Alfred Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Northcliffe (1865–1922): An Uncomfortable Visitor to Japan

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Lord Northcliffe with Murayama Ryūhei on his right and another Asahi executive

‘EVERYONE SAYS, AND I agree, that you don’t feel comfortable with Japanese,’ Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe, observed in his account of the round-the-world tour that brought him to Japan in November 1921.¹ Here he is then, feeling uncomfortable on 2 November, the evening of his arrival in Tokyo, hosting a banquet at the Maple Club, with the guest of honour, Murayama Ryūhei (1850–1933), President of the Asahi Shinbun on his right. The preeminent British newspaper proprietor of his day, owner of The Times, The Daily Mail and a large stable of daily newspapers and popular weeklies in Britain and the Dominions, Alfred Harmsworth, First Viscount Northcliffe, turns awkwardly from the camera, his figure curiously diminished between his guests.

For someone with such a visceral dislike of foreigners, in particular the Japanese and the Germans and such hybrids as the ‘Germans of the East’, Northcliffe saw a great deal of the un-English of the
world in 1921–22, coming to Japan from New Zealand, Australia, Borneo, the Philippines and Hong Kong (on the first leg of his tour of China) and going on to Korea, China, India and the Middle East. Japan was very much on his mind throughout his voyage. In Sydney he warned his hosts of Japanese ambitions and encouraged them to keep Australia ‘white.’ On 1 October, writing to a friend in Britain, he maintained that ‘Australia is a working man’s paradise, and will be until the Japanese get it, which they are almost certain to do, either by peaceful penetration or by war.’2 In Manila on 21 October he had given a speech calling for close Anglo-American cooperation in East Asia to forestall ‘events which, possibly, we do not like to name’, dreading to think what would happen if the ‘mad race for armaments’ continued between Japan, Britain and the United States. Two days later, still in Manila, he asserted that in the event of a ‘clash of arms in the Pacific’ he was sure that ‘the whole family of British nations would stand beside America.’3 In Hong Kong on 27 October, Northcliffe gave interviews that appeared in The Times, in local English-language papers and in the Japanese press accusing Japan of exerting hidden influence on China’s delegates to the Washington Conference and making plain his opposition to the renewal of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the agreement that had served as the basis of Britain’s relations with Japan and of British foreign policy in East Asia since 1902.4 These statements set in train a controversy that cast a cloud over Northcliffe’s visit to Japan.

Lord Northcliffe’s visit to East Asia was the first ever by such a powerful representative of the media of the British world in which Fleet Street, the Empire and Dominions operated an increasingly integrated system of news flows and information management. In the decade following Northcliffe’s ‘world whirl’ top executives of the main British and American news agencies such as Roderick Jones of Reuters and Kent Cooper of the Associated Press came to Japan to negotiate with its official press managers - indeed Japan’s Kokusai News Agency had operated a controversial media alliance with Reuters since 1913 - but of the press magnates of the day, only Northcliffe set feet on Japanese soil. William Randolph Hearst, whose newspaper empire did so much to alienate Japan in American eyes, never came. Perhaps this singularity enhanced Northcliffe’s importance in Japanese eyes. Like their counterparts in Britain and the United States, the Japanese authorities seemed convinced that what Northcliffe said inside and outside his newspapers influenced public opinion, although the source of Northcliffe’s power may have lain more in this conviction than in his actual influence on the public mind.5 Northcliffe ‘accepted the Empire as Kipling dreamed it’6 but he was a shrewd exploiter of colonial conflict as an issue that sold newspapers and, as Chandrika Kaul has pointed out in the context