In the first half of the twentieth century probably the most important royal relationship that Britain had was the one with Imperial Japan. This might seem a strange comment, but it should be recalled that after the collapse of empires of the Romanovs, the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs in 1917–18 only Britain, Japan and Italy remained as monarchical Great Powers. The royal relationship with Japan was important, because in contrast to the Italian case, the relations between the two courts clearly had an overt political purpose. During the years of the alliance, in an attempt to signify mutual respect, the very highest decorations were exchanged and royal princes from both countries set out on formal visits that took them to the other side of the world. Moreover, even after the alliance ended these ties continued into the inter-war period and were still used as a way of indicating that close
ties of friendship still existed. To look at why this royal relationship with Japan became so important to Britain is therefore a useful way of comprehending the nature of the larger Anglo-Japanese relationship.¹

In order to understand why royal diplomacy came to play such an important role, one has to begin in the late nineteenth century. During this period Japan was engaged in a major effort to modernize itself. As well as engaging in industrialization and the construction of a modern state apparatus, this also meant turning away from the ceremonial practices of the Sino-centric world. Accordingly, the Japanese monarchy sought to co-opt some of the customs and rituals of the courts in Europe. Thus, the Emperor began to wear Western-style military dress, which emphasized his link with the newly formed conscription army, while the nobility was organized into a British-based order of precedence.² These efforts to make Japan the equal of the Europeans were, however, compromised by the patronizing treatment that the Japanese court received at the hands of the West. A particular sinner in this respect was Britain. For example, in 1887, when Queen Victoria marked the fiftieth anniversary of her accession to the throne, the Japanese representative at the celebrations, Prince Komatsu, felt insulted by the inadequate welcome he received at British hands.³

The result of these perceived slights was that Japan developed a great sensitivity where royal relations were concerned. For example, in 1897, the Japanese only agreed to send a representative to the Queen’s diamond jubilee once Britain had guaranteed that he would be given the same treatment as European royalty.⁴ Thus, even before the alliance was signed in January 1902, it was clear that one criterion by which Japan would judge foreign countries would be how the latter treated the Emperor and his family. The obvious corollary to this was that if a Western country sought to develop a close relationship with Japan, it had to be aware that extraordinary scrutiny would be applied to the formal aspects of diplomacy to ensure that relations were being carried out on the basis of equality. At the same time, however, this also implied that Japan might be susceptible to flattery and that stressing royal ties might be a way of cementing the political relationship.

Certainly it seems that even when the alliance was being negotiated, Britain was aware of the importance of using the Court as a symbol of its good intentions. Moreover, this task was made considerably easier by the fact that King Edward VII was broadly favourable to the alignment with Japan.⁵ Thus, when the leading Japanese politician, Itō Hirobumi, came to Britain in December 1901, he was invited for an audience with the King and was presented with the Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath (GCB).⁶ In the following year, at the time of the King’s coronation, the Japanese representatives were treated with considerable attention in order to ensure that their amour propre