John McLeavy Brown was an employee of the Korean government from 1893 to 1905, one of the most hazardous times in the history of the peninsula. Though he was supposed to supervise the Korean customs organization, he found himself involved in many other activities, and this led to unpopularity in many quarters. The Russians twice tried to remove him, but did not succeed. Ultimately the Japanese did manage to pension him off in 1905. Brown was what the Japanese call an ‘o-yatoi gaijin’, a foreigner in the employ of Korea. A foreigner whose function was to teach financial prudence to the Korean court could not expect to be universally popular.

Brown was born in Lisburn, Co Antrim in 1835 and educated both at Queens University, Belfast and at Trinity College, Dublin. He entered the China consular service and, because of his rapid progress in the Chinese language, he saw service in the British legation at Beijing. Brown resigned to join the Chinese Customs Service in 1873. During periods of long leave he qualified as a barrister and finally in 1888 obtained the degree of LL.D from Dublin. He is the only person with doctoral qualifications who, in my experience, chose never to use the title. During his career in the East, he was almost invariably known as ‘Mr McLeavy Brown’. After twenty years with the Chinese customs, Brown was chosen to head the Korean customs.

Brown owed his appointment to Sir Robert Hart, director-general of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service. To Hart, Korean customs was the ‘Corean section’ of the Chinese network at a time of Chinese hegemony over Korea. When J. F. Schoenicke went on long leave in the autumn of 1892, Hart arranged for F. A. Morgan, who had been temporarily deputed to the customs post at Chemulp’o, to take his place. Hart was committed to the view that ‘fears regarding our hold of Corea are at an end.’1 This was, however, to prove over-optimistic. Morgan had to go home, suffering from a breakdown and needing surgery on his leg. He never returned to a post in Korea.

Hart hastily appointed Brown, then assistant commissioner of customs at Kowloon, a post of considerable responsibility and special sensitivity. It appears that Brown did not demur. The prospect of freezing in Seoul may
have seemed more attractive than sweltering in the South China seas. But Hart had his doubts: Brown was ‘a first class man for any big works, but, as head of an office, he lets current work into arrears to an extent that throws the whole Service “out of step”.’

A little later, he wrote to his London office, ‘Brown had taken Morgan’s place in Corea: wonder how he’ll get on there! He’s a first-rate man when he settles down to work, but terribly lazy generally speaking.’ This was the comment of a crusty headmaster on a junior pupil rather than that appropriate to a trusted servant aged 58. It must be remembered then that Brown was not the first choice for the post which he was to occupy with distinction for twelve years.

Brown took charge of the Korean customs on 15 October 1893. He was clever, experienced, an able Chinese linguist willing to learn Korean. He seems to have created good impressions in most quarters: Koreans, Chinese including Yuan Shikai, and foreigners. Within six months he had taken a firm grip on the Korean situation.

In the summer of 1894, war broke out between Japan and China. Japanese troops occupied the peninsula after Yuan Shikai and the Chinese withdrew and there were fears that Brown and other Britishers in the customs service might have to be pulled out. Brown himself had been involved in an attack by Japanese soldiers on 15 July while accompanying the acting British consul-general, Gardner, though this was not typical. To be sure, Brown was at this stage holding an appointment linked to the Chinese Maritime Customs and had a good knowledge of the Chinese language, then used for communication with the Korean court. It suited the Japanese to make use of Brown. They wanted a customs service which would be completely independent of China – something with which the Koreans were in full agreement. The Japanese induced the Korean government to set up a Korean customs. On 25 October 1894, Brown was appointed chief commissioner of the new organization. In practical terms his control of the service was undiminished. In personal terms, he was deemed to be on long leave from the Chinese service: he could return there in an emergency. Existing staff were all taken over en bloc from the Chinese customs, presumably on similar terms of employment.

Dissatisfied with the financial standards within Korea, the Japanese officials came to rely on Brown. In the first place they reorganized the customs service with Brown as chief commissioner of the new organization. In essence the collection of revenue and its disposal would now be controlled by the finance department of government. It was mooted in several quarters that Brown should be given an additional role and the foreign minister, after consultation with the finance minister, offered Brown on 29 October 1894 a post as adviser to the finance department. Brown accepted. Walter Hillier, the British consul-general, wrote in November as follows:

Mr Brown’s popularity with all classes of Corean officials, and his long experience in the management of Customs business in all parts of China, will render him a valuable servant to the Corean Government, while his reputation and attainments as a Chinese scholar will stand him in good stead. If the Japanese Government were sincere in the policy which has