Elizabeth Anna Gordon (1851–1925)

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MRS GORDON AND JAPAN

In 1891, Elizabeth Anna Gordon (née Henry) and her husband, John Edward Gordon (1850–1915), embarked on a round the world tour. This was not untypical at that time for people of their class and generation. Two years later, she published a memoir recording her experiences, ‘Clear Round!’: or Seeds of Story from Other Countries: Being a Chronicle of Links and Rivets in This World’s Girdle. Japan had evidently made a very great impression on her, and her reminiscences of the country fill several chapters. She was struck, in particular, by Japanese religious life and children’s education. Shortly before they returned to Britain, the Japan Society London was established: she and her husband joined the Society, in February 1892, almost immediately after their return. ‘Clear Round!’ was successful, since it ran into three editions. It may even have contributed to the promotion of a favourable attitude towards Japan among the reading public before the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902. Sixteen years later, Elizabeth Anna Gordon returned to Japan with a large
consignment of English books, as part of the ‘Books for Japan’ project which she had organized with the aim of furthering Anglo-Japanese cultural and religious understanding. From her mid-fifties onwards, she lived almost continuously in Japan, except for a few years after the First World War. She died in Kyoto in 1925.

Books were a central feature of Elizabeth’s life. She published at least thirteen titles, primarily on the subject of Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism. Eight were published in London; the other five titles were published in Tokyo. She was clearly precocious, having written five books before her marriage at the age of twenty-eight. She was also a major book collector, eventually amassing an enormous library. She initially collected books for her own studies of world religions, but later collected books with the aim of distributing them to the Japanese public. Her collections on religious studies ended up in Japanese universities as the Gorudon Bunko (Gordon Collection or Gordon Library) at both Waseda University Library and Koyasan University Library. Her collection of English books (around 100,000 books) which she and her colleagues collected was called the Dulce Cor Library. It was called Nichi-Ei Bunko or Nichi-Ei Toshokan in Japanese, i.e. the Anglo-Japanese Library. This library formed the core of Japan’s first public library, Hibiya Library, when it was opened in Tokyo in 1908.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND WRITINGS

Elizabeth Anna Gordon, highly religious by inclination, studied Christian history in her youth, and, after studying under Max Müller, extended her interests into the study of comparative religion – in particular, Mahayana Buddhism and Christianity. Her combined studies of Christianity and Buddhism were published in Japan as a series of four books: The Lotus Gospel; or Mahāyāna Buddhism and its Symbolic Teachings Compared…with Those of Catholic Christianity (1911), ‘World-Healers’, or the Lotus Gospel and its Bodhisattvas, Compared with Early Christianity (1913), Asian Crisolology and Mahāyāna (1921) and Messiah: the Ancestral Hope of the Ages, ‘the Desire of All Nations’, as Proved from the Records on the Sun-Dried Bricke of Babylon, the Papyri and Pyramids of Egypt, the Frescoes of the Roman Catacombs, and the Chinese Incised Memorial Stone at Cho’ang (1906). In these works Elizabeth Anna Gordon argued for what she believed to be the close relationship between, and common ancestry of, Mahayana Buddhism and early Christianity. In particular she emphasized the importance of Buddhist texts and their transmission in the development of religious conduct. She attempted to trace their journey eastwards, where she believed they reached their highest development in Japan. Her underlying argument was that Mahayana Buddhism had been directly influenced by Christianity.¹ The early development of Buddhism had begun five hundred