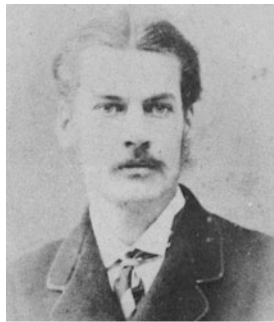
Ernest Mason Satow *A Diplomat in Japan* (1921)

Yoshihiro Ohsawa



Ernest Mason Satow

Ernest Mason Satow was born in London in 1843. His father was born in Sweden and his mother was English. He studied at University College in London, and at the age of 18, he joined the British Legation as a student interpreter. He wanted to be stationed in Japan, and after training in Beijing, his wish was granted. His study of Japanese in Japan was rewarded with a position as a Japanese-speaking diplomat assisting British Minister Harry Smith Parkes. Satow published an article in the *Japan Times*' British Policy section, in which he tried to explain the political situation in Japan for the British. In the article, he advocated that the Emperor be made the head of state and a coalition of lords (*daimyō*) be placed under his reign. His arguments were translated into Japanese and had an impact on the political

Yoshihiro Ohsawa passed away before the publication of this English language edition.

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situation in Japan. He became a secretary of the British legation in Japan in 1868, returned to the UK briefly with permission in 1869, and came to Japan again in 1870. Later, after leaving Japan in 1883, he was posted to Siam (Thailand), Uruguay, and Morocco. In 1895, he became Minister to Japan, and in 1900, Minister to Qing China, where he handled the Boxer Rebellion. He then left the Foreign Office and retired to the little village of Ottery St. Mary in Devonshire. He remained unmarried all his life (although he had a Japanese child with Takeda Kané). Satow authored many works, excelling especially in the field of Japanese and Oriental studies. He was conferred the title "Sir" for his services as a diplomat, and died in 1829, at the age of 86.

Ernest Satow was a British diplomat who lived in Japan at the end of the Edo period. The period he covers in *A Diplomat in Japan* is a total of 8 years, from 1862 (Bunkyū 2) to 1869 (Meiji 2). This was the period during which modern Japan was being formed, and Satow witnessed the establishment of Meiji Japan in all its tumultuousness. This was not only an interesting experience for him, but his records of it are valuable and relevant to us today. Above all, there is no reservation in his narrative. Because of his disregard for authority, a complete translation of this book was not authorized for publication until Japan's defeat in World War II.

Of course, the historical background of the Meiji Restoration is well known today. If you want to know facts, it would be better to read a textbook on Japanese history. The pleasure of reading Satow's book lies elsewhere. First of all, it gives us a behind-the-scenes view of the political process that led to various political decisions. Both the Shogunate (bakufu) and the Satchō alliance (between the feudal domains of Satsuma and Chōshū) used a variety of methods to probe foreign political intentions. The use of pseudonyms to conceal one's identity was a common tactic in those days, not only in diplomatic negotiations but also in everyday life.

In 1865, Satow first met Saigō Takamori during his stay in Hyōgo, Japan, and the encounter went as follows: "I [...] made an even more interesting acquaintance. This was a big burly man, with small, sparkling black eyes, who was lying down in one of the berths. His name, they said, was Shimadzu Sachiu, and I noticed that he had the scar of a sword cut on one of his arms. Many months afterwards I met him again, this time under his real name of Saigō Kichinosuke." No identifiable photograph of Saigō has yet been found until today, and Satow's depiction fills that absence. Here we can see Saigō living in history.

In Satow's book, what one finds is not only the historical figures engaging in political tactics. The book reveals the enthusiasm of those normally referred to as "the masses" in the following description: "Some difficulty was experienced in making our way through the crowds of people in flaming red garments dancing and shouting the refrain *ii ja nai ka*. They were so much taken up with their dancing and lantern-carrying that we passed along almost unnoticed, but I was half afraid the escort (*betté*) would provoke a quarrel by the violent manner in which they thrust people aside in order to make way for us; on the contrary, the crowd did not offer any rudeness to us, and let us pass without hindrance."

This was Osaka in 1867. It is well known that at the time a popular movement of this kind was active in the Kinai and Tōkai regions from August of the same year, but it is only through Satow's writings that we can imagine the atmosphere in which this

movement took place. The scene of the foreigners, and the Japanese samurais guarding them, as they weaved their way through the dancing crowd; the shouts of "ee ja nai ka" (Satow writes "ii ja nai ka") is incredibly vivid, almost cinematic. It is a pleasure to be gained by reading this book.

At the age of 18, when Satow read Laurence Oliphant's *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857–59*, which his elder brother had borrowed from the library, he was fascinated by Japan. The Japan he saw in the book was a fairyland that seemed out of this world. But when he visited Japan later in life, he found it to be a country full of deceit and fear. The foreigners in Japan at the time were convinced that "A Japanese was synonymous for a dishonest trader," Satow reported. He himself often encountered cases where he felt that way. He also met officials of the shogunate who spoke with a "double tongue." He was once targeted by imperialist loyalists who advocated: "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians (*Sonnō jōi*)." It must have shattered his boyhood preconceptions of Japan. Nevertheless, Satow did not suddenly shift from total affirmation to a rejection of Japan. Such was his fine sense of balance.

Satow was present at the execution of the murderers of two British officers in Kamakura, and shortly afterward he wrote: "It was impossible not to hate the assassin, but nevertheless, looking at the matter from a Japanese point of view, I confess that I could not help regretting that a man who was evidently of a heroic type, should have been so misguided to believe that his country could be helped by such means." Satow did not assume the British position as an absolute, but tried to consider multiple perspectives, even in the case of the murder of his fellow nationals—a matter that would have been of great concern to any diplomat. This shows his flexible attitude.

How did the Japanese landscape and the daily lives of Japanese people appear in the eyes of the unbiased Satow? Getting to know his impressions is another pleasure of reading this book. It offers nostalgic, memory-filled scenes that have virtually escaped the modern Japanese. The pleasure of looking at sepia-toned photographs of the past, or the pleasure of meeting ancestors in them, may not bring any material benefits, but it is indeed inexhaustible pleasure nonetheless.

Moreover, reading Satow's narrative is not merely a nostalgic experience. In some places, Satow's descriptions of Japanese people's overt fear of foreigners, now superficial and hidden from view, are very amusing. For example, Satow once accompanied a colleague and a young Japanese man named Matsune to a red-light district in Ozaka (Osaka). He wrote the following about that time: "A room had been taken in Matsune's name, and some of the bepowdered and berouged girls were awaiting the arrival of the Japanese party they had expected to meet, when to their surprise and horror three Europeans were ushered into their midst. We were at that time objects of more alarm than interest to the women of Ozaka. The fair damsels starting up with a scream fairly ran away, and no assurances from our friend would induce them to return."

It is true that even today, there are Japanese who shrink when they meet Westerners, but nowadays they would not all be so naïve. If not an everyday occurrence, it is no longer so rare to associate with a foreigner. Things have changed

dramatically. So, can we say we are not as dismayed today as the prostitutes of the Edo period were? No, in fact, it is not quite so. I do not think it is wrong to say that the Japanese today share their dismay at the deepest level of their consciousness.

Finally, I would like to mention the landscape as Satow saw it. For example, he writes of Edo (Yedo) as follows: “Though it [Yedo] contained no fine public buildings, its position on the seashore, fringed with the pleasure gardens of the *daimios*, and the remarkable huge moats surrounding the castle, crowned with cyclopean walls and shaded by picturesque lines of pine-tree, the numerous rural spots in the city itself, all contributed to produce an impression of greatness.” He also writes about Ozaka Castle: “Soon after passing Ama-ga-saki we came in sight of the castle of Ozaka, a conspicuous object in the landscape by its shining white walls and many-storied towers, visible for many a league.”

In today’s crowded metropolis, it is difficult to imagine what Satow saw. In particular, Tokyo and Osaka have changed drastically during and after the high growth period of the Shōwa 30s (from 1955 onward). The fields of the past are no longer there. Instead, reinforced concrete buildings line the streets. There is, however, no use in lamenting and turning to the past for salvation. People live in the present. However, this does not mean that we can ignore the past. The lives of the Japanese people Satow saw must have been poor and constrained in many ways yet they seemed to live happily. According to Satow, the round window of the house he rented in Edo, located on a hilltop, offered a panoramic view of Edo Bay during the day. Today such pleasure has become a luxury that most people cannot afford.

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