Burying the Bones: Pearl Buck in China by Hilary Spurling

Pearl Buck with her daughter, Carol, in the 1920s.

This book has been an eye-opener for me, and I think it will be for many readers. Pearl Buck is not a household name, though she was one not all that long ago. Hilary Spurling has given us a brilliant account of her life in China, the wellspring of a writing career that would produce 39 novels, and much else besides.

5 Buck thought she was Chinese as a child, although she was born in America in 1892, when her Presbyterian missionary father was on leave. They soon moved back to Zhengjiang, a port city on the Yangtze river in eastern China. She spoke Chinese before she spoke English. When she asked her Chinese nanny why her blond hair was being covered up, the nanny said, "It doesn't look human, this hair." Buck only realised she wasn't Chinese when she was eight. The family was forced to flee her father's missionary post in 1901 and seek shelter in Shanghai. The Boxer Rebellion had erupted, unleashing all the hatred of foreigners who had usurped the country after the Opium wars. More conflicts and calamities followed: famine, the abdication of the last Emperor, and the consequent fighting for power between warlords, nationalists and communists. And all around her, she saw poverty and death.

10 The family lived for a time opposite a brothel because it was cheap. Four of her siblings died of disease one after another. The first bones she buried were the tiny ones she found, of female babies unwanted by their parents. It was a child's game to put them in burial mounds and decorate them with pebbles and flowers. Later, bones, body parts and corpses became commonplace. If there is a Dickensian sprawl in her fiction, this is where it comes from.

15 But it was with her first husband, also a missionary, and an agricultural scientist, that she plunged deep into Chinese village life, trying to convert but also to understand the core of Chinese society. The experience inspired The Good Earth, the first part of a trilogy that sold millions of copies in the West and was turned into a Hollywood film, soon winning her the Pulitzer prize, and in 1938 the Nobel prize.

20 I knew little about Buck during my education in China, even when I majored in English literature. She was not on our curriculum, not on the reading list, not in the bookshops. She was criticised by the nationalists in her day, by the communists, and by Chinese intellectuals. The first said she only