

# Lady Fraser *A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan: Letters from Home to Home* (1899)



Takayo Kano



Lady Fraser

Mary Crawford Fraser was born in Rome in 1851. Her father was an American sculptor and her mother, who was of French descent, was from the American South. She had three sisters and a younger brother (the novelist, Francis Marion Crawford). Her father died when she was 6 years old, and her mother was later married to an American painter. The family continued to live in Rome, though from the age of eleven, Mary attended a boarding school in England for 3 years. There were many notable visitors at her family home in Rome, including Hans Christian Andersen, Robert Browning and his wife, Percival Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Edward Lear. In the spring of 1874 she married Hugh Fraser (1837–1894), a British diplomat working in Rome. During their marriage she accompanied him on his visits to Vienna, Rome, Chile and in 1889, she visited Japan for the first time when he was

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appointed as the British Minister to Japan. *A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan: Letters from Home to Home* (1899) is an account of their first 3 years in Japan. After Hugh's sudden death in Japan in 1894, she lived in Rome and England. Lady Fraser had two sons and she died in 1922. Other books on her memories as a diplomat's wife include: *A Diplomatist's Wife in Many Lands* (1911) and *Reminiscences of a Diplomatist's Wife: Further Reminiscences of a Diplomatist's Wife in Many Lands* (1912). Her writings on Japan include: *The Custom of the Country: Tales of New Japan* (1899); *The Stolen Emperor* (1904); *A Maid of Japan* (1905); and *The Heart of a Geisha* (1908).

I am no longer homesick, so I know that the journey is nearly done, and the new country is drawing me as the sun draws the sunflowers in the old gardens at home. I am looking forward to seeing this new old friend, Japan, with the certainty of happiness which absolutely fresh surroundings always bring me; for, dearly as I love the old, I love the new still better [. . .] But I am a little afraid of Japan! I would rather not have a host of first impressions of the ordinary kind, which, as it seems to me, satisfy meagre minds, and prevent their ever really understanding new places and races.

Mary Crawford Fraser wrote this as the ship she was traveling on approached Japan. It was the end of April 1889 (Meiji 22). She was 38 years of age at the time and was on her way to Japan with her husband, Hugh Fraser (1837–1894), who was posted to Japan as the British Minister, leaving her two sons behind in England. The above text is taken from the beginning of “*A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan*,” in which Lady Fraser wrote about her experiences and observations during the first half of their stay in Japan, the 3 years from May 1889 (Meiji 22) to April 1892 (Meiji 25). Her endearing personality is conveyed in the book, as is the mood of a young, newlywed woman full of innocent expectations and honest curiosity about a new country.

Her first impression was that “I think the friendship [with Japan] has begun. [. . .] The only thing that came to me as I stepped on shore at Nagasaki was a fit of really light-hearted laughter—laughter of the joyous and unreasonable kind whose tax is mostly paid in tears.” In this way, she became instantly familiar with Japan, a blessing for both, and this did not change during the rest of her stay. Indeed, she consistently viewed Japan with a friendly, understanding attitude. When her stay ended under the tragic circumstances of her husband's death, the heartfelt comfort she received from many Japanese people further bonded her to Japan and the Japanese people. Minister Hugh Fraser died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage in the spring of 1894, shortly after returning to Japan from a 2-year vacation.

The historical period between 1889 and 1894, when Fraser served as minister to Japan had been a turbulent one. First, in February 1889, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan was promulgated, and on the same day, the Minister of Education Mori Arinori (or Yūrei) was assassinated for his allegedly un-Japanese views. The following year, in 1890, Foreign Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu was seriously injured by a bomb thrown at him. Also in that year, the first elections were held and the first Imperial Diet was convened, but the Diet was at odds with the government from the start, and was dissolved in 1891. The second election in 1892 was notorious for its blatant election interference and unlawful suppression. Amidst further turmoil,

including the reshuffling of the cabinet and dissolution of the Diet, Japan entered the Sino-Japanese War in the summer of 1894.

In terms of relations between the U.K. and Japan, negotiations that had been underway for many years were now reaching a critical stage, with the Japanese side seeking to revise the so-called “unequal treaty” that had been concluded in the 1850s. An agreement was reached between the two countries in the summer of 1894, 2 months after the death of Minister Hugh Fraser.

As such, Lady Mary Fraser lived in Tokyo under extremely tumultuous social and political surroundings. However, as can be seen from her biography, her cosmopolitan upbringing, her natural artistic sensibility, and her accumulated experience of living as a diplomat's wife in Beijing, China and Santiago, Chile before coming to Japan, perhaps made her so flexible that she seemed to have enjoyed her stay in Japan to a great extent.

She wrote, in the form of letters to Britain, about events inside and outside the British legation, about people she met, what was being discussed in the newspapers, the Japanese vacation spots she visited, her travels along the way, art and crafts, and what she had heard or learned about Japanese history, literature, myths, and legends. This is the substance of *A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan*, a 466-page book published in London in 1899.

Because of her position as wife of the British Minister, she also wrote several accounts of her encounters with the Emperor, Empress, and other Japanese dignitaries of the time, as well as their families. There is a section describing an audience with Empress Haruko. She writes, “First the Empress asked after the Queen's health; and then, when she welcomed me to Japan, said she had been told that I had two sons whom I had been obliged to leave in England, and added that she thought that must have been a great grief to me. Her eyes lit up, and then took on rather a wistful expression as she spoke of my children. The heir to the throne is not her son, for she has never had children of her own, and has, I believe, felt the deprivation keenly.” Whether it is the Empress or anyone else, Lady Fraser always seems focused on the humanity of the other person, rather than the trappings of social status.

She enjoyed observing the ordinary people around her, especially the servants working in the legation. She writes, “Okusama is [transl. “I am”] not supposed to enter this courtyard except at stated hours; but cannot resist the pleasure of occasionally watching, through the closed blinds of an upper window, the many-sided, brightly coloured life of its inhabitants, of listening to the hum of chatter which rises from the human hive. Really, servants in Japan ought to be very happy! Each man may bring his wife and children and mother to live with him, when he enters our service. I have drawn the line at grandmothers, on account of overcrowding [ . . . ].”

This was after one summer day, she had found the grandmother of one of the servants in the kitchen wearing only a waistcloth. She lamented that even though it was hot, the old woman should at least have the manners to wear something appropriate in public, so she offered the old woman a place to live outside the legation.

When an eccentric ukiyo-e artist Kawanabe Kyōsai died, the news prompted Lady Fraser to introduce into her writings detailed accounts of his upbringing, beliefs, and painting career.

As she writes, “A countryman and intimate friend of Kyōsai, tells me,” Mary had a wide range of close friendships with the staff of the legation, the people around them, and beyond, and she seemed to get topics of conversation not only about Kyōsai but also about the theatre.

Each summer, she went on a retreat to places such as Ikaho, Karuizawa, Zushi, and in July of 1890, she sent a letter from Karuizawa detailing the Tanabata Festival: “[. . .] This is a very old story that was brought to Japan more than 2,000 years ago. Cyrus was in power in Persia, Rome was still a swamp where wolves roamed and where only a row of garrets stood, and Etruria was a land of vines and poppy blossoms, ruled by kings in purple robes and gilded gold.” Such was the free-spirited quality of her narration that Sir Hugh Cortazzi, former British Ambassador to Japan and editor of the new edition of *A Diplomat's Wife in Japan: Sketches at the Turn of the Century* (1982), cut out Lady Fraser's retelling of the Tanabata story as it was already well-known enough. When they climbed the Usui Pass, she eagerly recounted the story of Yamato Takeru no Mikoto, whose childhood name was Ousu, the son of Emperor Keikō, focusing especially on his romance with Princess Oto Tachibana-hime. Her writings reflect her deep appreciation of such episodes and stories which she clearly wanted to share with people in Britain who had little opportunity to access such.

There are many episodes in the book which might be described as a little too à la mode at times. However, it was probably due to Mary's personality that made it possible for her to enjoy her life in Japan so much, as she was interested in a variety of miscellaneous topics, especially the human aspects of Japanese people. In contrast, her husband, who was 14 years older than her, is said to have been sober, philosophical, and a typical gentleman of Scottish descent. Sir Hugh Cortazzi writes that perhaps the husband envied his wife for being such a dreamy, sensitive, open-minded person with a wide range of interests and a keen attention to detail.

Be that as it may, throughout this book, one can sense Lady Fraser's attempt, in her own way, to understand Japan as much as possible within the historical and cultural context of the country. Wherever she goes and whatever she sees, she begins her story with historical context. While this may be due to personal tendencies or her upbringing and background, it is also probably not unrelated to the fact that the United Kingdom has always been one step ahead of other countries in promoting “Japanology” ever since the opening of ‘modern’ Japan to the outside world. It has been an excellent tradition of British foreign policy to train diplomats to become experts in their countries by keeping them in their posts for long periods of time. In fact, the names of those who served in the British legation in Japan before Hugh Fraser come to mind: Sir Rutherford Alcock (1859–1864), Sir Ernest Mason Satow (1862–1883, 1895–1900), William George Aston (1864–1889), Sir Harry Smith Parkes (1865–1883), and Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford (1866–1870). (Figures in parentheses indicate the period of tenure in Japan.) Accordingly, by the time Lady Fraser arrived in Japan, a considerable amount of knowledge and research

results on Japanese history, culture, and literature had been accumulated, mainly at the British legation. Lady Fraser was well aware of this tradition and took full advantage of its achievements.

Fraser's *A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan* documents such a diverse cross-section of Japanese life that it could almost be called a foreign woman's version of Mori Senzō's anecdotal account of life in the capital, *Meiji Tōkyō itsubunshi*. For those interested in the details of life in Tokyo during the years of the Meiji era, this is truly an enjoyable book.

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