Nakai Hiromu (1838–94): A Forgotten Hero of Anglo-Japanese Relations

ELEANOR ROBINSON

INTRODUCTION

In the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art, there is a painting by a local Kyoto artist, Kawabata Yanosuke (1893–1981). The painting, *Snow in a Park*, oil on canvas from 1939, portrays a snowy park scene in Kyoto. In the centre, there is a statue covered in snow. The statue is that of Nakai Hiromu, which stood in Maruyama Park in Kyoto city. The statue in the painting was eventually pulled down, the iron melted for the war effort. In 1964, two of Nakai’s descendants, Nakai Kise and Nakai Hiroko, put up a new statue of Nakai on a smaller scale in the same place. This statue goes largely unnoticed by passers-by. Indeed, Nakai Hiromu, his history and legacy, attract little attention today although he had an important role in the history of Anglo-Japanese relations. Without Nakai Hiromu’s heroic actions one early spring day in 1868,
the course of Anglo-Japanese history might have developed rather differently.

It is not easy to trace his history as during his life he used several names. A native of the castle town of Kagoshima in Satsuma, Nakai was the eldest son of Yokoyama Eisuke. Upon his birth in late 1838 (in the old Japanese lunar calendar), he was given the name Yokoyama Kyūnoshin. His descendants today call him Nakai Hiromu. As a poet of Chinese verse, kanshi, he used the pen name Ōshū Sanjin. For a time he used the name Sameshima Unjō. In the 1867 diary of Iwasaki Yatarō (1834–1885), the famous Tosa samurai and founder of the Japanese shipping company Nippon Yūsen Kaisha (NYK) and Mitsubishi Corporation, Nakai appears as Tanaka Kōsuke. Another alias he used was Gotō Kyūjirō, and in the context of his relations with the British during the early Meiji period, he is referred to as Nakai Kōzō. In modern texts, both in Japanese and English, he is sometimes called ‘Nakai Hiroshi’, and in some contemporary newspaper articles his name is given the furigana reading ‘Nakai Kō.’

Nakai was a contemporary and friend to many of the prominent figures from the late-Edo and Meiji periods such as Sakamoto Ryōma (1835–1867), Iwasaki Yatarō, Inoue Kaoru (1835–1915), Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830–1878), Saigō Takamori (1827–1877), Gotō Shōjirō (1838–1897), Godai Tomoatsu (1835–1885) and Kirino Toshiaki (1838–1877). In addition, a number of prominent British diplomats knew him well.

CAREER

When US Commodore Perry’s ‘black ships’ came to Japan, the nation was in turmoil. Like many dissatisfied young samurai of the time, Nakai ran away from his domain at the age of sixteen, taking with him a large sum of money from his family home, and went to Edo (now Tokyo). He was caught by the authorities and sent back to Satsuma where he was imprisoned for about a year. On regaining his freedom, he flouted domain law and escaped from Satsuma again, on this occasion heading to Kyoto.

Around this time, he befriended the Tosa samurai Gotō Shōjirō who was a personal retainer of the daimyo of Tosa (now Kōchi Prefecture). On Gotō’s recommendation and that of his fellow Tosa samurai, Sakamoto Ryōma and with the financial assistance of Gotō, Nakai travelled to Britain for the first time in late 1866. Upon his return to Japan in 1867, Nakai became an agent in Kyoto for Date Munenari (1818–1892), the daimyo of Uwajima (now Ehime prefecture). With the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and the establishment of the new foreign affairs department, he was assigned the task of