An English Chemist Visits Korea in 1899

Edited by Brother Anthony

In 1899, an Englishman named Henry Glendinning, who had arrived in China not long before, employed by a British chemical company, found himself obliged to visit Korea briefly on behalf of his employers’ business interests. He kept copies of the letters he wrote reporting on his visit, and, by chance, transcripts of those letters, which are now in the British National Archives, have come into our hands. They offer a glimpse of what it was like to be in Korea on a short visit in 1899, knowing little about the country. Henry Glendinning was sent by Brunner Mond & Company to survey the Far Eastern market for their product, sodium carbonate, which is also often known as soda ash, and has multiple uses in the production of silk, paper and much else.

The history of the company is quickly told: John Tomlinson Brunner was born in Liverpool in 1842. In 1861, he took a clerical post at John Hutchinson’s alkali works in Widnes, Cheshire. There, he rose to the position of general manager. Shortly after starting work at Hutchinson’s, Brunner met the German-born chemist Ludwig Mond who was also working there. Ludwig Mond was born in 1839 in Kassel, Germany. In 1872 Mond contacted the Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay, who was developing a new process to manufacture soda, the ammonia-soda or Solvay process. The following year Mond went into partnership with John Brunner. They established the business of Brunner Mond & Company, building a factory at Winnington, Northwich. It became a public company in 1881. Brunner Mond was one of several companies whose merger in 1926 allowed the creation of the mighty ICI company.

Henry Glendinning was born 9 October 1863 at Hartlepool; he died 4 June 1938 at St. Albans, Hertfordshire. In 1883 he joined Brunner Mond as a chemist. His grand-nephew, Alex Glendinning, has placed online a spirited account of his life, http://archive.today/mRIqC#selection-427.32-537.1 from which the following is taken:

Henry (Glendinning) went to Zurich for his University education, studying chemistry. In 1883 he applied to join the firm of Brunner Mond and Company, who were recruiting young chemists for the management team. With characteristic impatience he wrote a letter to Ludwig Mond from his lodgings in Manchester on December 8th. It is preserved at the Cheshire Record Office: “My dear Sir, Will you kindly let me know as early as possible whether you have come to a decision with regard to my application to you for a situation as chemist in your works laboratory, as I have today heard of another post which I am thinking of applying for should your decision be unfavourable to me, which however will I hope not be the case.”

The letter did the trick, he was hired and put to work at the company’s head office in Winnington, beginning in plant management in a small way, looking after the Soda Crystal Plant. A salary book of the time puts his first week’s pay at £2.00. Brunner Mond and Company had been present at Winnington since 1873, when Ludwig Mond and John Brunner obtained a license for manufacturing soda ash (used in making soap, paper, glass, textiles and washing soda) from brine, limestone, ammonia and coke by a new method called the Solway process. They had, by the time Henry joined, built up a solid organisation based on the manufacture of heavy chemicals, with nearby plants in Middlewich, Sandbach and Lostock. (. . . .)

Henry became engaged to Eliza Helen Whittingham (1865-1896) of Sandbach, Cheshire in 1893 and married her at Elworth Church, Sandbach on April 26 1894. Henry installed his new bride in Newfield House, a short journey from the plant. They were very much in love and from being a stern and somewhat awkward man he became cheerful and sociable, they often entertained friends on Sundays in their gardens, something Henry had never done on his own, preferring the masculinity of his club or his own company.

Henry was delighted when she announced she was pregnant. But on the evening of the 6th of January 1896, she began to suffer serious pain and thrashed around on the bed in agony. The local midwife was called to the house. Henry was horrified when she was brought, very drunk, to the front door. But from the cries coming from upstairs it was clearly too late to find an alternative. He let her in and she rushed straight to Nellie’s bedside. Not a moment too soon, the baby chose that very instant to appear, and without scrubbing up or preparation, the midwife was forced to deliver him on the spot. Eliza was very weak after the birth but joyfully cuddled her baby and the old woman was sent packing.

It was obvious something had gone wrong the next day when she had become almost too weak to move. Henry stayed by her bedside, holding her hand. She became progressively paler and weaker as the hours passed. The local doctor paid a visit and recommended nothing more than bedrest. On the 9th of January she died, fading away before Henry’s eyes. He was grief stricken and refused to see his child. Tangye called and found him deeply upset, blaming his son for what had happened. He completely ignored the baby, and was to never have much to do with him as he grew up.

It was left to his sister-in-law Amy Whittingham to look after the boy, by now named Henry Whittingham Glendinning. It was she who gave him his nickname of Hal. Tangye, Glendinning’s closest friend, wrote in his diary, “An awful sad affair, during his short married life she (Mrs Glendinning) had influenced him excellently and he humanised.” Henry threw himself into his work and became a very forbidding person. He remained friends with Tangye, but it was as if all the joy had gone out of his life.

In 1899, as his work was being affected, the Directors of Brunner Mond found something new and important for him to do to take his mind off his problems and he was sent to China for two years. He returned to the home company in 1901, was made head of Information Sciences and later became Managing Director. He retired in 1928 and left Cheshire for good, settling in St Albans, where he was buried ten years later.

The British National Archives house the archives of Brunner Mond Company Ltd at the Cheshire and Chester Archives. The holdings include a “Press-copy letter book of H. Glendinning, agent for Brunner, Mond & Co in North China, Vladivostock and Korea. DIC/BM 5/12 Jan 1899-Jan 1900.” The following letters from Korea were copied by someone related to ICI from that source; the notes and transcripts were then given to a former President of the RASKB for later publication.

Henry Glendinning arrived in China around the start of 1899. He seems first to have spent time visiting northern China. By September 1899 he was in Seoul. After arriving in Seoul he wrote, very positively:

“Seoul is one of the most fascinating places I have seen. It has a beautiful climate, now that the rainy season is approaching an end, is situated in the midst of the very finest scenery, and the city walls climb in the most audacious way over the wildest hills and precipices. The people are not offensive to foreigners, like the Chinese, and Seoul itself has been greatly maligned; it is infinitely cleaner and less foul than any Chinese city or any Russian settlement!”

Glendinning had been given an introduction to Walter D. Townsend—an American Merchant living in Seoul, whom he at once employed for the distribution of samples and dealing with commercial enquiries. He was influenced by him and by the resident British Minister, Jordan and the Commissioner of Customs Brown and others to believe that the potential market in Korea for Brunner Mond products was considerable. Probably the greatest impression was made by W. du Flon Hutchison, who while employed in customs work had written a report in 1885 which “was generally conceded to be a masterpiece.” Glendinning sent extracts back to Brunner Mond, with the comment that the elapse of time had only served to emphasise the truth of the report, especially as it was written by a man who had had long and active experience in China and Formosa and was thus able to institute comparisons. The 1885 report by Hutchison is quoted as opening as follows:

Korea has been the victim of political trouble, external and internal and was generally damned as the most wretched poverty-stricken country in the world. Its mineral wealth was said to be chimerical its land poor and non-productive, the people incurably lazy and dirty, content to squat the livelong/day on their haunches smoking their long pipes, a country destitute of industries, of trade, of arts, possessing no merchant class, but only a wretched substitute in the shape of a few pedlars who might possibly dispose of a few cash worth of trumpery trinkets, a land so poor that any one possessed of a capital of ten dollars was looked upon with envious regard as a successful and well-to-do merchant. To those who believe a tithe of these fabrications, circulated it is to be feared, in too many instances from interested and unworthy motives, Korea will prove a wonderfully disappointing place should they ever visit it and see the reality. They would find a trade sufficient to attract a goodly and increasing number of shrewd business Japanese and Chinese, a class of eager and enterprising native traders whose business, though not extensive, is yet of respectable proportions, the germs of numerous industries that may well develop, a style of artistic workmanship intermediate between that of China and Japan, fertile and productive soil, a people certainly not poor, although secretive and unostentatious as to their wealth, who although not richly, are well and substantially clad, a race of men of superior physique and endurance, and possessing a strongly patriotic, if calm interest in the welfare of their land. A people characterised by a strange frankness, freedom and independence of manner, who live so far as good solid nourishing food is concerned, in a much better style than the people of either of the neighbouring empires, and whose average wealth is above the average wealth of a Japanese or Chinese of the masses of the people.

Thus all the advice that Glendinning received locally from prominent, resident foreigners convinced him that he ought to make a journey into the interior of Korea. However, the length of time required and the expense caused him to agonise about whether to do so and led him to cable Brunner Mand for approval shortly before setting off. His letter of the 23rd September, 1899, indicates that right up to the eve of his departure the following day no such approval had reached him. Whether he actually set off before receiving approval is not on record but it seems likely that he did so.

As I leave Seoul tomorrow for a trip to the South of Korea, I take the opportunity of writing you a few lines befcre my departure. I decided after anxious deliberation to take this journey, as it seems then that it ought to be well worth while, and I was advised to do by the most prominent men in the country. From what I can see, the prospects here for your goods are really favourable, but in order to give you anything like a good report on matters which concern you, I find that I must go into the interior. The treaty ports here are not developed like those of China: a vast quantity of paper must be made in (Chelludo) province which is the chief objective of my journey. The mineral wealth of the country is being rapidly opened up: my samples have arrived at Townsend’s just in time for me to take with me: already we have had an order from the American Mining Co for 10 kegs pure Bicarb, which he writes me that he has supplied from my sample lot: I shall see him here tomorrow and expect that he will then ask me to send you a wire ordering Bicarb.

The preparations for my journey have been extensive and complicated beyond all that I ever dreamed of: I must take all my own chow, bed and bedding, as well as a good supply of samples in bottles, and parcels for distribution, and Korean pamphalets: do as I will, my cavalcade will number 10 ponies. I cannot possibly complete my trip in less than 6 weeks—more probably two months, so that it will be the end of the year before I get back to Shanghai, and January at least before arriving at Hong Kong. I hope this meets with your approval: my feeling is that, working as I am here under such very favourable conditions, I ought to thoroughly exhaust the country before leaving it. I am strongly advised, after completing this trip, to go to Ping-Yang, a great Silk &c centre in the North: of course I am unhappily unable to tell in advance what profit will arise from my interior trip—I can only judge probabilities. You will receive this letter before I leave Korea, and it would greatly relieve my mind if you wired your approval or otherwise of my continuing my investigations in this country. One word will do: “approve” I shall take to mean that I am to continue until finished, even should it take 3 or 4 months more: “leave”, I shall construe as meaning that you wish me to leave the country as soon as the trip on which I am at present engaged to finish. Telegram should be addressed to: Hutchison, Seoul.

You will understand that a lengthy stay in Korea will leave me hardly any time for Hong Kong before the hot weather sets in. The difficulty in forming a correct decision in regard to these lengthy journeys is very great and I think this is a case in which, while quite understanding that you must depend on me for data in coming tc a decision, I ought to consult you. The best opinion is that Korea will be neutralised, which will leave it a good market, whereas all N China will probably be Russian before long, at least as far South as the Yellow River, in which case prohibitive duties are sure to be put on goods.

I have got some very neat pamphlets printed in Korea, specimen of which I send you: they are rather costly to prepare, as I had to get a highly-placed gentleman (Korean) to translate them and look after printing &c, and without Mr Hutchison’s assistance, I could not have done either that or many other things. I am having 2000 printed, the second 1000 on inferior paper and shall probably arrange for the newspapers to send them out and all who buy the papers, paying for them.as advertisements. Mr H has undertaken to give them out among the numerous official Koreans etc of his acquaintance. The British Minister, Mr Jordan and also Mr McLeavy Brown are highly pleased with them; they are the first thing of their kind ever printed in Korea and attract great attention. I have sent Townsend a supply. I ought to mention that they are entirely a product of Korean labour -- translation, printing, binding and arranging solely and absolutely done by Koreans alone.

I am also, through Mr Hutchison, getting some designs for ornamental labels in Korean style. I hope they will be successful, as people lay great stress upon the availability of good labels in Korean style. In fact I consider that this is a case in which I ought not to spare money, and I am not sparing it.

A British Merchant, named [W. G.] Bennett, has been enquiring the prices of your products and you may get an order from him: of course as I had an introduction to Townsend (an American) I shall continue to work through him, but nationality is very strong here, and no doubt Brown and Jordan (Commissioner of Customs and British Minister respectively) prefer to advocate the claims of Britishers. For this and other reasons I do not at present advise giving Townsend an agency. Bennett represents the Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank and was greatly relieved to hear that I had not given Townsend an agency, but that the market was open: Townsend however, is the better man as a merchant.

On September 2lst I wired you. “Coyness illumine Shanghai Glen’s i.e. “Forward me Letter of Credit: send immediately to Shanghai. Glen.” My expenses here will be heavy, what with telegrams, travelling, interpreters, translations, printing, advertisements, designs &c, and I am also buying some curios for Sir John Brunner, which I think will be unique and can be got on very favourable terms: they are not on the market and can only be obtained privately by men like Mr Hutchison at a reasonable cost.

All this means that I shall require more money on my return to Shanghai. I am quite unable to express my indebtedness to Mr Hutchison: he has practically done everything for me—I could not have done it for myself—his whole time has been given entirely to my efforts and no help could have been more valuable: I trust you will officially write him a very cordial letter of thanks, and I would just suggest that his exertions deserve more: he is not a rich man and I find that I have been rather imposing upon his hospitality: do you not think that you might ask him if he would accept a handsome cheque from you, and if he agrees, then forward it: I merely put this latter to you -- it is of course entirely my own suggestion and I have in no way received anything in the slightest degree resembling a hint from him: you would have to do it very nicely, and it might be of advantage to you later:

I am writing this in the intervals of arranging packing, amid continued interruptions and have no time for more: Hutchison is giving me a farewell dinner party today at which an American Minister and others will be present.

By the 10th October 1899, Glendinning and his cavalcade of ten ponies had reached Gunsan, a port on the West Coast of Korea, a journey of some 200 miles south of Seoul. From there he wrote to Brunner Mond:-

I left Seoul on the 24th September and since then have been travelling overland on horseback and living in Korean inns: this is the first place I have touched at at which I could receive or post a letter: it is by far the roughest work I have done,but I am standing it all right and it is really not half as bad as Mrs Bishop paints it in her book. I undertook this journey with considerable misgivings as to its utility, but am now very satisfied with the probable results: the papermakers have shown the greatest interest and not only that, but in the numerous market towns I have passed through I have been able to do much probable good: I took a large quantity of sample packages and bottles with me, have distributed them freely, as well as the pamphlets. The papermakers almost without exception use straw or grass ashes, which are difficult to obtain and more costly than pure alkali, which is best adapted to their purpose and which they will certainly use if the difficulties of distribution can be successfully overcome -- and as they have been done successfully in the case of caustic soda, now used in the interior for washing purposes. There is no reason why ash and the other products should not also make their way.

Only, it is absolutley essential in this country of pony, man, and bull carriage only, that the stuff should be supplied in small packages: I have already given you the carrying capacity of a horse and bull respectively and a man will carry about 80lbs over a long distance -- but it is advisable that the packages should not be of the full carrying capacity of a man, inasmuch as the interior is supplied with goods by market: each district possesses a “market town”, generally a mere village and here a market is held regularly every 5 days: it is supplied by itinerant merchants or pedlars, who have a regular round of four or five market towns in their district and spend their whole time in going from one to the other, generally carrying their goods on their backs, so that they do not want to have their whole carrying capacity taken up by one package: a package containing 25 catties nett would probably be the best kind of package.

I again repeat that in my opinion the importance of Korea to foreign trade has been greatly underestimated, firstly because the customs returns enormously underate the total quantity of foreign goods coming into the country, owing to the immense amount of practically unchecked smuggling and secondly because of the absence of shops in the interior: the very highly developed system of markets renders them unnecessary.

Glendinning spent a month on his journey into the interior of Korea, from Seoul to Mokpo in the South-West with many deviations. He led a cavalcade of ten ponies and fourteen men, for it was all done on horseback, except for mountain climbing. In December 1899, after he had returned to China, he wrote to a friend:

I had a very interesting trip through the interior of Korea, and was amused to contemplate myself in the entirely new role of leader of a cavalcade of ten ponies for a month. You can realise the immense amount of brain tissue that I expended in trying to get these men to hustle a bit, but all in vain; their ingrained and splendidly developed faculty of inertia is too much for the mere white man to combat. It is a strange country, but I found no hostility worth mentioning, only a curiosity almost suffocating in its intensity, and which left me no rest from prying eyes by day or by night. As soon as I entered an inn yard, the whole population o: the place capable of locomotion entered after me, and stayed there; if I attempted to obtain comparative privacy by shutting the gate, they either broke that down, or the fence, in their efforts to get at me. The inn rooms are 8 foot square made of mud, and filthier than any outhouse at home. The heating apparatus is a fire beneath the mud floor, fire is put in at one hole, and smoke escapes by a hole opposite, of course mostly into the room. Once the flames came through the hole in the floor and burnt my bag, which happened to be standing over it.

He seems to have shipped a considerable number of Korean antiques back to a certain Miss Calliford, of Newfield House, Sandbach, Cheshire, which had been his home at the time of his marriage. He gave her detailed instructions on what to do with the articles on arrival. For example: “Brass-bound Korean cash box. This is old, and a large piece of furniture. I propose that you sell or store the little wash stand in my room and replace it with this article. Notice the lock, to open insert the great brass key, and push merely. Do not try to turn or you will break the lock. It will serve to store all sorts of things in”. Miss Calliford was looking after his son, then nearly four years old, and also presumably acting as housekeeper. He sent love, kisses and a “Merry Christmas’’ to his boy and asked Miss Calliford to “accept the same for herself”.

Glendinning had enjoyed his visit to Korea and particularly Seoul which “is the only place I have struck in my wanderings that I would like to revisit”. He spent Christmas 1899 in Shanghai. A few days later he was establishing himself in Hong Kong from where he would investigate Southern China before returning to England in April/May 1900.

**Glendinning and Edward Selby Little**

“The crowning achievement of Henry Glendinning’s work in China was to identify E. S. Little a Methodist missionary, as being uniquely qualified to establish Brunner Mond’s business in China. By May 1899 he had researched, worked and travelled extensively in North China for more than six months. This experience convinced him that an exceptional person was needed to develop the potentially large market for alkalis, the existence of which he correctly forecast. During a visit to Chinkiang, a busy Treaty Port on the Yangtse River, in mid-1899 he stayed with the British Consul there and discussed his problems with him. Little was working with the Methodist Episcopal Mission in the region served by the Xangtse River and the Grand Canal immediately North of the river. He served in the Missions in Yangchow on the Grand Canal, Kiukiang, Nanking, and at Chinkiang where he was living at the time of Glendinning’s visit. Little had also discussed his problems with the British Consul who arranged for both of them to meet and by so doing he initiated a catalytic reaction of considerable significance.” (From Patrick Brodie, *Crescent over Cathay: China and ICI*, 1898 to 1956. Oxford University Press, 1990.)

Bob Molloy in his recent ebook *Colossus Unsung* (Xlibris Corporation, 2011) tells much more fully how the Dorset-born British missionary Edward Selby Little, who was tired of working in China for the American Episcopal Methodist Church, first met Henry Glendinning in mid-1899 at the home of Everard Fraser, the learned British consul in Chingkiang, China. Glendinning already felt sure that Little was the man the company needed, given his excellent Chinese and strong personality. Glendinning had already traveled through North China. He disliked China intensely but saw its market potential and realized it needed someone like Little to develop the business. The matter was finally settled in January 1900, when Little resigned from the mission and officially joined Brunner Mond. In the years that followed Little did a remarkable job, traveling all over China to establish contacts and branch offices. His later life, told by Molloy, was marked by dramatic conflicts and betrayals, before he finally retired to New Zealand, where he established a whole new agricultural venture growing citrus fruits.

**W. Du Flon Hutchison**

Glendinning expressed particular gratitude to W. du Flon Hutchison, who advised and helped him in so many ways during his visit to Korea. He could not know that Hutchison would soon succomb to one of the diseases that were so prevalent in the Korea of those times. An obituary of Hutchison was published in the *Korea Review* of July 1901:

At six o’clock on the morning of the 23rd of July 1901 Mr. Hutchison succumbed to an acute attack of uraemia. He had been ailing for some little time but the end was a sad surprise to his many friends.

Mr. Hutchison first came to the East under appointment from the British Government to teach in a school in Hongkong. He carried certificates of the highest character showing that he was a properly qualified teacher. For a time he acted as deputy post-master in Hongkong. When Baron von Mollendorff came to Korea he selected Mr. Hutchison to attend him as his private secretary. This was in 1883.

When von Mollendorff left in 1885 and H. F. Merrill became Chief of Customs, Mr. Hutchison became his secretary until sent to Chemulpo to help Mr. A. B. Stripling who was Commissioner at that port. After Mr. Stripling’s resignation in 1885 Mr. Hutchison continued a short time in the customs but finally left the service and through Yuan Shei-ki, who was Chinese Minister in Seoul, secured a position as teacher in an English Language School in Formosa. After some years of successful work at that point he was granted leave of absence to go home on furlough and the school was discontinued.

In 1892 he returned to Korea and was appointed, by the Government, teacher in a naval school on the island of Kang-wha but after the resignation of Mr. Bunker from the Government English School in Seoul Mr. Hutchison was transferred to the capital where he served six or seven years in the English School. About two years before his death he severed his connection with the Government and entered the service of The Eastern Pioneer Company, better known as The English Mining Co., as their Seoul agent. This position he held up to the time of his demise.

He was a man of great intellectual attainments and of generous instincts. His cordial handshake will be sadly missed by his wide circle of friends.

For a detailed life of the man Glendinning called “Townsend”, see: Harold F. Cook, “Walter D. Townsend, Pioneer American Businessman in Korea” in RASKB *Transactions*, Volume 48, 1973, pages 74-103.

**Other figures mentioned by Glendinning**

“**Jordan**”: Sir John Newell Jordan GCMG GCIE KCB PC (1852 – 1925), as he later became in the course of an illustrious diplomatic career, was born in Balloo, County Down, Ireland. He was educated in Ireland, then in 1876 he joined the Chinese Consular Service as a student interpreter. He held various posts in South China before being appointed Chinese Secretary at the British Legation in Peking in 1891. In 1896 he was appointed Consul-General at Seoul, becoming Chargé d’affaires in 1898 and Minister-Resident in 1901. He remained there until November 1905. In 1906 he was appointed HM Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to China as the successor to Sir Ernest Satow and remained in the post until his retirement in 1920. He was also appointed to the Privy Council in 1915. He served as second President of the RASKB.

“**Brown**”: Sir John McLeavy Brown, CMG, as he later became, was born in Magheragall, Lisburn, Ireland, on 27 November 1835 and died 6 April 1926. He was sent to Korea by Sir Robert Hart to manage Korea’s Customs Department, and as Chief Commissioner of Customs from 1893 he performed so well that King (later Emperor) Kojong granted him control of Korea’s finances. At the time of Glendinning’s visit he was at the height of his power. Soon afterwards, international conflicts arose and he finally left Korea in 1905, as Japan began to take control of the country.

For further information on the other British people mentioned, see:

J. E. Hoare. *Embassies in the East: The Story of the British and Their Embassies in China, Japan and Korea from 1859 to the Present*. Routledge,