

# “Prowd, Humorous, Dreamyng Fellos”: The English East India Company in Southeast Asia and the Failure of the Hirado Factory, 1600-1630



Jack Kontarinis

*The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate\\_honors\\_theses/tb09j715k](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/tb09j715k) or scan the QR code.*

“For God sake take heed of fire & [forget] not my  
pigeons & fishes.”<sup>1</sup>  
—Richard Cocks

Richard Cocks was an Englishman with a keen eye for detail. Countless passages of his Diary are spent nitpicking, suspecting, berating, or lamenting the various people and events that he encountered throughout his time as the head of the English East India Company’s factory at Hirado, between the years 1613-1623.<sup>2</sup> He was also a man given to intense surges of emotion. He often writes about his feelings of being betrayed by his fellow merchants, men who would consistently chide Cocks when they were in their cups. Cocks was even hard on himself when times got tough, although he was more inclined to place the blame for the failure of English trade on others, such as the Dutch, the other factories in Southeast Asia, and the Japanese.<sup>3</sup> But despite the nearly comical nature of much of Cocks’ writing, his Diary, two volumes and nearly 600 pages in length, provides an incredibly detailed basis for understanding the day-to-day operations of the English factory at Hirado. Paired with the

large volume of letters sent between the Company’s factories in Southeast Asia and to England, one can begin to understand not just the English factory at Hirado and its gradual collapse by 1623, but of the whole of the Company’s operations in Southeast Asia between 1600 and 1630.

Besides wondering how Cocks’ pigeons fared during his annual trip to Edo, his Diary and the correspondence between Company servants raise other questions as well. Why did the English trade ultimately fail in Japan? To what extent was the Company itself responsible for the failure of its factory? Was anything learned from the Hirado factory’s failure? Scholars have attempted to answer some of these questions, but few have answered them specifically in regard to the Company’s factory at Hirado. As this next section will show, scholars have tended to analyze the early years of the Company’s factory system in Southeast Asia mostly through economic and political lenses. Few, however, have fully incorporated into their analyses the rich English primary documents from the Hirado factory in the early 17th century.

[...]

<sup>1</sup> Richard Cocks, Letter from Richard Cocks to William Neelson and John Osterwick at Hirado, September 27, 1617, in *The English Factory in Japan 1613-1623*, ed. Anthony Farrington (London: The British Library, 1991), 1:628.

<sup>2</sup> A factory was essentially a trading post. The English factory at Hirado consisted of a house, a warehouse (later two warehouses), a garden, and a stable.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Cocks, Letter from Richard Cocks to Batavia, September 7, 1622, in *Ibid.*, 2:890; in this letter, Cocks calls himself “an ould [foole],” among other things.

The tendency of scholars, such as Keay and Chaudhuri, to gloss over the Hirado factory's failure is surprising given how many documents the factory and its servants left behind. These documents will serve as the basis for this paper. One of the most important sources for the study of the Hirado factory is the *Diary of Richard Cocks*.<sup>4</sup> Within the diary, Richard Cocks, who was in charge of the Hirado factory from its creation in 1613 to its demise in 1623, writes at length about his daily business, his opinions on the Japanese and his own men, and his observations on anything that piqued his interest, from fishing with birds to the mysterious causes of earthquakes in Edo.<sup>5</sup> Cocks' *Diary* is unlike any other source from this period of the Company's expansion in Southeast Asia, as it offers a comprehensive and personal narrative of the events that would eventually lead to the factory's dissolution.

To supplement Cocks' *Diary*, this paper also draws heavily from correspondence between the Company's servants in the East Indies, the various committees and governors of the Company back in London, and their factories in the East Indies.<sup>6</sup> Similar to Cocks' *Diary*, these letters to and from the Company, and between the servants of the Company in the East Indies, offer a ground-level view of the state of the Company's trade. The letters provide personal insight into the motivations and interactions of the Company's servants. The correspondence within the Company's network of East Indian factories is essential for this study, as the failure of the factory at Hirado was not due to one reason or one man, but due to an underperforming network of fledgling factories and the unstable and disorganized nature of the Company and its

operations in the East Indies.

Thus, it is clear that scholars, excepting Massarella's work, have slightly touched on, but have mostly avoided fully addressing the Hirado factory's failure. In this paper, it will be argued that the Hirado factory failed mainly due to overwhelming competition from the Dutch and Iberians, both militarily and economically. Second, this paper argues that the English did not enjoy stable, mutually beneficial relations with the Shogunate or the Matsuura daimyo of Hirado. Third, the English were unable to procure enough stores of silk from the other Company factories for Japanese markets, and were thus unable to procure silver from Japanese merchants, a metal that was incredibly valuable in Southeast Asian economies. Furthermore, the Hirado factory was failed by the Company itself, as the Hirado venture was created out of a Joint-Stock voyage, whose investors discouraged long-term investments and expected quick profit returns. The lack of a strong country trade, specifically a port-to-port trade between the Company's factories, also contributed to the Hirado factory's demise. The final section of this paper will discuss what exactly was learned from the failure at Hirado, and how that failure manifested itself in policy and structural changes within the Company and within its factory system in the East Indies both before and after the factory's closure in 1623.

[...]

<sup>4</sup> *Diary of Richard Cocks, Cape-Merchant in the English Factory in Japan*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2016), vols. 2; for this paper, I have used Routledge's digital copy of Thompson's version of Cocks' *Diary*, which was originally published by the Hakluyt Society in 1883.

<sup>5</sup> Cocks' scientific explanation of earthquakes, loosely based on the Roman philosopher Seneca's theory, follows: "it is thought it chanseth per... much wind [blown] into hollow caves under grownd at a loe water, and the sea flowing in after... causeth these earthquakes..." see *Ibid.*, 2:9.

<sup>6</sup> These letters are all found within *The English Factory in Japan 1613-1623*, ed. Anthony Farrington (London: The British Library, 1991), vols. 2.