**The Jennie Lovatt Letter: An Early View of Pusan in 1885**

Robert Neff

On December 13，1882，Paul George von Mollendorff, a German, arrived in Seoul, Korea, to serve as an advisor to the Korean court. He would play an important role in the opening years of Korea’s involvement with the west, both good and bad.

One of the first things he did was to establish the Korean Customs Service, patterned after the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service. In early 1883 he recruited some thirty westerners, Chinese, and Japanese to come to Korea and help form the service. Four offices were created. The main office presided over by Mollendorff was in Seoul, while the other three offices were in the three open ports of Chemulpo (Inchon), Wonsan, and Pusan. These offices were to regulate trade into the country, collect tariffs and taxes, and help prevent smuggling.

Among the group that Mollendoiff brought to Korea was William Nelson Lovatt.1) Lovatt, unlike most of the other men recruited, had some experience, having worked previously in the Chinese Customs Service, and was accordingly selected to serve as Commissioner at Pusan, Korea’s main port. The other Commissioners were Wright2) at Wonsan, and Stripling3) at Chemulpo. These three

1) William Nelson Lovatt (1838-1904) is often mistakenly referred to as a German, but he was an Englishman by birth and eventually became a naturalized American citizen. His history is an interesting one. He lied about his age to get into the military and served in China, where he rose through the ranks and eventually achieved the rank of colonel. After finishing his military service, he joined the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service until Mollendoiff recruited him in the early spring of 1883 to help establish the Korean Customs Service. Prof. Wayne Patterson is currently writing a book based on the journals of William Nelson Lovatt and the correspondences between him and various family members. This book will be a valuable asset as well as enjoyable reading for those interested in the daily life of a western family in Pusan in 1883-1886.

2) The Englishman T.W. Wright first came to the Far East in 1878 to take up a position with the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service. He was recruited by Mollendorff in early 1883 and was offered the position of Commissioner at Wonsan. The customs service in Wonsan was opened in October 1883, and soon afterwards T.W. Wright brought his wife and mother-in-law to live with him in a small house that he had renovated. These women were probably the first Western women seen by Koreans in the Wonsan area. The family remained in Wonsan until May 1886, when Wright was relieved of his position in the wake of Mollendorff losing his own position in 1885. Wright was later given a position as a clerk in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service in Shanghai, China, by Mr. Robert Hart, the Chief Commissioner. This was probably out of compassion for him and his family, and punishment for having left the service and joining Mollendorff, a man Robert Hart did not like.

[page 86] men spent a great deal of their own money (this may have been one of the factors in their selection) to get operations going, and hoped to eventually turn a profit after a few years at their posts. After nearly two and a half years of service, however, three were fired after Mollendoiff lost his position within the Korean government.

The records of the daily operations of the early Korean Customs Service have been lost, most of them destroyed in a fire in 1885. It is for this reason that the following letter written by Jenny Shaw Lovatt, the wife of William Nelson Lovatt, is so important. It sheds light on the early operations and financial difficulties experienced by the Korea Customs Service, and affords a rare glimpse into the daily life of the first Western woman to live in Pusan.

I would like to thank Mrs. Dorothy Shaw Gillette, a distant relative of Jenny Shaw Lovatt, for providing me with a copy of the original letter, and for granting permission for it be published in Transactions. Jenny’s handwriting was difficult to read, and in some parts there are words that were illegible and thus have been left blank

Fusan, Corea

April 8，1885

My dear Mother,

We expect the little steamer Hever4) here tomorrow and as she will

3) Alfred Burt Stripling (1838-1904) was an Englishman recruited by Mollendoiff to come to Korea and help establish the Korean Customs Service at Chemulpo in 1883. Prior to coming to Korea he served with various departments of the Shanghai Police Department for nearly 19 years. After Mollendorff was relieved in 1885, Stripling remained in Korea to work with the Korean government as a gold mine prospector, and then later as an advisor to the police department. His health failing, he later retired and lived comfortably on the wealth that he had acquired through land speculation.

4) This was a German steamer that operated along the coast of Korea and was eventually bought by the E. Meyer and Company in Chemulpo. It traveled the Nagasaki-Pusan-Mokpo- Chemulpo route and on to Chinese ports. Even though Mokpo was not an open port, the German company had a contract with the Korean government to transport tribute rice from the various ports, and was thus able to enter ports closed to other western ships. Karl Luhrs,, an employee of E Meyer and Company, wrote about his trip from Nagasaki to Korea aboard this ship in July 1886 and mentioned them loading rice at Mokpo.

[page 87] probably be just in time to meet the Shanghai Mail Steamer in Nagasaki we are anxious to get all our letters ready to go by her. I am very glad we are to have her coming for the next three months our way and if she gets enough business to make it pay her she will probably keep on this line and will likely come twice a month. I have told John5) about our missionary friends and think that there is not much more to say about them. Mr. Appenzeller6) came from some place not far from York, Penn. Possibly Mr. Nesbit7) may have heard of him. They seemed very nice people and you can imagine how much I enjoyed seeing a country woman of my own again and tried [sp.] to convince them this was the best place for them to stop but they said they had been sent to Seoul by the Society at home so they must go there.

Mr. Mollendoiff again wished Will to come to Chemulpo when he was here but Will would not say that he would do so. I hope Mr. M. will not insist upon it as one should like to stay here as long as we have to stay in Corea. Will can manage this office very well but up at Chemulpo they are always nearly in debt. This month Mr. Stripling send down to see if Will would not let him have $1,000 from this office to help pay his staff. When they get any money it is taken on to Seoul so then they can not manage very well. How Will always looks out to keep enough around to pay the staff for a month or two. We do not feel very secure about the Customs Service in Corea but if it holds out for another year Will will not be the worse for coming here. But for the good name of the service we should like to see its affairs a little better managed then they seem to be at present.

Mrs. Mollendorff will be here next month. Mr. M. has made a new house at Pukchong8) his place in Seoul and I suppose Mrs. M. will bring

5) Jennie Lovatt’s brother.

6) Appenzeller arrived at Pusan on April 5，1885 with his two-month pregnant wife. He was a large man for the times, nearly six feet tall and weighed about 200 pounds and was muscular with gray eyes and brown hair. They left Pusan shortly after arriving and proceeded to Seoul with Rev. Underwood. Rev. Appenzeller would later drown after his Pusan-bound steamship, the Kumagawa Maru, collided with another steamship (Kisagawea Maru) of the same company on June 11，1902.

7) Jennie Lovatt’s brother-in-law

8) This is probably spelled incorrectly and should have been “Pakdong”. “Two days after returning from China, he moved into a large, newly remodelled [sp.] house, attractive according to Oriental style and standards, located in Pakdong, not too far from the royal palace. The house was rumored to be haunted by ‘a ghost-appearance,’ inasmuch as it used to belong to Min Kyom-ho, who had been tragically killed in the Imo Revolt of 1882; it had remained vacant since then. Actually, the king had arranged for this house for von Mollendorff even before his arrival in December 1882, but he was worried about the ominous gossip. Von Mollendorff, however, laughed at the rumor and was more than glad to make the house his residence.” (Yur-bok Lee, West Goes East: Paul Georg Von Mollendorff and Great Power Imperialism in Late Yi Korea (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), p. 51.)

[page 88] out new families for it, and they will make themselves comfortable.

But still I think Mr. M. does not always find his position a pleasant one. The King’s favorite is one that generally incites the envy of many and always stands in danger of being displaced by some new favorite. Mr. M. gave me a very good picture of himself in his Corean dress. The Suruga Maru9) came in this morning. She is on her way to Waldevostock [Vladivostok] and is making her first trip this season. The harbor of Waldevostock is frozen over for about five months of the year. Captain Hussy says Waldevostok is quite different from any other city in the East. They drive horses in wagons and carriages there and have wide roads all through the country and have cows and other stock on the farms around the city and plenty of milk and butter are for sale10) and the place looks much like a western town in U.S. but the place does not yet work as a city but only as a military post and is governed by a Russian military officer.

Mabel11) is not feeling very well and I expect will end up by having the measles.

I have been sewing some lately, I have finished my black basque. I trimmed it with the remains of my black velvet jacket and it looks quite well. It is quite a long job to make a basque without a machine to sew

9) The Tsuruga Maru was a Mitsubishi Mail Steamship that operated from Kobe-Nagasaki- Pusan-uensan-Vladivostok It was later moved to the western coast of Korea and served Chemulpo and China. Captain Hussy was the same captain that brought Mrs. Denny and her party to Chemulpo from Shanghai on June 1, 1886.

10) She seems to be interested in the milk and butter because it was difficult to come by in Korea. The Koreans did not believe in milking their cows because they thought that it was cruel to the calves. One of the reasons for the ‘Baby Riots’ in 1888 was a misunderstanding over canned milk and photographic equipment. The missionaries had no milk cows, and the Koreans could not fathom the idea of milk in a can. So rumors got started [some claim Yuan Shih-K’ai, the Chinese Resident Minister, was behind them] that the missionaries were kidnapping Korean women and chopping off their breasts for milk.

11) The Lovatt’s daughter. Later that year and the following year Pusan was stricken with cholera to such an extent that the open port was quarantined.

[page 89] up the seams. I got a very pretty easter [hard to make out] pattern by last mail. I suppose Bessie12) must have sent it. I am very obliged for it. I shall have a look around the Japanese shops some day and see if I can find some materials to make me a dress. Nellie13) says she has got for a spring dress and got it early so as to have it to wear to a concert at which she expects to take part in the singing. I am glad to hear that she can sing.

April 9

At last we have a bright morning and the storm is over I think. The Hever is not in yet, but I hope she will come today so as to be in time for the mail. Mabel seems much better this morning and she may escape the measles after all. Miss Yamada14) says that Sato and F....[unreadable] are having them very light. The Coreans are trading here much more this year than last and the customs house is doing much better.

If England and Russia go to war15) it will probably make wheat very higher next year so that means [hard to read] will have a good year for business but it is hoped this affair will be settled peacefully between England and Russia. Cap. Creighton16) said when in Nagasaki an English

12) Jenny Lovatt’s sister.

13) The daughter, Helen, of William and Jenny Lovatt.

14) This might have been the daughter of Mr. S. Yamada, the agent for the Mitsubishi Mail Steamship Co. in Pusan, the company that owned the Tsuruga Maru. It is probably not stretching the imagination too much to say that the employees of the company and the Customs Department had a good relationship with one another. The two names that are mentioned afterwards might be family members or employees. “Sano” might be the father and employer of the company, or he might be S. Shimaoochi the accountant while might be the interpreter F. Enomoto.

15) England and Russia were at odds over central Asia, particularly the Afghanistan region. War looked imminent and the British on April 15, 1885, entered into the harbor of Komundo (known to the British as Port Hamilton) with their heavy ironclads the Agamemnon, Pegasus, and Firebrand Thus began a two year occupation that the Bntish government claimed was a pre-emptive move to keep the Russians from claiming the islands. The two countries were able to resolve their central Asian problems without going to war, and England eventually removed its presence from Komundo after receiving assurances that Russia would not occupy any part of Korea.

16) Probably a steamship captain on one of the Japanese steamships, possibly the Chitosa Maru or the Tamaura Maru.

[page 90] man of war was watching every Russian man of war in this harbor so that if war should be declared they would probably do some fighting out here on the high seas. We hear that the Japanese are not succeeding in their agreement with China and there is a rumor that the French are getting very friendly with the Japanese.17) If all the rumors of war that we hear are to prove true I think there would be fighting nearly all over the world.

In my last letter I enclosed a check for $20 which I hope reached you safely. Did John get the $17 and will find him all right? I fear the children are sending money for spring clothes but Will says he can only send Willie a check until he sends Jane more money to her bank which he will be able to soon. I hope to hear that Mr. Nesbit has got his school for another year. I trust you have got better of the pain in your back and that father’s rhumatism has all gone and that you are all very well. Mabel sends lots of love and many kisses to Grandpa and Grandma. Will sends love to all at home. I am as ever your affectionate daughter J.S. Lovatt

17) The French and Chinese had fought a war the previous year in which the Chinese were badly beaten and forced to negotiate with the French and give up their claims to Indo-China.