

# American Eyewitness Accounts of bakumatsu Japan, 1842–1846

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## Introduction

This article focuses on the historical period that begins with Treaty of Nanking, which ended the Opium War, and ends with the American naval expedition to Japan in the summer of 1846. My purpose will be to introduce and to evaluate (or reevaluate) the letter of the Dutch king Willem II to the shogun Ieyoshi, together with the eyewitness accounts of Captain Mercator Cooper, Commodore James Biddle and Charles Nordhoff, comparing them to previous American and European first-hand reports, and assessing their relative merits. My emphasis will be on what they saw, and how they described it, what seemed worthy of note, and what that tells us about their own point of view. The significance of the visit in 1846 of the two American warships under the command of Commodore Biddle for the subsequent opening of Japanese ports by Commodore Perry several years later has been discussed elsewhere, and will not be taken up in this article<sup>1</sup>.

The Treaty of Nanking, by ceding control of Hong Kong to the British and opening four other Chinese ports to British ships, radically changed the balance of power in eastern Asia in favor of the Western nations. With the total defeat of imperial China, ruled by the declining Ching dynasty, the attention of Western countries was naturally drawn to Japan, in expectation that its rigid seclusion policy might now be relaxed. The overwhelming victory of Great Britain induced the royal government of the Netherlands to recognize British military might and the likelihood that it might also be used to force a reluctant Japan to open its ports to British ships as well. For two centuries Holland had been the only European country allowed to trade with Japan; now it would adopt a policy of encouraging the shogunate to open its ports to Britain and other Western countries. Accordingly in 1844 a letter from the King of the Netherlands Willem II addressed to the reigning Japanese shogun Ieyoshi was sent to Nagasaki on the Dutch steam warship *Palembang*. The Dutch factor (*opperhoofd*) on Deshima M. Beck succeeded after some difficulty to have the letter conveyed to Edo. He later received confirmation that it was indeed delivered to the shogun.

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<sup>1</sup> Interested readers should consult my *The Opening of Japan, 1853–1855* for a full discussion of the relationship between the two naval expeditions.

## The Letter from King Willem II to the Shogun

In this section I will quote extensively from an English translation of the original letter from King Willem II written in Dutch<sup>2</sup>. By doing so, I will show how it represents both a continuation of the traditional Dutch view of Japan, while recommending a new foreign policy for Japan in order to maintain peaceful relations in a new era of Western dominance.

We, William the Second by the Grace of God, King of the Netherlands, ... write this our Royal letter with a faithful heart to our Friend, the very noble, most serene, and all powerful sovereign of the great Empire of Japan ... More than two centuries ago by Imperial order of [Ieyasu], permission was granted to the Dutch to come with their trading ships to Japan; and in virtue of this Imperial order, the Dutch ... are still received and treated with all kindness in Japan, and moreover the leading men in that trade have been granted the honor of paying homage in person to Your Majesty.

This unfaltering goodwill exhibited towards our subjects fills us with kindly feelings towards Japan and the desire to do all that is possible for the furtherance of peace with Your Imperial Domain and for the prosperity of Your subjects.

It was noted that there had never been any correspondence between the two sovereigns before. There was no necessity for it as all trade matters and general news was communicated through Batavia and Deshima. But now the king felt it was necessary to end this silence in order to communicate important matters about the political interests of Japan.

The king confessed that "The future of Japan causes us much anxiety. May we succeed in averting imminent disaster by our good counsel." The shogun learned from news reports brought on Dutch ships about the "violent war" that England was waging against the Chinese empire which resulted in a treaty of peace under which "the ancient Chinese policy has undergone great alteration, and whereby five Chinese ports have been opened to European trade."

This war resulted from quarrels that occurred between the English merchants and Chinese officials in Canton. The war was a disaster for China and the king warned the shogun that "such disasters now threaten the Japanese empire." He was concerned that "a mere mischance might precipitate a conflict." As the number of foreign ships sailing the seas near Japan will be greater than ever, a quarrel might easily occur between the crews of these ships and the Japanese inhabitants.

The thought that such quarrels may end in war fills us with solicitude. The wisdom that characterizes your Majesty's Government will, we hope, know how to avert these dangers.

The king thought that this wisdom was already shown in the mandate of 1842 that ordered the "kindly treatment" of all foreign ships that were driven on to the Japanese coast by storms or lack of provisions. However, he wondered how ships that came for other friendly reasons would be treated, and whether they would be repulsed by force or otherwise dealt with in an unfriendly way. If quarrels arose, these could lead to war and destruction he cautioned.

Those are the disasters which we wish to avert from Japan. It is our desire as a token of [gratitude] for

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<sup>2</sup> Greene, D. C. (1907) "Correspondence between William II of Holland and the Shogun of Japan, A.D. 1844," *TASJ*, XXXIV, 1907, 99-132

the hospitality enjoyed by our subjects for more than two hundred years.”

The intercourse between the different nations of the earth is increasing with great rapidity. An irresistible power is drawing them together. Through the invention of steamships distances have become shorter. A nation preferring to remain in isolation at this time of increasing relationships could not avoid hostility with many others.

We know that the laws of Your Majesty’s serene ancestors were issued with a view rigorously to restrict intercourse with foreign nations.

But, quoting Lao Tsu, “when wisdom is seated on the throne, she will excel in maintaining peace,” the king reminded his fellow ‘sovereign’ that “when in the strict observance of old laws, peace might be disturbed, wisdom will succeed in smoothing difficulties.”

The king offered his “friendly advice” that the shogun should “ameliorate the laws against the foreigners, lest happy Japan be destroyed by war.” This advice was offered “with honest intentions, free from political self-interest.” He hoped that the shogunate would have the wisdom to realize that peace could only be maintained through friendly relations, and that these in turn were only created by commercial relations.

This letter was signed by the King on 15 February 1844, but did not reach Deshima in Nagasaki until August that same year.

Its mention of a “happy Japan” recalls the peaceful and contented Japan witnessed in the Genroku era during the reign of the shogun Tsunayoshi by the German physician Engelbert Kaempfer. He later expressed his utopian vision of that Japan in his famous essay published in the early 18th century.

However, in this case, there is the very significant difference that the key to safeguarding the happiness of the Japanese people was said to be not in keeping the country closed to all but a very restricted and rigidly controlled intercourse with the outside world, but to open it more widely and freely to all nations, in particular, to all the commercially-inclined Western nations. Thus, while the desire to maintain the happiness of Japan was the same, the means to do so in a new era of increasing commercial intercourse among nations were seen to be radically different.

The shogunate’s centuries-old policy that forbid the building of large seaworthy ships ensured a steady stream of shipwrecked Japanese sailors drifting in the strong currents off the eastern coast of the Japanese islands. Their presence gave Americans engaged in whaling off Japan in particular an excuse to visit Japanese ports under the guise of humanitarian assistance to the unfortunate victims.

## **The Visit of the whaler Manhattan to Uraga**

In April 1845 the whaler Manhattan out of Sag Harbor, New York, commanded by Captain Mercator Cooper, came across a group of shipwrecked Japanese, who had been marooned on a small barren island (St Peter’s) only a few degrees southeast of Honshu, the main Japanese island, for several months. Communicating largely in sign language, Cooper understood that they had been shipwrecked and pointing out his ship to them, he told them that he would take them to back to Japan, if they would entrust themselves to his care. They joyfully consented to do so, and at once set off with him for the ship. Cooper had decided to sail at once for Edo, the seat of the shogunal government, despite its well-known prohibitions on American, British or other foreign ships, except Dutch and Chinese, entering its waters.

Cooper was said to have “...two great and laudable objects in view.” The first of these was “...to restore the shipwrecked strangers to their homes.” The other was “...to make a strong and favorable impression of the government, in respect to the civilization of the United States and its friendly disposition to the Emperor and people of Japan.” He later reflected that “...the step decided on has led to some curious and interesting information, relative to this country, whose institutions and the habits of whose people are but little known to the civilized world.”

After sailing a day or two in the direction of Honshu, the main island of Japan, the American ship encountered a large Japanese vessel that had been wrecked by a storm several weeks before and had been drifting at the mercy of the currents and appeared to be in danger of sinking. Eleven survivors of its crew—all Japanese men—were found in it, and Captain Cooper took them all on board as well and continued sailing toward Honshu. As a gale arose the next day, Cooper surmised that the wrecked ship must have sunk. The Americans also took some books and a Japanese chart of the main islands of the Japanese archipelago. After a careful perusal, the captain pronounced this chart to be “...perhaps one of the most interesting specimens of geographical art and literature which has ever wandered from the shores of eastern Asia.”

When the Manhattan reached the eastern coast of Honshu, it was found to be considerably north of the position of Edo. At this point, the “navigator” of the ship (perhaps the captain himself, although the text is not explicit on this point) and two of his “passengers” (presumably referring to the rescued Japanese waifs) went ashore in a small boat. Cooper noticed that many of the inhabitants were engaged in fishing at various distances from the shore. Moreover, most of the natives he met on land were fishermen, and all appeared to be commoners. He further noted: “They seemed intelligent and happy, were pleased with his visit, and made no objection to his landing.” From this place he sent one of the Japanese to “the emperor” [shogun] in Edo with a message stating his intention to enter its harbor in order to put ashore the men whom he had rescued and to obtain water and other necessary supplies to enable him to continue his voyage. Then, returning to his ship, Cooper sailed his vessel along the coast for “many leagues” comparing his own charts with the one taken from the wrecked ship. However, the winds became unfavorable and drove the ship away from land so far that after they had changed, it took him a week to return to a location near to where he had first landed. Going on shore again, he dispatched two more Japanese messengers to the capital with the same message as before, but adding an explanation for the delay in arriving there. Sailing again for Edo, this time the winds were auspicious and the ship smoothly sailed into the straits off Uraga. At this point a barge came to meet the American whaling vessel. It appeared to be commanded by a high-ranking officer, judging from his elaborate costume, who informed the captain that his messengers had arrived “at court” and that “the emperor had granted him permission to come up to [Edo] with his ship.” However, the captain was instructed to anchor the ship off of a “certain headland” for the night, and the next morning it was towed up to his anchorage “within a furlong of the city.”

Cooper then describes what happened after his vessel had anchored:

“The ship was immediately visited by a great number of people of all ranks, from the governor of [Edo] and the high officers attached to the person of the emperor, arrayed in golden and gorgeous tunics, to the lowest menials of the government, clothed in rags. All were filled with an insatiable curiosity to see the strangers and inspect the thousand novelties present to their view.”

“[I] was very soon informed by a native interpreter, [Moriyama Einosuke] who had been taught Dutch and who could speak a few words of English but who could talk still more intelligibly by signs, that neither he nor his crew would be allowed to go out of the ship, and that if they should attempt it

they would be put to death. This fact was communicated by the very significant symbol of drawing a naked sword across the throat.”

It is doubtful that Cooper took this gesture literally, and it was probably not meant that way either, but it proved to be an effective deterrent. No Americans attempted to go ashore during their brief visit.

“The captain dealt kindly with all, obtained their confidence, and assured them he had no inclination to transgress their laws, but only desired to make known to the emperor and the great officers of Japan, the kind feeling of himself and of the people of America towards them and their countrymen. The Japanese seamen who had been taken from the desolate island and from the wreck, when parting from their preserver, manifested the warmest affection and gratitude for his kindness. They clung to him and shed many tears. This scene—the reports of the shipwrecked men of the many kindnesses they had received—and the uniformly prudent and amicable deportment of the American captain made a very favorable impression on the governor of [Edo].<sup>3</sup> During his stay, this great dignitary treated him with the most distinguished civility and kindness.”

In fact, neither the captain nor the crew of the *Manhattan* were ever even permitted to go over her sides. Japanese officers remained on board continually to prevent anyone from doing so. As a further means of blocking any communication with the shore, three rows of guard boats surrounded the ship. The first row was about one hundred feet away from the vessel, and the individual boats were tied together so tightly that their sides touched each other forming a perfect barrier to prevent passage of any other boat.

The sterns of the boats faced the ship, and the Americans could see from the deck the Japanese weapons standing in them: “... long lances and other steel weapons, of various and curious forms, such as are never seen, or heard of in modern times among European nations.” They also noticed how they were sometimes “covered with lacquered sheaths, at others, they were left to glisten in the sun, apparently for the purpose of informing the foreigners that their application would follow any attempt to pass them.”

In other words, the Americans thought they were being given a clear non-verbal message, one meant to reinforce the throat-cutting gesture, which was that their Japanese guards were prepared to use their weapons to enforce their isolation. Among these weapons were also displayed flags and banners of various colors and patterns.

The number of boats that made up the three concentric rows was estimated to be almost a thousand, a figure that seemed “bewildering” to the Americans. All the boats were armed and decorated in some way.

It was a scene of the most intense interest and amusement to the Americans, the most of whom had never heard of the strange customs of this secluded and almost unknown people.

As magnificent and wonderful a spectacle, however, as this vast array of boats presented during the day, decorated with gaudy banners, and with glittering spears of an infinite variety of forms, [at] night it was exceeded by a display of lanterns in such countless numbers, and of such shapes and transparencies, as almost to entrance the beholders and to remind them of the magic in the Arabian Tales.

In this way, to the Americans on board the *Manhattan*, Japan was not only an odd and curious country, but an enchanting and magical one as well. However, it also at times seemed like a dangerous country as well, in which a simple misunderstanding might have fatal consequences. For instance, when the captain attempted to lower one of the ship’s boats by crane into the water, in order to have it taken in over the

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3 By whom is probably meant one of the two governors of Uraga, who was resident in Edo.

side of the vessel, all the Japanese on board immediately drew their swords. The officer in charge of the deck guard became greatly alarmed and vocally protested against the action, declaring that the Americans involved in the action would be killed if they persisted in it, including even the captain. Captain Cooper assured him that he had no intention of going ashore, and explained to him clearly what he was trying to do.

When the officer had fully understood the object of the action, he was greatly pleased; he ordered the American crew to stop and instructed a number of his own menial workers to take the boat into the ship, without lowering it onto the water.

In all the *Manhattan* was at anchor in the bay off Uraga for only four days. During that time the ship was supplied "by command of the emperor" with wood, water, rice, rye in the grain, various kinds of vegetables and even some lacquerware. In short, the ship was given all that it needed, and all payment was refused. By this refusal it might seem as though the Japanese authorities were trying to encourage further visits to Japan, but, in point of fact, Captain Cooper was told never to come to Japan again. During the four days the ship was anchored off Uraga, the captain allegedly had many opportunities to converse with the governor of [Edo] and other high-ranking officials, through their interpreter.

Here one can only wonder about what was actually said or meant, and how the interpreter in fact said it. He must have been careful to convey the gist of what was said, but at the same time he would have probably been very liberal in his choice of words. For example, on one occasion Captain Cooper was reportedly told, through the interpreter, by the governor of Edo (Uraga bugyo) that "the only reason why he was allowed to remain in the waters of Japan was because the emperor [shogun] felt assured that he could not be a bad-hearted foreigner by his having come so far out of this way to bring poor people to their native country, who were wholly strangers to him." In addition, he was told that "the emperor thought well of his 'heart' and had consequently commanded all his officers to treat him with marked attention and to supply all his wants."

That these reports of what the 'governor' or even the 'emperor' had allegedly said, must not be taken literally is underlined by the additional claim that the day before the *Manhattan* left Japanese waters, "the emperor sent him [Cooper] his autograph, as the most notable token of his own respect and consideration." This autograph seemed, "by the size and boldness of its characters" to resemble more than any other print he had seen the marks of "a half grown chicken [that] had stepped into muddy water and then walked two or three times deliberately over a sheet of coarse paper." First of all, that the 'emperor' i.e. shogun, would deign under any circumstances to bestow his autograph on the captain of an American whaler, no matter how great his heart was thought to be, is extremely unlikely. Nevertheless, it is possible that some less exalted official might have provided a specimen of his signature, but probably only if he had been requested to do so by the captain himself. Secondly, in either case, the autograph seems to have failed to impress the American captain favorably; its aesthetic qualities were, to say the least, underappreciated.

Cooper and his men learned from a small book taken from the sinking Japanese junk about the different grades of Japanese aristocracy and the insignia by which they are distinguished, which are always wrought on the back of the officer's tunic. The weapons that each body of men used were of a particular shape that corresponded to the grade and the insignia or badge on the tunic of their commanding officer.

Captain Cooper was once reported to have embarrassed the governor by asking him through the interpreter, after he had been told he must never come to Japan again, "how he would wish him to act under the same circumstances." The governor seemed "somewhat disconcerted" by this hypothetical

question and avoided it by simply repeating that “he must not come again.” Cooper was not satisfied by this evasive answer, and pressed him further, asking him: “If he should leave his countrymen to starve or drown, when it was in his power to take them from another wreck.” In reply the governor alleged that “it would please the emperor more for them to be left, than for strangers to visit his dominions.” Cooper then told him that he would never allow them to drown or starve, but would rescue and feed them. He then inquired what he should do with them. The governor replied that they should be taken to some Dutch port, but never brought to Japan again. He seemed to speak with “mildness but with firmness also, as if he uttered the imperial will.” Cooper was convinced that this was what the shogun himself desired.

The governor was said to be a “grave and elderly looking man··· with a remarkably intelligent and benignant [sic] countenance, and also to have very mild and prepossessing manners.”

He appeared interested [in] Capt. C[oooper]’s account of the people and civilization of America, and the latter spared no pains to leave a good impression of the American name and character, especially as a commercial people, on the minds of these high officers whose position might carry them into audience with their sovereign.

It seems like wishful thinking on Cooper’s part for an official of the samurai class to be favorably impressed by a people whose primary interest was in commerce. He was probably unaware of the fact that, in contrast to the US, merchants and traders occupied the lowest rung of the social order in Tokugawa-ruled Japan.

As for the climate and overall appearance of the country, Cooper found it to be “pleasant and lovely in the extreme.”

Wherever he inspected the coast, the whole earth teemed with the most luxuriant verdure. Every acre of hill and dale appeared in the highest state of cultivation. Where the eminences were too steep for the agricultural genius of the inhabitants, they were formed into terraces, so that for miles together, they presented the appearance of hanging gardens. numerous white neat looking dwellings studded the whole country. Some of them were so charmingly situated on sloping hill sides and sequestered asides foliage of a fresh and living green that the delight mariners almost sighed to transplant their homes there—the spots were so sunny, so inviting and so peaceful.

The whole appearance of the landscape indicated a dense and industrious population. Around the capital, the same signs of culture were exhibited as in the country, further north. The city itself was so filled with trees, and foliage that not enough houses could be distinguished from the ship to indicate with certainty that a city existed, or to allow the circuit of it to be defined. The buildings were white and rather low and no towers or temples were seen peering above the other edifices.

What he was seeing was probably only the small town of Uraga. He seems to have the mistaken impression that the great city of Edo was much closer to its anchorage than it actually was.

The harbor of [Edo] presented a maritime population as numerous and industrious as that which appeared to exist on the land. Vessels of all sorts and sizes, from mere shallows to immense junks, were under sail or at anchor, wherever the eye turned on the bay. [Edo] seemed to be the mart of a prodigious coastwise commerce, and the whole sea was alive with the bustle and activity appertaining to it.

Cooper also recorded his impressions of the physical traits of the Japanese. Like many other Occidentals he was apt to compare them to that other Oriental people most known to them—the Chinese. He also described their costume, taking special note of the variations in dress among the different social classes.

The Japanese... are rather a short race of men, square[ly] built and solid, and do not possess Mongolian features to the extent exhibited in the Chinese. They are of a light olive complexion, are intelligent, polite and educated.

The dresses of the common people were wide trousers and a loose garment of blue cotton. Dignitaries and persons of consequence were clothed in rich silks, profusely embroidered with gold and silken thread of various colors, according to their rank. Some of the personages were so splendidly attired as to excite great admiration in the foreign visitors. No woolen fabric composed any part of their dress, but of this material they seemed particularly curious, and examined it with great attention. It seemed a great novelty, and all the small pieces they could obtain, were solicited and taken on shore as objects of curiosity.

Captain Cooper found the coast which he followed to be correctly represented on the map he had taken from the sinking junk, but his own charts of Honshu to be "altogether erroneous." However, it was the topography of the interior of the islands that presented the most interest. From the differently colored districts separated by clearly delineated boundaries, with accurately denoted and named towns and villages, the captain concluded that Japan was administered in a highly organized and systematic way. He thought that this conclusion accorded with previous knowledge of the country.

Cooper was very impressed with the number of rivers and the way that they were all traced back to their sources. He also commented on how well-developed the road system was. This particular observation is in accord with those of the German physician Engelbert Kaempfer, made during his journey along the Tokaido in the Genroku era. In this way, Cooper was able to surmise a great deal about the country merely by perusing this map

The number and extent of these streams is surprising. No country of its size, can be more abundantly watered, than [Japan]. The streams are so numerous that the whole interior has the appearance of being irrigated by countless canals.

The public roads are exceedingly numerous, intersecting the whole country from shore to shore, and indicating a vast amount of travel throughout the empire.

From a close study of this map, obtained by accident, Cooper was able to infer a great deal of basic topographical, agricultural, political and administrative information about the Japanese islands. All of it was information that would ordinarily never have been given to foreigners. Indeed, the rescued waifs had assured the captain that they would be endangering their own lives if the authorities learned that they had provided foreigners with any information about the country or its institutions. They reportedly showed great alarm about this prospect, and even went so far as to conceal or destroy many objects that were scattered around the ship as it approached Edo. Cooper did not attempt to prevent them from doing so.

The general appearance of the country is that of gold and lofty hills alternating with great numbers of broad valleys. All pour forth rills and streams which fertilize the earth as they flow along, and afford a thousand advantages and encouragements to an industrious population engaged, like the Japanese, in agricultural and commercial arts. The whole Empire swarms with towns and hamlets. It is almost impossible to conceive of its populousness without an inspection of this map.

When the time came to depart, after four days at anchor, the winds were adverse and the ship could not move on its own. Therefore, the governor ordered a multitude of boats to attach themselves in a line to the ship and tow it out to sea. They were arranged four abreast in a line so long that they could not be

counted. However, it was estimated that there were nearly a thousand boats. "It was an immense train, and presented a spectacle to the eyes of the seamen, approaching the marvelous."

Cooper observed that the boats were propelled forward by being sculled with a single oar, rather than being paddled in American fashion. In this way the Manhattan was towed twenty miles out to sea, and would have been taken out even farther, had not further assistance been declined. The Japanese then took "a courteous leave" of the ship, leaving the American captain feeling "very gratified with the result of his adventure among this recluse, but highly civilized people."<sup>4</sup>

In the view of the editor of the *Chinese Repository*, remarking upon this account of the Manhattan's visit to Japan, this country was "one of the most interesting countries in the world, rich in all its varied productions natural and artificial, with a dense and industrious population." Likewise it was his opinion that "Japan is one of the most interesting states in all Asia." He believed that if its inhabitants were allowed to acquire knowledge of the sciences, if free and friendly intercourse were allowed with the people of Christendom, the islands of Japan would be in the East what the British isles are in the West. He asked:

And who will deny that such free and friendly intercourse ought to be allowed? Could any man, but a misanthropist, situated as captain Cooper was, pass by those exiles, those shipwrecked mariners? He who could leave his fellow creatures to drown or starve would be unworthy of the name of Christian or of man. He would be but a brute, a fiend. And yet every one would act thus if he should revere and conform to the policy of the Japanese. Doubtless the emperor would rather his subjects, who had been driven by storm far into the ocean, should perish there than that strangers should visit his dominions. Captain C[oooper]... acted rightly, and he did his duty only, when he took up and carried those poor men to their homes. So in the case of the Morrison. But being unarmed she was fired on. And had the Manhattan been unarmed she might have been treated with like severity. The conduct of the government in both cases was hostile and incompatible with reason and those just principles which ought to regulate international intercourse. The time is not probably very remote when such conduct will be rebuked, and its directors be held answerable for their inhuman cruelty. What if a French or an English admiral should anchor in the bay of [Edo] with a dozen [ships], would a triple cordon be thrown around the squadron? Would all intercourse with the shore be denied? For ourselves, we see no reason why the Japanese waters should not be visited by the government vessels of western nations and treaties of amity and commerce formed at once with the emperor."

Furthermore, he speculated about how the course of history might have been different, had the negotiations with the Chinese authorities been successful. In particular, he seems to be concerned to head off a similar violent clash with Japan. This concern echos the sentiments repeatedly voiced in the letter to the shogun from the Dutch king, who was also solicitous about the future of Japan and very motivated to prevent a second 'opium war' with that country.

Had the nations of Christendom, ten or twenty years ago, entered on negotiations with the Chinese, and in a proper manner, the expenses and the horrors or the late war might, probably would, have been saved. So with regard to Japan, it will be well if early and honorable negotiations are entered on and so conducted as to prevent "a Japanese war."<sup>5</sup>

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4 Chinese Repository, (1846) Vol. XV, April 1846, pp. 172-179

5 Chinese Repository, Vol. XV, April 1846, pp. 179-180

In the meantime, back in Japan, having deliberated for a year on how to respond to the letter from the Dutch king, or perhaps whether to even respond at all, the senior council (roju) sent a formal reply to Deshima in order to be conveyed to Holland on a Dutch ship. The document acknowledged that the fact that the king had taken the trouble to write such a letter from such a distance taking into consideration the interests of Japan and offering his suggestions was “most certainly evidence of hearty good will.”

Furthermore, the reply even went so far as to admit that the advice had considerable merit. “Although the suggestions are worthy of adoption there are reasons why this cannot be.” These reasons involved first of all the rigid distinction between commercial relations (tsusho) and diplomatic relations (tsushin) which were limited to Holland and China in the former case, and Korea and Ryukyu in the latter. aside from these four countries all intercourse (kotsu) was prohibited. Without stating explicitly by order of which shogun these distinctions and prohibitions had been established, the reply declared that to abolish them now would be “in contravention of ancestral law.” The reply was also significantly apologetic in tone. “Although this may appear discourteous, such is the strictness of the ancestral law, that no other course is open to us.”

In addition, the presents were accepted, “since they are expressions of good will and have been sent from so great a distance…” Nevertheless, the king was earnestly requested “to cease correspondence” and warned that further missives would not be received. It was further stated that despite the rejection of the king’s suggestions, the shogun “deeply appreciates his sincere loyalty.”

The reply was signed by the members of the shogun’s senior council (roju) in July 1845, headed by Abe Masahiro. This was some three months after Abe’s decision to overrule the supreme judicial council (hyojosho) and accept the Japanese castaways rescued by Captain Cooper of the Manhattan. By making such a decision, he seems to be confirming the wisdom of the Dutch king’s advice, in order to avoid quarrels and avert violent conflict with the Western powers.

## The American Naval Expedition to Japan of 1846

It is significant in a geopolitical context that the American commodore James Biddle had received official notice of the US declaration of war against Mexico in Shanghai, just before sailing to Japan.<sup>6</sup> This news had been expected for some time, and when it arrived, it likely led to the related expectation that the United States would as a result soon acquire a long coastline on the Pacific ocean, thereby becoming a truly continental nation. In this way it was seen to be fulfilling its ‘manifest destiny,’ a phrase that had only very recently been coined. Once the north American continent had been fully spanned, the next phase in the fulfillment of this destiny was conceived to be the expansion of American commerce across the Pacific to China and Japan. Thus, Biddle was entrusted with the delivery of a letter from the President of the United States to the Emperor of Japan, in which was expressed a desire to begin negotiations for a trade treaty between the two nations.

At the beginning of his official report to the Secretary of the Navy, he noted that “The Japanese… have always been more rigid in the exclusion of foreigners, than were the Chinese;…”

As evidence for this assertion he recounted the long-established policy of the Japanese shogunal government that excluded all Europeans except the Dutch from trading with Japan, and confined the latter

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6 In fact, the declaration of war was signed by President James K. Polk on 13 May 1846

to their 'factory' on Deshima in the port of Nagasaki and limited their trade to one annual ship. Thus, according to Japanese laws, foreign ships were not permitted to enter any port, except Nagasaki. Nevertheless, Biddle, being convinced that the Dutch factor there would not welcome the American presence and do all he could to influence the Japanese against it, together with his belief that the Japanese officials in Nagasaki lack the authority to negotiate with foreign officers (besides the Dutch), determined to sail to Uraga. In addition, that latter port had the advantage of proximity to the seat of government in Edo. Biddle had learned from reading "a work on Japan, published at New York in 1841"<sup>7</sup> that the distance between Nagasaki and Edo was 345 leagues and that the journey usually took seven weeks. Therefore, he decided to sail directly to "the bay of Yedo" [Edo], actually Uraga strait, where his flagship the 74-gun ship-of-the-line *Columbus*, and its accompanying sloop of war *Vincennes* anchored on 20 July 1846.

Biddle later wrote in his report<sup>8</sup> that:

Any attempt to penetrate Japan, made at that port, would be sure to encounter the hostility of the Dutch, whose exertions have hitherto been successful against every attempt to disturb their monopoly. The Japanese officers are without authority to treat with foreign officers; they could not accede to any propositions; they could only transmit them to the seat of government at [Edo].

However, Biddle was soon to discover that, in fact, the Japanese officers who came to meet him on his ship as it lay off Uraga, had no more authority to negotiate with him than did their counterparts in Nagasaki. They also could only transmit his inquiries and proposals to the senior executive council of the shogunate (roju) in Edo, and await their instructions. The only real advantage lay in the proximity to the capital and the consequent rapidity of communications with it.

The success of those communications was also crucially dependent on the degree of knowledge of the Dutch language on both sides. Biddle wrote in his report that on his arrival off Uraga, even before his ship had anchored, "an officer, with a Dutch interpreter, came on board." He did not mention him by name, but this was the 22-year-old Hori Tatsunosuke, a "Dutch interpreter" (oranda tsuji) trained in the Dutch language in Nagasaki. Meanwhile, on the American side there was only one Dutch-speaking sailor on each ship, whose knowledge of abstract vocabulary would not likely have been adequate to the task of negotiating any sort of treaty. In addition there were three Chinese speakers on the *Vincennes*, through whom some degree of written communication using Chinese characters, or kanji, may have been possible. Indeed, the Japanese interpreter of Dutch Hori was the only 'professional' interpreter among them, but he lacked experience. Although he was said to speak Dutch well, he would have known only a few key words or phrases in English, taught to him by the Dutch on Deshima. Indeed, he reportedly had difficulty translating the documents written in "the American language."

Communication was further handicapped by the refusal of Karl Gutzlaff, the Chinese interpreter in the Superintendency of Trade in Macao to allow any of the Japanese waifs who had come to Japan on the *Morrison* to accompany the American ships to Japan.

The inadequacy and deficiency of linguistic skills on both sides was demonstrated in the unfortunate incident involving Commodore Biddle which occurred toward the end of the Americans' brief visit. While

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<sup>7</sup> This must have been *Manners and Customs of the Japanese*, as discussed in my *Foreign Images and Experiences of Japan, Volume 1, First Century AD-1841*

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft from James Biddle, Document 59, pp. 64-66, written on the *Columbus*, off the coast of Japan, July 31, 1846

attempting to board a Japanese junk to receive the written reply from the shogunate to the letter from the President, he was pushed back into his own boat by a Japanese soldier standing guard there. None of the Japanese officers were there to receive him. Biddle faulted the Japanese officers for not being on deck to meet him; they protested that they had not expected him to come alongside the junk, believing that his final decision was for them to come aboard the American ship. This exchange convinced Biddle that this “unpleasant” incident was the result of “bad interpretation.” Yet he still found the conduct of the Japanese soldier who had pushed him “inexplicable,” especially in view of the fact that “all the Japanese in and about the ship had evinced great good nature in all their intercourse with us.”

Biddle was also convinced that “the outrage had been committed without the procurement or knowledge of the Japanese officers, as every atonement that I could expect or desire was promptly rendered, . . .”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, he was convinced that the soldier had acted on his own initiative, without having been told of the Commodore’s intention to come aboard the junk. In fact, in repelling Biddle’s attempt to board the junk, he was probably only acting out of a sense of duty. No one had told him to permit Biddle to board, and there was no common language which they could have used to communicate each other’s intentions or to clarify the situation. The soldier might even have warned Biddle in Japanese, but, if so, the latter had clearly not understood. Likewise, Biddle might have told him to summon one of the Japanese officers, when he noticed that no one was there to receive him. Finally, if one of the Japanese interpreters from Macao had been permitted to accompany the expedition, the whole misunderstanding would probably have been avoided. As it was, this sort of intercultural misunderstanding was almost inevitable.

Biddle included his account of this incident in his report in order to “guard against any incorrect statement that may appear in the public prints.” However, it proved impossible to ensure that the significance of the incident would not be misinterpreted by others.

For example, that fall A. H. Everett, the head of the US Legation to China, in a letter to the US Secretary of State, James Buchanan, referred to Biddle’s recent proposals to the shogunate “for opening commercial and friendly relations between the United States and Japan.” He concluded that: “It appears that the overture was positively rejected, and that the commodore was even treated with some degree of personal indignity.” He does not specify what this “personal indignity” resulted from. However, he seems to be referring to the incident of being pushed back into his boat by the Japanese soldier. If so, such a conclusion is based on a misunderstanding of the situation. Although Biddle certainly would have felt personally indignant, there is no direct connection between the rejection of his proposals by the shogunal government and his treatment by the Japanese guard. As stated previously, the latter acted independently, carrying out what he thought to be his duty. Biddle himself affirmed that all other Japanese had shown great courtesy and ‘good nature’ in their interactions with the Americans.<sup>10</sup>

In his official report to the secretary of the navy, Commodore James Biddle made very few comments pertaining to Japanese customs or character. His report was brief and almost exclusively concerned with the details of his communications with the Japanese officers who came aboard his flagship, and the reply that he received in regard to his inquiry about the accessibility of Japanese ports to American ships.

In contrast, Charles Nordhoff, who served as a young shipboy on board the *Columbus* during its voyage in 1846, has left an eyewitness account that focuses more on Japanese customs and costumes, appearance

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9 Letter to Secretary of the Navy George Bancroft from James Biddle, dated July 31, 1846, Document 59, p. 66

10 For further details about this visit, and about the incident referred to consult my *Opening of Japan*, pp. 39–42.

and character, which he observed at close range while on board the American ship during its brief stay in Japan.

Ashmead (1987) characterizes his observations on the Japanese as 'scanty' and having 'a bookish tinge.'<sup>11</sup> However, I consider this judgement to be somewhat unfair and overly dismissive. His descriptions of the Japanese officers and sailors who came aboard the American vessel are mainly concerned with physical appearance, character, dress, swords, and armor, salutations, food, etc. Yet they are quite detailed and accurate in these respects and show a keen power of observation and a generally clear writing style. They also have a vividness owing to personal and close observation on board the ship. Hundreds, if not thousands of Japanese, representing a large swath of Japanese society, from the highest-ranking samurai to the lowliest boatmen came on board the American ships, creating a rich environment in which to observe their contrasting dress and demeanor. It was in fact a perfect laboratory for an amateur ethnographer such as Nordhoff seemed to be. So the fact that neither he nor any of his crewmates or officers were allowed to go ashore during their brief stay in Japanese waters, does not mean that they had no chance to observe Japanese culture firsthand.

On the contrary, those hundreds and thousands of Japanese who visited their ships brought themselves and their culture—language, greeting customs, costume, work habits, etc. with them. All the Americans had to do was look and listen, watch and record their impressions.

As for his prose style, although it does sometimes seem a little 'bookish,' it is generally clear and readable. Moreover, that sort of florid, verbose style was much more characteristic of 19th century prose than it is of contemporary prose. His account also contains several well-drawn illustrations of Japanese in various costumes.

Nordhoff gives us this impression of the Uraga straits into which the American ships sailed:

It is a large, noble-looking harbor, almost entirely land-locked, and surrounded by thickly-wooded, beautiful-looking hills.

As soon as they had entered the straits, a number of boats came out to meet them from several different parts of the shore.

They pulled alongside and boarded us without ceremony, scrambling into the open ports, climbing up the channels, and crawling in over the bows by the head rigging, apparently choosing any mode of getting aboard that seemed the easiest.

As more boats were leaving the shore all the time, and all who boarded the ship made their boats fast to the ship, it seemed that "they would soon materially impede our progress to the anchorage, as the numbers on board already hindered all movements about decks.

In consequence, Biddle communicated to the principal officer on board that he desired to have the decks cleared of most of these uninvited passengers until the ships could come to anchor. Nordhoff relates how:

This was instantly done, some of the overcurious boats' crews being severely beaten by the nobles and chiefs, in their haste to get them out of the ship.

They then anchored about 1 and 1/2 miles from the entrance to the straits, right at the head of its lower portion.

When the anchor was down and the sails furled, the strangers were again allowed to come on board,

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11 John Ashmead, *The Idea of Japan*, p. 59

and our decks were soon filled by a crowd of as curious mortals as ever lived. they walked about drinking in with their eyes greedily all the wonders of our ship, many of them carrying little note-books in their hands, in which they made memorandums of what struck their attention most forcibly.

Nordhoff reported that the Japanese were very communicative, at least when it came to pantomime, which was the only way to communicate with the mostly English-speaking crew. The Americans could judge from their body language how they reacted at the sight of a modern Western man-of-war.

They were evidently greatly surprised at the vastness and solidity of everything on board, and opened their eyes with astonishment at the size of our rigging.

The Americans, in turn, were "as much astonished and delighted with all" they saw and devoted themselves to their visitors, whereby

groups of sailors taking parties of Japanese round the ship, exhibiting to them the wonders of the lower decks, the store-rooms, etc., while they in turn good-naturedly allowed the tars [sailors] to examine their dresses, ornaments, and accouterments.

During the nine-day stay of the two American ships in the bay off Uraga, great numbers of Japanese of all ranks, but no women, were said to visit the ships, such that the decks were crowded each day. Nordhoff and his crewmates seemed to have regarded the Japanese as exotic 'specimens' whom they observed closely in order to pass judgement on their racial characteristics. In fairness, it must be said that the Japanese were, according to earlier foreign accounts, also notorious for their intense scrutiny of Europeans.

Judging of the people generally, from the specimens which came under our observation, we were forced to admit that they were a far better developed race, both mentally and physically, than we had met with since leaving the United States.

The boatmen, the only ones of the lower classes with whom we came in contact, had not, it must be acknowledged, very intelligent countenances. They looked like slaves, [who showed] their cringing and servile obedience to their rather haughty masters...

In contrast, Nordhoff thought that it would be hard to conceive of "a nobler and more intellectual looking set of men than were those of the better classes that we saw..."

There was not one old or young whose appearance would not command respect in any society.

Their frank open countenances, their marked politeness toward each other, and toward us, strangers, as well as the degree of intelligence evinced in their observations on all they saw on board, prepossessed all hands greatly in their favor, contrasting as they did, strongly, with the dull inanimate appearance, and boorish manners of the Chinese.

Indeed, Nordhoff thought that despite the obvious physical features of Mongolian origin, "they yet resembled far more than any other East Indians, the Caucasian race."

His minute focus on the physical features of the Japanese tells us something about the obsession with overt racial characteristics of Europeans and Americans in the 19th century. Some of his descriptions of the physical appearance of the Japanese sound like that of some amateur 19th century anthropologist set down among some remote jungle tribe with a checklist of notable physiognomic features to record:

Their color is very clear nut-brown. Features tolerably regular: eyes bright, moderately large; nose straight; forehead broad and prominent; and hair black and coarse.

This may be an example of that "bookish tinge" to which Ashmead referred. However, he described their peculiar hairstyle in a more polished passage.

The entire front and crown of the head is smoothly shaven, and the hair of the back and sides of the head drawn upward and forward, and gathered into a tuft on the top.

In contrast, when it came to a description of their usual costume, his prose was more readable and tolerable, and contained some detailed observations. All articles of clothing from head to toe were described. Some of these were very similar to observations in previous accounts of Japan by foreign visitors. Others were less common.

They wore no hats, although many carried with them straight broad-brimmed, heavily japanned head coverings, doubtless as protections against the sun...

The hats... are rather carried than worn, [and] are very awkward contrivances, the Japanese seeming to stand as much in need of a reform in the matter of head covering as do the Europeans and Americans.

The awkwardness of this head covering so impressed him that he devoted an entire paragraph to a minute description of it. In the final sentence he concludes humorously:

No wonder, thought I, when I examined this novel contrivance to keep out the rain, that they prefer to go bareheaded.

The chief articles of their dress appear to be several large loose gowns, worn one over the other, the outer one being of silk or fine cloth, and having embroidered upon its back and breast various fanciful devices, in striking colors, proclaiming, probably, the wearer's rank.

A belt confines their dress at the middle, and serves, beside, to suspend the sword, or swords, all the higher grades of the nobles carrying two of these weapons.

Both swords, one short, the other long, have straight blades, which, we noticed, were invariably keen edged, as though prepared for instant use. They are worn both on the same side, one above the other.

Their shoes are very rudely constructed, being simply sandals of plaited straw, held on by a thong or latch, which fits between the two larger toes. Their feet are encased in a kind of stockings, made of white cotton cloth, room being left between the toes for the thong of the shoe to catch readily.

On entering any of the cabins, or private apartments of the officers, the sandals were left at the door, their owner walking in in his stocking feet. Thus there were [some] fifty or sixty pairs of sandals in the little ante chamber of the commodore's cabin.

In their broad sleeves, or the bosoms of their gowns, they carried, with a variety of other matter, the square sheets of white paper which served them in lieu of pocket handkerchiefs. When one of these sheets was used, it was carefully deposited in an empty sleeve, to be thrown overboard at the first opportunity.

One of the most interesting and imaginative passages concerned the possession of a fan by all and its use as a versatile tool. While he is not at all the first to describe this particular object, his description goes beyond any previous one that I have read in its depth and range of observation, as well as the vividness of the writing.

The *fan* seemed to be universally in use with them. From the highest to the lowest, all, walking or sitting, talking, eating, or saluting, had a fan in their hands. It is applied to the most various and different uses. Did the sun shine: the fan performed the office of a parasol: were they eating: morsels of food were presented to friends upon a fan; did one desire to make a memorandum of some object striking his attention: the fan serves as an extempore writing-desk, on which to lay the notebook; was it necessary to drive overboard some over-curious boatman: the fan, now transformed into an

instrument of punishment, showers blows upon the back of the offending serf. In short, the fan is evidently used anywhere and everywhere, on and for all occasions.

He also noted that the educated men carried a small wickerwork basket on their person, the contents of one of which he examined was said to be:

...a small compass, divided off in an entirely different manner from that used with us, the principal point being according to Chinese usage, the south, instead of the north, some small slips of white paper used for memorandums, some Indian ink, two or three pieces of different colored silk, a little sack, which I took to be an amulet as it much resembles articles of that kind worn by the Chinese, and a scent-bag containing musk, with the smell of which everything in China and Japan is impregnated.

He next described the light chain mail that the samurai wore over their outside robe to be "woven so closely as to be not only spear but bullet proof." (One wonders if he actually went so far as to test it by firing a bullet at it!) He concluded that: "It was altogether a highly-finished piece of workmanship, and spoke well for the advancement of this particular art among them."

Judging from the following passage there were even some instances of friendly swordplay between the Americans and their Japanese visitors, in which the latter were able to display their skills convincingly. The beautiful decoration of their sword hilts also impressed the Americans' eye. They were said to lack any firearms.

We found them to be most expert swordsmen, many of the officers and crew trying their skill with foils and single-sticks, in which they proved themselves nowhere behind the most skillful of our men.

The hilts of their swords were beautifully ornamented with gold and silver, and inlaid pearls and precious stones. The scabbards were generally lacquered or japanned.

In regard to their food and eating habits, Nordhoff makes some interesting and insightful observations. The traits he ascribes to the Japanese still set them apart today, and not unfavorably, from those of the Europeans and Americans.

Their manner of partaking of food and their moderation seemed to me to betoken a people who eat to live, rather than live to eat. They seemed desirous merely to satisfy the necessities of the body, and in their abstemiousness in this respect they certainly showed themselves far removed from the condition of savages, who desire only to satisfy their physical wants.

Nordhoff devotes three paragraphs to a detailed description of the greeting customs between equals on the one hand, and between superiors and inferiors on the other, which the Japanese enacted repeatedly on deck of the ships, in front of their American hosts. His impatient reaction to these elaborate rituals is typical of many Americans, whose society generally emphasizes simplicity and informality of greetings conducted between ostensible equals.

Their ceremonies of politeness were tedious, and although evidently matters of much consequence to them, seemed to us singularly absurd. Two friends would meet upon our quarterdeck. : straight away assuming as earnest looks as though intent upon a matter involving life and death, the approach one another, and, one standing straight up, the other makes a low bow, nearly touching his head to the deck; rising, his vis-a-vis now repeats the genuflection, a few words are muttered on each side, the bows are repeated, some singular motions are made with the hands, and the ceremony is over. Now the cloud disappears from their countenances, and, turning off, they enter into cheerful and lively conversation. This was between equals.

Between superior and inferior the case was a little different. The latter, on meeting the person with

whom he desired to communicate, would assume a countenance of abject humility, and standing before him, wait for him to notice his presence. Should the superior, after perhaps a minute's consideration, deign to do so, the inferior proceeds to the various manipulations, prostrations on the ground, etc., in such cases made and provided, the superior standing still and looking contemptuously down at the poor fellow before him.

When all is finished, the inferior stands respectfully before the object of his late semi-adoration, humbly looking down on the ground, waiting for his serene highness' permission to speak. And, perhaps, after all this bowing and scraping, he only desires to address a sentence or two to him.

Nordhoff had read of 'a universal system of espionage practiced among the Japanese' and saw evidence of it even in their social intercourse with them. He noticed that wherever two or three Japanese were together, they seemed to feel very restrained, and none of them were willing to show the Americans any of his articles of clothing, or to permit them to handle his swords, or to accept any small coins or other trifling articles, which they were in fact eager to obtain from them. However, if they could isolate a single individual in some corner where he felt himself unobserved by his companions, he would eagerly accept anything offered to him and unhesitatingly lend them any of his articles that they wanted to examine more closely.

However, "the most singular instance of this general espionage" was said to have occurred when on the evening before the day the American ships were due to set sail, a delegation of officers visited Commodore Biddle, and returned to him many of the articles that had been given to various Japanese individuals by members of the ship's crew. Nordhoff reasoned that there must have been a general search conducted of all those who had visited the American ships. He then drew what must have seemed the inescapable conclusion that: "The authorities evidently desired to wipe out every trace of the visit of the barbarians." Indeed, their very presence was perceived by them to be a violation of that 'ancestral law' which the shogunate was bound by its dominant Confucian ideology to uphold and respect.

Over the three days just prior to their departure, the American ships were provided with "...a large supply of most excellent drinking water, the best we had met during the whole cruise." This certainly sounds like high praise, for the Americans must have been supplied with water at quite a number of different ports in the world.

Fresh provisions of vegetables of various kinds, and several hundred chickens were brought to the ships prior to their departure. Nordhoff mused that:

A bullock or two would have been most welcome, but the Japanese do not kill or eat their cattle—using them only for draught and to milk.

Unlike some other Americans who would later find themselves confined on Japanese shores, Nordhoff knew better than to complain about the lack of availability of beef in Edo-era Japan.

As in the case of the *Manhattan*, the two American warships were constantly surrounded by cordons of linked Japanese boats. Biddle was initially told that they were only there to be on hand in case the ships need to be towed. But he did not believe that story. Nordhoff tells us what the Americans believed to be the true purpose behind their presence.

During the entire period of our stay in [Edo] bay, our ships were guarded by an immense number of boats, which were constantly, night and day, on the alert, with the intention of preventing us from holding any communication with the shore.

The contrast between rowing and sculling was noted by several previous foreign observers. In this

passage its use as a means of propulsion was clearly explained. The distinctive noise emitted by the rowers was also imaginatively described.

These boats were anchored at various distances from the vessel, but forming a cordon about us, through which it would have been impossible to pass with any of our boats. Their boats are large and strongly built, and manned with from six to ten oars on each side. They do not use their oars as do the boatmen of most other nations, stationed with their backs to the stern, and pulling the blade through the water, but stand up, facing to the side of the boat, and scull, and by this means they propel their little craft with great velocity through the water.

At every motion of the oars, the whole crew give vent to a sharp hissing noise, at the same time putting out the whole strength. the continual hsh, hsh has a singular effect, sounding at a little distance not unlike the hissing of an immense serpent.

The following passage bears similarities to the description of Captain Cooper on the *Manhattan* anchored in the same bay a little over a year earlier. In both accounts darkness augments the mystery of an already strange and mysterious land.

At nightfall our guards hung lanterns upon masts in the stern of each boat, and the broad surface of the bay, dotted with numberless lights, looked like a vast city. This illumination had a beautiful effect on dark nights, and lend an additional touch of romance to the strange situation in which we were faced.

Having provided all that the commodore had requested-and more-by way of supplies of food, water and firewood, the Japanese officers made an "earnest request" for the Americans to depart immediately. Accordingly, the following day was appointed. The Americans understood that no recompensation for the supplies would be accepted. "The only service asked in return was to stay away."

The following passages recount under what circumstances and with which feelings the American ships took their leave of Japanese waters. It also reveals that they seemed to have a better idea of where the city of Edo was located relative to their anchorage.

On the morning of our sailing day [29 July 1846], there happened to be but little wind where we lay, under the shelter of the land. But lack of wind was not to be any excuse for our longer stay. At early dawn, between fifteen hundred and two thousand boats gathered under our bows, and the commodore was informed that if would now lift the anchor, these boats would tow us out.

Accordingly the anchor was weighed, the sails set, and two long hawsers passed over the bows to the waiting boatmen, who, fastening to these, and to each others' craft when the hawsers would no longer reach them, soon towed us to the entrance of the bay, when, taking the breeze, the boats cast off, and, amid waving of fans and hats, we bade good-by[e] to Japan.

We left Japan behind us without any regrets... Our visit had been a source of great pleasure to all on board--yet the many strange things we had seen had only raised in us an intense desire to see more in detail their everyday life--to visit the people ashore.

So strongly was this excited in many of the old tars that they blame the commodore for not at once sailing up to the city [Edo], which we understood lay in the upper portion of the bay, concealed from our sight by an intervening promontory--and there going ashore, under cover of the guns, and at once forcing them to hold communications.

This last paragraph reminds one of the threats made by Commodore Perry several years later to do just what these "old tars" had reportedly wanted Commodore Biddle to do. While Perry had the means to

reliably do so, with his steamships, Biddle would have been dependent on the fickle bay winds.

This last passage reveals that the last group of Japanese the Americans met were not at all shy or hesitant about communicating or trading with them. It also tells us that glass was a valuable and scarce commodity in Japan at that time, which may have made it into an article of smuggling.

Two days after leaving the harbor, we met two Japanese fishing boats, which sailed boldly up alongside, and held up some fish for sale. They made fast alongside, and, on receiving a quantity of empty bottles, handed up in return a number of fine fish. They did not appear at all shy, and evidently were much rejoiced at the excellent bargain they had made. Glass is a scarce article in Japan, as we are informed in the descriptions of the country given by the Dutch agents who have resided there. Glass bottles are in special demand, and no doubt it was the anxiety to possess themselves of some treasures of this kind which induced the fishermen to come alongside. They manifested no hesitation or fear whatever, but appeared on the contrary very anxious to communicate. It struck us that if the discipline was so strict everywhere else throughout the island as we found it at [Edo] Bay, they would experience some difficulty in smuggling their bottles on shore. The fishing boats were the last we saw of Japan...<sup>12</sup>

Nordhoff assures us that: "There was not a man on board that was not heartily glad to find the old ship once more...homeward-bound..."

According to Nordhoff, Commodore Biddle was eager to sail his ship to the Pacific coastline, in order to be of possible service in the war with Mexico. Although California was still part of Mexico, and called Alta California, it was probably the general expectation that now that the war had begun, it would soon belong to the United States. Indeed, a few Americans had already settled there, and many more were on their way. In a little over two years' time, gold would be discovered at Sutter's fort in Sacramento, and the trickle of immigrants would quickly turn into a flood. When California officially became American territory following the conclusion of the peace treaty with Mexico, it was put on the fast track to statehood, joining the union in 1850.

In the space of only a few years, the United States would have more than a thousand miles of coastline on the Pacific facing Japan, Korea and China. Then no longer did these countries represent the vision of an exotic and remote 'far east' but now increasingly the not so distant and not so unfamiliar 'far west' beyond the shrinking sea.

## Summary

This article began with the dramatic alteration in the dominant Western view of Japan that occurred in the wake of the defeat of imperial China by Great Britain. Japan was seen as an Asian country that was closely linked to China in terms of race and religion, politics and culture. As such, it was widely believed that it would soon have to follow China in opening its ports to Western ships and commerce. The burning question was the manner in which it would happen, whether violently, as in the case of China, or peacefully, as was hoped by many.

Foremost among those who wished for a peaceful opening of Japanese ports was the Dutch king Willem

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12 Charles Nordhoff(1855), *Man-of-War Life*, pp. 176–190

II. His letter addressed to the shogun Ieyoshi in 1844 amply demonstrates this sincere desire. The king tried to impress upon the mind of the shogun and his councillors that in a world dominated by the military power of Great Britain and the other Western nations, there was no alternative but to ameliorate their traditional seclusion policy.

An opportunity to follow the Dutch king's advice came in the spring of 1845 when the American whaler *Manhattan* brought twenty-two Japanese waifs back to their homeland. The head of the shogunal senior executive council (roju) Abe Masahiro made a special decision to accept the waifs, given as they had not had any contact with foreign lands. The captain of the whaling ship impressed the Japanese by his kindness and solicitation for their unfortunate compatriots. He in turn was much impressed by the high degree of civilization of Japan and the great courtesy on the part of all the Japanese with whom he came in contact.

The visit of two American warships to Uraga strait in 1846 was another opportunity for Americans to meet the Japanese face to face and become better acquainted with their customs and conduct. The account of Charles Nordhoff went beyond that of Cooper in its detailed descriptions of Japanese appearance and character, customs and costumes. It was the first such detailed account written by an American.

Although both accounts are limited on the one hand by their lack of familiarity with Japanese language and culture, and on the other by Japanese restrictions against foreigners, they do provide an interesting and valuable picture of the state of Japanese society on the eve of its modernization.

The extensive quotations from original sources show how the American view of Japan at that time (as well as that of the British and French) was still based on ignorance and misunderstanding of the actual governmental structure of the Japanese shogunate and also tied up with their largely outdated and prejudicial view of the Dutch trade in Japan.

Perhaps the overall experience of the Americans during the combined thirteen days they spent cooped up on board their ships off Uraga might be summed up succinctly as: friendly people, unfriendly laws.

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## 概要

本稿は、アヘン戦争の後 1842 年からの東アジアにおける激しく変化する国際状況の中で、西洋人の日本観の変容について論じます。日本は古くから中国の文明と密接に交流しており、中国がイギリスの軍事力によって敗北、香港などの港を開かされると、日本もいずれ西洋の国々に港を開くことを避けられなくなるだろうと広く思われました。一番に議論されたのは、その開き方が戦争によるか、または平和的におこるかということでした。そして、1844 年オランダ王 Willem II が初めて将軍徳川家慶宛に手紙を書き、出島にあるオランダ商館長を通して江戸に転送してもらいました。オランダ王は日本対イギリス、アメリカなど軍事力が強い国の間と戦争が簡単に起こりえるという事を恐れ、将軍に昔からの「鎖国」の方針を止め、日本の港をすべての国との貿易に開くように熱心に呼びかけました。

その後 1845 年春にアメリカの捕鯨船マンハッタン号は 22 人の日本人漂流民を乗せて、浦賀沖に停泊しました。老中主席阿部正弘の特別評価のおかげで、漂流民は日本の役人たちに引き渡されました。ただし、アメリカの捕鯨船は日本の小舟に囲まれ、アメリカ人の乗組員は船長も含め船から降りることは固く禁止されました。しかし、船長とその乗組員はわずか 4 日間の滞在中、日本人の役人と友好的に交流し、お互いに人間として知り合いました。船長はアメリカ人の親切さとアメリカの日本に対する友好的態度を見せ、日本の文明や日本人の礼義正しいことを高く評価しました。

翌年 1846 年夏、アメリカの軍艦 2 隻がまた浦賀沖に停泊し、すぐに日本の小舟に囲まれ、9 日間の滞在中アメリカ人たちは船から降りることは許されませんでした。しかし、日本人の役人や船人が大勢軍艦に乗り込み、アメリカ人の少年ノードホッフは良く観察して、日本人の見かけ、性格、風俗、衣服、食事等についての詳しい記録を残しました。これはアメリカ人による初めての詳しい記録です。

このふたつの記録は、日本語と日本文化に対する知識不足や当時の日本の鎖国による制限があるにもかかわらず、近代化の前夜の日本について、興味深く重要な事柄を残しています。幕末日本に訪問したアメリカ人の日本に対する観点を一言で要約すると、「友好的な民族で、非友好的な法律」と言えるでしょう。

**Key Words : bakumatsu Japan ; Opium War ; whaler Manhattan ; ship-of-the-line Columbus ; Captain Mercator Cooper ; Commodore James Biddle ; Charles Nordhoff**

キーワード：幕末日本、アヘン戦争、マンハッタン号、コロンバス号、日本人漂流民、クーパー船長、ビッドル提督、チャルズ・ノドホフ