Tatsuno Kingo (1854–1919): ‘A Leading Architect’ of the Meiji Era

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Tatsuno Kingo was born on 13 October 1854 into the Karatsu clan, in the small but attractive castle town of Karatsu on the north coast of what is now Saga prefecture in Kyushu, noted for its Korean-influenced pottery and the annual festival called ‘Karatsu Kunchi.’ He was the second son of the Himematsu family, but following common practice was adopted into the Tatsuno family which lacked an heir. Both families had come to Karatsu in 1818 from Aizu in northern Honshu with the head of the neighbouring Ogasawara clan. Further back in history the Tatsuno family had originated in the village of that name in present-day Nagano prefecture and moved to Aizu in 1643. 1

The Karatsu clan had been slow in adapting to the Meiji Restoration, but in 1870 it opened an English school called the Yōgakkō (‘School for Western Learning’). This was soon closed, but during its brief existence Tatsuno Kingo and others who would play leading roles in the Meiji period were educated there. One of these was Takahashi Korekiyo (1854–1936), 2 a classmate of Tatsuno and later a president
of the Bank of Japan, finance minister and prime minister, who taught Tatsuno English.

STUDY IN TOKYO (1873–79)

In 1873 Tatsuno was one of the first students at the newly opened engineering college, the Imperial College of Engineering (I.C.E.) or Kōgakuryō (from 1877 called the Kōbu Daigakkō) of which the Principal was Henry Dyer. He learned English first from an Englishman named Morris. Most of the professors selected by Dyer were from the British Isles: they included Edward Divers (Chemistry), David Marshall (Physics), William Craigie (English), John Milne (Geology), John Perry (Engineering) and William Ayrton (Physics, Telegraphy).

In 1879 Tatsuno was one of the first graduates of the ‘building-engineering department’ (zōkagakka) of the Kōbu Daigakkō, where he was a student for two years of the talented young British architect and teacher Josiah Conder (1852–1920), who had arrived in Japan in early 1877. In fact Tatsuno was the top student of Conder’s first class of four men, and was just two years younger than his professor. The other three were Katayama Tōkuma (1853–1917), Karatsu-born Sone Tatsuzō (1853–1937) and Satachi Shichijiro (1857–1922), all of whom left their mark on the Meiji architectural landscape.

After graduating on 8 November 1879 Tatsuno Kingo married on 1 December that year Toba Hideko (born 1863). They would later have a daughter and two sons. Their elder son Tatsuno Yutaka (1888–1964) became a noted scholar of French literature. On 26 December 1879 Kingo was ordered by the Ministry of Works (Kōbushō) to go to Europe to complete his training as an architect.

TATSUNO IN ENGLAND (1880–82)

Tatsuno went to England in a party of eleven outstanding I.C.E. students which included the noted chemist Takamine Jōkichi (1854–1922) who later produced Takadiastase, and the telecommunications pioneer Shida Rinzaburō (1855–92), later described by Lord Kelvin of Glasgow University as ‘my finest student.’ They left Tokyo on 8 February 1880, sailing from Yokohama in a French ship and transferring to another at Hong Kong. After six weeks they reached Marseilles from where they travelled by train to Paris, crossed the Channel and at last reached the Victoria Hotel, London. The party was welcomed by the then Japanese consul and student interpreter Mita Kitsuryō and met Hugh M. Matheson, chairman of Matheson Co. They stayed together for about two weeks at a hotel near Finsbury Park before each student began his designated training.