

The Iwakura Mission in Britain, 1872

By [W.G. Beasley](#) | Published in [History Today Volume: 31 Issue: 10](#)



W.G. Beasley continues our special feature on Japan: The Closed Country, with a look at the late 19th century Japanese diplomatic mission to the west.

Shortly after 11 pm on August 17th, 1872, the Liverpool train pulled into Euston Station, bringing to London the members of a Japanese diplomatic mission, who had recently completed an extended visit to the United States. It was a large party: an ambassador plenipotentiary, four deputies and three commissioners, plus a secretariat of forty men. It was also the most powerful such group ever to leave Japan. The ambassador, Iwakura Tomomi, 1825-83, a Court noble of distinguished lineage, was Minister of the Right, and as such the second-ranking member of his country's government. *The Times* described him as 'probably the ablest and most enlightened Minister who ever gave laws to Japan'. Of his deputies, Kido Takayoshi, 1833-77, and Okubo Toshimichi, 1830-78, were former samurai. They represented the continuing influence of the feudal domains of Choshu and Satsuma, which had played a crucial part in overthrowing the Tokugawa Shogun in January 1868, thereby 'restoring' the Emperor's traditional authority. Kido was a Councillor of State in 1872. Okubo had left the council the previous year to become Minister of Finance. The other senior members of the mission were also officials of consequence, several of whom were to hold cabinet posts in the next twenty years. In particular, Ito Hirobumi, 1841-1909, as the architect of the 1889 Constitution and Prime Minister when Japan humbled China in the war of 1894-95, was to achieve a dominant position in Japanese politics by the end of the century. He was making his second visit to England, having been a student at University College London briefly in 1863-64. *The Times*, showing perhaps some lack of prescience, thought him 'a genial man of the world', speaking English 'with tolerable fluency'.

The embassy had three objectives. The first, long urged by Iwakura personally, was to secure international recognition for the transfer of power which had taken place in Japan after the fall of the Tokugawa, thereby reducing the risk of foreign interference in Japanese politics. This was a largely ceremonial function, involving the presentation of letters of credence to Western heads of state. During the seven months they had spent in America, Iwakura and his colleagues had been received with full honours by President Ulysses S. Grant. They were to be received similarly in France, Belgium, Holland, Germany and Russia in the early part of 1873. Not to be outdone, the British government appointed Sir Harry Parkes, then on leave from his post as British minister in Tokyo, to supervise arrangements for the Japanese ambassador, 'generally with the view of making his visit agreeable and producing an impression which may prove serviceable hereafter to our intercourse with Japan'. On December 5th Queen Victoria accorded the embassy an audience at Windsor, followed by lunch. Iwakura took the opportunity to extol the benefits they had gained from visiting 'your enlightened and powerful kingdom'; the Queen, a little ominously, expressed in reply a hope 'that the course of Japanese policy may be such as to ensure for the future the lively sympathy of the nations of Christendom with Japan'. Since the mission was also made welcome by the Prince of Wales at Sandringham and entertained by the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth, it could fairly be said to have had proper recognition, despite the lack of any formal meeting with the Prime Minister, Gladstone.

A second objective, more obviously diplomatic, was to canvas Western views about treaty revision. The agreements signed with Japan by Elgin and others in 1858 had imposed on that country the same 'unequal' relationship with the West as had been devised earlier for China: one in which Western citizens in Japan remained subject to their own laws, administered through consular courts, and enjoyed favourable tariff arrangements, which, by virtue of being embodied in the treaties, could be varied only by negotiation between the governments. The new Japanese government was determined to overturn these arrangements. It recognised, however, that it lacked the power to do so entirely of its own volition. One purpose of the Iwakura mission, therefore, was to discover what changes would be needed in Japan's legal system and financial administration in order to persuade the powers to relinquish their special privileges.

In the United States it had seemed at one point that actual negotiations might be possible on these matters, but such hopes proved groundless in the end. Accordingly, when Iwakura entered into talks with the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Granville, in November, he was unwilling to make any statement of Japanese policy on the treaties, preferring simply to enquire about that of Britain. Granville obviously thought such abstractions a waste of time. He did emphasise, however, that Japan must not expect too much too soon. Citing Egypt as a parallel, he told Iwakura that Britain would only 'yield the local authorities jurisdiction over British subjects in precise proportion to their advancement in enlightenment and civilization'. To Parkes he wrote in January 1873, commenting of these exchanges, that 'it would not be for the advantage of Japan to undertake responsibilities in this respect which it cannot discharge, but which, if neglected to discharge them, would be calculated to bring Japan into collision with Great Britain'.

There was nothing in this that Iwakura could claim as a success. All he had done was to identify more clearly the difficulties facing treaty revision. Yet overcoming them was also the business of his embassy, if only indirectly. He and his colleagues, he informed Granville at their meeting on November 22nd, were entrusted with the task of carrying out an organised study of Western society; specifically, in the words of the Foreign Office minutes of the discussion, they were to 'observe all that constitutes English civilization, so as to adopt on their return to Japan whatever they may think suitable to their own country'.

This was not the first time in Japanese history that such an exercise had been undertaken. In the seventh century, missions had been sent to the mainland, consisting in part of students who in some cases remained for many years studying Chinese ideas and institutions. On their return to Japan, these men furnished the knowledge which formed the basis of far-reaching reforms in Japanese government and religion. Something of the kind was envisaged now, but with the West as model. This time, however, there were important differences. One was that Japan felt threatened by the West, as she had not been by China. Hence the motive for study in the nineteenth century was not merely emulation of what many Japanese believed to be a more advanced civilisation, or even the identification of particular ways in which Japan could conform with foreign prejudices for the purpose of treaty revision, but also the achievement of a measure of 'wealth and strength' which would ensure the country's safety in an imperialist world. This in turn determined what was chiefly to be studied, that is, the sources of the West's own wealth and strength. They could readily be identified: science and technology, especially in their military and industrial applications, together with the political and economic structures that made them operable. In the contemporary phrase, these were the means by which Japan might 'use the barbarian to control the barbarian'.

To these ends the secretariat of the Iwakura mission was organised in three sections. One was to examine laws and political institutions, including courts, parliaments and government departments. Another was to collect information about Western economies and economic organisation, covering the fields of trade, industry, communications, banking, currency and taxation. The third was to concern itself with education: its finance, administration and curricula; 'schools for officials and the populace', schools of commerce, schools of technology. These things were to be studied, in the words of the Imperial Chancellor's instructions, 'with a view to adopting them in Japan and establishing them there'. In addition, all members of the mission were to assume responsibility for acquiring a knowledge of 'anything which will be of benefit to our country' with respect to the organisation, equipment and training of military forces, their arsenals, dockyards, and so on.

In Britain, as in the other countries they visited, the expectation of commercial advantage brought ready compliance with Japanese curiosity. The ambassadors, while in London during August and September, were taken to Parliament, the City, Woolwich Arsenal and the Telegraph Office, as well as regular tourist attractions like the Zoo and Crystal Palace. A few days in Portsmouth enabled them to observe a court martial, tour the naval dockyard and the Spithead forts, and inspect HMS *Minotaur* ('minutely', according to the Foreign Office summary of their travels). During October and the early part of November they went north to industrial Britain, following an itinerary that must have been as exhausting as it was comprehensive. It included the port of Liverpool; the railway works at Crewe; cotton mills, an assize court and the prison in Manchester; colleges, schools, libraries and lighthouses in Glasgow and Edinburgh, in addition to shipyards, blast furnaces, a sugar refinery and a rubber factory; Crossley's carpet works in Halifax; the Armstrong works at Newcastle, where they dined with Sir William Armstrong; the Gosforth coal pit; a steelworks manufacturing armour plate in Sheffield and another making cutlery; a glassworks, a ribbon factory and watchmaking in Birmingham; the Birmingham Small Arms factory in Coventry; porcelain works in Stoke and Worcester. Later there was a visit in the rain to Huntley and Palmer's biscuit factory and Sutton's seed warehouse in Reading. In between these more serious occupations were sandwiched concerts, plays, a circus, religious services (both Episcopalian and Free Church in Scotland), even a meeting of foxhounds. There were excursions to Brighton Pavilion, Loch Lomond and Melrose Abbey. Everywhere the visitors attended dinners and receptions, given by mayors and chambers of commerce, at which toasts were drunk and addresses delivered in the interest of goodwill. A report in *The Times* on one such occasion commented on the dignity and good temper with which the ambassadors endured what must have been very tedious hours; since the language barrier prevented most of the party from engaging in conversation with their neighbours at table, they were left with nothing to do but observe the social habits of their hosts. The last few weeks back in London were by comparison peaceful, though a visit to Becton gasworks enabled them to experience their first strike. On being told that the workers were already paid thirty shillings a week, the Japanese are said to have expressed 'astonishment at anyone quarrelling with such advantageous terms'. In Japan, they commented, 'strikes were unknown'.

While the ambassadors were being feted, their subordinates were hard at work collecting facts, often independently of the more public programme. One result of their labours was a report, edited by Iwakura's secretary, Kume Kunitake, and published in five volumes by the Imperial Household Ministry in 1878, which not only provided a detailed narrative of the mission, but also constituted a work of reference on matters relating to 'wealth and strength'. Still more important was the effect their experiences had on the political views of the ambassadors themselves. Not the whole of it was attributable to what they saw in Britain, of

course. America had greatly impressed them. So, too, did Bismarck, who gave them dinner on March 15th, 1873, during their visit to Berlin. After the meal he lectured them on *realpolitik*, arguing that small countries, such as Japan, must rely on their own efforts to maintain their independence against the depredations of imperialist powers like France and Britain, not on international law or diplomatic agreements. He offered Prussia as a model and Germany as a disinterested friend.

His discourse found a sympathetic audience. After all, it was precisely because the Japanese feared the intentions of the powers that the decision had been taken to send a mission to America and Europe. Moreover, its members had just seen at first hand the immense industrial and technological resources of Victorian Britain. Okubo, writing to one of his Satsuma associates on December 20th, 1872, four days after leaving Dover, had summarised the experience as follows:

Our recent travels have taken us to many interesting and famous places: lawcourts, prisons, schools, trading companies, factories... as well as coalmines, salt-mines, even temples and castles. There is nothing we have not visited. Everywhere you go there is nothing growing in the ground, just coal and iron.... Factories have increased to an unheard-of extent, their black smoke rising to the sky.... This is a sufficient explanation of England's wealth and strength.... And it is said that this great growth of trade and industry in the cities is something which has happened in the last fifty years.

The burden of Okubo's earlier letters from London had been much the same. So had some of Kido's from the United States. Similarly, an emphasis on trade and industry as the principal ingredient in modernity runs all through the embassy's official report, published five years later.

This being so, it is not surprising that one conclusion the ambassadors reached was that there was much more to do than they had originally thought before Japan could stand on a footing of equality with the West. This soon became apparent on their return home (which was at various dates in the summer of 1873, the party having separated on leaving Germany). While they had been away a longstanding Japanese dispute with Korea had reached a new point of crisis. The members of the Government in Tokyo had decided to force an issue, believing that it would be possible to mount a successful military expedition against that country. The returning ambassadors, when they heard of this, totally disapproved. In August Kido wrote a memorandum arguing that since Japan still 'lacked civilization', having 'independence in name but not independence in fact', the proper policy to be followed was 'to give heed to our own affairs and increase our national strength', not to engage in dangerous and discreditable adventures overseas. Okubo was equally forthright. In October, working closely with Iwakura, he precipitated a confrontation with their opponents in the Imperial Council. His own view, he made clear, was that, of Kido: Japan must concentrate on developing her wealth and strength at home, 'not rashly open hostilities against Korea'. One reason was that the country lacked the resources to pursue both policies simultaneously. Another was that to get involved in hostilities would increase the risk of intervention by Russia and Britain. Britain, for example, might well seek to intervene on the pretext of safeguarding the loan she had recently made to finance the building of the Tokyo-Yokohama railway. It was initially through economic action that she had established her power in India: 'first a number of Englishmen created a company to trade with Indian territory, then they used their profits to strengthen the company's position, establishing an army and navy, until they were able to act as rulers'. Quarrels between Indian lords thereafter gave the company further opportunities to

expand, until it was able to make the whole of India a British dependency. 'We in Japan must give careful thought to this.'

Victory in the dispute over Korea made Okubo the strong man of the Japanese government until his assassination in 1878. Iwakura remained his ally at Court; Ito became his principal lieutenant in a programme of modernization. The nature of this was fixed in terms of what they had learnt on their travels. The manner of pursuing it, however, was not always what their Western hosts might have wished. For one thing, their admiration of Western society was not unqualified. In October 1872, while in Manchester, Iwakura had received a delegation from the United Kingdom Alliance, urging him to pass laws 'to exclude intemperance from Japan'. In reply, according to *The Times*, he said:

We are making the circuit of the world that we may gather out of the various lands we visit whatever is good in the civilization of the West. It shall be our endeavour at the same time to avoid the evils that seem everywhere to have followed the advance of civilization.

To Iwakura, in other words, the pursuit of Western-style strength was not to be confused with uncritical imitation of the West. In different ways the same held good for Okubo and Ito. They wanted Japan to be strong, just as Britain was strong. They did not necessarily accept that the way to achieve this was to copy what Britain was doing in their own day. It was not desirable to espouse Free Trade, for example. As early as 1871 Ito had observed that the United States made use of protective tariff barriers. Okubo, writing in the spring of 1874, commented that in the early stages of her modern development Britain had enforced Navigation Laws, thereby building up her merchant marine and protecting domestic industry. Japan, possessing similar geographical advantages, might hope to emulate her; but to that end, government must establish laws and institutions 'in accordance with the people's character and degree of knowledge', that is, appropriate to the country's traditions and stage of development. Only when a proper foundation had been laid, he believed, should these laws be relaxed, permitting freedom of trade.

From the perspective of the twentieth century it is possible to conclude that Japan's leaders had acquired from their travels not only a more elaborate formulation of national ambitions, but also some understanding of the differences between early and late developers among industrial countries. Contemporary British observers saw the outcome rather differently. Thus one of the biographers of Sir Harry Parkes, no doubt reflecting the frustrations Parkes felt during his later service in Japan, described the results of the mission as disappointing. Nothing useful had been achieved with respect to treaty revision. True, the ambassadors had acquired a proper respect for 'the machinery of western civilization', but they had failed to understand 'the secret forces which gave it life and permanence'. Consequently, the manner in which they had tried to implement change had been 'altogether wrong': too much bureaucracy, too stiff a relationship with Western representatives, too great a dependence on 'bad foreign advice' (mostly from Americans). In sum, 'they attempted to achieve in a decade what ... could scarcely be effected in much less than a century'. Stripped of its perjorative tone, the point has substance. Certainly, the mission had played its part in setting Japan on a course which was only to be completed - under American guidance - after 1945.

Further Reading

- The best introduction to Japan's cultural relations with the West in the nineteenth century is George Sansom, *The Western World and Japan: A Study on the Interaction of European and Asiatic Cultures*, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1950)
- The political background to the mission is examined in W. G. Beasley, *The Meiji Restoration*, Oxford University Press (1973)
- Parkes's role is discussed briefly in S. Lane-Poole and F. V. Dickens, *The Life of Sir Harry Parkes*, Macmillan (two vols., London, 1894)
- On aspects of the mission itself, see Marlene Mayo, 'Rationality in the Meiji Restoration: the Iwakura embassy', in Bernard S. Silberman and H. D. Harootunian, eds., *Modern Japanese Leadership*, Arizona U.P. (Tucson, 1966) and Eugene Soviak, 'On the nature of Western progress: the journal of the Iwakura embassy', in Donald H. Shively, ed., *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, Princeton U.P. (Princeton, 1971)
- The letters of Iwakura, Okubo, Kido and Ito have been published in Japanese

About the Author

W.G. Beasley is head of the Japan Research Centre, School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London. Translations in this article are by the author.