*The Life of William Richard Carles*

Brother Anthony of Taizé

W. R. Carles’s book *Life in Corea*, published in 1888, is one of the very first books about the country based entirely on personal experience. Yet no account of his life seems ever to have been published. What follows is based on records and materials available through the Internet.

William Richard Carles (1848 – 1929) was the second son of the Rev. Charles Edward Carles, B.A., Vicar of the parish of Haselor, Warwick, and Georgiana Baker, his wife. His father had studied at Catherine Hall, Cambridge. His elder brother, Charles Wyndham Carles (1842-1914. M.A. Lincoln College, Oxon) was born on 29th December, 1842. William Richard Carles was born in Warwick on June 1, 1848. Both brothers were educated at Marlborough College, where they played cricket. William Richard entered the Consular Service in 1867, when he was sent as a student interpreter to China. He served in various parts of China from 1867 to 1901. He reports that his first journey in Korea was made in the early winter of 1883, at the time that a treaty between Great Britain and Korea was being negotiated by Sir Harry Parkes. He was appointed “provisionally” British Vice-Consul for Corea on March 17, 1884, at the same time as William George Aston (1841-1911), then Consul at Nagasaki, was appointed to be “provisionally” Her Majesty's Consul-General for Corea (*The London Gazette*, March 25, 1884, p. 1404). Both served there in 1884 and, in Carles’s case, into 1885 and were the first European representatives to reside for any length of time in Korea. Carles was perhaps chosen for the position on account of his knowledge of Chinese.

Aston was born in Londonderry, educated at Queen’s College, Belfast, and had been in Japan since 1864, arriving there first as a student interpreter. He had been studying Korean since the mid-1870s and was fluent in both Japanese and Korean. He had accompanied Vice-Admiral Willes in 1882 as interpreter during his visit to Korea, when Willes drew up a treaty based on the American treaty with Korea, and signed it on behalf of the British government, but this treaty was later repudiated by the British government. Aston, with others, had to make repeated visits to Korea in 1883 to negotiate a new treaty, which Aston and Sir Harry Parkes, the British Minister to China, drafted. This new treaty, the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Her Majesty [Queen Victoria] and His Majesty the King of Korea, was signed at Seoul on 26 November 1883, and marks the beginning of Anglo-Korean relations. It was Aston who in May 1884 secured the land on which the British legation / embassy now stands. On December 4, 1884, Aston attended the dinner held to celebrate the opening of the Korean Post Office, during which a group of pro-Japanese reformists staged the Gapsin coup, killing and wounding many of the pro-Chinese conservative ministers present. Aston and his colleagues were taken through icy streets to the safety of the American legation. Aston fell sick and was obliged to leave Korea for good early in 1885.

Carles says in his *Life in Corea* that in all he spent some 18 months in the country. The first part of the book, chapters 1-4, describe his first visit late in 1883. This was a private visit, on the invitation of a Mr. Paterson, a partner in the firm of Messrs Jardine, Matheson & Co.. It happened to coincide with the visit by Sir Harry Parkes to Korea to negociate the new treaty. Carles accompanied two other Englishmen, Paterson and Morrison, and a Dane, the rest of the group being composed of Chinese servants, 3 ponies and several dogs. They arrived at Chemulpo from Shanghai on November 9, 1883. After a few days in “Soul” (the way Carles always spells Seoul), on November 16 they set out to explore the mining areas immediately to the north and east in already freezing weather. After returning they spent a few more days in Seoul, then they went to Chemulpo to return to Shanghai but their boat had left. They were obliged to take another boat to Busan, then on to Shangahi, where they arrived on Christmas Eve, 1883.

After being appointed Vice-Consul in April 1884, Carles returned to Korea at the end of April and attended the ceremony in the palace on May 1, 1884, when Sir Harry Parkes presented a letter from Queen Victoria to the King. After the conclusion of the ceremonies, Carles took up residence as Vice-Consul in Chemulpo, which was still a very small settlement with no adequate buildings and little to do. He made occasional visits to Seoul, endured a dreadful summer, then early in September he was ordered by London to make a survey of the so-far unexplored northern regions, to see if there were business prospects for Britain in that direction. They set off on September 27 and returned to Seoul on November 8. On his return, Carles was ordered to take up the position of Vice-Consul in “Fusan” (as it was then known). He therefore sent his furniture down to Fusan and left for a short visit to Shanghai. He had not returned when the Gapsin Coup erupted on December 4. Carles seems to have returned quickly to Seoul, where he took the place of Aston, who had returned to Japan sick soon after the coup. Carles was present at and describes events in Seoul during the spring of 1885, and lists the gifts of food he received from the King. He does not say when he left Korea. We know he was in London in January 1886, when he presented his paper about Korea to the Royal Geographical Society.

In July 1886, Carles was appointed Vice-Consul at Shanghai (*The London Gazette,* July 13, 1886, p. 3396). He cannot have left at once, though, since he and Helen Maude James were married in Devon in September 1886. He was appointed Consul at Chinkiang (Zhenjiang) in July, 1889 (*The London Gazette*, July 19, 1889, p. 3895). His wife is recorded as having given birth to a son at Shanghai in 1890 (*North China Herald*, February 14, 1890, page 1.) but the newspaper records no name and nothing more is known of him. Another son, Alan James, was born on 1 February, 1894, in Chinkiang.

In September, 1897, Carles was appointed Consul at Swatow (*The London Gazette*, November 15, 1897, p. 6077). In May, 1899, he was made Consul at Tientsin (*The London Gazette*, June 20, 1899, p. 8866) and was promoted to Consul-General there in June, 1900 (*The London Gazette*, August 14, 1900, p. 5032). During the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, he acted as go-between for the besieged legation in Pekin. In January, 1901, he was made a Companion of the Order of Saint Michael and Saint George and he seems to have retired back to England soon after. Apart from a paper on the history of Shanghai he presented to the China Society in London in May 1916, there is no online record of any activity by him for the rest of his life.

During the time he spent in Korea, Carles made several trips to explore the interior of the country. He published reports about them in various places, including at least one Government Paper, the paper given to and published by the Geographical Society of London in 1886, and in *The Field,* before publishing his *Life in Corea* in 1888. The book was republished in 1894. Apart from the monumental *Choson: The Land of the Morning Calm* by the American Perceval Lowell dated 1886, it is the first book-length account of Korea published on the basis of an extended period of residence in the country. William Elliot Griffis had published his *Corea, The Hermit Nation* in 1882 without once setting foot in the country. Carles’ book includes photos taken by Lieut. G. C. Foulk U.S.N., “who was in charge of the united States Legation in Soul while I was there in the early part of 1885.” Foulk made a heroic journey through the southern regions of Korea in the autumn of 1884, but his account of it was not published until 2008.

Carles was a keen botanist and he sent plants which he collected to the Royal Botanic Garden in England. In addition to Korea, he collected plants and sent them back to Britain from China (1877-98: Fukien; Hopeh; Kiangsu); India (1884-91 ); and Japan (1892-96). His name was given (unbeknown to himself) to the wonderfully fragrant Korean Spicebush Viburnum (*Viburnum carlesii*) by William Botting Hemsley, Director of Kew Gardens. He became a Fellow of the Linnaean Society of London in 1898. A set of his plants from Korea, Kiangsu, and Fokien is in the Kew Herbarium

William Richard Carles and his wife Helen Maude James were residing at “Silwood”, The Park, Cheltenham (Gloucester) at the 1911 Census, together with a daughter, Helen Mary, aged 23, born in China, and 3 sons, Richard Eric (aged 18, born in Berkshire), John Robin (aged 11, born in China) and Henley William (aged 8, born in Dorset). Their son Alan James (aged 17, born in 1894 in China) was serving as a naval cadet at the time. Mrs. Carles’s brother, John Ernest James, a retired school-master, was living with them, as were four servants and a “hospital nurse.” Charles Wyndham Carles, William Richard’s older brother, also a retired school-master, is recorded as being present as a visitor in a nearby house (“The Woodlands” The Park, Cheltenham) on the day of the census. Perhaps he had come on a visit and there was no room for him in his brother’s house? He was headmaster of Cothill School, Marcham, Berkshire at the time of the 1891 census.

A few years later, during the war, Lt Alan James Carles, Royal Navy, was killed (missing in action) when HM Submarine E22 was sunk on 25th April 1916, in the North Sea off Harwich. Acting Captain Richard Eric Carles of the Bedforshire Regiment was awarded the Military Medal “for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty” (*Supplement to The London Gazette*, 22 June, 1918), the location is not specified. He died on 14 December 1924, aged only 32.

William Richard Carles died in June, 1929, in Bradfield, Berkshire. His wife lived on until 26 November, 1953, when she died in Reading, Berkshire.

**Publications**

*Foreign Office Report Of a Journey by Mr Carles in The North of Corea*. HMSO. 1885

“Recent Journeys in Korea.” In *The Proceedings of The Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* Vol. VIII, No. 5. May, 1886. pages 289 – 312, having been read at the Evening Meeting of the Society, January 25th, 1886.

*Life in Corea* (London ; New York : Macmillan and Co. 1888, 1894)

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"The Yangtse Chiang", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Sep., 1898), pp. 225–240; Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)

*Some Pages in the History of Shanghai,* 1842-1856 : A Paper Read Before the China Society on May 23, 1916. (London : East & West, Ltd. 1916)

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“The Emperor Kang Hsi's Edict on Mountains and Rivers of China. A translation of the edict originally published in the winter of 1720-21.” 12pp. Map. *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society.* 1922

Peter Korniki’s account of Aston’s life and activities:

http://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/deas/korean/aston-and-korea.html