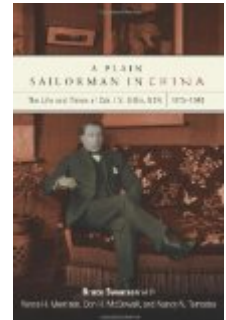


**Bruce Swanson, Vance Morrison, Don H. McDowell, Norton Tomasko.** *A Plain Sailor in China: The Life and Times of Cdr. I. V. Gillis, USN, 1875-1948*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 272 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-105-4.



**Reviewed by** Tony Demchak

**Published on** H-War (February, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

*A Plain Sailor in China* is a biography of Commander Irvin Van Gorder Gillis, an officer in the United States Navy, from his enrollment in the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1890 to his final retirement in 1919. He had a storied career, being present during the Philippine Insurrection of 1902; the Russo-Japanese War; World War I; and, as a civilian, World War II. Although the book was initially written to uncover the retired Commander Gillis's contributions to the Gest Oriental Library Collection (now the East Asian Library) at Princeton University, the late Bruce Swanson and his colleagues wrote on his career in the navy as well.

Until 1904, Gillis had a fairly typical career. He served on the USS *Texas*, the first American battleship, as a signal officer in 1896. Over the years, he served in various capacities, including as an engineer and as commander of his own torpedo boat (the USS *Porter*). In 1904, Gillis was named assistant naval attache in Japan, the beginnings of a life-long career as an intelligence officer for ONI (the Office of Naval Intelligence), inti-

imately involved with the affairs of Japan and China. This position, and a similar one in Peking (where he was either assistant naval attache or the naval attache in 1907-08, 1911-14, and 1917-19), helped him develop key contacts among the American and Chinese business communities, which enabled him to serve as a representative for Bethlehem Steel and the Electric Boat Company. He also met and worked with Guion Moore Gest, an engineer who, troubled by bad eyesight, asked Gillis for help. Gillis directed him to a traditional Chinese remedy that helped Gest. Enthusiastic about other potential ways that ancient Chinese scholarship could help Western medicine, Gest commissioned Gillis to act as Gest's agent to collect as many rare Chinese books on medicine as possible. This task, with a few exceptions, consumed the remainder of Gillis's life.

This book, as a biography of Gillis, is well written and engaging. At times, particularly when discussing Gillis's encounters with new individuals in Japan and China, the book becomes difficult to follow, as people are introduced in a paragraph

or two, breaking the flow of the narrative, then returning to Gillis's life. An examination of the American minister in China, William Woodville Rockhill, and some of his subordinates takes two pages, for example, where a couple of explanatory endnotes would have sufficed.

The footnotes, as the authors admit, were not in Swanson's original manuscript (apart from the first chapter). Assembling and cataloging the necessary references, as well as writing the final chapter were their "biggest challenges" (p. xii). However, even given the magnitude of that task, some of the evidence is questionable at best. The first footnote to chapter 2, for example, is from the Web site answers.com. The page cited does not exist now, and even if it did, answers.com is hardly a scholarly source. Another Web site used more than once, u-s-history.com, has no sources for its material and is littered with garish ads. The Web site absolutehistory.com, used in footnote 36 for chapter 5, no longer exists at all. These problematic Web sites do form less than 1 percent of the footnotes, and the other scholarship is exemplary.

The strongest part of the book is the final chapter, which discusses Gillis's life and activities after his retirement from the navy. It is clean, concise, and easy to follow, and expertly shows how Gillis's spirits rose and fell as his interest in the Gest library waxed and waned. Gillis's personality is demonstrated much more poignantly in this chapter than the others. One amusing episode tells how a letter that Gillis sent to a friend had originally had "President" Roosevelt, but it was changed to "Governor-General" as a result of Gillis's dissatisfaction with the president's policy on China.

As a whole, *A Plain Sailorman in China* is a very fine resource for students interested in naval history or U.S. foreign policy in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. There are some excellent appendices as well, one

of which shows the courses that Gillis had taken at Annapolis.

to

,

T

,

,

Dr.&#160;

ing

the

19

19

19

;

e

the&#160;

w

would&#160;

is meeting

,

(pp. 91-93)

Dr.&#160;

[their]&#160;

.

w

. (pg. 219)

,

w

Another

w

absolutehistory.com,&#160;

. (p. 228)

w

%

P

(pg. 182).

would have

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Tony Demchak. Review of Swanson, Bruce; Morrison, Vance; McDowell, Don H.; Tomasko, Norton. *A Plain Sailor in China: The Life and Times of Cdr. I. V. Gillis, USN, 1875-1948*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37085>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.