Journal of Global Buddhism 2025, Vol.26 (1): 54–60
DOI: 10.26034/lu.jgb.2025.8029
www.globalbuddhism.org
ISSN: 1527-6457 (online)

Discussions and Critical Notes

Captain John Mathews James (1838–1908): The Cornish Seaman who Became Known as the First Western Nichiren Shu Buddhist in Japan in the Nineteenth Century

Valentine Harding
Independent Researcher

This critical note outlines research to date on the history of John Mathews James, part of an ongoing project. During my research so far, I have found only one published article in the UK and further private research undertaken by Nichiren Shu Buddhists in Japan and the UK. Captain James seems to be unknown to academic researchers in the field of Buddhist studies. I shall outline the life events that led Captain James towards embracing Nichiren Shu Buddhism in Japan and highlight some of the social and political contexts of his life. He does not appear to have participated in international Buddhist networks, and possibly this is the reason why he does not appear in English-language discussions of early Western converts. However, his memory has been kept alive and honoured by the Nichiren Shu community, who always refer to him respectfully as 'Captain James,' and I shall refer to him similarly throughout this article.

Keywords: Captain James; migration; seafaring; Japanese navy; Nichiren Shu Buddhism; Japan

John Mathews James (1838–1908) left the shores of England in 1853 at the age of fifteen, employed as a 'ship's boy,'[1] and died in Japan at the age of seventy. My interest in Captain James and my knowledge of his existence are through my family history. He was the godfather of my grandmother, born in 1883, and related through the extended family network.[2] Around 1967, my grandmother gave me a copy of his obituary from a Penzance newspaper (1908) that hailed him as "a distinguished native of Penzance" and described his life as a seaman, conversion to Buddhism, and the location of his tomb in Japan. The obituary remained in the possession of my family for many years, but I took little notice of it until I became interested in Buddhism myself. Then, in the year 2001, one of my nephews was working in Japan and agreed to visit Captain James's tomb at the Kuonji temple on Mount Minobu, where he discovered just how well-known he was in Japan. In 2001, the temple continued to receive an annual gift from the emperor in his memory. Apart from the information in the obituary, we still knew very little about him until 2018, when we saw a blog post on the internet entitled "Walking with Captain James." The blog was written by the Reverend Kanse Capon from the Nichiren Shu Temple in Dagenham, East London, UK, and was a record of his pilgrimage over the course of four weeks when he walked 318 miles from Penzance to London, chanting the *Odaimoku* (*Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*) in the name of Captain James. The doors then began to open.

My account of Captain James's life is drawn from two main sources in addition to my own family history research. These include published research by Sebastian Dobson in an article written for the Japan Society (Dobson 2013) and private research undertaken by the Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto in Japan.

[1] The lowest rank of the shipboard hierarchy, running errands for officers and passengers, cleaning and menial tasks, as well as assisting with rigging and sails and navigation.
[2] The James family and my grandmother's family were Anglicans, and the appointment of Captain James as her godfather would have been a social arrangement rather than one carrying religious responsibilities.

The significance of a life may vary from one group of people to another. My parents were not at all familiar with Buddhism, and they did not talk much about Captain James. My grandmother died before I could ask her more questions. However, to some of my contemporaries of the present day, who have a greater knowledge of Buddhism, his life is a more fascinating story and should not be forgotten. Historically, his life is significant in the evolution of modern Buddhism as a part of the "dizzying array of interactions and connections across Asia" (Bocking, Cox, and Turner 2013: 2). His memory has been kept alive by Nichiren Shu Buddhists who have a deep respect for him and he is believed to be the first European to embrace Nichiren Shu Buddhism, and as such he is seen as having become a foothold or foundation for Nichiren Shu's missionary work in Europe, the desire to spread the *Lotus Sutra* throughout the world being an important part of Nichiren Shu teaching.[3]

Early Life and Emigration from Cornwall

Captain James was born in Penzance, Cornwall, UK, the son of an accountant and the grandson of a shipbuilder. The family lived very close to the harbour, and Captain James would have grown up familiar with the sea and seafaring occupations. Two of his brothers were also mariners, as were other men in the extended family, all living within the vicinity of this Cornish seaport, well-known in popular history for its association with smuggling and piracy. The nineteenth century was also an era of mass emigration from Cornwall, and other members of the family were emigrants, including Captain James's first cousins. Most emigrants moved to the colonies of Australia, South Africa, Canada, North America, and elsewhere, and ex-Cornish communities established themselves abroad and often took their native culture with them.[4] However, it seems that Captain James adopted the culture of the country he moved to rather than bringing his home culture with him, and in this respect, he did not follow in the footsteps of other Cornish migrants.

There were multiple factors contributing to emigration from Cornwall. These included potato famine in Cornwall in the 1840s (Payton 2020: 8), and later in the 1870s the decline of the tin and copper mining industries (Payton 2020: 9). However, there was already a spirit of migration and a 'culture of mobility' (Payton 2020: 26) earlier in the century generated by economic depression, high rents and heavy rates and taxes and dissatisfaction with the institutions of church and state (Payton 2020: 54–55). Emigrants sought improved opportunities in the colonies.[5] Although these factors might have influenced Captain James's family, his departure from Penzance at the age of fifteen would also have been driven by family seafaring traditions and perhaps a desire for adventure. It was said, later in his life, that by all accounts he was in his element when at sea (Dobson 2013: 5).

His career as a seaman began in 1853 in Penzance at the age of fifteen, working as a 'ship's boy' onboard a merchant ship bound for Mauritius. Four years later, he worked for the Bombay Steam Navigation Company in India.[6] After this, he was employed as an officer and then as a master from 1862–1865 aboard opium clippers owned by the trading company Messrs. Jardine and Matheson. He progressed through the ranks of the mercantile marine (later known as the Merchant Navy)[7] and was a Master (Captain) by the age of twenty-six.[8] He was known as 'Captain,' however, it is important to note that this was not a military naval rank.

[3] Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto. Personal communication 2025.

[4] Cornish pasties, saffron cake, Methodism, Celtic traditions, Cornish language.

[5] Between 1861and 1900, Cornwall lost an estimated 10.5% of its male population overseas, which included 44.8% of the male population aged between fifteen to twenty-four (Payton 2020: 24–25).

[6] Significantly, this was the first Indian-owned shipping company in British India.

[7] The term 'Merchant Navy' was not in use during Captain James's lifetime. The Merchant Navy in the UK today describes commercial ships and the civilian seafarers who operate them. It is distinct from the Royal Navy, which is a military organization. The term 'Merchant Navy' was first coined by King George V in 1919 to honour the sacrifices of civilian seamen who provided invaluable support during the First World War, 1914–1918, upgrading merchant shipping to the status of 'navy'.

[8] Information obtained from The Captain's Register of Lloyd's of London (Guildhall Library Ms 18567). The register designates Captain James as a 'Merchant Navy Seaman' during employment on his early voyages (see footnote above). However, opium clippers were not officially registered and unlikely to be designated as 'Merchant Navy'. Captain James's career moved through the ranks from 'ship's boy', to Ordinary Seaman (OS), to 1st, 2nd , 3rd , 4th Officer, and then to Master (Captain).

The British Trade in Opium

Jardine and Matheson's opium clippers sailed between Calcutta (Kolkata) in India and Shanghai in China, transporting opium that was grown in large quantities in Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, and initially sold illegally in China. Opium production was controlled by the East India Company and impoverished the lives of millions of Indian farmers, while the ill effects of opium smoking blighted the lives of the Chinese population. Trade in tea was also built on the back of opium trading. The East India Company and Jardine and Matheson made huge profits.

Great Britain famously fought two Opium Wars with China, 1839-1842 and 1856-1860. By the time Captain James worked for Jardine and Matheson, the opium wars were over, and the opium trade was legalised, and Hong Kong had been ceded to the British. The Jardine and Matheson ships on which he worked were based in Hong Kong at the time.

At the start of the Opium Wars, British political opinion concerning the opium trade had been divided, with Lord Palmerston as Foreign Secretary in 1839 agreeing to British military action against China in defence of this illegal narcotics trade (Lovell 2011: 95), while William Gladstone was opposed to this "infamous and atrocious traffic" (Lovell 2011: 107). The Chinese Imperial Commissioner to Canton, Lin Zexu, working under Emperor Daoguang, forcefully condemned and opposed the British opium trade (Lovell 2011: 55). Julia Lovell describes how the officers on opium ships were well paid for shaving time off a voyage, for task-mastering potentially mutinous men, and for pirate-fighting (Lovell 2011: 28). Dobson (2013: 2) notes that Captain James had a reputation as a martinet, which was explained by one contemporary as "doubtless a legacy from hard experience on the opium ships with Malay crews in his early days". To be the Master (Captain) of an opium clipper at the age of twenty-six, even by the standards of those days, was a hard task. This was a high-risk occupation.

Shipwreck, a turning point, and an encounter with Buddhism

It was the next episode of Captain James's life that brought him into contact with Buddhism. In 1867, he was master of a ship named the *Genkai* carrying coal, tea, silk and pottery, but not carrying opium. However, these items would have been purchased from the sale of opium. The ship was sailing from Hong Kong to Britain via Singapore. The *Genkai* was owned by Thomas Glover, another well-known British/Scottish trader in the Far East at that time. The *Genkai* was caught in a severe storm off the coast of Hong Kong, resulting in the ship sinking and the crew being forced to abandon ship. Captain James and others reached the shore safely, but not before being attacked by local shore people off the coast of China who hoped to salvage some of the ship's cargo. Seventy-one lives were lost that night. In a tribunal investigating the loss of the *Genkai*, Captain James was fully acquitted; he and his officers and crew were not blamed for the incident and were commended for their actions, with the poor design of this steam-powered ship being partly to blame.[9] On board was a Japanese samurai named Seki Yoshiomi, who later became a politician. Captain James and Seki became friends, and it was apparently Seki who first introduced him to Buddhism. Around this time, several clans in Japan were secretly dispatching students to the West to learn skills that could benefit the advancement of a clan's interests in Japan. Seki was, in fact, being smuggled to the UK with Captain James in charge of his passage (Dobson 2013: 4). However, following this incident, both men returned to Japan.

This incident proved to be a turning point. He settled in Japan and built a house in Shinagawa, Tokyo. He continued to work as a seaman, but now he worked on various commissions to oversee the construction and delivery of warships built in British shipyards for the Japanese government at a time when Japan was modernising their navy during the Meiji period (1868–1912). The first of these commissions was the construction

[9] The loss of the *Genkai* was reported in the Shields Gazette and Daily Telegraph on Dec. 9th, 1867.

of the *Josho-maru* in Aberdeen in 1868 (Dobson 2013: 4). He also trained crews in naval skills and navigation. Captain James played a significant role in the development of the Japanese Imperial Navy. He married a Japanese wife, Kataoka Yaeko (Dobson 2013: 11); however, they did not have children. Kataoka Yaeko was a servant in the home of Japan's first Prime Minister, Ito Hirobumi, who acted as a matchmaker for the marriage.[10]

Having first been introduced to Buddhism by his friend Seki, he then studied with Seigain Nikko, a monk of the Nikko/Fuji lineage at Renchōji, a Shinagawa branch of the main Nichiren temple at Ikegami Honmonji, who also taught him Japanese (Dobson 2013: 8). He later studied with Arai Nissatsu Shonin (1830–1888), a famous and influential monk.[11] Jacqueline Stone notes that in the past Nichiren Shu has had a long history of confrontation within it's own sects and with other Buddhist traditions in defence of it's *exclusivistic* (sic) claim that only the *Lotus Sutra* leads to salvation (Stone 1994: 231), however, Arai Nissatsu Shonin promoted inter-sectarian cooperation between opposing Nichiren sects and became the first superintendent of several newly allied branches within the Nichiren sect incorporated under one name in 1876 (Stone 1994: 248), at the time when Captain James was studying Buddhism. In 1880, he was formally initiated at the temple of Enkaisan Ryūhonji in Yokosuka (Dobson 2013: 8). His choice of this branch of Buddhism would seem to be unusual for a Western convert at that time. The present-day Nichiren Shu belief is that Captain James was a man who wished for the happiness of others, and the Buddha's seed guided him. He is believed to be a true Bodhisattva.[12]

Life in Japan

During the Meiji period, Japan underwent a period of modernisation and renewed national identity, including a renewed Japanese Buddhist identity. It would appear that Captain James sympathized with the Meiji period movement, including the caution over Westernisation, the need for modernisation, defence against the threat of Western imperial power, and the Buddhist revival at the time. He openly expressed a dislike for Christian missionaries (Dobson 2013: 9). He was not alone in these sympathies, as other foreign residents and visitors to Japan at the time were interested in Japanese culture and Buddhism, and opposed Christian missionaries.[13] The well-known Theosophist and Buddhist Colonel Henry Olcott, who made a well-publicised tour of Japan in 1889, also criticized Christianity, seeing it as impeding progress (Snodgrass 2003: 167). Captain James met Olcott during his tour, but did not seem to be very impressed and was sceptical of his theosophist beliefs (Dobson 2013: 10). Captain James does not appear to have taken steps towards 'furthering the Buddhist cause' and does not appear to have been involved in the many international congresses and expositions of the late nineteenth century that made a major contribution to the globalisation of cultural ideas at the time (Bocking 2013: 23). Could this have been due to the policy of the Nichiren Shu branch to which he was affiliated?

Dobson flags up the possibilities of Captain James being a man who did not see a future in his native country and successfully found an "opportunity for self-advancement and self-discovery" in Japan (2013: 7, 13). This would be in keeping with the Cornish 'culture of mobility,' mentioned earlier, although more usually that involved migration to British colonies. However, I would suggest that Captain James adapted to life in Japan, perhaps feeling more ideologically at home there than he would have done in a country under British colonial control. While working for Jardine and Matheson's opium trading company, he had experienced British colonial policy firsthand. He then almost lost his life in a shipwreck, while at the same time, he encountered Buddhism through a fellow survivor of that shipwreck with whom he became a close friend. He distanced himself from the opium trade after this incident and took up residence in Japan. To become a Buddhist after this experience and to

[10] Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto. Personal Communication 2025.
[11] Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto. Personal Communication 2025.
[12] Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto. Personal Communication 2025. In the Nichiren Shu tradition, a Bodhisattva is one who has done good deeds in the past or who has contributed to society by wishing for the happiness of others, and is unconsciously led to places where the *Lotus Sutra* is preached.
[13] See U Dhammaloka, Charles Pfoundes, Lafcadio Hearn, in *Contemporary Buddhism* (Bocking, Cox, Choompolpaisal, Turner 2013). Also, the history of U Dhammaloka in *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk who faced down the British Empire* (Bocking, Cox, and Turner 2020).

declare his opposition to missionaries and colonial expansion would suggest that he had rejected the unethical stance of the opium trade. It is said that he viewed Christian missionaries as being in the "vanguard of colonial expansion by unscrupulous means."[14] His Japanese friends apparently later recalled how he would point out missionaries to them and denounce them as mere '*yamashi*,' or charlatans (Dobson 2013: 9). His life in Japan and adoption of Buddhism could be described in terms of '*dissident* Orientalism' (Cox 2013: 128). Laurence Cox describes '*dissident* Orientalism' in the context of the Irish experience of early Irish Buddhist converts identifying with other colonized nations and cites the individual example of the Irish monk U Dhammaloka, who sought to bring corrupt officials in the British Empire to book (Cox 2013: 128). Captain James's actions and words about missionaries and colonial expansion, and his support for Japanese nationalism and conversion to Buddhism, suggest his use of 'Asian vantage points to critique his own society' (Cox 2013: 128). While he may have been seeking opportunities for 'self-advancement,' he was perhaps also motivated by humanitarian principles and Buddhist ethics.

Dobson describes Captain James as the only Briton to have made a lasting impact on the toponymy of Tokyo. There is an uphill road named Zeimusuzaka ('James-Slope') near Shinagawa, Tokyo, which has served as a popular memorial to Captain James since the early twentieth century. Its original name, Sengenzaka, only appears now on a commemorative pillar standing at the base of the slope. Captain James requested and financed the building of this road to make it easier for local people to climb this very steep hill (Dobson 2013: 10).

There seems to have always been an element of enjoyment in Captain James's life. His chanting of the Lotus Sutra from his house in Shinagawa, Tokyo, was said to be audible throughout the neighbourhood.[15] He wore a kimono, and contemporary newspapers and memoirs of Captain James described him as "a Nichiren Buddhist, active, laughing, with a *juzu* (prayer beads) on his wrist" (Dobson 2013: 1). Nichiren Shu teaches that enlightenment can be achieved in this life here on earth. The Reverend Tsukamoto[16] thought that Captain James would have been attracted to Nichiren Shu for this reason and would not have been interested in Pure Land beliefs[17] that were a part of the doctrine of other schools of Buddhism prevalent in Japan at the time. Nichiren lays an emphasis on living in the here and now and practicing Buddhism in daily life, at work, with family, and in the world, not in retreat or in the next world. Captain James does not appear to have spent time on retreats; he comes across as a practical man, socially active, hardworking, and the sea was his 'nirvana.'

Dobson writes:

> By all accounts, James was a capable naval instructor and despite his increasing salary and growing respectability, the habits he had acquired as a sailor never left him. For the remainder of his life, James was a man of contrasts: at one moment, a friend recalled, he was 'the quintessence of urbanity', the next, 'an odd compound of quarter-deck manners with choleric outburst and foc's'le language that proved a sore trial to his friends'. By all accounts, he was in his element when at sea, and the Japanese navy provided him with a succession of challenging commands.... His Japanese pupils affectionately referred to him as 'kapitan'.... Possibly in order to avoid confusion with another British employee of the Naval Ministry with the same surname, or simply to amuse his students, James instead used the self-chosen sobriquets of 'Shinagawa James' and, more self-deprecatingly, 'Monkey James'. (Dobson 2013: 5)

However, there was a scholarly side to him. He presented three papers to the Asiatic Society of Japan on the topics of the travel of historic Japanese adventurers[18] and on Buddhism. His paper '*A Discourse on Infinite Vision,*

[14] Quote from Reverend Capon 2018 in the *Walking with Captain James* blog.
[15] Reverend Capon 2018.
[16] Personal communication 2025.
[17] The attainment of Buddhahood in the next life in the celestial realm of the Pure Land (Sukhavati).
[18] This was a translation from Japanese of a paper written by the Confusion scholar Saido Setsudo (Dobson 2013: 7).

as attained to by Buddha (1879)' [19], was a transcript of a discourse that had been held at the Shinagawa temple near Captain James's home the previous year, which he translated from Japanese into English. The original author of this transcript is unclear; however, it is likely that Captain James was present at the temple when this discourse was held (Dobson 2013: 8). The second paper, '*Descriptive Notes on the Rosaries (Jiu-dzu) as used by the Different Sects of Buddhists in Japan*' (1881) was written by himself in English.[20] When discussing the *juzu*, Captain James comments that they are "one of the molecular links on which the Buddhist dogma is composed," and he suggests that metaphysical reasoning is an essential part of understanding Buddhism. The paper goes on to describe an intricate and detailed knowledge and analysis of *juzu*. Likewise, the paper on *Infinite Vision* is a metaphysical discourse on the world beyond direct physical and sensory experience. Both papers are extremely interesting and provide an insight into the Buddhist doctrine that Captain James must have been studying.

He was also skilled in Japanese calligraphy, and samples of his work that were highly commended exist today. In 1890, he received a permanent annuity from the Japanese government. He was granted Japanese citizenship[21] and was also awarded three *Orders of the Rising Sun* by the Japanese Emperor and honoured with special status as a *shōnin*.

Death

He died at the age of seventy after a bout of ill health caused by kidney disease, in those days known as "Bright's Disease." His friend Seki Yoshiomi was at his bedside when he died. At his request, he had a Buddhist funeral, and his ashes were taken to the Kuonji Temple at Mount Minobu, where his tomb was erected in a distinguished position.

After his death, he was honoured with the Buddhist name 東海院殿忠篤義国日光大居士 (*Tō Kai In Den Chū Toku Gi Koku Nik' Kō Dai Ko Ji*; "Sun Bright of the hermitage of the Eastern Seas, the loyal and dedicated Great Lay Person who helped the people of Japan").[22]

Conclusion

Captain James made somewhat unique choices in his life, neither following the usual patterns of Cornish emigration nor the more conventional paths of Buddhism that other known early Western converts embraced.

His encounter with Japan was a positive one. He adapted readily, and he dedicated his life to the country. However, his family back home was not forgotten, and his becoming a godfather to my grandmother is one such example of the contact he maintained. Obviously inspired by what he learned about Buddhism, he put much time and effort into his study and practice.

His choice of Nichiren Shu Buddhism remains an interesting one. My plan for the next step in my research is to develop my knowledge of the characteristics of Nichiren Shu doctrine and practice in the Meiji era. How did a European like Captain James fit into this branch of Buddhism? Did Nichiren Shu Buddhism appeal to him because it suited his personality, and a preference for 'faith in action'? Apart from his papers to the Asiatic Society, Captain James does not seem to have been involved in networking or presenting Buddhism to Western audiences. Was this because he felt no need to do so, or was this following instructions from his teachers? It would be interesting to know how the priests who gave him instruction felt about accepting a foreign convert, and whether there were other Western Nichiren Shu converts in Japan following on after Captain James.

[19] *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (1879:267)
[20] Copies of these papers sent to me by Sebastian Dobson.
[21] Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto personal communication. Captain James was legally married with the approval of the Prime Minister Ito Hirobumi and Japanese citizenship would have been required for this legal marriage to take place. However, further research on documentation to establish this would be useful.
[22] Information and translation from Reverend Kanse Capon.

I think that Captain James would be pleasantly surprised if he knew that 110 years after his death, a Western priest of the Nichiren Shu school undertook a pilgrimage from Penzance to London in his name.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Reverend Kanto Tsukamoto in Japan, the Reverend Kanse Capon in the UK, and Sebastian Dobson in the UK for sharing their research with me. I would also like to thank Laurence Cox and Brian Bocking for pointing me in the direction of their work and research on early Western Buddhists.

References

Bocking, Brian. 2013. "Flagging up Buddhism: Charles Pfoundes (Omoie Tetzunostzuke) Among the International Congresses and Expositions, 1893–1905." *Contemporary Buddhism* 14 (1): 17–37.

Bocking, Brian, Laurence Cox, and Alicia Turner. 2013. "A Buddhist Crossroads: Pioneer European Buddhists and Globalizing Asian Networks 1860-1960." *Contemporary Buddhism* 14 (1): 1–16.

Bocking, Brian, Laurence Cox, and Alicia Turner. 2020. *The Irish Buddhist: The Forgotten Monk Who Faced down the British Empire*. Oxford University Press.

Cox, Laurence. 2013. "Rethinking Early Western Buddhists: Beachcombers, 'Going Native,' and Dissident Orientalism." *Contemporary Buddhism* 14 (1): 116–33.

Dobson, Sebastian. 2013. "John Mathews James (1838-1908)." In *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*. Vol. VIII. Japan Society.

Lovell, Julia. 2011. *The Opium War*. Picador.

Payton, Philip. 2020. *The Cornish Overseas: A History of Cornwall's "Great Emigration"*. University of Exeter Press.

Snodgrass, Judith. 2003. *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West*. University of North Carolina Press.

Stone, Jacqueline. 1994. "Rebuking the Enemies of the Lotus: Nichirenist Exclusivism in Historical Perspective." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 231–59.