CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE HUMAN LEGACY OF THE JAPAN-BRITISH EXHIBITION OF 1910

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When the Japan-British Exhibition closed its gates on 29 October 1910, the massive task of dismantling and packing up began, preparing for the long journey back to Japan. During the five and a half months of exhibiting, however, a number of Japanese artists and craftsmen had the opportunity to learn about life in Britain, and for various reasons ended up taking the momentous decision not to return to Japan. This study attempts to trace the human trail of those who remained, and assess their lasting legacy as part of a minute, but active, immigrant community.

The Japanese population in Britain up until the Exhibition had been small, the first recorded numbers being a total of 264 in 1884. The majority resided in London, and the largest group consisted of servants, who made up part of the Japanese households of government officials and businessmen. There were also a number of students, a large portion studying in Glasgow, as well as a smattering of other occupations such as entertainers. By 1911, the Japanese population in Britain had risen to over 500, and included many more small independent business operators. Their recorded occupations were artists, craftsmen and miscellaneous traders1 – most certainly a result of the Japan-British Exhibition.

There is no exact record of how many Japanese opted to remain in Britain after the Exhibition, and the individuals who appear in this study are traced through personal contacts or chance encounters with their descendants, or the mention of their names in community notices. What is certain is that they boosted the non-expatriate London Japanese community. Moreover, they tipped the composition of the community towards the arts and crafts, thus reinforcing the image of Japanese as a people of refinement, with artistic talent and skilled craftsmanship.

The names of people who are known to have come for the Exhibition and stayed are: Moriai Otokichi, Teraoka Tokujirō (metal work artist), Torii Kumajirō, Torii Sairoku, Urushibara Yoshijirō and Yamamuro Takisaburō.

1 Nihon Teikoku Nenkan, vol. 31, 1912.
Others who came around the same time and were engaged in related businesses and so might have been part of the Exhibition are: Gotō Saburō (artist), Inada Hogitarō (ukiyo-e expert), Kishida Eijirō (profession unknown, 1910 arrival), Kurihara Chuji (artist), Matsumoto Ryōhei (trader in Japanese textiles and paintings), Matsuyama Chūzō (artist), Miura Kageo (art dealer based in Harrogate), Murakami Daijirō (transport business in Soho), Nogi Kinsui (lacquer factory owner), Wakameda Takeji (writer) and Yano Takuma (restaurateur and nurseryman). And there are probably others whose names do not appear anywhere in the records. By listing as many names here as possible, the hope is that someone, somewhere might recognize a name, or an association, and be able to provide further information on ancestors who might be part of the Exhibition human legacy.

Descendants tracing family roots can be a valuable source of information. This study is a case in point, originating from an e-mail I received from Tabitha Tarling, granddaughter of Moriai Otokichi, wanting to find out about early Japanese in Britain. Tabitha had also contacted Ayako Hotta-Lister because it was the 1910 Exhibition that had brought Moriai to Britain. Piecing together information provided by the Moriai family and data collected during my earlier research on the Japanese community in pre-War London, it has been possible to gain some insight into the paths followed by those who opted to make Britain their home.

From an unpublished short piece on Moriai written by Otokichi’s son, Ian Yōji, for his family, we know that Otokichi was born in 1887 in a village near Yokohama, Japan. Otokochi had the ambition to become an artist, and appears to have received some form of training in water colour painting. Through an uncle who was in some way connected with the Japanese side of the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition, Otokichi managed to be included in the Japanese contingent. Otokichi later told his children that he had painted postcards, which were sold to the public for sixpence each.

Ian writes, ‘What his [Otokichi’s] reasons for remaining in this country after the exhibition were I do not know. It may have been that he thought that the opportunities to fulfil his ambitions were greater here than they were at home.’

Indeed, what could have been the reasons for Otokichi and others to remain in Britain at a time when such a life-changing decision could surely not have been easy? The answer most likely is as Ian surmises – that there

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