Thomas James Waters (1842–98): Bibles and Bricks in Bakumatsu and Early-Meiji Japan

NEIL JACKSON

Joseph Conder (1852–1920), the young English architect who was invited by the Meiji government to be the first Professor of Architecture in Japan and is consequently credited with being the ‘father of Japanese architecture,’ arrived at Yokohama on 28 January 1877. Yet it was not to a country uninitiated in the language of western architecture that he came, but one which for the last fifteen years or so had seen the steady if rather uncertain growth of buildings which would not look out of place in Hong Kong or India or the farther reaches of the British Empire. The bakumatsu (up to 1868) and early-Meiji (after 1868) governments feared as much as admired the industrialized power of the British Empire and so turned to it for expertise, guidance and trade. Throughout this time Britain offered strength and stability which the Russians, recently defeated by the British and French in the Crimea (1853–56), the Americans, embroiled in a civil war (1861–65), and ultimately the French, humiliated by the Prussians (1870–71), could not do.
Meanwhile the Dutch, for so long the sole trading partners of Japan, tended to be forgotten.

Conder would have passed through the European settlement at Yokohama where, as the architect and designer Christopher Dresser, who had arrived a month earlier, noted, ‘beautiful villas — in character half English and half Japanese — nestle in lovely gardens’ and beyond that ‘the native town’ where ‘all is strange and quaint beyond description.’ From Yokohama he would probably, like Dresser, have taken the train to Edo (Tokyo), a journey of eighteen miles, the iron railway following the edge of Tokyo bay where ‘the scenery along the route, though curious, presents few features of marked interest.’ What Conder found, on arriving at Shimbashi station in Tokyo (opened as recently as October 1872), was certainly not like the native town at Yokohama. Georges Hilaire Bousquet (1845–1937), the French legal scholar, on arriving by train that same year, thought it as ugly as American cities and Isabella Bird (1831–1904), who came the following year and published her book *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* in 1880, described Tokyo as less like an Oriental city than like the outskirts of Chicago or Melbourne. From Shimbashi Conder would have probably made his way to the foreign settlement at Tsukiji to the east, passing the new brick buildings of Ginza which were the cause of Bousquet and Bird’s distress. As he looked down the long, straight, tree-lined avenues of the gridded town with its Tuscan colonnades and balconies above, he might have recalled momentarily the quadrant in London’s Regent Street, and realized that, although he had come half way around the world to instruct the Japanese in the making of western architecture, somebody had got there first. That person was a tall, rather thin Anglo-Irish engineer called Thomas James Waters. It is possible that the two men met, but if they did it was like ships passing in the night, for Tom Waters was now breaking his ties with Japan, moving on to China, New Zealand and eventually to the United States, where he died.

Before the Meiji government started inviting specialists, such as Conder, to come to Japan to instruct the Japanese in the arts and sciences of the west, there came a wave of opportunists or, as in the case of Waters, what Fujimori Terunobu has described as ‘adventure-engineers.’ There were great opportunities to be had and, with the right connections to either the government or to local *daimyo*, money to be made. But there were also souls to be saved: ‘Oh if I could persuade every one to throw their sin at the foot of the cross,’ Tom had written to his sister prior to his departure for Japan. ‘Pray for me dear Lucy for London is a fearful place; there is so much to draw one away from the narrow way that leadeth to life, the lust of the eye & the pride of life . . . ’ If London was bad, Japan would be no better.