In Memoriam: Stephen Alister Kentwell (1950-2026)

With deep sadness, I report the death of my lifelong friend, colleague, and co-author Stephen Kentwell. We met as teenagers at a World Ship Society (WSS) meeting in Melbourne in 1966, when we found a common interest in Asian shipping. Since 1973 we have published as co-authors. Stephen's passing is tragic in its timing because it came just two days before the launch by Hong Kong University Press in Hong Kong of our book, *C.Y. Tung and the Rise of Modern Chinese Shipping*, which is the culmination of our lives' work. On medical advice, he had reluctantly cancelled his flights a few days beforehand but there had been no indication that his recovery from open-heart surgery six months ago would so suddenly turn fatal. I did not learn of his passing until I had returned to Australia bearing warm wishes and gifts that I was unable to share.

Stephen was born in the Sydney's suburb of Epping on 7 June 1950. In April/May 1958, the family travelled to Kobe on OSK's cargoliner *Andes Maru* so his father, then a teacher, could take up a position at Mukogawa Women's University. Stephen and his younger brother Philip attended an international school before in 1964 the family returned to Australia on *Philippine Maru* for Stephen to continue his higher education.

It may be noted that Stephen was actually the fourth generation to have a close connection with Japan. In 1891 his great grandparents travelled across the Pacific among the first group of the Scandinavian Alliance Mission to be sent from the United States. Stephen's Australian paternal grandfather went to Japan as a 17-year-old to accompany his uncle, a merchant, on a business trip, then remained to work in the Osaka office of Australian merchant and agency house Parbury, Henty & Co. There he met and married Kobe-born grandmother Alfhild Lindstrom. Stephen's father, Alister James (born 1925), was also born in Kobe. When Stephen's father turned 18, he enlisted in the Australian Army. Only 19 years old and with the rank of Corporal, on 8 September 1945 he interpreted at the Japanese surrender at Balikpapan, East Borneo. Subsequently he served as interpreter with the British & Commonwealth Occupation Forces in Japan, based at Kure but seconded to the New Zealand contingent at Shimonoseki. Later he became a diplomat.

Stephen's parents met while holidaying at Burleigh Heads on Queenland's Gold Coast. Loris Doreen Kentwell (née Buckland) was born in 1927 and raised at Mansfield in the foothills of the Victorian Alps but trained as a nurse at the Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH). When he passed away in 1964, her uncle, the reclusive William Buckland, was one of Australia's wealthiest men with a large interest in Ampol Petroleum as well as the northern pastoral industry. Though the Kentwell side of the family did not share in the Buckland wealth, there was also a maritime aspect, because William could afford to indulge a

passion for beautiful steam yachts. In 1932 he bought in Adelaide the 71-ton, 100-foot *Isis*, then after she had been wrecked weeks later in Port Phillip, he bought from the Commonwealth Government at Rabaul the 288-ton *Adele* (Leith, 1906), previously used as an inspection vessel by the Administrator of Papua New Guinea. From 1959 his pride and joy was the splendid steam yacht *Natalie* (ex *Alice*, 1929 by Swan Hunter), which he kept on the Riviera for cruising the Mediterranean. By a remarkable coincidence, in 1971 she was sailed to Japan and brought on shore at Hiroshima, where pieces of her evidently remain (see https://www.superyachttimes.com/yacht-news/searching-for-motor-yacht-natalie).

Stephen finished high school at the end of 1967 and enrolled in an Asian Studies degree at the Australian National University. Between March and September 1970, he took leave to work in the Australian Pavilion at Expo-70 in Osaka, where he met his wife-to-be Yoneko, then returned to ANU to complete his Honours degree with an excellent thesis 'A Study of the Fortunes of the Mitsubishi Company, 1870-1885' [forerunner of NYK].

On graduation, Stephen joined the Department of External Affairs (later Foreign Affairs), a career for which he was well prepared and in the course of his career was posted to Paris, Washington and Japan. At age 60, rather than return to Canberra at the end of his third posting in Tokyo, he chose to stay on by retiring from what was now DFAT and taking on two part-time jobs. During this time, he was able to use his leave to make short trips to many parts of China, as well as conducting research in Japan's parliamentary library. After reaching Japan's compulsory retirement age of 65 and no longer able to afford to live in Tokyo, he and Yoneko went back to Canberra, though each year he returned to Japan to renew his Japanese residency.

Notwithstanding Stephen's impressive diplomatic career, it is his research into the mercantile shipping of Japan and China since the mid-19th century for which he has become best known around the world. This interest arose from travelling by sea to Japan as an eight-year-old on the cargoliner *Andes Maru*, then growing up in the hillside suburb of Rokko overlooking the busy port of Kobe. Later travelling to and from Japan to Australia in the school holidays he enjoyed travelling austerity class on such fine ships as RIL's *Tjiluwah* and *Tjiwangi* and Jardine's *Eastern Queen*. He learned to use a black-and-white camera to good effect and to record the various companies and their fleets. In early 1966, by great good fortune, we both at the same time began to attend the monthly evening meetings of the WSS in the railways building on Flinders Street and soon found that we shared an interest in the ships that plied between Australia, Hong Kong and Japan. As the youngest members of an eclectic group of shipping enthusiasts, we were welcomed and mentored, not least in how to research and compile a detailed company fleet list, working from Lloyd's Registers, WSS Marine News, and the resources of the WSS Central Record.

Stephen's favourite ship: *Tjiluwah* at Sydney, Aug. 1962 (J. Mathieson/NAA).

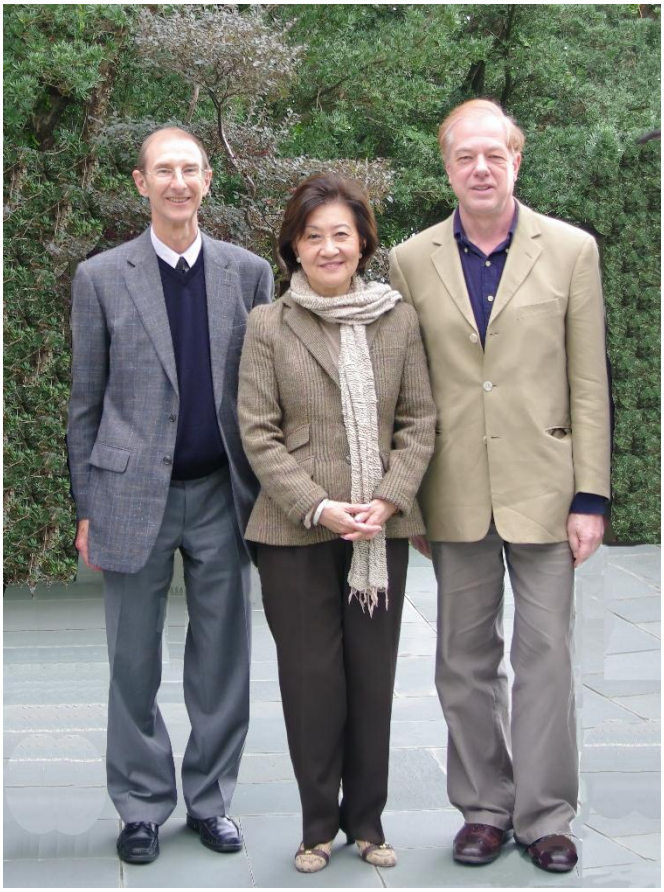
By 1968, Stephen had become interested in the rapidly expanding bulk and liner fleet of C.Y. Tung's Oriental Overseas Line. While working at Expo '70 in Osaka, he had opportunity in April 1970 to look over OOCL's recently converted containership *Geh Yung* (ex *El Salvador Victory*), which was inaugurating the first Chinese-flag transpacific container line. His list of around 100 ships was duly published in 'The Log' over several bi-monthly issues in 1972. Together we compiled the little red booklet *Far Eastern Fleets* which, with the financial support of the NAA, was printed in Canberra in 1973 and more widely read around the world than we had ever anticipated. In 1988, again with the backing of the NAA, we were able to publish in hard covers the revised, expanded, and better illustrated *Beancaker to Boxboat: Steamship Companies in Chinese Waters*, followed in 1991 by a sequel *Sold East: Traders, Tramps and Tugs of Chinese Waters* that documented other Chinese and Hong Kong fleets. Each book was more than 300 pages (inc. index) and in due course both sold out.

Stephen's view of OOCL's Geh Yung trial loading at Kobe, April 1970.

After Stephen and I had both retired early, we had more time and discussed how best to revive our common interest. We decided that the biggest challenge was to find photographs or other images that as far as possible would visually identify the fleets that

we had documented in our two books. For Swire's China Navigation Co. this had already been done by the company itself (Wikiswire) but not for any of the other companies. We therefore began looking for needles in all the haystacks we could find, slow, forensic work at which Stephen excelled, in particular identifying the steamers of the Yangtse and Pearl rivers. Many images were not identified, others incorrectly, some vessels were just an object in a panorama, but gradually, with the assistance of the internet, ebay, and associates around the world, we assembled the jigsaw of each fleet, including the early fleet of the PRC, and eventually were amazed at how much we were able to achieve. The other issue was how to publish. We ruled out further hard-copy publication as too demanding and too expensive. The obvious solution was a website that could be continually updated as new material came to hand. This was the genesis of <oldchinaships.com > Stephen bravely took on the demanding role of webmaster, designing a simple Wix site that did not require much outlay for IT support yet would be a user-friendly way to share pdf files. We need not wish to introduce advertising, so the Google profile remained modest, but traffic gradually built up around the world, often with interest from unexpected countries. As of July 2026 <oldchinaships> consists of 118 separate pdf files and over 2500 pages that document and illustrate the history and fleets of a multitude of both Chinese and foreign companies and enterprises (plus the Maritime Customs and Shanghai Pilot Service) on the China Coast and rivers and, under separate tabs, extending to Japan, the Philippines and Southeast Asia. This resource is made available in the public domain subject only to the copyright restriction that the authors be acknowledged in any further publication and that the low-resolution images are solely for research purposes unless by further agreement with the image holder.

Around 2000 Stephen was approached by Alice King, daughter of the late C.Y. Tung, who was aware of Stephen's documentation of the Tung fleet and sought his assistance in editing her father's diary and papers. In March 2010 Stephen and I both met with her in Hong Kong to discuss our writing a commissioned biography of C.Y. Tung for the centenary of his birth in 2012. The manuscript was completed but, because of health issues, did not proceed to publication. Thus we were delighted in 2023 when the unpublished manuscript came was to the attention of members of the Tung family and the book able to be revived through Hong Kong University Press.

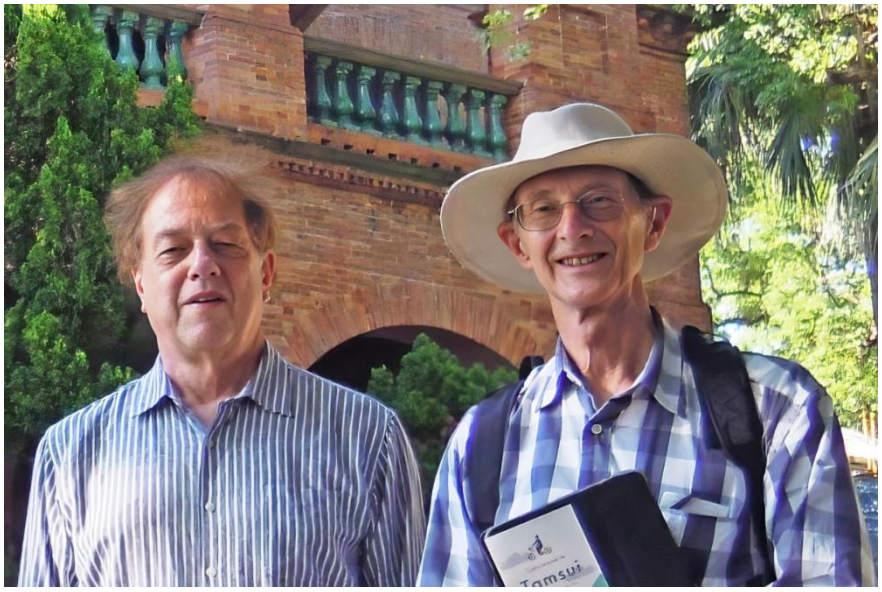


Stephen [R], Alice Tung and Howard at Island Club, Hong Kong, March 2010.

While the book was in the proof stage, Stephen had to undergo open-heart surgery in January of this year but continued checking through to the seventh and final proof. Though somewhat apprehensive of the effort that would be involved to attend the launch in hot and steamy Hong Kong in mid-July, he booked flights and prepared his speaking notes and slides well. Everything seemed to be in place. Then, a few days before we were due to fly from Sydney, he rang to say that his medical advice was against making the trip. His health was paramount, so I agreed to speak for both of us.

During the hectic but enjoyable days of two launches (Book Fair and Maritime Museum), a family history seminar (HKUST), and various meetings, I could not access email and was unable to reach Stephen by phone or message. I returned on the subsequent Friday, jetlagged but with much good news and warm greetings as well as gifts to share with him. On the Saturday, when I had the energy to go online and make contact, I was shattered to find a resent week-old message from his brother to advise that Stephen had died on the morning I had flown out of Sydney! The book that represents the climax of his life's work has become a memorial that he never actually saw or held. It is almost beyond comprehension.

Dick & Kentwell/Kentwell & Dick was a partnership that endured for over fifty years. We pursued our common interest around the world, encouraged each other, stimulated each other, wrote for each other. It is hard to say where one of us ended and the other began, because we saw the world through each other's eyes. Even though we mostly lived in different places, met only occasionally, and did not even speak much by telephone, until Stephen's surgery we corresponded every day, often several times, as we juggled our ongoing projects, sought to identify new photographs, and copied in our emails with maritime researchers around the world, as well as updating the <oldchinaships> website. I have lost a good part of myself, his family much more.



Stephen (L) and Howard beside the old British consular residence at Tamsui, Nov. 2023.

Stephen was a self-effacing and intensely private person who, having partly grown up in Japan and having lived there so long, as well as being married to his Japanese wife Yoneko, was in his thinking and behaviour as much Japanese as Australian. He was conscientiously professional, meticulous in research, scrupulous in behaviour, thoughtful, prompt, and courteous with a warm smile and a disarmingly dry wit. He was my closest friend and colleague and I wish that I could restore him to life. Given that I cannot do so, I will do my best to ensure that his work endures, is added to in our joint names, and shared in the public domain as far as our friends and colleagues can enable this to be achieved.

Stephen is survived by his wife Yoneko and their two beautiful daughters, Maira and Saya.

Howard Dick

1 August 2026

Appendix: Maritime publications

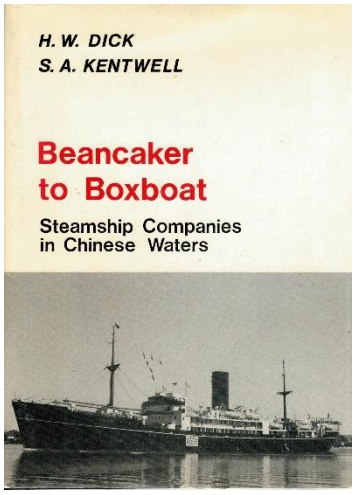
Books

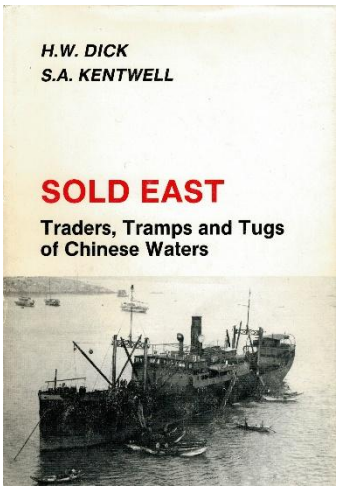
Dick & Kentwell, *Far Eastern Fleets*, Nautical Association of Australia, Canberra (1973).

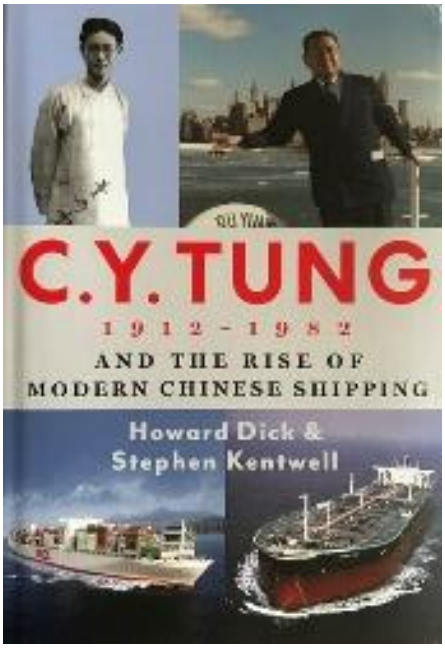
Dick & Kentwell, *Beancaker to Boxboat: Steamship Companies in Chinese Waters*, Nautical Association of Australia, Canberra, xiv + 329 pp. (1988).

Dick & Kentwell, *Sold East: Traders, Tramps and Tugs of Chinese Waters*, Nautical Association of Australia, Melbourne, xiv + 338 pp. (1991).

Dick & Kentwell, *C. Y. Tung and the Rise of Modern Chinese Shipping*. Hong Kong University Press, xxiii + 429pp [launched in Hong Kong, 18-19 July 2026].







Articles

'Japanese (ship) names', *The Log*, 1968 (#3), p. 67.

The C.Y. Tung Group, *The Log*, 1972 (#25-28, 31).

'The Unfortunate *Braeside* and *Burnside*, *The Log*, June 1974 (#36), 39-46.

'The fate of *Awa Maru* and her sisters', *The Log*, November 1975 (#42), 109-15.

'The former coasters *Moonta* and *Taroona* enter the 1980s', *The Log*, August 1981 (#65), 71-73.

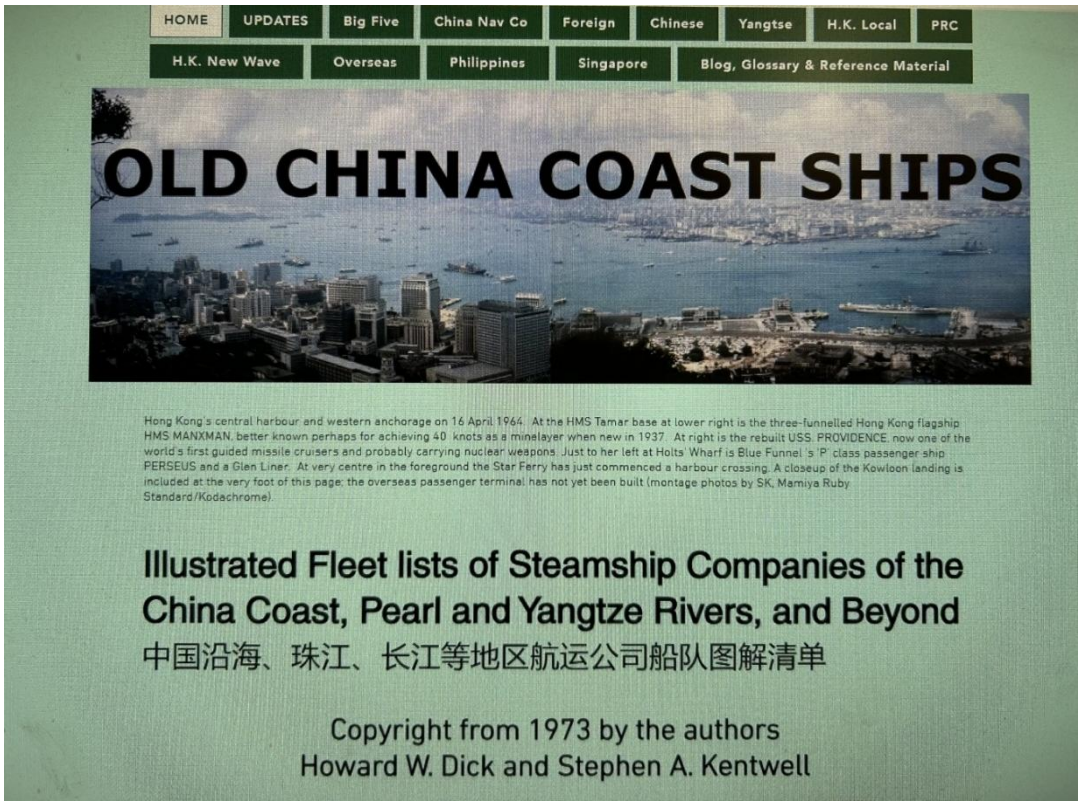
'Far Eastern Traders: Bruusgaard, Kiosterud & Co., Drammen', *The Log*, 1982 (#69-70), 69-74, 105-117.

(Dick & Kentwell) 'From the Yangtse to Australia and Back Again: The Very Long Career of the River Steamer (HMS/HMAS) PINGWO of 1922', *The Log*, 48 (2), 76-98 (2015).

(Kentwell & Dick) 'The Royal Interocean Liners *Tjiwangi* and *Tjiluwah*', *The Log*, 59 (1), 21-35 (2026).

Website (designed and curated by S. Kentwell, content jointly created with H. Dick)

www.oldchinaships.com



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