The Early Years of Ernest Mason Satow (1843-1862)

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Abstract

This paper is intended as the basis for a first chapter of a biography of the distinguished British scholar-diplomat Ernest Mason Satow who served in Japan from 1862 to 1883 and from 1895 to 1900.

Family, Childhood and Schooldays

"My father was a strict disciplinarian, and we were brought up in habits of obedience. Any serious deviation in conduct was punished by a horse-whipping, administered by a whip which he called 'the black friend'. It stood behind his armchair in the corner of the dining-room. We all experienced the attentions of 'the black friend', but not very often."

(from A Family Chronicle of the English Satows)

Ernest Mason Satow was born in Clapton, a respectable middle class area of terraced houses and green parkland in northeast London, on June 30th, 1843. It is curious to note that he was born at almost the exact midpoint of the calender year.

In the same year the world's first underwater tunnel was completed under the River Thames, and Nelson's Column was erected in Trafalgar Square. Queen Victoria had ascended the throne in 1837, and the Opium War had just ended in China in 1842. Britain's confidence in its engineering and military achievements was soaring. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels came to reside permanently in Britain in 1849. Japan was visited for the first time by Perry's Black Ships in 1853 when Ernest was ten years old. The first major treaty between England and Japan was signed in 1858, the Round Room in the British Library was built in 1859, and the American Civil War began in 1861.

Satow was the third son in a typically large Victorian family comprising six brothers and five sisters. The family lived first at No.4, Hadlow Cottages in Upper Clapton, then at No.10, Buccleugh Terrace, and lastly at No.4, Lower Terrace. These houses and addresses are no longer in existence. However, a small photograph of the back of one of them, a dark and rather gloomy building, is included in the first volume of Satow's diary with the playfully ironic title "Satow Castle". Clapton in the London Borough of Hackney became fashionable as a residential area for the relatively wealthy financiers of

the City of London in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a quiet but convenient suburb with large houses and gardens in a leafy setting by the River Lea.

Satow's father David was Swedish until he chose to become a British national in 1846, three years after Ernest was born. His full name was Hans David Christopher Satow. His mother Margaret was English. Her maiden name was Mason. Satow's father was born in 1801 at a sea-port on the southern shores of the Baltic called Wismar.

"Satow" is the name of a small, unknown and unremarkable village on the road between Wismar and Rostock in Mecklenburg province in the eastern part of Germany, and it is clear that the Satow family name came from the place name which meant "village of the sower", indicating its agricultural preoccupations. Satow is a pretty common name in that part of Mecklenburg.² The original German pronunciation sounds like "Zat-oh", though the name itself is of Slavic origin, and was brought by immigrants to this part of Germany. The pronunciation was later anglicised to "Sat-oh". Although the latter sounds like a common Japanese family name - a fact which was to stand Satow in good stead in later years - the coincidence is purely fortuitous.

As for the name Ernest, by family tradition it came from the doll Ernest Augustus (named after the King of Hanover) owned by Ernest's eldest sister Selina who died in May 1852 of tuberculosis. Shortly after the birth when Margaret Satow was dandling the infant boy on her knee and wondering what to call him, she heard Selina going upstairs and talking to her doll.³ The name seemed to fit.

The port of Wismar changed hands three times (from Sweden to the Duke of Mecklenburg Schwerin to France) in the unstable Napoleonic period, so in 1808 Ernest's grandfather, who dealt mainly with London decided to move to the Latvian port of Riga, seeking more settled conditions for his mercantile business. In particular he was affected by the ban issued by Napoleon on trade with England. This forced him to move to Riga which was German-speaking and outside French jurisdiction.⁴

However, in 1812 Napoleon advanced on Russia, prompting Satow's grandfather to pack the 11 year old David off in a merchant ship to travel round the world. He probably worked as a cabin boy. In 1814 he returned to go to school and then joined the firm of a merchant by the name of Schnakenburg where he learned business practices. At the age of 24 he moved to England (in 1825), seeking to establish his own business and make his fortune there. In this venture he was supported financially by Schnakenburg and his elder brother Andreas. He received about 500 pounds from each of them which became his initial capital. Andreas was the closest of David's brothers and sisters, and visited him in London in 1859.

In 1832 David Satow married Margaret Mason and made London his permanent home. She was eleven years his junior, and they had met at the Nonconformist chapel in Poultry in the City of London where the Mason family worshipped. They lived for a time in Jewry Street near the Tower of London where David managed a "counting house", buying and selling land and dealing in financial matters. By 1835 David had made enough money to buy a house in Clapton, while retaining his office in Jewry Street. 5

Bernard M. Allen, a cousin of A. Louis Allen who was a nephew of Satow, wrote an overly laudatory memoir entitled *The Rt. Hon Sir Ernest Satow G. C. M. G.* which was published four years after Satow's death in 1933. He describes Satow's family as having been brought up on typical Victorian lines.⁶ Satow's father, who after all his early wanderings settled down to the routine of an English business life, was a strict Lutheran and a regular attendant at the Nonconformist chapel in Clapton. So strict was he that on Sundays after the obligatory chapel service the Satow children were not allowed to read anything other than the Bible. All the toys were put away and the Ten Commandments were recited repeatedly.

Allen tells us that David Satow believed in the exercise of parental authority and in the occasional use of the rod. But he did not rule by fear alone and he knew how to win the affection as well as the esteem of his children. He was also a member of the Committee of the German Hospital at Dalston in South Hackney from 1848 to 1873. He died aged 73 in 1874 at Myrtle Lodge, Sidmouth in Devon which he had bought as a country retreat six years earlier. Satow describes him as being fond of boating and billiards. He detested the French from his boyhood experiences and he was "a thoroughly loyal and patriotic British subject". Satow was with his father when on leave from Japan in the summers of 1869 and 1870. They went to Germany with Satow's mother on 1859, and Satow went with his father to the baths at Neuenahr in the following year.

Margaret Satow passed away at the age of 87 on September 10th, 1899. She had been brought up as a Congregationalist, and Satow recorded that it was a great grief to her that none of her children, as they grew up, could be persuaded to share her views. Satow himself became an Anglican in later years. 9

Satow's elder brothers and sisters were Selina, ten years older than Ernest, who died of tuberculosis at the age of nineteen; Agneta, eight years older, whose daughter Helen researched into Erasmus and married Percy Allen, the warden of Corpus Christi College, Oxford; and Lucy, seven years older, who died unmarried at the age of twenty one. Next came David who was the eldest son. He married twice and followed his father in a financial career. One of his sons Lawrence became a captain in the Royal Navy. The fourth sister was Augusta. She became a scholar of Greek and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and she married a don of Exeter College, Oxford by the name of Henry Tozer. Edward who was three years older than Ernest also followed a financial career, but died in Shanghai of cholera at the age of twenty five in 1865, Mary who was two years older than Ernest had a daughter Josephine who married her naval cousin Lawrence. (Mary and Lawrence are buried with Satow.) One of Mary's sons Percy married Agneta's daughter Helen to create further complications in the family tree.

Nothing much is known of Ernest's younger brothers Theodore and Charles, although the latter had a large family. The youngest brother Samuel (Sam) became a solicitor and his son Harold was Consul General in Beirut and Tunis. Another son Christopher became a commander in the Royal Navy.¹⁰

Ernest was a clever, bright-eyed, dark-haired boy of slim build. Furthermore he was the only one of the eleven brothers and sisters to enter university. This must have made him special in the eyes of his parents who certainly placed great emphasis on a good education. He first attended a small private school, conducted on Pestalozzian lines which partly consisted in making use of the elder boys under the name of 'monitors' to teach the younger ones. Not only was this respectable educational theory, but it made sound business sense by reducing costs. Then at the age of thirteen he was sent to Mill Hill, now a well-known public school but in 1856 just a small school for young Nonconformists with only seventy-five boys. Satow later described it as a "dull old place". 11

Within three years Satow had worked his way up to the top of the school and in the summer of 1859 he won a scholarship to University College, London which had been founded in the 1820s for the sons of Jews and Nonconformists who were in those days denied access to Oxford and Cambridge.

Satow entered University College in 1859 at the youthful age of sixteen. At this time there was a good deal of intellectual turmoil in the universities. Darwin's Origin of Species and J. S. Mill's On Liberty were published in the same year, and Herbert Spencer's materialism was fashionable among students and lecturers. Spencer, an English sociologist and philosopher, had published the first part of The Principles of Psychology in 1855. Born in 1820, he was an early advocate of the theory of evolution, and coined the phrase "survival of the fittest", often mistakenly attributed to Darwin. From a dissenting Nonconformist family background like Satow, he had abandoned Christianity. This philosophical atmosphere certainly exerted a great influence on Satow.

While at University College young Ernest got his first taste of the East. He attended some Chinese lectures in the Cantonese dialect of dubious quality and usefulness given by James Summers, the professor with to academic degree at King's College, and he was a passionate student of western languages, both classical and modern. In later years Satow was to publish brief articles in two short-lived periodicals edited by Summers: The Chinese and Japanese Repository (1863-65) and The Phoenix (1870-73).

Satow made such good progress that he completed his degree studies in two years. His parents hoped strongly to send him on to Trinity College, Cambridge. However, Nobutoshi Hagihara, the leading Japanese scholar of Satow, has pointed out in *Toi Gake* (Distant Cliffs) that, even though Cambridge University was more tolerant of Nonconformists than Oxford, and he might have been allowed to study there, it is doubtful that he

would have been allowed to proceed to a degree. The doors of the two ancient universities were not opened fully to Nonconformists or women until the Universities' Tests Act of 1871.

The Isles of the Blest

Chance took a hand in Satow's future when at the age of seventeen (i. e some time in the second half of 1861 or the first half of 1862) while still at University College he came across Laurence Oliphant's Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59, which had been published in two volumes, in 1859. China was described in the first volume, and Japan in the second. Lord Elgin was the Governor General of India, and he had succeeded in signing the Treaty of Yedo (Tokyo) with the Shogun's representatives (but without Imperial approval) on August 26th, 1858.

Oliphant was Private Secretary to Lord Elgin during the mission, and was later to serve in the British Legation in Japan. One of Satow's elder brothers (Edward who died in Shanghai in 1865) had borrowed the book from Mudie's mobile library. Satow wrote in his memoirs that the book inflamed his imagination with pictures both verbal and coloured of a country where the sky was always blue.

The book portrayed a land "where the sun shone perpetually, and where the whole duty of man seemed to consist in lying on a matted floor with the windows open to the ground towards a miniature rockwork garden, in the company of rosy-lipped black-eyed and attentive damsels - in short a realised fairyland." But that Satow should ever have a chance of seeing these Isles of the Blest (as he called them) was still beyond his wildest dreams at this point.

Here we find the nascent germ of young Satow's longing, excitement and enthusiasm for Japan. The book which so fascinated Satow is indeed a fine production with beautiful coloured illustrations from original drawings and photographs of the Bay of Nagasaki, the city of Edo and so on. There are also hints of sexual liberation in such statements as: "In Japan, religion is not used as in some countries to conceal immorality, but rather to give it countenance and support..." Such heady notions must have seemed intriguing to the young man in his stiflingly prim and strict family home.

Soon afterwards, Satow read an account of the American Commodore Perry's first expedition to Japan of 1853 in the Black Ships (Kurofune). This reinforced his interest in Japan to the point of obsession. He thought of nothing else from that time onwards.

Satow's good fortune continued as he discovered lying on a table in the college library a notice that three nominations to student-interpreterships in the Consular service in China and Japan had been placed at the disposition of the Dean of University College. Until 1859 nomination by one's university had meant automatic recruitment, but from 1860 a competitive examination was organized by the Civil Service Commissioners for

students at London University and certain Scottish and Irish universities between the ages of eighteen and twenty four.

Satow obtained permission to enter the competition with difficulty from his anxious parents who were no doubt unwilling to see their son travel to such a remote and dangerous country. There were fourteen candidates of whom eleven were successful. The examination included handwriting, arithmetic, precis writing, geography, geometry, and translation from Latin and French into English. Satow, who was only just old enough by ninety minutes to be a candidate, came top of the examination. The other two candidates from University College failed.

In his memoirs Satow wrote of the uncertainty of such examinations. "The scheme of examination is no test of the linguistic capabilities of the men, and sometimes sends into the service those who can no more learn to speak foreign language than they can fly." Furthermore they took no account of moral qualities. 14

As a result of his academic success Satow was given first choice between China and Japan, and chose the latter. At this time he never expressed or felt any interest in China. One other successful candidate, R. A. Jamieson, who was placed seventh in the examination, also chose Japan. The remaining nine all chose China.

So it was that on August 20th, 1861 Satow was appointed by a letter from the Foreign Office which stressed that the primary object of the appointment was that he should study the Japanese language for subsequent interpreting or translating duties. Letters of appointment to two predecessors (Frederick Lowder and Russell B. Robertson) in the previous year had instructed them to study Japanese and Dutch, but by this time it was felt that Dutch was a barrier to effective communication and intelligence gathering.

Satow was also instructed to acquire an insight into the way in which business in consulates was conducted. This latter instruction was to be the cause of much resentment to Satow, as it in practice condemned him to many hours of ultra-tedious office work (called "chancery work") which in the days before photo-copiers mainly consisted of copying the long, dull and prolix despatches of his superiors for destribution to other consular offices, often in quintuplicate. Not only was this desperately boring, but it also took up time in which Satow keenly desired to study Japanese. Yet Satow's experience was typical for student interpreters in the consular services of the Far Eastern triangle of China, Japan and Siam, and the Foreign Office made clear its policy of sharing out chancery work on numerous occasions. In 1865 A. B. Mitford (later Lord Redesdale) was obliged to do the same kind of work, copying out Alcock's interminable despatches in Peking, even though he was a member of the Diplomatic service.

However, Satow was still blissfully ignorant of such bureaucratic nightmares when he left Southampton full of joyful anticipation at the adventure which beckoned on November 4th 1861. He sailed on the 2000 ton P & O wooden paddle steamer *Indus*, waving farewell to his father and mother who stood on the wharf as the ship left har-

bour, but not before sitting for his final examination at University College in October. ¹⁵ He had wisely applied to the Foreign Office for permission to postpone his departure until he had got his B. A. which was granted. The other successful candidates had left by the first available boat on September 4th.

A report in *The Times* of October 3rd, 1861 of the attack on the British Legation at Tozenji temple in Yedo on July 5th in which Laurence Oliphant (by now Secretary of the Legation) was seriously wounded prompted Satow to include a revolver in his luggage. This was a standard precaution for Westerners in Japan throughout the 1860s.

Oliphant was subsequently invalided out of the Foreign Office and finally joined a strange cult in the United States headed by one Thomas Lake Harris (no relation of the first American consul Townsend Harris) called the Brotherhood of the New Life in which he became known by the name of Woodbine and learned to sew petticoats.

Kicking about in China

"Satow of the Japan consular service, destined to become successively minister to Japan and China, in his aloof maturity a fearsomely correct figure, was briefly posted to China in his arrogant youth and booted his disobedient boy downstairs with two good kicks."

(from The China Consuls by P. D. Coates, p. 45)

Satow's arrival at his cherished ultimate goal was delayed, to his great surprise and chagrin, by an enforced sojourn in China from January to September 1862. Satow did not know that he would be detained in China to study Chinese until he actually got to Shanghai on January 16th. He recorded his astonishment in his diary. Yet it was probably beneficial to his career in the long term that it began in China, because the Foreign Office considered China a much more prestigious posting and more important for trade than Japan which was still an unknown quantity with miniscule trade.

The reason for the delay was that Sir Rutherford Alcock, Her Majesty's first Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary in Japan from 1859 to 1864, had accepted the recommendations put forward by W. H. Medhurst, an interpreter in the Chinese consular service who had visited Japan and noted that there were many shop signs that he could read, that a basic knowledge of Chinese characters was necessary for the study of Japanese. Alcock was disappointed with the progress of student interpreters in learning the Japanese language, and frustrated that noone on the Legation staff could as yet read Japanese. It made dealings with the mendacious Japanese all the more difficult. 16

Of course this was not part of Satow's game plan at all, and it is clear that he was highly impatient to get to Japan. In his diary he noted on February 2nd, 1862 that when Alcock went on leave to England he would have to try to get Winchester, then Consul in Shanghai, to let him go over to Japan.

In his memoirs Satow commented on Medhurst's half-baked theory that "though an acquaintance with Chinese characters may be found useful by the student of Japanese, it is no more indispensable than that of Latin is to a person who wishes to acquire Italian or Spanish.¹⁷" This was an astute and scholarly observation, for although the Japanese language used characters which originated in China, the readings and meanings (to say nothing of the writing styles) were sometimes quite different. This is still true in the present day. Eventually the arrival of a note in Japanese from Yedo which no Chinese could make out, much less understand, was the death knell of the theory and the student interpreters were consequently shipped off to Japan with the least possible delay. This was also probably welcomed by Lt Colonel Neale, the chargé d'affaires in Japan while Alcock was absent on leave, who needed to strengthen his overworked staff.

Satow's private diaries for this period in China reveal something of his personality and eagerness to study.¹⁸ On February 17th he sketched a Chinaman grinding corn with pencil in a very rough hand and copied some characters from a shop front without knowing their meaning. The characters were 大正明光 and 隅海障保. On April 12th he breakfasted in Peking with the Minister Bruce whom Satow described as "a fine tall old fellow with a noble forehead and brown eyes." He was introduced eventually to Mr Wade, the Chinese Secretary and a great scholar, destined eventually to teach Chinese at Cambridge. Wade interrogated young Satow vigorously with a view to finding out whether he had any particular talent for languages. Satow felt that he had not made a favourable impression. Two days later he "wasted the morning in what is technically called knocking about." After tiffin (Anglo-Indian for a light lunch) a man came with curios and he bought a snuff bottle for 6d. He also bought a map of Peking for sight-seeing.

On Easter Day Satow saw High Mass celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church in Peking. However, on Februry 2nd he mentioned cutting church for skating at the on persuasion of Middleton, a fellow student interpreter. He did this with certain qualms of conscience and asked his diary if it was right to skate on a Sunday, concluding that the matter was for wiser heads than his to answer as it required some thinking about.

We may conclude from this and other diary entries that he was not inclined to religion at this period of his life. The influence of the free-thinking materialism at University College seems to have combined with the reaction against his strongly religious family background and his inclination toward "immorality".

China also clearly showed a less flattering side of Satow's personality. According to his diary on May 29th Satow forced his way into the Temple of Heavenly Peace, and on June 22nd Satow kicked his servant downstairs "with two good kicks". These actions show a lack of cultural sensitivity, and a sense of superiority towards Orientals which was then prevalent among Westerners. It also indicates Satow's immaturity and arrogance.

Yet worse behaviour was to come, born of boredom, frustration and impatience. In Peking Satow was a member of a wild and ill-disciplined gang of tearaways. He and H. J. Allen, a fellow student interpreter, spent a Sunday morning shooting at the roof ornaments of a famous institute of Chinese learning. Eight students caused three accidents in a day by cantering around street corners, and the Chinese complained of student behaviour in a temple. On instructions from the disgusted Bruce, Wade told them that anyone offending the Chinese again would be severely disciplined, and particularly warned them against entering the Temple of Heaven unless the gate was willingly opened in return for a gratuity. The students, including Satow, responded by climbing over the Temple of Heaven wall again that same afternoon.

It seems that Satow had forgotten about such youthful indiscretions when he became Minister at Peking in 1900. At that time he controlled the service with humour-less strictness.

On the other hand on May 8th Satow recorded in his diary that he took his horse to the Temple of the Earth before breakfast to catch butterflies. On May 22nd he included a pencil drawing of a temple, and on June 30th we find the ironic observation: "I am nineteen years old today; what a frightful age". In his memoirs Satow writes of early morning rides over the plain in the north of Peking, the dirt and dust of the streets, the pink lotus blossoms on the lake of the marble bridge and the carts bumping over the stone pavements worn into deep ruts. It was a "strange Eastern life that surrounded a band of boys fresh from school or college or their mother's apron-strings". 19

Old Nippon at last

"It was one of those brilliant days that are so characteristic of Japan, and as we made our way up the Bay of Yedo, I thought no scenery in the world could surpass it. Irregular-shaped hills, covered with dark-green trees, lined the whole southern coast, and above them rose into the air for 12,000 feet and more the magnificent cone of Fuji, with scarcely a patch of snow visible..."

(from A Diplomat in Japan, p. 20)

Satow left Shanghai on September 2nd, 1862 in the steamer *Lancefield* with another student interpreter, Russell B. Robertson. The third member of the group, R. A. Jamieson, had fallen by the wayside in Shanghai. He had left the Consular service to start a newspaper at the end of August, on the persuasion of one James Whittall. Satow naturally envied him the promised annual salary of 1,000 pounds. This was five times Satow's 200 pounds earned as a student interpreter, and in between the annual salary of the Vice consul in Shanghai (750 pounds) and the Consul (1,500 pounds). The Diplomatic service was better paid than the Consular service: the Minister in Yedo received 2,500 pounds at this time. However, the notion of moving up to that level can hardly have entered young Satow's head.

Six days after leaving Shanghai the *Lancefield* steamed into the bay of Yedo. Satow recorded the scene with delighted enthusiasm in "Diplomat". Curious duckshaped boats of pure unpainted wood jostled on the sparkling waters. The sunburnt fishermen were naked but for a loin cloth. "At last the white cliffs of Mississippi Bay became closer and more distinct: we rounded Treaty Point and dropped anchor on the outer edge of the shipping. After the lapse of more than a year I had at last attained my cherished object."²⁰

Satow was driven not only by a strong curiosity about the country which was still unknown to him, but also by a desire to escape from his family and from the rigid morality, class and religious discrimination of Victorian England. He left behind a society in which an Oxbridge degree meant more than it does today in terms of status and prestige. Nonconformists were still not fully accepted, and the Diplomatic service, at least in the major European embassies, was monopolised by French-speaking alumni of Oxbridge with Foreign Office connections.

Foreign Office employees at the time were divided broadly into two groups: those who spent most of their working lives in London, and those who worked almost entirely abroad. The latter group was divided strictly into the Diplomatic and Consular services. While there was some movement between the home and overseas postings, the chances of promotion from the Consular to the Diplomatic service were very small. The only reason that Alcock, Parkes and Satow achieved the promotion was that they were Far East specialists destined to work exclusively in China, Japan or Siam.

Satow was a young man full of enthusiasm kicking over the traces. He was clearly in revolt against his family upbringing. A comparison may be made with Satow's good friend Dr Willis who had arrived in Japan aged twenty five in May 1862, anxious to earn money to maintain a housemaid at the Middlesex Hospital (Maria Fisk) and illegitimate son whom he had left behind. The difference in age and maturity notwithstanding, both Willis and Satow were in a sense escaping from England by coming to Japan.

On September 8th 1862 Satow set foot on Japanese soil for the first time. His long association with the land beyond his wildest dreams had begun.

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- 1. Family Chronicle, p. 17
- 2. Family Chronicle, p. 3
- 3. Family Chronicle, pp. 17-18
- 4. Toi Gake, p. 85
- 5. Toi Gake, p. 87
- 6. Allen, p. 2
- 7. Family Chronicle, p. 67
- 8. Family Chronicle, p. 35
- 9. Allen and also H. W. V. Temperley in the "Dictionary of National Biography 1921-1930" both describe Ernest as the *fourth* son, though this conflicts with the information given in Satow's family tree and on his gravestone which both state that he was the *third* son. Until now no explanation for this discrepancy has come to light. It seems likely that Temperley whose brief biographical outline was published first made an error which was later duplicated by Allen.
- 10. Toi Gake, pp. 88-89
- 11. Allen, p. 2
- 12. *Diplomat*, p. 17
- 13. Diplomat, p. 17
- 14. *Diplomat*, p. 19
- 15. Family Chronicle, p. 27
- 16. See the Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan (fourth series, volume 9, 1994) for an article by Sir Hugh Cortazzi. On p. 17 he refers to a previous article in Monumenta Nipponica (volume 46, number 1, Spring 1991) by Professor W. G. Beasley entitled, 'Japanese Castaways and British Interpreters' in which Medhurst's recommendations are explained in detail (MN pp. 100-103).
- 17. Diplomat, p. 18
- 18. PRO 30/33 15/1
- 19. *Diplomat*, p. 19
- 20. Diplomat, p. 21