INTRODUCTION

by

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OSWALD WHITE, THE TREATY PORTS AND THE JAPAN CONSULAR SERVICE

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Oswald White

When my grandmother died in 2000, I was given charge of a variety of her artefacts that had either been in her house or in her son’s house. That son was my father. Along with a pile of ancient documents, I found a briefcase containing a manuscript written by my Grandmother’s father, Oswald White, which is presented here.

Oswald White¹ was born on 23 September 1884 in Gosforth, Northumberland, the son of James White, a commercial clerk from Newcastle and Annie White, née Fish. He spent his whole career in the Japan Consular Service, serving the last third as a Consul-General, the highest position in the Service. He left his last official post in February 1941, before Pearl Harbor (December 1941) and therefore shortly before Japan, which had been fighting China since 1937, went to war with Britain and the United States. Towards the end of his career in the 1930s, he wrote his memoirs in notebooks, chronicling his time in the Service. These notebooks he subsequently wrote up into a manuscript in 1941 and 1942.

Consequently there is a changing perspective as some of the writing takes place either side of Japan entering the Second World War.

After 1941 Oswald White returned to London, where he finished his career, using his unparalleled knowledge of the Japanese language and culture to help the government in their efforts against Japan. He retired in 1944 when he turned sixty, receiving a warm letter from Anthony Eden, which alluded to ‘special services’ he had undertaken for the government when back in London during the war:

….. The period of your service, which began just before the Russo-Japanese War, has coincided with the rapid growth of Japan and the resultant situation in the Far East which has ended in the present war there. The remarkable knowledge of the Japanese people, language and mental outlook which you acquired and developed through your service has proved of very great value to your country. This knowledge, supported by your gifts of character and ability, has enabled you to render outstanding service at various posts, culminating in your appointments as His Majesty’s Consul-General at Seoul and Osaka where, thanks to your energy, tenacity and skill in negotiation, you succeeded to a remarkable degree in protecting British commercial interests in circumstances of great difficulty.

…..

You will I am sure, be glad that your exceptional knowledge of Japan has enabled you to continue to take a very important part in the struggle against the country. I am fully aware of the outstanding nature of the special services which you are at present rendering to His Majesty’s Government. …. 

I am not sure exactly what these services were, but with his long experience of the region from a Western perspective, his knowledge and insight must have been invaluable.

Later, in 1952, Shigemitsu Mamoru,² the Japanese Foreign Minister who signed the surrender at the end of the Second World

² Shigemitsu Mamoru (1887–1957), Japanese diplomat and politician. He was ambassador in London from 1938 to 1941, and was convicted as a war criminal in the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. See Antony Best, ‘Shigemitsu Mamoru, 1887–1957: Critical Times in a Long, Ambivalent Career (London 1938–41’), in Ian Nish, ed., Japanese Envoys in Britain,
War, published his memoirs. As these were written in Japanese, once again White’s assistance was sought. Shortly afterwards, he told his grandson (my father, David Read) that the security services approached him to translate the work, as he was quite probably the West’s leading expert on Japanese at the time, plus he had expert knowledge of the Japanese empire. He told my father that the Pentagon and US intelligence services were particularly keen to see a translation of Shigemitsu’s work, because it opened a window onto the Japanese mentality that took them into the war. His translation of the work was published in 1958.

As can be readily inferred from these memoirs, White was a very modest man, whose great mind, skills and diplomacy he never bragged about. Even though by the end of his career he was among the leading Western experts on the Japanese language and had profound knowledge of the culture and the region, it would be hard to tell from his own writings.

Following the publication of his translation of Shigemitsu, White, now in his mid-seventies, finally retired for good to his house in Hampstead with his wife Peggy, and not far from his three daughters and two grandsons. After the death of his wife he sold his Hampstead home and lived his last few years in residence at the Leicester Court Hotel, South Kensington. He died on 29 December 1970, at the age of eighty-six.

Before finishing this introduction to his memoirs, it is worthwhile understanding the context of the Japan Consular Service during his time in office.

**The Fall of China and The Rise of Japan**

Coming into the nineteenth century, China had a very long and proud history as a powerful imperial power through a succession of dynasties. The last of these dynasties, the Qing (or Manchu), started in the seventeenth century and ran until 1912. This multi-cultural empire formed the territorial base for the modern Chinese state. However, by the mid-nineteenth century the

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dynasty was in decline. The First Opium War between Britain and China (basically fought on trading rights) started in 1839, which was the start of the ‘century of shame’ as it is known in China. The decline and weakness continued after the collapse of the Qing and throughout what was called the Republic of China, which lasted from 1912 to 1949. This chapter of Chinese history only finished when the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949.

At the same time as the Qing dynasty was collapsing, the Japanese Empire, under the Emperor Meiji from 1868 to 1912, was growing rapidly and starting to eclipse China as the main power of the Far East. The first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), was won by Japan, resulting in the Japanese increasing their control in Manchuria (Northeastern China) and also replacing China as the main influence in Korea (see Fig.1). Japan subsequently went on to annex Korea in 1910. So from the second half of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century up to the end of the Second World War, Japan was the pre-eminent power of the Far East.

**Treaty Ports**

During this Chinese century of shame, the first of what came to be called the Unequal Treaties were signed with Western powers. These treaties were considered unequal in China because they were not negotiated by nations treating each other as equals but were imposed on China after the loss of a war, and because they encroached upon China’s sovereign rights, reducing the country to semi-colonial status. In many cases China was effectively forced to pay large amounts of reparations, open up ports for trade, cede or lease territories (such as Hong Kong to Great Britain and Macau to Portugal), and make various other concessions of sovereignty to foreign powers following military defeats.

The first of these treaties, the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing) was signed in 1842 after the Qing’s defeat in the first Opium War. This and subsequent treaties with Britain opened up five ports to foreign trade while also allowing foreign missionaries to reside within China. Foreign residents in the port cities were also put
on trial by their own consular authorities instead of the Chinese, a legal system called extraterritoriality. Under the treaties, the UK established a Supreme Court for China and Japan and the United States established the Court for China. Both were based in Shanghai.

Further treaties following the Second Opium War (1856–1860), opened up eleven more ports to Great Britain, France, Russia and the US. Eventually more than eighty treaty ports were established in China, giving extraterritoriality to many foreign powers, including Japan.

In each treaty port, most countries that had signed a treaty gained a concession in the port, which they essentially controlled. These concessions, often newly built on the edges of existing port cities, enjoyed extraterritoriality as stipulated in the treaties. Foreign clubs, racecourses and churches were established in major treaty ports.

So, for example, in the treaty port of Tientsin (Tianjin), the port city for the Chinese capital Beijing, there were separate concessions controlled by Austro-Hungary, Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and Russia (see Fig. 2).3

Between 1854 and the early 1870s, Japan signed similar treaties. However, in 1899, with the rise of Japanese power, the Japanese ‘unequal’ treaties were replaced with new treaties that put Japan in a much stronger position. The foreign concession areas still existed in the Japanese ports, but foreigners were now under Japanese jurisdiction and control.

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3 Tientsin (Tianjin) is one of the five national central cities in China. Lying on the Bohai Gulf portion of the Yellow Sea, it is the largest coastal city in northern China. At the end of the first part of the Second Opium War in June 1858, the Treaties of Tianjin were signed, which opened Tianjin to foreign trade. The treaties were ratified by the Emperor of China in 1860, and Tianjin was formally opened to Great Britain and France, and thus to the outside world. Between 1895 and 1900, Britain and France were joined by Japan, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Belgium, in establishing self-contained concessions in Tianjin, each with its own prisons, schools, barracks and hospitals. These nations left many architectural reminders of their rule, notably churches and villas. Today those villas provide an exotic flavour to Tianjin. See Fig. 2 for a map of the Tientsin concessions.
By contrast, the Chinese position was very weak. As well as treaty ports there were also several leased territories, which gave the leaseholder not only the right to trade and extraterritoriality over their own subjects, but also effective control over the whole territory – i.e. a de facto annexation. One of these was the Kwantung Leased Territory, which made up the southern half of the Liaodong peninsula in Manchuria. The lease was originally held by Russia but was turned over to Japan following the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). This included the treaty ports of Port Arthur and Dairen. Also from 1905 Japan obtained extraterritorial rights north of the territory adjacent to the South Manchurian Railway, which extended north of Mukden (now Shenyang) to Changchun.

Extraterritoriality also operated in Korea after 1876, when Japan negotiated that country’s first modern treaty, but ended after the Japanese established a protectorate in 1905. The last traces of the old treaties ended with the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910.

The Japan Consular Service

Britain’s Japan Consular Service emerged after the signing of the first British-Japanese treaty in 1858 and operated until 1941, when Japan declared war on Britain. Until 1899, British consular officials exercised extraterritorial jurisdiction over British subjects in Japan, with appeals from consular decisions being made to the British Court for Japan in Yokohama and final appeals going ultimately to the British Supreme Court for China and Japan, based in Shanghai. At the major treaty ports, the consular post would be a consul-general, whereas at the rest it was a consul.

The main treaty ports in Japan were Yokohama, Kobe, Nagasaki and Hakodate. Edo (now Tokyo) and Osaka were designated open cities. Shimoda and Niigata also featured in the treaties but did not develop foreign communities.

As Japan effectively controlled South Manchuria, British concessions in the treaty ports in this region were staffed from the Japan Service. In Korea, there were British consular posts at Seoul and Chemulpo (now Inchon) after 1883. The first consul-general in Korea was W. G. Aston, from the Japanese Service, but from his departure in 1885, Korea was staffed from the China Service. After a brief period from 1900 to 1905, when Korea was treated as an independent country, the posts continued to be staffed from the China Service until the Japanese annexation in 1910. Thereafter, consular staff came from the Japan Service. Chemulpo was closed during the First World War and only Seoul remained a consular post.

Successful entrants into the Japan Consular Service were expected to serve their entire careers in Japan or the Japanese Empire after 1895 and the acquisition of Taiwan. Manila and Honolulu were later added, to improve career prospects. New entrants began as student interpreters whose main task was to learn Japanese, although they were also expected to take a share of other work to prepare them for their future careers. In the first decades of the Service, almost all dealings with Japanese officials were in Japanese and British consular officials had a high standard in the spoken and written language. This declined over time as more Japanese officials learnt English.

It is in this situation that Oswald White entered the Service in 1903. He had finished top of his year in his grammar school (Mercers’ School, Holborn) and immediately entered the 1903 Open Competitive Examination for 4 Situations as Student Interpreter in China, Japan or Siam. He finished in first place out of the 53 entrants (Sansom and Phipps who finished second and third in the

5 G. B. Sansom, later Sir George (1883–1965), was to become not only a successful member of the Consular Service and later of the Diplomatic Service but also one of the greatest twentieth-century scholars of Japan. See Gordon Daniels, ‘Sir George Sansom: Pre-eminent Diplomat and Historian, in Cortazzi, British Envoys in Japan 1859–1972, pp. 250–9, and Katherine Sansom, Sir George Sansom and Japan: A Memoir (Tallahassee, Florida: Diplomatic Press, 1972). Gerald Hastings Phipps
exam respectively, appear in his memoirs) and was duly assigned to the Japan Service as a Student Interpreter in Tokyo. He started in this post later the same year, just shy of nineteen years old. This is where we pick up the memoirs.

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January 2017

Note On Romanisation

Since Oswald White wrote this memoir, there have been major changes in the way words in Chinese and Korean are romanised. His usage has been kept in the text, but the modern equivalent has been added to the footnotes. In addition, he gave many Korean place names in the Japanese reading. Again, this has been kept in the text but the modern Korean way of transliterating such words appears in the footnotes.

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