

ASTON, CAMBRIDGE AND KOREA

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In the early 1880s the British Treasury was confronted with a proposal to make funds available for the purchase of a site in Chong-dong in Seoul for a British Legation and for the construction of permanent accommodation to house the staff. The Treasury is never generous at the best of times, of course, and perhaps cannot be blamed for failing to foresee the importance to Britain that Korea would one day assume. The Treasury officials described Korea as 'this wretched place' and the most they were willing to do for a place that seemed to them to be beyond the pale of civilization was to sanction a temporary British presence. That temporary British presence in that 'wretched place' was William George Aston (1841-1911), who was appointed British consul-general for Seoul in 1884 and was the first European diplomatic representative to reside in Korea. During his brief stay in Korea he was caught up in a bloodthirsty bout of political infighting and was often caught up too in the mud on the roads. He could have been forgiven perhaps for sharing the Treasury's view of a Korea as a 'wretched place', but he did not. Aston was an intellectual explorer, who made it his business to learn Korean long before he went there, to read as much as he could in Korean, and to pass on what he knew of Korea to the educated reading-public at home in England. After he died his very substantial collection of Japanese, Chinese and Korean books was acquired by Cambridge University Library creating a happy connection between Cambridge and Korea. I should add here, though, that some of his Korean books were acquired by the Asiatic Museum in St Petersburg at some time before the Russian Revolution and are now kept in the Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg.

First of all, I should give a brief sketch of Aston's life and career. It will have to be brief, for Aston was an intensely private man: he left no diary and precious few letters and he has survived principally as the author of public texts, from diplomatic despatches to the many books and articles he wrote on Korea and Japan. Aston was born near Londonderry in what is now Northern Ireland and was educated at Queen's College, Belfast; he was a scholarship boy from a family of no wealth or importance, but he distinguished himself at university, where he received a very thorough philological training in Latin, Greek, French, German and modern history. In 1864 he passed the examination for entry to the Consular Service - remember that in those days the high-status diplomatic service and the more mundane consular service were different entities - and was sent to Japan. His first job was that of student interpreter at the embassy in Edo, now called Tokyo, and his task was to learn Japanese for the conduct of consular business. In those enviably free and easy days his official duties never took up more than half the day and he was free in the rest of the time to learn languages or to browse through the bookshops. He served in the consular service in Tokyo, Kobe and Nagasaki until in 1884 he was appointed consul-general in Korea. As I shall explain he was forced to leave Korea in 1885, and he returned to consular duties in Tokyo until compelled by ill-health to retire in 1889. In the remaining years of his life, until his death in 1911, he published influential books on Japanese literature and religion as well as a number of articles on Korean matters. So much for his life story.

Just when Aston started to learn Korean is not clear, but it must have been some time in the mid 1870s, while he was still in Tokyo. He was not the only student of Japanese to turn his attention to Korea: Ernest Satow, who had come to Japan two years earlier than Aston, and Basil Hall Chamberlain, who was at this time a teacher of English in Japan, both turned to Korean once they had mastered Japanese and they

too were collectors of Korean books. It was Satow in fact who was the first to report that Korean movable-type printing was several hundred years older than that of Europe, and his collection of very rare Korean books is now in the British Library. The three of them, Aston, Satow and Chamberlain, were all intellectual and linguistic explorers, and Korean, which for Westerners at the time was more or less virgin territory, was a temptation none of them could resist. Aston was the most enthusiastic of the three and by 1880 he had prepared a set of notes on Korean grammar which he passed on to the other two to help them in their studies. By this time it is clear from Satow's correspondence that Aston was a fluent speaker of Korean. Those of us here who are not native speakers of Korean do not need to be reminded that Korean is a very difficult language, so how did Aston do it? Did he know of the short-cut to mastery of the Korean language that we would all dearly love to find? The answer is no, alas. The only description of the Korean language in a European language available to Aston was in French in Dallet's history of the church in Korea, and that he found of little use. But what he did have was a set of textbooks compiled in Japanese in 1841 for the use of Japanese residents in Pusan. This requires some explanation. Although it is well known that Japan and Korea maintained diplomatic contacts throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is not widely known that there was throughout this time a permanent Japanese trading post operating in Pusan with the permission of the Korean government. The trading post covered an area of 55 acres in what is now the wharf area of Pusan and its chief business was the conduct of trade; it handled the export to Japan of Ginseng, Korean silk, furs and dried tiger meat and the import from Japan of copper and lead. Amongst the permanent staff at the trading post were some interpreters to handle negotiations between Japanese and Korean merchants, and one of them, a man called Urase Iwajiro, compiled in 1841 a manual of Korean together with a volume of dialogues in Korean. Aston acquired manuscript copies of these from the Japanese foreign office in the 1870s and to my knowledge his copies are the only ones surviving: they are now in St Petersburg. In addition to these books he also had several Korean teachers. One of them, a Korean resident in Japan, who called himself by the Japanese name Asano, taught both Aston and Satow in the late 1870s. Another, whose name was Kim Chae-guk, seems to have been Aston's regular teacher between at least 1885 and 1887; he was apparently a Christian and wrote a number of stories for Aston to use as practice.

How did Aston use his knowledge of Korean? In the first place, he was the obvious choice as interpreter to accompany Vice-Admiral Willes in 1882 during his visit to Korea. Willes' squadron of ships visited Wonsan, Pusan and the island then known as Port Hamilton (now Komundo), and at each stop Aston tried out his Korean. In his report on the voyage, he wrote: 'At all the places visited I conversed with large numbers of Coreans, and found them invariably friendly, though sometimes inclined to be unpleasantly familiar. Their desire for information knew no bounds.' Willes drew up a treaty based closely on the American treaty with Korea, and then signed it on behalf of the British government, but this treaty was later repudiated by the British government, partly because it seemed to limit the activities of British traders too much by setting high tariffs. As a result, Aston had to make several visits to Korea in 1883 to secure postponement of the treaty and then to negotiate a new treaty which he and Sir Harry Parkes, the British Minister to China, had drafted. This new treaty, the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Her Majesty [Queen Victoria] and His Majesty the King of Korea, was signed at Seoul in November 1883, and marks the beginning of Anglo-Korean relations.

In addition to the business of the treaty, Aston had also been busy trying to find a suitable site for a British Legation in Seoul. With some assistance from the well-known foreign office official Kim Ok-kyun, he managed to obtain first refusal on a

site within the walls of the city, the site still occupied today by the British Embassy. It consisted of a Korean house with a number of outbuildings, and although it was in a good situation, being only a mile from the Palace, the Foreign Office and the Japanese Legation, there were some drawbacks: the house was in poor condition and would be difficult to defend in case of attack, and Aston regarded it as suitable for temporary accommodation only. As already mentioned, the Treasury was too mean to pay for the necessary improvements, and the result was, as we shall see, illness and humiliation for Aston.

In April 1884 Aston returned to Korea to take up the position of consul-general, resident in the house he had himself selected. He had a busy summer. In the first place he compiled detailed trade summaries of the trade of Korea, based on material from Korean customs officials and from the Japanese consuls, in the hope of increasing the extent of British trade with Korea. The prospects were not good: there were few Korean merchants, he reported, with sufficient capital to carry on a business, there were problems with debasement of currency and inflation, and furthermore he thought the enthusiasm for mining in Korea was based on dreams of wealth rather than hard realities. As early as June 1883 the British company, Jardine Matheson and Co., set up an agency in Ch'emulpo, now part of Inch'on, and Aston got Kim Ok-kyun to give them every help he could, but Aston didn't think their mining ventures would come to anything and he was right, for they soon withdrew from Korea. In August 1884 he made a trip from Seoul to Kaesong, and on the way was delighted to come upon a village shop selling some English cotton cloth.

The year, however, was overshadowed by the events of December, for Aston had growing intimations that there was trouble ahead. He reported in September 1884: 'I have come to the conclusion that the government of Korea is in a thoroughly rotten condition, and I fear that there will be no reform without some violent change.' He was right of course and he was one of the guests at the notorious dinner to celebrate the opening of the Post Office in December which resulted in the assassination of those opposed to the reformist party. The dinner party broke up, naturally, and the exposure to the frosty night air brought on a pulmonary attack which nearly cost Aston his life; furthermore, since the British Legation could not be defended he was forced to accept American protection and retire to the American legation. Aston's health then went into a steady decline and he left Korea early in 1885, never to return.

Aston had played a part in a very dramatic episode in Korean history, and his observations are still of use today to students of that period. But I would like to turn now briefly to his academic work on Korea. His most influential work was a long essay in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in which he undertook a thorough comparison of the Japanese and Korean languages. This was the first demonstration of a linguistic relationship between the two languages, and as recently as 1976 Bruno Lewin, the great German scholar of Japanese and Korean, described Aston's work as a 'breakthrough to the first scientific comparison' and said that 'Aston's arguments are still worthy of consideration even today'. In addition to this, Aston published several translations from Korean books and manuscripts in his possession, mostly the genre known today as *Kodae sosul*, and wrote several pieces on *hangul* and Korean literature. The most interesting of these is one on Korean popular literature, which starts with these words: 'Popular literature is conspicuously absent from the shelves of a Korean gentleman's library, and is excluded even from the two bookshops of which Seoul boasts, where nothing is sold but works written in the Chinese language. For the volumes in which the native Korean literature is contained, we must search the temporary stalls which line the main thoroughfares of the capital or the little shops where they are set out for sale along with paper, pipes, shoes, crockery, etc.' By searching these bookstalls and relying on his teachers for help, Aston was able to

acquire a collection of Korean books, including a number of historical and literary works. The arrival of some of these books in Cambridge, gathered by Britain's first representative in Korea and donated in 1911, marks the beginning of a Korean presence in Cambridge.

In 1947 Donald Keene, later to become famous as an interpreter of Japan and scholar of Japanese literature, was appointed lecturer in Japanese and Korean at the Faculty of Oriental Languages, as it was then called, in the University of Cambridge. This was the first time that the University had expressed an interest in Korean, but when Donald Keene left for Columbia University in 1950 Korean ceased to be part of the job description. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Peter Kornicki and Kin Younghan taught Korean to students in the Faculty of Oriental Studies. Now interest in Korea is on the rise in Cambridge, an all-comers introductory Korean language course has been offered for the past 2 years by the university's East Asia Institute (EAI) to interested students and staff across the university, and it is hoped earnestly that soon teaching of the Korean language and history can take their proper permanent place in the teaching programme of the University of Cambridge.

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