*Chapter 4*

# *A Place in the Community: 1927–1941*

MISS Edna Sabrina Atkins had arrived in Hong Kong to teach at St. Stephen's Girls' College in October, 1919. In 1923 she had become the first Warden of the newly-founded St. Stephen's Hall. In 1925 she had been appointed the first Warden (Deputy Headmistress) of Fairlea under Mrs. Cheung. By May, 1927, when she took over as Acting Principal of St. Stephen's Girls' College, she had therefore had experience of all three of

Miss Edna Sabrina Atkins

the C.M.S. Associated Schools. Although it was not until April, 1929, that Miss Atkins was formally appointed as Principal of St. Stephen's Girls' College, her responsibility as Principal of the school actually dated from 1927. It was to last until August, 1949.

## *Historical Background: 1927–1941*

After the split with the Communists in 1927, Jiang Jieshi and the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) had set up the Nationalist Government in Nanjing: this was to rule for ten years. They did not, however, have complete control of the vast country of China. Some warlords still held sway in certain areas and the Communists were in power in others. From 1930 to 1934 Jiang used his military power in several campaigns to try to crush the Communists. Even when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 Jiang still concentrated on defeating the Communists rather than declaring war on the invading power of Japan. At about the same time terrible floods in the Yangzi basin were causing millions of refugees to flee the devastation, resulting in untold hardship and suffering for the Chinese peasantry.

In 1934 Jiang's campaign against the Communists in Jiangxi precipitated their epic Long March of 1934–1935. Of the 100,000 people who started on the March, only 20,000 reached Yan'an, but their courage and endurance, under the leadership of Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung), proved seminal for the Chinese Communist Party and its future revolution.

Hostilities between Japan and China continued intermittently throughout the thirties. Yet Jiang Jieshi still acted on his belief that the Chinese Communists must be defeated before he could turn his attention to the Japanese invaders. Nevertheless public opinion was rapidly turning against this view, and Zhang Xueliang (Chang Hsüeh-liang), the 'Young Marshal', previously one of Jiang's supporters, urged alliance with the Communists in the so-called Xi'an Incident of 1936. With Zhou Enlai (Chou En-lai) negotiating a deal on behalf of the Communists, an uneasy truce was settled with the Nationalists whereby their joint efforts would be used against the foreign invader.

The full horror of the Japanese invasion began in July, 1937 when they took Beijing and Shanghai before pressing on to Nanjing, Jiang Jieshi's Nationalist capital. After a brutal attack Nanjing fell in December: the 'Rape of Nanjing' horrified the world. Jiang was forced to transfer the seat of the Guomindang Government to Chongqing. The whole of eastern

China was taken by mid-1938, and Guangzhou and its surroundings in October, 1938.

Jonathan Spence has shown how, by 1941, the united front of the Nationalist and Communist forces was almost at breaking point.[1] Then, on 8th December, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. Only then did the West begin to see China as an ally and to support it by flying in equipment. This went to the Guomindang in Chongqing, since this was 'China's legally recognized Government'.[2]

The war in Europe had started in September, 1939. In early 1941 Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, refused to increase Hong Kong's garrison, having decided that the colony was indefensible. When, on 8th December, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, they also bombed Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong and destroyed its few planes. A land invasion of the New Territories also began. The Japanese soon reached the Kowloon Peninsula, and finally invaded Hong Kong Island itself. Despite a brave defence by Canadian, Indian and British forces, with courageous support from the Hong Kong Volunteers, Hong Kong was forced to surrender on Christmas Day, 1941.

## *Hong Kong: Society and Schooling*

The years before the Japanese occupation saw only slow changes in society and schooling in Hong Kong.

Sir Cecil Clementi (Governor, 1925–1930) advocated limited constitutional reform but, apart from a slightly enlarged Legislative Council, little came of this. He did, however, appoint Sir Shouson Chou, in 1928, as the first Chinese on the Executive Council. Even this appointment caused criticism and the Governor had an uphill task in a colony which maintained rigid divisions in society. It was a place where class distinctions and race differences determined whether social contact was possible. A missionary school like St. Stephen's was one of the few places where the cultures and races could meet and interact on a more equal footing — a privilege often noted by the missionaries themselves.

There was a marked discrepancy between the salaries paid to Chinese and expatriates in all spheres of life, teachers included. The salaries received by teachers in grant schools were lower than comparable salaries in government schools. There was no equal pay for women, and locally qualified teachers were often paid less than their overseas counterparts.

Chinese women teachers in grant schools like St. Stephen's therefore lost out on all three counts: they were very poorly paid.

Graduate Teachers fared best, but degrees from Chinese universities were not always recognised. Then there were Certificated Teachers, who had qualified from the Hong Kong vernacular normal schools (teacher-training colleges). Lastly, there were Passed Student Teachers, often former students of the school concerned, who took evening classes at the Technical Institute to become qualified.

During Sir Cecil Clementi's Governorship there was some development of schooling in Hong Kong, but government expenditure on primary schooling remained low and individual secondary schools were left largely to their own devices. It was not until the time of his successor, Sir William Peel (1930–1935), and the *Burney Report* of 1935 that significant progress towards an education system was made.

Edmund Burney was a member of the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies which had been set up in England in 1929. He was an Inspector of Schools (H.M.I.) and arrived in Hong Kong in 1935 to investigate the colony's educational system. His report was highly critical of the lack of direction in education and the inadequate funding of primary schools. He pointed out that the Government was giving the least help to those least able to afford schooling.

Burney commented that most of the Government's funding of schooling was going to secondary and higher education, with the twelve government secondary schools and thirteen grant schools — all English-medium — getting the lion's share. He therefore strongly advocated a move towards better financial and pedagogical support for vernacular primary schools.

Burney found that most secondary school pupils were very weak in spoken English and comprehension, even when their written work was of a reasonable standard. He discussed the question of the medium of instruction which was to bedevil Hong Kong's schools for decades. His report questioned the predominance of English-medium schools and suggested that education policy in the colony should concentrate on Chinese studies. 'Education should be gradually re-orientated so as eventually to secure for the pupils, first, a command of their own language sufficient for all needs of thought and expression, and secondly a command of English limited to the satisfaction of vocational demands.'[3]

By the 1920s the University of Hong Kong had taken over the running of the Junior Local Examination, which students took in Class II, as well as

the Matriculation Examination taken in Class I. In 1930 it had been announced that, from 1934, the Junior Local Examination would be abolished, and that students would take a School Certificate Examination, to include Matriculation, in Class I.[4] This arrangement lasted for three years only. Burney thought it was a disastrous plan, and complained that the university matriculation requirements seemed to be directing the whole of schooling.[5] How often that complaint was to echo down the years!

Instead, Burney proposed that the School Certificate should be taken in Class II and be seen to be a course complete in itself. The top Class I could then be for matriculation for the university. This policy, with School Certificate taken in Class II, was adopted in 1937. The new School Certificate Examination was run by a syndicate, made up of heads of schools and members of the Education Department, and with responsibility for devising syllabuses and setting and marking papers.

Another recommendation which came into effect in 1937 was the setting up of a training course for teachers of physical education, again thanks to the *Burney Report*.

Meanwhile progress had also been made in modernising the teaching of Chinese in Hong Kong, following an earlier move in this regard in China itself. In 1930 a committee had been set up in Hong Kong 'to examine the Chinese syllabus for English [Anglo-Chinese] schools with a view to the revision thereof'.[6]

The Grant Code was revised in 1938. Through this revision the Government sought to exercise more control over the grant schools whose heads reacted by insisting on maintaining their freedom and initiative in running the schools as they wished.[7]

Limited educational reform did begin in the years under review, but it was severely strained by the great influx of population from China which started in 1931. It is thought that about three-quarters of a million people entered Hong Kong in the three years of 1937, 1938 and 1939, bringing the total population up to 1.6 million.[8] All services, schooling amongst them, were overwhelmed.



## *The Church and the Church Missionary Society*

Some missionaries like Archdeacon E. Judd Barnett in Hong Kong had long realised that a paternalistic approach was not only unacceptable but counterproductive and that it was essential for the Church in Hong Kong

C.M.S. Conference, 1931, in the porch of St. John's Cathedral
*Left to right, standing*: Mr. Asche, Revd. Arthur Stewart, Revd. Shann, Revd. Halward, Mrs. Shann, Revd. Carpenter, Gertrude Bendelack, Miss Dillon, Dorothy Wise, Miss Jennings; *seated (behind)*: Miss Beswick, Kathleen Martin, Mrs. Carpenter, Mary Baxter, Revd. Jenkins, Miss George; *seated (front)*: Revd. Ernest Martin, Miss Clarke, Edna Atkins, Beatrice Pope, Alice Cooper, Miss Hollis.

to become indigenous and self-directing and not to depend on overseas missionary workers. Before he retired he had set up a Missionary Conference on devolution and it was largely due to his influence and to that of his successor as C.M.S. Local Secretary, the Revd. C. I. Blanchett, that the Diocesan Board of Missions was founded in Hong Kong in 1929. This was given responsibility, under the Standing Committee of the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui for oversight of missionary work, including that of foreign missionaries, of whom there were still about fifty.[9]

Although this board was discontinued in 1935 it had had its impact, and missionaries came to accept the authority of the local Church. A further move towards devolution was also influenced in the 1930s by the financial problems of the C.M.S., both at Headquarters and in Hong Kong. These problems were partly connected with the world depression. It was, nevertheless, still possible to send teacher-missionaries to Hong Kong as they could be attached to the grant-aided Church schools where their salaries were paid by the schools and not by the C.M.S.

Bishop Ronald Owen Hall succeeded Bishop Duppuy in 1932 and was consecrated Bishop of the Diocese of Victoria (Hong Kong) and South China. In R. O. (as Bishop Hall was affectionately known) there was another strong force for devolution: it was not long before the diocese had its first Chinese Bishop: Archdeacon Mok Shau Tsang of Guangzhou was consecrated Assistant Bishop of the diocese in 1934.

Bishop Hall made an immediate impact. The Revd. Harry Wittenbach called him 'a man of such deep spirituality and lovable personality'.[10] Arthur Stewart (still in Hong Kong, although retired as Principal of St. Paul's College) wrote that 'R. O. is simply magnificent as Bishop and has done wonders in this short while'.[11]

In some areas of China itself, anti-foreign feeling had continued to run high after the Shanghai shooting incident of 1925, and missionaries, together with their Chinese converts, were included in this antipathy. Many missionaries from western and southern China had been forced to leave, and they must have felt that there was little chance of being able to return.

In mid-1928, the International Missionary Council had held a conference in Jerusalem. Missionaries from China, C.M.S. missionaries included, were amongst those attending. Despite the anti-foreign sentiment, missionaries still hoped to return to China. Many pinned their hopes on Jiang Jieshi and the Guomindang, only to be disappointed. It was under Jiang and the Nationalists in the 1920s that mission schools were seen as 'an affront to national pride' and legislation introduced 'to stop proselytising in schools'.[12]

As early as 1924 the Chinese authorities had started to control missionary activities in education. In December, 1925, the Warlord Government had issued guidelines for missionary schools and, on 10th January, 1927, the Guomindang promulgated a law concerning foreign schools. In 1928, after the Nanjing Government had been set up, this was further clarified to cover four main points. First, the chairman and the majority of the members of the governing school council must be Chinese; second, the head of the school must be Chinese; third, the curriculum must follow the standard curriculum laid down. It was the fourth requirement which was most problematical: the school's aim must not be to evangelise, and neither religious teaching nor acts of worship could be made compulsory.[13] The question was: Could a school still be considered a Christian school under this last requirement?

In 1930, under the Hong Kong Diocesan Board of Missions, a committee called the Diocesan Board of Education was set up. Its work was

to draw up a graded religious studies syllabus, and to write religious studies textbooks and hymn books. It was also concerned that some C.M.S. primary schools in Guangdong Province were not including religious studies in their curriculum, and the board therefore searched for ways in which to make this compulsory, contrary to Chinese Government policy.

At C.M.S. St. Hilda's in Guangzhou, Gertrude Bendelack, as Principal, categorically refused to register the school. She believed that it could no longer be considered a Christian school under these restrictions, particularly those of the prohibition of compulsory worship and religious teaching. St. Hilda's therefore continued for a while as an unrecognised or illegal establishment, and its students were considered to be unqualified and were not permitted to go on to university studies.

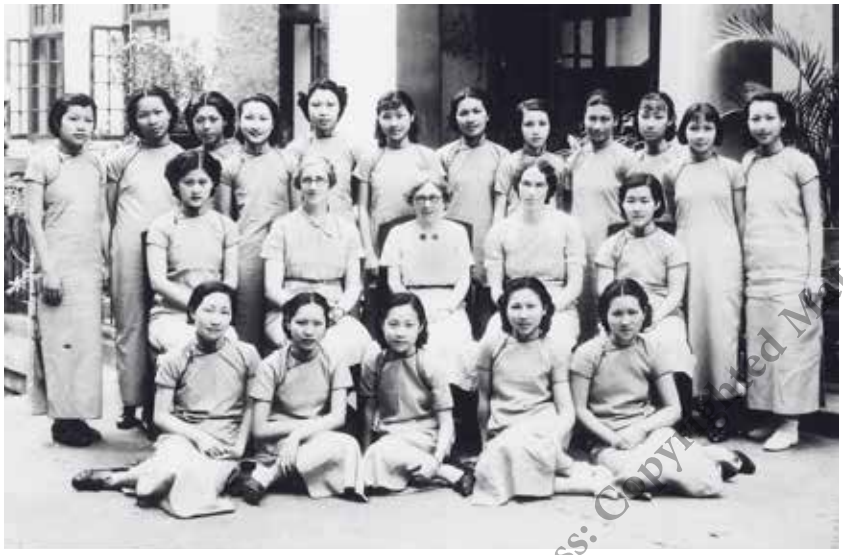
The position of St. Hilda's was referred to the Diocesan Board of Missions, which decided in 1934 that St. Hilda's was now operating illegally and must be registered. Gertrude Bendelack was seriously ill at the time, and was replaced by a Chinese head. St. Hilda's was finally closed when the Japanese took Guangzhou in 1938.

## *Miss Edna Sabrina Atkins and School Uniform*

R. O. was sometimes critical of C.M.S. Headquarters, and of the more old-fashioned of its policies. With a C.M.S. missionary like Miss Atkins, however, he was completely at one, and they worked well together. Both of them were outward-looking, seeing the Christian Gospel as concerned with the whole of life, and seeking to show forth the love of God in service to the poor, the needy, the sick and the downtrodden.

St. Stephen's Girls' College pupils had for some years been encouraged to see their privileges as opportunities to serve others; the classes for amahs and *mui-tsais* are evidence of that. But when Miss Atkins took over from Miss Middleton-Smith there was a subtle change. Miss Atkins, unlike her predecessors, did not come from a wealthy background, and she wanted both to open the school more widely to the girls of Hong Kong, and to actively encourage them to go out to serve the community. Through the thirties, St. Stephen's took its place in the community, both as a leading school and, under Miss Atkins, as a launch-pad for service to the disadvantaged.

One of the first things Miss Atkins did was to introduce a school uniform. Some of the wealthiest girls had enjoyed competing to be the best dressed student in the school. It was clear to Miss Atkins that the elegant



Class I (equivalent to the current Form 6), with Dorothy Wise, Edna Atkins and P. McKindoe in the 1930s

dresses, jewelry and fancy shoes had to be abolished if girls from less well-to-do homes were to feel comfortable in the school. But the request for uniform came from some of the girls themselves, perhaps following the lead of Ellen Tsao (Li) in her conflict with Miss Middleton-Smith over uniform for the choir. Miss Atkins was delighted to respond positively to their request and asked them to decide on the colour and material. So finally, in 1928, a pale-blue cotton *cheong-sam* (Chinese dress with slit sides) for summer and a thicker, dark-blue *cheong-sam* for winter were chosen for the standard uniform. And they really were long dresses in those days. Uniform for the youngest children in the Lower School (primary) was to be pale blue *sam-fu* (Chinese top and trousers). Through the introduction of uniform Miss Atkins was able to teach a practical lesson of consideration and concern for others.

In December, 1924, Miss Atkins had finally become a full C.M.S. missionary 'in home connection', after being accepted 'in local connection' in 1923. Despite having been given no special time for study she had successfully completed her second language examination. In addition she had, according to the report sent to Headquarters, given evidence of her 'Christian character and special zeal for missionary work'.[14]

One of Miss Atkins' many qualities was her ability to get on well with others. She liked people and respected them and they, in turn, became her devoted followers. Years later, when she was very elderly, she could still inspire affection and respect in young people meeting her for the first time. When she was Warden of Fairlea, serving under Mrs. Cheung, she had contributed much to the solution of the difficulties implicit in the 'one building, two schools' situation. She sought always for harmonious relationships and the resolution of differences, and over the many years of her service she became a much-loved figure, both in the school and in the wider community.

Miss Atkins was nevertheless aware of undercurrents of unrest within the student body. In the mid-twenties, with anti-Western feeling in Hong Kong at its height, young people could not help but be influenced by the prevailing mood. Miss Atkins did not find St. Stephen's students showing signs of anti-Western feeling, but their loyalty to China was openly and enthusiastically expressed.[15] In the 1930s, as the Japanese army moved south, this erupted into strongly anti-Japanese emotions.

Miss Atkins was sensitive to the aspirations of the students. She had earlier written about 'the atmosphere of change and unrest in China, influenced by the claims of students to be the only body able to save their country from the disorder and chaos which reigns … is it any wonder that they chafe against restriction and authority?'[16] Perhaps it was to help the students to express some of their hopes and ideas in a clear, analytical way that Miss Atkins started a new venture: the first school magazine was published in 1929.[17] Sadly no copy is now known to exist.

Miss Atkins believed that education, and particularly scientific education, had the power to help young people to think clearly. 'So many students and leaders in China today have been thrown off balance by the inability to see clearly [and] to think wisely, logically and scientifically that the need for more and better teaching of science is most urgent and important.'[18]

At Speech Day on 4th February, 1931, she said that 'The teaching of science should be of infinite value in training a reasoned judgement and an observant mind, and in helping to give students the balance and restraint which is so difficult to attain in days of swift change. New China has been passing through the destructive stage of her progress and is still in need of constructive thought and ability. In the casting away of the old and the putting on of the new, what standards ought to be used? Surely those of truth and reason, and it is in the experimental work of the laboratory and

in the hours of communion with the God of Truth that those standards will be tested and proved.… In seeking to understand the wonders of Truth — through telescope, microscope and laboratory, we learn to know God.'[19]

## *The New Wing*

The first step towards a better scientific education was to ensure that the school had a suitable science laboratory. Miss Atkins therefore set about persuading the Associated Schools Council that the East Wing, which had

The new East Wing, 1929

been included in the original plans but not built because of lack of funds, should now be erected. The Council approved her proposal, despite the fact that an annual sum of $6,000 still had to be refunded to the Government to repay the loan on the Main Building. (This loan would not be fully repaid until 1931.) Plans for the new wing were approved in 1928, and the four-storey extension was completed in 1929 at a total cost of $50,000.

The East Wing included a covered playground, extra classrooms, a science laboratory and residential accommodation for teachers. In addition, because of the extra space it provided, another room on the top floor could be converted into a Quiet Room. The science laboratory had twelve working stations, although there were often sixteen or more in the junior classes. Equipment was purchased gradually, when funds permitted.

Building work on the new wing took place seven days a week. This provided Chiu Hon Kwan and Bo Pope with an outlet for their missionary zeal and, after breakfast on Sundays, they climbed onto the building site to conduct evangelistic services for the workmen. It was a brave attempt to witness, but one which received little response: often the workmen hid behind the scaffolding or looked down from their perches on the building in puzzlement at Chiu Hon Kwan's words. But they missed it when Chiu Hon Kwan stopped.[20]

Drill in the covered playground, 1929