

**Mao's Toe:  
Memoirs of the Life of David Chipp, A Serious Correspondent**

edited by Damien Freeman

A review by Merlin Waterson for *The Garrick*

Members of the Garrick may be surprised by the photograph on the cover of David Chipp's *Mao's Toe*. It shows the author at a time when he liked to be known as 'China Chipp', wearing a cumbersome overcoat, pork-pie hat pushed back from his forehead and his fingers poised over a typewriter. There is just a hint of the disreputable. That would not have displeased Chipp, who insisted that journalism was a nasty trade – but with the deeply serious purpose of seeking the truth – rather than a profession. What may strike his Garrick friends as unfamiliar is that in the corner of his desk is, not a well-filled glass, but a potted plant.

Chipp often spoke about his memoirs of the thirty months he spent as Reuters correspondent in Peking, the first non-communist western journalist to be granted residency by the Chinese government. He regarded it as the high point of a career that included seventeen years as Editor-in-Chief of the Press Association. Although he was still reshaping and altering them just before he died in 2008, the memoirs had not found a publisher. His executors decided to produce the book in an expanded form, including tributes to Chipp; part of a planned history of journalism; and other occasional pieces. It has been admirably edited by Damien Freeman. Among the essays is an excellent piece by Paul Fox on 'What the Garrick Club meant to David Chipp; and what Chipp meant to the Garrick.' Members who think they might be lampooned or at least get a mention obviously need to rush up to the Secretary's office and grab a copy (see below).

By incorporating this additional material, the book has been made vastly more interesting. Indeed the chapters on his reporting from China between 1956 and 1958 suffer from the loss of his diaries and photographs from that period. The picture he paints is fascinating, but he was twenty-eight at the time and his recollections were put together with the help of friends half a century later. The title of the book refers to the moment when, at an official gathering, he trod on the toe of Chairman Mao, who made light of the incident, probably because he was well aware of how popular Chipp was in Peking. Premier Zhou Enlai told a colleague: 'We like Mr Chipp. He is very interested in everything about China; he gets a lot wrong; and is always laughing and joking. But he is a very serious correspondent.' It was those qualities that made Chipp such an engaging companion on the Garrick's centre table.

There were serious moments even there, including the time when the Garrick was used by Chipp as a field hospital in the battle between the print unions and the Press Association. That was in 1979, when the National Union of Journalists called its members out on strike and the National Graphical Association would only accept stories that had been 'subbed' and signed off by the Editor-in-Chief. There was a combative streak in Chipp, as those who were coached by him on the river at Henley will remember. For seven weeks he relished the confrontation, personally editing every news and parliamentary report, the sporting stories and even the captions to the pictures, so keeping the national and regional papers supplied with the material needed to continue production. What made this test of his stamina possible was that it was a brief, brisk walk from his office to lunch at the Garrick.

He was the most indulgent of friends, particularly when it came to administering champagne. His doctor had told him that unless he stopped drinking he would kill himself; but he might be allowed an occasional glass of champagne. It was consequently to be regarded as an antidote, not an alcoholic drink. It could even be used as a political instrument, as when he proposed a toast in the Garrick bar on hearing of the news of Robert Maxwell's death ('one pompous ass told me it was in terrible taste, but that didn't stop him taking a drink'). Champagne was also a necessary ingredient of friendship. He was apt to quote the Roman orator Cicero: 'the best and most beautiful upholstery in life is friendship'. *Mao's Toe* exemplifies that truth.

*'Mao's Toe' has been privately printed by the Estate of David Chipp and is distributed by the Development Office at King's College, Cambridge, CB2 1ST. Copies are available to his friends without charge, either from the College or from the office of the Secretary of the Garrick. They are asked to consider making a donation to 'King's College Supplementary Exhibition Fund' in his memory.*