

Robert Morton

Sir Rutherford Alcock

*First British Minister
to Japan (1859-1865),
Consul (1844-1859) and
Minister (1865-1870) to China*

Amsterdam
University
Press

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The memorial to Alcock on Mt Fuji. Being the first foreigner to climb the mountain is the thing he is most remembered for in Japan today. Photograph by the author.

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Introduction

Abstract

Why a biography of Alcock was worth writing. His place in Chinese and Japanese history and how he is viewed in those countries now. How this book was written and a summary of his character and achievements.

Keywords: China; Japan: informal empire; imperialism

At first glance, Sir Rutherford Alcock (1809–97) is an unattractive proposition for a biographer, being guilty of perhaps the two worst sins for a subject who lived before the typewriter was invented: he was long-winded and had difficult-to-read handwriting. But in Japan he was the pioneer, the first British minister (what we would now call ambassador) to that country. For that alone he deserves a biography, I think, but this position was just one part of a long and remarkable life.

Although it was his time in Japan that secured his place in history, he spent a total of only three and a half years there, while he was in China for seventeen. However, in China he was following beaten tracks and, while his work there was very significant, it was part of a narrative that stretched back to the 1830s—his contribution just does not stand out there to the same degree. His activities there are important for us today, though, because, as Robert Bickers put it, ‘history matters in modern China, and the past is unfinished business.’¹ President Xi Jinping has frequently lambasted Western actions there during Alcock’s time (it spanned 1844 to 1870); in 2021 he said that in the period after the First Opium War (1839–42), China was ‘gradually reduced by foreign powers to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society that suffered greater ravages than ever before’, bringing ‘intense humiliation for the country’ and ‘great pain for its people’.² Alcock’s experience suggests that, while China was weak, it was not as disempowered as Xi suggested.

1 Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China* (London: Penguin, 2012), 10.

2 Carol Shiue and Wolfgang Keller, ‘Modernisation and China’s “Century of Humiliation”’, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/modernisation-and-chinas-century-humiliation> (accessed 28 November 2022).

Historians in China have tended to look past the individual in studies of empire, seeing them as necessarily beyond the pale; whatever personal qualities they might have had, they were willing collaborators in a wicked project. But as John Darwin has pointed out, you do not have to sympathise with men such as Alcock to accept that they are subjects worthy of study.³ Certainly from a British perspective, trying to understand them is helpful in considering questions of the nation's imperial past, particularly, in Alcock's case, in managing its 'informal empire' in which it exercised enough control to maintain a lucrative trade but avoided the expense and responsibility of governing (China falls into this category).⁴

Alcock was not a rampant imperialist and was ambivalent about Britain's activities in East Asia, particularly over matters like the opium trade, respect for local laws, and even whether Britain should be there at all. He once wrote, 'It has been said, with only too much truth, that in all history there is not a more dismal and humiliating chapter, than that which records the conduct of civilised, and especially of Christian nations; towards those that are uncivilised or semi-civilised' (China and Japan were in the 'semi-civilised' category).⁵ However, at other times, he sounded like a martinet: 'a salutary dread of the immediate consequences of violence offered to British subjects ... seems to be the best and only protection in this country [China] for

3 John Darwin, 'Orphans of Empire', in *Settler and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas*, edited by Robert Bickers (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 329–45.

4 The phrase 'informal empire' or 'semi-colonial' has been used to describe a situation in which a nation was not formally a colony but was subject to such strong military and economic power from outside that it was as if they were. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson posited in 'The Imperialism of Free Trade' (*The Economic History Review* 6, 1 (1953): 1–15) that Britain's nineteenth-century expansion overseas was as much through this kind of empire as by colonisation. More recently, John Darwin has shown how it was informal empire—not its formal one—which enabled Britain to achieve global dominance in the second half of the nineteenth century (*Unfinished Empire* (London: Penguin UK, 2013)). The morality of this kind of empire building has been much considered. Alcock himself basically believed that British colonisation was a force for good (although he occasionally argued the opposite) but was dubious about the benefits of 'informal empire', at least in the cases of China and Japan. The morality of Britain's activities in China has been well assessed by Robert Bickers in *The Scramble for China* (London: Penguin, 2012) and elsewhere. He sees the West's role as fundamentally brutal and exploitative, but presents a nuanced picture, arguing that the CCP's 'national humiliation tale' is a distortion of the history (394). He is a lot less black and white than J. Y. Wong, who relentlessly catalogued Britain's sins in useful, but one-sided detail: *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism, and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

5 [Rutherford Alcock], *Our Policy in China: Or a Glance at the Past, Present, and Future of China in its Foreign Relations and Commerce* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1858), published anonymously, 26–7.



Englishmen.⁶ And he certainly defended the British presence in China and Japan through his actions. His chopping and changing makes him an instructive guide to the moral complexities of British imperialism. This ambivalence has seeped into this book: I feel conflicted about his actions in East Asia and rather than pronounce judgment on them, I hope I am enabling the past to speak for itself.

Alcock today is viewed much more positively in Japan than he is in China. Modern Japan sees the nation's engagement with the West in the 1850s and 1860s as being ultimately good because it made Japan's leaders realise how far they had fallen behind, which fired them with the determination to catch up.⁷ Furthermore, the West, particularly Britain, supplied the know-how for them to succeed.⁸ The *bakumatsu* (the end of rule by the shoguns) and the 'Meiji Restoration' of 1868 (the transfer of power to the emperor and his ministers) is considered to be a heroic period in the nation's history, in contrast to China's view of those years as being part of its 'century of humiliation'.⁹

*

Thomas Baty wrote back in 1952 that Alcock's 'life remains to be written, and is well worth writing', so why has no biography been published until now?¹⁰ I suspect that it largely comes down to the impenetrability of Alcock's

6 Alexander Michie, *The Englishman in China During the Victorian Era as Illustrated in the Career of Sir Rutherford Alcock, K.C.B., D.C.L., Many Years Consul and Minister in China and Japan*, vol. I (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900), 135.

7 This positive view is greatly helped by the fact that Japan's leaders refused to accept Western influences uncritically and were determined to preserve the nation's traditional values, a point emphasised by Alistair D. Swale in *The Meiji Restoration: Monarchism, Mass Communication and Conservative Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Michael Auslin's *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and the Culture of Japanese Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004) is good for showing that Japan was far from a passive victim of Western power.

8 Britons accounted for half the foreign experts (*o-yatoi gaikokujin*) who were employed in the early Meiji period and two-thirds of those at the Public Works Ministry, which was responsible for major technological projects (H. J. Jones, *Live Machines* (Tenterden, Kent: Paul Norbury publications, 1980), 7).

9 A good place to start with understanding the place of the *bakumatsu*/Meiji Restoration period in the nation's psyche would be Shiba Ryōtarō's *Ryōma ga Yuku* ([Sakamoto] Ryōma on his way) (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1997–1998). Another useful book for this—in English but making extensive use of Japanese sources—is Donald Keene's *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His world, 1852–1912* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002). An excellent guide to the Restoration and its later resonance in Japan is Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000).

10 Thomas Baty, 'The Literary Introduction of Japan to Europe', *Monumenta Nipponica* 8, 1/2 (1952): 38.



output and, in particular, the difficulty of reading his handwriting. This creates a formidable barrier to understanding him, especially for Japanese and Chinese scholars who are not native speakers of English.¹¹ It should be said that a quasi-biography was published in 1900 by Alexander Michie, *The Englishman in China During the Victorian Era as Illustrated in the Career of Sir Rutherford Alcock, K.C.B., D.C.L.*¹² Michie explained that he had planned to write ‘some account of occurrences in the Far East during his own residence there’ and after Alcock’s death decided to focus it on him because ‘there was no other name round which these events could be so consistently grouped during the thirty years when British policy was a power in that part of the world’.¹³ So it is more a history of the times than a biography, and large sections of the book barely mention Alcock. As a reviewer in *The Graphic* put it, we end up knowing ‘little more of the personality of the man at the end of the 950 ... closely printed pages of this work than we did at the beginning’.¹⁴ (It certainly evoked its subject in its wordiness and cannot be recommended to any but the most diehard Alcock fan.) The other problem with it is that it is hagiography:

The life history of Sir Rutherford Alcock is that of the progressive development of a sterling character making in all circumstances the most of itself, self-reliant, self-supporting, without friends or fortune, without interest or advantage of any kind whatsoever. From first to last the record is clear, without sediment or anything requiring to be veiled or extenuated. Every achievement, great or small, is stamped with the hall-mark of duty, of

11 This barrier is clearly not impenetrable because a Japanese scholar, Sano Mayuko, is currently working on a life of Alcock.

12 The other main biographical works on Alcock are Hugh Cortazzi, ‘Sir Rutherford Alcock, Minister to Japan 1859–62’ and ‘Alcock returns to Japan’ in *British Envoys in Japan, 1859–1972*, edited by Hugh Cortazzi (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2004), 9–21 and 33–8; and in Japanese, Masuda Tsuyoshi, *Bakumatsuki no Eikokujin: R- Ōrukoku oboegaki (Bakumatsu Englishman: notes on R. Alcock)* (Kobe: Kobe Daigaku Kenkyū Kiwamushō Shokan Gyōkai, 1980), and Sano Mayuko, *Ōrukoku no Edo: Shodai Eikoku Koshi ga Mita Bakumatsu Nihon (Alcock’s Edo: Bakumatsu Japan as Seen by the First British Minister)* (Tokyo: Chūōkōron Shinsha, 2003). A particularly sympathetic portrayal of Alcock’s career in China can be found in P. D. Coates, *The China Consuls* (Oxford: OUP, 1988). John McMaster is probably the writer in English who has been most critical of him in, amongst other works, ‘Alcock and Harris: Foreign Diplomacy in Bakumatsu Japan’, *Monumenta Nipponica* 12, 3 (1967): 305–67. The most recent piece on Alcock is Sano Mayuko’s ‘Disturbed Reciprocity: Rutherford Alcock’s Diplomacy and Merchant Communities in China and Japan’ in *Chronicling Westerners in Nineteenth-Century East Asia*, edited by Robert S. G. Fletcher and Robert Hellyer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 55–84.

13 Alexander Michie, *The Englishman in China*, vol. I, v.

14 *Graphic*, 22 December 1900.



unflinching devotion to the service of the nation and to the interests of humanity.¹⁵

Before working on this book, I wrote biographies of two of Alcock's subordinates who also served in Japan and China, A. B. Mitford and Sir Harry Parkes, so by writing this one I have covered the years from 1859 to 1883, which take us through the dying days of the shogunate and the first fifteen years of the Meiji government from the British perspective (along with China from the 1840s to the 1880s, although that is more patchy).¹⁶ The demise of the shoguns and their replacement by a constitutional monarchy was the key turning point in Japanese history. Biographers live in hope that great events like these are easier to grasp if told through the experiences of a single key figure.

This book was much harder to write than the other two because of the amount of reading involved. Alcock certainly had 'the pen of a ready writer', a phrase from Psalm 45 that was often used about him. He described the publication of his thousand-page doorstopper *The Capital of the Tycoon* as 'bestowing my tediousness upon the Public', showing a glimmer of feeling for his readers, although this does not seem to have made him bestow a bit less of it.¹⁷ On top of a large published output, he wrote hundreds of official memoranda, reports and despatches, which are all available to view in the Foreign Office files at the National Archives in Kew, a place which becomes your second home if you are engaged in a project like this.

All nonfiction books involve the writer having to make tricky choices about what to put in, but when the source materials are on this scale, you are only including a tiny fraction of what is out there. Unfortunately, this means you are leaving so much out that you cannot avoid distorting the picture—my view of what is important would not be the same as that of an economist or a social historian. And I have tried (although it may not seem like it) to make the book as easy to read as possible—I am aiming for comprehensibility rather than comprehensiveness. For this reason, I do not want anybody to think this is the last word on the events covered in the book, or indeed on Alcock himself. Rather, I will be glad if others read it and decide that there is still plenty left for them to say.

15 Michie, *The Englishman in China*, vol. I, vi.

16 Robert Morton, *A. B. Mitford and the Birth of Japan as a Modern State* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017) and *A Life of Sir Harry Parkes: British Minister to Japan, China and Korea, 1865–1885* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

17 Alcock to Hammond, 10 January 1862, FO391/1.

A particular lack in this book is the relatively little use of Chinese and Japanese sources. I decided that, as I was basically telling Alcock's story, it was best to primarily use his own accounts of his activities, along with those of his superiors and colleagues. I hope that Chinese and Japanese scholars will fill some of the very big gaps created by this approach.

Having complained about Alcock's verbosity, I must hasten to state that buried under it is a remarkable story. In that he was a middle-class boy who rose to the highest level of the diplomatic service, he was very unusual for his time, but not unique. What was really different about him was the way he did it: he resisted taking almost every position he gained, and the higher the position, the more he resisted taking it. Almost every job he had was one he did not want.

And yet he made a success of pretty much everything he did, and his few failures were not really his fault. He ended his life a prominent and respected public figure in Britain. Usually, great men are the ones that grabbed their opportunities. Alcock was one who did everything he could to throw them away. Playing hard to get rarely works well in public life, but he pulled it off.

So, his was a haphazard progress, in which he moved forward by zigzag movements instead of in a straight line. This makes him interesting to write about—every stage of his eighty-eight years was full of activity and consequence amidst all his twists and turns. It was a remarkable career, lived against the backdrop of great events in Portugal, Spain, China, and Japan, along with the UK.

History remembers him for starting Japan's modern relationship with Britain, but he also made significant contributions in the fields of surgery, exploration, colonisation, philanthropy, art, religion, and, most notably, public health, although they are forgotten today. I have learned a lot about a really diverse range of topics while working on this book and feel grateful to my subject that he has led me down such unexpectedly interesting paths. I sincerely hope that my readers, spared the need to read the unexpurgated Alcock, may get as much out of his journey through life as I have.

