

---

# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## Satow, Sir Ernest Mason

(1843–1929)

N. J. Brailey

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/35955>

**Published in print:** 23 September 2004

**Published online:** 23 September 2004

**This version:** 03 January 2008

**Satow, Sir Ernest Mason** (1843–1929), diplomat and scholar, was born on 30 June 1843 at 10 Buccleuch Terrace, Upper Clapton, Hackney. He was the third son and eighth child of (Hans) David Christophe Satow (1801–1874), merchant, of Wismar (in Mecklenburg) and Riga, who had settled in London in 1825, and his wife, Margaret (1812–1899), elder daughter of Edward Mason, a law stationer. Satow was educated at Newcombe's schools in Lower Clapton (1852–6) and at Mill Hill (1856–9), and at University College, London, where he took his BA in 1861. In that year he came first in the examination for student interpreterships to the Far East. Of precocious talent, especially linguistically, Satow's career in Japan and China was to last more than forty years.

It was never Satow's desire originally to serve in China, but—more romantically—in Japan, only recently reopened to the West by the gunboat diplomacy of the 1850s. That 'diplomacy' itself prompted violent political upheaval, and the young Satow lived life to the full, accompanying further punitive naval expeditions and encouraging what he himself subsequently described as the 'revolutionary' tendencies then abroad in Japan. At the same time, as a student interpreter in the consular service, he developed an almost unprecedented proficiency in the language (for a foreigner), which the successive British ministers in Japan, Rutherford Alcock and Harry Parkes, were not slow to exploit. However, after the overthrow of the humiliated Tokugawa dynasty of shoguns in 1868, and its replacement mainly by the leaders of the Satcho group, the role of the British legation diminished. Satow was appointed Japanese secretary in that year. He turned his attention to scholarship, becoming the first of a triumvirate of great British Japan scholars, the others being W. G. Aston and B. H. Chamberlain. He also started a family with Takeda Kane (1853–1932), his *musumé* (mistress, or common-law wife), who made a home for him in Tokyo from the 1870s until he left Japan for Bangkok in 1884. They had two sons.

Unlike Aston and Chamberlain, who became full-time scholars, Satow moved on in public life. In 1884 he secured his first independent posting, as consul-general at Bangkok, where he began

---

to work to undermine the system of extra-territorial jurisdiction which represented the most insidious encroachment on the sovereignty of the Asian polities still free of Western colonialism, and to sustain Siam's independence in the face of both French and British ambitions. He was promoted to the rank of minister in 1885, but his health broke down. He spent four years in recuperation as minister at Montevideo in Uruguay from 1889; at the nadir of his career he experienced a religious revelation that nearly turned him into a Roman Catholic. He returned to the firing line in 1893, going as envoy-extraordinary and minister-plenipotentiary to Morocco, where he was active in defending its independence, mainly against France.

In 1895 Satow was made KCMG and appointed minister-plenipotentiary to Japan, the job he had hitherto always coveted. During his further five years in Tokyo he sought to build on his old personal contacts with the Satcho leadership, on Britain's abandonment of its extra-territorial rights in Japan, and on Britain's refusal to join the triple intervention powers (Russia, Germany, and France) in their attempts to cancel out Japan's victory in its first modern war with China over Korea. In this context, and foreseeing an eventual confrontation between Russia and Japan, Satow favoured Japan's influence in Korea and even in China, and also supported a full-scale alliance between Japan and Britain, which was not to materialize until after he had transferred to Peking (Beijing). Back in Tokyo, he resumed regular contact with his Japanese family.

The final phase of Satow's official career saw him transferred reluctantly to China to help sustain China's independence and territorial integrity in the aftermath of the Boxer uprising. As the leading figure at the year-long Boxer Conference, he found himself for the first time a major player in international affairs, and earned the GCMG that was his reward for the agreement signed between China and the Western powers in Peking in September 1901. Ironically, however, Sir Claude Macdonald, who had been the previous minister at Peking, and who had been moved to Tokyo to make way for Satow, was promoted ambassador in 1905 as a consequence of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese alliance and Japan's success in its war with Russia of 1904–5, while Satow was refused translation to a Western embassy and retired early, in 1906, still a mere minister.

Satow had gone far in the diplomatic service, thanks to almost unswerving loyalty and discretion, the word he virtually lived by: few of his inner thoughts appear outside his voluminous diaries and private correspondence. But he had not progressed as far as he had hoped, and he returned to England in the summer of 1906 a disappointed man. In particular, he evidently concluded that his association with the East had ultimately counted against him back in London. Moreover, his final reception in Tokyo, *en route* for England, at the hands of the two Japanese he had considered his special friends, Ito Hirobumi and Inoue Kaoru, had seemed almost devoid of gratitude on their part. The Campbell-Bannerman government's surprise invitation to Satow to be Britain's second delegate at the

---

second peace conference at The Hague in 1907 helped to give him a new direction. The Foreign Office expected little enough of Sir Edward Fry and Lord Reay, the other principal delegates to the 44-country jamboree, and therefore looked to Satow to take the lead in pursuing its strictly mundane and nationalistic aims. Initially, he sought instead to express his own more idealistic principles. In particular, his sympathies were with the small countries, outside and also within Europe, but amid the confusion of the conference it became impracticable to sustain such a stance. Thus it was his own proposal to defer much of the conference's business to the twelve-country major power conference in London in 1908-9 that effectively disposed of this important effort to realize a permanent international organization before 1914.

Now fully retired, Satow settled at Ottery St Mary in east Devon, and threw himself into local politics, his magistracy, and charitable work. He made no further journeys abroad after a final visit to Germany in 1914, but he supported Christian missionary endeavour around the world, especially in China. His disillusion with his Eastern career led him to dispose of much of his Japan library, and for the rest of his life he had as little to do with the East as he could, while maintaining his friendships with many 'old Japan hands'. He had his younger son over to England for six years (1910-16) to study botany, an old interest of his own, before the boy returned to his mother in Japan. At an earlier stage he had already organized the emigration of his tubercular older son to the healthier climate of Colorado in the United States, where he died in 1926. But Satow revealed their existence only to those close to him; he did retain to the end of his days his Japanese manservant, Honma Saburo. Almost as an afterthought he issued his memoirs of sixty years before, *A Diplomat in Japan*, in 1921, which nevertheless became a minor classic. Another book, *A Diplomat in Siam*, was not published until 1996.

Satow turned scholar, and anti-German soon after. On the latter score, for much of the rest of his life he strove to refute all suggestions that he and his family were part-German, with the consequence that he found himself variously described as Polish, Swedish, Russian, and even Dutch-Russian. Of course, his family connections with Germany had been strong, and he had paid the country many visits in his youth. As for scholarship, after early contributions on the Far East to the *Cambridge Modern History* (vol. 19, 1909) and a couple of articles for the *Quarterly Review*, his first major work was *The Silesian Loan and Frederick the Great* (1915), which helped him justify his changed attitude to Germany and to compensate for his failure to secure a university chair in international law. The climax to this new phase of his life came shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, when he was signed up to compile a *Guide to Diplomatic Practice*, otherwise known simply as 'Satow', which was still in print in 2002. It originally appeared in two volumes in 1917; Satow was much occupied thereafter in expanding it for a second edition in 1922. Strangely, the work led to a close association with the inter-war internationalist historian Harold Temperley, a critic of the pre-war diplomacy of which Satow had been an exponent. Thus Satow pre-

---

read much of Temperley's *Foreign Policy of Canning* (1925); Temperley later wrote Satow's biography for the *Dictionary of National Biography*. It was also thanks to Temperley that Satow was able to place some of his work on international law with the *Cambridge Historical Journal*. Prior to this he had already published on the post-war reorganization of Europe, and like others with Eastern experience, and unlike Temperley, he always remained sceptical of the League of Nations, which he considered no more constructive than the 1907 conference at The Hague, and perhaps more likely to contribute to a new age of dictatorship and war than of peace. But seen widely by this time as just an old fogey, he exerted little influence, and did not live to see his fears realized. He died on 26 August 1929 at his home, Beaumont, in Ottery St Mary, at the age of eighty-six and was buried in Ottery parish churchyard.

Despite his own somewhat attenuated education, Satow was a highly cultivated man. He had a love of music, art, and literature, and, if he had disappointed his father by preferring Japan to Cambridge, he maintained links there (he delivered the Rede lecture there in 1908) and at Oxford, both of which universities awarded him honorary doctorates. During home leaves he had also studied law, at Marburg in 1875 and Lincoln's Inn in 1883, and was called to the bar in 1887 after passing the examinations with distinction. His wide circle of acquaintances among scholars, extended by family connections with Oxford and Cambridge colleges, included such distinguished figures as Herbert Spencer, C. H. Firth, and Gilbert Murray. But with the greater part of his life apparently wasted in the effort to promote a broad world-view, Satow always kept the intellectual world essentially at bay. In the end, his privately printed *Family Chronicle of the English Satows* (1925) was a testament to what probably mattered to him most.

## Sources

---

Satow MSS, TNA: PRO, Foreign Office Archives

Siam and Japan series, TNA: PRO, FO 69 and FO 46

E. M. Satow, *A diplomat in Japan* (1921)

E. M. Satow, *A diplomat in Siam*, ed. N. Brailey (1996)

E. M. Satow, *Family chronicle of the English Satows* (1925)

B. M. Allen, *The Rt. Hon. Sir Ernest Satow* (1933)

---

H. Cortazzi and G. Daniels, eds., *Britain and Japan, 1859–1991* (1991)

I. H. Nish, *Biographical portraits: Britain and Japan*, 2 vols. (1994–7)

G. A. Lensen, *Korea and Manchuria between Russia and Japan* (1966)

N. J. Brailey, 'Sir Ernest Satow, Japan and Asia', *HJ*, 35 (1992), 115–50

N. J. Brailey, *The Satow Siam papers*, 1 (1997)

C. O. Davis, *The United States and the second Hague Peace Conference* (1975)

C. O. Jan, 'The East Asian diplomatic service and observations of Sir Ernest Satow', PhD diss., Florida University, 1976

b. cert.

d. cert.

N. Hagiwara, *Toui gake* (1980), 49–76 ['A cliff far away']

## Archives

---

TNA: PRO, corresp., diaries, and papers, PRO 30/33

Bodl. Oxf., corresp. with Lord Kimberley

Bodl. Oxf., letters to Sir Matthew Nathan

Mitchell L., NSW, letters to G. E. Morrison

NL Scot., letters to Sir James Lockhart

TNA: PRO, letters to Sir James Macleod, PRO 30/26/85

## Likenesses

---

Spy [L. Ward], chromolithograph caricature, NPG; repro. in *VF* (23 April 1903)

cartoon, repro. in Lensen, *Korea and Manchuria*

---

photographs, Yokohama Archives of History, Japan

photographs, repro. in Allen, *The Rt. Hon. Sir Ernest Satow*

portrait, repro. in *ILN* (29 Sept 1900)

## Wealth at Death

---

£19,872 19s. 11d.: resworn probate, 1929, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

### Archive Edition

View this article in the DNB archive

### More on this topic

Satow, Rt Hon. Sir Ernest Mason, (30 June 1843–26 Aug. 1929) <http://ukwhoswho.com/view/10.1093/ww/9780199540891.001.0001/ww-9780199540884-e-216701> in *Who Was Who* <http://ukwhoswho.com>

### External resources

Bibliography of British and Irish history [http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/incoming.cfm?odnb\\_id=35955](http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/incoming.cfm?odnb_id=35955)

National Archives <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F49889>