

## "A *Might Have Been* on the Other Side":

Laurence Oliphant's Missions to China and Japan in Margaret Oliphant's *Memoir* (1891)

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### Introduction

Laurence Oliphant was a prominent and problematic celebrity in his time, being a traveller, a diplomat, a writer, a Member of Parliament, a British intelligence agent, and a spiritualist. Margaret Oliphant was not exactly his close relative, but a very good family friend who may have shared an ancestry. Two years after his death, she published *Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant and of Alice Oliphant, His Wife* (1891). The retelling of Laurence's life in the *Memoir* will be studied in this presentation, with particular attention to Chapter Six, "The Mission to China," which also includes his experiences in Japan. This is one of the most intriguing chapters in the *Memoir*, not only because Laurence's real-life adventure in East Asia was indeed an exciting one, but also because it owes to Margaret's retelling and editing. This presentation investigates how Margaret has established Laurence's image as an intrepid achiever by integrating the exotic representations of China and Japan.

I also wish to connect Margaret's own unfulfilled sentiments concerning her own life with the *Memoir*. Margaret once confessed that she "used to be intensely impressed in the Laurence Oliphants with that curious freedom from human ties" (*Autobiography* 15). In contrast, Margaret later says she "always had to think of other people, and to plan everything ... always in subjection to the necessity which bound me [her] to them" (*Autobiography* 16). Though she comforts herself by saying that she "did with much labour what I [she] thought the best, and there is only a *might have been* on the other side" (*Autobiography* 16) (original italics), her obsession with Laurence to the extent of writing a three-hundred-pages biography seems undiminished. This may be, I would argue, because Laurence was also an acclaimed writer like Margaret herself, not just a free-spirited wanderer of the world, hence embodying her idea of "a *might have been*."

### Laurence in China

Laurence gladly accompanied Lord Elgin to China as a private secretary during the Second Opium War. Up to that point in Laurence's biography, Margaret had established the early image of Laurence as a young "heaven-born diplomat" (*Memoir* 12), who was not a "creation of school or college" (*Memoir* 13). She also portrayed him as a mommy's boy; especially in the earlier half of the biography, she alludes to him as a darling "Lowry" with a "chivalrous tenderness for his mother" (*Memoir* 12). This may be a reflection of her own experience of motherhood to four boys. Margaret, who struggled with bringing up her own sons though she loved them dearly, may have felt envious of such a strong stable bond between mother and son.

Margaret remarks at the end of Chapter Five that Laurence "was so far independent that he had the means of *moving about at his pleasure without any absolute necessity to work for daily bread*, - a fact which gives wings to impatience, and *makes every sudden movement practicable*" (*Memoir* 115) (my italics). This is subtly a reversal of Margaret's situation as written in her own autobiography, where she confesses about how she envies Laurence's freedom and ponders what she could have done with her life or what she "might have been" without her hardship. Margaret claims that she "have had a great deal of my own way ... but only *at the cost of infinite labour, and of carrying a whole little world* [her family] *with me whenever I moved*" (*Autobiography* 16) (my italics). In a nutshell, Margaret and Laurence were opposites in terms of wealth, mobility, and domestic responsibility.

Despite the chapter being entitled "The Mission to China," Margaret limits her retelling of the Chinese part to less violent scenes and most of all dedicated her pages to the discussion of Laurence's religious thoughts. Her main intention was probably to establish herself as an intimate and advantaged biographer who can access confidential letters and delve into his enigmatic spirit and spiritualism that later came to the attention of Victorian society. On the other hand, it seems that the stories set in China were a mere prequel for the upcoming journey. The reader's dissatisfaction towards the sense of stagnation or lack of vivid elements in China as portrayed by Margaret is recuperated by the latter half of the chapter: his adventures in Japan.

### Laurence in Japan

During the long wait upon the sea before the final ratification of the Treaty of Tientsin, Lord Elgin's expedition including Laurence had a chance to briefly visit Japan, which impressed them in comparison to their stressful experience in China. Consequently, as Laurence had wished, he returns to "Yedo" or Tokyo in June 1861 as First Secretary of Legation under Sir Rutherford Alcock. Naturally, Laurence is thrilled about this new opportunity in a country that he pictured as a dreamland. However, it can be observed that Margaret did not necessarily take his representation of Japan at a face value. Margaret carefully implies that Laurence favoured Japan because he wanted to escape from China, where the British had many diplomatic troubles. Margaret cautiously discerns that Laurence's experience in Japan was "when all was novel and fresh, and the strangers were received with naive enthusiasm before any complication had arisen" (*Memoir* 150).

The climax of Laurence's adventure in Japan is the First Tozen-ji Incident, in which the British Legation located in the Zen temple in Shinagawa was attacked by anti-foreign ronins in the middle of the night of July 5th. In order to feature this attack dramatically, one of the techniques she used was to quote from a peaceful letter written only a few days before the outrage. According to the letter, Laurence initially felt that "[w]ith entire humility one is in no danger whatsoever and a truly sincere Christian ... might live here [in Japan] in perfect safety all his life" (*Memoir* 152).

Even after suffering from the attack, from which he did not fully recover physically, it seems that Laurence was not at all disillusioned by Japan. Although he never returned to Asia afterwards in his life, he occasionally lectured about Japan at universities in Scotland, and when some Japanese students from Satsuma came over to London, he kindly guided them as their mentor in society. Moreover, it is known that he even took six of them to Brocton, New York, to introduce them intimately to the mystic utopian community of Thomas Lake Harris.

The reason why Laurence kept his sympathy to Japan throughout his life may come from various factors. For one thing, Laurence seems to have been satisfied with the Japanese government's explanation that the Legation attack was "an expression of private hatred alone, and entirely unconnected with any official" (*Memoir* 156). Margaret also quotes Laurence's thought-provoking words: "The result of our forcing ourselves upon people who never wanted us, has been to place us in the dilemma from which the only escape is one or other of the courses I have proposed" (*Memoir* 156). It is hinted here that Laurence might have harboured an ambivalent feeling towards Britain's imperial endeavours in Asia, especially after witnessing the controversial war with China. The bottom line is that he is introspectively aware that they are "forcing" themselves upon foreign nations and he sees the attack as its "result," as if to say that the British brought it on themselves.

## Conclusion

Margaret's *Memoir* can be read as a structured bildungsroman of Laurence Oliphant in epistolary style. Her main objective was to honour him and to promote her privileged connection with the distinguished family, heavily using private letters that only she could obtain. Her intensive focus on Laurence and Lady Oliphant's mother-and-son relationship, and her sympathetic representation of Laurence as an adorable boy or lively youth that obscures his faults, may come from Margaret's own maternal mindset and her difficult but nonetheless cherished experience with her own sons. Simultaneously, the *Memoir* importantly reflects her own yearning for freedom and mobility coupled with her intricate idea of gender identity, or the idea of "a might have been". While Margaret self-deprecatingly assesses herself as "a fat, little, commonplace woman, rather tongue-tied" (*Autobiography* 17), she also writes that she has "learned to take perhaps more a man's view of mortal affairs" (*Autobiography* 10). As for Chapter Six of the *Memoir*, or the retelling of Laurence's adventures in China and Japan, it well reflects the above characteristic of the biography as a whole. Not only that, but the chapter also highlights Margaret's ingenuity in reconstructing his adventures, effectively highlighting Laurence's activity in Japan in contrast to the previous toned-down observation in China. Concurrently, Margaret keeps her own reserved attitude towards Laurence's infatuation with Japan. The *Memoir*, though it is hardly read today, still holds significance when looking at issues of life writing, gender, and empire.

## Works Cited

Oliphant, Margaret. *Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant and of Alice Oliphant, His Wife*. William Blackwood and Sons, 1892.

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