Book Review

C.T. Assendelft de Coningh. *A Pioneer in Yokohama*, edited & translated by Martha Chaiklin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2012. 162 pp. (ISBN 9781603848367)

Martha Chaiklin has performed an invaluable service for scholars and students alike in translating and editing this brief diary. The author, Dutch merchant C.T. Assendelft de Coningh, visited Japan three times: twice towards the end of Japan's *sakoku* ("closed country") period, and again for an eighteen month sojourn commencing soon after the opening of the port of Yokohama to foreign residence in 1859. The historical outlines of this period are likely familiar to anyone who has studied Japanese history. What the current volume adds is a rare insider's look at developments during this period of momentous change, one that vividly brings to life the earliest days of the treaty port system in Japan.

De Coningh begins with a glimpse into life on Deshima, a man-made island off the coast of Nagasaki to which the few Dutch who alone among Europeans were allowed to trade with Japan during the *sakoku* period were generally restricted. De Coningh, who spent three months on Deshima in 1851, describes life there as a sort of idyll, where pleasant scenery, good food, infrequent spurts of real work, and their ever-solicitous Japanese hosts more than compensated for the relative isolation imposed on Dutch visitors. As De Coningh explains, "my quiet stay on Deshima was like being in exile in the middle of the most magnificent nature – one that might even be considered a small beneficial respite, like a stay at a spa to

recover from an illness" (30). De Coningh also comments approvingly on how well Japanese from all walks of life treated him. As Chaiklin suggests, the first chapter seems designed to draw a sharp contrast between Japan before the treaty port system and immediately thereafter. De Coningh portrays Yokohama in 1859 as a rough and ready "wild west" frontier of privations and peril, but also possible riches. Even before disembarking from his ship, De Coningh receives an unexpected visit from two heavily-armed fellow countrymen intent on warning him of the dangers ahead. Some of the attacks on foreigners that occupy much of the rest of the book are very real (and historically verifiable), including a dramatic tale of two Dutch captains brutally cut down during their first night ashore in Yokohama. Others are imagined, such as a particularly memorable account in which De Coningh mistakes the arrival of a trio of night watchmen at his door for that of assassins out to slit his throat. No matter the circumstances, it's apparent that Yokohama's expatriate community lived in constant fear of attack by what De Coningh identifies as nameless agents of the shadowy "Prince of Mito" (the xenophobic Tokugawa Nariaki). "Scarcely a day passed," De Coningh complains, "that there was no news told round of enemy plans for the following night" (130). Left to their own devices by their home governments, and understandably dubious of the protection promised by their ambivalent Japanese hosts, Yokohama's foreign contingent kept weapons constantly at the ready and organized volunteer patrols at night.

In addition to threat of attack by anti-foreign elements, De Coningh recounts more mundane terrors of fire, earthquake, and even a near-fatal typhoon. Yokohama in 1859-1860, moreover, was little more than a ramshackle collection of hastily-erected "wooden bungalows with matching warehouses" (44) to which the Shogunal authorities had confined their Western guests, allegedly to keep them

safe from the perceived greater hazards of contact with the nearby Japanese community of Kanagawa. Despite the lack of proper amenities and the apparent dangers, De Coningh nevertheless joined some eighty other intrepid foreigners in Yokohama that first winter. Some, like De Coningh, arrived as respectable businessmen on ships laden with trade goods for the new Japan market. Others were true fortune hunters eager to profit from a quick scam during Japan's brief "gold rush" (when Japan's idiosyncratic gold-silver exchange rate favored foreigners). What De Coningh's account makes abundantly clear is that there was money to be made even in those earliest days, which attracted an ever-increasing number of foreigners to Japan.

The lure of profits and improved security for foreigners in Japan ultimately insured that Yokohama would grow and prosper into a true commercial center. In consequence, the "dissolute fortune hunters of the day" (45), whose uncouth behavior De Coningh worried was ruining the image of all foreigners in Japanese eyes, were increasingly replaced by more respectable and staid representatives of major European and American trading firms. In a sign of changing times, De Coningh recounts how towards the end of his stay three leaders of the foreign business community intervened to stop an eagerly awaited duel between an Englishman and a Dutchman. "Confidence in this new port will be so thoroughly shaken," the businessmen gravely warned of the impending event, "that no one in Europe will venture into business with such a precarious establishment" (103). The sensationalism of a bloody duel could not be allowed to threaten larger business concerns.

Yokohama's foreign residents are understandably De Coningh's primary concern; in those cases where he refers to ordinary Japanese, however, he generally does so with more sympathy and understanding than was likely common among his

contemporaries (his most noteworthy critique being leveled at Japanese women's fashion). Whereas the expatriate community would quickly come together in times of danger, De Coningh also exposes the nationalistic biases and tensions that complicated relations between them; in his telling, for example, the British often come off as arrogant and imperious and the Americans as rather loud and aggressive. De Coningh especially laments his own country's loss of position and influence in post-*sakoku* Japan.

De Coningh provides a ground-floor view of Yokohama's rapid transformation, and his eyewitness stories of international trade and traders in Japan will entertain and inform specialist and non-specialist alike. The reader is further aided by the extremely capable editing of Chaiklin, whose extensive explanatory footnotes shed light on many obscure references by De Coningh while confirming the veracity of his account. Chaiklin's thorough fact-checking and fluid writing style enhance the accessibility of De Coningh's diary, making it a useful complement to Japanese history courses at all levels.

Reviewed by
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