Introduction

During the thirty-year period following Mrs Hodgson’s departure from Japan, no other wife of a consul or diplomat published any writing about her experiences. This literary silence was not broken until Mary Fraser, wife of Hugh Fraser, the British Minister to Japan (1888–94), published *A Diplomatist’s Wife in Japan: Letters from Home to Home* in 1898. In 1912 Mary, Baroness d’Anethan, the English wife of the Belgian Minister to Japan, published her diary – *Fourteen Years of Diplomatic Life in Japan* (1893–1906) – which chronologically overlapped Mrs Fraser’s writing by a few months. Taken together, these two narratives span seventeen consecutive years from the mid- to late-Meiji period (1889–1906). The thirty-year hiatus between the writing of Mrs Hodgson and that of Mrs Fraser not only saw marked changes in both the political and cultural life in Japan, but also in the social roles and expectations of Victorian women. These changes had a profound influence not only on the content and style of the writing, but also on the manner in which discourses about Japan in the late-nineteenth century were received by their audiences.

Mrs Hodgson had been born towards the beginning of the reign of Queen Victoria; by the time Mary Fraser and Baroness d’Anethan visited Japan, Victoria had been on the British throne for more than fifty years. Although the concept of the angel-in-the-house still lingered, the reality of the place of women in Victorian society had changed markedly from
the role expected of Mrs Hodgson, exemplified in Tennyson’s image of women in his 1847 poem:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else is confusion.¹

By the 1870s, even a conservative critic such as the novelist Charlotte Yonge, wrote that she thought that girls by this time had ‘a much freer, bolder life … travelling alone is hardly doubted about’.² In 1848, Queen’s College had opened, followed by Bedford College in 1849, paving the way for tertiary education for women. The enfranchisement of women developed as a political issue. In 1866, the first Women’s Suffrage Committee was formed and in 1867 the first parliamentary debate on Women’s Suffrage was held. Although, between 1870 and 1914, there were twenty-eight unsuccessful Bills relating to votes for women, women had moved irrevocably into active participation in politics. By 1882, the Second Married Women’s Property Act gave married women the same rights over their property as unmarried women, and gave husbands and wives separate interests in their property.³ For the first time, women were empowered with legal rights which gave them unprecedented economic independence.

Changes such as these were not universally accepted. In 1870, Queen Victoria, referring to the ‘wicked folly of Women’s Rights’ wrote ‘God created men and women different – then let them remain in their own position,’ and in 1889 more than a hundred women published an ‘Appeal against Female Suffrage’.⁴ However, many women relished the freer social atmosphere, and increasingly women’s voices were heard in public, often campaigning against social ills such as prostitution and contagious diseases. The two main political parties started their own organizations for Liberal and for Conservative women, and the Women’s Protective and Provident League for organized workers was founded in 1875. It became increasingly hard to argue that the place of women was in the home when so many were visibly involved in public life.⁵

Growing to adulthood in the latter half of Queen Victoria’s reign, with the gradual demise of the ideology of angelology, both Mrs Fraser and Baroness d’Anethan experienced a degree of freedom from social, legal and educational constraints unknown to Mrs Hodgson. Importantly, this changed social situation had a significant impact on the experiences, perceptions and expectations that these wives of diplomats brought with them to Japan and, as well-educated, worldly and well-travelled women,