

Quest for Ernest Bramah: A Study in Literary Detection

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ERNEST BRAMAH is a name unknown to millions of readers. It would have been unknown to me too if my wife had not read in Dorothy Sayers's *Strong Poison*—where Lord Peter Wimsey is trying to get Harriet Vane, on trial for her life, to marry him—her quotation from *The Wallet of Kai Lung*: “Your insight is clear and unbiased”, said the gracious Sovereign. “But however entrancing it is to wander unchecked through a garden of bright images, are we not enticing your mind from another subject of almost equal importance?” After my own reading of a few of these wonderful Chinese stories, centered around this character named Kai Lung, full of more of those marvelous aphorisms, I was hooked on Bramah's literary opium. “But who is Ernest Bramah?” I asked no one in particular. Histories and studies of English literature were no help at all: he is in none of them. For all I knew he might have been Chinese, but Kai Lung's China didn't ring an authentic gong: it seemed to have a make-believe jasmine odor, reeking more of a clever Englishman's imagination than an authentic Oriental's experience. These weren't Chinese stories but satires of England dressed in Far Eastern kimonos.

Oh, novels and short stories signed “by Ernest Bramah” are real enough, though I had difficulty finding them in libraries, for they were not well known nor highly regarded by informed critics. My first disappointment, of which there were to be many, came in 1957 when I tried to get the Wayne State University Library to buy for \$35, from an English antiquarian bookshop, 21 of his books and books in which he appeared. Before the academic red tape could be unsnarled, the books were sold, so I determined to collect him myself. It wasn't easy, but I managed to get and to read most of his books, the Chinese stories particularly appealing to me: *The Wallet of Kai Lung* (1900), *The Mirror of Kong Ho* (1905), *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922)*

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Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat (1928), *The Moon of Much Gladness, Related by Kai Lung* (1932, called *The Return of Kai Lung* in America), and *Kai Lung Beneath the Mulberry-Tree* (1940). Briefly, the pattern of all these (except *Kong Ho*) is the same: Kai Lung, an ingenious and ingenuous professional storyteller among thieves, rogues, and mandarins, is accused of many crimes but postpones the verdict by charming his captors from day to day with marvelous tales. It is not so much the matter of his tales as the manner, the style, the satire, and those endless aphorisms, such as these two favorites:

“It has been said... that there are few situations in life that cannot be honorably settled, and without loss of time, either by suicide, a bag of gold, or by thrusting a despised antagonist over the edge of a precipice on a dark night”; and,

“After secretly observing the unstudied grace of her movements, the most celebrated picture-maker of the province burned the implements of his craft, and began life anew as a trainer of performing elephants.”

Well, as I said, I got the books, I even compiled and published a bibliography, and read a paper on Bramah before the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters in March 1958. I've always enjoyed discovering unsung and unappreciated writers; and two weeks after I had read an earlier paper before the Michigan Academy, on Nathanael West, his collected works were announced for publication, though my paper had nothing whatever to do with his subsequent rise to critical acclaim. But after my talk on Bramah's critical reception in America—my point was that there was no critical reception—nothing happened. And now, eight years later, what has happened? Precisely nothing. No one has written on him--except me. No one pays any attention to him--except me. But I do have a contract to write a book on him, in the TEAS Series (Twayne English Authors Series) for Twayne Publishers, New York. And my search for the subject of this book, Ernest Bramah the man, as apart from the Kai Lung stories themselves, is the topic of this current short paper. Is there an Ernest Bramah?

In setting out on a literary search to discover our man Bramah, one is put off by such remarks, over the past forty years, as these: by his publisher, Grant Richards, in 1923, “I do assure his readers that such a person as ‘Ernest Bramah’ does really and

truly exist. I have seen and touched him. His portrait has been published--although, recalling the case of Fiona Macleod, who was actually introduced to George Meredith, I am not so sure that even this statement, or its predecessor, carries absolute conviction"; then a questioning remark from George H. Doran, Bramah's American publisher, in 1924, "I have always had a feeling that you were a mythical person"; and in 1928, Edwin Bjorkman, wrote in a review in *The Ashville* (North Carolina) *Times* (a review which Bramah liked), "His actual existence has been questioned. He has been spoken of as a 'myth', a 'mystery', and a 'dual personality'... a la William Sharp-Fiona McLeod, you know"; and finally two recent commentators, John Connel, (in 1947) and Anthony Boucher (in 1965). The former said that even Bramah's "publishers did not see him for years at a time", that he fended off interviewers and eluded literary lion-tamers in London, and Sir John Squire, "who was one of his keenest admirers, with whom he exchanged a long and stimulating correspondence, was never able to lure him to a meal or a meeting, in spite of the most zealous attempts. Appointments were even made by telephone; and then, at the last moment, most unfortunately Bramah was summoned away suddenly to the country." Mr Boucher puts it in a few words: Bramah's "life rivals Shakespeare's in paucity of biographical data."

However, we do know a few, but very few, things. His name isn't Bramah, but of all things, Smith: Ernest Bramah Smith. The "Bramah" is from his mother's family, and this too isn't quite right, for she spelled it "Bramah", which is how it appears on his birth certificate. On his first book, published in 1894, *English Farming and Why I Turned It Up*, the author's name appears as Ernest Bramah, and that's how it's been ever since.

The name and a list of books are all we get in *Who's Who* (up to 1942) and also in *Who Was Who 1941-1950*; the back cover of the Penguin editions of the Kai Lung books give us a few more facts: he was born in Manchester, gave up farming after three years to go into journalism, was a correspondent on a "typical provincial paper" (no name and no area are mentioned), and came to London to be secretary for Jerome K. Jerome, on whose magazine, *To-day*, he worked. He was then with a publishing firm (again no name), editing a periodical called *The Minster* (misspelled by Penguin as *The Minister*) for two years before turning "to writing as a full-time

occupation." These meager details—plus a note that he "was intensely interested in coins,.. wrote [in addition to the Kai Lung stories] two one-act plays...and many articles [and] died in 1942—are absolutely all one could find out about this shadowy figure named Ernest Bramah. The books and magazines in which one expects to learn about him all ignore him completely—except that his novels and other works were reviewed—and those tiny few who do mention him, say little, and often that is in error.

For instance, there's the date of his birth. From his first book, published in 1894, which is autobiographical, we may infer that he was born about 1870; his obituaries give it as 1868 and 1869; *Chambers's Biographical Pictionary* says 1867. In my own piece on Bramah in the Spring 1964 *Book Collector* I put the year as 1869 with a question mark after it. A reader of that journal went to the General Register Office, Somerset House, London, and found his birth certificate: March 20, 1868. (A year later I too found my way to Somerset House, where I turned up this birth record, his marriage certificate, his will, his wife's will, and his father's.)

So at least we know that a person named Ernest Bramah Smith was born March 20, 1868, at 1 Rushton Street, Hulme, Chorlton (near Manchester) in the County of Lancaster; his father was Charles Clement Smith, his mother Susannah Smith, formerly Bramah, and his father was a Manchester warehouse man. Ernest Bramah Smith (the other "m" in Bramah was gone by then) was married to Lucy Maisie Barker in the Parish Church of St. Andrews, Holborn, London on December 31, 1897; by that time his father's profession had become "gentleman," and Bramah gave his as "editor." the wedding was solemnized by his brother, the Rev. C. Percy Smith. When his father died on May 15, 1910 Bramah inherited a share of the £8,392 inheritance. When Bramah himself died during World War II, on June 23, 1942 at Weston-Super-Mare, at the age of 74, he left his widow £15, 172/13s./6d., a fairly good estate. (There apparently were no children.) when Lucy Maisie Smith died on July 23, 1957 in Bath she left a larger fortune, £25,629/18s.

Well, there we have the bare bones of Bramah's biography, a mighty skimpy thing on which to base a critical study—my book in the Twayne Series. Naturally what a writer has written is the important matter, yet the more you know about a man the

happier you are in doing a full-length account of him and his work. So I clearly had to find some meat for these bare bones.

A gift of five letters from Mr. Charles E. Feinberg, the Detroit collector, was helpful in an interesting way. The letters told us little about Bramah: where he lived in 1900, 1913, 1915, 1928, and 1929; a few details about magazines and anthologies in which he appeared, and money matters; but I did learn the name of his literary agent, James B. Pinker, and in obtaining permission to print the letters in *The American Book Collector* (March 1965), I discovered the owner of the Bramah copyright, Mr. W. P. Watt of London.

Another group of five letters from Bramah to Pinker turned up in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library (plus two others to Pinker, dealing with Bramah's writings); but they too give us very little of biographical or critical importance—only that at this time he was signing his name, "E. B. Smith" or "Ernest Smith" and not "Ernest Bramah," as he sometimes did. The first is actually a card, addressed in Bramah's hand to James B. Pinker Esq/Talbot House, Arundel St/Strand/W. C.; postmarked 4 Dec 12:45 a. m. [no year]; with an embossed letterhead, 10 Ravenscourt Mansions/Ravenscourt Park, W.; and reading in its entirety:

Thanks for yours to hand to-day with enclosure as stated.

E. B. Smith.

The second item is to the same man at the same address, Postmarked Hammersmith [London], Ja [nuary] 24, [19] 11, 8:45 a. m., with the same letterhead in red capitals; and reading:

Dear Mr. Pinker,

Thanks for your intimation[?] of the 20th re Nash's Magazine.

Yrs

E. B. Smith

The third item, a little more communicative, is written on the same kind of embossed card as the first one:

10 Dec 14

Dear Mr. Pinker,

The enclosed recruiting sketch might possibly do for some paper. I sent it to *Punch*

on account of their anti-football bias but nowhere else.

Yours sincerely

E. B. Smith

Bramah has a four-page story, "Recruiting Eye," among his MSS., which I assume is the recruiting sketch he refers to above, but I do not know where it was published. If we are to learn anything about him, we'll have to discover letters that say more than these three. A fourth one in the Berg Collection, again to Pinker, is somewhat more satisfactory:

210 Hamlet Gardens
Ravenscourt Park, W.6

24th. October, 1921

Dear Mr. Pinker,

Yours of the 19th. inst. reminds me that I have not yet replied, as I intended doing, to your kind letter of the 6th.

Your reference to the time over which our transactions has carried (not either many or extensive as you say, and, I must add, alas, I am not conscious, very profitable to you,) strikes a sympathetic cord.

If you can carry your mind back to so trivial an incident twenty years ago, you might remember that when I first saw you in connection with literary agency I wished (having already published two books,) to restrict it to short stories, etc., and to serial-rights generally; but you pointed out to me that as this was the more troublesome and unenumerative part of the business it would put you to a disadvantage, and to the justice of this I acquiesced. I only recall this to illustrate that as I have now to see to the troublesome and unenumerative details justice seems to require that the books (if any) should come my way also.

When I referred to the return, in due course, of any MSS you might have, I meant when our agreement came to an end. This actually should be at the end of another year. If, however, (as would seem to be the case from your returning the MSS,) you think it more convenient to end it now by mutual consent, this will be equally agreeable to me if you will send me a line to that effect. I hope, however, that you will still continue to receive for me the royalties on books that you have placed with Nelsons and Methuens.

Yours faithfully,

Ernest B. Smith

The final letter is written, not to James B. Pinker, but to J. Ralph Pinker, and it is,

as in 1921, typed:

210 Hamlet Gardens,
Ravenscourt Park, W.6
12th. September 1929.

Dear Mr. Pinker,

Thank you for forwarding to me the copies of the *Kölnische Zeitung* and also the American anthology "The Omnibus of Crime."

I enclose herewith (as requested) Methuen's royalty statement, which I had put aside to send to you when I had occasion to write. Presuming that you only wanted it for filing the time of its return did not seem to matter.

Yours faithfully,
Ernest B. Smith

J. Ralph Pinker, Esq.

The *Kölnische Zeitung* is a publication in which, presumably, Bramah's "The Vision of Yin" and "The Probation of Sen Heng" (from *The Wallet of Kai Lung*) appeared in German translations. They were sent to them by E.F. Marx, a German literary agent, who was not able to find a German publisher for the *Wallet* in book form. (This is the substance of a letter from Marx to James B. Pinker & Sons, dated March 16, 1928, in the Berg Collection.) *The Omnibus of Crime* is Dorothy Sayers's anthology of crime stories in which Bramah's "The Ghost of Massingham Mansions" was reprinted. It is from *The Eyes of Max Carrados* (1923), which concerns a blind detective, one of the four Carrados books (the others are *Max Carrados*, 1914, *Max Carrados, Mysteries*, 1927, and *The Bravo of London*, 1934), well known to detective connoisseurs but not up to the Kai Lung stories in literary quality. Methuen, referred to in Bramah's letter, is the London publisher of *Max Carrados*, Bramah's book on *English Regal Copper Coins* (1929), and reprints of *The Wallet of Kai Lung* and *Kai Lung's Golden Hours*.

The other Pinker letter in the Berg Collection concerning Bramah is from a London magazine, *The Bystander*, rejecting his short story, "The Lost Englishman," and asking for a story of 3500 to 4000 words for which they will pay £9 "if it is suitable for this [Worldly] series." The editor says, "If Mr. Bramah reads this week's story or that of a preceding week I am sure he will get the hang of the series. I should think this suggestion quite just to Mr. Bramah who I am sure would prefer to write a story to

order.....rather than ask me to pay for one which I shall probably not ever use." I'm afraid this letter tells us more about British editors than it does about Bramah—editors who order stories in the same way as one orders a suit of clothes or a leg of lamb.

Private letters of public persons often make interesting reading, but the glimmer these shed on the life of our present subject is dim indeed. We should need hundreds of them—and dull things they might likely be, stiff and formal—to illuminate his personality. The only other published one I know is in Grant Richards's *Author Hunting* (1934), where Bramah writes his publisher, who has just published his own first novel, *Caviar*, in 1912.

Having established that there really and truly is an Ernest Bramah, I next wished to find out, other than in these letters which help little or not at all, what sort of person he was, and what made him so. Biographical data could surely help, but where does one find them?

In February 1959 at Sotheby's in London, 33 lots of Bramah MSS and papers were sold at auction for £ 3015, a remarkable figure for someone as little known and lightly regarded as the creator of Kai Lung. Unfortunately, at least for my purposes, two of the announced lots of autobiographical material were withdrawn; but of those sold, 24 went at last to the University of Texas Humanities Research Center, and I was able to go to Austin, on a Wayne State University grant, and spend some time in the Spring of 1965 to study them. For anyone working on Bramah, the amount of material is overwhelming: MS notebooks in which he wrote his original drafts in his incredible and illegible hand, typescripts, galley proofs, page proofs of novels, stories, and other prose, some of it unpublished, about 200 entries in all; and then there are hundreds of letters to Bramah, most of them in the late 1890's, when he was editing the magazines *To-day* and *The Minster*. Those who wrote to him include Hilaire Belloc, John Buchan, George Gissing, W.E. Henley, Bret Harte, E. V. Lucas, George Moore, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Grant Richards, Michael Sadleir, Dorothy Sayers, G. Bernard Shaw, Sir John Squire, Arthur Waugh, and Israel Zangwill. For a study of Bramah's methods of composition, the Texas MSS and typescripts are invaluable, and of course I made some use of them in this area.

For biographical research, the material here was limited to two similar typewritten

autobiographical drafts of six and ten pages each, two and a half pages of which were devoted to a list of his books, with brief notations. That left a three-and-a-half page autobiography, far too short but of some value. It added a little to the small amount we have. Here is the opening paragraph from this unpublished MS.:

A native of Manchester (England). Younger son of a business man of that city. Educated (nominally) at a dame's school, a private boarding school, and the Grammar School, Manchester (a good public day-school where De Quincey was educated though he was not very grateful to it), and more usefully by having the run of a large house with an adequate, if very miscellaneous, library, and a garden as big as a field (it contained two tennis courts, a croquet lawn and a quite moderate artificial lake with fish, an island and a boat); also the (illicit) run of a neighborhood cotton mill with its forge, carpenter's shop, etc., and the fascinating society of boilermen, blacksmiths, stokers and other delightful people. What more could one ask for, from six to sixteen?

He tells how he got started on a local newspaper as its district correspondent after trying to farm for three years and failing; however, he names neither the newspaper nor the district he covered. With his father's help he tried to write in London, his allowance guaranteeing him "from the romance of actual starvation." A shorthand and typing course led to a job with Jerome K. Jerome's magazine *To-day*, on which he became sub-editor, handling the fiction and more literary articles. Bramah writes:

We published very excellent serials and my duties brought me into touch, either personal or epistolary, with many of the leading writers of that time: Anthony Hope, Stanley Weyman, Zangwill, George Moore, Thomas Hardy, Sarah Grand, Clark Russell, Miss Braddon, Eden Phillpotts, George Gissing, etc. Kipling and Stevenson also appeared in the magazine pages, the former with several short stories including the inimitable "Kaa's Hunting," the latter with the rather disappointing "Ebb Tide"; but to my regret then all details of the Kiplings went through his literary agent and those of "Ebb Tide" through Sir (then Mr.) Sidney Colvin of the British Museum. Finally, and most momentous in my mind, there was Bret Harte (whose work I had loved for years) with "The Bellringer of Angel's," "The Sheriff of Siskyou" and the full length novel "Clarence."

After more on Bret Harte, a paragraph on W.L.Allen, another American writer, and something of his interest in coins, Bramah says that he left *To-day* because the work

was becoming routine, joined a new firm, edited *The Minster*; and, "After two years of this, in 1897, I served my connection, and thence forward I have been purely an 'outside' writer." There, save for a sentence or two on each book, to 1934, the MS, ends.

Obviously all this left much to be desired, grateful though I was for these few facts from Bramah's own hand. What else did he read beside Kipling, Stevenson, and Bret Harte? What about his education? What about other literary associations? Where did he get the idea for his Chinese stories? Did he ever go to China? When? What about his life after 1897, on which he says not a single word?

Appeals in queries in *The American Book Collector, Notes & Queries* (Oxford), *The Book Collector* (London), and *The Times Literary Supplement* brought nothing whatever, though my "information wanted" note in *TLS* did result in a letter from Hutchinson and Co. (Publishers) Ltd., London, saying they were interested to see I was writing a book on Bramah for Twayne Publishers, New York: "If you have not yet found a publisher for your work in this country we should certainly be interested to consider it."

My search for Bramah next took me to London, materially assisted by a grant from the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia. The Pinker papers were no longer in England: I had a few letters, the Berg Collection had a few more, and some Pinker MSS were in Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois; but no Bramah material, I was told, were among the papers there. Mr. Lew David Feldman of the House of El Dieff had sold more than two hundred items from the Pinker-Bramah relationship but he could not tell me where: he thought they were in the University of Chicago, but they said no, nor were they in the Newberry Library. None, as far as I was able to find, were in London. Negative replies to my enquiries became standard.

After finding the will of Ernest Bramah's widow, written in 1952 and probated after her death in 1957, I wrote to her nephew at the Cheshire address given in the will: what could he, Hilary Smith, tell me about Bramah? I got no answer. How does one find a man named Smith, Hilary Smith, in England?

Grant Rithards, Bramah's publisher, was long dead: his widow was no longer in London

but was in the south of France and she may not have been able to tell me much. Martin Secker, who took over the Richards Press, had retired to the country, almost blind. I tried telephoning him, but he said he knew little about Bramah, although number of people in London had referred me invariably to him. He said he had seen him only once. Nevertheless I wrote him, and he replied: "Thank you for your letter this morning. As I already told you on the telephone I can add nothing to your information about Bramah, and in those circumstances I can see no point in our meeting." It was to be like this again and again: I talked to countless people, people in the London book world whom I either knew or whom I had been referred to, and I learned precisely nothing. On four occasions, when I asked dealers in antiquarian books about Bramah, they recalled an article about him in the Spring 1964 issue of *The Book Collector*. This was interesting, to say the least, and flattering but not in the least helpful, for I had written that article.

Meanwhile the worst thing that occurred had to do with W. P. Watt, Bramah's literary agent, who was left the copyright to the novels and stories. He had given me permission to print the letters in the *ABC*, and I hoped to see him when I got to England on July 1, 1965. When I telephoned a day or two after I arrived I was told that he had died on June 27. His sudden death had understandably upset his small office staff, and it was several weeks before they were able to help me on publication and bibliographical matters. Miss Patricia Butler was of particular assistance to me, but on one score it was not possible to verify her information. She thought Mr. Watt had once said something about Bramah going to China. *The New York Times* obituary of Bramah said he "lived for some time in china"; *Chambers's Biographical Dictionary* said he "lived for a while in China, which forms the background for the 'Kai Lung' stories"; and a columnist in a London book-publishers periodical, *Smith's Trade News*, reported in 1963: "Ernest Bramah was a recluse called E.B. Smith (1868-June 23, 1942) who spent some part of his life in China and never got over it." Maybe so, yet I found no evidence whatever to support this. Grant Richards had this to say in his 1923 introduction to *The Wallet of Kai Lung* about this matter that has troubled all of Kai Lung's admirers:

How long, I asked in effect, were you in China? And when? Has Chinese literature

always had a fascination for you? I know you have not visited the East in recent years—in that time have you kept your Oriental Knowledge and sympathetic understanding alive by frequenting the society of Chinese diplomats and students? To each of these questions our author made a bland, evasive and, as I now suspect, characteristic reply.

Sir John squire said in his 1929 preface to *The Mirror of Kong Ho*: "How far Mr Bramah faithfully reflects the attitude of the practical masses of Chinamen in this or any other age I do not know. I do not even know if he has ever been to China, though he had all the literary and superstitious jargon at his fingers' ends." And, now in 1963, in the latest Kai Lung collection, *The Celestial Omnibus*, John Connell writes that "there is no evidence at all that Bramah ever went to ChinaBramah's knowledge and love of China and of things Chinese were prnducts entirely of his own mind and temper."

It would be rather convenient for readers, critics, and preface-writers if Bramah had visited China; if he didn't go in recent years (around 1923), according to Richards, he should have gone before he wrote his first Chinese story. That must have been before 1896, for the earliest such story I've found was "The story of Yung Chang," as "Narrated by Kai Lung, in the Open Space Before the Tea-Shop of Celestial Principles, at Wu-Whei," which was published in *Chapman's Magazine of Fiction* (London), Vol. V, pp. 142-153, October 1896. (It was included in *The Wallet of Kai Lung* in 1900.) But it was written earlier, for a letter in the University of Texas Library, dated November 12, 1895, from Quiller-Couch to Bramah, refers to these Chinese stories, which Cassell & Co. declined to publish. So if Bramah went to the Far East, it was before 1895; and this is not possible, as I can account—on the basis of my research during the summer of 1965 in England—for almost all of his doings from his birth in Manchester in 1868, schooling from 1874 to 1885, farming from 1885 to 1892 (with his newspaper work from 1890 to 1892), and his studying and editing and writing in London from 1892 to 1895. Of course he made "a bland, evasive reply" to Richards: he was never in China.

Among the "items" I discovered in London was an unknown—except to its owner—and unpublished autobiographical MS. of Bramah's, which led me to the *South Birmingham News* (later called *The Birmingham News*, South Edition), for which Bramah

wrote from December 13, 1890 to September 17, 1892. And this MS. also relates that one of Bramah's literary associates in London suggested an idea for a Chinese story, which Smith (or Bramah) didn't use until he met a Chinese family looking inscrutable in a train one day—and thus the Kai Lung stories were born. Too, in an Oriental bookshop in London I found two books (in English) which came out and were available just about the time Bramah was thinking of these Chinese tales and writing them: *The Transmigrations of the Mandarin Fum-Hoam (Chinese Tales)*, edited by Leonard C. Smithers (London: H. S. Nichols and Co., 1893), and *Chinese Stories*, by Robert K. Douglas (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1893).

In the literary detective work which engaged my attention, not only did I learn that he was the correspondent for the *Birmingham News* from Packwood (the name he later used on his home in London), and I turned up some of his early pieces, but there were a series of negative results. His literary agent died and his publisher knew little about him, nor did I find a single person who knew him. There would have been a relatively few at best, as he died 23 years before my search began. The Ellery Queen episode is typical: I wrote to him under his real name, Frederic Dannay, having heard that he may have met Bramah or had letters from him because of their mutual detective story interest, but he replied that he didn't know him personally and didn't know where his letters were. Numerous persons in London said exactly the same thing. Having read Pearl Buck's book, *The Chinese Novel*, in her agent's office (who was also Bramah's agent), I wrote to ask her opinion of Kai Lung—was his China an authentic or a bogus one?—and she replied, I must confess that I know nothing about Kai Lung and Ernest Bramah." When I wrote to G. F. Sims, a rare book seller who sold the author's own copies of his books, his answer was: "So sorry but I can't help much, if at all, with your quest for Bramah: I bought these books from a dealer and he (it turns out) bought them at a sale, and was not in touch with the family. I have never been in touch with his family and really know nothing about him." So it went.

Paul Jordan Smith, a widely traveled and widely read Los Angeles book reviewer whom I knew, wrote: "I have the five Kai Lung books [plus others] and some other oddments, but, unfortunately, no letters. All I know about the man has been gained

from *Twentieth Century Authors*, by Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, and from reading his own books. I wish I might have met him, and might have done through Arthur Machen when I was in London, 1920-23," John Hayward, that wonderful London editor whom I saw in his flat a few weeks before he died and who knew everyone in the book world, never met Bramah. I often wondered if anyone did.

What John Connell, in Bramah's *Celestial Omnibus*, says of Kai Lung's creator is certainly true: "No other author except Junius, for very different motives—so jealously or so successfully guarded his privacy." However, Mr. Connll's photograph of Bramah, which he got from Martin Secker, was not the only one available, for I knew of several others: in Grant Richards's *Author Hunting* and on the back cover of the Penguin Kai Lung books and *Max Carrados Mysteries*. When I located the name and address of the photographer in London, Howard Coster, I was too late: he had died, and Walter Bird, who was looking after the portraits made by Mr. Coster, wrote that the negatives had been turned over to the British government's Central Office of Information.

I was able to find files of *To-day*, the magazine with which Bramah was connected, in the British Museum, and files of the *South Birmingham News* in the B.M.'s newspaper library; but their issues of *The Minster* were destroyed by enemy action during World War II. Copies, I was told, were in the University Libeary, Cambridge, where I went to spend several hours going through Vols. I and II, Janunry-June and July-December 1895. There was nothing written by, and no mention anywhere of, Ernest Bramah. Copies of Vol. III, 1896, apparently when Bramah's publishing firm took over *The Minster*, were lost and I was never able to see the issues he edited. ¹

In his own autobiographical note Bramah mentioned the Manchester Grammar School, to whom I wrote for information about his school career. The secretary to the High Master replied: "I very much regret to tell you that we have not been able

1. If this is so in America, it is even truer in Korea. During my year in Seoul as a Fulbright Professor of English Literature, 1963-1964, I found no copies of Bramah's novels and stories in any Korean university, and no one had ever heard of him. Nothing of his, as far as I know, has ever been translated into Korean or even Japanese. Although his stories use Chinese conventions, his locale is not an actual Chinese one, but pseudo-Chinese, an imaginary China that exists only in the author's fertile imaginaton. I am sure, however, that Bramah was well read in English translations of Chinese and Oriental stories and lore.

to trace any record of Ernest Bramah Smith having been at this school. I should point out, however, that this does not by any means prove that he was not in the school. Record Keeping during this particular period [1880-1885] was extremely scanty and in parts non-existent."

Before leaving for England I found a catalogue with a Bramah letter for sale, but I thought I could wait a few days until I got to London, where I would call personally on the dealer, Miss Winifred Myers, whom I hoped might know something about Bramah. Not only did she, like everyone else, know Bramah only through his books, but the letter had been sold to an American bookseller in Tacoma, Washington.²

Nevertheless, my English quest for Bramah was most assuredly not a dead loss. Through the good offices of Miss Patricia Butler I was able to learn a great deal about Bramah and book and magazine publishers and his failures and successes in getting his writings into print. Mr. John Baker, who took over The Richards Press from Mr. Martin Secker, allowed me to see their files for Bramah contracts. Penguin Books, Ltd. of Harmondsworth, Middlesex, was also helpful with sales figures of their paperback Bramahs and sent copies of their photographs of him. Through rare book dealers I found the few Bramah titles missing from my own collection. Through the British Consulate-General I was able to secure several photographs which the late Howard Coster had taken. And finally Mr. P. G. Mason, the High Master of The Manchester Grammar School, succeeded in unearthing a few facts about Ernest Bramah Smith's school record—an undistinguished and even dismal record it is. In the Middle 1st form classics he was 31st out of a class of 31; in the Upper 1st form classics he pulled himself up to 16th out of 26; and for five years his career there wavered from 23rd out of 33, to 23rd out of 25, to (in his last year there, 1885) 22nd out of 45. He left without completing the course which is the normal end of secondary

2. The bookseller, Mr. Morley H. Fox, who kept the letter for his own Bramah collection, was kind enough to send me a copy of it. Dated July 2, 1941, and written to an unknown correspondent, it reads: "Thank you for your very kind & gratifying letter. It is a very simple & easy civility to comply with your request in plain form—I am a collector myself though not of this particular variety but I feel, as I invariably do on similar occasions, that it would be a laboured rite if I responded in that idiom which you have paid me the compliment of adopting." It was sent, not with his home address but his agent's, and it is signed, "Yours faithfully, Ernest Bramah." This letter and the others I have quoted are printed through the courtesy of the owner of the copyright. Copyright © 1966 Kathleen M. Watt.

education in England, took no School Certificate or matriculation examinations. In other words, he was what Americans would call a dropout. Nor was there any record of a contribution by him in the school magazine. Later, it will be remembered, he also failed after three years of farming. So when he arrived in London in 1892, at the age of 24, his prospects cannot be said to have been bright.

He did get his first book published, *English Farming and Why I Turned It Up*, yet it was reviewed hardly at all and sold but 260 copies. *The Minster*, which he edited in 1896 and 1897, also—in his own words—“came to grief.” There he was, at the end of that year, just married, with no position and starting a career as an “outside writer.” No less than eight publishers rejected his best book, *The Wallet of Kai Lung*, before Grant Richards issued it in 1900. No, his literary future did not look rosy, either.

Despite the numerous rejections, also, of his other novels and short stories—life was not an easy one for a free-lance writer, nor is it ever—Ernest Bramah did make a living and did make something of a success. To this day, a fairly small group of admirers think there is nothing quite like the Kai Lung stories. Yet all this is not within the scope of my present paper. The answer to my original question is: yes, there is an Ernest Bramah. Up to about 1897, although I have far from everything I should like, I do have a relatively full record of his goings and comings. What he read, what he enjoyed, what he felt—these I certainly do not know, and may never know. What he was like I know only from Grant Richards’s 1934 comment in *Author Hunting*: “Bramah is small and—may I say?—he does not look ferocious; I believe him to be uncarnivorous, and indeed I think that he eschews the pleasures of the table—whether from compulsion or inclination I cannot say.” From 1897 on he was almost a complete recluse if not an enigma: he did not even reveal his real name to the public, he shunned publicity, he abhorred interviews, and when a meeting was arranged it would be called off by a telegram at the last moment.

With an author such as that as the subject of a biography, the biographer is thrown back on the author’s writings. As he himself said, “I am not fond of writing about myself, and only in a less degree about my work. My published books are about all I care to pass on to the reader.” Thus, 24 years after his death, Ernest Bramah will have his way.