Edward Grey (1862–1933)

IAN NISH

By inclination Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933) was a countryman, coming from a landed family in Northumbria. To his dying day he enjoyed rural pursuits like fishing, bird-watching, walking and even bicycling and valued detachment from urban conviviality. Yet there was instilled in him a sense of public duty and he was persuaded with reluctance to enter party politics. He devoted himself to the Liberal Party and, when the party took office and triumphed in the general election of January 1906, he accepted the office of foreign secretary. Grey was to occupy this onerous post for a decade and set a record for length of service.

It would be misleading to suggest that Japan was at the top of his agenda but it certainly required constant attention, even if its problems were not of the highest priority globally. Compared with other contemporaries, Grey was not a great traveller but he had visited India in 1887–88. It is not our purpose to describe Grey’s policy towards Japan, largely the work of his officials in the ordinary diplomatic correspondence. Instead by looking at his writings, his minutes,
the impressions of his closest officials and the impressions of Japanese diplomats, we hope to glimpse part of the thinking which underlay his policy-making.

APPRENTICESHIP

Educated at Eton and Balliol College, Oxford, Grey became Member of Parliament for Berwick-upon-Tweed in November 1885 as a Liberal Party member. When the party came to power in 1892, he was selected by the foreign secretary, Lord Rosebery, as parliamentary under-secretary for foreign affairs at the age of thirty. Two years later when Rosebery became prime minister, he made it a condition that he would still control foreign policy. Grey continued to serve under the amenable newcomer, Lord Kimberley. Since both foreign secretaries were members of the House of Lords, Grey became in effect the Foreign Office spokesman in the lower house. But he writes self-deprecatingly in his autobiography, Twenty-five Years, that he was merely supporting and defending policies formulated by the cabinet of which he was not a member and did not really have a policymaking role.¹

In his recollections, Grey writes briefly of far eastern questions, highlighting the treaty of 1894 which was technically described as ‘the Anglo-Japanese treaty of commerce and navigation’. But Grey emphasizes not the commercial side of the treaty but the aspect of treaty port jurisdiction:

> We gave up all those rights of jurisdiction over our British subjects in Japan….We had made up our minds that the time had come when dealings with Japan must be put on the same equal terms as exist between nations of European origin.² (My italics)

Britain was the first country to put into treaty form this recognition of Japan’s aspirations. It was part of Liberal doctrine to recognize Japan’s progress during the Meiji era.

The other aspect, which Grey recalls, is the Triple Intervention of Germany, Russia and France in far eastern affairs after Japan’s victory in her war against China in 1895. Invited to join the three, Britain refused to cooperate with the others in telling Japan to give up territory on the Asian continent, which had been transferred to her under the peace treaty. Rosebery made his own decisions and even in Kimberley’s day dominated foreign policy. He suspected that it was a German attempt to divert Russia into activity in the east rather than in Europe and did not want to get involved in these continental intrigues about which he was deeply suspicious. Grey warns against any suggestion that Britain by these two actions showed that she was aiming for a long-term relationship with Japan: