PART TWO

INDIVIDUAL EMPERORS AND EMPRESSES
THE ‘GREAT EMPEROR’ MEIJI

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Introduction

The Meiji Emperor lived from 1852 to 1912, and reigned from 1867 to 1912. His given name was Mutsuhito, and his childhood name was Sachi no miya (Prince Sachi). He was the 122nd emperor according to the traditional order of succession. He was the second son of Emperor Kōmei, who reigned from 1846 to 1867, and his mother was the imperial concubine Nakayama Yasuko (1834–1907). He married Ichijō Masako, who was later renamed Haruko and after her death became known as the Empress Dowager Shōken. All of his children, both sons and daughters, were born of imperial concubines. His third and only surviving son became the Taishō Emperor. Upon his death, the Meiji Emperor’s body was interred in the Fushimi Momoyama Mausoleum in Kyoto. In 1920, the Meiji Shrine (Meiji Jingū) was built in Tokyo to enshrine his soul. Up until the end of the Pacific War, the Meiji Emperor was referred to as Meiji Taitei, or ‘Meiji the Great’, and revered as the driving force behind Japan’s spectacular emergence as an industrialized great power in the course of a single generation.

Paternal Instruction in Waka Poetry

The Meiji Emperor was born at the house of the courtier Nakayama Tadayasu, his maternal grandfather, in Kyoto on 3 November 1852 (by the traditional calendar, the 22nd day of the ninth month, in the 5th year of Kaei). He received the childhood name of Sachi no Miya, or Prince Sachi. In accordance with the custom of having imperial offspring brought up by prominent court members, he was raised in the household of his maternal grandfather until he was four years old. In 1856 he was moved into the inner apartments of the imperial palace in Kyoto, where he received direct instruction from his father in reading and composing waka, the 31–syllable Japanese poems. In 1860, at the age of eight, he was formally adopted by the principal consort of Emperor Kōmei, Asako (later known as Empress Dowager Eishō).