



An Insular Possession

Timothy Mo

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The author of the acclaimed *Sour Sweet* presents a sweeping historical novel about corruption and greed, class, race, love and treachery set in Macao and Canton before and during the Opium Wars of the 19th century. Nominated for England's prestigious Booker Prize.

An Insular Possession Details

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Marc Bordier says

I spent the last three weeks trying to get into An Insular Possession, Timothy Mo's novel about the 1839-1842 Opium war, a conflict between Britain and China which originated from diplomatic tensions caused by the trade of opium in Canton and Macau. Yet, despite all my efforts, I could not get into the book, and I dropped off after just three hundred pages, not even halfway through... Historical fiction is one of my favorite literary genres, and I was initially more than eager to immerse myself into this story of two Americans working for one of the trading houses who participated in the opium business. The first chapter looked promising, with its beautiful and picturesque description of the Pearl river as a symbolic highway of history, life and commerce. Yet, after a few pages, I felt annoyed by the absence of a plot. I kept on turning the pages, but what I was reading looked more like a loose collection of events rather than a constructed narrative with a sense of progression. I was also annoyed by interruptions from the long, stern, tangled and pompous articles from The Canton Monitor, a pro-British newspaper which the author uses as a means to convey a sense of the bias and tension between the British and Chinese communities. In the end, after I realized how much I disliked reading it, the book simply fell from my hands.

In a review of Timothy Mo's book in the New York Times, Robin W. Winks draws upon an essay from the newspaper founded by the two American characters of the novel to explain the differences between the Western and the Chinese novel: whereas a Western novel moves by virtue of its plot, "a veritable engine which advances the tale along its rails to a firm destination, [...] the native novel ... moves in a path which is altogether circular," being made up of separate episodes joined only by the loosest threads. Maybe I am just too much of a Western reader to fully appreciate Timothy Mo's writing.

Ellen says

It took me a little while to get into this story but I am pleased I persevered I absolutely devoured this book it was short listed for the 1986 Booker Prize and rightly so. The first page describes how the river rolls past taking everything in its wake, children falling off fragile native crafts, drunken sailors falling from ships. The victims swept out to sea.

This is where the commerce plays out but this river is dangerous and a nuisance. The reader gets transported by the author's descriptive narrative to so many places. Canton 1833. Walter and Gideon two young Americans become involved in the war on the opium trade through their attacks on a rival paper. This makes their lives very precarious.

Amador says

Absolutely fabulous historical fiction about the beginnings of Hong Kong

Andy Todd says

Cracking pace, a racy historical novel.

Christian says

No rating, as didn't finish. Managed about 250 pages.

I wanted to give this the benefit of the doubt, but concluded in the end that life's just a bit too short. I suppose alarm bells should have rung with one of the reviews on the back of this edition describing An Insular Possession as "leisurely". There's leisurely, and then there's lethargic. This felt very much like the latter, with the focus of the narrative too often not providing sufficient interest. Frustrating, when considering the historical period; it shouldn't have been difficult to craft a story, from the raw material, with a little more intrigue and dynamism.

In fairness, this may be one of those books which needs to catch you in the right mood. With that in mind, will maybe try again somewhere down the line.

Lena Lenina says

As a foreigner living in Hong Kong, I was excited to read a book that takes you to the days the Brits have set foot on Hong Kong island for the first time. Alas, that happened about 10 pages before the book ended. Somehow I got very little new information or perspectives. That said, half way through the book the details of the military actions started to appear. I soon started skipping these, as I, the girl that I am, found it unbearable to be reading about ships' maneuvering, guns reloading, soldiers in formation.

The book is written as consisting of fragments of correspondence and newspaper articles intercepting the prose. This gives Possessions a nice factual feel, but makes a stumbly read. The reading is complicated further by the language. The language of the 19th century is adopted, which is great fun ones you get into it. IF you get into it.

The plot - incoherent. A love story, which falls off the pages as unexpectedly as it appears. Most of the plot has to be deduced, pieced together from the flying around exerts. Very satisfying last paragraphs though and I'm a sucker for an elegant ending.

Simon Cooper says

There is an epic extended battle sequence towards the end of this book, told exhaustingly from the POV of one of the main characters, that is one the top grandiose set ppieces I can remeber reading.

Douglas Roberts says

I spent a long time reading this for various boring reasons, one of which was that I found it tough to get to grips with. The narrative shifts away into newspaper articles and correspondence frequently, and while they serve to further the historical context and inform the plot, I found them a bit jarring and hard going. Something about the time it took added to the experience though, and now I feel like it's left a more lasting

impression for it. This is a historical novel that slips its characters in amongst real figures from the expatriate communities in Canton and Macao, and later Hong Kong, before and during the first opium war. I knew the bare bones of the conflict, one of the more insane-seeming results of the colonial century, but the novel encouraged reading the history alongside, so by the midway point I could spot the events and battles and major figures as they arose. It follows two American traders in Canton who become disillusioned with the business when their firm decides to take the plunge and start trading opium to catch up to its competitors, and leave to set up a newspaper, rival to a preexisting rag which trumpets the British Imperial line. The newspaper extracts account for most of the progression of time (the novel covers seven years) and set the scene for vignettes featuring the characters, fictional and non-fictional rather blurring together. One main character, Chase, learns Chinese in secret, which sets him up to become embedded with the colonial forces as a translator and become our eyes on the front of the war late in the novel. There's a large amount to take in: historical situation, the referential newspaper asides and their implications for the plot, subtle relationships between characters, and the vast implications for the future that we have now seen, the creation of a community for a hundred and fifty years squeezed between two empires, and later between the first and second worlds.

Jeff Jones says

Fabwlas

Murray says

Powerful recreation of colonial life and times - which I read with great satisfaction when it came out, too long ago to remember more than an outline.

Toby says

I found it quite hard to get into the story but very glad that I persevered. A good lens on the period in history with some gripping action.
