In the early 1990s, I was approached by the John Holt Company to produce a new version of the diary of its founder. An original edition was published in 1948\(^1\) but as it consisted of only one hundred copies and had been long out of print it was felt that a fresh, annotated study was now appropriate. The director subsequently appointed to represent the firm on this project was Mr Colin Noel Cornes and as a result of this cooperation the revised volume was issued in 1993.\(^2\)

During the course of our conversation Mr Cornes mentioned that his family had enjoyed a long business association with Japan and in view of my own particular interest in that country\(^3\) I followed this up with great enthusiasm. This was further encouraged when it emerged that he was in possession of an extensive archive of his great grandfather’s papers and that he would be pleased if I wished to examine them in detail. When this was arranged the immense importance of the correspondence became immediately apparent both as a general source for Japanese commercial development during the Meiji era and in respect of Frederick Cornes’ status as a significant contributor to this process.

My inspection of the collection showed that it consisted of 117 *Copy Books* (averaging forty-five pages each) which began with a single letter in 1864 and then covered the period from 1867 to the end of 1910 with regular letters from Frederick Cornes to his partners, managers, employees and other, separate companies from wherever he was currently based. There were also two volumes of *Private Letter Books* which included many letters to other firms and individuals as well as to his own colleagues during the years from 1864 to 1889. Taken together these sources amounted to approximately 7,000 pages of tissue paper pressings\(^4\) in various degrees of legibility. Both series are only in one direction, i.e. there are no direct replies to Frederick’s queries, requests for information and instructions although much can be inferred from subsequent letters.

The correspondence is primarily concerned with business matters especially those regarding the ordering and processing of items from London or Yokohama, together with commercial intelligence concerning their respective markets. They also contain many personal references and provide a limited amount on conditions in Japan and on external affairs but it should be remembered that the letters
are written between individuals who are fully aware of the events under discussion. It is not assumed that all potential readers will share their background knowledge of these matters but this can only be partly remedied here. This disadvantage is, however, greatly offset by the fact that few, if any, internal collections exist for Japan or other parts of the Far East during this period\(^5\) – there are certainly none for Yokohama where the 1923 earthquake, fire and tsunami destroyed all records, as well as causing huge damage and massive casualties. Consequently, it would appear to be helpful to all interested in the transformation of the Japanese economy from a near feudal system to that of a modern industrial state that this correspondence – with all its manifest flaws – should be made widely available.

The scale of such a project made it essential that external funds be raised and so, as a first step, an approach was made to the Japanese multi-national company which had grown out of the Frederick Cornes enterprise. This resulted in an interview with Shinichiro Watari (President and Chief Executive of the Group) who expressed considerable interest in the idea and after a period of investigation and consultation agreed to offer 50\% of the initial sum required to produce a typescript from the original manuscript. This was, however, conditional upon matching funds being made available by a British academic institution as a form of guarantee of my personal integrity! Fortunately, this aspect was well satisfied when the Leverhulme Trust decided to support the proposed scheme.

Once the necessary funds had been deposited with the University of Liverpool (which had kindly agreed to monitor expenditure) a number of key decisions needed to be made. My first thought was to employ a research assistant but it was quickly discovered that this was not practical as reading the original copies (many in poor condition) placed too much strain on mind and eyesight for it to be undertaken eight hours a day. Instead, a system was devised whereby a number of academic typists were recruited on a part-time basis and each then worked on individual books at their own pace in their own time. This method had some drawbacks but when the first draughts had been corrected and subsequently collated after being re-typed this resulted in a final typescript which was reasonably accurate and readable. Each of the letters in both series was then summarized by myself so as to provide a brief outline of their contents and these guides to the correspondence are all included in this volume.

Once the typescript had been completed more consideration was given to the options for making it accessible to all who were interested in the modernization of Japan. The scale of the mss. meant that a printed version would run to many volumes which would be extremely expensive and unlikely to be viable. Another possibility was to take advantage of the fact that the original mss., plus a copy of the new typescript, had been deposited at the Sydney Jones Library of the University of Liverpool and that a further copy of the typescript had been sent to the offices of the Cornes Group in Tokyo. Under this arrangement articles would have been published in the relevant academic journals which would have outlined the contents and provided a general guide to the correspondence. It was then anticipated that those individuals who wished to pursue specific topics would be able to consult the typescripts in Liverpool or