CHAPTER TWO

REVIVAL OF BRITISH COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY IN JAPAN

When Portuguese traders and missionaries found Nagasaki in the mid-sixteenth century, they could tell without even leaving their ship that they had entered one of the best natural harbours in the world. The rough waters of the East China Sea were tamed by a long channel that bottlenecked at the entrance and opened into a wide, calm bay protected on three sides by tree-clad mountains. Although little more than a remote fishing hamlet, the town at the head of the bay provided the closest safe haven in the Japanese archipelago for the carracks sailing from the Chinese continent.

The Europeans engaged in friendly negotiations with the local lord, Ōmura Sumitada, and, in 1570, received permission to establish a base for commercial and missionary activity. A decade later Nagasaki had grown into a bustling international port studded with Catholic churches, frequented by European traders and missionaries, and visited without hindrance by ships of all nations. The Japanese population, almost exclusively Christian, ate meat and bread, drank wine from glass goblets, played chess and backgammon, and otherwise carried on in a manner unimaginable in other parts of Japan. The European influence was so strong that travellers began to refer to the port as ‘Little Rome’.

An atmosphere of cooperation and freedom predominated in Nagasaki, but the religion professed by the Europeans began to draw criticism from Japanese leaders because its followers, whose numbers swelled to a peak of some 300,000 by the turn of the century, tended to choose allegiance to a foreign god over submission to temporal authorities. In the spring of 1600, the Dutch ship Liefde foundered on the east coast of Kyūshū, an event that marked not only the beginning of Japanese-Dutch exchange but also the addition of a Protestant country to the international cocktail brewing in Japan. The Dutch won permission to trade from the newly-inaugurated Tokugawa Shogunate and established a factory (trading

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post) at Hirado in 1609. In 1613, the British ship *Clove* commanded by John Saris sailed into Hirado Harbour, and the British established a factory for the English East India Company within sight of the one run by the Dutch. As it turned out, however, only four British ships including the *Clove* ever touched Japanese shores, and the British factory soon closed.

The Tokugawa Shogunate accepted the stubborn presence of the Catholic priests and their Japanese congregations as an unpleasant yet inevitable condition for continuation of the profitable foreign trade, but in 1612–1614 it imposed a complete and final ban on Christianity and ordered the destruction of all churches, the expulsion of priests, and the registration of every last Japanese citizen as a member of one of the principal Buddhist sects. The impact could not have been felt any greater than in ‘Little Rome’: churches were razed and Japanese Christians forced either to recant or to face gruesome torture and martyrdom.

In 1641, the Dutch East India Company moved its factory (trading post) to Dejima, the artificial island in Nagasaki Harbour built a few years earlier in a last-ditch effort to maintain the lucrative European trade while confining Portuguese residents and curbing the spread of Christianity. The Chinese also won the right to continue a modicum of trade on the condition that they reside only at Nagasaki and, of course, refrain from any activity that smacked of Christian promulgation. The latter were free for the first few decades to take up lodgings anywhere in the town, a situation that resulted in a surge in the number of Chinese ships visiting the port and a remarkable flowering of Chinese culture. The trade became so unruly in fact that the Tokugawa Shogunate decided to restrict the number of Chinese ships to seventy a year in 1688 and, the following year, to confine all Chinese residents to a segregated quarter in Jūzenji-gō, near Dejima.

For the next century and a half, the Dutch and Chinese enclaves in Nagasaki – the only two places in Japan where foreigners could reside – served as an interface for international exchange and portals through which a trickle of merchandise and information reached this country from abroad.

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2 A small port in the northern part of present-day Nagasaki Prefecture, Hirado was the seat of the Matsura domain and the site of a trading post run by the Portuguese before their transfer to Nagasaki.

3 Nagasaki Shishi Nenpyō Hensan Linkai (ed.), *Nagasaki shishi nenpyō* (Nagasaki City Chronology) (Nagasaki City Hall, 1981), p. 43.