

RICHARD GREEN

MONTAGUE DAWSON

Chiswick 1895 - 1973 Midhurst, Sussex

Ref: CD 197

The China tea clippers Ariel and Taeping on 5th September 1866



Signed lower left: *MONTAGUE DAWSON*
Oil on canvas: 40 x 50 in / 101.6 x 127 cm
Frame size: 47 ½ x 57 ½ in / 120.6 x 146 cm

Painted *circa* 1950



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Provenance:

Frost & Reed Ltd., London, acquired from the artist
Private collection
Christie's New York, 23rd February 1989, lot 462;
Richard Green, London;
private collection, USA

Montague Dawson was fascinated by the towering grace of the mid-nineteenth century clipper ships, which inspired some of his most celebrated works. This painting vividly depicts the 1866 tea race between *Taeping* and *Ariel*, most celebrated of the China tea clippers.

The reduction in the duty on importing tea into England in the 1860s spurred the development of a new generation of clippers, with towering sail plans and exceptional speed. Each spring the clippers went out to the Chinese ports – Foochow being the busiest – and waited for the tea to be brought down from the interior. The ‘Tea Races’ in which these elite vessels strove to be the first home with the new season’s cargo of tea caught the imagination of the press and of the world. Heavy wagers were laid on who would be home most quickly, and there was a premium paid in London for the freshest cargo.

Taeping was designed by William Steele and built in 1863 by his brother Robert Steele for Alexander Rodger of Glasgow. Registered at 767 tons, 183 ft in length with a 31 ft beam, she was the first composite tea clipper (made of wood on an iron frame) to come out of the Steeles’ famous yard at Greenock on the Clyde. *Taeping* made a very good maiden voyage from China to London in 1864, despite being disabled by a typhoon off Formosa and being forced to put into Amoy for repairs. The following year she made the tea run in 104 days.

Ariel also came from the Steeles’ yard at Greenock and was launched on 19th June 1865. Ordered by Shaw, Lowther & Maxton of London, she was registered at 852 tons, 198 ft in length and with a 34 ft beam. Slightly larger than *Taeping*, she likewise proved extraordinarily fast.

1866 witnessed the most breathtaking battle between four great clippers, *Ariel*, *Taeping*, *Fiery Cross* and *Serica*. The clippers finished loading their cargo at Foochow at the end of May and made their way downriver; by noon on 30th May all were in open sea and the race had begun. The ships passed, repassed and sailed abreast of one another on the long journey home. Reaching the Scillies for the final dash, *Ariel* and *Taeping* were neck and neck as they raced up the Channel, logging fourteen knots for much of 5th September. At 8 am the next day, *Ariel* made her number off Deal, with *Taeping* only ten minutes astern of her. Off the Nore, *Taeping* picked up the better of the two available tugs and arrived off Gravesend just ahead of *Ariel* to wait for the tide. After the last dash up the Thames, *Taeping*, drawing less water than her rival, docked in London at 9.47 pm, *Ariel* at 10.15 pm. So close were the rivals that it was decided that the captains should share the prize as

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well as the premium on the first tea cargo of the year. The journey had taken ninety-nine days.

Dawson shows *Taeping* and *Ariel* in a classic starboard view as they hurtle past Land's End, all sail set, on the final stage of the 1866 race. The raked masts, streamlined hulls and great press of sail, skilfully handled, made them the fastest vessels afloat, even though the age of marine steam power was well advanced by the 1860s. They were also supremely elegant, symbolizing the romance of the days of sail in a way which has continued to fascinate into the twenty-first century. LGG Ramsey describes the Steeles' ships as being 'celebrated not only for beauty of model and perfection of build, but for the superb finish, the figureheads, gingerbread work and deck fittings of picked teak'¹. They carried carefully selected crews of around thirty men.

In 1867 *Taeping* was first home again, in 102 days, and the following year was only beaten in the final stage up the English Channel. In 1870 she was first home once more, but in 1871 disaster struck the noble clipper: she was wrecked off Ladd's Reef in the South China Seas on 22nd November 1871. *Ariel* suffered a similar fate. After the 1866 race, she made her next passage out from Gravesend to Hong Kong (pilot to pilot) in seventy-nine days, the fastest ever recorded. In 1870-71 she carried tea from Yokohama to New York but disappeared at sea sometime after leaving London, bound for Sydney, on 31st January 1872.

The race between *Taeping* and *Ariel* proved a popular subject, which Dawson painted at least seven times, always varying the angle of the ships and the climatic conditions. They include *The Great Race – Ariel and Taeping* (with Richard Green in 2006; private collection, Europe). LGG Ramsey lists five paintings on this theme².

¹ *Montague Dawson RSM A, FRSA*, revised edn., Leigh-on-Sea 1970, p.18.

² *Op. cit.*, pp.18-19, no.13-17.

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Montague Dawson was the son of a keen yachtsman and the grandson of the marine painter Henry Dawson (1811-1878). Much of his childhood was spent on Southampton Water where he was able to indulge his interest in the study of ships. For a brief period around 1910 Dawson worked for a commercial art studio in London, but with the outbreak of the First World War he joined the Royal Navy. Whilst serving with the Navy in Falmouth he met Charles Napier Hemy (1841-1917), who considerably influenced his work. Dawson was present at the final surrender of the German Grand Fleet and many of his illustrations depicting the event were published in the Sphere.

After the War, Dawson established himself as a professional marine artist, concentrating on historical subjects and portraits of deep-water sailing ships often in stiff breeze or on high seas. During the Second World War, he was employed as a war artist and again worked for the Sphere. Dawson exhibited regularly at the Royal Society of Marine Artists, of which he became a member, from 1946 to 1964, and occasionally at the Royal Academy between 1917 and 1936. By the 1930s he was considered one of the greatest living marine artists, whose patrons included two American Presidents, Dwight D Eisenhower and Lyndon B Johnson, as well as the British Royal Family.

The work of Montague Dawson is represented in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich and the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth.

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