By the spring of 1947, Goryōrin had come and gone, dissolved, as it had been created, for reasons of political ideology. And within a few decades it was largely forgotten. But in its own day it was a significant part of both Japan’s forestal and royal history, and today it still sheds light on those experiences. It also gives us further insight into ways in which the British and Japanese historical experiences have and have not been similar.

REFLECTIONS ON GORYŌRIN

Aspects of Goryōrin history – its founding, difficulties, and overall performance – seem to merit some last reflections, as may a brief “might have been,” had Imperial Forest not been summarily abolished in 1947.

Its Founding

At the time of Goryōrin’s creation around 1890, the decision by Meiji leaders to establish an independent fiscal foundation for the Imperial Household was not unreasonable. As inheritors of the 1868 victory, after all, they were the leaders of a conquest regime and had ample reason to guard the heart of their claim to legitimacy against both rivals for power and the discontented among those whom they ruled. Moreover, much political rhetoric of the day – whether employing ideas and information from Europe or from their own political heritage – helped validate the whole notion of a financially robust imperial institution.

More specifically, considering both the precedents of Japan’s own hereditary elite and current practice among the crowned heads of Europe, it was reasonable to give the royal house a substantial landed base. Furthermore, given the expansiveness of Japan’s forested terrain and the intensive use to which the remaining land was already being put, once the fiscal potential of timberland was understood, it made good sense to center that landed estate in woodland. Finally, such an arrangement fitted nicely the new legal principles that Meiji leaders were appropriating from Europe, in particular the notions of exclusive property
ownership and property taxes. These concepts provided the government with a doctrinal basis for repudiating the whole complicated and ambiguity-ridden legacy of use rights and obligations that blanketed Naichi, replacing it with a seemingly clearcut system of property rights that would permit the creation in perpetuity of an unencumbered imperial estate.

Its Difficulties
Precedent, logic, and legal niceties notwithstanding, from the very outset Goryōrin encountered difficulties. The mere facts of change itself, of new demands on old woodland, of demands by uninvited outsiders, and of too much demand on too few resources were ample grounds for conflict and difficulty. Much Goryōrin in Naichi was neither as productive nor as extensive as its creators seem to have presumed, and much was already being used more fully than they evidently realized. Then, when the Property Office addressed those problems by agreeing to one or another type of rental arrangement, the Imperial Household lost much of the fiscal value of its estate.

Regarding that last point, those rental arrangements assured many villagers of access to basic necessities – fertilizer, fodder, fuel, and myriad lesser items. And village dependence on this type of forest yield did not decrease during Goryōrin's lifetime. Quite to the contrary, Japan's unprecedented population growth (from about 32 million in 1870 to more than 70 million in 1940) expanded the total demand for such customary forest products, and villagers fought hard to get enough to survive. Even when they were able to harvest the goods in ways that did no environmental damage (and given the rising level of demand, too often they couldn’t), village income levels generally were so low that the Imperial Household could not squeeze a significant rent out of the harvest. And land devoted to production of these goods could not be utilized in other ways more profitable to the Household.

Moreover, villagers (larger landowners and local lumbermen in particular) discovered new ways to turn more and more woodland to advantage as new uses for forest produce created new demand and thus new market opportunities. These new types of demand included mulberry leaves for producing export silk; charcoal and fuel wood for powering steam engines and smelting metals; pulpwood for paper and chemicals; construction wood for railroad ties, mine timbers, vehicles, vessels, buildings, bridges, and so on; and specialty wood for a grand variety of purposes, including tea chests, matches, export bric-a-brac, gun stocks, warships, and, by 1940, airplanes. So villagers had both a need for more goods in their own lives and the opportunity to benefit from the marketplace if they could harvest stands or exploit lands at will, including those the Imperial Household claimed as its own. And few among those villagers wished to share their gains with the hereditary elite.

On Naichi, then, much of the land that became goryōchi was already being intensively exploited, and its local exploiters justified their claims