

## INTRODUCTION

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THOUGH published almost one hundred and fifty years ago, this book by John M'Leod relating events associated with a visit to the Far East in 1816 deserves to be read in the modern day. The felicitously told story of the long voyage of the *Alceste* from England via Brazil and Cape Town, the relatively inhospitable reception in China and on the shores of Korea, the idyllic stopover in Okinawa, the shipwreck near Java, and the eventual return of the ship's company via St. Helena, where Napoleon was encountered, is a good adventure yarn. Moreover, its detailed account of the Ryukyu Islands, the principal episode of the book, affords a valuable observation of life

of a century and a half ago in what even today is a little observed or known part of the world.

The impact of recent events on the Ryukyus—the complete absorption of the Ryukyu kingdom into Japan, the ensuing decades as a neglected and poverty-stricken prefecture of Japan, the devastation of the last great battle of World War II, the years of American control over these islands whose “residual sovereignty” rests with Japan, the development of a complex military establishment protecting the Free World, the efforts of the Ryukyuan people to adjust to a changing life—have transformed Okinawa from its quiet beauty of 1816. However, many of Mr. M’Leod’s penetrating observations on the life and society of the Ryukuan people are helpful to understanding the background of the present day. They create nostalgia for that long-gone gentle life of these islands of courtesy, but they may also, by contrast, light up the present scene.

Because copies of the account are scarce, it is republished with this introduction and with maps adapted from a companion work. The colored plates, though necessarily reproduced in monotone, are interesting for the

detail of dress and landscape they give. The farewell poem, by the ship's clerk, is a unique feature of such a travel account. Though M'Leod's account of the Ryukyus has been recently translated and published serially in Japanese in the magazine *Shurei no Hikari*, it is not generally known. Shortly after its publication in 1817, it went through a number of editions and reprints and was widely read and quoted in the literature of that day. In 1818 it was translated into Dutch and French. An American edition was published in 1819. Basil Hall, the captain of the *Lyra*, the companion ship in the expedition, also wrote an *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and the Great Loo-Choo Island*, which was even more widely disseminated. Hall, however, restricted his description to events in Korea and the Ryukyus, and thus M'Leod's narrative gives a fuller account of the whole adventuresome voyage.

John M'Leod was the surgeon of the *Alceste*, a frigate of 46 guns, a component of a British expedition to the Far East. A native of Bonhill, Dumbartonshire, M'Leod became the surgeon of the *Alceste* in 1815. He was a

man of wide interests and wrote other travel books in subsequent years.

At the time of the writing and publishing of the book, Britain, Western Europe, and the young United States were in the throes of great economic development. There was a searching out of new overseas markets for products made abundant by the industrial revolution and for raw materials to supply the new demand. As a consequence, popular travel literature was in great demand both to inform the merchants and to entertain the stay-at-homes. This book is one of a large number of travel accounts which graced the shelves of private libraries. It was written to give pride in the far-reaching economic empire which Britain was rapidly developing.

The British had at this period, after the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812, a great interest in the commercial possibilities of the Far East. Though this was due in part to a desire to block the expansion of Czarist Russia, more important was the desire to open trade with China and Japan. The British had taken over the control of Java from the Dutch, only to return it after a short period. How-



ever, their attempts to develop trade with Imperial China had been thwarted; they were treated with disdain as barbarians. As a consequence of the pleas of the East India Company and the British merchants in Canton for official action, Lord Amherst was dispatched with a mission to establish better forms of diplomatic relations. His mission, in essence, was a failure, but a fortunate side effect was the voyage of a part of the British fleet along the coasts of Korea and the Ryukyus.

The *Alceste*, on which M'Leod served, left England on February 9, 1816. Lord Amherst and his diplomatic party were in special quarters. Captain Murray Maxwell, later knighted, was in command. Two other ships, the brig *Lyra*, commanded by Captain Basil Hall and the *General Hewitt*, carrying presents to be given to the Chinese emperor, were a part of the expedition. The voyage of the *Alceste* from England to Macao in southern China, via the Canary Islands, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, and Batavia in Java, was relatively uneventful. The squadron, which had been augmented at Macao by two small survey ships of the East India Company, finally reached anchorage off

Tientsin on July 28. Leaving Lord Amherst and his suite, the ships cruised along the coast of North China and the Shantung Peninsula. The *General Hewitt* went off for Canton. Later the two survey ships followed. The *Alceste* and the *Lyra*, often with the small brig going ahead to sound the waters, set sail for the shores of Korea to explore the coasts and the islands of the East China Sea and to spend 40 eventful days in the Ryukyus. Subsequently at Canton, five months later, Lord Amherst, having come overland, was greeted aboard the *Alceste*. After a visit to Macao, the *Alceste*, on January 29, 1817, took "leave of China, steering for Manilla."

The return of Lord Amherst and the ship's company to England, in contrast to the outward trip, was full of eventful happenings. The faithful *Lyra* was sent to India with dispatches and thence returned to England. The *Alceste*, however, on February 18, 1817, in going through the straits of Gaspar and steering "to clear every danger (and the last danger of this sort between us and England) . . . struck with a horrid crash on a reef of sunken rocks . . ." After adventures with

“Malay pirates” who looted and burned the stranded ship, the ship’s company was rescued and taken to Batavia, then under Dutch control. M’Leod’s description of life in this colony is vivid with critical judgments of Dutch colonial practices.

Finally, on April 12, Lord Amherst, his party, and the officers and crew of the *Alceste* embarked on the ship *Caesar* for the return to England. The first part of the cruise on the *Caesar* was enlivened by a fire on board, during which excitement the boatswain’s wife, the only woman who had made the journey, died of shock. A boa constrictor, whose feeding habits and death are described in gory detail, was a part of the cargo. Equally strange was an orangutan which was allowed to roam the decks. After stops at the Cape of Good Hope and St. Helena, where the officers were introduced to Napoleon, they arrived on English soil on August 17, 1817.

Many parts of M’Leod’s narrative are of interest, but of particular value is his account of Okinawa, or, in his words, “the Island of Lewchew.” The Ryukyus (pronounced Liu Ch’iu in Chinese) were relatively little known



to the Western world at this time. The log book of William Adams noted his visits in 1614 and 1618; a few fragmentary accounts of other travelers or writers mentioned the islands. The major previous English account was that of Captain William Robert Broughton in his *Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean* . . . Broughton, in a 400-ton sloop, the *Providence*, on May 17, 1797, ran on a reef off Ikema in the Miyako group of islands in the southern Ryukyus. After transferring to an 86-ton schooner which had accompanied the *Providence*, he was very hospitably treated in Miyako. He returned to Macao with a short stop at Terama Island. Subsequently, in July, Captain Broughton returned from Macao and this time made a two-day visit to Naha. His accounts were widely known and had been instrumental in the decision that the *Alceste* and the *Lyra*, after depositing Lord Amherst in Tientsin, should explore these waters. M'Leod, also, knew of and quoted at length a translation published in 1781 by Father Antoine Gaubil of an account of the Ryukyus written by Hsu Pao-kuang, a Chinese emissary of 1719.



M'Leod's description of the island of Okinawa, and in particular of the Naha-Shuri area, gives an impression of idyllic surroundings peopled by happy folk. The ship's company was allowed to wander near the anchorage off what is now the port of Tomari. A temple was given over to them to be used as a hospital and shore base. The ships were refurbished and refilled. Charting the shores and making astronomical observations kept part of the crew busy. The officers had many contacts with the local officials, with whom they carried on negotiations and exchanged courtesies and presents.

In recent decades, many changes have taken place in this area. Naha (called Napa-kiang by M'Leod) now has amalgamated with Shuri and has a population of a quarter of a million people. The harbors have been deepened; the tidal flats have been reclaimed. Today this area, which was reduced to rubble during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, has been rebuilt with modern streets and buildings. The hills have been denuded of their trees, and Western-style suburbs, public buildings, a university, television towers, and defense establish-

ments now form the skyline. The temple site is now a high school grounds. Close by is the International Cemetery containing the grave of the British sailor whose death is noted in M'Leod's account. The coasts, particularly in the north, where the *Lyra* went on a charting expedition to the Port of Unten (Port Melville) and the islands of Ie-shima (Sugar Loaf) and Kouri-shima (Herbert's Island), have not changed greatly, though their shores are now much more densely populated.

The officers and crew of the *Alceste* and the *Lyra* met many Okinawans. They received a warm and cordial welcome from their hosts: "... the kindness and hospitality of its inhabitants have fixed upon every mind, a deep and lasting impression of gratitude and esteem."

Among their closest contacts, the person who made the greatest impression was Madera Cosyong. According to the research of Professor Toshiichi Sudo, who wrote an introduction to the Japanese edition of Basil Hall's account, Madera's first name was Boshō; his official name was Ka Sei Ei. How the name used by the British evolved is difficult to deduce. He was a native of Kanagusuku and

had been schooled in mathematics and the Chinese language at the recently established National Academy. Thirty years old at the time of the visit, he performed his duties so well that he was promoted, though, because of his relatively low family status, he never reached the highest court ranks. Before his death in 1829, he wrote a book, *English Conversation*, which was used in training interpreters in later years.

For various reasons, including the very real and constant language barrier, the British were not able to understand the exact political situation of the Ryukyus. This was obviously complicated. As George H. Kerr has pointed out in his *Okinawa, the History of an Island People*, the Shuri court "had no firm precedents to govern its behavior." On the one hand, it maintained its titular relation as a vassal of Imperial China; and yet it was strongly controlled by the Lord of Satsuma, who sanctioned this apparent Chinese vassalage for the rich trade which it allowed. Moreover, Okinawa was caught in the internal political struggle between Satsuma and the Tokugawa shogunate and, on a larger scale,



between the Japanese desire for isolation (with a little trade) and the Westerners' desire to use Okinawa as a wedge to open wide the doors of Japan. Actually, in 1853-54, Okinawa was used in this way by Admiral Perry; but, at the time of the visit of the British, conditions were not propitious for such a move.

An Okinawan version of the visit of the *Alceste* and the *Lyra* has been extracted from the official court records by Professor Sudo. Some parts of this have been translated and merit repetition:

On 25 July of this year, two British ships came to our country. They appeared on the sea near Tomari village and anchored to stay. The larger ship was 36 fathoms long, 8 fathoms wide, and  $6\frac{1}{2}$  fathoms high. The smaller one was 23 fathoms long,  $5\frac{1}{2}$  fathoms wide, and  $4\frac{1}{2}$  fathoms high. The total number of the crew of the two ships was 470, of which one was female, eleven were Negroes, and one was Chinese.

Ryukyuan officials came to Tomari to watch them. The two ships were loaded

with many weapons such as cannons, guns, and swords. The crew members on the decks were busy in surveying and sounding the sea. Officials were surprised to see them sounding the sea and surveying the coasts. Various forts were built in Naha, Tomari, and Kume villages to protect ourselves from the foreigners. We provided them with fish and vegetables when asked. We were greatly frightened when the foreign captain sought an interview with our governmental officials. . . .

Since the ship needed repairs, the cargos were unloaded and transferred to the Seigen-ji Temple. The Ryukyans built additional barriers at every inlet to keep the foreigners from landing. The smaller ship visited various inlets to survey the coasts. During their stay at Tomari, one of the crew died. The body was buried in the pine wood in front of the Seigen-ji Temple by the Ryukyans. Being moved by this deed, the captain wanted to extend his gratitude directly to the King of the Ryukyus. This proposal was, however, turned down by the Ryukyuan authorities. The

captain was told that it was a Ryukyuan convention that the government would handle any and all foreign affairs on behalf of the king. . . .

Being dissatisfied with this explanation, the captain insisted on having an interview with the king. The Ryukyuan officials told him that the King of the Ryukyus would never see any foreigner except ambassadors sent by foreign kings; that even Chinese officials had been allowed to see only the Ryukyuan officials; that he should follow this convention. . . .

The king ordered Shokoki, head of Nakijin district, to go to the ship with various souvenirs and see the captain. The captain said that if the Ryukyuan official would not allow him to see the king, he should be provided with a personal letter of the king with his seal on it which should state the ins and outs of the matter. The proposal was accepted by the Ryukyuan official.

The following day, the captain came to the Rinkai-ji Temple to express thanks and said that they were sorry to disturb the Ryukyuan during their forty-day stay. The



British ships left the Ryukyus for home on September 7.

The warm and hospitable reception of their visitors was largely conditioned by the traditional welcome given by the Ryukyuan to those who had difficulties at sea and needed the protection of land. Moreover, the British, by not pressing too hard for audiences in the court, by their generally pleasant manners, and by their lack of interference in social and religious matters, were able to gain the respect of their hosts. A moving episode which brought together the two groups was the death of a young sailor and his burial, mentioned in the Ryukyuan account. Another episode—not so serious—was the offer from some “high lord” that the wife of the boastwain remain behind; her husband, after “two days of consideration,” turned down the offer.

The Ryukyuan, at this time, were actually at the start of a period of serious economic decline, partially due to physical causes, typhoons, tidal waves, droughts, and the like. The pressure from Satsuma had increased, yet the Ryukyuan had no adequate method of

protecting themselves from this bondage. The ties with Imperial China were weakening. The king showed symptoms of being mentally disturbed. The advent of the colorful foreigners may have taken their minds off their troubles. Some hopes may have been raised that, if handled adroitly, the foreigners' visit might be turned to the islanders' benefit.

The enduring direct results of this visit were actually slight. There were more and more visits from foreign ships of many nations, culminating with the visit of Admiral Perry. But the Ryukyus were not taken over by any Western power. Satsuma, at the time of the overthrow of the Tokugawa shogunate, gained in power, so that the Ryukyus became even more closely knit to Japan. Eventually, in 1879, the Ryukyuan kingdom was abolished, the king and his family were exiled to Japan, and Okinawa Prefecture was established. The foreign interest aroused by visits such as that of the *Alceste* had little effect on this historical trend.

Oddly, there was one impact—the coming of the first Protestant missionary—that did develop directly as an aftermath of the visit

of the *Alceste* and the *Lyra*. Lieutenant H. J. Clifford, on half pay and without specific duties, had accompanied Captain Hall on the *Lyra*. He "was enabled to devote himself entirely to the acquisition of knowledge." As Captain Hall notes in the preface to his book, Lieutenant Clifford collected vocabulary and recorded many interesting occurrences. One Sunday, the young officer rather disrespectfully told some Ryukyuan visitors that in the Sunday worship, from which they were excluded, the British were "chin-chinning Joss (worshipping God)—just as you do." Years later, after undergoing a religious conversion, Mr. Clifford, stricken by his conscience at his memory of this episode, organized the Loo-Choo Naval Mission. This organization raised funds, largely from British naval and commercial interests, to repay the Ryukyuan hospitality by sending missionaries. Their choice was unfortunate. B. J. Bettelheim, who arrived in Naha in 1846, and left with Admiral Perry in 1854, had little Christian impact on the Ryukyus. His successor lasted only two years, and in 1856 the Loo-Choo Mission was dissolved.



Though it is difficult to judge, the visit of the *Alceste* and the *Lyra* to the Ryukyus did have some indirect effect in the opening of the islands and of Japan to the outside world. However, copies of Madera's work, *English Conversation*, cannot be found today. The Loo-Choo mission was short-lived. The picture of idyllic life on Okinawa was considerably changed after greater contacts with the increasingly impoverished islands in succeeding decades.

But in reading again this account of life in the Ryukyus of a century and a half ago, one cannot help but get an impression of a likable, quiet, courteous people, a people whose basic traits today are very similar despite the ravages of modernization and war. The readers of this account may re-echo the hopeful wish expressed in one of the verses of the farewell poem:

Farewell, dear isle!— On you may breath  
Of civil discord never blow!

Far from your shores be plague and death,  
And far—oh! far—the hostile foe!