

# Adrift in the Middle Kingdom

by

Jan Jacob Slauerhoff

One of the delights of reviewing books is every now and again you are presented with a book that takes you completely by surprise, *Adrift in the Middle Kingdom* by one of the most important figures in twentieth-century Dutch literature, Jan Jacob Slauerhoff (1898–1936) is certainly one of those books.

Slauerhoff found fame as a writer throughout the 1920s and 1930s and in 1932 he published *Het verboden rijk* (The Forbidden Kingdom), part historical, part realist novel combining the life of a 20th-century European with that of Luís de Camões, the 16th-century Portuguese poet (author of the epic *The Lusads*) who'd spent part of his life in the Orient.

Both *Het verboden rijk* and the 1934 follow-up novel *Het leven op aarde* (Life on Earth) were widely praised, and it is *Het leven op aarde* that is now receiving its first English translation by award winning translator, David McKay, under the title *Adrift in the Middle Kingdom*.

*Adrift in the Middle Kingdom*, once again, takes the reader to China and for the

majority of part one of the book to the city of Taihai (Shanghai) where we are shown the depravity, poverty and corruption of a ravaged Post Opium War China which had left the country ravaged during a time many called China's "Century of humiliation". This however, is Slauerhoff's own view of China, as his own experience of China was limited due to his life onboard ship as a floating doctor. The second part of the book takes place in Chungking (an often-romanticised version of Chongqing in a part of the country he never had chance to visit, due to his death in 1936).

*Adrift in the Middle Kingdom* revolves around the main character, Cameron, longing for escape from his life on the sea and find some meaning in his life burying himself in a forgotten China. Battling his loneliness, indecision and a China that's emerging into the new world yet reluctant to experience the inventions of the West, it is these inventions of the West that continually appear to draw Cameron back to his old life, but yet also the means of his own liberation.

Although the text of *Adrift in the Middle Kingdom* is fictional, the reader must remember that this is Slauerhoff's China, and due to a lifetime of ill health the only adventure in the country he was ever to experience, so this China very much belongs to Slauerhoff. However, although the narrative may be fictional the experiences within the text are experiences from gathered from a variety of printed sources and experiences of those he met on his own travels. These sources and experiences allowed Slauerhoff to create an accurate description of the journey from Taihai up the Yangtze River and over land to Chungking.

Although the reader is made aware

from the beginning that the novel is set within a fictional world Slauerhoff successfully manipulated elements from his own experiences and those of others with Chinese history to create his own China that provides the setting for Cameron's journey.

*Adrift in the Middle Kingdom* is an outstanding narrative of one man's quest for self discovery and a must read for any lover of the later Beat Generation. My only regret after reading this was that I hadn't read it sooner.

• *Adrift in the Middle Kingdom* by Jan Jacob Slauerhoff is published by Handheld Press (£12.99). To order a copy go to [www.handheldpress.co.uk](http://www.handheldpress.co.uk)