INTRODUCTION

Winston S. Churchill (1874–1965) was born six years after the Meiji Restoration (1868). The politically active part of his life almost coincided with the emergence, decline and rebirth of modern Japan. In 1900, he had been elected as a member of parliament and he took part in the vote on the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902. He followed with close interest the 1904–5 war, which Japan narrowly won against Russia under the aegis of the Alliance. As First Lord of the Admiralty before, and at the beginning of, the First World War he strongly advocated extensive naval collaboration with Japan.

Initially, Japan was not a major focus of interest for him, but Anglo-Japanese relations came to demand his attention increasingly as he climbed the ladder in politics and government. Through the years, he
acquired enormous knowledge and information about Japan. He had an insatiable intellectual curiosity and carefully followed political trends in Japan through the statements and writings of Japanese leaders and military officers. The extensive information he accumulated is reflected in his numerous speeches and articles. In this respect he was singularly different from other world leaders like Roosevelt and Stalin.

Churchill’s exposure to Japan was negligible until his parents went on their long tour of Japan in 1894, the year in which Japan went to war with China. The impressions of Japan, which his mother conveyed to him, appear to have left indelible marks on Churchill. He was then twenty years of age and emotionally attached to his mother whom he ‘loved dearly though at a distance’. Lady Randolph Churchill’s intelligent, unbiased and aesthetically active mind enabled her to have penetrating views of ‘Things Japanese’ as amply demonstrated in her excellent article ‘A Journey in Japan’.

Churchill never visited Japan but maintained a friendly, understanding and compassionate attitude toward the country. He once contemplated a visit in conjunction with his lecture tour in the United States in 1933 but in the end did not go there. Anglo-Japanese relations were far from agreeable at that time and it is debatable whether his sympathetic attitude towards Japan would have changed, if the visit had taken place. He wrote for Collier’s Magazine in 1936:

I am one of the dwindling band of Members who voted for the ratification of the original Anglo-Japanese Alliance. I watched with enthusiasm the loyal co-operation of Japan in the Great War. The impression left on my mind by many years of working with the Governments of the Mikado has been that the Japanese are sober, steady, grave and mature people; that they can be trusted to measure forces and factors with great care, and that they do not lose their heads, or plunge into mad, uncalculated adventures. But of late years we have been confronted with a somewhat different Japan. The elder statesmen and their sagacious power seem to have dispersed. For the last four or five years the political movement of Japan has seemed to effect itself through the murder of statesmen who were deemed too prudent or circumspect, or in other ways were objectionable to secret societies of Army officers. Great and honourable Japanese leaders have fallen in a swift succession to the sword or bullet of honourable assassins.

His view of Japan was based on up-to-date knowledge. He was harsh when he felt it appropriate and necessary in the cause of justice to chastise Japan’s unacceptable behaviour. However, he was always fair and sincere in his comments: