F.W. Strange and Rowing as a Sport in Japan

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INTRODUCTION

FREDERICK WILLIAM STRANGE (1854?-89) is considered to be the founder of the collegiate sport of rowing in Japan. An English teacher at Yobimon (preliminary course) of what became the University of Tokyo, he was instrumental in teaching students the skills and spirit of rowing, as well as acting as an intermediary between student rowers and foreigners in Yokohama.

EMERGENCE OF ROWING IN THE YOKOHAMA FOREIGN SETTLEMENT (KYORYŪCHI)

By virtue of the Ansei Treaties of 1858, settlements or enclaves of foreigners were formed in the ports of Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hakodate and Kobe. These settlements, called Kyoryūchi, were areas where the Treaty powers exercised extra-territorial rights. It was in these areas that modern sports developed in Japan.
Around 1863, crews of English warships stationed in Yokohama port started organizing regattas. A ‘Grand Yokohama International Regatta’ was scheduled to be held on 1 and 2 October 1863, but this seems to have been postponed to 5 and 6 October 1863. According to a newspaper report, the regatta was organized by a management committee, consisting of British and French naval officers; the bands of the English and French Admirals provided musical entertainment. This suggests that the regatta was essentially a naval event.

From about 1865 foreigners living in the Yokohama settlement started to take part in the regattas. In the following years, there are records of various regattas being held in Yokohama. These regattas typically consisted of a cutters race, yacht race, four-oared outriggers, men-of-war’s gigs, a sculling race, a canoe race, etc. Thus, all types of boats were involved, not just rowing shells. Entrance fees were charged and prize money was paid out of the funds collected.

These regattas later led to a more permanent rowing club being formed, although it is not clear exactly when the club was established. According to a history of Yokohama city, a boathouse was built in 1866 near the area of what was then called the ‘French hatoba’ (wharf), but we do not know exactly what organization used this facility. A boat club called ‘Barge Club’ was established and charged twelve dollars per season for the use of boats and yachts. The club also organized various events such as swimming. This Barge Club is thought to be the predecessor of what later came to be known as the Yokohama Amateur Rowing Club (YARC).

YOKOHAMA AMATEUR ROWING CLUB (YARC)

The Yokohama Amateur Rowing Club was established in 1871. Although there do not seem to be any early records of annual reports, the report of the annual general meeting held at the Grand Hotel on 7 March 1879 is described as their ‘Eighth Annual Report’. J. P. Mollison, an early settler, speaking in 1903 said that the ‘first four-oared inter-port race’ had taken place in 1871. According to Mollison, young men headed by his then colleague George Hamilton inaugurated the Rowing Club. Hamilton was ‘affectionately spoken of as the father of rowing Yokohama’. It is possible that what was called ‘the Regatta’ was the committee which met ‘at the Club’ which later became the YARC.

The Club usually organized two regattas a year, one in the spring and one in the autumn. These regattas were some of the biggest events in Yokohama and were attended by practically all expatriate ladies and gentlemen living in the settlement. Sometimes the British Minister and his wife attended and presented a trophy cup at the ceremony following the end of the day’s events. From the autumn of 1871 the YARC held an inter-port race with the KRAC from Kobe. From then