

THE EMPEROR QUESTION AGAIN :  
ANGLO-JAPANESE RELATIONS, 1945 & 1989

Roger Buckley

'It is a matter for sincere regret that you should have suffered from great loss of life and property caused by this war.'<sup>(1)</sup>

The death of the Showa Emperor marked the end of an era in Anglo-Japanese relations. This paper attempts briefly to examine changing British perceptions of the Japanese monarchy at the time of Japan's surrender in the summer of 1945 and during the months of his long illness and eventual death on 7 January 1989.<sup>(2)</sup>

The Emperor question was one of the comparatively few issues of post-surrender policy that the British government discussed during the second world war. The need to first defeat Fascism in Europe and then contribute to what Japanese historians are now terming the 'Japanese-Anglo-American War' left little time for British officials to draw up detailed plans for the occupation of Japan, yet some discussion is known to have taken place both in London and through British diplomats stationed in Washington DC. The key figure in these preparations and soundings with the Americans was Sir George Sansom, whose knowledge of things Japanese earned him considerable respect in the United States and to which he would return after retirement as professor at Columbia.

Central to much of these British commentaries was a wish to safeguard the Japanese monarchy. It was a reckoning that was based for both the Foreign Office and State Department on the lack of viable alternatives. Japan after its defeat would inevitably be a turbulent and

potentially revolutionary place; it followed that the Imperial line might provide an anchor for what was seen by the small number of Japan specialists within Whitehall as a society where deference and tradition could perhaps be deployed to prevent radicalism. Critics of this bureaucratic concept of a conservative Japan were appalled. They wanted no truck with Hirohito and knew the popularity of their position among public opinion within Britain. Servicemen in Burma and the families of British POWs from the Malayan campaign saw the Emperor as both the symbol of Japanese aggression and an active leader in Japan's bid to dominate the Asian-Pacific region.

Anger at the Emperor and his nation cut across economic and social divides.<sup>(3)</sup> The fall of Singapore and the maltreatment of British and Commonwealth soldiers and civilians combined to leave Japan facing strident demands for revenge. The British people might know little of the complexities of Japanese politics but they identified the Emperor as the master-mind behind the war and Japanese atrocities. British propaganda, of course, had encouraged such views. "Vengeance, bloody vengeance" had been the message in wartime newsreels seen throughout Britain and overseas. Hirohito, Mussolini and Hitler were convenient shorthand expressions for uniting British society and intensifying the war effort.

Yet on 29 July 1945 when the newly appointed British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin met Secretary Forrestal at Potsdam it was already apparent that even the Labour Party's leading trades unionist figure had no time for any further reference to Emperor "bashing". James Forrestal recorded in his diary:

'I asked him a question about the Emperor in Japan, whether he thought we ought to insist on destruction of the Emperor concept along with the surrender. He hesitated and said this question would require a bit of thinking, but he was inclined to feel there was no sense in destroying the instrument through which one might have to deal in order to effectively control Japan.'<sup>(4)</sup>

Bevin's remarks strongly suggest that the influence of the Foreign Office on the British government's handling of the fate of the Emperor was crucial. Pre-war specialists on Japan, such as Sansom, had deployed their knowledge of the nation to stress the necessity of retaining the Emperor within a modified political system. Undoubtedly the Emperor's behaviour in the days preceding Japan's belated surrender played into the hands of Britain's Japanologists. It was, said a junior Foreign Office official who would later end his career as ambassador to Tokyo, vital to reckon with the Emperor's past and present role. Arthur de la Mare of the Far Eastern department minuted in December 1945 that 'the Emperor is the greatest asset we hold in the control of Japan. It was not the atomic bomb which caused the Japanese surrender; it was the Emperor's rescript ordering them to do so'.<sup>(5)</sup>

What still has to be explained, however, is the ease with which the Foreign Office won the day and was able so comfortably to see off the hostility of much of British opinion on the future of the Emperor. The answer probably lies in the circumstances that faced British society following VJ-Day. Relief at the sudden and unexpectedly early surrender of Imperial Japan was quickly followed by the disturbing knowledge that Britain would have to face a seemingly lengthy period of economic dislocation and deprivation. Concern for jobs and housing were the twin priorities of the new Labour cabinet and much of Britain. There was no holiday. Rationing, shortages, conscription and queues continued as if the war had not yet ended. As George Orwell told his American readers of *Partisan Review* in May 1946:

'.....we have as yet had no solid advantage from the change of the Government, and people in general are aware of this. For anyone outside the armed forces, life since the armistice has been physically as unpleasant as it was during the war, perhaps more so, because the effects of certain shortages are cumulative.'<sup>(6)</sup>

In the months after Japan's capitulation British politics simply had too large an agenda to find much space for occupied Japan. If there was to be a Brave New World under Clement Attlee it would be one concerned first and foremost with domestic reconstruction and only if there was any surplus energy left over would issues of international affairs begin to intrude. Japan undoubtedly benefitted from this lack of interest within Britain, particularly as a comparable movement was underway in Truman's United States. General Eichelberger, the commander of the US's Eighth Army stationed in Japan, was correct to sense that American opinion quickly lost interest in scrutinizing events in Japan.<sup>(7)</sup>

The preparedness of both the Attlee cabinet and the Truman administration to leave Japanese business to General MacArthur and his staff in the Dai-Ichi Building was most certainly a reflection of the lack of sustained public attention on the Allied occupation of Japan.<sup>(8)</sup> The subject of Japan became almost dull and journalists stationed in Tokyo began to move to China to cover the ensuing collapse of the Nationalists at the hands of Mao Tse-tung. News from Shanghai had a higher priority than the predictably enthusiastic press handouts from SCAP GHQ. While for Britain it was, as Orwell pointed out, a case that '[a]ll who bother about politics are immersed in the day-to-day struggle over Trieste, Palestine, India, Egypt, the nationalization of steel, the American loan rehousing, the Health Service Bill, and I do not know what else, but no thoughtful person whom I know has any hopeful picture of the future.'<sup>(9)</sup>

British policies for Japan were dumped accordingly into the grateful lap of the experts. The Allied occupation was to prove to be one of the rare periods in postwar British institutional history when the Foreign Office had virtually *carte blanche* to run affairs as it saw fit. The diplomats made the most of their unexpected opportunity.

The issue of the Emperor was quietly taken care of by persuading Foreign Secretary Bevin and the new cabinet that any movement to arrest and try Hirohito would be an invitation to anarchy. Whitehall and the government were quick to argue in the defense of their action and

calculated correctly that the British public had other and more immediate problems to tackle. The prompt and outwardly deferential response of the Japanese people to the beginnings of the occupation and the impression that the Emperor himself gave to General MacArthur at their first meeting on 27 September 1945 added evidence to support the diplomats' views. There were no serious incidents against Allied troops and the political system of Imperial Japan was torn up. Much, at least on the surface, did change, including the role of the Japanese monarchy.

The British government's support for the retention of a modified Imperial system may well have been behind the extraordinary message that the Emperor conveyed through Sir George Sansom to Buckingham Palace in the winter of 1946. In this statement the Emperor made a rare, and possibly unique, series of remarks. He said:

'I did my utmost to avoid war. Things, however, came to such a pass for reasons of internal affairs that we very reluctantly opened hostilities against your country, with which Japan had long maintained most friendly relations ever since the time of the Emperor Meiji, and where, during my memorable visit, I was given a most cordial reception by the Royal House, the pleasant recollections of which I have always cherished. It is a matter for sincere regret that you should have suffered from great loss of life and property caused by this war.

I signed my name to the Declaration of War with heart-rending grief, repeatedly telling General Tojo, the then prime Minister, that, while recalling the memories of my happy days in England, I should be obliged to do that with much regret and reluctance.

I earnestly desire to carry out the terms of the Potsdam declaration faithfully, and to make every effort to rebuild a better nation dedicated to peace and democracy. I cannot but hope sincerely that we shall be able to regain the

diplomatic relations between our respective countries on some future date and restore our friendship of the past.

I take this opportunity of expressing my good wishes for the welfare of the Royal House as well as for the prosperity of the British people.<sup>(10)</sup>

The Emperor's message was a rare glimpse of the Emperor's own thinking. Unfortunately for the British government it was unable to regain some of the influence it had once possessed in Japan through its Court contacts. MacArthur insisted that all non-American links to the Emperor be closely monitored and this discouragement, coupled with the reemergence of the dreary protocol-conscious ways of the recent past, left London with few tangible rewards for its efforts to uphold the Japanese monarchy. The Imperial institution, after a few years of relative liberalism during the Allied occupation, returned to its roots and gradually discarded what were increasingly viewed by the Imperial Household Agency as alien accretions.

Public attention on the monarchy only resurfaced with news of the Emperor's illness in 1988. British newspapers then began publishing a series of robust attacks on the person of the Emperor, suggesting that he shared culpability for the outbreak of the Pacific War and for the maltreatment of POWs and civilian internees. This in its most strident form was the speciality of the British tabloid press but it would be inaccurate to assume that readers of other newspapers were of any very different persuasion over the role of the Emperor during the war.

What is apparent from this media blitz on the dying Emperor is the extraordinarily bitter emotions that resurfaced. The vehemence of British opinion in 1988-89 is a reflection of the weaknesses of popular knowledge of Japanese history, which inevitably played into the hands of the more sensational editors, and an undercurrent of resentment at post-war Japan's remarkable economic accomplishments. The contrast between the reversal in fortunes of Britain and Japan undoubtedly contributed to the bout of Emperor "bashing". Japan's reemergence as a great power by 1990 was to a considerable degree at the expense of

Britain's position in the Asian-Pacific region and had seriously jeopardized London's claims to any "special relationship" with Washington. Japan's rise paralleled Britain's decline.

The long terminal illness of the Emperor was a last attempt to rake over the coals. It gave comfort to many groups in British society, however much Britain's former ambassador Sir Hugh Cortazzi might complain to *The Times* over the 'unchristian and unworthy' nature of such attacks in the media.<sup>(11)</sup> The Japanese government made formal protest to London over the suggestion of the Emperor's criminality and the wish of some Fleet Street papers that he 'rot in hell'.<sup>(12)</sup> But there was little any outsider could do to staunch the wounding stories. Japanese government spokesmen might complain and leading politicians, such as Watanabe Michio, then chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party's Executive Board, call for legal action, yet the problem was essentially a British one. The defining of the Emperor as 'the sinking son of evil' and an 'evil monster' suggested that much of the official rhetoric of Anglo-Japanese cordiality had been counter-productive and in disregard of popular doubts within Britain. Such sentiments, which had a similar resonance in Korea and southeast Asia, should act as a cautionary break against assuming that the recent past can be written off as history and consigned to the archives.<sup>(13)</sup>

The question that remains, however, to be answered is why the news of the Emperor's illness led to far greater public hostility within British society in 1989 than it did when the Emperor and indeed the whole of the Japanese Empire was at the Allies' mercy in 1945. The Thatcher government was sufficiently concerned by this sudden swell of anti-Japanese sentiment to reconsider the names of those that the cabinet would send to Tokyo for the Emperor's funeral. In 1945 the Foreign Office had been able to give the lead to the government—this does not appear to have been the case in 1989; similarly the role of public opinion was unquestionably stronger in 1988-89 than in 1945.

Any hypothesis on the Emperor requires both long-term and more immediate factors to be taken into consideration. The end of the Pacific war had resulted in simply too many greater issues for Britain

to be able to concentrate on a nation that had to be (however reluctantly) recognized as within the American sphere of influence. Yet by the time of the San Francisco peace conference in September 1951 there were already serious doubts over the validity of the Labour government's relatively mild approach to post-war Japan. Public interest focussed on the lack of restrictions placed on Japan's commercial and industrial rehabilitation. Demands for a less generous peace and a greater attention on how British industry would be able to compete with its Japanese counterparts were growing apace.<sup>(14)</sup> There was also a half-hidden undercurrent of anxiety that Britain was about to surrender its remaining claims to being a Pacific power as the United States imposed its own security arrangements on both Japan and Commonwealth governments. The signing of the ANZUS pact (without any even subsidiary role for Britain) spelt out all too clearly the fact that the Pacific was an exclusively American lake.

British commentary on Japan in the postwar decades clearly had economic and political misgivings at its core. The Emperor's illness in 1988 was then used as an opportunity to regroup much of the dormant anti-Japanese feeling that had rarely been confronted in the years from San Francisco to the 1980s. The Emperor was attacked for supposedly leading his nation to war, for being so successful in the initial months of hostilities and, above all else in the popular mind, for permitting the maltreatment of British prisoners. Sansom had accurately warned his Japanese contacts in January 1946 that British 'opinion was still very bitter by reason of Japanese atrocities, and that the Japanese Army had perhaps done more damage to Japan by their cruelties than by losing the war.'<sup>(15)</sup> Very little had apparently changed in the intervening two generations to remove this British resentment. A succession of publications of both a serious and sensational nature had done their best to keep the horrible subject fresh and to introduce the topic to those who had had no first-hand experience of the second world war.<sup>(16)</sup> The Emperor and the black side of Japanese imperialism would remain indelibly linked in the British mind.

The bitterness of many in Britain to the Japan of their memories



should not be interpreted as entirely an exercise in spite and recrimination. There may possibly be two particles of hope among all the dross. Firstly, the criticism of Japan was a head of steam that has seemingly been finally let off. It is likely that the British perception of Japan is in the process of change following the death of the Emperor. Mrs Thatcher, who took note of British anger to the extent of making certain that the itinerary of the Duke of Edinburgh was altered to permit a visit to the Commonwealth war cemetery immediately after the British party had attended the Emperor's funeral, clearly wishes to reconstruct the relationship. She is particularly eager to encourage Japanese inward investment and employs the prospect of greater European economic unity after 1992 as a weapon to this end. In return Britain is attempting to offer a greater international vision to Japan, something that during the Gulf crisis is not to the liking of much of the Japanese electorate, and is pressing for a Euro-Japanese partnership to offset the Washington-Tokyo axis.<sup>(7)</sup>

If the press barrage against the Emperor may be seen as not without its therapeutic side for Britain, perhaps the same might also be claimed for Japan. The vehemence of the British criticism was an undoubted surprise to the Japanese public, where the entire subject of Imperial responsibility or involvement in the Pacific War remains strictly taboo. To suggest that the late Emperor might have had even some slight involvement in the decision to go to war or to delay the surrender process is to risk physical injury.<sup>(8)</sup> For the Japanese people to have to listen to overseas views that contradicted their own received wisdom (albeit in a hysterical form) should be of value. Sooner or later the Emperor will have to be brought out of the closet and it is not going to be an entirely painless exercise either for the Court's minions or the people of Japan. The Emperor question that the British so unceremoniously debated at the end of the Showa era is, in essence, the Japan question.

## Notes

- (1) The Emperor to George VI, message of 29 January 1946, F3512/55623(F0371/54286) dictated by the Emperor in Japanese to Matsudaira and sent to the Foreign Office by Sir George Sansom. Seen by the King 12 March 1946.
- (2) The British government's Thirty Year Rule obviously precludes access to debates within the Thatcher cabinet over London's policy in 1989.
- (3) See Buckley, *Occupation Diplomacy: Britain, the United States and Japan, 1945-1952* (Cambridge, 1982) and Kiyoko Takeda, *The Dual-Image of the Japanese Emperor* (Basingstoke, 1988)
- (4) Walter Millis (ed), *The Forrestal Diaries* (London, 1952) p.92
- (5) de la Mare quoted in Buckley, *op cit* p.61
- (6) Orwell's London letter to *Partisan Review*, probably written in early May 1946. For his lengthy list of problems in postwar Britain see Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, vol iv*, (Harmondsworth, 1970) pp 219-220.
- (7) see Eichelberger correspondence to his wife, Duke University.
- (8) A comprehensive survey of how the US media handled the story of the occupation has yet to be written. The memoirs of Theodore White and Robert Shaplen would provide a convenient starting point.
- (9) Orwell, *op cit* p.233. Orwell had been closely involved in reporting from the BBC's Empire Department to audiences in India and south-east Asia during the war. After 1945 the subject of Japan does not reappear in his writings.
- (10) Reprinted in *The Independent*, (London), 27 January 1989 with a commentary by Michael Fathers on the role of Sir George Sansom in the affair. Sansom had been in Tokyo as a member of the Far Eastern Advisory Commission; he refused to accept the Emperor's invitation to a meeting because of the danger of any such occasion being misunderstood.

For anti-Emperor stories in Britain see the *Daily Star* and the *Sun*, both 20 September 1989. If the British government in 1946 had seen fit to fully explain the Imperial role in December 1941 and publish his post-war apology Anglo-Japanese relations might have got off to a better start.

- (11) Sir Hugh Cortazzi, *The Times*, 24 September 1988
- (12) No foreign correspondent in Tokyo has come forward to claim authorship of these extreme opinions and it must be assumed that the invective was made in Britain.

For analysis of an earlier era see Buckley, 'Gambling on Japan : the British Press and the San Francisco Peace Settlements, 1950-1952' in the commemorative issue in honour of the seventieth birthday of President Saburo Okita, *Bulletin of the Graduate School of International Relations*, International University of

Japan, 1984

- (13) For South Korean press hostility see *Asahi Evening News* 29 September 1989. Asian criticism appears to have been directly proportionate to the degree of brutality experienced by the individual countries when occupied by Japan. Indonesian reporting was milder than that of Singapore.
- (14) M. Ps from textile, shipbuilding, cutlery and pottery constituencies were particularly fearful of a future Japan now about to be able to trade at will under US encouragement.
- (15) Sansom, *op cit.* The Foreign Office was well aware that many British soldiers had managed to retain their war diaries while in captivity and would expect action over camp superintendants and their ultimate commanders.
- (16) Two excellent examples from the 1980s convey the flavour of the British experience. See Ronald Searle, *To the Kwai and Back: War Drawings 1939-1945* (London, 1986) and J.G.Ballard's best-seller (and later movie) *Empire of the Sun* (London, 1984)
- (17) See Brian Bridges, 'The "1992" Process and Euro-Japanese Relations', (JATI International, Reading, UK, 1990)
- (18) See Buckley, 'A Little Violence Goes a Long Way' in *Asahi Evening News*, 17 June 1990

For the uncertainties that confront any retrospective view see *Asahi Shimbun* editorial 'A Time to Reflect', 24 February 1989, translated in *Asahi Evening News* same day. To note that 'his reign included the World War II years' was not particularly helpful.

## 天皇論争（再燃？）

— 日英関係，1945～1989年 —

〈要 約〉

ロジャー・バックレー

太平洋戦争終戦時，英国の政府及び外務省は国内の反対意見グループからの強い圧力にもかかわらず，一貫して天皇を救うという姿勢を崩さなかった。

しかしながら，1988年，89年には英国に於いて反日感情が非常に高まったのも事実である。

本稿は日本の敗戦降伏から約45年経過した1980年代末期に，なぜ英国民の日本批判—天皇及び政治経済に対して—が激化したかを考察し，論じたものである。

昭和天皇の死により，日英関係はまた新しい前進へと一步を踏み出した。