Arthur Hesketh Groom (1846–1918): Emblematic Edwardian, Compulsive Clubman, Accidental Ancestor

ANGUS LOCKYER

INTRODUCTION

Arthur Hesketh Groom is a minor but useful figure with whom to think about the relationship between Britain and Japan during the Meiji period. Born in London a few years before the Great Exhibition of 1851, he arrived in Japan at the beginning of the new era that followed the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate and the inauguration of the new Meiji government in 1868. Almost immediately he married a Japanese woman, and spent the rest of his life in Kobe and Yokohama, trying his hand at the various business opportunities of the period. He eventually settled in Kobe, whose modest scale and distinctive topography perhaps suited his low-key ambitions and expansive enthusiasms. There is little evidence that Groom was much more than an average businessman. Late Victorian and Edwardian Japan was generous with such figures, however, providing the space,
time and resources with which to cultivate a lifestyle to which they
might never have become accustomed back in Britain. Nor would
there be any reason to remember Groom, were it not for an almost
accidental by-product of his enthusiasms and resources.

In 1895, Groom rented some land on Mt Rokkō, overlooking
the city of Kobe, and built the first of what would soon be a rash of
villas, to which the foreign community could escape on weekends
and in the summer. A few years later, on a friend’s suggestion, he
began to clear the land for a few fairways and sand greens. The golf
course opened in 1901 and the Kobe Golf Club was founded two
years later. Groom himself was not a good golfer and Kobe is at best
a quirky course. The club seems rather to have been an extension
of his enthusiasm for company and, particularly, the sports club as a
means for ensuring well-ordered and well-lubricated leisure.

In retrospect, however, Groom is venerated as the father of Japanese
golf, Kobe as the Mecca for any serious golfer. On top of Mt Rokkō,
he has also been commemorated since the end of the Meiji period,
with a brief interruption during the war, as the man who opened up
what subsequently became a playground for the middle classes of Kobe
and Osaka. Here his claim is more contested: those who would prefer
an indigenous account of Kansai modernism tend to talk about railway
entrepreneurs rather than expatriate clubmen. On both accounts,
however, Groom can tell us much about the compulsions that drove
late-nineteenth-century Englishmen to come to Japan, the conditions
that allowed them to reproduce and sustain a characteristically Anglo-
Saxon, middle-class life and the way in which the institutions of the
latter thereby began to be adopted in Japan itself.¹

GROOM, THE BUSINESSMAN

Arthur Hesketh Groom was born in London on 23 September 1846
on Upper Seymour Street, just off Portland Square. His family may
or may not have been long-standing Freemasons, but his father was
a solicitor, who himself had been born in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Five
years later father, now retired, and son were living as the lodgers of
a college servant and his wife in St John’s Street, Cambridge, while
the other three members of the family, mother, older brother and
sister, seem to have stayed in Islington. Some time later Arthur was
packed off to Marlborough, leaving after the midsummer term of
1864, having presumably cultivated the enthusiasm for sport that
became so apparent later on.² It is tempting to speculate about the
psychological effects of a Masonic heritage, a dislocated childhood,
and/or the mixed blessings of boarding school, but the early life
remains obscure. Things only begin to come into focus four years
later, when Groom arrived in Kobe.