

“Problems of the Far East”: Imperial Geopolitics Reflected in the Korean Travelogues of British Officials, 1889–1900

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At the end of the nineteenth century, western incursions into Korea had gradually opened the peninsula to the outside world, and by the 1890s foreigners were not only permitted to reside in the country, but becoming commonplace in treaty ports and in the capital. At the same time, Britain, Russia, and increasingly, Japan, were engaged in a contest for geopolitical supremacy in the northern Pacific; Great Power contestation over access to trade in north China centred on the Korean peninsula as a major point of tension for the international balance of power. In this period a number of British official visitors came to Korea, and three prepared reports on the characteristics of the Korean people, society, economy, and geography. They were all politicians or colonial functionaries: Charles W. Campbell, a naturalist and consular official stationed in Seoul, George Nathaniel Curzon, a Conservative member of Parliament, who would later become Viceroy of India, and Joseph Walton, a Liberal member of Parliament from Yorkshire with a consuming interest in East Asian affairs. These men’s narratives provided a great deal of the information on Korea available to the British official mind as it formulated its East Asian policy. This article assesses the underlying motivations behind these visits, and examines the effect of British regional geopolitics on these men’s attitudes to encounter in Korea.

Keywords: Korea, travelogues, imperial history, political history, British Empire

I. The Korean Nation and 19th Century Encounter

The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw a drastic change in the relationship between Great Britain and East Asia. Communications and transportation became increasingly rapid and accessible, fuelling popular and official demand for detailed information about British activities overseas (Potter 2004; Pratt 1992; Thomas 1994).¹ Imperial policy was subject to extensive debates over the nature of colonial expansion, as a response to rigorous competition from imperial rivals in an age of “new imperialism.” At the same time, Britain, as the foremost manufacturing power in the world, remained focused on the expansion of trade (Hobsbawm 1987; Thompson 2005). In this context, the first British nationals legally (Kim and Kim 1967, 12) set foot on the Korean peninsula, beginning with merchants and missionaries, and followed closely by military personnel (the Royal Navy briefly occupied the Kōmun island group in 1885–7) and government representatives to keep tabs on British interests in Korea.²

Three men of the latter category, George Nathaniel Curzon, Charles William Campbell, and Joseph Walton, came to Korea between 1889 and 1899 to prepare reports for both public and official consumption in Britain. These trips, made possible by the increasing interconnectedness of the late-Victorian world, were an early analogue of the contemporary politician’s ‘fact-finding’ trip. The men shared some telling similarities. All possessed brilliant academic minds (Curzon was an Oxford scholar and a Fellow of All Souls, while Campbell was a gifted linguist and zoologist, and Walton a keen amateur geographer and Sinophile); they were all agents of the British state (Campbell as a diplomat, Curzon and Walton as Conservative and Liberal politicians respectively); and they all shared a particular fascination with Asia.

This article examines the Korean travelogues written by these three British representatives, analyses their assumptions and attitudes to encounter, and draws out the extent to which their writings reflect British strategic aims in the Far East. The role played by the British Empire in Far Eastern geopolitics was complex and contentious, and this paper argues that imperial incursions onto the Korean peninsula in the period 1876-1910 must be seen in the light of the differing strategic and commercial contexts of the imperial powers, each of which had a different understanding of, and relationship to, Korean sovereignty (Cho and Roberts 2018; Kim 1980; Lensen 1982). From the British point of view, the core considerations reflected in these accounts were the overwhelming importance of protecting Britain’s favourable position *vis a vis* Chinese trade, and denying the Russian empire the opportunity of occupying a warm-water port in the Pacific. Underlying these strategic priorities, these sources also reflect the colonialist and “civilizing” assumptions commonly held by Britain’s ruling and administrative classes. Orientalist attitudes to encounter underlay the production and transmission of

¹ For accounts of travel writing across various East Asian localities, see Bickers 2001; Clifford 2001; Neff 2012; Ryang 1997.

² British expeditions first encountered Korea in the late eighteenth century; however, until the treaties of the 1880s, Europeans were not permitted to reside in Korea.

knowledge to the imperial metropolis.³

The late nineteenth century was a crucial time in the modern history of Korea, as the isolationist kingdom grappled with the dual challenges of internal reform and increasing exposure to European and North American imperial powers (Agarwal 2006, 266; Kim 2013, 266-48; Schmid 2002).⁴ As Korea was gradually inculcated into the imperial world in the late nineteenth century, encounter allowed for the production of knowledge about her inhabitants and its diffusion across the globe, while in parallel impelling Korean society to adapt to a growing foreign population of missionaries, merchants, and officials (Hawley 2007; Shin and Robinson 2004; Uchida 2011; Underwood 2003). This collision between Korea and the wider imperial world occasioned a great deal of social upheaval; the opening of the country to global trade precipitated a reappraisal by Korean intellectuals of the nature of nationhood, and effected the construction of a modernist Korean national project. The period evinced a growing nationalist movement among both elites and ordinary Koreans, while the beginnings of a popular press provided a venue for exploring these new forms of national knowledge (Chandra 1986, 13-34; Lee 1986, 1-12). This article focuses primarily on the activities of foreigners in Korea, and the way they reflected imperial policy, although the reactions of Korean officials to these impositions invites extensive further study that is beyond the scope of this article.

While Koreans grappled with imperial encounter, the great powers hungered for information on Korea as a potential imperial site, specifically seeking information on its strategic resources, system of government, geographical features, and its capacity as a market for manufactured goods. It was assessed by various powers as an outpost for imperial defence and power projection, and even a candidate for colonization. The travelogues of outsiders visiting Korea represented an early step in this process, setting the groundwork for the way powerful states observed and understood Korea. This had an impact on the Korean national project, too: Korean intellectuals produced a “hybridized” Koreanness, simultaneously internalizing Western characterizations of Korea, and valorizing a national past linked to classical civilization (Lee 1986, 1; Schmid 2002). Foreign travellers were, however, largely deaf to this nuanced conversation of encounter, tending to view Korea simplistically as culturally stagnant and unchanging.⁵

Charles William Campbell was an Irish-born consular official who arrived in China in 1884 as a student interpreter, aged just twenty-two. He was drawn to the Far East due to a passion for ornithology and was appointed to the consular service in Shanghai after placing

³ The extent to which British officials conceived of a ‘civilizing mission’ as an aspect of their work has been discussed extensively, particularly with regard to British India; the concept is also, though less often, applied to Britain’s informal empire. See Adas 2004; Dirks 2004; Fischer-Tiné and Mann 2004.

⁴ There is a long historiography on this question; see also Battistini 1952; Kim and Kim, 1967; Pak and Patterson, 1984.

⁵ A reflection of this can be discerned in the *Korean Repository*, a magazine produced by the foreign community in Söul, in which Homer Hulbert lamented in 1895 that the author of one travelogue had completely misinterpreted Korean cultural practices: “the peculiarities and singularities of things Korean are magnified to several times their actual proportions... The author should have spent his time in ascertaining facts rather than in imaginative excursions” (Hulbert 1895, 230).

first in the competitive examination, which he sat while a student of Chinese interpretation at the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution in London.⁶ His travels in northeast Asia, which took him not only to Korea but also around China and into Mongolia, were animated by the dual purpose of his consular career, and as a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and member of the Royal Geographical Society (*Geographical Journal* 1927, 189; Lucas 1907). Campbell first came to Korea in 1888 in the capacity of British Consul at Chemulp'o (Inch'ŏn). A year later, he completed his long perambulation around the northern part of the peninsula, taking in Seoul [Sŏul], Wonsan [Wŏnsan] and the northeast coast, the mountains bordering Russia and China to the north, and Pyongyang [P'yŏngyang]. Campbell's stated goal was to reach Mount Paektu, in the hopes that by describing it he might understand its perceived importance in Korean culture. Due to the approaching winter, Campbell's party did not succeed in scaling the mountain, however the report of his travels was nonetheless widely circulated in Britain in the following years, and became a matter of official discussion when a version was prepared as a Parliamentary white paper on Korea (Jo 2008, 49).

George Nathaniel Curzon was a classic exemplar of the Victorian polymath: a geographer by training, and a political leader by dint of his aristocratic social position, Curzon lived a life described by one biographer as “a hurricane of trivialities,” seasoned with extensive travel and eclectic interests (Goudie 1980, 203). As a young man beginning his political career, he travelled extensively in the East, taking in Russia, Central Asia, Persia, and Southeast Asia, before embarking, in 1892, on a tour of China, Korea, and Japan. He would go on to hold the positions of Under-Secretary for the Colonies, and, in 1899, Viceroy of India. His attitude towards Asia was informed by his early adoption of a strongly imperialist mentality. According to Sir James Stephen, the British empire enraptured him: that “there was in the Asian continent an empire more populous, more amazing, and more beneficent than that of Rome... [ruled by] men of our own people” was a source of intense pride for Curzon (Moore 1993, 722). His Korean journey thus emerged from Curzon's fascination with Asian traditional cultures – he remarked that “the number of Englishmen who have travelled in the interior of Korea may be counted upon the fingers of two hands” (Curzon 1894, 8) – but was also a product of his experiences in Parliament: he was part of a small cross-party tendency, which also included imperialist MPs like Edward Grey and Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, who held that Britain was neglecting developments in the Far East, and that without reliable information and a coherent plan of action, British interests in the region would be usurped by imperial rivals (Berryman 2002; Sweeney 2017).

A third, more obscure figure, Joseph Walton MP, visited Korea in 1899. While his account of travel has attracted far less scholarly attention than that of Campbell or Curzon, it nonetheless provides an important further perspective on Britain's official picture of the Korean peninsula. Like Campbell, Walton did not have a typical aristocratic background: his family were Yorkshire mine owners. A radical member of the Liberal Party, his account is reflective of the “liberal imperialist” trend in British politics at the end of the nineteenth

⁶ The Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution was the forerunner of today's Birkbeck, University of London.

century (Matthew 1973; Otte 2006). His account, which also takes in Japan and China, is thus important in its reflection of the attitudes underlying British imperial policy at the turn of the twentieth century. Like Campbell, Walton was a member of the Royal Geographic Society, and was a founding member of the Central Asian Society. Over his twenty-five year career in elected office, he came to be regarded as an authority on East Asian issues.⁷

Before the travelogues are examined in-depth, it is necessary to review the literature concerning the geopolitical context of these men's journeys, and the complexities of cultural encounter underpinning their narratives.

II. Travel Writing, Empire, and Encounter at the end of the Nineteenth Century

After the establishment of Korean treaty ports, attitudes to foreigners began to soften, and in the 1880s the necessity for official policies dealing with the infusion of Western ideas and attitudes had become apparent (Kim 1980, 308; Lone and McCormack 1994, 14–15; Shin & Robinson 1999, 10–11). Radical reformers and Christians pushed a policy of “modernization” while conservative officials advocated resistance to “Western barbarism” (Lee 1986, 5–6). These different reactions to encounter underlie the majority of the scholarly work done on Western travelogues.⁸ Park Jihang (2002) writes that through figures like Curzon, we may “learn how the British perceived and represented East Asia when the British Empire reached its zenith”. Park describes Curzon's trip as “a kind of political reconnaissance” (514), noting that he was concerned primarily with “the political situation and power relations in East Asia and the prospects for the British Empire in that area.” In Park's analysis, these travelogues effectively colonized Korea in the minds of readers, casting it as an exotic subject of study, and, possibly, conquest, and Curzon appears as a forerunner of further imperial expansion.

More provocatively, Pak and Patterson (1984, 112) argue that western travelogues, particularly Curzon's, served an unambiguously imperialist aim; that they deliberately sought to construct a “myth of the Russian threat” as part of a strategy of justifying Japanese imperialism in Korea. In contrast to Park, this is a reading of Curzon's account as a product of imperial decline, and a desperate attempt to derail the expansion of Britain's rivals. To this, they add what they see as a clear intent toward British colonization, manifested most notably in the British occupation of Kōmun-do (Port Hamilton) in 1884–6. This view has proved controversial; according to Cristina Davis (2008, 156) and others, Britain, unlike other imperial powers, had neither the capacity nor the desire to colonize Korea, and its response to Japanese expansionism, while reflective of problematic cultural and racial assumptions, was essentially reactive. The Conservative government of Lord Salisbury followed a strategy of isolationism in response to what were seen as excessive diplomatic entanglements, which

⁷ According to his obituary, Walton was known at the time as ‘the Member for China’ for his consistent monitoring of developments in the Far East. *The Times*, 1923.

⁸ A selection of recent notable monographs include Clark 2003; Hawley 2007; Neff 2012; Underwood 2003.

disinclined Britain to expansionist adventure; the majority of British expansion in this period was occasioned by the actions of ambitious “men on the spot” at the imperial periphery, and was not the product of a coherent expansionist foreign policy (Van Dijk 2015, 23).

At this time, Korean self-perceptions also changed, culminating in the declaration of the Korean Empire in 1897. Korean nationalists rankled at foreign writers’ depictions of Korea: Western commentators emphasized the backwardness of Korea’s pre-industrial economy and stereotyped its system of government as a premodern “Oriental despotism” (Bishop 1897, 22). Japanese travel writing was a semi-conscious effort to produce an image of “Korean backwardness and primitiveness” in order to make the case for colonization, according to Sonia Ryang (1997, 136). As in western travelogues, the emphasis, however, was not on formal colonization but rather on saving Korea ‘from itself’, casting its pre-existing political and social system as hopelessly corrupt, underdeveloped, and isolated. In response, a strong intellectual and popular tradition developed championing Korean tradition and culture as a bulwark against foreign incursion (Lee 1986; Shin and Robinson 2004). In opposition to this was a growing ‘modernizing’ view that advocated for Westernization (Park 2002, 531). There was a distinct intellectual trend within Korean society towards Enlightenment, an experimental admixture of western and eastern philosophical traditions, which developed in lively debates between Korean elites surrounding the national question (Schmid 2002, 12). Curzon, Walton, and Campbell thus came to Korea at the height of the kingdom’s collision with modernity and the imperial world-system.

At the end of the nineteenth century the British empire relied increasingly on East Asian trade. Horace Newton Allen (1908, 254), the head of the American legation in Seoul, noted that trade with China was the linchpin of the British Empire: as “England is primarily a manufacturing nation... starvation and riot await the shutting down of her mills. So important is the China trade... [to] cotton manufactures, that it has been asserted on good authority they cannot be kept running without this trade.” All three accounts of Korea discuss the trade in cotton textiles at length, suggesting that Curzon, Campbell, and Walton were well aware of its importance. Attracting frequent comment in travelogues was the presence of British merchants and officials in Korea. Isabella Bird Bishop, a British visitor to Korea in 1895, encountered English officials of the Chinese Maritime Customs service in Busan, “lent to Korea, greatly to her advantage, for the management of her customs revenue” (Bishop 1897, 23). Bishop’s narrative casts Korea as a land in which “the foreigner, shut out till 1883, is making its presence felt, and is undermining that which is Korean... by the slow process of contact” (37). Her impression of cultural stagnation (“the arts are *nil*” [18], and “everything in Korea has been on a low, poor, mean level” [446]) led her to the conclusion that “Korea is incapable of reforming herself from within, she must be reformed from without” (432).

Contemporary sources, then, paint a portrait of Korea not in the midst of a renaissance of national life, but struggling under the yoke of an outdated and decadent political system, and in desperate need of ‘tutelage’ from one of the great powers.

III. Curzon's *Problems of the Far East*, Campbell's "Journey in North Korea," and Walton's *China and the Present Crisis* Compared

Campbell, the youngest of the three men, was also the first to make his journey, circumnavigating the north of the peninsula in the autumn of 1889. Curzon's account, penned in 1892, is the longest, and thus goes into the greatest detail about Korea's culture and the potential benefits Britain might accrue, though it goes into less granular detail on trade and infrastructure. Walton's account, produced seven years after Curzon's, and ten years after Campbell's, is the product of a drastically altered political situation after the Sino-Japanese War. Nonetheless, common aspects of Britain's imperial priorities are reflected in all three accounts.

First, all three men were imperial practitioners, and it is important to read their accounts within this context. Curzon, for example, presumes objectivity before immediately showing his pro-imperial bias, writing that "I have no anterior theory to support, and no party interest, unless the British Empire be a party interest" (Curzon 1894, x). Part and parcel of this imperial view was that all three men subscribed to the commonly-held apprehension of Russian expansion in East and Central Asia as representing a dire threat to the most profitable parts of the British Empire. This obsession with the "Great Game," it will be argued, caused the British official mind to underestimate the scope of Japanese imperial ambitions in Korea.

Second, all three accounts clearly express that Britain's major interest in the Korean peninsula was commercial. They variously identify potential new treaty ports, provide detailed information on the state of Korea's infrastructure, agriculture, mining, and industrialization, and detail the activities of rival trading powers. Between them, the three accounts reveal the extent of British trading activities over a ten-year period.

Third, each account evinces a surprising amount of criticism of the influence of foreign powers in Korea - this is limited not only to Japan and Russia, but also includes Germany and the United States. The accounts portray the influence of foreign trade, expertise, and investment in a decidedly chequered light. This is allied to the expression in all three accounts of two seemingly contradictory views: first, the assumption that Korea could not stand on its own as an independent country; and second, a surprising reticence to countenance the prospect of formal colonization.

Finally, these travelogues provide a key insight into the British response to Japanese colonial expansion, both before and after the critical events of the Sino-Japanese War. Taken together, the accounts provide a nuanced and complex picture of British strategic priorities and attitudes towards Korea in the 1890s, and Britain's role in the slide toward Japanese colonization.

1. The British Imperial Perspective: the 'Great Game' in the Far East

The major question mark overhanging British foreign policy in the north Pacific was the status of Russia. The British official mind had long registered the threat to India of a strong

Russian presence in Central Asia, as the central contention of the so-called “Great Game” (Frankopan 2015, 287; Hyam 2012, 72). In the Far East, Russian expansionism was thus a key consideration. While the British travelogues evince a definite wariness of Russia’s activities and motives, to Korean nationalists the Russian threat was not a priority. In comparison with Japanese threats to the life of the royal family and the political stability of the country, Russia’s actions did not seem consequential (Chandra 1986, 18).

Curzon arrived in Korea in 1892 to discern the clear presence of Russian expansionism, albeit at an early stage and with limited chances of success. He recorded that “wild schemes for a network of railways throughout Korea are said to have been formulated in the brains of those who anticipate an early Russian seizure of the entire peninsula,” but that “it will be worthwhile to wait till the Russians are there before discussing what they will do” (Curzon 1894, 184). At the end of the decade, Joseph Walton too predicted that Russia’s strategy in the Far East was to construct “an extensive system of railways” which will “secure for her the bulk of [Northeast Asian] trade” but was sceptical of Russia’s ability to carry out these plans (Walton 1900, 6).

While they assessed the possibility of a Russian takeover as unlikely, both Curzon and Campbell nonetheless recognized the military imperative of limiting Russian influence on the peninsula; Curzon made reference to the development of a steamer service to Vladivostok and other projects to develop the shipping capacity of Korea. He contended, “It is not for mercantile gain that the Russian subsidies are given, but for the avowed object of providing a useful auxiliary marine, with well-organised complement, in time of war” (Curzon 1894, 187). Campbell took note of extensive Russian investment in developing the northern part of the country, with the seeming intention of drawing Korea into the Russian sphere. When approaching the Tumen River, Campbell encountered a (thus far unsuccessful) Russian attempt at establishing a trading settlement:

Kyeng-heung [likely Kyōnghŭng-gun], a town on the Tumen close to the few miles of Russian frontier which are conterminous with Korea, was declared open to Russian subjects. It was evidently hoped to create a market there after the style of Kiakhta and Maimaichin, but up to the present nothing of the sort has resulted. The basin of the Tumen is a poor country under present conditions, and the river[s]... commercial importance is of the slightest... navigation is therefore limited to flat-bottomed boats, the largest of which are capable of floating five or six tons of timber (Campbell 1892, 5).

In the British view, Russia’s trading activities on the peninsula were merely a ruse for the projection of naval power: “A Russian Consul has been appointed at Fusan [Pusan], where there are no Russian subjects, and as yet next to no Russian trade... In Korea itself an impression prevails that they are only the forerunners on a movement which will not slacken till a Russian fleet is moored at Port Lazareff [Wonsan], and the Russian flag waves over Fusan” (Curzon 1894, 227). In the north of the country he noted the establishment of a Russian trading colony “for seven years only”—an agreement which, in Curzon’s opinion,

displayed “naivete” (227).

By 1899, Walton held that Russia’s intentions - and Japan’s countervailing ambitions - had become clear enough that war was widely anticipated. At the time of his trip, a rumour was circulating that Russia had occupied Wonsan (Walton 1900, 80). Walton’s own opinions on the matter mirrored those of the British official mind, still fixated on containing Russia as a *sine qua non*. Adding urgency to this view was Walton’s report of his conversations with Russian military officers, who held the view that “England’s policy had largely failed” in the Far East (81). Walton left the region with the firm belief that “Russia has a settled determination... to annex at least the North of China” and that Britain ought to mobilise to prevent this turn of events: “our withdrawal would be regarded as further evidence of our weakness, and would be another blow to our already shattered prestige in this part of the world” (83). Resisting this impression of defeat and preserving the balance of power were thus vital considerations for safeguarding British trade (Osterhammel 1999).

2. Treaty Ports and the Expansion of Trade

It is clear in all three accounts that Britain’s major consideration was trade. This was a longstanding feature of British imperial expansion in East Asia: Curzon (1894, 227) noted “The primary interest of Great Britain in Korea is as a market for an already considerable trade.” Alongside the drive to establish new markets for the manufactured goods of Manchester was a wider strategic imperative:

Of far greater moment, however, is the secondary and contingent interest arising out of the political future. A country so well provided with harbours which could both supply and shelter great flotillas, and so richly endowed with many potential sources of wealth, might involve a serious menace to British commerce and interests throughout the China seas, and even in the Pacific Ocean, if held by a hostile state. A Russian port and fleet, for instance, in the Gulf of Pechili would, in time of war, constitute as formidable a danger to British shipping in the Yellow Sea as they would to the metropolitan province and the capital of China (227–8).

Undoubtedly, then, the actual appearance of such a port in 1898, with the Russian annexation of Port Arthur, caused British authorities in London and Hong Kong great alarm (Otte 2006, 411). The British response, including its own lease of the Yellow Sea port of Weihaiwei in the same year, was thus calculated to maintain a favourable trading position:

Permanent Russian squadrons at Port Lazareff and Fusan would convert her into the greatest naval Power in the Pacific. The balance of power in the Far East would be seriously jeopardised, if not absolutely overturned, by such a development; and England is prohibited alike by her Imperial objects and her commercial needs from lending her

sanction to any such issue. (Curzon 1894, 228)

Of principal importance was a slowly-growing market for English cotton textiles. Campbell's account goes into some detail on the specifics of Korean trade, and the provenance of the goods being sold in various markets. He makes particularly favourable mention of the amount of Manchester cotton goods he comes across: "Trade, which was not active on the Sëul-Wen-san [Seoul-Wonsan] route, was particularly stirring along the east coast. It is mainly in Manchester cottons, as much as 100,000l. worth being imported at Wen-san during 1888" (Campbell 1892, 5). There is perhaps a frisson of commercial rivalry in Campbell's observation that "North of Kyeng-seng [Kyöngsöng] the small demand for foreign goods is supplied by Vladivostock" (5). Alongside the "bale or two of Manchester goods" which Campbell observed in a number of market towns along his route, typical foreign products included "Japanese matches, Prussian blue in card boxes, and aniline dyes in bottles, cheap knives, santolin lozenges (these, the dyes and needles are of German origin)... A sign of the advancing times is occasionally seen in cigarettes, and lacquered holders of Japanese manufacture, and cheap foreign soaps" (6). Despite the availability of a wide range of imperial goods, then, the market remained a small one. In part, this was due to the prohibitive costs and persistent dangers of transportation (Walton 1900, 293) and the "poverty of means of communication between the producing and the consuming areas and between the interior and the coast" (Curzon 1894, 182).

Despite these barriers to trade, all accounts foresee a future of increasing imports of manufactured goods and exports of natural resources. Korea's economy defied Walton's preconceptions: "we are told again and again that Korea is a barren and worthless country, but from the most reliable authorities I am in a position to state that the climate is good and the soil fertile, capable of growing the finest timber and every fruit grown in England" (Walton 1900, 293). Curzon, too, celebrated Korea's "excellent climate, a soil of more than ordinary fertility, vast tracts of still virgin country, and a robust rural population," concluding that these "four conditions of agricultural prosperity" would lead to "a great future for Korean agriculture" (Curzon 1894, 181). In the northern provinces Campbell was "struck":

by the prosperous, fruitful appearance of this part of the country... luxuriant crops of rice, millet, beans and buckwheat covered the valleys. Even the squalor and wretchedness of the straw-thatched huts, which are the dwellings of the vast majority of the peasants, were forgotten in the picturesque gardens of melon, chilli, tobacco, hemp, and sesame surrounding them (Campbell 1892, 1).

Campbell also provides information of a practical nature concerning the possible expansion of the mining industry: "In the course of my wanderings I visited or passed by at least half-a-dozen washings, none of which were very prolific, owing, I believe, to the utter want of pumping appliances" (7). He predicted the expansion of gold and quartz mining, though "Of other minerals I can say little. Coal has been reported from two or three localities. I

paid a flying visit to one of them near Peng-yang [P'yŏngyang] and was much struck by the extent and breadth of the seam. A competent engineer has pronounced very favourably on this mine" (7).

Campbell also explored possibilities for expanding trade, advocating that P'yŏngyang be opened:

Peng-yang... impressed me more favourably, from a commercial point of view, than any other place I had visited in north Korea. It is situated in the midst of a rich agricultural region, within easy distance of important gold washings and coal deposits, and its river, the Tei-tong [Taedong], is navigable to ships of moderate burthen to within 15 miles of the city... Trade is brisk at Peng-yang. The quantity of foreign goods, chiefly Manchester cottons, exposed for sale was very large. All foreign articles come from Wen-san or Chemulpo, Peng-yang, unfortunately, not being a treaty port. Were the place open directly to foreign trade, there is every reason to believe that a great extension of markets would result (11).

At the time of Curzon's visit, he could observe that "Korean trade pursues, with occasional relapses, an upward career," noting that "[I]n 1891, which was the best year yet realised, the net value of the foreign trade was nearly 1,440,000l., and the total trade during the ten years since the opening of the Treaty Ports is stated to have been \$50,000,000 [approximately £8.6 million]" (Curzon 1892, 184–185).⁹ Britain's increasing revenues in Korea were intimately bound up with its trading regime in China:

though there are no British merchants in the country - the system of Chinese or Japanese brokers operating with sufficient success - over sixty per cent of the sum total, and practically the whole of her trade in piece goods, hail from Great Britain, who may claim, even in remote Korea, to have discovered one more market for Manchester (185).

The fact that British trade relied upon a network of Chinese merchants and peddlers, and the cooperation of Chinese officials in Seoul, directed all strategic decisions relating to Korea. Britain continued to back the Chinese position in the political contest over Korea, long after it had become clear that China was being rapidly outpaced by Japan (Darwin 1997; Uchida 2011). The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War put British interests in a perilous position, and its delicate trading arrangements, rather than any explicit policy of 'withdrawal', occasioned its forced neutrality during the conflict (Berryman 2002; Otte 2006, 288–9).

By the end of the century, despite being blindsided by the outbreak of war, Britain appeared to have increased its share of trade on the peninsula to a level that could no longer be considered insignificant. As Joseph Walton observed, "The countries which do the largest trade with Korea are Japan and England"; however, Britain still evidently relied on Chinese collaboration, as "There are only one or two English commercial firms established in the

⁹ Conversion based on the Sterling rate for Mexican Silver Dollars at Shanghai in July, 1888.

country, and they mainly represent steamship lines” (Walton 1900, 298). It thus became increasingly necessary to prevent other imperial powers from undermining China’s position in Korea.

3. British Attitudes to Imperial Incursion in Korea

Given the cautious optimism enunciated by these men regarding Korean trade, it is curious that they were ambiguous about what Curzon (1894, 85) called “the doubtful rays of Western civilization”. He noted “the advent of the foreigner cannot be said as yet to have brought much profit”, and observes that the opening of the country had in fact brought new hardships to ordinary Koreans: “The prices of everything... assimilate themselves to those of surrounding markets, with the result that the necessities of life have become dearer... food stuffs in particular” (188–189). For this, he lays blame at the feet of two intertwined culprits: unscrupulous foreign interests intent on stripping Korea of its wealth; and a weak and corrupt central government happy to facilitate foreign gangsterism:

The first thing that the Government has to do is abandon the idea that Korea is an Amalthea’s horn, into which foreigners will pay enormous prices (in the shape of royalties or commission) for the privilege of dipping their fingers. The next step is to realise that without foreign capital little can be done, and under native management nothing. At the same time a wary eye must be directed upon the not too dispassionate offers of financial assistance which are pressed upon the interesting *debutante* with such suspicious emulation by her astute neighbours (191–192).

This passage reveals a number of assumptions that coloured British officials’ views of Korea: the idea that Korea was unable to survive as an independent country without the boons provided by imperial trade and industrialization - an opinion mirrored by some Korean officials, who argued for the adoption of Western industrial methods on Korean terms (Schmid 2002, 33–38). Also present is an impression that Britain was ‘losing out’ on trading opportunities; Walton’s account evinces frustration at the fact that Germans and Americans appeared to be securing Korean railway and other concessions, while “England appears likely to be almost left out in the cold... If this sort of thing is to go on unchecked, I wish to know where, in the future, the markets for the products of British labour will be found” (Walton 1900, 294–5).

While all three accounts express a chequered view of foreign interventions in Korea, they reserve praise for two institutions, both, unsurprisingly, largely British-administered and involved in facilitating trade. The first was the customs service, administered by officials seconded from the British-dominated Chinese Maritime Customs at Peking. Curzon writes that “In the nurture of Korean commerce too much credit cannot be given to members of the Chinese Imperial Customs Service” (Curzon 1894, 187). He attributes their efficiency

to the work of “a number of European officials”, and cautions against its supersession by a privately-organized service run by the Chinese viceroy in Korea, Li Hongzhang 李鴻章: “In the interests of Korea this would be a most unfortunate step, since it would mean the substitution of universal jobbery and smuggling for a pure and efficient administration” (187). Curzon’s faith in British administration is echoed in his enthusiasm at the news that British know-how was being applied in another area:

Quite recently the King has been persuaded to organise a small cruiser service, which... may further in time develop into the nucleus of a small but effective Korean navy. For this purpose he has applied for the loan of two English officers, to give the requisite start to the undertaking (188).

Increasing British influence, however, should not be read as a prelude to colonization. Unlike in the Sudan, for example, Britain never harboured a compulsion to occupy the Korean mainland in order to deny it to other powers; rather, the British viewed Korea as a place already subject to too much foreign incursion (Kim 2002, 66). Curzon’s account characterizes Korea as the “shuttle-cock of nations”, a prize in the power struggle between China, Japan, and Russia. The preferred British course of action was splendid isolation. (Otte 2006, 388–90; Van Dijk 2015, 331)

Kim Hyun-Soo (2002, 67) cites the British Navy’s withdrawal from Port Hamilton (Kōmundo) in 1887 as evidence of its declining diplomatic clout in the region, as well as its apparent intention to expand its occupation of Korea, and even to colonize the peninsula. However, there is little evidence of this in the accounts of these British officials. Curzon’s account of the Port Hamilton incident is illustrative:

What China shrank from and what Korea dreaded, was not the establishment of a British naval or coaling station, or even a British maritime fortress in the mouth of the Sea of Japan, but the charge of a corresponding Russian movement in some neighbouring quarter... The evacuation of Port Hamilton has also shown that, while Great Britain is interested in keeping out others from this Naboth’s vineyard of the Far East, she has no reversionary desire for its possession herself, and is about as likely to seize or to annex Korea as she is to invade Belgium (Curzon 1894, 229–30).

This gives the impression of Britain as a disinterested honest broker, rather than the reality of a rapacious imperial power engaging in gunboat diplomacy. According to Stephen Royle (2016, 24–26), even in the context of late nineteenth-century imperialism, the unilateral military occupation of Korea’s sovereign territory shocked the other powers. In an attempt to mitigate this reaction, the Royal Navy trod lightly on Kōmundo, compensating farmers for the appropriation of land and preserving the Korean government and legal system, concessions that were not present in typical British colonies. Curzon places the affair within a context of Russian intrigue, rather than colonization:

Rumours, not without solid foundation, were circulated of a secret agreement between Russia and Korea, negotiated by the German Adviser of the King, by which Russia was to reorganise the Korean army and to support the Korean claims to Tsushima, while Korea in return was to cede Port Hamilton; and it was something more than rumour of the latter intention that induced the British Government to anticipate an impending Muscovite seizure by hoisting the British flag upon those islands (Curzon 1894, 224–5).

Contrarily, Royle (2016, 24) argues that far from dissuading Russian incursions into the Korean peninsula, there was deep concern that Britain's occupation would serve as a precedent to be followed by other imperial powers. Curzon's admission that occupation was "an answer to the Russian aggression at Penjdeh" (1894, 228) reveals that it was a result of the strategic priorities of the Great Game, rather than an attempt to subsume Korea into the British Empire. Indeed, Curzon lists a number of disincentives to colonization:

the Russian General Staff... has gone so far as to reason against Russian annexation of Korea on the ground that the country is too thickly populated to admit of easy conquest, too different from Russia to render assimilation possible, and too poor to make the experiment remunerative. There is much to be said for this view; and undoubtedly it cannot for some time be to the interest of Russia to involve herself in direct hostility with China... On the other hand Russia can hardly desire to have as her immediate neighbour, within a few hours' sail of Vladivostok, so pugnacious and aspiring a power as Young Japan (225–6).

Despite the British reticence concerning formal colonization, there was clearly no compunction about violating Korean sovereignty in other ways; for example, the accounts share the assumption that Korea could be used as a military staging post in order to protect British trading interests in the Yellow Sea, and British officials were concerned in particular about a possible Russian occupation of the warm-water port of Wonsan (Kim 2002). Both Britain and Russia berthed naval vessels at various Korean harbours, and both empires later established naval bases on the Yellow Sea, in the Chinese cities of Weihaiwei and Port Arthur (Lushunkou) respectively. Potentially the most significant disincentive to colonization referenced by Curzon was the threat of a rising Japanese Empire.

4. The Regional Balance of Power and Japanese Expansionism

The 1890s saw a shift in the regional balance of power from China to Japan. While Korea was still nominally a tributary state of China, by the late nineteenth century this was mainly a ceremonial relationship. Nonetheless, there were substantial ways in which China expressed influence on the peninsula, which to the British official mind represented a vector for increasing their own influence. Curzon and Campbell point to Chinese control over a number

of key concessions, and the aforementioned network of Chinese merchants operating in Korea, as evidence of its importance and of the influence of the Chinese resident, Yuan Shikai 袁世凱. According to Curzon:

[I]n Söul itself, every one of the Foreign Diplomatic Corps... knows perfectly well who is the real master. The Chinese Resident, who is a man of great energy and ability, named Yuan Shih Kai, is in the position of a Mayor of the Palace, without whose knowledge nothing, and without whose consent little, is done (1894, 221).

Not only did British officials harbour the assumption that Korea fit more ‘naturally’ into the Chinese sphere than the Japanese, but the British mercantile and customs apparatus remained reliant on China; in 1900, Joseph Walton noted that “the English trade in Korea has been almost exclusively carried on up to the present time by Chinese. There are 6,000 in the country who are under the protection of the British Government” (1900, 298).

There was, however, an emerging threat: “[Japan’s] colonists and merchants have gradually fastened a grip on to the weaker country which it will be exceedingly difficult to shake off” (Curzon 1894, 204). He goes on to complain about the important concessions won by Japan: “The Japanese have got the mint and banks already.” He warned that “Their eye has long been fixed upon the Customs, at present in the hands of their rivals the Chinese” (204–5). To Curzon, the aims of the Japanese were clear: “in a few years’ time they hope to have obtained so commanding a hold upon the national resources of Korea as to render her political dependence upon China a constitutional fiction” (205).

Indeed, it is curious that Curzon does not make more of Japanese expansionist tendencies, when he recognizes a clear colonizing mentality amongst the Japanese he encountered: he contrasts his impression of their “civil and obliging” nature “in their own country” with “a faculty of bullying and bluster” in Korea, “the result partly of national vanity, partly of the memories of the past. The lower orders illtreat the Koreans on every possible opportunity” (205). Curzon characterizes Japanese activity in Korea as a “marked contrast with the amicable terms on which the Koreans and Chinese appear to subsist side by side” (206). This highly critical view of Japanese interests in Korea is a marked contrast from Walton’s assessment seven years later, for whom it was “not surprising” that Japan had a large legation and 15,000 subjects residing in Korea, and “only natural” that 800 Japanese troops were stationed in the country “to safeguard her interests” (Walton 1900, 310). It is a telling contrast to British reactions to Russian incursion, possibly explained by the increasing slice of Korean trade that was transacted via Japan and by Japanese merchants from the mid-1890s. Japan had, between Curzon and Walton’s visits, established a dominant commercial interest in Korea, of which the British took notice (Uchida 2011, 43–44).

At the time Walton was writing, Japan was only six years from declaring a protectorate in Korea, and just over two years from signing the Anglo-Japanese *entente*. The differences between Walton and Curzon’s accounts suggest that, rather than playing up Russian expansionism in order to de-emphasize the importance of Japan, British policy experienced

a dramatic *volte-face* in response to the pace of Japanese industrialization. Walton drew an explicit connection between industrialization, colonialism, and civilization in 1902 when he declared in the British Parliament that Britain's *entente* with Japan had admitted it to "the pale of civilized nations" (*Hansard* 1902, c.1307). The extension of the alliance in 1905 and 1911 reveals a British endorsement of Japan's colonial designs on Korea. This is echoed in the conflation of Japanese expansion with 'progress' by British officials (Campbell 1892, 2). Walter Hillier, the British consul in Seoul, wrote in 1897:

it must be evident to all who know anything of Korea that a condition of tutelage, in some form or another, is now absolutely necessary to her existence as a nation... the only hope of advance in the direction of progress - initiated, it is only fair to remember, by Japan, and continued under Russian auspices - is to maintain an iron grip... at the present rate of progress much... will, before long, be "improved" out of existence (Hillier intro. to Bishop 1897, 2-4).

British policy, revolving as it did around the necessity of keeping Korea tied to its Chinese trading network, changed dramatically following Japan's victory over China in 1895. Curzon's account illustrates this shift:

so long as her three great neighbours continued to regard each other from a watchful distance, Korea, which lies between, might escape the armaments of each... My own conviction is that the only hope of continued national existence for Korea lies in the maintenance of her connection with China, which history, policy, and nature combine to recommend (1894, 231-2).

Immediately following this passage Curzon appended a curious addendum concerning the war: "Now, however, that the gage of battle has been thrown down between two of the three, her territorial integrity, to which all three are virtually pledged, is vanishing into thin air" (231). Curzon makes the realization that his prior view, of China and Japan "looking over their shoulders at the real antagonist, Russia", was inaccurate, and that in fact Japan was putting in motion a well-choreographed annexation (232). It was the realization that a rising Japan could play an important role in containing Russia and securing the north China trade, along with the admiration for Japanese 'efficiency' on display in these travelogues and elsewhere, that contributed to the negotiation of the Anglo-Japanese *entente* in 1902 (Sweeney 2017, 719).

IV. Conclusions: Imperial Encounter in Korea

The relationship between the British Empire and Korea is indicative of the wider story of Korea's collision with the imperial world of the late nineteenth century, and of the re-

construction of Korean nationality couched in the imperial discourses of modernity and civilization. The experiences of British officialdom in Korea can only ever provide partial insight into this complex period, and the experiences of foreign travellers and Korean intellectuals grappling with Korea's national identity beg comparison. While only part of the story, there are nonetheless telling insights to be gleaned from these sources.

The similarities in these three accounts are reflective of British imperial policy in East Asia. Positive comments relating to the expansion of trade and improvements in infrastructure were tied explicitly to the purchase of British goods and the extension of concessions controlled by the British, while the actions of rival powers, notably Russia, were regarded with grave concern. A strain of pessimism about the future development of Korea runs through the accounts, though is most evident in Walton's. This seems to reflect British apprehensions about the international situation and the unexpectedly rapid rise of the Japanese Empire, which had the effect of dramatically altering a longstanding British policy of isolation in international affairs (Matthew 1973; Otte 2006).

Despite these telling similarities, there are also important differences which underlay the three men's impressions of Korea. Campbell was a civil servant, rather than an MP – as a functionary of the British government, with long experience in East Asia, his account originates from a more deeply-informed, and arguably more sympathetic, perspective than Curzon's or Walton's. Campbell was also not from a typical elite background, though a middle-class Irishman with a non-elite education was not entirely atypical in the consular service. Walton, an industrialist, also did not reflect the mentality of the British establishment as neatly as the aristocratic Curzon; however, he strongly advocated for an interventionist imperial policy from the opposition benches after his return from Asia (Otte 2006, 411).

According to a number of Korean historians, Curzon's narrative is unambiguously negative. Park (2002, 526) contends that "Korea elicits no sympathy from Curzon. To him, Korea is nothing but a depraved and irredeemable country." The extent to which Curzon was a sympathetic narrator is disputed by the scholars of his many travelogues (Goudie 1980; Moore 1993, 721). While Curzon was a vocal and enthusiastic British imperialist, we should not forget that he was also widely travelled, multilingual, and sought to collect as much cultural insight and statistical information as possible on the places through which he travelled. While Curzon's narrative is certainly problematic, and his conclusions compromised by his imperialist lens, close analysis shows that it is neither wilfully ignorant, nor is it entirely unsympathetic.

According to Park, "Curzon's pride leads him to undermine Japan's imperialist ambitions at the cost of painting a rosy future for the British Empire in Asia" (2002, 533), meaning British policymakers' understanding of the political situation was clouded by British overconfidence and imperial ambition. At the same time, however, there is no love lost in Curzon's account for the Westerners in Korea, and he dwells on the influence of "native ignorance in alliance with foreign speculation" at length (Curzon 1894, 178). Koreans are depicted as officious, credulous, and incompetent, while foreign advisors come across as ignorant, avaricious, and manipulative; nobody is portrayed in a particularly positive light.

The Korean state is described variously as a “shuttlecock among nations” and “a sort of political Tom Tiddler’s ground between China, Russia, and Japan” (198–199). While there is certainly a great deal of patronising imperialist posturing in Curzon’s writings, seen in a geopolitical context these pronouncements appear, *pace* Park, to be made in response to pessimism, rather than optimism, about the British position in Asia. Curzon paints a bleak picture of British opportunities in the face of declining regional stability, and predicts only disaster due to the fact that “the various powers who are represented at [Korea’s] capital... treat her from entirely different and wholly irreconcilable standpoints, according to their own interests or prejudices” - Curzon’s depiction of a Korea “simultaneously patronised, cajoled, bullied, and caressed” (198) by the various imperial powers, including Britain, can only be read as a prediction of future instability.

Further colonial incursions into Korea were not supported by British imperial policy, which was distracted in 1899 by early upsets in the South African war, and the Salisbury government’s continuing reticence to brook further overseas entanglements, especially in China. Lord Salisbury reinforced this point in his 1900 electoral manifesto, writing “we are probably more interested than any other nation in the preservation of the treaty rights which protect our [Chinese] commerce” - an end which would not have been well served by raising the British flag over Seoul. In the end, British actions in east Asia in this period constituted an instance of ‘the flag following trade’, in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to secure regional stability.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the fate of Korea was a crucial consideration for the protection of British interests in China; Joseph Walton’s warning, “There is little doubt that the eyes of Russia, as well as those of Japan, are turned towards Korea” as a “most suitable opening for expansion” (1900, 297), underlined the importance of keeping Russia from challenging Britain with a warm water port at Wonsan.

The three British agents’ experiences in Korea were coloured by their imperialism. Parliament’s arch-imperialist, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, was lamenting that Britain “has been steadily pushed down-hill in many parts of Africa, in Asia, and in other quarters of the globe” (*Hansard* 1898, c.303), and they accordingly opposed isolationism and the avoidance of entangling treaties by Britain, and advocated allying with Japan to contain Russia, with Korea’s liberty as the necessary price for the maintenance of Britain’s imperial interests (Van Dijk 2015, 32–34). The expansion of Russian influence in Manchuria and Korea was assessed as a very real threat to the Chinese treaty ports, and thus to the integrity of the British Empire (38).

Thus, the Pak-Patterson thesis, that Russian expansionism was a myth propagated as “a pretext for Great Britain and Japan to carry out their aggressive policy in East Asia” (1984, 110) does not hold water. British and Japanese priorities did not always align throughout this period; rather, the conclusion of an imperialist parliamentary faction was that an expansionist Japan was a price worth paying to keep the Chinese shipping lanes open, at a time when British policymakers were obsessed with imperial decline (Gibbons 1925, 2; Van Dijk 2015,

¹⁰ An inversion of the popular imperialist phrase ‘trade follows the flag’. See Darwin 1997; Cain and Hopkins 1987; Robinson and Gallagher 1953.

41; Walton 1900, 224). This is evidenced by the changing depiction of Japan in these three travelogues, from an increasing wariness of Japanese motives in 1889 and 1892, to the near-endorsement of Joseph Walton's account of 1899. Walton further embodied this shift in his Parliamentary contributions in 1900, when he declared that "even at the risk of war, they [Japan] would prevent any Russian interference with what they consider their priority of right in Korea" (1900, 231). That Walton went on to write "the interests of Japan are identical with our own" (231), and "the active co-operation of Japan could be counted on in any effort to uphold throughout China the treaty rights of all nations" (232) illustrates that the British official mind had still not grasped the extent of Japanese expansionist ambitions.

An analysis of the three officials' accounts suggests that British strategic priorities in Korea centred on two interlinked aims: first, the protection and expansion of markets for British manufactured goods and the lucrative unequal trade arrangements with China; and second, the prevention of Russian expansion, particularly in the form of a permanent warm-water base for the Russian navy. Britain's policy toward Japanese expansionism after 1894 was largely reactive, and their decision to transact an alliance with Japan in 1902 was based in part on the imperialist assumption that Korea could not survive as an independent state. British imperial policy never seriously considered the colonization of Korea, in line with the Salisbury government's reticence to over-extend in its foreign policy. This is mirrored in a wider British imperial tendency towards indirect rule and informal alternatives to colonization (Lugard 1922; Darwin 1997, 619–620).

After the upsets of the period 1894–98, Japanese expansionism became increasingly aligned with British strategic imperatives in the Far East. In the opening decade of the twentieth century, a greatly weakened government under Arthur Balfour was eager to avoid being drawn into a war between Russia and Japan in 1904, at a time when tensions with a rising Germany were threatening the European balance of power. Ultimately, the colonization of Korea in 1910 was welcomed by British public opinion, in no small part because of the public pronouncements of men like Walton, who remained convinced that it would facilitate the preservation of the regional *status quo*. The 1902 alliance with Japan had broken a longstanding tradition of British reticence to diplomatic entanglements, and this shift in foreign policy would, ironically, prove a contributing factor to the outbreak of the First World War twelve years later.

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