



WILLIAM BEASLEY

William Gerald Beasley

1919–2006

TOWARDS THE END of the Second World War the British Government set up the Inter-Departmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental, Slavonic and East European and African Studies under the chairmanship of the Earl of Scarborough. When it reported in 1947, it laid great stress on the importance of 'Oriental Studies' (among others) for the cultural, political and economic future of the United Kingdom. The 1939–45 war, it said, had made clear the deficiencies in the number of people available to provide expert knowledge about these parts of the world. In particular, it was anxious that university graduates in general history should be persuaded to turn their attention to the history of the orient. It is in this context that the career of William (Bill) Beasley can be understood. In the 1930s, apart from Sir George Sansom who had combined the role of diplomat stationed in Japan with that of historian of Japan, Britain had produced no senior historian of that country. Beasley was, therefore, to be the pioneer in introducing Japanese history into British academic circles as teacher, researcher and author. Simultaneously, there was a select group of scholars coming to prominence in the United States who were filling the oriental gap there, and in Britain where George Allen and Richard Storry were producing seminal works in their distinctive aspects of Japanese history.

Bill Beasley was born in Hanwell, Middlesex on 22 December 1919, and moved to Brackley, Northamptonshire, where he was educated at Magdalen College School. In 1937 he registered for a degree in history at University College London. His call-up papers for military service reached him the day he was sitting his finals in 1940. He spent the war years in the Royal Navy, the first two and a half years in Dartmouth, the

North Atlantic and the Baltic convoys. During the summer of 1943 he was chosen to learn Japanese in the services and was posted to the US Navy Language School in Boulder, Colorado. There he studied with many of those with whom he became academically associated in his later career.

Encounters with Japan

In the last weeks of the war Beasley was in the Pacific Islands interrogating Japanese naval prisoners who were few in number and 'never seemed to possess important information'. Late in June 1945 he was ordered to join the flagship of the British Pacific Fleet, the *HMS King George V*, so as to be 'available for duty in Japan, if needed'. He was anticipating a lengthy period of service in the Pacific when the Asia-Pacific war took an unexpected turn. As he joined the fleet in Japanese waters, two atomic bombs had been dropped on Japan. He arrived in Tokyo Bay just as Japan's surrender was being signed on board the *USS Missouri* on 2 September. He did not attend the ceremony but listened to the proceedings on the ship's radio. Landing at Yokohama, he served as one of a group of British representatives drawn from the three services who set up office in the British consulate-general. Though rather unprepared for the task, they assisted in the evacuation of allied nationals, both internees and prisoners of war. Bill then spent some months at the US naval headquarters established at the former Japanese naval base of Yokosuka. He finally moved to the staff of the United Kingdom Liaison Mission (UKLIM) located in the pre-war British embassy in the Japanese capital, which was commissioned as *HMS Return*. In an account of these early experiences, Bill wrote: 'My first experience of living and working in Japan was as a junior naval officer during the first six months of the occupation. . . . I was serving at the level at which policy was implemented, not that at which it was formed. Hence I was able to observe what people at these levels actually did, not what their seniors hoped they were doing.' This gives us a glimpse of Beasley, the sceptical observer of the political scene.¹

Following his demobilisation in March 1946, Beasley completed a teachers' training course at Westminster College but then decided instead

¹ The quotations here and elsewhere in this Memoir are taken from the 'Personal Memoir' published in his *Collected Writings* (Richmond, 2001), referred to below.

to proceed to graduate research in history. Working at University College London under the supervision of Gustav Renier, Professor of Dutch History, he toyed with the idea of exploring the Dutch connection with Tokugawa Japan but eventually completed a doctorate in 1950 on Anglo-Japanese relations which was speedily published under the title *Great Britain and the Opening of Japan, 1834–58* (London, 1951).

In 1947 Beasley began to teach at the School of Oriental and African Studies (hereafter SOAS) which was the beneficiary of financial help under the recommendations of the Scarbrough Commission; he was appointed as Professor of the History of the Far East in 1954 at the young age of 35 in succession to Professor Charles Boxer. Before this he had returned to Japan in the autumn of 1950 to carry out post-doctoral research and was lucky enough to gain an entry visa from the US occupation authorities on the understanding that he was attached to UKLIM, which was by then a sizeable organisation with a predominantly civilian character. This connection was invaluable academically for the collaboration he received from British officials like (Sir) Vere Redman, the Information Counsellor, in establishing contact with Japanese academics and university authorities which had been cut because of the war.

Bill was naturally anxious to move about the country, which had not been possible five years earlier. One of his much-repeated anecdotes from this period deals with one of his opportunities to travel. He was asked by Vere Redman to accompany George Fraser, the Cultural Adviser to UKLIM, on one of his visits to remote universities in Kyushu and act as his interpreter. Fraser was an eminent poet and felt he had a mission to lecture about twentieth-century poets like W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce who were less familiar to a Japanese audience than the traditional ones. It is demanding enough to interpret in Japanese but to be called upon to interpret outside one's own field on modern poetry was a tall order for Beasley; but it gave him the opportunity to learn about the country.

As a researcher Bill decided to embark on a large historical project on the subject of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 which was controversial because of the predominance of Marxist influences in Japanese academic circles. He was to spend a total of two and a half years in Japan between autumn 1950 and the summer of 1963 conducting research on this theme. This was mainly spent at the Historiographical Institute (Shiryô Hensanjo) at the Hongo campus of Tokyo University. The research involved the study of the outlying feudal domains and their relation to the central government and made it necessary for him to explore the

resources of prefectural record offices in the outlying provinces of southern Japan. He paid a special tribute to the help freely offered to him by scholars so soon after the war, both in Tokyo and in the provinces. Special mention should be made of the helpfulness of the one-time director of the Shiryô Hensanjo, Dr Numata Jirô. These scholars were later to be collaborators in the holding of a number of major conferences on Asian historiography in London on *Historians of China and Japan*, the results of which Beasley later edited (jointly with Professor Pulleyblank; London, 1961).

Beasley published in 1956 with SOAS support *Selected Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy, 1853–68* (London, 1956) which contained translations of key Japanese documents illustrating the agonies felt by Japanese politicians as they faced the encroachments of western countries. Its almost book-length introduction contained a masterly analysis of the complexities of Japanese politics and foreign policy and marked a new level in the study of Japanese-western diplomatic relations.

Beasley combined his teaching with the wardenship of Connaught Hall, a hall of residence of the University of London adjacent to SOAS. In 1955 he married the secretary of that hall, Hazel Polwin. In autumn 1956 the Beasleys embarked on an extended trip to Japan. Bill's sabbatical was spent mainly at Zushi, a coastal town some twenty miles from Tokyo. He travelled to record offices as far afield as Kagoshima for the Satsuma archives and Kochi for the Tosa domain. These were days before the new electrified rail network, now familiarly known as the Shinkansen, was launched in 1964. Inevitably the journeys were slow, smoky and dirty. In his memoir, Beasley described the vicissitudes of life for a foreign researcher in a Japan which was still deeply impoverished in the 1950s. In libraries, he explained, 'heating was provided by a single *hibachi* supplied with a limited store of charcoal (it was still rationed) . . . My thoughts turned to the literary image of the Confucian scholar, disregarding cold while he studied the classics by the light of a single candle. Somehow it seemed appropriate to my situation.'

The Beasleys' return journey took in visits to Canada and the United States. In Vancouver Ronald Dore, Bill's former colleague at SOAS, laid on a conference at the University of British Columbia. Then, thanks to a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, they were able to visit Institutes of East Asian Studies throughout the United States. They called on Seattle, Berkeley and Stanford, where they met Sir George Sansom in retirement, and then proceeded to universities at Los Angeles, Chicago, Ann Arbor, Columbia, Harvard and Princeton. It was an opportunity for

Bill to lecture and present the results of his current researches. He made the acquaintance of scholars who had entered the profession since the war and were already publishing in East Asian fields like Marius Jansen in Seattle, John Hall at Ann Arbor and Bill Lockwood at Princeton.

Bill contributed a succinct account of Japan's late-nineteenth-century modernisation to volume XI of the *New Cambridge Modern History* in 1962. Following this, he produced a survey of Japan's modern development for the Weidenfeld Asia-Africa series in 1963. The most widely read of his books, it was originally entitled *The Modern History of Japan* (London, 1963) and went through several editions before reappearing in an extensively revised form as *The Rise of Modern Japan* (London, 2000). It has been reprinted many times and translated into German, Italian and other languages.

Beasley devoted well over a decade to writing his comprehensive study of *The Meiji Restoration* which eventually appeared in 1972 (Stanford, CA, 1972). He considered the various interpretations of the Restoration and the evidence on which they were based, looking especially at the Satsuma and Tosa domains. This was an enormously ambitious undertaking not least because so much work on the subject by Japanese historians needed to be digested and Japan's political divisions into more than 200 feudal domains meant that an unusually large number of decision-makers and activists in the mid-nineteenth century had to be considered. In a real sense it could be compared with writing a history of the French Revolution. Although two American scholars, Marius Jansen and Albert Craig, had produced major studies of the Meiji Restoration ten years earlier, they had focused on one particular domain and mostly confined themselves to the period leading up to the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate. Beasley explored more broadly the causes and consequences of the dramatic events and rapid changes which transformed the political landscape of Japan between the mid-1850s and the mid-1870s. By skilfully weaving together narrative and analysis, he succeeded in presenting a remarkably coherent picture of a highly eventful and often confusing period. If he ultimately saw the Meiji Restoration as essentially a nationalist revolution, he also acknowledged that it was impossible to explain the rapidity and far-reaching nature of the post-1868 reforms without reference to the changes in Japanese society that had been occurring since at least the early part of the century. The book remains key reading for anyone with a serious interest in Japan's modern transformation, and its magisterial quality earned it the J. K. Fairbank Prize of the American Historical Association as the outstanding work in the field of East Asian history in 1972.

SOAS and Beyond

These and other publications had to be fitted into a busy life of teaching and administration, within SOAS and the University of London. Beasley had a high reputation as a good lecturer for large and small audiences at the undergraduate level, lucid and well-prepared. A versatile and efficient administrator, he presided over many academic committees and was twice head of department. He was chairman of the Centre for Far Eastern Studies for several years after its establishment in 1967 and head of the Japan Research Centre (1980–2). As a supervisor of postgraduate students he was caring, patient and methodical. One of these has commented: ‘He was in many ways an ideal supervisor, available when needed but not intrusive. He let me get on with research and writing but kept an eagle eye on the timing.’ Beasley was the master of how to conduct a graduate seminar, drawing out of a discussion the implications for Japan but also, since he was always concerned with larger historical issues, its broader implications for world history. Bill’s seminars were attended by postgraduates from Europe, Asia and the United States; he revealed considerable dexterity in arranging a wide ranging programme embracing disparate topics. He encouraged all attending to present papers and he directed discussion sympathetically, ensuring that debate focused on vital issues and that participation was reasonably comprehensive.

His graduates obtained posts in all continents, including the United States, Canada and Australia. Since his title was Professor of Far Eastern History, it is not surprising that his graduates also achieved high posts in eastern countries ranging from Singapore to Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and Japan. Some of them took part in the preparation of a volume dealing with the Iwakura Mission of 1871–3 which was a topic he had earlier written about in his magnum opus. *The Iwakura Mission in America and Europe* (Richmond, 1998) carried the dedication to him as ‘the doyen of Meiji Studies in Britain over five decades’. This volume was later translated into Japanese by a team from Dôshisha University led by Professor Asada with the same dedication; extra chapters were added by Japanese scholars. (Sadao Asada (ed.), *Ô-Bei kara mita Iwakura shisetsudan* (Kyoto, 2002).)

One former associate has written: ‘Bill Beasley was an ideal colleague. He was extremely considerate of other people’s feelings but could be relied upon for frank and constructive advice when asked. Though modest, he was far from reclusive. He enjoyed exchanging ideas and anecdotes, especially in the senior common room after lunch, and was

universally liked as well as highly respected. The reputation for good judgment and integrity which he acquired gave him an exceptional authority which he did not abuse but which often allowed him to get things done smoothly and promptly where others might have encountered opposition or suspicion.'

Apart from his in-house contributions to the life of SOAS, there were his contributions to London University and to academe generally. He was the secretary and later chairman of the History Board of the University and chairman of the Board of Examiners in History. Himself an enthusiastic sportsman, he was a strong supporter of the London University Athletic Union. The University invited him to give the Creighton Lecture in History in 1984. Away from London, he served as a member of the Hong Kong University Grants Committee and was awarded the honorary degree of D.Litt. by the University of Hong Kong in 1978. He became a member of the Anglo-Japanese Mixed Cultural Commission (1961–8) which was set up as a result of the Anglo-Japanese Cultural Convention (1960) and was its British chairman for four of these years.

Bill Beasley was elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy in 1967, in an entry class that included such distinguished historians as G. R. Elton, Richard Cobb, Robert Blake and Alan Bullock. He delivered the Academy's Raleigh Lecture in 1969 on *Japan and the West in the mid-nineteenth century: nationalism and the origins of the modern state*. He served on the Council from 1973 to 1979, with one year as Vice-President (1974–5) and four years as Treasurer (1975–9). Matters with which he was particularly concerned as Treasurer included the establishment, initially with University Grants Committee funds, of the Small Grants Research Fund in the Humanities, a keystone of the Academy's support for humanities research to this day; a review of investment policy and objectives, and changes in the management of the Academy's investments; and negotiations for the Academy's removal from outgrown shared premises in Burlington House, ultimately to its own house in Cornwall Terrace, Regent's Park. He was a conscientious officer in matters large and small, and could be observed on afternoons in the Fellows' Room going carefully through the cash ledgers.

Beasley took an active part in a conference which European scholars held on modern Japan, partly at St Antony's College, Oxford and partly at SOAS, London, in 1973. He took on the task of editing the papers of the conference and himself contributed a reflective introduction (*Modern Japan: Aspects of Japan, Literature and Society*, London, 1975, pp. 13–23). During this conference it was unanimously decided to form a European

Association of Japanese Studies. When his volume appeared, it became the first publication of the new Association. Bill was later honoured by the British Association of Japanese Studies which elected him as Fellow Emeritus of the Association in 2001, being one of the first to receive the honour after it was created in that year.

In December 1981 Beasley collaborated with the important exhibition of Japanese art of the Edo period mounted in London by the Royal Academy as part of the Great Japan Exhibition of that year. He contributed an important article on 'Edo Japan' to the exhibition catalogue. With the sponsorship of the Japan Foundation and SOAS, he held a conference which was intended to examine aspects of the cultural background to the exhibition. This brought together top scholars from Japan and the United States to discuss the comparatively smooth transition that took place between the Edo period and the Meiji period and to emphasise the contribution of the Edo period to Japan's later modernisation. The papers were published as 'Edo Culture and its Modern Legacy' in a special issue of *Modern Asian Studies* (Vol. 18, 1984).

Retirement

In consequence of the severe financial pressures resulting from the reduction in university funding announced by the Conservative government in 1981, Bill Beasley joined colleagues in SOAS and other institutions in accepting early retirement in 1983. During his last years of teaching, he had been reviewing some of his ideas about Japanese history. In his all-too-brief memoir, he reveals his view that Japan had, during his teaching years, been depicted in popular literature influenced by the Asia-Pacific war as aggressive, imperialistic and an ambitious coloniser. This view needed to be reviewed. Bill, in his great book *Japanese Imperialism, 1894–1945* (Oxford, 1987), re-examined the nature of Japan's imperialism. After considering Japan's expansion on the Asian mainland and the part played in this by her rapid industrialisation and the increasing role played by the military in her decision-making, he concluded that for her to take colonies and create economic spheres was part of her concept of national security and had within it not only offensive elements but also defensive ones. For this study Bill returned to the archives at the Public Record Office, Kew (now The National Archives), and consulted Foreign Office files throwing light on Japanese decision-making, for example on the origins and character of the Twenty-one Demands pressed on China

by Japan in 1915. In spite of its brevity, *Japanese Imperialism* was a wide-ranging study which demythologised much historical writing on Japan. It is a commentary on its objectivity that the book was translated into Japanese by Professor Sugiyama of Keio University. (Shinya Sugiyama, trans., *Nihon teikoku shugi, 1894–1945*, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1st edn., 1990, 2nd edn., 2006.)

This was followed by a return to an earlier field, the mid-nineteenth century, with *Japan Encounters the Barbarians: Japanese Travellers in America and Europe* (New Haven, CT, 1995). This book describes the determination of Japanese domains and ultimately the central authorities to study the West in order the better to compete with it. It records the various missions of the 1860s leading up to the elaborate Iwakura mission of 1871–3, while it also charts the ambitions of young students sent to study abroad and their later careers in the bureaucracy. Four years later appeared *The Japanese Experience* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), which was a short history spanning the period from the arrival of Buddhism to the collapse of the Japanese Empire in 1945. It was an attempt to show the uniqueness of Japan as a country which had existed for centuries in not so splendid isolation but was finally persuaded to change tack and convert herself with incredible vigour and speed into a highly industrialised state.

In 2001 Bill published a selection of his *Collected Writings* (Richmond, 2001), consisting primarily of significant articles and book reviews. His publisher writes: ‘His early reaction to participating in the *Collected Writings* series is worth recording. In his own inimitable and succinct—perhaps minimalist—way, he summarised his survey of his papers as follows: “I have found some unpublished pieces for which publication does not seem the proper destiny; some published ones which I would prefer not to see resuscitated; some more which you might be able to use”. In the end, such was his self-deprecating and self-critical nature, the original plan for a volume of over 400 pages, came out at less than 300 pages. But it did contain his fascinating “Personal Memoir” by way of Introduction.’ Beasley rounded off a remarkably productive period by editing in 2002 an eight-volume series of mid-nineteenth century writings by westerners on Japan which appeared under the title of *The Perry Mission to Japan, 1853–54* (Richmond, 2002). This contains a thoughtful introductory twenty-four-page essay on American–Japanese relations which proved to be Bill’s last piece of writing. To the end he wrote with cogency and precision, and in his popular works took pains to make the subject accessible to a wider public. He was much indebted to his wife,

Hazel, for sustaining him despite increasing infirmity, and enabling him to keep up this proud record of publication till an advanced age.

Bill's publisher further reveals that 'prior to the sudden deterioration in his health in 2003, we had also been talking about a new edition of *The Meiji Restoration* (1975); he was anxious to reappraise some aspects of his conclusions, stating that he now believed there was more to say regarding its implications for the future of Japan. Alas, this was not to happen. However, on the question of his Occupation experiences, which were also being considered, he did manage to dictate enough to make future publication a possibility.'

Bill's retirement combined academic productivity with relaxation. These were years of peace and contentment when he found time to accommodate his interests in sport, the theatre and poetry. As his life became dogged by ill-health, Hazel created a happy environment for him with visits from family, especially his grandchildren, and friends. His experience of Japan in 1945 of which he had a vivid recollection often cropped up in dinner table conversation and was recalled with wit and humour.

Bill died at his home at Twickenham, Middlesex, on 19 November 2006, much honoured for his scholarship and his contribution to Anglo-Japanese relations. He was awarded the CBE in 1980. His contributions to Japanese studies were recognised by the award of the Order of the Rising Sun, 3rd class (1983), his election as an Honorary Member of the Japan Academy (1984), and the award of the Japan Foundation Prize in 2001. In academic circles in the West and East Asia, he will be much missed for his leadership in the field, his scholarly writings and his kindly personality.

IAN NISH

Honorary Member, Japan Academy