‘The Real Birthday of New Japan’ – Lafcadio Hearn’s ‘After the War’

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The birth of the New Far East,’ said the writer, Arthur Diósy in 1898, took place ‘on the seventeenth of September, 1894, from noon to sunset,’ as the ‘thunder of great guns rolled over the waters of Korea Bay, between the Island of Hai-yang and the mouth of the Yalu river.’

Diósy was referring to the battle of Yalu, that fierce naval encounter between the fleets of Japan and China, which effectively determined the outcome of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894/95 in favour of Japan. It was, according to Diósy, ‘the most important naval action since Trafalgar,’ a battle which proclaimed Japan’s entry into the modern world as an independent military power, as a ‘nation no longer in leading strings, but capable of being, and fully determined to be, a dominant factor in Eastern Asia.’ The rest of the world was forced to take note. ‘As the battle-smoke drifted away over the waves of the China Sea,’ he said, with the colour characteristic of his prose, ‘the astonished eyes of Occidentals beheld the Old Far East sinking in the flood, along with the boasted naval
power of China, and, in its stead, rising steadily from the 'edge of Asia,' the New Far East came into view.\textsuperscript{2}

Diósy, born in 1856 of Magyar background, was, of course, only one of the many Western commentators ready to offer views on the Sino-Japanese War. As a rule, these contemporary commentators agreed that the outcome of the war was of great importance for the development of modern Japan. Historians since that time have also regarded the conflict as a turning point in the history of Asia, defining the future role of Japan as the dominant power in the region. For his part, Diósy considered the war as a 'wake-up call' to the Western powers. Before the war, he said, Japan was, in the opinion of the great majority of Europeans and Americans, 'what it had always been, – a pleasant land of beautiful scenery, bright with lovely flowers . . . that strange medley of the beautiful and the comical described in the narratives of scores of travellers in the Land of the Rising Sun.' Until Yalu, 'Western peoples had never taken Japan seriously.' Nor did Diósy exempt Westerners resident in Japan from ignorance of the people among whom they lived. ‘There are, probably, no communities, residing out of their own countries,’ he wrote, ‘so absolutely isolated from the people amongst whom they live, so completely out of touch with native feelings and aspirations, as the European, and, to a lesser extent, the American, colonies in the Far East.’\textsuperscript{3}

Diósy, of course, did not consider himself as part of this fraternity of the uninformed. Early in his book he establishes himself as a Japan-expert, describing in its opening chapter a conversation among six members of the Japan Society in London two years before the opening of hostilities in the Sino-Japanese War, during which, he claims, only he correctly predicted the outcome of any future Japanese war with China. Where the naval power of Japan itself was concerned, he had, in fact, some first-hand knowledge. In his book, he describes a visit in November 1893 to the Japanese warship, \textit{Yoshino}, then lying off Plymouth, which he had made at the invitation of its captain, who had previously been Naval Attaché at the Imperial Japanese legation in London.

A few months later, the \textit{Yoshino} would itself see service in the war against China, but in his account of action at Yalu on 17 September, the opening day of naval activities, Diósy drew particular attention not to the \textit{Yoshino} but to action on the Japanese flagship, the \textit{Matsushima}. Diósy included in particular the heroism of the principal medical officer on board, Dr Hōshū Kawamura, the Inspector