Basil Hall’s Account of a Voyage of Discovery:
The Value of a British Naval Officer’s Account of Travels
in the Seas of Eastern Asia in 1816

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ABSTRACT

Basil Hall’s Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and the Great Loochoo Island of 1818 is a valuable account of a British naval officer’s experiences which graphically illustrates the state of isolation of Korea at that time. It is also an important record because, being written just after the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, it stands chronologically on the cusp of historical events—Britain’s industrial development and imperial expansion. The views of Korea espoused by the Hall and his companions at that time are quite different from British views of Korea at the end of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Basil Hall, Sir James Hall, Amherst Mission, Robert Broughton, Dunglass

Britain and East Asia at the Opening of the Nineteenth Century

At the opening of the nineteenth century, Britain was neither the great industrial power, nor the great colonial power that she was to become by the end of the century. The industrial revolution was in its infancy and a global British Empire was not even thought of. Colonial possessions at the beginning of the nineteenth century were overseas possessions largely peopled by persons of British extraction, not nations ruled by a minority British administrative elite.

For Britain, the early years of the nineteenth century were characterised by the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath, and by the search for commercial and trading opportunities around the world. The world was still to be explored, mapped and charted, and commercial relations created. This theme continued the traditions of the eighteenth century, the era of the great voyages of discovery to all parts of the globe, symbolised by the adventures of such naval heroes as Captain James Cook (1728-1779), and the improvements in navigational technology. The account by Captain Basil Hall (1788-1844) of his travels in the Yellow and East China Seas in 1816 is perhaps the last British account of East Asia before the advent of full-blown Victorian industrial and imperial expansion. The large-scale industrialisation which was to come in the latter part of the century led to the search for resources and markets for industry and the creation of a great worldwide empire. But that was in the future. When Hall and his companions came to Korea not quite two centuries ago, Europeans were still in ‘The Age of Discovery’. The very title of his work, Account of a Voyage of Discovery, conveys the sense of excitement at exploring and describing the unknown. Indeed, one could argue that
Halls account of his visit to the west coast of Korea and to the Kingdom of the Ryukyus was the final phase of this age of 'innocent' European exploration. The visit to Sŏch'ŏn County in 1816 was on the cusp of dramatic social, political and economic changes and developments, and for this reason Hall's account is especially precious. It provides a British account of a distant part of the world before imperialism.

The British squadron which arrived off Korean shores two hundred years ago was part of the diplomatic and commercial mission of the British government to the Qing imperial court, led by William Pitt Amherst (1773-1833), 2nd Baron Amherst. It was a rare and important undertaking. Lord Amherst's mission was the ninth formal attempt by various European courts and commercial traders to establish formal and equal trading relations with Qing China, and the second one conducted by the British government. At the time, these attempts were recognised to have been failures in 'opening up' China. Contemporary opinion held that the failure to accomplish this goal was due to political ineptitude and that it would have been more beneficial if merchants and commercial traders had been involved primarily in establishing trading relations with China and other East Asian nations.1

The first British mission to China was the Macartney Mission of 1792-1794. Led by George Macartney, 1st Earl Macartney (1737-1806), it was an attempt to obtain a broader market for British goods, and to encourage the Chinese government to give up the tributary system for dealing with foreign nations in favour of a system of envoys and representatives. Because of the refusal of Lord Macartney to perform the complex system of bows in greeting the Chinese emperor (other European representatives in the past had also refused to do so), the mission did not achieve its aims.2 However, this mission had no contact with Korea or Koreans, nor had it made any attempt to do so.

The first contact of a Briton with Korea took place in 1797 when Captain William Robert Broughton (1762-1821) commanding the HMS Providence reached Pusan harbour in early October of that year. Not part of the Macartney Mission, Broughton was one of a group of British naval officers who had been commanded to explore and chart the coasts of northeast Asia and the north-western part of the American continent. The Providence explored the east coast of Korea and by 14 October had reached the area of modern Pusan. The reception given to Broughton and his crew in that area had been good enough for him to land, receive some basic provisions, and to have a look at some of the surrounding hamlets. After a stay of over a week, he left the Pusan area on 22 October, and proceeded amongst the islands of the Korea Straits reaching the vicinity of Cheju Island by 27 October. He left Korean territorial waters on 30 October heading for Macau.3

1 These included inventions by John Harrison (1693-1776) of a chronometer which compensated for differences in climate, and the most accurate method for determining longitude.

2 This view of all the European diplomatic missions was put forcefully in a review of the official account of the Amherst Mission which appeared in the Edinburgh Review in 1818. See the review of Ellis, pp. 433-435.


In one way or another, Captain Broughton spent a month in Korean territory. This reflects his intentions as stated in a letter to the Admiralty upon purchasing a tender to accompany the Providence saying that it would be useful in 'exploring the coast of Corea and Tartary [eastern Siberia, HJG] with the Japanese islands'. This indicates that Broughton specifically had a strong interest in clarifying the coastline of Korea by creating better charts of its territorial waters. The title of his book, published in 1804, reflects a sense of the excitement of exploration, A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean, a sentiment which was characteristic of the age. However, in spite of the fact that Broughton spent a lengthy period of time in or around Korea, and wrote engagingly about what he had seen there and elsewhere in Northeast Asia, his book had very little influence and is now difficult to obtain. This lack of influence may be attributed in part to the time when the book was published, in the middle of the Napoleonic war years when British attention would have been focussed on military and political events in continental Europe and not on commercial and hydrological interests in distant parts of the world. Thus, although William Robert Broughton may have been the first Briton to touch Korean soil, his visit had little effect on Anglo-Korean relations.

The Place of Lord Amherst's Mission in British Contacts with East Asia

The mission of Lord Amherst to the Chinese imperial court in 1816-1817 was the second attempt by the British government to change the way in which trading and diplomatic relations were conducted by the Qing. Although this mission was no more successful than Lord Macartney's mission, it was different from the previous mission in that it combined diplomatic and commercial interests with scientific ones. Macartney's mission and the scientific explorations of naval officers such as Broughton had been separate endeavours, although they had taken place during the same period of time. Following upon the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars, Britain took a greater interest in the world beyond Europe for reasons of commercial trade. As a result of the enhancement of trade, a greater knowledge of the sea lanes, coastal areas, and characteristics of the people in distant nations became essential. Thus, a commercial and diplomatic mission would as a matter of course include persons capable of making sound geographical, nautical and scientific observations, as a consultation of the composition of the persons making up the mission would indicate.4 As we shall see, Basil Hall himself had considerable

4 See his account of his travels in Broughton 1804. The visit to Korea is discussed on pages 323 to 393. The work also included a substantial vocabulary list of Korean, Japanese and Ryukyuan words. Broughton's account, however, is more nautical in focus and lacks the depth of description about the things which he saw compared with Hall. Hall is better at description and gives a better sense of his engagement with the people he encountered. This is a shame as Broughton was in Korea much longer and could have provided much more information. His account, I believe, failed to gain popularity in part because he failed to gain the attention of his reader in the same way in which Hall did.

5 Public Record Office (UK) ADM/1 vol.1517 Letter Capt. B512.

6 See M'Leod 1817: 2-3.