

The William Alt Project:

Correspondences Penned by a Young British Man at Sea and as a Merchant in China & Japan, 1852-1864

This database, made possible by the generous donation of these letters by Mrs. Tessa Montgomery and the kind editorial and technical assistance of Prof. Akama Ryō of the Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University, includes the personal correspondences of William J. Alt (1840-1908) spanning from circa 1852 to 1864. Following the death of his father, a British army officer, Alt sought employment on a British merchant vessel. Many of the collection's initial letters, most addressed to his mother and other relatives, detail Alt's job search in the London area in 1853. Late in that year, Alt secured a position on *Charlotte Jane*, a merchant vessel that transported goods and people around the world. Between 1853 and 1858, Alt penned letters home to his mother and other relatives from ports of call that included Australia, Bermuda, China, and the island of St. Helena.

In 1858, Alt left *Charlotte Jane* to pursue opportunities as a merchant in Shanghai. Letters written between 1858 and 1859 describe a short stint in the office of a Portuguese merchant, followed by brief periods of employment in a British firm and as a clerk in the Qing Customs House. Alt subsequently moved to Nagasaki a few months after it opened as a treaty port in July 1859. Most of the collection's remaining letters are written from Nagasaki, where Alt established a trading firm, Alt and Company. The letters describe his trading activities, life in the city, and various family matters. The collection's final letters date from early 1864, shortly before Alt married Elisabeth Earl in September of that year. The couple lived in Nagasaki until 1868.

For more information about the life and business activities of William Alt, please consult the following:

- 1) Robert Hellyer, "Mid Nineteenth-Century Nagasaki: Western and Japanese Merchant Communities within Commercial and Political Transitions" in Lin Yu-ju and Madeleine Zelin, eds., [*Merchant Communities in Asia, 1600-1980*](#). Pickering and Chatto, 2014, pp. 159-176.
- 2) Lane Earns and Brian Burke-Gaffney, eds, [*Oura Biographies*](#)

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