



# Decadence Mandchoue: The China Memoirs of Sir Edmund Trelawny Backhouse

By Edmund Trelawny Backhouse

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In 1898 a young Englishman walked into a homosexual brothel in Peking and began a journey that he claims took him all the way to the bedchamber of imperial China's last great ruler, the Empress Dowager Tz'u Hsi. Published now for the first time, the controversial memoirs of Sinologist Sir Edmund Backhouse provide a unique and shocking glimpse into the hidden world of China's imperial palace, with its rampant corruption, grand conspiracies, and uninhibited sexuality. Backhouse was made notorious by Hugh Trevor-Roper's 1976 bestseller *Hermit of Peking*, which accused Backhouse of fraudulence and forgery. This work, written shortly before Backhouse's death in 1943, lay for decades forgotten and unpublished in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, dismissed by Trevor-Roper as nothing more than "a pornographic novelette." But *Décadence Mandchoue* is much more than that. Alternately shocking and lyrical, it is the masterwork of a linguistic genius—a tremendous literary achievement and a sensational account of the inner workings of the Manchu dynasty in the years before its collapse in 1911. If true, Backhouse's chronicle completely reshapes contemporary historians' understanding of the era and provides an account of the Empress Dowager and her inner circle that can only be described as intimate.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Few in [Sir Edmund Backhouse's] time wrote so brazenly . . . about surging homosexual desire and its unbridled practice in such an exotic setting. This edition makes available to readers, for the first time, a little gem of English erotic literature from the pen of a very queer Englishman abroad." —Robert Aldrich, professor of European history, University of Sydney

"Though Backhouse's credibility must certainly be challenged, does this mean that we discard all of *Décadence Mandchoue* automatically? His reputation as a source of Peking information has not been seriously challenged and even if he was relaying gossip, this was gossip that was taken seriously." —Frances Wood, Chinese curator, British Library

"In retrospect, the cultural transgressiveness of Sir Edmund seems to me much more worthy of appreciation than his sexual unconventionality." —T. H. Barrett, professor of East Asian history, University of London

"Derek Sandhaus has done a fantastic work in editing this text . . . For readers interested in literature (notably travel literature) on the one hand and sexuality on the other, its value is obvious and indisputable." —Vincent Goosaert, adjunct professor of religious and cultural studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong

"One of the most outrageous, colourful and hilarious memoirs ever written." —Frank Dikötter, chair of humanities, University of Hong Kong, and author, *Mao's Great Famine*

"Outrageous . . . Backhouse's memoirs remain historically highly controversial." —*Daily Telegraph* (April 1, 2011)

"[A] remarkable account . . ." —*South China Morning Post* (April 3, 2011)

#### About the Author

**Edmund Trelawny Backhouse** was a translator who worked in China for the British Foreign Service as well as for *London Times* correspondent George Morrison. He is the coauthor of *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* and *China Under the Empress Dowager*. **Derek Sandhaus** is the chief editor of Earnshaw Books and the author of *Tales of Old Hong Kong* and *Tales of Old Peking*.

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