Lord Rosebery (1847–1929) and Japan

IAN NISH

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important events in Japanese history, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5, coincides remarkably with the period in office of the Liberal Party in Britain presided over by Lord Rosebery. Rosebery succeeded William Ewart Gladstone in March 1894. He had considerable experience in foreign affairs having served Gladstone as foreign secretary in his 2nd and 3rd administrations and tended to dominate policy-making. He straightaway encountered a serious crisis in East Asia over the claims of Japan and China for the kingdom of Korea. This was the first time that ‘far eastern affairs’ had become a matter of conspicuous public interest in Britain and other European capitals. There was increasing newspaper reportage and debate in parliament which led in turn to discussion in cabinet.

There were formidable restraints on Rosebery’s autonomy in pursuing an independent Liberal foreign policy. He belonged to the Liberal Imperialist wing of the party and found himself opposed within the cabinet by Sir William Harcourt who, because of
his seniority, was chosen as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Rosebery being in the House of Lords could not present his case in the House of Commons. He appointed as foreign secretary Lord Kimberley who was a senior and well-liked figure in the party and had the unenviable task of acting as mediator between Rosebery and Harcourt. Harcourt was opposed to intervention in foreign adventures. The situation was summed up by Munro-Ferguson who wrote that it was ‘hard if not impossible to work decently with some of this team on Foreign Affairs.’

The other constraint on Rosebery was the international environment. Throughout the western world there was an appetite for imperial acquisitiveness and the newcomers were particularly jealous; in particular, jealous of Britain and suspicious of Britain’s every act in the foreign field.

Rosebery who was a great traveller had not visited either China or Japan. But he had spent time in Australia in 1883–4 which gave him some grasp of the situation there. In 1894 his anxiety about the effect of a possible war on China was expressed in one of his speeches:

The sudden destruction of the central Government of China by a conquering force . . . [would] mean such a scene of chaos and horror as the world has never contemplated. A population suddenly let loose without the control – none too strong as it is – of a dynasty or Government in Pekin, means . . . such an appalling danger to every Christian situated within its limits . . . that I for one consider it might be the gravest catastrophe that could happen to Asiatic civilization.

Rosebery’s views on Japan were moulded by his contemporaries who had journeyed to the east. For the Conservatives, George Curzon had roamed round East Asia and written detailed letters which were published in *The Times* and later in his book *Problems of the Far East* (1894). One of the staff of the Tokyo legation, Cecil Spring–Rice, also expressed his opinions in private letters sent to influential colleagues at the Foreign Office. His assessment of Japan in 1893 was mainly positive but had grains of uncertainty about the future:

I am very much impressed with Japan as a power, and it will be interesting to see what it turns out to be – bubble or nugget.

In July, when war was looming on the Korean peninsula, Kimberley asked whether it would be possible to persuade world powers to intervene to bring about some settlement. But the Powers, especially the US and Germany, were lukewarm in their response. As a result, Britain on her own rebuked Japan on 20 July for acting