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**WALTER D. TOWNSEND, PIONEER AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN IN KOREA**

**Harold F. Cook**

**INTRODUCTION**

The subject of this paper was a person about whom we don’t know very much. He was one of those peripheral characters with which the pages of history are filled; one of the countless little men, of whom no great deeds are recorded but who, nevertheless, did manage to leave their names behind. He held no important government positions, left no corpus of literature. In fact, like most of us, he did nothing really outstanding, although survival in Korea as a foreign businessman for thirty-four years at the turn of the century is, in itself, an accomplishment of relative significance. I think, nevertheless, that a paper on a man such as this does perform two comparatively useful functions.

First, we gain some additional insights into a fascinating period of modern Korean history. For a moment or two, we open the door to the past just a fraction wider and catch an additional glimpse of an era that is gone. Second, we develop an appreciation for the tangled intricacies which challenge the talents and try the patience of the research scholar. Hopefully, through a paper such as this, we become a bit more enlightened on both counts.

**RESEARCH APPROACH**

I’m not really sure when—it was so long ago—that I first came across Townsend’s name. Perhaps it was in Fred Harvey Harrington’s [page 75] “God, Mammon and the Japanese,” the story of Dr. Horace N. Allen’s years in Korea. This book was published in 1944 and reprinted in 1961. References to Townsend are fragmentary, however, and provide precious little information about the man.

I came to Korea for my third period of residence in this country in July of 1966 to complete research for my doctoral thesis. My topic was Kim Ok-kyun and the background of the 1884 incident.

The Korean Research Center, near the west gate intersection, has a fine collection of microfilm covering the diplomatic correspondence of the American legations in Seoul, Peking, and Tokyo. It was there, in many hours of reading and note-taking during cold winter days of late 1966 and early 1967, that I found Townsend’s name several times and, from his passport renewal application, learned his date and place of birth. That he originated from Boston, that he came to Korea as a young man after a period of residence in Japan, and that he had a Japanese wife intrigued me for a variety of personal reasons.

I came across Townsend again, unexpectedly, in the basement of the library of Tokyo University, the following spring. Next we chanced to meet briefly in the prefectural library at Nagasaki. On both occasions I was reading Japanese and English language newspapers for the period of time covered by my thesis. My acquaintance with Townsend was growing apace.

In June 1967 I visited the Inch’on Foreigners’ Cemetery for the first time. Lo and behold, one of the finest stones there marked the resting place of the mortal remains of Walter D. Townsend. The inscription gave me his date of death―March 10, 1918—and told me that he had “resided at Chemulpo for 34 years.” The base of the stone bore the name of T. MacDonald & Co. of Shanghai. The reference, of course, was to Thomas MacDonald and Company, for many years the only undertakers in Shanghai for foreign residents. The grave lot was a single one, so I concluded that the wife and family, whoever they were, had gone elsewhere, either before or after Townsend’s demise. I resolved then and there to keep on this man’s trail until I had collected enough data to do a paper on him.

In March of 1968 I approached the then president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea, looking for work, The man in question [page 76] was concurrently the president of American Trading Company Korea, Ltd. He gave me a job with his firm, and I provided him with some background on Townsend and the company’s on-again, off-again long history in Korea. Neither he nor his New York home office, as I later found out, knew anything of this background. Thanks to me, they added to their letterhead stationery “In Korea Since 1884.”

Back in the states with a health problem in the summer of 1969, I visited American Trading in New York. They had no files on the early years and could provide no new information. I did manage an interview in Stamford, Connecticut with a retired, eighty-two year old former member of the firm, who had started his employment in the autumn of 1919,about one and one-half years after Townsend’s death. He offered much that was of general interest, but nothing which related to Townsend.

Next I went to the National Archives in Washington and looked at the consular reports for 1918 from Korea. Sure enough, there was Townsend again, with information about his death and the settlement of his estate.

I didn’t know quite how to proceed in attempting to trace Townsend’s family background. Who, for example, were his parents? I had his date and place of brith―February 9,1856 in Boston—so I thought I would try the 1860 federal census records on microfilm in the National Archives. Cataloging, I discovered however, was complicated and finding my man literally would have taken forever. I gave up, but only temporarily.

In the manuscript room of the New York Public Library I went through the papers of the Horace Allen collection. Here I found some additional information about Townsend and learned that his brother’s name was Edward and that the latter was a Boston businessman.

Time ran out, and I returned to Seoul with nothing further accomplished. Townsend’s kettle went onto the back burner of the stove to simmer for a while.

In the States again in the summer of 1971 I revisited Harvard’s mammoth library, scene of many hours of reading and research in my younger days, and discovered, among their many other holdings, an alphabetical index, on microfilm, of obituaries from Boston newspapers. [page 77]

Townsend’s brother, Edward, was included. Date of death was February 7, 1910. Interment was at Forest Hills in Boston’s Jamaica Plain.

I went to the cemetery. Records there were very complete, and the office staff was most helpful. I found Edward’s grave. It was in a family plot which included his father and mother, uncle, and others; a total often persons. I utilized the occasion to renew a graveside pledge made four years earlier and half a world away.

Now I knew the name, as well as the dates of birth and death, of Walter’s father. From the inscription on the stone, I also knew that he had been a medical doctor. Where would one get an M.D. degree in Boston in the mid-19th century? At Harvard, of course; where else?

The Francis A. Count way Library of Medicine on Shattuck Street in Boston includes the archives of the Boston Medical Library and the Harvard Medical Library. It was there that I discovered that not only Walter’s father but his grandfather and great-grandfather as well were Harvard M.Ds.

I returned to Seoul again in August 1971. Subsequently, the records of the Korean foreign office for the years that Townsend was in Korea yielded additional facts. Information was piling up, but the gaps remained numerous.

Through another exchange of correspondence with an archivist at Harvard, I learned that Walter’s nephew, one of older brother Edward’s four sons, was known to be alive and residing in Boston as recently as 1964. The address was provided. I took a chance and wrote. After some delay I received a letter from a third party who informed me that the man in question was in the hospital but that he would try to answer any questions I might wish to ask. I sent a reply posthaste by return mail, speculating that a seventy-seven year old man in the hospital might possibly be approaching the end of his life’s story. I never heard further.

Finally, I knew that at the time of Townsend’s death in 1918, his only son was living in Hawaii. I knew the son’s name. A friend of a friend made a xerox copy of the page of the Honolulu telephone directory which included the surname Townsend and sent it to me. Sure enough, there was a listing under the same name as the son, prefixed by “Mrs.” “Ah,” I thought, “the widow.” I wrote to another friend at the East-West [page 78] Center and asked her to make the necessary phone call. Her letter came back promptly: it was the widow, the second wife, of the dead man. I hope to meet her in person when next I cross the Pacific.

So there you have it: Seoul; Inch’on; Tokyo; Nagasaki; Honolulu; Cambridge; Boston and suburban Jamaica Plain; New York; Stamford, Connecticut; Washington; and. . . . who can forecast now where next the trail will lead me? The gaps are as numerous as ever, for each new fact uncovered gives rise to additional questions. Admitted shortcomings in research notwithstanding, I drafted the bulk of this paper during the last week of December 1972 and the first two or three days of January this year.

I hope that this brief outline gives you some appreciation of the scope of the task involved in running down information on one of recorded history’s peripheral figures. I do confide, nevertheless, with perhaps just the hint of a blush, that I enjoy this sort of business.

So much for how I went about this project. Now, what did I find out?

**FAMILY BACKGROUND**

Walter Davis Townsend was born in Boston on February 9, 1856, the third son of Dr. William Edward Townsend and Ellen Britton. He was a direct line descendant in the seventh generation from Thomas Townsend of Norfolk, England, who had come to Massachusetts and settled there in 1637. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all had graduated from Harvard. The position to which a man might hope to rise in New England, if his line traced back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was somewhat different from that of the man who numbered his ancestors among those who left Ireland two centuries or more later to escape the potato famine. Or was it?

Walter’s great-grandfather, David Townsend, made a name for himself as a doctor during the Revolutionary War. Born in Boston in 1753,he graduated from Harvard College at the age of seventeen in 1770. [page 79] David studied medicine under General Joseph Warren and accompanied him as surgeon in Bunner’s regiment at the battle of Bunker Hill; was commissioned surgeon in Whitcomb’s 6th regiment on January 1,1776; was senior surgeon to the general hospital, northern department, in 1777 ; was with the army under George Washington during the winter at Valley Forge; and in 1781 was made surgeon general of the hospital department.

He married Elizabeth Davis in 1785, after the war, and for many years was the physician in charge of the U. S. Naval Hospital in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Harvard awarded him an honorary M. D. in 1813. An active member of the Massachusetts Medical Society, Dr. David Townsend also was an ardent Universalist and, in 1794, published a book entitled Gospel News.” He was a Mason and, the record tells us, was buried according to their rites in Revere Beach, at low tide, in 1829.

David Townsend and Elizabeth Davis had seven children. The most famous of the lot, and the one who became Walter D. Townsend’s grandfather, was Solomon Davis Townsend. Born in Boston in 1793, Solomon graduated from Harvard in 1811 and received his M. D. from the same institution in 1815. He served three years as a naval surgeon, chiefly in the Mediterranean on the “Independence,” where he began a life-long friendship with the future admiral David G. Farragut, then only a midshipman. Solomon Townsend married his cousin, Catherine Wendell Davis, in 1819, and they raised four children. He served as corresponding secretary of the Massachusetts Medical Society, was president of the board of directors of the Massachusetts Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary, assisted his father for a time at the naval hospital in Chelsea, and was a member of the surgical staff of the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston for twenty-five years. Dr. Solomon Townsend was present at the first operation carried out under anesthesia in America and performed the second such operation himself.

At the time of his death in 1869, the obituary in the Boston Daily Advertiser included the following reference to Dr. Solomon Davis Townsend:

His professional skill, his uniform courtesy and kindness of heart, and the unbending integrity of his character, won for him [page 80] in every station of life respect and esteem. He was in the truest sense of the word a Christian man, unselfish, living for others, unambitious of fame, simple-hearted, generous, childlike and true. He lived without an enemy, and died peacefully as he had lived, manifesting the same calm serenity in the last hour that had marked all the hours of his good life.

For what more could a man ask?

The first son of Solomon Davis Townsend and Catherine Wendell Davis was William Edward Townsend, born in Boston in the summer of 1820 at the end of his parent’s very first year of married life. He was to become Walter D. Townsend’s father. William prepared for college at the famous Boston Latin School and graduated from Harvard in 1839. On the latter occasion, he penned these lines:

I was born on the 20th of August 1820, in the good old City of Boston, where, with the exception of my residence in Cambridge, I have always lived. Having fitted for College at the celebrated Boston Latin School, in the month of August 1836 I entered the Sophomore class of the still more renowned Harvard University. Since that period I have become an entirely different person. I am, to use the words of a celebrated author now in much vogue, not the “me” I was three years ago. My character, habits, tastes, have all changed, whether for the better, or worse, some more competent judge than myself must decide. I have passed many pleasant hours here; gained some friends, I know, and made no enemies, I trust. But for all this I am anxious to leave College restraints, because I am tired of the “mill horse round of recitation, hall, & chapel.” I wish to feel myself a man, dependent on my own exertions for support. I have hitherto been distinguished for nothing in particular; Quietly I was born, & quietly have I lived; & intend to quietly spend the remainder of my life, in quieting others, in the practice of my profession, as a physician.

William Townsend studied at the Tremont Medical School and [page 81] received his M.D. from Harvard in 1844. Three years later he married Ellen Britton of Orford, New Hampshire and three sons were born to the marriage, of whom Walter was the yongest.

During the slightly more than two decades of his professional career, Dr. William E. Townsend attained prominent rank as a skilful physician. He served the City of Boston as a member of its school committee and the federal government as a surgeon at the military hospital on Gallop’s Island.

He died prematurely at the age of forty-six, however, as described in the following extract from the November 17, 1866 edition of the Boston Daily Evening Transcript:

That well known and highly esteemed member of our medical fraternity, Dr. William E. Townsend, died suddenly at half past twelve o’clock this afternoon at his residence, No. 20 Beacon Street. It is reported that his case was one of genuine cholera. He attended the funeral of Rev. Dr. Jenks yesterday apparently in usual health, but early last evening was seized with violent illness, which continued until his demise as above stated. His father, Dr. Solomon D. Townsend, was called in promptly and remained with his son during the night and this forenoon, but all skill was unavailing. The deceased had a few days since professionally attended a cholera case in Salem Street, which proved fatal, and from which it is probable he took the disease. Dr. Townsend will be buried privately tomorrow.

Dr. William E. Townsend was survived by his widow, the former Ellen Britton, and three sons. Edward, then eighteen, was the oldest, having been born in November 1848. His middle name was Britton, his mother’s family name.

Arthur Farragut Townsend was the second son. I have been unable to find out anything about this man, not even his dates of birth and death, except that he was living in Pasaic, New Jersey at the time of Walter’s death, in 1918. There can be no doubt that he was named Farragut, however, out of respect for his grandfather Solomon’s close [page 82] friendship with the famous admiral, previously mentioned.

Walter, the youngest, was just ten, going on eleven, at the time his father died. His middle name, Davis, undoubtedly also came via grandfather Solomon, who carried it himself and who, as already indicated, married his cousin, who was surnamed Davis.

Dr. William E. Townsend also was survived by his younger brother, Thomas David, seven years his junior. It was Thomas, in fact, who purchased the grave lot in Boston’s Forest Hills Cemetery for William’s burial Thomas was a Boston sugar broker, with three children of his own.

Walter D. Townsend, our protagonist, deprived of his father at the tender age of ten, spent the next twelve years of his life attending school and growing up on Beacon Street in Boston. Old grandfather Solomon passed away in 1869,when Walter was thirteen. His mother did not remarry, but, considering the closeness of the Townsend family circle, we may surmise that elder brother Edward and perhaps even uncle Thomas, to some degree, became like second fathers to him. All is conjecture, however, for we know nothing of this period of his life.

**JAPAN YEARS**

 I have yet to establish with certainty why Walter D. Townsend turned his back on Beacon Hill and set out for the Far East to seek his fortune. Wanderlust and a desire for adventure, of course, may have been the motivating factors. That none of the three brothers—Edward, Arthur, and Walter—went on to Harvard in their father’s, grandfathers, and great-grandfather’s footsteps may indicate a possible decline of the family fortune after the father’s premature death in the late autumn of 1866. Their cousin, Charles Wendell Townsend, who was uncle Thomas’s son, went to Harvard, however, and continued on, in the family tradition, to become a medical doctor. In later years, Harvard also claimed three of Edward’s four sons.

 I’ve fared no better in trying to trace the initial link between [page 83] Townsend and his employer in Japan, James R. Morse. Did Townsend have a contract for employment or other agreement before he left for the East? Did he strike out cold and subsequently find a job after his arrival? I just don’t know.

Morse himself is another fascinating character who could properly be the subject of a separate paper An enterprising Yankee, with sufficient amounts of capital and ingenuity at his disposal, Morse established the American Clock and Brass Company at Yokohama in 1877 for the purpose of merchandising clocks and brassware.

Although founded for the purpose of handling small specialized lines, American Clock and Brass, in the person of its energetic founder, quickly discovered that the field for American goods in the Far East was as wide as their production. In 1884 Morse changed the name of his firm to American Trading Company and in 1900 merged, under this name, with the older New York firm of Flint, Eddy and Company, which traced its origin back to 1857. Under Morse’s proprietorship, American Trading Company grew to be the largest American general trading company in the Orient.

How James R. Morse and Walter D. Townsend first got together remains unclear. Whatever the motivation, and whatever the arrangements, however, Walter D. Townsend left San Francisco on December 3, 1878 on the Pacific Mail Steam Ship Company’s “City of Tokio;” 5,050 tons, Captain Maury in command. He reached Yokohama, Japan slightly more than three weeks later on the day after Christmas. Trans-Pacific cabin passage cost him $250.

American Clock and Brass Company’s Yokohama office was located at that time in a two-story building at 28 Main Street, opposite the Yokohama branch of the Chartered Mercantile Bank. Other businesses sharing the same address were The Yokohama Curio Mart and Kelly and Company. The latter were dealers in stationery, books, tobacco, and fancy goods.

James R. Morse, President of American Clock and Brass Company, lived with his wife and two infant children at 234 Bluff, overlooking the harbor. I was unable to discover the location of Townsend’s residence.

American Clock and Brass Company was a frequent advertisor in the English language press of that day. I cite some examples: [page 84]

Waltham Watches. Key and Stem Winding. The undersigned has just received a fresh supply of these celebrated watches, which they offer at very low prices. Also, a few elegant Mantel Marble Clocks. From $25 to $75 each.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \*

American Watches. Gold and Silver. At Manufacturer’s Prices. The undersigned are Sole Agents in Japan for the celebrated Waltham Watch Company.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Gentlemen’s Gold Watches priced from $55 to $120 each. Key winders and stem winders. Also a variety of ladies’ Watches always kept in stock. Watch movements are William Ellery; P. S. Bartlett; Waltham Watch Company; Appleton, Tracy & Company; and American Watch Company.

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At the International Exhibition at Sidney, the Judges on Horology gave to the Waltham Watch Company Two Special and Five First Class Awards, on their Second, Third, and Sixth Grade Watches (other grades not exhibited), for originality, invention and discovery, utility and quality of material, skill in workmanship, fitness for purposes intended, adaptation to public wants, economy, cost, finish and elegance of cases, and time-keeping qualities. Four English, three Swiss, two French, and one German manufacturer competed, and the result was as shown above. The American Company triumphed over all. These Watches are for Sale at Manufacturer’s Prices, at the Office of The American Clock and Brass Company, Agents for Japan and China.

Just what Townsend’s duties were with his new employer cannot be stated with certainty but can be imagined. It was his job to help Morse sell various products of American manufacture in Japan. From the snipping lists published daily in the English language press, we know that [page 85] he made at least two trips to Kobe and possibly to Nagasaki in the spring and summer of 1880. Undoubtedly there were other trips which either were not recorded or which my research did not disclose.

Townsend lived and worked at Yokohama from December 1878 until he set out for Korea in April 1884,an interval of somewhat more than five years. This was the period of his life when he was between twenty-three and twenty-eight years of age. It must have been a romantic time, discovering Japan and meeting the Japanese girl who eventually became his wife, bore his children, and shared his long years in Korea with him.

Meiji Japan of the early 1880s was a rapidly developing nation; the first non-Western land to adopt the industrial and commercial techniques of the West on a significant scale. She had opened Korea in 1876, incorporated the ancient kingdom of Ryukyu into the empire as Okinawa prefecture in 1879, and was constantly pressuring the Western powers for a revision of the unequal treaties which had been forced on her a generation earlier. She had built railroads and streetcar lines; installed gas lights and a telegraph system; and opened factories and schools. Japan of that day, in short, was an exciting place for a young American to be.

It was Korea, rather than Japan, however, which was to claim Townsend’s interest and attention for the rest of his life. And, it was a Korean, Kim Ok-kyun, that late 19th century pioneer advocate of enlightenment and reform, who served as the instrumentality that brought this about.

Kim was in Tokyo for the first time during June and July 1882. He was there again from mid-October of the same year to early March 1883. Finally, he spent over nine months in the Japanese capital from July 1883 to April 1884.

During his third visit, Kim’s principal task was to secure a foreign loan for Korea. The amount which he sought was three million yen. Among the people who listened to Kim with interest were James R. Morse and Walter D. Townsend.

American Minister John A. Bingham in Tokyo wrote to his counterpart, Lucius H. Foote, in Seoul on September 10, 1883 that Kim had consulted with him “several times” on the subject of a loan and that [page 86] on one occasion he had come to the legation in the company of Morse. Kim had visited Bingham again that very day, in fact, and told him that Morse had gone to New York, attempting to arrange for a loan.

The loan, unfortunately or otherwise, never materialized, although Morse worked hard on it. Financial circles in both New York and London would have none of it, and as one prominent banker reportedly put it, “Korea is too far from the Bowery.”

If Morse and Townsend couldn’t loan the Koreans any money, at least they could sell them something, shrewd Yankee traders that they were. First, being agents for the Waltham Watch Company, they talked Kim Ok-kyun into buying some gold watches, decorated with diamonds, as presents for King Kojong, Queen Min, and others. Next, they decided that what Korea needed was some firearms. As early as December 1883 we find reference to a Korean government purchase from Morse’s company of 4,000 rifles. The weapons reached Korea in June 1884. A second purchase in July of the latter year covered an additional 1,000 rifles plus six Gatling guns. The latter, as you know, was the machine gun of its day, named after its inventor, Richard J. Gatling, and having a revolving cluster of barrels which fired once each per revolution.

Expanding the scope of their activities just a bit, Morse and Townsend signed a contract with Kim Ok-kyun in April 1884 for the cutting and export to Japan of timber from Ullung island, off Korea’s east coast. What they failed to realize at the time, however, was that Kim already had given the same rights to a Japanese businessman who subsequently tried unsuccessfully to take the case to court. Further problems involving Ullung island and its timber will come into context slightly later.

In any event, in the same month in which they signed the timber agreement, Morse decided to send Townsend to Korea with Kim to have a firsthand look at trading potentialities. Townsend and Kim left Yokohama on the “Nagoya Maru,” reaching Nagasaki on April 13. There they transferred to the “Chitose Maru” and set out for Korea. After a short stop at Pusan, they reached Inch’on, or Chemulp’o, on May 1884, For Walter D. Townsend, the great adventure had begun.

**KOREA**

Townsend spent the first few months in Korea getting acquainted. He undoubtedly met more than once with Captain Charles H. Cooper, the only other American in Chemulp’o at the time engaged in business. By October, he had made a trip into the interior in order to buy a quantity of rice for resale at Chemulp’o. Townsend ran into trouble with the local Korean authorities, however, with the result that Minister Foote wrote the following letter on his behalf to the Korean foreign office:

Two junk-loads of rice, in which Mr. W. D. Townsend, a citizen of the United States, has one half interest, are detained at Yong Ho, by order of the Governor or Magistrate of the District. This rice was bought in the district of Kim Joi [Kimje] by Choe Han Yo [Ch’oe Han-yo] and Choe Sa Haeung [Ch’oe Sa-hyong], the Agents of Mr. Townsend and others, and was intended for shipment to Chemulpo. By Treaty stipulations, citizens of the United States have the right to purchase produce in the interior of Corea, and to have it transported to the open ports, without being subject to the payment of any tax, excise or transit duty whatsoever. . . I could therefore ask Your Excellency to direct the Governor or Magistrate by whose order these junks are being detained to release the same, that they may proceed on their way to Chemulpo.

This letter was written by Minister Foote on November 27,1884. Before the matter could be resolved, however, the December 4th incident occurred at Seoul, and final disposition of Townsend’s rice problem became lost in the page s of history.

Townsend was living in Seoul, with his Japanese wife and infant son, at the time of the December 4, 1884 incident. I was unable to ascertain when his family came from Japan to join him. A Japanese employee of the newly established Korean postal service wrote an eye- [page 88] witness account of the incident which included this colorful reference to Townsend:

Townsend, his Japanese wife, and child lived near the Japanese legation. Since the disturbance on the night of the 4th, they had been staying at the legation. Townsend had a long sword stuck in a sash around his waist, and he carried a rifle. He was guarding the Japanese legation with some Japanese soldiers. On the morning of December 7, he decided to go to the American legation. Therefore, accompanied by a Japanese who spoke Korean well, he and his family went to the American legation.

Among the articles pillaged from Townsend’s house in Kyo-dong (which was an area extending through parts of present-day Kyongun-dong, Nagwon-dong, and both Chongno 2-ga and 3-ga), at the time of the incident, were the following. From this listing we can get some idea of the contents of the home of a Western foreigner in Seoul in this period of early contact:

2 bags of flour 1 1/2 bags of potatoes

3 bags of beans 2 pillows

2 bags of turnips 6 pillow cases

3 24 pints of beer 5 blankets

3 1/2 bottles of brandy 12 towels

4 dozen cans of milk 1 rug

2 dozen cans of vegetables 2 umbrellas

5 bottles of raisins 2 lamps

6 tins of jam 1 lot of medicine

4 tins of butter 1 overcoat

6 cups and saucers 4 suits of clothes

12 dinner plates 3 shirts

6 dessert plates 2 pairs of underpants

6 soup bowls 1 pair of boots

24 forks, knives, & spoons 12 linen handkerchiefs

6 glass tumblers 2 dozen cotton socks

6 Sherry glasses 1 horse [page 89]

6 Claret glasses 1 saddle and bridle

3 pairs of window curtains 1 revolver

6 bed sheets 160 cartridges

Etc., etc.

Townsend estimated the total amount of his loss at $562,90. The horse alone was tagged at $44, which, by present-day standards, is a very small amount. Interestingly enough, the list makes no mention of any personal effects belonging to his Japanese wife. Through the American legation in Seoul, Townsend presented a claim for reimbursement to the Korean government in January 1885,the month following his loss. It took fourteen months’ time and seven letters from the American legation to the Korean foreign office before the Korean government finally reimbursed Townsend for this loss in February 1886. Townsend’s receipt for payment was dated at Yokohama on March 30 and indicates he must have returned to Japan for a while on business or for a vacation.

Despite this personal setback, business went on, however. In mid-1885, a report from the American legation to the secretary of state referred to Townsend and American Trading Company in these terms:

Mr. W. D. Townsend, Agent for the American Trading Company of Yokohama, makes frequent visits to Korea and has executed considerable commission business for the Korean government, such as importing stock animals of the several kinds from America for the Korean government farm, table-ware, furniture, etc. for the Palace, arms and ammunition etc. The business transacted by this company to date will probably foot up to $175,000 paid up in full.

The story was not all sunshine and roses, however. On February 16, 1885 Townsend wrote directly to the Korean foreign office as follows. The topic was the aforementioned Ullung island and its lumber, and the letter represents the only substantial example of Townsend’s own writing that I found in all my hours of research:

‘ -

I beg to inform your Excellency that our company contracted on [page 90]

April 1884,with the Korean Kaitakushi [Kaech’oksa] Department, to work for Korean Government account, the timber on the Island of Ullunto [Ullung-do]. As the contract states that a Korean Official shall be appointed to attend to the business on behalf of the Korean Government and changes having taken place in the Government, I beg to ask Your Excellency that some Korean official be appointed to take charge of the business, with whom we may cooperate in the future working of the timber, as given in the contract.

Townsend’s letter was addressed to the head of the foreign office. The reply of the next day, however, was signed by a lowly clerk. It stated curtly that one Yi Kyu-won had replaced Kim Ok-kyun as development commissioner and that Townsend should do business with him.

Things didn’t go well, however, for in June the American legation wrote to the Korean foreign office and pointed to the existence of two contracts for Ullung island’s timber; one with Townsend and another with an Englishmen,J. F. Mitchell. No reference was made, however, to yet a third agreement, mentioned earlier, between Kim Ok-kyun and a certain Japanese businessman. The letter asked the foreign office to declare Mitchell’s contract null and void and to reaffirm Townsend’s sole right to the timber. The answer came back that all contracts with the Korean government had to be endorsed by the foreign office. Since Townsend’s contract bore no such endorsement, it was that contract, not Mitchell’s, which must be declared null and void.

American response was prompt and to the point. Charge d’affaires George C. Foulk fired back this reply :

. . . .I beg to state that the Korean government has not heretofore given notice that contracts made with the government must all be endorsed by the Foreign Office. Such a notice is very rarely issued by the governments of the world, and it is the rule to regard an officer’s commission as a guarantee that the government is responsible for the work he does in his name. If no such notice is given, how can foreign merchants and others know how Korea wishes them to transact business with it? Even if such a notice is [page 91] given, does the Korean Government wish the merchant to secure himself the indorsement of the Foreign Office? A notice of this kind might well be issued by the Korean government, if it be assented to by the treaty powers, but no such notice could apply to transactions of the time when it had not so been issued. As in other countries, where no such regulation exists, it was right and natural that the Head of the Kaichoksa [Kaech’oksa] should be regarded as competent to make contracts for the sale of Ullonto [Ullung-do] timber. In closing your letter you refer me to Kim Ok Kiun to settle this matter. I beg your Excellency to please explain this statment. I have addressed the government of His Majesty upon a subject which certainly belongs to it, and it would appear that Your Excellency in making this statement asks the Government of the United States to deal with a man whom your government has denounced as a traitor. To prevent any misunderstanding, I would request a reconsideration of my letter of the 12th instant and a reply which I may forward to my Government.

At least five other letters went back and forth on this subject until a compromise was worked out in August. American Trading Company was permitted to sell the wood which it already had imported into Japan, deduct its commission and expenses, and transmit the proceeds to the Korean government. At the same time, the company was to return its contract for cancellation. Mitchell’s contract would continue in force, but he was to sell wood only in Shanghai, not Japan. Neither American Trading nor Mitchell was to be held in any responsibility for the wood which certain Koreans and Japanese had cut secretly and shipped to Japan. In September, additionally, American Trading was given authority to seize this latter wood and sell it in Japan on behalf of the Korean government.

The monkeyshines weren’t over, however. Six months later, in February 1886,at the same time that Townsend, who had just turned thirty, finally was being reimbursed by the Korean government for his loss of December 1884, Charge Foulk was writing again to complain that Mitchell had taken a load of timber from Ullung island to Kobe, Japan for [page 92] Sale there. Foulk protested this in the strongest terms and demanded that Mitchell be ordered to turn over this wood to American Trading Company. I could find no reply from the Korean side, nor any further correspondence on this matter. Ullung island and its timber slipped from the page s of history.

Townsend was a businessman, and he must have registered a profit in Korea or he wouldn’t have stayed here. It is the problems and the frustrations which stand out in the record, however, and which give us some insight into what it must have been like to live and work in Korea, as a Westerner, back near the turn of the century.

As already indicated, Townsend was living in Seoul at the time of the December 1884 incident. He moved his residence to Inch’on, or Chemulp’o, shortly thereafter, however, and continued to reside in that port city for the rest of his long years in Korea. I have been unable to determine the location of his house or office in relation to present-day Inch’on geography.

In November 1886 Charge Foulk was writing again to the Korean foreign office on Townsend’s behalf:

For some time past the Chinese Telegraph Company has been using the house called Sun Shing Chang [Sunsinch’ang] in the General Foreign Settlement at Chemulpo as telegraph office. This house is the property of an American citizen, Mr. W. D. Townsend, who does not wish to rent it to the Telegraph Company. In reply to Mr. Townsend’s request that the Telegraph Company vacate the house, the agent at Chemulpo states that the Korean Government has given them the use of it and directs him to apply to that government in regard to the matter. I have now to lay this matter before Your Excellency, with the request that steps be taken to cause the Telegraph Company to vacate the house as soon as possible. The house was formerly owned by the Korean subject So Sang Ok [So Sang-ok], who sold it to Mr. Townsend with the full knowledge of Your Excellency’s Office to whom I referred the matter last year and exhibited the deeds.

Two letters in the foreign office files indicate that the Korean govern- [page 93] ment told Foulk that they would look into the matter and that the foreign office had referred the subject to the telegraph bureau. Nothing happened, however.

A month later, in December, Foulk took pen in hand again:

I beg to ask Your Excellency’s attention to the fact that the Telegraph Company of the Korean Government continues to use the house called Sun Shing Chang [Sunsinch’ang], belonging to Mr. W. D. Townsend in Chemulp’o as telegraph office inspite of the protests of the owner, who has never consented to the Company’s using his property . . . I now learn that the Telegraph employees at Chemulpo state that they will continue to occupy the property as long as they please, and have made no sign of leaving. This conduct is most extraordinary.

The fact of the Telegraph employees having occupied the house without making any agreement with the owner was highly irregular . . . .

I now, once more, ask Your Excellency to cause the telegraph office to be removed at once. . . . Further delay. . . . may unfortunately result in a claim for damages. . . . to compensate the loss to Mr. Townsend in being unjustly deprived of the use of his own property.

This letter brought no reply, so another one was dispatched at the end of December. The nature of the Korean foreign office reply to the latter reminder is contained in the response which it evoked from the American legation on New Year’s day, 1887;

. . . . (Y)ou state that the telegraph employes at Chemulpo living in the house called the Hsun hsin chang [Sunsinch’ang], belonging to Mr. Townsend, cannot leave the house at present on account of the cold weather. . . .

While I feel very sorry that the people now living in this building should be put to inconvenience and obliged to leave during the cold weather, Your Excellency must agree with me that these reasons are not sufficient to justify me in approving of any delay [page 94] in settling this affair.

I have learnt that in the Chinese settlement at Chemulp’o there are many vacant houses one of which the Telegraph employes could occupy, and I must beg Your Excellency to order them to remove to one of them and return to Mr. Townsend his property.

Four days later the foreign office replied that the house in question actually did not belong to Mr. Townsend and that he had only been using it. Besides, the weather was too cold to consider forcing the telegraph employees to move.

The American response flatly contradicted the Korean assertions and demanded action. Five days later Townsend filed a claim for $380 to cover rent for December and January plus repairs which he would have to make to the property when he reoccupied it.

Still nothing happened. At the end of January 1887 the American charge wrote again:

I have the honor to request that you will give me an immediate and definite answer in the business of Townsend’s house called the “Shun Shin Chang” [Sunsinch’ang], failing which I will have to telegraph to my Government requesting it to take further measures in the matter.

At this juncture, the telegraphers finally moved out, but Townsend collected no compensation. In a report to Washington, dated February 10, 1887,the American charge concluded on this note:

This case is one of many which will illustrate the utter ignorance of the Korean government in all which concerns its obligations under the treaties, and the dilatoriousness of its methods, so incompatible with Western customs and ideas of justice. There is no legal means of regress [sic] for foreigners for wrongs done them by natives except through their legations and the Foreign Office, and the latter, while recognizing the validity of a claim will put off considering it until absolutely forced to do so. So long as such methods endure so long will foreigners be prevented from entering into any commercial or other relations with this country except at great risk and too frequently considerable loss. [page 95]

A few months later, in April, Townsend made an extensive trip through the northern provinces of Hwanghae, Pyongan, and Hamgyong. He was looking at mining prospects, but I have been unable to discover any report of his findings.

Exchanges of correspondence between the American legation and the Korean foreign office in 1888 are the first to refer to the firm which Townsend represented as “Morse Townsend and Company,” rather than American Trading Company. The name indeed was changed about this time, although I have never found the exact date nor the specific reason for the change. A few years later, at about the time of the Sino-Japanese War, the “Morse” was dropped, and the firm became known simply as Townsend and Company. It remained that way even after Walter D. Townsend’s death in 1918.

American Minister Hugh A. Dinsmore wrote to the Korean foreign office at the end of April 1888:

I have the honor to enclose herewith a contract given by one Song Hak Su [Song Hak-su], a Korean subject to Morse Townsend and Company, American Merchants, in which to secure the payment of One Thousand Five Hundred Dollars they have given a lien on certain rice lands.

This Song Hak Su has three times as I am informed tried to run away to avoid the settlement of his deb, but was taken by his partners in the contract and has been delivered to the Examiner at Chemulpo who now has him in custody. I beg Your Excellency will make an order that this case be examined and that the lands be sold that the debt may be satisfied, provided that the debt is not sooner paid, and that Song Hak Su may be held until the proper steps may be taken.

The foreign office replied that it would look into the matter.

Over four months later, in early September, Dinsmore wrote again to state that Song had settled his debt with Morse Townsend and Company and, therefore, should be released from custody in Chemulpo.

There the matter should have rested, but it didn’t Dinsmore wrote thusly at the end of October; [page 96]

In the settlement after Song Hak Su had been arrested he gave to Mr. Townsend certain deeds for rice lands to secure the payment of his debt, and the rice grown this year on the lands. When Mr. Townsend went to get his rice he discovered that the deeds which Song Hak Su had given him were fraudulent and that they were not for lands owned by Song Hak Su.

It is said that he borrowed the deeds of a poor widow with which to perpetrate the fraud, and it is probable that his consul who lives in the vicinity of his rice lands assisted him in the fraud Song Hak Su evidently is a bad man and I beg Your Excellency will give us benefit of Your Excellency’s official assistance in the collection of the debt from him.

Nearly a month went by with no response to this letter. Dinsmore wrote again. By the end of December the case was in the hands of a court of claims in the Seoul magistracy. There, as with Ullung island lumber, it disappeared from the page s of history.

In the summer of this same year, 1888,there occurred two instances of the forceful obstruction of Townsend’s commercial activities. On both occasions, boats which he had hired to carry his cargo along the coast were attacked, the crews beaten, and the cargo and flags of Morse Townsend and Company were seized and carried off Dinsmore wrote:

This conduct seems to be directed solely against this one firm as I am informed there is no interference with other persons employing boats in the same way. The matter has been carried so far now that Messers. Morse Townsend and Company find it almost impossible to secure a boat. Why is it Your Excellency that our citizens are thus discriminated against?

The foreign office replied that it would look into the matter. Dinsmore wrote again at the end of July, in rather dramatic fashion:

I have today returned from Chemulpo to Seoul. I regret to find that my two despatches written to you asking you kindly to protect our American citizens against a violation of treaty regulations [page 97] in the use of Corean boats for transport of cargo have not secured to our merchants the relief asked, but on the contrary have had only the effect to do our people greater injury. I am informed that a Corean man employed by the firm Morse Townsend and Company and whose service is very valuable to them is about to be punished and probably taken away from them. While I was at Chemulpo I investigated the matter about the boats thoroughly and I am sure that the statements in my two despatches are true and that the Corean employee mentioned has done no wrong. The Government of the United States has ever been the friend of His Majesty the King of Corea and has done all in its power to assist your country. Is this then the return which you make for our kindness?

It will pain our President and high officials when I write that Americans cannot obtain protection of their rights in Corea.

The Korean foreign office replied, in usual fashion, that it would look into the matter. It added, however, that the Korean in question would not be punished. The record contains no further references to this matter, so I presume it, was settled satisfactorily.

In mid-1889 Townsend made another extensive trip through the interior of Korea, but we know none of the details.

In mid-1890 Morse Townsend and Company was plagued by minor officials and underlings of the Korean government office at Chemulp’o. Exchanges of correspondence between American Minister Augustine Heard and the Korean foreign office indicate that the problem was settled quickly.

In April 1892 Heard wrote again on behalf of Townsend, asking for help in collecting two claims; one for $12,012.41 against Hong Chong- dae and the other for $5,530.68 against Chon To-il. Nothing happened, of course, and Heard wrote again in June. He closed with tongue in cheek: “I would therefore pray Your Excellency by no means to relax pursuit, and if necessary to increase the vigor which has hitherto been shown.”

In September Heard pointed out that certain Chinese creditors of Hong had been able to secure settlement of their claims “through the [page 98] action of the local authorities upon his relatives, many of whom are well to do, in his native town of Weiju [Uiju].” Heard also remarked that he had learned that a large portion of the claim against Chon had had been recovered. He concluded ： “I would suggest making payment to Morse Townsend and Company. A merchant always needs money and these gentlemen have been deprived of the use of theirs for a long time.” Results were not forthcoming, so Heard wrote again in October and November. Finally the foreign office replied that collection of debts from the families of debtors “was in opposition to the Treaty.” Heard rejected this answer and urged “serious consideration without delay.” The foreign office waited two weeks and then responded that it was not customary in Korea to compel the family of a debtor to contribute toward paying his debts.

The matter dragged on through the winter, and in March of the following year Heard pointed out:

(C)ustom at the north appears to be different from what it is here, as the magistrate at Weju [Uiju] seized his [i.e., Hong’s] relatives and extorted from them large sums of money for the purpose as alleged of paying his [i.e., Hong’s] debts to the Governor of Ping Yang [Pyongyang].

In June Heard was pleading that the present course of events in this long, drawn out case “can only lead to heart burning and ill feeling, and is manifestly unjust.”

Keep in mind, please, that this whole business started in April of 1892. In July 1895,over three years later, American Minister John M. B- Sill, who had replaced Heard, was still writing to the Korean foreign office in a vain attempt to get satisfaction for Townsend. The name of Chon Toil, the lesser of the two debtors, had dropped from the record, either because a settlement had been reached or because the case proved hopeless. Townsend was still after Hong, however:

I have the honor to present a brief statement of the course pursued by Mr. Min, former governor of the Province of Ping An [P’yongan] in the matter of money collected by his order under instructions [page 99] from the Foreign Office, from the relatives and debtors of Hong Chong Tae [Hong Chong-dae], an insolent debtor to Morse Townsend and Company. [Governor Min collected money from Hong’s relatives and debtors and kept it for himself to cover debts allegedly owed to him by Hong.] It is now known that the debt due to Governor Min. . . was a private debt, and that he had no color of right to seize in payment thereof. . . . (I)t is known that Governor Min was in a business partnership with Hong, that money was lost in the transaction, and that the alleged debt was his own private mattter. . . . (C)ash collected from book debts was in consequence of credits given for goods which Hong got from Morse Townsend and Company but never paid for; and, therefore, belonged especially to that firm. . . . (W)hile the Governor kept the share, he allowed, either through neglect or else purposely, the Wei Ju [Uiju] Magistrate to keep a large amount

He [i.e., Min] refuses to pay over any money to Morse Townsend and Company for the astonishing son that it has all been spent and therefore that he can pay nothing over. I believe. . . that Governor Min wrongfully withheld money justly due to Morse Townsend and Company and that Justice demands that any property possessed by him when he went into exile should be held and sold for the full amount of Morse Townsend and Company’s claim.

History’s curtain comes down at this point, and we are left wondering, but certainly speculating, on the outcome of it all.

At the beginning of July 1893—we’re backtracking a bit now— an electric light plant, ordered by the Korean government through Morse Townsend and Company, arrived at Inch’on. The American legation notified the Korean foreign office that an advance payment of $10,000 was due before the cargo could be delivered and that the balance of about $37,000 would have to be paid upon receipt of a final statement showing settlement of exchange and expenses of transshipment in Japan. Ten days and three letters later Townsend received $7,000 and a promise to pay “within a few days.” It took an additional week and several more letters to produce the $3,000. [page 100]

In August 1894 Minister Sill wrote to the foreign office about a shipment of nine li (about three miles) of wire which the Korean government had ordered through Morse Townsend and Company for its electric light plant. The contract called for a payment of $4,000 by July 23 and the balance upon delivery. No money had been forthcoming. Sill wrote again two months later, in October, repeating his request. In December the foreign office notified the American legation that it was cancelling the contract.

On the evening of April 30,1896,Townsend’s residence at Che- mulp’o was burglarized and the following items taken: 1 Seth Thomas Pendulum Clock, 8 day, strike; 1 Remington 44 caliber revolver with a box of cartridges; 1 Smith and Wesson 38 caliber revolver with a box of cartridges; 1 Hopkins and Allen 38 caliber revolver with a box of cartridges; 1 dark blue coat; and 1 vest to match. Considering the den of thieves in which he apparently was living and doing business, Town- send doubtlessly had need of these firearms.

Townsend, who was now forty years old, offered a reward of $20 and gave indication of whom he thought the guilty party might be. Minister Sill notified the foreign office on May 2 and suggested that the police watch the residence of Mrs. Mary Scranton, founder of that pioneer educational institution for girls which grew into present-day Ewha Woman’s University, as the suspected culprit’s aunt was in Mrs. Scranton’s employ. Again, we are left in doubt as to the outcome, for the record is silent.

In this same year of 1896 James R. Morse, on behalf of his own firm, American Trading Company, signed a contract with the Korean government for the right to construct the country’s first railroad, the line between Inch’on and Seoul. Ground was broken at a point about two miles from the waterfront of downtown Inch’on on March 22, 1897 with Walter D. Townsend supervising a group of “fifty picked coolies” equipped with American wheelbarrows, shovels, and pickaxes.

Also in 1896,in October, Townsend purchased 11,700 square meters of property on W61mi island, in the harbor at Chemulp’o, for the purpose of erecting kerosene warehouses which could not be built within the limits of the General Foreign Settlement. Purchase price was a mere $132. Within less than a year, Townsend transferred title for half of this prop- [page 101] erty to Standard Oil Company of New York, for whom, at that time, he was the agent in Korea.

On March 26,1899 Townsend had his only recorded audience with Emperor Kojong. The occasion was a visit to Korea of Mr. J. Sloat Fassett of New York who was largely responsible for the money with which the gold mines in Korea were being worked at that time. Townsend represented both Oriental Consolidated Mining Company and Seoul Mining Company and accompanied Fassett when the latter was received by the Emperor.

In October 1900 Townsend was again appealing to the Korean government, through the American legation, for help in collecting an overdue debt, this time for more than $7,000. In June 1901 he asked for assistance in collecting damages for a house which he owned in Seoul, formerly the property of a Chinese from whom he had taken it in settlement of an outstanding account. The house had been partially wrecked by a mob in some sort of altercation on June 18. Townsend asked for $50 and finally received it eighteen months later in January 1903. There is nothing in the record to indicate final disposition of the $7,000 debt.

**CONCLUSION**

And so it went. As I remarked earlier, he certainly must have made money or he wouldn’t have stayed here, but it was not all sunshine and roses. You businessmen here in Korea today don’t have these problems, do you?

As you can see, at this point, the record provides some interesting episodes but yields precious little information about Townsend himself.

Additional information is fragmentary. We know, for example, that he was five feet eleven inches tall and that he had gray eyes, brown hair, a prominent nose, full mouth, round chin, fair complexion, and a medium full face. At least, that was how he looked at age thirty-two in 1887 when he renewed his passport in Seoul. We know that he played a good game of billiards, for he won the silver cup at a tournament in [page 102] Seoul in 1904.

We also know that he had two children; a son, who was the older of the two, and a daughter. The boy was called Kimio, a Japanese name. After Townsend’s older brother Edward, who was president of a wholesale coal company, died in Boston in February 1910, the son adopted his uncle’s name. At some point in time he left Korea for Hawaii, where he went into business for himself. A letter to Townsend from his friend, Horace N. Allen, written in October 1904 while Allen was still American Minister to Korea, poses some questions. Townsend asked for legal advice regarding adoption and citizenship for Kimio. Allen concluded, “You had better arrange the whole matter by will.” Townsend, in fact, made a specific point of acknowledging paternity in his will. At the time of his death, the son already was an American citizen.

Townsend’s daughter’s name was Margaret. I have yet to discover much of anything about her, except that on March 19, 1905 she married James de Forrest Atkinson, who worked for her father. Townsend, at the time, was one year short of his fiftieth birthday. The wedding took place in the Chemulp’o Methodist Church with a reception at the Townsend residence. Margaret’s husband was one of six children of Reverend Doctor John L. Atkinson, a Christian missionary in Japan for as many years as Townsend was a businessman in Korea. Atkinson eventually inherited his father-in-law’s business, much to the chagrin of Edward, the son in Hawaii.

Townsend’s father, it will be recalled, died when Walter was only a boy often. His mother survived her husband by forty years and died in February 1906. I was unsuccessful in finding out anything about Town- send’s wife.

Over the years, Townsend and Horace N. Allen became particularly close. Allen liked Townsend and referred to him as “a very busy man and quite successful;” “the most conservative man out here,” whose business in kerosene, rice, cigarettes, and general items was “flourishing well;” “a very highly respected man here and good in all things;” a man “who always rails so against fuss, feathers, and ceremony.” At the turn of the century the Townsends were regular guests of the Aliens each year for Christmas dinner, and it was the Aliens who gave an engagement party in honor of Margaret and her fiance. When Allen’s two young sons [page 103] first went off to the United States to study, they lodged with Townsend’s older brother Edward in Boston.

It is from Allen, for example, we learn that in 1897 Townsend’s kerosene imports on behalf of Standard Oil were “upwards of 1,000,000 gallons.” In early 1899,it also was Allen who wrote that Townsend was “so angered by this missionary agency business, and especially Underwood’s attempts to get out a cargo of kerosene, coal, etc. that he wrote in such a strong manner to his mother as to cause her to cease her very considerable annual subscriptions to the cause of missions.”

Townsend was active in civic affairs in Chemulp’o, where he owned at least seven lots of land, totaling nearly 10,000 square meters. He served numerous terms on the Chemulp’o Municipal Council, including several as treasurer, and was a member of the Chemulp’o Club. His son-in-law was one of the three managers of the Chemulp’o Foreign Public Cemetery.

As he approached the age of sixty in 1916,Townsend suffered from urinary gravel and diabetes. He sought treatment in the United States which resulted in much improvement. He fell, however, and was left with some stiffness of the back and a little weakness of the left leg. Death, “sudden and painless,” came from cardiac failure on March 10, 1918, at the age of sixty-two. Burial was in a three-grave lot in the Chemulp’o Foreign Public Cemetery. As indicated earlier in this lecture, two of those graves were never used. James de Forrest Atkinson, the son-in-law, inherited Townsend and Company, while son Edward in Hawaii got $20,000.

We’ve taken a look at this man, his life and times, and have considered the various steps involved in trying to put the whole story together. Apart from all that has gone before, I wish to add in closing that Walter D. Townsend also gets credit for introducing to Korea the horse and dray, a water pumping windmill, and a mechanized rice cleaning mill. And, last but not least, he was, for eighteen years, a member of the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.