

# Julian Tenison Woods in Japan: Two Journeys

RODERICK O'BRIEN

Lefevre Catholic Community, SA 5019  
roderick.obrien@mymail.unisa.edu.au

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The Linnean Society of New South Wales includes among its members Fr Julian Edmund Tenison Woods, a distinguished nineteenth century Australian scientist. From 1883 to 1886, Woods conducted scientific research and travelled in Southeast and East Asia. This included two visits to Japan. This article gives some reconstruction of his travels in Japan, outlines his scientific work, and provides some of the later output which Woods generated as author, as collector, and as artist. The article also touches on the secretive nature of his work in Japan, though without giving a definitive conclusion.

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## INTRODUCTION

Julian Tenison Woods will be well known to members of the Linnean Society of New South Wales. Woods was an active member of the Society in its early years. There is a very helpful overview of his work in the natural sciences delivered to the Society by the then President (King 2016). Rather than repeat the overview given there, I will assume that you have ready access to this. Professor King notes that Woods joined the Society in 1876, served two terms as President in 1880 and 1881, and remained a Vice-President until his death. One of his last activities, on 24 October 1888, less than a year before his death, was to chair a meeting of the Council of the Society. King also notes that Woods contributed over 70 papers to the Society. I would also recommend, as he did, a very useful biography by Margaret Press (Press 2004).

Julian Tenison Woods made two visits to Japan, the first in April to June 1885, the second in September 1885 to February-March 1886. Margaret Press dates his leaving Japan at February 1886 (Press 2004, 214), but David Branagan (in a lecture given at Penola on 6 June 1995) dates this departure in March. These visits were part of a three-year sojourn in Asia, beginning when he sailed from Brisbane in August 1883 and concluding with his return to Darwin in late

June 1886. During these years he travelled widely in Southeast and East Asia, generating scientific reports, learned papers, popular scientific papers, and numerous letters. He delivered many lectures, and some have been recorded. Though dogged by sickness, he continued to publish after his return to Australia, until his death in 1889.

The Japan visits total around eight or nine months, a significant portion of his thirty-four months away from Australia. As King (2016) made only cursory comment on Woods' Asian travels, I offer this review of Woods' visits for the detail which they give us about Woods' life and research.

## THE FIRST VISIT

Woods left Hong Kong on 10 or 11 April 1885 and sailed for his first visit to Japan. His stay, apparently intended to be short, in fact lasted to 21 June 1885. He was very impressed by Japan, and on his return to Hong Kong he had time to write to his brother Terry: *'Nevertheless I never liked any country as much as I liked Japan & would go there again tomorrow if I cd.'* (Woods 2008, 7 July 1885).

As happened many times on his journeys, Woods became sick, and so the visit became longer than he expected.

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### THE SECOND VISIT

Woods began his second trip from Hong Kong in mid-September 1885. He may not have intended to visit Japan, or at least not immediately. He had intended to visit China and travel the Changjiang (Yangtze) river, but cholera broke out on the China coast, and he headed for Japan (Woods, 2008, 24 September 1885). He seems to have spent much of his time in Arima, in the mountains near Kobe, escaping cholera and then smallpox, and the quarantines which were enforced against those coming from infected areas (Woods 2008, 14 December 1885).

Woods' finances were always precarious. He not only had to support himself, but also to assist his ailing brother. Writing to a friend, William Archer, during his second visit to Japan he commented:

*'Well you will say, when is this wandering to cease? I don't know but no one can say that I have not had hard work for many years in Australia and I can't see that I can be of much more use just now so I might as well travel. But the most laughable thing about it is that I am as poor as Job and yet am able to get about just as I wish and never want for anything. You know I never saved anything and yet everyone thinks me rich because I travel so much and have all I want. It is quite a miracle, isn't it?'* (Woods 1983, 2 November 1885).

In 1882, the Garden Palace in Sydney was destroyed by fire. Among the government and private owners to suffer loss was the Linnean Society, whose loss was estimated at £2,500. The loss for Rev J.E. Tenison Woods was estimated at £1,500, which must have been a significant blow to his finances just before he left Australia. Neither the Society nor Woods seem to have been insured (Anon. 1882). With such a financial situation, we can agree with Woods that it seems to be a miracle that he was able to travel so extensively. But we can also note his hard work in government and private consulting, and in writing for profit.

### RECONSTRUCTING WOODS' MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

We can reconstruct some of his movements from his publications and his letters. Woods' writings give us some information about what he did in Japan. But his writings do not distinguish between his two visits, and it is not always possible to place a particular location in one or the other visit. These writings were

published after his return to Australia in 1886. Woods visited Kobe during both of his visits.

Significant work on Japan is included in a series of letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the Asian coal trade. These show that he had spent considerable time investigating coal mines and the coal market in Japan. Woods certainly visited Nagasaki, and in the midst of his technical and commercial discussion, there is a nice description of entering the harbour:

*'But beyond question the principal mines are in the island of Takasima, a few miles from Nagasaki. As one steams up this beautiful harbour amidst the circlet of hills and mountains of charming aspect, one sees numberless sheltered bays, each with its trim-looking town lining the shore with peaked houses and pagodas. Noticeable amongst these are the mines of Takasima on the right, while Nagasaki is fully visible in front. In this island many seams of coal are visible, which will be described presently. Next to Takasima the most important mines in Western Japan are Miike and Karatsu.'* (Woods 1887c, IV).

Woods thanks individuals for their information and hospitality. He specifically mentions Mr Glover and Mr Stoddart at the Takasima colliery (Woods 1887c, VI), but he also relied on research by others, and so it is not possible to retrace his travels through places mentioned in his writings. Yet there are some clues, scattered in other writings.

In his description of the Volcano of Taal, published by the Society, Woods mentions that he has seen a plant in Taal, and in Japan, near Simonosaki (contemporary Shimonoseki) (Woods 1887a). Shimonoseki is a significant port and the scene of the Shimonoseki campaign of 1863-1864. In the same article, Woods mentions the widespread use in Japan of gourds as containers but does not refer to a particular place.

After his return to Australia, there were reports of a volcanic eruption in Japan. This gave Woods an opportunity to pen a letter on the topic (Woods 1889). In his published letter on a volcano in Japan, Woods mentioned that he had visited the Bandai mountain about three years before. As the letter was published in January 1889, this could place the visit to Bandai in about January 1886.

Writing about his trip along the Victoria River in the Northern Territory, Woods remarks in passing that the rapids in the Victoria River reminded him of rapids in the Katsura River, which is between Osaka and Kyoto (Woods 1887b).

## TWO TALENTS

One of the many gifts that Woods displayed in Japan was that of a linguist. His talent was worthy of special mention in the remarks of Professor Liversidge of the Royal Society of New South Wales, in 1890. These remarks are included as an appendix to Anderson's survey of Woods' geological work (Anderson 1989). In Malaya he could quickly communicate in Malay. In Japan he was able to pick up rudimentary Japanese, for his daily needs. By the time of his second visit, he could write from Arima to his old friend William Archer:

*'I am living in a Japanese house of wood and paper, especially paper; amongst Japanese people entirely and no other medium to express my wants and no other outlet or inlet for social intercourse than the Japanese language. Thus I am learning it rapidly without much trouble.'* (Woods 1983, 2 November 1885).

At Woods' anniversary, geologist Peter Anderson referred to 'His enormous erudition including extensive knowledge of contemporary scientific literature in at least English, French and German' and this talent is reflected in his Asian journeys (Anderson 1989).

Another scientist, a geographer, has suggested that Woods always remained linked to his early training in journalism (Powell 2001). A significant proportion of Woods' work was not intended for specialists, but for the general or lay reader, and much was published in newspapers or generalist journals. When engaged in his priestly work in Australia giving missions, 'it was his invariable custom to deliver a popular science lecture or two during his visit.' (Curran 1889-90).

## HIS COMMITMENT TO MISSION

Throughout his Asian journeys, Woods never wavered in his faith and in his commitment to ministry as a priest. While we have examples from other places, there is little in his letters from Japan to describe his ministerial life.

Writing to Archer from Arima, Woods expressed his contentment in difficult circumstances:

*'I am very happy, for I have three Christians near me, one of whom serves Mass in my paper house, and so far I am well provided for spiritually and temporally.'*

Woods also mentions his daily Masses, and his baptismal work:

*'And yet I am not entirely idle. I have baptised nine pagans in all — five were dying infants so there was not much difficulty in my conversions.'* (Woods 1983, 2 November 1885).

## HIS SCIENTIFIC WRITINGS

His first major writing to include Japan was a series of articles on the trade in coal in Asia and Australia, published in the Sydney Morning Herald late in 1887. These articles are vintage Woods: he includes his own observations, incorporates the reports of others (acknowledged), and field interviews with those in the trade. The article ranges from the islands of Borneo, to Formosa and the China mainland, and then to Japan. It is an article about the economics of the trade, with strong statistical detail about pricing and the market. Considering that Woods' own finances were often in disarray, it can seem surprising that he is so detailed about the financing of coal. A writer nearer to Australia's coalfields was quick to draw attention to Woods' work (Anon. 1887).

Woods had a gift for scientific writing. He could write his own technical reports, he could deftly summarise the research or explorations of others, and he could write popular pieces which brought science to the general reader. While he valued the esteem of his scientific peers, he also valued the income which he could derive from his popular writings. Woods not only had to support himself, but also the family of his sick brother Terry. Woods hoped that his articles on the coal trade could be republished in Hong Kong (Woods, 1887c, V), perhaps to earn a little more from the work, but there is no record of this happening. He had extra copies made of his article on the volcano of Taal which the Linnean Society had published, hoping to sell them (Woods, 1983, 22 March 1888).

I have mentioned that in 1888, there was an eruption at Mount Bandai (Bandai San) in Japan, which resulted in serious loss of life. Woods, back in Australia, was able to write a short article which recalled his own earlier visit to Mount Bandai. It was a popular scientific work, including the physical and cultural resemblance to Mount Fuji, and the volcanology of the Japan islands (Woods 1889).

In the opening paragraphs of his Geographical Notes in Malaysia and Asia, Woods mentions that he will include some comments on Japan, but he does not provide any (Woods 1888). His biographer Sr Anne Player suggests that he intended a second part of this general paper, but that because of his increasing illness it never eventuated (Player 1989).

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In a letter to William Archer, Woods had mentioned examining botany and geology (Woods 1983, 2 November 1885). To his sister-in-law Sarah Woods, he wrote that he

*“was spending my time in botanizing and examining the geology of the country.”*  
(Woods 2008, 31 December 1885).

Not long after his return to Australia, in Brisbane he was interviewed at the wharf by a reporter, and the report mentions that Woods spent eight months in Japan ‘mostly botanizing’. This wharf-side report perhaps put both journeys together (Anon. 1886). However, only his geological examinations were included in the publications he managed to produce before his death.

### THE MYSTERY

What was Julian Tenison Woods doing in Japan? There is a gap in our knowledge, but enough hints to make us curious. In his letters to his ailing brother Terry, Julian broadly hints at a confidential enterprise. In a letter headed from Kobe 24 September 1885 (during his second visit), Julian writes:

*‘I wd try return as soon as I could if I knew you really were in any serious danger, but I cant do so immediately I have undertaken to do a certain work here & as money not my own has been expended I must fulfil my part of the contract.’* (Woods 2008, 24 September 1885).

And in a letter dated from Arima on 24 October 1885, Julian writes:

*‘I am sorry to add that I cannot return immediately. I have undertaken a certain work which I must do before I come back & it is one which I cant throw up or leave. Yet it may not take very long & then as far as I can see I will go back to Australia as soon as possible.’* (Woods 2008, 24 October 1885).

Again in December he wrote to Terry:

*‘I am not travelling for pleasure now, & would go away at once if I had no obligations to fulfill.’* (Woods 2008, 14 December 1885).

Writing to Terry’s wife Sarah shortly after his return to Australia, Julian writes:

*‘Had I been travelling for amusement or for myself I would have been at Terry’s bedside long ago. But you know dear Sarah until I came back to Australia I have not been my own master.’* (Woods 2008, 31 December 1885).

So who was his master? And what were his duties? We know that Woods was accustomed to accept government or private paid commissions for his geological work. These employments were open, and the resulting information made its way into his publications. As an example, we can note that between his Japan visits, he had accepted a commission from a newly formed gold-mining company to advise on gold prospects in the Malayan sultanate of Pahang. On his return to Singapore, he immediately wrote an article about this for the London magazine *Nature* (Woods 1885).

Woods’ series of letters on the coal trade indicate that he was very familiar with the trade in Japan. Could it be that he was commissioned to investigate coal in Japan?

Fr John Milne Curran (1859-1928) was a geologist who contributed six papers to the Linnean Society. Woods had encouraged Curran and given him books. After Woods’ death, Curran wrote a short biography of Woods (Curran 1889-90). In his biography, Curran remarks:

*‘The British Admiralty placed HMS Pegasus, commanded by Captain Bickford, RN, at his disposal, with instructions to report on the coal resources of the East, that could be available in time of war. His reports have not been made public, but their value must have been very great for the Admiralty was munificent in recompensing him for his work. An able officer on the China station remarked that Tenison Wood’s (sic) discoveries as to the coal resources of the East had increased the strength of the English Navy in that part of the world by a force better than half-a-dozen good-sized frigates.’*

However, those comments seem to relate to earlier work by Woods in south-east Asia, not to his work in Japan. Woods was only associated with HMS Pegasus for six weeks in 1884, in Labuan and Borneo. And certainly the ‘munificent’ remuneration, if it ever existed, had vanished by the time Woods returned to Sydney. Woods depended, in his final years, on the charity of friends, and what he could earn from his publications.

Another early biographer thought this likely: Jesuit Fr William O’Dowling, who wrote the entry on Woods for the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1910, thought that Woods was employed by the British Admiralty (O’Dowling 1910). George O’Neill, writing a few decades after Woods’ death, conjectures that he was probably engaged in evaluation of the coal resources and other minerals that lay at the disposal of China,

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Japan, and other non-British owners of territory in Eastern Asia, on behalf of the British government (O'Neill 1929). Nearly 30 years ago, I wrote that O'Neill might be reading too much into the situation (O'Brien 1994). However, perhaps I am in a minority. More recently, historian of geology David Branagan (in his lecture in Penola) also has the opinion that Woods might have been examining mineral resources, especially coal, for the Royal Navy. Branagan tried unsuccessfully to find reports that Woods might have written, and I have also tried with the same lack of success. At this point, the mystery must, I think, remain unsolved.

### WOODS' COLLECTION AND ART

While in Japan, Woods collected mineral samples, and local curios. On his return to Sydney, he took part in a *Conversazione* organised by the Royal Society of New South Wales on 5 September 1888, in the Great Hall of the University. There were forty-four exhibitors, the Rev. J.E. Tenison Woods having perhaps the largest exhibit. His exhibit featured curios from Japan, Java, the Philippine Islands, and other places, and included a bottle of ash from Krakatoa, Java (Anon. 1888). Others exhibited on his behalf at meetings of the Society.

In 1890, after his death, his executrix disposed of Woods' estate, and the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences purchased some of his samples and curios. The Museum has more than 150 items collected by Woods, and the majority are from Japan (Powerhouse Museum undated). The items from Japan were part of a much larger collection. Anni Turnbull of the Powerhouse Museum wrote:

*'The collection offered for sale by his estate in 1890 contained a huge number of valuable specimens. Over 800 shells and 450 mineral specimens were acquired by the then Technological Museum. Many of these have now been transferred to other institutions, but a few choice pieces remain.'* (Turnbull 2013).

At least one drawing from Japan has survived in his notebook of drawings made from 1872-1886, which is now held in the State Library of New South Wales (State Library, undated). The website Design and Art in Australia Online (DAAO) also refers to

*'a series of delicate watercolours he made while ill and snow-bound in Japan during the winter of 1885-86.'* (Callaway 2011).

However, the link for this website is broken, and it needs further investigation. Plants which he collected

while in Japan may have been purchased by his long-time friend Baron Ferdinand von Müller, and may still be available (Anon, undated).

### CONCLUSION

Anita Callaway describes Woods as *'sketcher, scientist, Roman Catholic priest, and mystic'* (Callaway 2011).

This is a description which is unlikely to be matched. In Woods' two visits to Japan, we can observe some of these descriptions in action. Perhaps we could add more: he is remembered as a collector, an important role in nineteenth century Australian science. We also observe Woods' talents as a journalist and author. Yet in observing Woods' two visits to Japan, our focus is largely on his scientific work. And it is as scientist that Woods is best remembered by the Linnean Society of New South Wales.

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