INTRODUCTION

Lord Salisbury dominated British foreign policy for the better part of a quarter of a century at the close of the Victorian era. Between 1878 and 1902, Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquis of Salisbury, served four times as foreign secretary and was thrice Prime Minister, for the most part holding the two positions in conjunction. A high Tory, wary of the two mid-Victorian extensions of the franchise and given to ‘gloomy thoughts’ about the undesirability of progress,¹ his principal political interests lay in the field of foreign affairs, still relatively shielded from public interference as it then was. The intricacies of international diplomacy, his daughter and biographer reflected, appealed to his ‘instinctive reverence for facts’.² The conditions of the unreformed Victorian Foreign Office were a conducive environment for the reclusive Marquis. He took, at best, an intermittent interest in the administration of his department; and in official business he was ‘Olympian and aloof’, as one of his private secretaries later observed.³
That characterization might equally well be applied to Salisbury’s attitude towards Japan. Indeed, for all his political longevity and the wealth of his often incisive comments on events elsewhere, it is difficult to establish, with any degree of precision, Salisbury’s views of the East Asian island power. There are few extensive comments from his pen, especially so during his earlier periods in office. This should not come as a surprise to students of Anglo-Japanese relations. In his foreign policy Salisbury was driven by pragmatic considerations of British strategic priorities; and he regarded diplomacy as a moderating force that helped to identify and then to build on mutual interests. For Salisbury Japan’s significance was thus defined by Britain’s broader strategic interests and by the state of her relations with other Powers, principally those with Russia. Sketching Salisbury’s perceptions of Japan thus throws into sharper relief the shifts in the wider international landscape, the emergence of Japan as a major Power, and the evolving nature of Anglo-Japanese relations.

‘THE MUSHROOM CIVILIZATION OF THE JAPANESE’: SALISBURY AND JAPAN 1878–1892

It has been argued by imperial historians that, for the British, ‘the Empire reinforced a hierarchical view of the world’. This applied not only to the administration of colonial possessions, but also to foreign policy. The global reach of the Empire and the disparate nature of Britain’s strategic interests dictated a certain order of geopolitical priorities. Key to British policy during Salisbury’s tenure of the Foreign Office was Britain’s rivalry with Russia and France in the crisis crescent that stretched from the Ottoman dominions in the Balkans and North Africa to Afghanistan and India’s northwestern frontier provinces. In consequence, in this well-ordered view of the world, Japan’s position was that of a peripheral Power, distinctly in the second flight of international politics. It changed only in consequence of one of the most important events in Japan’s modern history, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. The defeat of China in this conflict marked a watershed in East Asian politics and beyond. It reversed the traditional power structures of regional politics; and it also shifted the focus of the ongoing Anglo-Russian struggle for mastery in Asia.

Salisbury’s attitude towards Japan reflected these changes. Until Japan hove into view as a major international Power in the 1890s, he took only an occasional interest in her affairs. The perusal of Foreign Office files for the 1870s and 1880s underscores that Salisbury paid but scant attention to Japan. Indeed, for the most part, he delegated much of the detailed work to the department’s permanent under-secretary, Sir Julian Pauncefote, a man of some first-hand East Asian experience. Intriguingly, though, Salisbury ignored his PUS’s advice, in 1879, to