

## FROM HO KAI KAI TO CAPTAIN WALTER BOSMAN: RACE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN HONG KONG AND NATAL

by *Milner Snell*

**W**ALTER Bosman is best remembered in Natal as aide-de-camp to Duncan McKenzie during the Bhambatha Rebellion and the author of the first history written on the conflict. On the surface Bosman was a fairly successful white civil servant in the Natal colonial administration and later a prosperous businessman in Durban. His race and cultural roots were, however, far more complicated. Born Ho Kai Kai in Hong Kong, he was one of five children of a Dutch father with Jewish roots and a Chinese mother. While his brothers identified themselves as Chinese and became prosperous and prominent citizens of Hong Kong, he adopted his father's surname and regarded himself as an English-speaking European Christian.

Walter Bosman's father, Charles Bosman, was born in Rotterdam in 1839.<sup>1</sup> In 1859 he moved to Hong Kong to work for a Dutch trading company. Within a few years he was a partner in the company and by the age of 29 was part-owner of the Hong Kong Hotel. He was also a director of the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company and by 1869 served as the Dutch consul. In the early 1870s his business was in financial trouble and he sold up and moved to England. In 1877 he married Mary Agnes Forbes in San Francisco. She later joined him in London and they had a family of four boys and one girl. Charles Bosman died in 1892, aged 54.

When Charles moved to England, he abandoned a family in Hong Kong. Shortly after arriving in the territory, he had met a Chinese woman named Shi Sze with whom he had five children: Ho

Pak Ngan (1861–1896), Robert Ho Tung (1862–1956), Ho Fook (1863–1926), Ho Kom Tong (1866–1950) and Ho Kai Kai (1867–1946). When Charles left Hong Kong, Shi Sze, at age 28, became the partner of Hing Ying Kwok and had three children with him. Walter Bosman thus came from an extended multi-cultural family with members who would have been considered either European, Eurasian or Chinese.

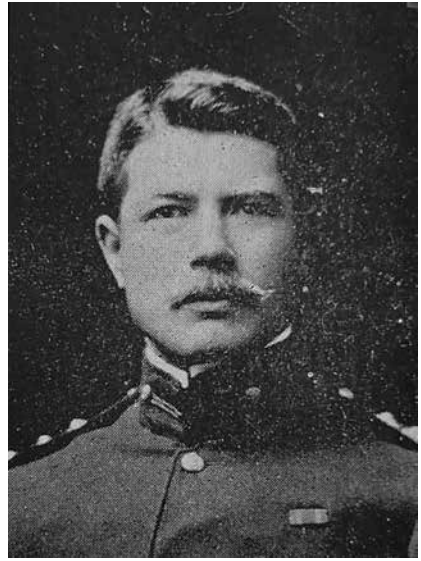
Inter-racial relationships were common in Hong Kong and a distinct Eurasian community developed, which was reinforced by intermarriage and business alliances. Eurasians were, however, for most of the nineteenth century looked down upon by the Chinese and European communities as examples of moral laxity because of their illegitimacy and often their poverty. Many Eurasians identified themselves as Chinese and adopted Chinese surnames 'as a way of erasing one's mixed heritage' so as to blend in and survive.<sup>2</sup> Walter Bosman's brother, Robert Ho Tung, has been described as spending a lifetime 'attempting to become more Chinese than the Chinese'.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the prejudice they faced and growing up in strained financial circumstances when he left them, Charles Bosman's sons all became wealthy businessmen and prominent citizens of Hong Kong. His eldest son Robert Ho Tung was knighted in 1915 and was regarded at one point as the richest man in Hong Kong. Ho Fook was also a wealthy businessman and grandfather of Stanley Ho, the casino and shipping magnate. The lives of Bosman's sons and their journey from outcasts to leaders of the

Eurasian community in Hong Kong has been studied in some detail and we will concern ourselves with Walter Bosman who adopted a very different path and identity in a very different part of the empire.<sup>4</sup>

It is not clear when Charles's youngest son Ho Kai Kai adopted the name Walter Bosman and with it a European cultural identity. There is a telling family portrait, which probably dates from the early 1880s, that shows Walter Bosman in Western clothes, while his brothers are all wearing Chinese attire. Bosman, like his brothers, attended the Government Central School, the first public secondary school founded in the territory, where he was taught in both English and Chinese. In 1884 he won a scholarship to study engineering in England at the Crystal Palace School of Practical Engineering.<sup>5</sup> The school had a colonial section that offered courses on civil and electrical engineering so as to prepare men for service overseas. After qualifying in 1887, he worked as an assistant engineer for the London and South Western Railway for two years.

Bosman came to Natal in 1889 as an assistant engineer on the Natal Government Railways.<sup>6</sup> This was the beginning of a steady rise in the civil service. By 1891 he was in charge of the depot of the Public Works Department at Es-howe.<sup>7</sup> On 23 December of the same year he married Louise Davenport at St Paul's Church in Durban. By 1895 he was the director of public works in Zululand. Bosman served on the Anglo-Portuguese Boundary Commission in 1896 and 1897 which demarcated parts of the border between Maputaland and Mozambique. He was a lieutenant in the Natal Field Artillery during the Anglo-Boer War. By 1902 he was the district engineer for Zululand and the following



*Walter Bosman in 1905*  
(source: The Natal Who's Who)

year he was transferred to Durban.

During the 1906 uprising against the introduction of a poll tax, Bosman served as aide-de-camp to Duncan McKenzie, the commandant-general of the colonial forces. Walter wrote a history of the rebellion, which is still a valuable source in terms of the details it contains of the campaign. It is, however, an apologetic work that justifies the actions of colonial troops and their commanders. Bosman made it clear on numerous occasions that he identified himself as a white man whose life and role in Natal were under threat. In an emotive preface he wrote that the 'natives' wanted to 'drive the white man into the sea'.<sup>8</sup> Later in the book he expressed his solidarity with the white population by stating, 'had our enemy met with any success, one trembles to think of what might have befallen our brothers and sisters living on the isolated farms in the Colony.'<sup>9</sup>

Bosman left the civil service in about



*A family portrait with Walter Bosman in European attire*  
(source: L. Cheng and W. Siu-Lun, 'From social outcast to colonial elite')

1908 for the business world and he and Louise settled in Durban. Walter's brother Sir Robert Ho Tung invited him to visit Hong Kong which he did in 1938 for the first time in 54 years and wrote a book about his experiences.<sup>10</sup> Louise died in March 1942 and a few months later Walter married Gladys Steyn, one of South Africa's first female advocates and daughter of the former president of the Orange Free State, Marthinus Steyn, on 15 August 1942 at St Joseph's in Durban.<sup>11</sup> By then it was mandatory to record the race of contracting parties on marriage certificates and Walter and Gladys were described as European.<sup>12</sup> Walter died a few years later on 12 October 1945.<sup>13</sup>

There is no indication that Walter Bosman's Eurasian background was widely known in Natal or that it served as a hindrance to his career. He lived and was accepted as an upper middle-class white man. He held positions in the civil service, served in colonial

regiments, belonged to the Durban Club, which would have required financial means but also social acceptability, and had an entry in *The Who's Who of Natal*.

#### NOTES

- 1 Details of Charles Bosman's life come from his obituary in the *China Mail*, 21 December 1892; and Louella Cheng and Wong Siu-Lun, 'From social outcast to colonial elite: the rise of an Eurasian entrepreneurial family in Hong Kong' (Paper at Rising Dragon, Soaring Bananas International Conference Auckland, New Zealand, 17–19 July 2009).
- 2 Vicky Lee, 'Erasure, solidarity, duplicity: inter-racial experience across colonial Hong Kong and foreign enclaves in China from the late 1800s to the 1980s' *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 14(2) 2017, p. 22.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 4 Cheng and Siu-Lun, 'From social outcast to colonial elite'.
- 5 Arnold Wright (ed.), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other Treaty Ports of China* (London: Lloyd's Publishing, 1908), p. 124.
- 6 Walter Bosman's career in Natal is drawn from his entry in *The Natal Who's Who* (Durban: Robinson, 1906).

- 7 G. Selwyn Moberly, *A City on a Hill: The History of Eshowe* (Eshowe: Eshowe Rotary Club, 1970), p. 58.
- 8 Walter Bosman, *The Natal Rebellion of 1906* (London: Longmans, Green, 1907), pp. v-vi.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 133.
- 10 Walter Bosman, *Land Unknown* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Daily Press, 1939).
- 11 Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository (PAR), MSCE 34486/1942, Death Notice for Louise Matilda Bosman.
- 12 <https://www.familysearch.org>.
- 13 PAR, MSCE 661/1947, Death Notice for Walter Bosman.