ALICE M. FRERE (Mrs Godfrey Clerk)
[Japan: A few weeks from 12 August 1866]

The Antipodes and Round the World
or Travels in Australia, New Zealand, Ceylon, China, Japan and California (1870)

Background

In 1865, at the age of twenty-four, Alice Frere began two years of constant travelling which was to take her on a circuitous journey from Bombay to England. After leaving Bombay, on 15 April 1865, she travelled to Australia where she visited Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. She then travelled to New Zealand, visiting Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Back in Australia she visited Tasmania and Adelaide, then journeyed to Ceylon, China, Shanghai, Manchuria, through Mongolia to Tientsing and Peking, to Japan, then to San Francisco and New York, and finally, returned to ‘dear old England’ on 21 April 1867.

Her journey began in Bombay where she was to accompany her father, William Frere, a long-serving civil servant of some distinction in the judiciary, home to England.1 In her Introductory, Alice Frere wrote that they were ‘leaving a country in which, from having lived in it, and held responsible posts in its government, for five-and-thirty years, my father’s best affections were naturally centred’.2 It is not clear how long she had lived in Bombay and how much of her life was spent in England. Her reference to ‘dear old England’ could have been one of personal familiarity or simply a designation which was used by many colonials when referring to England which they considered to be their spiritual ‘home’.

Alice Frere’s narrative was derived from her letters which ‘had been carefully preserved’, and were in the form of diaries which she had ‘regularly and lengthily sent home for the amusement of two “old aunts”’. 
In a style common to the writing of nineteenth-century women, she attempts to distance herself from the public/masculine nature inherent in publishing by stating that she had no intention of writing a book but ‘On returning to England I was, however, persuaded to do so by the advice of friends.’ Although she does present very well-constructed apologia for both the writing style and content of her narrative, referring to ‘the “slipshod” style which is, I fear, only too commonly employed in letter-writing’, she nevertheless states that she does not wish her introductory remarks to be received as such because ‘The conventional apology, so mercilessly treated by critics and reviewers, for publishing “what was never intended for publication”, I do not attempt to offer.’

The Freres’ extensive trip had been long planned. She wrote:

For fear of it proving impracticable, we had not said very much about our cherished scheme of visiting Australia, New Zealand, China, Japan and California on our way home; and I do not think that many of our friends believed in the reality of our intentions until they saw us on board the ‘Jeddo’, bound for Point de Galle, whence radiate P. and O. steamers to all parts of the globe, except direct to England.

The narrative

There are two important aspects of her narrative on which I wish to focus. To some extent, both these focuses become intertwined. The first, of a socio/cultural nature, is her interaction with Japanese people; the second is of the prevailing political scene and how this affected not only her travels but also determined East-West relationships at that time.

When Alice Frere reached Japan, on 12 August 1866, she had been travelling for sixteen months. By this time a very experienced and confident traveller, she was well-prepared for her Japanese journeys, and her enthusiasm to embrace the new remained undimmed. Her travel experiences through the sometimes-difficult terrain in both Australia and New Zealand would have prepared her well for any physical difficulties she was to encounter in Japan, and her extensive travels throughout China would have given her some insights into an Asian culture. Like many travellers both before and after her, she was to compare the Chinese most unfavourably with the Japanese. She wrote that:

The Chinese seem an essentially unprogressive, and hence necessarily a retrogressive race; they have no ambition, no originality, but are perfectly content to live upon the traditions of their forefathers, and think them perfection. The Japanese are exactly the reverse ... The native Japanese towns are a grand improvement on the Chinese. At Nagasaki there were no unpleasant smells.