

The Edgar Snow I Knew

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I first met Edgar Snow in Inner Mongolia when I was on my way to work on a famine relief project in 1929. At that time I merely thought of him as an American journalist—the man who comes and watches others doing things, and while being mildly interested, is chiefly out to get a ‘story’ as part of his business of living. Through subsequent years I met him occasionally though, in the main, he lived in old Peking which I, who lived then in Shanghai, did not often visit. Then in 1936 there came a call from the Long March fighters of the Red Army for a foreign bourgeois journalist who would come to them and tell the truth as he saw it, so that the world could understand them. They also asked for a Western-style doctor.

At that time I attended group meetings of a Marxist Study Group in Shanghai, one other member of which was a young American doctor, George Hatem, afterwards known in China as Ma Hai-teh. George had been working with me in the factory inspectorate of the Shanghai International Settlement doing research on industrial health amongst Shanghai apprentices, and had progressed politically in the process. When the proposition came for him to drop all and go to the Red Army, he immediately accepted the challenge and offered his services. The next thing was to find the journalist, and Edgar Snow was approached.

It was not an easy path that was laid down in front of him. There was a vicious anti-communist campaign going on in China. Anyone with communist sympathies amongst the Chinese population was singled out, usually jailed and often shot. A whole horde of police and special service agents were engaged on this, ably assisted by foreign secret service organisations. There were vast Kuomintang armies spread out over the country, trying to kill off any accused of ‘Left’ thinking of any kind. The path to the Red Army, then at the last stages of the Long March, lay through the barren, wild, bandit-ridden North-west of China, a land of great poverty and denial, where officials would only travel if surrounded by many guards and high security care.

Despite the fact that he had very little ready cash with which to prepare for such an adventure, Ed consented to make the try. Ma Hai-teh set off first, but arrangements which had been made in Sian to smuggle him through failed and he was forced to return unhappily to Shanghai—which was certainly no encouragement to Ed. But next time things went better. Ed and George started out together and in Sian operations on the underground worked smoothly. Both got through the countryside out of that great walled North-western city and George was soon making his way to the Long March Army in Kansu while Ed was on his way to Pao-an, in north Shensi, which Mao

Tsetung and Chou En-lai, with a portion of the Long March Army, had already reached.

There were many hazards in the countryside. Not so long previously a foreign famine relief member had been killed by bandits. There was the threat to health and life; typhus from body lice reaped a very high mortality rate from foreigners—dysentery also. North-western food habits were very different from the foreigners'. There was the language difficulty; Ed had little Chinese, George none at all. Travel was laboriously slow and tiring and on the roads Ed's smattering of Mandarin was of little help with the broad Shensi dialect and its entirely new range of idiom.

In Pao-an and later in Yen-an Ed grew to know and admire Chairman Mao and Chou En-lai. He could well see that in these who wore the rough garb of peasants lay unsurpassed qualities of leadership. 'The new men' he called them and their comrades, in early recognition of what was to be their great role in history. He not only wrote of them clearly and with understanding, he loved them for the gallant, thoughtful fighters they were. For the first time a readable first-hand account of China's Red Army as a principled force of revolutionaries began to emerge and take form in his classic *Red Star Over China*—a book that went into many editions in a great many languages and did an enormous amount to enlighten readers all over the world. It was first published in 1937 and has been re-issued many times since then.

After its publication Ed worked in Peking on translations from some of the leading Chinese progressive writers of the time whose works were adding to the ferment amongst Chinese rebel youth. Stories by the incomparable Lu Hsun and those by Mao Tun and others were amongst these writings. He dedicated this work to Soong Ching Ling (the widow of Dr Sun Yat-sen), who ever remained in his

mind as one completely dedicated and incorruptible, an example for all.

Then came the storm of the Japanese attack on Shanghai, and Ed came to cover the story for US papers. Together with many Chinese city people we stood on top of a building in the old French Concession throwing down steamed bread to hungry folk in the Chinese city which had been cut off temporarily from food supplies. Together we stood on Bund building tops with Evans Carlson, the US Army officer, watching the burning of Pootung. Together we were actually looking at another scene in the first act in the great drama that spelt the liberation of one quarter of the world from the oppression of the old order, but for the moment our minds were dulled by the ferocity and chaos of it all. Said Ed, 'It is so big! How can one write it?'

Later I took my plan for the establishment of Gung Ho—the movement for a line of co-operative industry in the unoccupied regions of China—to Ed, so that he edited and added to it, getting it printed and published. It was then taken by international friends Ed had made to the provisional Chinese capital at Wuhan; not only taken there but sold to an unwilling Kuomintang as a popular front measure. Gung Ho became the 'in' thing of the moment and the setting up of the Indusco Committee by another friend of Ed's, Ida Pruitt, in the USA brought so much US sympathy and help that the Kuomintang—then almost ready to give up the fight—was immensely impressed and Gung Ho, as one of the efforts holding the Kuomintang to at least nominal resistance, became more important. Ed's role in the beginnings of all of this therefore was an essential one.

Ed wrote his next book, which came out in England as *Scorched Earth* and in the USA as *The Battle for Asia* and gave his story of many aspects of the struggle much to the increased understanding of peoples all over the world. In the setting up of the International Committee for

Gung Ho in Hongkong he was a staunch help; for without any International Committee there all financial help from outside China would have had to go through the Kuomintang—which would have been the end of it. The lust for any kind of foreign exchange by Kuomintang officials of the time was insatiable. They did not believe the war could be won and all wanted to make a nest-egg abroad. So many were absolute thieves and saboteurs.

To write *Scorched Earth* Ed went to live at Baguio in the Philippines and while there he stimulated the organisation of Gung Ho committees, getting me to travel over there during a convalescent period after a severe bout of malaria with which I had been laid low in Hongkong when on a quick visit there from Kiangsi to an International Committee meeting. Ed had the late Evans Carlson staying with him also and encouraged Evans to come with me to visit Gung Ho in the field. We went through the Japanese lines by boat at night from Waichow in Kwangtung to do this. Evans travelled with me through co-operative work in many provinces; and up to the Gung Ho work at Moulin in the New Fourth Army region; then back with me by bus and truck through Kwangsi and Kweichow to Chungking. Later Evans called his US marine raiders who operated at Guadalcanal 'Gung Ho Raiders' after our movement in China. (The term 'Gung Ho' has since established itself as an American idiom.—Editor)

Ed watched all this and continued to struggle for our support. But he was a journalist. He had to follow the news, so as the Second World War broke he was in many other parts of the world writing, editing, organising his own life anew in the USA. It was 1960 before he revisited China and once more met up with old friends, getting the material for his book *The Other Side of the River*. I travelled to old Yen-an with him, and also in Honan for a time. He did a great deal of other travel on that trip, which took several

months. In 1965 he came again but did not get his material published before the Cultural Revolution broke and all had changed again—so that the material he assembled has remained on one side. In 1970 he was invited again, an invitation that was charged with meaning for it was the first time that China had made a gesture to the West for some years. He came, and his interviews with Chairman Mao and Premier Chou received wide publicity in both the US and European news media. But he was already a sick man. He still wrote fast and well but got tired so much more easily than he once did. Yet he preserved a wonderfully youthful spirit and his strong sense of humour which carried him far. His wife Lois came with him this time and gave invaluable secretarial help, so that his articles appeared around the world in rapid succession. He himself was intensely thrilled by his interviews with Mao Tsetung and Chou En-lai, for his great admiration for these people's leaders had never dimmed—on the contrary, became ever brighter.

On his return to Switzerland sickness plagued him. He had had an operation before coming to China and now faced another. Yet his letters were always optimistic for his work, and for the future of China, looking forward to a new visit in the not too distant future.

But it was not to be. The scourge that mankind, with all its science, has been unable to eliminate took hold of him and carried him off on a cold February day in 1972 at his home at Eysins in Switzerland. His friends were good to him. Chairman Mao sent his old comrade, Ma Hai-teh, together with other Chinese doctors and nurses, to take care of him at the last. A friend of the people of China passed on, as so many who fought for the great change for one quarter of mankind have already passed on, with the world richer because they have lived and worked to the best of their understanding.

Although one knew he was very sick, when the telegramme brought the news

of his death it was a shock. The daily paper in Christchurch, New Zealand (where I then was) carried his picture, and as I looked again into those quiet, inquiring eyes I saw once more that cold, hard country of China's North-west and

felt for a moment the dust-laden winds that drum, carrying the thought of so many gallant fighters who have given their all so that others might live better. Ed, I felt, was in good company. Inadequately, I wrote the following lines:—

EDGAR SNOW—IN MEMORIAM

*Looking out at me
from the morning's paper
the quiet steady face
the understanding eyes
of the American dreamer
who saw how dreams
could be made come true
and who caught some
of the fire of the Chinese
Revolution and its leadership
so that along with them
did he fight with his pen
for all he came to believe in.*

*Yes he suffered all right
not simple to face those wild
North-west highlands in search
of the Red Army that
the then world called bandits
only to be exterminated;
not simple to get their
story and paint it so deftly
so that it rocked around
the world in every major
language.*

*He did not die rich
this good American; never
with more than just
enough to get by; yet
ever with ordinary people
millions of them
hanging on his words
gaining through him
new clarity.*

*Gone from us in body
his spirit living through
his writing is this man
whose heart was with
fighters and to whom
youth of the future will look
in gratitude for the classic
Red Star Over China
that ever remained his star
his hope for a saner
cleaner world to be.*