, on Christmas Day, by the Consular Chaplain John Henry Gray. After an August dinner with her husband and the Rev. Gray, Amy began to visit the Chalmers each Sunday, presumably to undertake religious instruction. The Rev. John Chalmers, a missionary for the LMS, was also a scholar of Chinese, and a fluent speaker of Cantonese. It is reasonable to believe that Amy's baptism may have been the precursor to a Christian marriage rite. However, there is no copy of a marriage certificate among the family papers—an interesting omission in a family that seemed to make a practice of keeping important documents. If the marriage ceremony occurred in late 1863, or in 1865 (the year in which Amy's baptismal certificate was issued), the Birds would have had good reason to 'lose' the document, in the form of their two (or three) children already born. In 1862, Shearman had written to the Royal Engineers Widows Fund (as it was then called) to enquire about the type of evidence that would be required should Amy become a widow and wish to claim

an annuity, and was told that a legally valid marriage certificate would be necessary.[40] Shearman had maintained his payments to the Society following resignation of his commission, and as Amy was successful in making a claim for the payments following Shearman's death in 1873, it is clear that a Christian marriage ceremony took place at some point.

Most notable amongst those whom both Shearman and Amy considered friends were Granville and Matilda Sharp. Over decades in Hong Kong, Granville Sharp rose from a position of bank manager to become a very wealthy merchant and property investor, and founder of the Matilda Hospital. In early February 1863, three years after Granville had set himself up in business as a bills and bullion broker, Matilda paid a visit to Canton, staying with the Birds' neighbours, the Turners. Shearman's diary notes that Amy paid a call on Matilda, who came for lunch the next day, and later sent Amy gifts.[41] Remarkably, the Sharps maintained a relationship with Amy in Canada long after Shearman's death. In 1891 they sent Amy, who appears to have been in financial straits, £50, and in 1898, Granville, then in England, intervened with Amy's brother-in-law, the Royal Marines Colonel Commandant at Chatham, in an unsuccessful effort to persuade him to cancel a £200 debt incurred by Shearman almost 30 years earlier. Both letters mention earlier correspondence and ask after the welfare of the children.[42]

Lucilla Sharp, whose letter provides the only available personal account of Amy and Shearman, was Matilda's younger sister, married in 1865 to Granville Sharp's cousin Edmund, a solicitor in Hong Kong.[43] Lucilla wrote that Shearman 'takes home with him five little children whom one can tell at a glance to be Anglo-Chinese', and worried that Shearman's 'refined and lady-like sisters' in England would not know what do with Amy, who lacked the language and table manners to pay or receive social visits. She also thought Amy and the children would be followed about the English countryside by a 'little mob' of the curious. Lucilla's long letter giving her views on Shearman and Amy's marriage lacks the empathy and openness toward the Chinese that are often expressed in her sister Matilda's letters, but Lucilla likely represented the anxieties of many married, socially-striving women in Hong Kong's developing European elite.[44]

Shearman's marriage to a Chinese woman was undoubtedly the most unusual event of his short career in China and Hong Kong. The question remains: why did he go so far as to marry and live openly with her? While informal interracial relationships were common, as they were in every colony where single European men vastly outnumbered European women, lasting

sexual relationships were private affairs, known perhaps to the male friends of the man involved; there were significant social barriers to making these informal unions 'legal' to European eyes. Christopher Munn suggests that while the degree of secrecy varied with social class, or the marriage status of the man, 'simple selfishness' discouraged most men from extending the full benefits of open marriage to their 'protected women'.[45]

At the time that the Bird's first child was baptised in 1860, with both parents named on the register, Hong Kong's best known inter-racial couple were Daniel Caldwell and his wife. Caldwell and Chan Ayow first married in a traditional Chinese marriage in 1845; following Chan Ayou's conversion to Christianity, they were married in 1851 in St John's Cathedral.[46] Caldwell spoke various dialects of Chinese with native-like facility and at one point held the position of Registrar General in the colony, functioning as the 'main intermediary between government and people'. A controversial figure, he became the subject of an official commission, accused on nineteen counts of corruption, several of them related to brothels purportedly operated by his wife's family.[47] However, as Christopher Munn puts it in his comprehensive recounting of what became known as 'the Caldwell Affair', 'at certain points in the enquiry it seemed that an unstated twentieth charge, that of being married to a Chinese wife, was the dominant concern of the proceedings'.[48] Testifying before the legislative commission's enquiry into the affair, Charles May, the Hong Kong police chief, supported his evidence of corruption by framing it in racial terms, claiming that Chan-ayow's marriage to Caldwell had not 'eradicated … the inherent character of the Chinese'.[49] After the 'Affair', descriptions of Caldwell in the English language press changed from one of 'blue eyes and truly English countenance' to 'a man of mixed blood' and 'Singapore half-caste'.[50]

Carl Smith believed that 'Mrs. Caldwell would not have fitted well into a European congregation, particularly as her husband was a civil servant'.[51] Christopher Munn goes farther, concluding that 'in openly marrying a Chinese woman according to Christian form, and by raising what by all accounts was a happy family, Caldwell, uniquely, had overstepped the tacitly agreed boundaries and provoked complex and unstable responses in the colonial community'.[52] Nonetheless, Caldwell, 'even after his fall from grace, continued to be an indispensable agent both to the colonial government and to the Chinese community.[53] Shearman, of a different social class but similar to Caldwell in his possession of highly valued skills, seems also to have been able to persuade the European community in Hong Kong to tolerate his unconventional marriage.

While the 'Caldwell Affair' set European Hong Kong society on edge, there is no doubt that in the 1860s concerns over race and miscegenation, often expressed using the racialised vocabulary of appearance, were intensifying in both Britain's colonies and the imperial homelands, leading to strengthening feelings of racial difference.[54] Mixed-race children were of special concern to colonial authorities everywhere because they challenged authority, European identity, and legal issues of who was citizen or subject; Hong Kong was no different. Lucilla Sharp's descriptive vocabulary of Amy, who 'save for her face you would quite think … an Englishwoman', and of her children 'whom one can tell at a glance to be Anglo-Chinese' were contrasted with Shearman, 'who is himself a perfect gentleman, refined in manner'. The letter would have been understood by its recipient in England and even if Shearman's contemporaries in Hong Kong were not given to voicing to such thoughts to his face, it would have been surprising if he were not generally aware of the widespread disapproval of the public nature of his relationship with Amy and their children.

The treatment by European officials and merchants of their partners in long-term liaisons and of the mixed-race children that resulted from them was not uniform. As Carl Smith noted, Chinese women could find financial opportunity in the various types of relationship: 'the casual was normally based on prostitute-client terms; the temporary meant maintenance as long as the relationship lasted and often ended with provisions for the future needs of the woman; marriage ensured the right of inheritance'.[55] Daniel Caldwell explicitly included in his will his wife and all ten of his children, including those born before his Christian marriage.[56] Robert Hart, however, went out of his way to destroy the written evidence of his relationship with Ayou, the Chinese mother of his three children, sending the children as 'wards' to England to be educated; but he continued to make occasional payments to Ayou following his marriage to a European woman.[57] Surveyor General Charles St George Cleverly's brother Osmund baptised three children by his Chinese mistress, giving them his first name as a surname, without naming their mother on the baptismal record.[58] The daughter of Postmaster General Francis William Mitchell married the Eurasian son of Daniel Caldwell, with missionary James Legge in attendance at the wedding breakfast; Legge noted the intentional absence from the ceremony of the bride's father.[59]

There are no extant documents recording Shearman Bird's reasons for his decision to marry. His qualifications as an engineer and architect were badly needed in the young colony and provided him with the financial

security to defy convention, but they do not reveal why he chose to do so. Without documentary evidence, there can be no firm conclusions, although it is possible to advance some suggestions. Perhaps his behaviour reflected youthful impetuousness; Shearman was just 21 when he 'married' Amy in the summer of 1859 and their first child arrived a little more than a year later. Their marriage may have been a true love match; Lucilla Sharp called the relationship a 'romance'. Indeed, a faded pencil sketch by Shearman of Amy in profile with her hair ornately dressed 'as she appeared on New Year's Day 23 January 1860' shows more than casual affection. Yet even a happy love affair could be put aside easily when the time came to take a proper English wife. A less impetuous, long-term commitment is evident from 1862, when Shearman continued his subscription to the Royal Engineers Widows Fund after his departure from the Engineers. Amy herself expressed apparent anxiety about her marriage to Matilda Sharp on the eve of the family's journey to England: 'M said to her "Oh Mrs. Bird, you know your husband loves you." The poor little woman immediately burst into tears and sobbed out, "He love that chilo!"'[60]

There is evidence that Shearman and Amy intended to return to Hong Kong following their 1867 journey to England; he had what appeared to be a promising career ahead of him and his brother Sotheby Godfrey Bird had recently arrived in the colony. Shearman's health problems, which crop up frequently in his diaries may have been the determining factor in his decision not to return. In February 1867 the Acting Colonial Secretary Henry John Ball certified that Shearman had been ailing 'for some time' from the effects of the climate, adding 'symptoms of febrile and bilious disease have become so prominent of late that I strongly recommend him not to risk next summer in Hong Kong' and granted him twelve months' leave from June at half pay.[61]

If Shearman believed that England would provide him with equally good prospects, he was mistaken; unable to find employment, he moved his growing family to the small town of Barrie in Ontario, Canada, in 1869. His resignation letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated 15 April, stated that he was proposing to move to Canada 'in hope of finding suitable employment in that country'.[62] A letter written to one of his sisters shortly after his arrival in Canada regretted that he 'had no choice' about the move.[63] Why Bird chose Barrie as the place to settle with his young family is not known, but it is clear that the town, which functioned as a centre of the logging and winter ice harvesting (for refrigeration) industries and was one end of a portage route from the Great Lakes, offered opportunities for

someone of his skills. By the time he died in early 1873, he had established himself as an architect, and had several major buildings, including a church, to show for it. His widow raised all eight of their children to successful adulthood, with help from some members of the family in England. Shearman's father may not have fully approved of his relationship with Amy, but it is clear from documents that, after the family's emigration to Canada, the older man educated Shearman and Amy's eldest son in England at a nearby grammar school and accommodated him in his household during vacations. After Shearman's death, two of his daughters were also sent to England to live in their grandfather's household for several years. The Reverend Godfrey Bird's will, which divided his estate equally between his surviving children, left Shearman's portion to his children.

## Notes

1 Shearman Godfrey Bird to Clara Bird, *Letter*, 1863, collection of Derek Bird, Bird Family Papers. This article benefited from access provided to family papers by Derek Bird and Alice Fauré-Munro of England, and the late David Bird and Harold Bird of Canada. The author is grateful to Professors Joan Judge and David Koffman of York University, Toronto, who reviewed an earlier version of this article.

2 Lucilla Sharp to Marian Sutton, *Letter*, 10 June 1867, collection of Alice Fauré-Munro, *Lincolne Family Papers*. For consistency, I refer to 'Mrs. Bird' as Amy, her baptismal name, and the name that Shearman himself used. Amy's descendants use a variety of spellings and pronunciations, most commonly 'Amoi' or 'Amoui', both of which are likely derived from the characters for 'little girl'.

3 Shearman's diary for January 1863 to March 1864 is in the collection of Naomi Ridout, while a partial diary for 1859 is in the collection of Derek Bird.

4 'True Extract from the Register of Baptisms belonging to the British Consular Church Establishment at Canton, China', 14 April 1865; Collection of the late David Bird, Toronto.

5 Elizabeth Sinn, 'Women at Work: Chinese Brothel Keepers in Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong', *Journal of Women's History*, 19:3 (Fall 2007) p. 98.

6 Elizabeth Sinn, 'Women at Work', p. 88.

7 Carl Smith, *Chinese Christians: Elites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005) pp. 108–10; Jung-Fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842–1913* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp. 39, 45.

8 Jung-Fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese Histor*y, pp. 63–4; John M. Carroll, *Edge of Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005) pp. 70–72. Amy's descendants own traditional Chinese articles of jewelry (rather than export ware) that once

belonged to her. The costume is in the Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto).

9 Correspondence to Amy is in the collection of the late David Bird, Canada.

10 The family was listed in the standard work on the subject, popularly known as 'Burke's Gentry'; John Burke and John Bernard Burke, *Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Henry Coburn, Publisher, 1847) p. 99.

11 Malcom Purvis, *Tall Storeys: Palmer and Turner, Architects and Engineers—the First Hundred Years* (Hong Kong: Palmer and Turner Limited, 1985) p. 27.

12 Winchester College, *Register*, January-July 1852.

13 Howard Staunton, *The Great Public Schools of England: An Account of the Foundation, Endowments, and Discipline of the Chief Seminaries of Learning in England* (London: Strachan and Co., Publishers, 1869) pp. 74–75; https://books.google.ca, retrieved 7 February 2021.

14 Sebastian Alexander George Puncher, *The Victorian Army and the Cadet Colleges, Woolwich and Sandhurst, c.1840–1902* (University of Kent at Canterbury, United Kingdom, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 2019) accessed online March 2 at https://kar.kent.ac.uk/76773, pp. 103, 106; W.J. Reader, *Professional Men* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966) p. 8.

15 Sebastian Alexander George Puncher, *The Victorian Army*, pp. 263–66.

16 Woolwich *Register*, Record no. 2101. https://sandhurstcollection.co.uk. Retrieved 5 August, 2013.

17 Shearman Godfrey Bird to 'Dunna', *Letter*, August 1858 (collection of the late Harold Bird, Canada).

18 Shearman Godfrey Bird to 'Dunna', *Letter*, August 1858. For more on the activities of the 'Allied Commission' in Canton at that time, see Steven A. Leibo, 'Not So Calm an Administration: The Anglo-French Occupation of Canton, 1859–1861', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 28 (1988) pp. 16–33.

19 Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary*, 1859 (collection of Derek Bird, Bird family papers).

20 Christopher Jessup, 'Transforming Wives into Spouses: Changing Army Attitudes', in Hew Strachan, ed., *The British Army, Manpower and Society into the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 88. Accessed as e-book, 3 March 2022.

21 Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841–1880* (Hong Kong: Hong University Press, 2009) p. 307.

22 Lucilla Sharp, *Letter*. 10 June 1867.

23 Carl Smith, 'St. Jns. Cath: 285 – Sept. 3, 1860, Aug. 17, 1860, James Godfrey, son of Shearman Godfrey and A-Mooy Bird, Victoria, Lieutenant Royal Engineers'; *Carl Smith Collection*, Government Records Service, Hong Kong, card CS/1009/00082319. Some family sources report that James Godfrey was born in 1861.

24 *Letter*, Sir H. Robinson, Governor of Hong Kong to the Duke of Newcastle, Colonial Secretary, 12 November 1860, Great Britain, Colonial Office, Original Correspondence: Hong Kong, 1841-1951, CO 129/78, 295.

25 *The China Directory for 1862* (Hong Kong: Shortrede and Co, 1862) pp. 2, 22, 77.
26 The competition offered $1,000 for the winning design. *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, 17 March 1860, p. 58; *The Building News and Architectural Review* (London: Proprietors of the Building News) Volume the Sixth, 18 May 1860, p. 408.
27 Dates for the journey to England were determined using the 1863 diary and Carl Smith's card records of land transactions showing that Shearman was active in Hong Kong in late 1861; Carl Smith Collection, card no. 00082329. Shearman's 1863 diary refers often to letters and photographs of his children that were sent back to his sisters in England, indicating that his family were aware of his domestic arrangements.
28 *Bulletins and Other State Intelligence for the Year 1862, Part II* (London: London Gazette Office, 1866) p. 1207, 4 July 1862 'Royal Engineers, Lieutenant Shearman G. Bird has been permitted to resign his Commission'. *Letter*, Charles St Geo. Cleverly, Surveyor General of Hong Kong to the Hon. W.H. Alexander, Acting Colonial Secretary, 19 November 1862, CO 129/88, 176.
29 Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary*, 1863, Monday 12 January 'Amy went to a wedding feast'.
30 *The Hong Kong Government Gazette*, Published by Authority, Hong Kong, Colonial Secretary's Office, 29 April 1864. *Letter*, Wilberforce Wilson to the Right Hon. Edward Cardwell, 12 April 1865; Great Britain, Colonial Office, *Original Correspondence: Hong Kong, 1841–1951*, CO 129/104; a note on the on the correspondence states 'the office of Ass't Surveyor is £700 a year'; a second note in different handwriting states 'Mr. Bird to be appointed'. As Steve Tsang noted, 'To put the value of their salary into context, the cost of employing a Chinese servant in a European household was about £15 per annum, a bottle of wine about three shillings, a pound of cheese about two shillings, and a pound of pork only about three pence. In the same period [the 1860s] a senior official like the registrar general received a salary of £700, the second most senior official, the colonial secretary a salary of £1500.' Steve Tsang, *Governing Hong Kong: Administrative Officers from the 19th Century to the Handover to China, 1862–1997*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007) p. 21.
31 Carl Smith, '1866, 17 Feb. DP - estate of Capt. J.D. Bird of P. & O. Co. - send to Shearman G. Bird, 12 Shelley St.'; CS/1009/0008229, Government Records Service, http://search.grs.gov.hk. Retrieved 8 March 2021.
32 Johnathan Andrew Ferris, *Enclave to Urbanity: Canton, Foreigners and Architecture from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016) p. 76.
33 K. Bruner, J.K. Fairbank and R.J. Smith, *Entering China's Service: Robert Hart's Journals, 1854–1863* (Cambridge Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1986) p. 240; Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary*, 28 March 1863.
34 Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary*, 19 and 27 May 1863.
35 Richard J. Smith, John K. Fairbank and Katherine F. Bruner, eds., *Robert Hart and China's Early Modern Modernization, 1863–1866* (Cambridge, Mass and London: The Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991) pp. 303, 500.
36 Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary,* 17 March 1863 records that Shearman proposed a

salary of $400 monthly for the job at Shanghai offered by Ding. There is no record of how much, if anything, was actually paid for his work for Ding in Canton.

37 Lucilla Sharp, *Letter*, 10 June 1867,

38 Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary*, 16 February 1863. John Owen Whitehouse, *London Missionary Society Register of Missionaries, Deputations, etc., from 1796 to 1896* (London: London Missionary Society, 1896) entry for Frederick Storrs Turner, p. 194

39 Shearman Godfrey Bird, *Diary*, 13 February 1863.

40 R.W. Parsons, Secretary, Royal Engineers Widows Fund, to S.G. Bird, late Royal Engineers, *Letters*, 15 and 19 July 1862. The secretary of the Royal Engineers Widows Fund wrote 'With reference to your question respecting the Marriage, I can only offer you my opinion that if you produce a Certificate from the proper Colonial Authorities that the ceremony was duly performed as required by law, no difficulty is likely to arise detrimental to your Widow, provided you keep your subscription punctually paid up.' A letter from Mr Parsons to Amy dated 8 May 1873 informed her that she would earn an annual amount of £30, 'to which an addition of Twenty-five pounds is at present allowed'. It is assumed from this that proof of the marriage was submitted, although neither the certificate nor the marriage register (presumably the Consular Chaplain's) appears to exist now.

41 Joyce Stevens-Smith, *Beyond and Under Victoria's Sway* (Burton-in-Kendal: 2QT Publishing, 2011) p. 65.

42 Matilda Sharp, to Mrs Bird *Letter*, from Hong Kong, 12 February 1890. Granville Sharp, to Mrs Bird, *Letter*, 4 October 1898. Granville Sharp also mentions Shearman's brother Sotheby Godfrey Bird. They had more than a passing acquaintance—Sotheby was later to be an executor of Granville Sharp's estate. England and Wales National Probate Calendar, https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1904, accessed 27 February 2021. Sotheby and Shearman, who at times both used the signature SG Bird are often confused with each other in archival catalogues and by researchers.

43 Joyce Stevens-Smith, *Beyond and Under*, p. 69.

44 Joyce Stevens-Smith, *Beyond and Under*, collected and published many of Matilda Sharp's letters to her family. They show Matilda to be an acute observer of her surroundings, with a self-deprecating sense of humour and an openness to adventure.

45 Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 323.

46 Carl T. Smith, *Chinese Christians*, p. 199.

47 Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China*, pp. 65, 310-11.

48 Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 314.

49 Christopher Munn, 'Colonialism "in a Chinese atmosphere": the Caldwell affair and the perils of collaboration in early Hong Kong', in Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot, eds., *Imperialism in New Communities in East Asia, 1842-1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) p. 24.

50 Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 323.

51 Carl T. Smith, *Chinese Christians*, p. 200.

52 Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China*, p. 323.

53 Christopher Munn, 'Colonialism "in a Chinese Atmosphere"', p. 33.

54 Catherine Hall, 'Introduction', in Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p. 7; Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995) p. 177.
55 Carl T. Smith, 'Women on the Fringe of Expatriate Society', in Helen Siu, ed., *Merchants' Daughters: Women, Commerce and Regional Culture in South China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) p. 130.
56 Susanna Hoe, *The Private Life of Old Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. 69.
57 K. Bruner, J.K. Fairbank and R.J. Smith, eds., *Entering China's Service*, pp. 152, 210, 219.
58 Susanna Hoe, *The Private Life*, p. 69.
59 Susanna Hoe, *The Private Life*, p. 71.
60 Lucilla Sharp, *Letter*, 10 June 1867, (quoting Matilda).
61 *Letter*, Richard Graves MacDonnell, Hong Kong, to the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, October 28, 1867, CO 129/122, 237.
62 *Letter*, Shearman Godfrey Bird, Colchester, to the Undersecretary of State for the Colonies, April 15, 1869, CO 129/142, 128.
63 Shearman Godfrey Bird to his sister Edith Bird, Letter, July 4, 1869 'Goodbye, Edie dear—we all send our very best love, and wish we were still at Donyland—not that I regret having come here, as I had no choice in the matter'.

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