Josiah Conder (1852–1920)

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INTRODUCTION

Japonisme is usually regarded as a phenomenon belonging to the second half of the nineteenth century, but it has metamorphosed itself and penetrated into a number of areas throughout the twentieth century. In particular, the taste for the Japanese garden was widely taken up in many of the Western countries. Also in the twenty-first century this tendency has become even more flourishing. The person who argued for the first time the question of why one should build a Japanese garden in the West was Josiah Conder, well known as the so-called ‘father’ of modern Japanese architecture.1

In 1886, he gave a lecture ‘The Art of Landscape Gardening in Japan’ which was then published in the same year in the Transactions of Asiatic Society of Japan. In 1893, he published Landscape Gardening in Japan and also a Supplement, which contained many collotype photographs. A revised version was published in 1912.

This publication is now regarded as the standard work on Japanese garden design. However, there is a subtle difference between Japan
and the West over how this publication is evaluated. In the West whenever the history of the Japanese garden is discussed, this book by Conder is invariably mentioned. For example, Brent Elliot, the foremost authority in garden history, commends this publication as the most authoritative. However, in Japan with the exception of Shirahata Yōzaburō this book seems to get a lukewarm reception among the scholars of the Japanese garden. In the West, already in 1964, a paperback facsimile edition was published by Dover, whereas in Japan, only in 2002 a hardback edition was issued by Kodansha International. Both of these reproduced the English text of the 1912 revised edition. In another case, a 2007 republication of Honda Kinkichiō’s 1890 book *Zukai teizōhon* (Illustrated garden design guide) included just the text of Conder’s book presented rather bizarrely as a commentary to Honda’s text.

It seems strange that no Japanese translation of Conder’s book has yet appeared. One of the reasons for this is in my view the underestimation of Edo Garden by most of the commentators during the Shōwa period. The scholars knew that Conder’s book was dependent on *Tsukiyama teizōden* (Commentary on landscaping and garden design), a famous Edo period garden design manual, but this meant that among the Shōwa scholars, who adored the much older famous classic *Sakuteiki* (Manual for garden design) at the expense of Edo garden design, Conder’s book received a negative evaluation. Also for the previous generation of scholars of the Japanese garden coping with an English publication may have been rather too tedious.

**JOSIAH CONDER’S LIFE**

What kind of a person was Josiah Conder? He was born in London in 1852 and died in Tokyo in 1920 within two weeks of his wife Kume’s death. He is said to be a descendant of the famous eighteenth century sculptor, Louis François Roubiliac, and his grandfather also called Josiah was a cultured man, moving among the circle of the poet Robert Southey, and writing among other subjects on India. His wife published his biography and there is an entry on him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Our Conder seems to have grown up in a cultured urban middle class environment. He was trained as an architect by a relative of his, Thomas Roger Smith, founding editor of the periodical *The Architect* and later a Professor of the University of London. Conder also spent time at the architectural office of the aesthete and Japanophile William Burges. In 1876 the young Conder received the Soane Medal from the Royal Institute of the British Architects. In the same year without having built a single building of his own design, he was employed by the Japanese government and arrived in Japan.