

## *Commodore Perry's Japan Expedition Press and Shipboard Theatre*

By S. E. Morison

ALTHOUGH an article on the subject has already been printed in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* for 1958,<sup>1</sup> more imprints and information have turned up during the writer's research on Commodore Matthew C. Perry. So it seems worthwhile again to describe the work of this seagoing printing press.

For Commodore Perry's Japan Expedition, which left Norfolk in December, 1852, the State Department provided a printing press, type, and ink, but not in time for the Commodore to take it with him to China in flagship *Mississippi*. The press was loaded in U.S.S. *Vermont* which Perry expected to join him in Hong Kong; but the Navy Department could not find the money to man this big ship of the line. Accordingly, the press, together with a collection of gifts to the Emperor of Japan—miniature railroad, Audubon's *Birds* and *Quadrupeds*, parlor stoves, cases of champagne, etc.—were off-loaded onto storeship *Lexington*. She, an uncommonly slow sailer, consumed several months in the voyage to China, finally arriving in late December, 1853, at Hong Kong, where Perry's squadron based between his two visits to Japan. Eager to leave for his second, treaty-making visit in order to forestall the Russians who

<sup>1</sup> XII, 242-52. Robert W. Lovett, the author, is in error stating "that Perry used the press to send information back to the Secretary of the Navy during the Expedition." Secretary Dobbin would have been outraged to receive a printed communication from the Commodore in advance of a manuscript letter.

were also trying to "open" Japan, Perry awaited the *Lexington's* arrival with growing impatience.

Since the State Department had not seen fit to supply paper for the press, the Commodore wrote to his flag interpreter, the sinologist S. Wells Williams, "in great haste" on 4 January 1854, begging him to procure paper at Canton. Perry's paymaster had already purchased "a quantity" of European-made paper at Hong Kong but not enough for probable needs.<sup>2</sup> Williams procured a lot of the flimsiest sort of mulberry-leaf paper and some blue rag paper, which Perry used to splice out his insufficient supply of low-quality white stock bought in Hong Kong. The press was capable of printing only single sheets of about 6 by 8 inches, but by running double sheets through twice, a number of two-page leaflets were produced.

Perry used the press for three purposes: (1) to print sailing directions for the harbors and coasts of Japan and Okinawa ("the Great Lew Chew") which his officers had surveyed; (2) to disseminate throughout the Squadron copies of official documents, such as President Fillmore's Letter to the Emperor and the treaty with Okinawa; and (3) to print playbills for theatrical performances on board his ships.

The sailing directions are evidence of Perry's desire to help all ships of all nations. He did not keep them for his own country's vessels; they were reprinted in his official Report, in the Hong Kong newspapers, and elsewhere. The official documents testify to his desire to let all hands know what their expedition was about. And the playbills, most interesting of the lot—as they were never reprinted—show what fun the sailors had in Perry's squadron.

It was the Commodore's idea (which interpreter Williams regarded as undignified and unworthy) to keep up seamen's morale during their long periods of swinging around the

<sup>2</sup> Perry to Williams, 4 Jan. 1854. Williams mss., Yale Univ. Library.

hook in some place of dubious shore attractions, by encouraging them to put on theatrical shows. For the same purpose he recruited a flag band of music under an Italian bandmaster, which gave concerts at sea and in port, greatly to the amazement of Japanese guests. On one occasion they called for an encore of the first number on the program. The encore was not well received; the interpreter gathered that what the Orientals really wanted was the preliminary tuning up, which most resembled their own music.

Theatrical performances began months before the press arrived, when the Squadron was lying at Hong Kong and other ports in the Pearl River estuary. British guests were invited to attend, and the Hong Kong newspapers—*China Mail* and *Friend of China*<sup>3</sup>—gave each one an enthusiastic write-up. For a performance on board *Susquehannah* at Whampoa Anchorage, we also have a detailed account by a cabin boy of another ship. The deck forward of the wheelhouse was the stage, with “well painted scences and stage properties.” Female characters were represented by ships’ boys “appropriately wigged and dressed.” The entertainment began “with a very pritty tablieu formed of flags and arms draping a monument upon which were inscribed the names of some of the most renouned American naval heroes, while one of the men in Man O War uniform sang a patriotic song which was highly applauded and encored.” There followed two one-act plays, *Bombastes Furioso* and *Family Jars*, interspersed with songs, all rewarded with rounds of applause “from the officers and crews of the various ships present besides whom there were several merchant captains attended by lady visitors.”<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant Preble, also one of the audience, said that he had seen worse acting on the professional stage.<sup>5</sup> Commodore Perry has been

<sup>3</sup> Files in Library of University of Hong Kong.

<sup>4</sup> H. F. Graff, ed. *Bluejackets with Perry in Japan* (1952) pp. 92-93.

<sup>5</sup> G. H. Preble *The Opening of Japan* (Norman, 1962) p. 61.

accused of having no sense of humor, but he always attended these performances, laughed at the jokes and led the applause.

Unfortunately the Commodore could not attend the performance, followed by a "magnificent supper" on board *Susquehannah* in Victoria Harbor, Hong Kong, around 1 December. An attack of arthritis confined him to his cabin. The *China Mail's* Hong Kong rival *The Friend of China* reported this entertainment in detail, enthusiastically:

The *Troupe of Funny fellows*, as the Americans on board the U.S.S. *Susquehanna* denominate themselves, gave their promised Entertainment on the night of Monday last, and a very excellent entertainment it proved to be. A pleasant easterly breeze, and a smooth sea rendered the passage from the shore to the Vessel an agreeable trip, and the comfortable seats on the wheel bridge, forming the boxes of the Theatre, together with the polite attentions of the officers to the many visitors, including a good sprinkling of officers of H.M.'s 59th Regiment and of the several Men of War in port, were in excellent keeping with the endeavours of the crew, of whose means the theatricals were provided.

The pieces selected were the celebrated Drama of *Rob Roy* and the very laughable farce of "The Old Gentleman" with a miscellaneous interlude of Songs and a recitation. . . . We had not expected to hear such "gude braid scotch" from an American representative of Bailie Nicol Jarvie. . . . The parts of Helen McGregor, Rob Roy, the Osbaldistons and Dougal, were also excellently filled;—the Tartan dresses being apparently as well made by Chinese as if manufactured by Highlanders about the Clachan of Aberfoil.

But what may be said of the Comic singing?—simply that it was superlatively good.—Mr. Coursey's *encored* song of "I've been to California" being followed by Mr. Buck's recitation, (in Nigger character) and 'Walk your chalks Ginger blue' in first rate style. So enraptured indeed were the audience with Mr. Buck's dancing, that with a repetition of it the performance should have concluded. . . .

The great width of the *Susquehanna's* deck enabled the Amateurs to fit up a Theatre on the starboard side of the foremast as large, positively, as some of the minor places of performance in England; and the scenery and decorations were admirable. Personally we take this opportunity to return our sincere thanks to the *Susquehanna's* "troupe of funny fellows" for the pleasure their performance yielded, and trust that before their vessel leaves the harbour we shall again be enabled to report on their kind endeavours to amuse the public.

Nor did the *China Mail* deny praise to an entertainment on board *Powhatan* at Christmastide:

One of the most pleasing performances witnessed in Hongkong, either ashore or afloat, was given on board the U.S.S. Steamer *Powhatan* last evening. The invitations were very general, from their Excellencies the Governor and Admiral downwards, and the welcome accorded to every visitor was of the most cordial description. The "Ethiopian Minstrels" performed their parts to perfection, amid roars of laughter. The theatre, on the ample deck, was most tastefully formed of the flags of all nations; and below, the tables groaned with good things for the refreshment, after the performances were over, of as many guests as could be accommodated.

This *Powhatan* performance was so successful that it was repeated frequently in the year 1854, and for these we are fortunate to possess three playbills, two of them printed on the Expedition Press. The sailors presented a typical "Nigger Minstrel Show," that folk-cultural form which sprang up in 1843, lasted well into the present century, and is not yet dead in England.<sup>6</sup> Minstrel shows were played partly by Negroes, of whom there were a considerable number in Perry's squadron, but mostly by black-faced white sailors. A line of banjo players was drawn up, and two "end men"—"Mistah Bones" who played castanets, and "Mistah Tambo" who played the tambourine—exchanged jokes and insults umpired by a faultlessly dressed gentleman called the Interlocutor. Popular songs were sung and dances danced to the accompaniment of the banjo orchestra. The entertainment was concluded by a burlesque on some popular play or opera, in Negro dialect. The *Powhatan* minstrels made such a hit with their home-made parody of Bulwer Lytton's romantic play, *The Lady of Lyons*, transferring the scene from the banks of the Loire to those of the Mississippi, that the Hong Kong *Friend of China* printed the dialogue in full, and the *Powhatan* company included *The Lady of Lyons* in all subsequent performances at Okinawa, Hakodate and

<sup>6</sup> See Mark Twain's description of one in Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain in Eruption* (N.Y., 1940), pp. 110-18, and S. E. Morison, *Oxford History of the American People* (N.Y., 1965) pp. 495-96. These minstrel shows are seldom given now in America, as they have become offensive to Negroes; but the writer witnessed a very good one in London at Christmastide, 1966.

Shimoda. In each instance Perry invited native gentlemen to attend, and the Japanese audiences roared with laughter over the dancing and acting, although they could understand nothing of the dialogue. One of the favorite subjects of the Japanese artists who visited the Squadron was the black-faced minstrels strumming and dancing. All men mentioned on the playbills were seamen; none were officers or chief petty officers. One wonders whether some did not become professional actors after being paid off in the United States.

The press was placed on board U.S.S. *Powhatan* in January 1854, prior to Perry's departure from China for his second visit to Japan, and it followed his flag to the *Mississippi*. What eventually became of it is unknown. The first "Ethiopian" program which has been preserved, that of 26 March 1854, records a performance given on board the flagship in Tokyo Bay, following the conclusion of the Treaty of Kanagawa. Some of the Japanese interpreters may have been invited to this, but Perry evidently considered it not dignified enough for the imperial commissioners, who were given a banquet on board *Powhatan* next day. The second program is that of a similar performance on 29 May on board the flagship in the harbor of Hakodate, Hokkaido, a port opened to American ships by the treaty. This performance had a highly appreciative Japanese audience. It was repeated in the harbor of Shimoda on 22 June; but for this we have no Expedition Press program, only a reprint, probably done ashore in Hong Kong. We know from a diarist of the Expedition that the "Ethiopian Minstrels" also performed on board the then flagship, *Mississippi*, in the harbor of Naha, Okinawa, on 15 or 16 July 1854. All the Okinawan nobility were invited, as was Dr. Bettelheim, the local Anglican missionary, with his wife and daughters; and all were delighted. No program of this performance has survived.

A check list of all known issues follows, in chronological order. A more detailed account of each, with dimensions, etc., will be found in Lovett, *op. cit.*

Ethiopian Concert. United States Steam Frigate "Powhatan." Undated, but date added in ink, "Sunday Evening, the 26 inst." [March 1854]. Copy pasted into Lieutenant George H. Preble's ms. Diary, Mass. Hist. Soc. Reproduced by Lovett *op. cit.* Plate II.

Japan Expedition Press. United States Steam Frigate "Powhatan," Simoda, Japan, May 1st, 1854. 2 pages. Letter From the President of the United States. This is followed by "Translation of the Answer to the President's Letter . . . through the Imperial Commissioners, 23 February 1854," in English and Dutch. U. S. Naval Records, National Archives, Washington, D. C.

Japan Expedition Press. United States Steam Frigate Powhatan, Harbor of Hakodadi . . . May 27th, 1854. Two pp. P. 1 is Sailing Directions for Napha, Island Great Lew Chew. Signed by Lieutenant Silas Bent, Macao, Oct. 1st, 1853. P. 2 is Oonting, or Port Melville, Island Great Lew-chew sailing directions; plus Sailing Directions and Observations Upon Lloyd's Harbor, Bonin Islands, from reports of Acting Masters Madigan and Bennett of U.S.S. *Saratoga* and *Susquehanna*. Signed by Lieutenant Bent, Macao, Oct. 1st, 1853. Mulberry-leaf paper. Naval Acad. Mus. Annapolis; U. S. N. Records, Nat. Arch. Page 2 only in Perry mss. belonging to Mrs. August Belmont of New York.

Ethiopian Concert. United States Steam Frigate Powhatan, Hakodadi, island of Yesso, Empire of Japan. May 29th [1854]. Naval Acad. Mus. Annapolis. Mrs. Belmont's Perry mss., on mulberry-leaf paper.

A similar program at Shimoda, June 22, 1854, pasted into Preble's ms. diary, is printed in green ink, with type different

from the others. It was probably printed later in Hong Kong. See Lovett *op. cit.* p. 251.

Japan Expedition Press. U. S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, at Sea, June 27th, 1854. Appointment of pilots for American vessels at Shimoda, and their fees. With Dutch translation. Kress Library, Harvard Business School.

Japan Expedition Press, U. S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, at Sea, June 28th, 1854. Regulations Respecting Pilots, and the Supplying of American Vessels Entering the Port of Shimoda. With Dutch translation. Signed by Kura-Kawa-Kahei, Lieutenant Governor, and M. C. Perry, June 23. Phila. Mar. Mus. and U. S. N. Records, Nat. Arch. Reproduced in Lovett, *op. cit.*, Plate I.

Japan Expedition Press. U. S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, Napa, Lewchew, July 7th, 1854. Sailing Directions for the Harbor of Simoda, by Lieut. W. L. Maury, U.S.N. 2 pp. Kress Library, Harvard Business School.

Japan Expedition Press. U. S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, At Sea, July 17th, 1854. Compact Between the United States and the Kingdom of Lew Chew, Signed at Napa, Great Lew Chew, the 11th day of July, 1854. Phila. Mar. Mus. and Kress Lib. Harv. Bus. Sch.

Japan Expedition Press. U. S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, At Sea, July 20th, 1854. Sailing Directions for Hakodadi, by Lieut. Wm. L. Maury, U.S.N. Phila. Mar. Mus. and Kress Lib. Harv. Bus. School.

Japan Expedition Press. U.S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, At Sea, July 21st, 1854. Additional Regulations Agreed to between Perry and Imperial Commissioners about Shimoda, 17 June 1854. Signed by Perry. Phila. Mar. Mus. and U. S. N. Records, Nat. Arch.

Japan Expedition Press. U.S. Steam Frigate Mississippi, Hong Kong, Sept. 4th, 1854. Sailing Directions for Yedo.



By Lieut. Wm. L. Maury, U. S. Navy, Phila. Mar. Mus. and Kress Lib. Harv. Bus. School. This copy on blue paper.

Seaman McCauley states in his diary<sup>7</sup> for 3 June 1854 that two of his friends on board amused themselves by printing a daily diary of events, in which they abused each other editorially in the style of Dickens's famous election campaign in *The Pickwick Papers*. But none of these issues are known to survive.

The Royal Navy gave Commodore Perry the compliment of adopting his method to keep up seamen's morale.<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant George M. Preble, in his diary for 28 October 1854, states: "Last Friday evening there was a capital theatrical performance on board the *Comus* which I forgot to mention. The Officers performing one of the plays and the crew the last. I will send you the bill printed on satin."<sup>9</sup> The bill, printed on yellow satin, is pasted into Preble's manuscript diary which is at the Massachusetts Historical Society. As the type differs from that of Perry's press, it must have been printed ashore.

Thus, this little shipboard press deserves honorable mention in the history of American typography. It printed the first accurate sailing directions for several Japanese and Okinawan harbors, which were reprinted in the Hong Kong papers and in subsequent Admiralty and American pilot books for many, many years. It acquainted Perry's sailors with what they were there for, and what they had accomplished. And it printed playbills for shipboard merriment which, even after a hundred years, exhale an atmosphere of mid-century fun and frolic.

<sup>7</sup> Printed in A. B. Cole, ed. *With Perry in Japan* (1942).

<sup>8</sup> However, as Lt. Com. P. K. Kemp has pointed out, theatricals were held on board H.M.S. *Horatio* in 1816. This event was recorded in *A Narrative of my Professional Adventures (1790-1839)* by Sir William Henry Dillon (London, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> p. 353.



PLATE 4a. Printer's ornaments mainly reproduced from books in MWA, NjP, and Welch collections. Figs. 204, 208 are reproduced from 965.10 (MWA), 965.3 (NjP) respectively. They and figs. 188-203, 205-207, 209-217, 219-239 have had lines and outlines strengthened similar to what was done for the figures on plates 1 and 4. Black Koh-i-noor Universal Drawing Ink in a Koh-i-noor Rapidograph Technical Fountain Pen, with an "ooo" pen point, was used. The lines were darkened, when looked at under a low powered dissecting microscope. Fig. 218, is a composite of two prints of the battle scene cut from William Williams' *Martial Wisdom Recommended*. Boston: T. Fleet, for Daniel Henchman, 1737, (MWA), Evans 4210. The left half of the cut was printed lighter and superimposed on a darker print of the illustration, which made the lines of the entire cut clearer and not need retouching. The nick in the left rider's shield is as extensive as it is in the same cut when used in 1036.1.

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