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Peake and Kuling

G. Peter Winnington

The British Library has published Mervyn Peake's father's 'Memoirs of a Doctor in China' – retitled, rather confusingly, *Peake in China*. Before Mervyn Peake's fans rush out to buy it, they should be warned that Doc's memoir does not mention Mervyn, nor does it contain information relevant to him not already provided in the biographies by Watney, Yorke, or myself. Furthermore, an unsigned 'Note to the Reader' about the illustrations in the book misleadingly states that 'Dr Peake's original typescript was illustrated by his son Mervyn.' While it is true that Doc offered thanks to Mervyn for illustrations 'which have caught so faithfully the atmosphere of by-gone days,' it was in fact a pious hope. There is no evidence that Mervyn ever got round to illustrating his father's memoir. His brother Lonnie said as much when he loaned me the typescript in the mid-1970s.

There are quite a few illustrations in the book – many of them photographs that appeared in *Mervyn Peake: the Man and His Art*. When reproducing pictures that have already appeared elsewhere, it is customary to acknowledge this, but *Peake in China* does not do so. Rather inconveniently, it contains no list of the illustrations, either.

Peake in China opens with a twenty-page Introduction by Hilary Spurling, who also wrote the Introduction to *Drawings by Mervyn Peake*, way back in 1974. For her life of Pearl Buck (mentioned in *PS* 12: ii for April 2011, p.45), Spurling visited Kuling and returned convinced that Peake modelled Gormenghast and its mountain on the Lushan, among whose hills Kuling is situated. This conviction and enthusiasm for her idea lead her to mis-read Peake's work and to mis-represent it. For instance, she states that 'the castle [is] built high on Gormenghast mountain' (p.23), justifying it with a quotation from chapter 80 of *Gormenghast*:

on the rocky slopes, not more than three hundred feet from the

VIEW OF THE KULING ESTATE

A general view of Kuling

claw-like summit . . . the castle could be seen heaving across the skyline like the sheer sea-wall of a continent.

In this passage from *Gormenghast*, it is Fuchsia's grave that lies not more than three hundred feet from the summit, not the castle. There are *fourteen* lines of text behind the ellipsis separating the opening phrase from the rest of the quotation. The distance between the castle and the mountain is such that it takes 'an expedition' to reach the mountain '*from whose slopes* [my emphasis] the castle could be seen heaving across the skyline.' This basic mistake in understanding the geography of the Titus books leads Spurling to fuse the mountain and the castle – 'the spiky pinnacles and stony sides [of which seem] to be at times almost indistinguishable from the mountain itself' (p.23). Thus she can cheerfully affirm that *Titus Alone* 'starts with the young Titus Groan abandoning the mountain that was the only world he had ever known' (p.18). Peake makes it quite clear at the end of *Gormenghast* that it was the castle (as a synecdoche for Titus's title to it)

FROM CENTRAL VALLEY RIDGE.

Photo by A. H. Wilzer, Esq

g from *Historic Lushan*

that he was abandoning; the mountain was but the backdrop to the story.

Hilary Spurling is as ill-informed about Kuling as she is about the contents of the Titus books. The problem stems from the fact that she visited the place one hundred years after Mervyn's birth. In that time, things have changed a great deal. She describes the estate as being 'laid out like an English garden suburb on gently sloping woodland between three wooded pinnacles' (p.9),¹ whereas photographs taken at the time when the Peakes were there show the hillsides surrounding the estate almost completely devoid of trees, and their crests bare and rounded. Not a pinnacle in sight. (Spurling likes the word *pinnacle* and, as you may have noticed above, attributed 'spiky pinnacles' to Peake's castle. He used the word only metaphorically; nowhere is there a literal pinnacle, spiky or otherwise, in his descriptions of Gormenghast castle or mountain.) So she is wrong on every count.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the vegetation at Kuling was low scrub – for the local people had cut down all the trees for fuel.

VIEW FROM

Another general view from *Historic Lushan*, with Kul

Not for nothing does a postcard in Dr Peake's collection (reproduced in my article on Kuling (PS 9: iv, p.21) and on page 168 of *Peake in China*) show two men half-hidden beneath the great bundles of sticks they are carrying down a road to Kuling. The only remaining trees in the area were either revered and consequently preserved (like the Three Trees at the southern extremity of the estate, mentioned by Mervyn Peake in his notes for an autobiography),² or inaccessible ones, clinging dramatically to the edges of cliffs. Since that time, the trees that the missionaries planted around their houses and the re-forestation of the whole area undertaken by the Chinese have completely changed the landscape. Today, wide panoramic views of Kuling, such as were printed in *Historic Lushan* (published in 1921 'at the direction of the Kuling Council') and reproduced here, are not possible. The houses are now quite hidden by the vegetation – and even threatened to be overrun by it: see the photograph of a villa hemmed in by trees on page 17 of my article. So Spurling's claim that Peake 'endowed Gormenghast [mountain] with "the high and jagged cone" of Lushan's summit, its woods of fir, chestnut and acacia' has no foundation in reality. The woods came later. What is more, they

PINES ROAD,

Photo by A. H. Wilzer, Esq.

ing's non-denominational church down on the right

now prevent the visitor to Kuling from seeing the hilltops. Quite clearly, Spurling's 'three wooded pinnacles' come from her imagination alone.

In the West Valley of the estate, which *Historic Lushan* refers to as a 'barren locality' (p.30), there was once a 'Monastery of the Great Forest' – its name a reminder of what had been destroyed by 'indiscriminate felling' (p.22). In 1919 there were pine trees in the Russian Valley, in the south-east corner of the estate and about an hour on foot from the centre of Kuling. Down there was 'one of the most enjoyable walks in the vicinity, as it is always in the shade' (p.40). For lack of trees, shade was at a premium. This made the Three Trees a popular picnic spot, which is probably why Mervyn Peake remembered them. They were cedars; chestnuts would have provided better shade, but there were none of any size in the valley at that time.

So much for Spurling's tree-covered slopes of Kuling. What about the shape of the hills, which she believes inspired both the castle and the mountain of Gormenghast? If Peake really was inspired by an actual mountain, we are looking for one whose general shape is a 'high and jagged cone' and which terminates in a 'claw-like summit'.

Unfortunately for Ms Spurling, it would seem that no one has recorded a feature like that anywhere in the Lushan.

And the castle, then? *Peake in China* contains two photographs of natural features which Spurling offers as sources of inspiration for Peake. The first is known today as Five Old Man Peak; a hundred years ago they called it the Lion's Leap. This is the one place to which little Mervyn could possibly have been taken on a day excursion in the summer of 1919. It lies on the far side of the hillside on which the Peakes' house was situated. Spurling describes this remarkable outcrop as 'five sandstone spires constructed from massive blocks of masonry sliced by geological shears and cleavers' (p.27). I had to read that twice. Its ambiguity gives the impression that she has found a correlate in the natural world, like the pinnacles already mentioned, to her own imaginings rather than to anything out of Peake's work. Moon Dehua's photograph of the Lion's Leap on page 28 of *Peake in China* gives no sense of scale, but it is in fact quite small. The 'spires' (Spurling) or 'humps' (*Historic Lushan*) can be climbed without difficulty in a few minutes by a person who is physically fit and has a good head for heights. Hardly inspiration for a castle the size of Gormenghast.

The other photograph in *Peake in China* is of the 'south-east face of Lushan rising like a fortress from the flatlands below' (p.12). This range of hills may be what Spurling imagines Gormenghast might look like from afar, but it is highly unlikely that any of the Peakes ever enjoyed that view. They approached Kuling from the north; it would have required a serious expedition to reach the point from which Moon Dehua took this photograph.

We have to remember that the missionaries went to Kuling for rest and refreshment. The very name of the place derived from the English word *cooling*. Even visiting the Lion's Leap would be neither restful nor refreshing: 'As there are few shady places, an exceedingly hot day should be avoided.' Excursions of this kind were usually undertaken in spring or autumn, when it was cooler. 'It must also be taken into consideration that this region [of the Lion's Leap] is devoid of water, and that a good supply should be taken' (*Historic Lushan*, p.44). Excursions longer than a day's walk required hiring coolies and were

generally undertaken for some practical purpose, rarely for pleasure.³
A far cry from today's bus tours!

We know almost nothing of Peake's summer holiday at Kuling in 1919. All we have are the notes that he made for an autobiography in the early 1950s, in which his memories are extremely succinct:

The three trees

Drawing the elephant missionary's legs

The stream. Boulders

The dragon pool. [This was another popular picnic spot, where
adults bathed.]

Three men drowned diving for one another

The myriad steps like pavements (Peake's *Progress*, p.477)

A mere six lines compared with pages of notes on the compound and his school in Tientsin.

You could do several things with these lines. You could speculate on the meaning of 'the elephant missionary'. Is 'elephant' a familiar term for a particular missionary movement (along the lines of 'conger eels' for Congregationalists), or did this particular missionary have some illness (like elephantiasis) that caused him or her to have legs like an elephant's? If it was the latter, it would be an early example of Peake's fascination with the grotesque in human beings. Then you might notice that one of Mr Slaughterboard's hands 'was formed in the shape of an elephant's foot' (Peake's *Progress*, p.69). As for those steps, up which the missionaries were carried to Kuling in open palanquins, you could remind readers that in *Gormenghast* Titus was conveyed to his tenth birthday celebration in just such a manner.

As nothing in Peake's notes supports Spurling's claim that the hills around Kuling inspired him with *Gormenghast*, she invents. She tells us that 'he revisited the mountain' (notice the redundant prefix; this was the one and only visit to Kuling that he ever made) 'aged eight and was enchanted by it, swimming, picnicking and exploring its stony heights' (p.13). Does anyone know when Mervyn learned to swim? It would have been exceptional for the time if he could swim before he went to Eltham. Exploring those 'stony heights' is equally unlikely. At just eight years old, he would not have been allowed soli-

tary explorations into the hills. The memorable story of the three drowned men illustrates the care that parents took to warn children of the dangers of the natural world at Kuling. This cautionary tale served to show how even a mountain pool could prove fatal if one ventured too close to the waterfall that fed it.⁴

Spurling goes on to inform us that the Lushan is celebrated for the mists that half-hide its hills for two thirds of the year – does that include the summer of 1919, though? She rightly points out how often Gormenghast mountain and sometimes the castle itself are wreathed in mist in the Titus books. (England also has a good deal of mist and fog, although it is rather less picturesque than Lushan's.) When Peake came to make notes for an autobiography he made no mention of the mist at Kuling, any more than he did the shape of the hills there. Yet Spurling would have us believe that, a decade before, when Peake was called up and began writing *Titus Groan*, he 'opened a cache of stored images in his mind' (p.25). 'It was from these pictures, still pristine in their freshness and intensity, retrieved intact from a past in which he only half believed, that Peake began constructing an alternative imaginative reality, where even the weather invokes [*sic*] the climate of his childhood' (p.19).

She may be right about the weather, but according to Peake the mist was elsewhere: his notes emphasize how little he remembered, how 'an ever-thickening mist' divided him from his past and confused his memory (*Peake's Progress*, p.472, repeated on p.473). 'This misty sea of time' (p.472), he tells us, has left only a 'coloured residue' (p.474 – erroneously quoted as 'imaginative residue' by Spurling, who also mis-identifies her source as page 47 of *Peake's Progress*) – so that 'long summer holidays from boarding school have left no trace' (p.474) in his memory. Moreover, Peake observes that, apart from the few people and places that he lists under 'Tientsin Grammar School' (half of which actually relate to Eltham College), 'The Compound' and 'Shanghai', the things that he remembers are not sights or scenes, but what he *felt*. If writing *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast* really had revived lost memories, would he not have said so here? As it is, nothing corroborates Spurling's contention that Peake had discovered 'a cache of stored images'; still less were his

memories ‘pristine in their freshness and intensity’ or ‘retrieved intact’.

Hilary Spurling’s determination to find correlates in the real world for places in Peake’s fiction suggests that she does not believe in the power of his imagination, or his ability to transform what he had seen into something quite other. Her Introduction to *Peake in China* is ill-informed and wrong-headed (to say the least), speculation presented as fact, quite as misleading as the new title that has been given to Doc’s memoir. She adds nothing new to our knowledge of the Peakes, either.⁵

Doc Peake’s memoir mentions of course the revolution that overthrew the age-old Manchu Qing dynasty. It started with fighting in the Wuchang-Hankow area in October 1911, and he left Kuling to join other doctors to retrieve and treat the wounded under the Red Cross flag. Readers may like to know that another witness to these historic events was Laura Beckingsale, who became a lifelong friend of the Peakes and gave Mervyn financial support in 1957. When orders were given for women and children to evacuate Hankow on 18 October 1911, she opted to remain and was consequently one of the few European women to witness the fighting. Extracts from her letters and diaries have now been published as *Letters from Hankow*. Having no medical training – she was a schoolteacher at Wuchang Girls’ Boarding School – she helped as best she could, making sheets, pillowcases, straw mattresses, and clothes for the wounded. During a lull in the fighting, she went out with Dr Peake to assess the situation and was beside him when they came across the head of a looter ‘hung up on a telegraph post . . . with his loot of 6 umbrellas and a few rolls of cloth hung up beside it’ (*Letters from Hankow*, p.65). Doc took a photograph which was printed in *Mervyn Peake: the Man and his Art* (p.65); it is also reproduced in *Peake in China* (p.175).⁶

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Notes

- 1 The hillsides at Kuling are not so gentle as Ms Spurling suggests. They are steep enough in places to require steps to reach the villas rather than footpaths – see the photograph on page 15 of my 2006 article on Kuling.
- 2 These ‘three trees’ were ‘one of the sights of the mountains’ (*Historic Lushan*, p.22). Two of them were cedars (*Cryptomeria japonica*), estimated to be ‘at least 1000–1500 years old’ (p.23). They were the last survivors of a group of forty-eight cedars at this spot.
- 3 There being no inns or hotels, travellers had to resort to temples and monasteries for overnight shelter: ‘their halls are usually clean and contain wooden furniture and wooden boards used for beds.’ *Historic Lushan* devotes a couple of pages to listing everything that tourists should take with them, starting with ‘a waterproof bag which can be locked’ for ‘linen, blankets, and other bedding,’ running through all the usual camping utensils, and ending with ‘hooks for screwing into pillars, where they may be used for hanging up one’s clothes, a hammer and a few nails . . . and a compass should not be forgotten.’ All this was to be carried by coolies. ‘If long distances have to be covered, as for instance on the first day of the Lushan Valley trip to Kwei Tsung, one should take three men for two travellers and pay off the third man on the second day’ (pp.15–16).
- 4 My source here is Lonnie’s comment on this line, in *Peake’s Progress*, p.480.
- 5 Spurling’s quotations from documents in the archives of the London Missionary Society are all taken from the notes that I made for myself when I spent a couple of weeks in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the early 1980s. I drew on them for my article on ‘Peake’s Parents Years in China’ (*Mervyn Peake Review* 18, pp.21–30) in the spring of 1984, and again in the opening chapters of *Vast Alchemies* (2000; reissued as *Mervyn Peake’s Vast Alchemies*, 2009). Twenty years later, I made a copy of my notes for Sebastian Peake when he was visiting me and complaining that he knew nothing of his father’s life in China. Not knowing where they came from, Fabian Peake passed them on to Hilary Spurling for her Introduction.
- 6 Two other photographs of Hankow at this time that are printed in

Peake in China are also reproduced in *Letters from Hankow*. In each book it is assumed that the writer took the pictures. I wonder who the actual photographer was.

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Seen something in the press or on the web? Read a good book that mentions Peake? Remember to pass on the news and your views to the Editor for inclusion!