

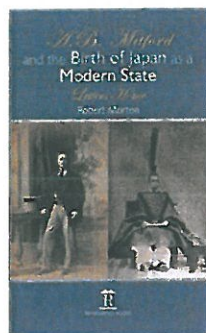
A. B. Mitford and the Birth of Japan as a Modern State: Letters Home

by Robert Morton

Renaissance Books (2017)

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Review by Sir David Warren



Algernon Bertram ("Bertie") Mitford was one of the earliest British diplomats in Japan: he served in the Legation there from 1866 to 1870. He was born into an aristocratic family of letters. His great-grandfather William wrote a five-volume *History of Greece*, and one of his mother, Lady Georgina Ashburnham's, ancestors had attended on Charles I on the morning of his execution (the family retained the King's bloody shirt as a keepsake, until Mitford's grandmother inadvertently washed it). Japan was a small element of Mitford's life, but his occasional writings on the country reached a wide audience in Britain and helped to fuel the enthusiasm for things Japanese in the 1870s and 1880s. Mitford himself left the Foreign Office in 1873. He was a success as Secretary to the Board of Works (appointed by Disraeli) from 1874 to 1886, when he resigned on inheriting an estate and a fortune from his cousin. Thereafter, he concentrated on rebuilding the estate and garden, and on his writing, publishing his memoirs in 1915, by which time he had been elevated to the peerage as the first Baron Redesdale. He died the following year at the age of 79. He was an affectionately-regarded member of the aristocratic society of his time: 'he had the dandy's charm', as his admirer Edmund Gosse wrote in his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

Robert Morton's excellent and readable biography gives a sympathetic portrait of the man and an evocative study of his life and times. Mitford, like his friend and colleague Ernest Satow, was an eye-witness of the events leading up to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. He had arrived in Japan after the clashes at Kagoshima and Shimonoseki, in which Britain and the other great Powers had asserted their rights under the commercial Treaties they had forced the Shogun's administration to sign as the country opened up in the 1850s. The foreign Powers' focus was now on enforcing trading links. The Shogun's government was weak, in the face both of foreign pressure and of the rebellion of the *daimyo* (feudal lords), loyal to the Emperor. Some *daimyo* were determined to follow the Emperor's call for the foreign barbarians to be expelled.

Others, including some younger samurai who had illegally travelled and studied abroad, saw the value of acquiring Western know-how as they forged a new and united Japanese nation. The British, and their main rivals the French, had to promote their interests in a volatile and uncertain environment, where it was not clear who was in charge or how the struggle for power would play out.

There was an element of the adventurer and dilettante about Mitford. As a young man about town in London, his social contacts – he was a friend of the Prince of Wales – had taken him effortlessly into the Foreign Office, although he had chosen to serve in China and Japan, well outside the traditional charmed circle of European Chancelleries. He was an excellent linguist, as Satow observed in his memoirs, and clearly also a brave and resourceful man. The Minister under whom he worked in the Legation, Sir Harry Parkes, left Mitford alone and in charge of the British representation in Osaka from March to July 1868, after the Powers had presented their credentials to the newly-restored Emperor Meiji; he discharged his responsibilities very capably. He was also interested in, and sensitive to, the strange and unfamiliar culture in which he was now living and working. The assorted collection of stories and sketches he published in 1871, *Tales of Old Japan*, was admired by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lafcadio Hearn; and his eye-witness account of a hara-kiri – the first published in English – was quoted approvingly by Japanese authors. While he gave an exaggerated impression of Japan as a country of great violence and bloodshed, he also helped to give British readers a more human sense of the Japanese people, rooted in a respect for their values and culture.

Mitford's actual career as a diplomat was brief. The policy of the British Government in the pre-Meiji period was one of strict neutrality between the Shogun and the *daimyo*, and while 'it is reasonable to speculate', as Robert Morton writes, that Mitford may have interpreted this flexibly, and sent encouraging signals to the *daimyo* that a challenge to the Shogun would not be unwelcome to the British, there is little evidence that he was a figure of real influence. Mitford's reactions to Japan are often superficial: he recast the most disobliging of them in his later writings. Shortly after his arrival in Japan, he wrote to his father: 'I hate the Japanese. Treachery and hatred are the only qualities which they show to us'. Six months later, he is still complaining: '[Japan] is the most overpraised country I ever saw ... and as for the people, my contempt for them is boundless'. In his memoirs, however, he

intimates that he fell in love with the country more or less at first sight, after the inevitable disappointment of arriving in this new fairy land in the pouring rain: '...suddenly coming in full view of Mount Fuji ... I was caught by the fever of intoxication ... which burns to this day, and will continue to burn in my veins to the end of my life'. There is a sentimental streak in his attitude to Japan. He describes the *hara-kiri* he witnessed not as a horrific mediaeval ceremony, but as an act of self-sacrifice of which a Victorian gentleman could approve, and the violent *ronin* marauding around the country as 'somewhat disreputable knights-errant'. His values are those of the Victorian aristocrat – traditional and conventional. He bounded between extremes of enthusiasm and revulsion. The man he was working for, Sir Harry Parkes, slightly caricatured in this book as no more than a belligerent brute (although he was generous in his appreciation of Mitford's work), was a harder-headed and ultimately shrewder judge of where Britain's interests lay and how to promote them.

In telling Mitford's story, Robert Morton draws not only on his published writings and official records, but also on his letters to his father, uncovered in the 1980s by Sir Hugh Cortazzi. His use of multiple sources is expert, and he wisely structures the book so as to focus on Mitford's years in Japan, in which he was an engaging observer of a fascinating and tumultuous period of change. And he draws a portrait of Mitford which is fair and judicious, giving full rein to the man's generosity of spirit while not ignoring his other qualities. Mitford was louchely typical of his era in several ways. In common with many young foreign men in Japan, he had a Japanese mistress and fathered an illegitimate child; and although he had a long and

successful marriage, with nine children, he also had many affairs, including it is believed with his wife's elder sister, which may possibly have made him the father of Clementine Hozier, who married Winston Churchill. It is unfair to attribute to him the racist attitudes of his two ghastly grand-daughters, Unity Mitford and Diana Mosley: he was not an anti-Semite. But the admiring introduction he wrote to the pro-Aryan writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain's book, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, can most kindly be described as an unwise hostage to fortune, not least as many years later it enabled Hitler to tell the two Mitford girls what an honour it was to be visiting the grave of Wagner with the grand-daughters of the great Lord Redesdale. He later retracted his admiration for Chamberlain. But the episode was typical of Mitford's impetuous inconsistency where other writers would have proceeded with greater care.

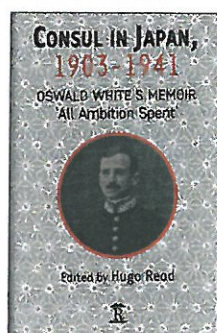
Robert Morton handles all these difficult areas with good sense. He also writes fluently and accessibly: this is a book which can be read without a detailed knowledge of the complex politics of Japan as it began to open up to the outside world in the 1860s. He tells Mitford's story with a sense of proportion. Mitford was not a profound analyst of the dramatic developments through which he lived. But he was a sympathetic observer of Japan, and his affection for it helped to build greater knowledge of Japan among British people and a deeper understanding of the country. And his official and personal papers give us a lively impression of a historical moment of great significance. Robert Morton's biography is a fitting memorial. S

Consul in Japan, 1903-1941. Oswald White's Memoir 'All Ambition Spent'

edited by Hugo Read

Renaissance Books (2017)
ISBN-13: 978-1898823643

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi



Readers should not be put off by the tittle of this book. 'All ambition spent' suggests a disappointed man and a dull life in a far off corner of the globe. In fact the book contains much of interest to the historian and to anyone concerned with the international relations of Japan in the first half of the twentieth century.

Oswald White first went to Japan in 1903 as a 'student interpreter' in the British Japan Consular Service. In Japan he served in Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagasaki and Osaka. He had two stints in Korea. His final postings were as Consul-General in Mukden and at Tientsin ending in 1941. From these posts he observed the evolution of Japanese foreign and economic policy.

Those of us who have experienced the postwar scene in Japan and have studied Japanese in different circumstances may be amused by some of his comments on language study, the work of consular officers in his era and their role in relation to trade.

His final chapter on Anglo-Japanese relations, which was written in 1941 while he was on leave in

Canada, is well worth reading carefully. It contains many points, which are still relevant today.

He had retained his liking for Japanese people, but had no illusions about Japanese motives and behavior in East Asia. He noted that 'Japan never showed any particular consideration for British interests. It was significant that wherever she gained control, British trade faded out of the picture'. (p. 200) The Japanese were, he thought, 'very self-centered' and 'do not readily see the other man's point of view'. 'When the time comes that another nation blocks what he considers his natural expansion then to him it is the other nation that is the aggressor!'

He is, however, just as scathing about British policies in the Far East. In the decade from 1930 to 1940 Great Britain had fallen between two stools. 'Its tactics were either too strong or not strong enough. It scolded Japan in season and out of season for its doings in China but it merely succeeded in infuriating her'.

White drew attention to Austen Chamberlain's comment that the British 'decide the practical questions of daily life by instinct rather than by any careful process of reasoning'. He thought that the British tendency to inspiration at the critical moment had been 'apt to result in British officials at different posts pulling in different ways. ... with disastrous results'. Here he was no doubt thinking of the open

disagreements in the 1930s between the British missions in Peking and Tokyo.

In a swipe at appeasement he declared that 'Our old doctrine of the balance of power, our opportunism, our tendency to range ourselves in recent years on the side of lost causes and then watch them go under all give the impression to outsiders that we are unprincipled'. This approach and our attempts at playing one country off against another had led, he felt, to Britain being seen as 'old and cunning' (in other words as 'perfidious Albion').

He was critical too about the lack of foresight in the formulation of British policy towards Japan. He noted that in our desire to maintain our established rights, we had 'no definite plans, no strategy and, as a result, the tactics we have devised at the eleventh hour have not been wisely chosen'. In his view 'we carried on as though we were still living in the good old days when a protest backed with a threat of action could carry the day'. But we had neither the will nor the means to take effective action. Our threats were seen as empty and as 'we climbed down all along the line' our bluff was called.

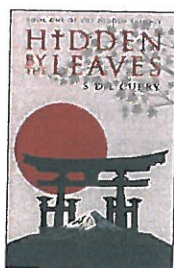
His conclusion that there was 'some truth in the criticism that we never forget and we never learn' sadly resonates today. §

Hidden by the Leaves

by S.D.L. Curry

Book Guild Publishing Ltd (2016)
ISBN-13: 978-1911320173

Review by Harry Martin



Japan in the early 17th century can be seen on a par with modern day North Korea in terms of its self-imposed isolation, trade restrictions and political paranoia. The Shogun of the time, Tokugawa Iemitsu, had revoked previous policies on international trade and movement of foreign nationals, enforcing in place strict commercial regulations and outright banishment of foreigners outside the specified trading ports in Southern Japan.

This period of national isolation, or *sakoku* in Japanese, coincided with the ongoing expansion of Christian missions within Japan's borders, a movement which was aggressively and brutally suppressed at the time, resulting in mass persecution and the creation of a clandestine religious community. It is in this dramatic

historical theatre that S.D.L. Curry's *Hidden by the Leaves* is set.

Book one of the author's new 'Hidden Trilogy', the story pursues Catholic Father Joaquim Martinez and his two junior clergy who have defied the Shogun's banishment laws and remained in Japan at great risk to help their oppressed Christian converts and the community to which they belong. What ensues is a remarkable yet brutal story of good vs evil, tracing the persecution of Catholic communities from the provincial towns of Kyushu to the trading ports of Osaka and Nagasaki and finally the Imperial majesty of Edo at the peak of Tokugawa rule.

The prose is vivid and illustrative in its depth of description, creating a pictorial sense of medieval Japan in both its beauty and its unbelievable brutality. This is clearly the work of a passionate and exceptionally well-informed historian who can at times draw the reader so far into the descriptions of torture and mutilation that the pages become uncomfortable to read. S.D.L. Curry's writing imparts the sense of desperation and fear that