4 Britain, the Suitor Disillusioned

Early in 1861, Sir Rutherford Alcock (1809–97), who had been in the British consular service in China for about fifteen years, and from 1859 Her Majesty’s Representative in Japan, called for the need for a new type of realism in writing about Japan:

Some such true impressions of photographic accuracy are becoming more than ever needful in the plethora of new compilations, and the dearth of new authentic matter to fill them with.¹

‘Photographic accuracy’ was the notion which preoccupied Alcock whenever he tried to describe Japan and her inhabitants. His emphasis on the importance of such realism was indicative of a definite change in the approach to Japan inspired by recent developments in photography. The essence of photography could be said to be fidelity and precision, although one should also take into account the arbitrariness of the photographer in choosing his subjects and the photochemical bias in the sensitivity of the wet-plate.² Photography was neutral, in the sense that any image which might be focused on the plate was reproduced faithfully regardless of its cultural connotations. During the 1850s, photography had been growing past the experimental stage. Particularly in the late 1850s and 1860s, stereoscopic photography became so popular as to bring photography into almost every drawing-room. Various photographic subjects, foreign views in particular, opened up a new world to the Victorians.³ It seems that Alcock, in his effort to present to his readers ‘new points of view’ towards Japan was strongly impressed by this new technology. He aimed for:

... something of a stereoscopic view, in which some of the leading features of people and landscape may pass in rapid review, showing how the former dress and work, live and trade, fight and revel, being very much given to both the last, it seems; how their streets and houses change their character with the quarter, and Yeddo puts on a new physiognomy twenty times a day, according to the hour and the direction in which the traveller wanders.⁴

Within three or four years of the opening of the treaty ports of Kanagawa (Yokohama), Nagasaki and Hakodate in May 1859, it was

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¹ T. Yokoyama, Japan in the Victorian Mind © Toshio Yokoyama 1987
said that there was a British community numbering some three hundred persons in these ports of Japan. Certainly, British visitors to Japan and the publications of their accounts of the country increased. In April 1862, Laurence Oliphant wrote in *Blackwood's Magazine*: ‘Since Lord Elgin’s visit to Yeddo, we have had a fair sprinkling of works on Japan,’ which were, according to Oliphant, ‘monotonous’ and ‘almost identical’ reproductions of the earlier visitors’ accounts of those already familiar subjects such as the two emperors, pretty countryside, attractive teahouses, advanced art and sciences, or the custom among married women of blackening their teeth and plucking their eyebrows. It was natural that people who had experienced a long stay in Japan tended to be irritated by these publications. On the other hand, the word ‘resident’ seems to have given a magical tinge of authenticity whenever it was used to qualify the reporter. In February 1863, Alcock used the title *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Japan*; in 1861, Christopher Pemberton Hodgson, British Consul for Nagasaki and Hakodate, had published a narrative entitled in a similar fashion: *A Residence at Nagasaki and Hakodate in 1859–1860*. Another example emphasising the author’s long-term experience in the area is the work by Major Edward Barrington de Fonblanque of the British Army: *Niphon and Pe-che-li; or, Two Years in Japan and Northern China*, which was published in 1862. On the other hand, short-term visitors were well aware of the possible inaccuracies of their observations of Japan and fairly defensive against criticisms by resident writers. For example, George Smith, Bishop of Victoria, Hong Kong, published a book of his visit to Japan under the humble title of *Ten Weeks in Japan*. As for Oliphant himself, in spite of John Blackwood’s expectation that Oliphant would soon become one of the leading resident writers on Japan, the attack on the Edo Legation made the dream impossible, and subsequently led this talented young man to enter an eccentric life of mysticism. The early 1860s marked the climax of the anti-foreign movements led by samurai and commoners who were under the influence of the chauvinistic interpretation of Japanese history known as Mitogaku, a variety of Confucian learning which had developed in the Mito domain. Acts such as assassinating foreigners, firing on foreign vessels, or setting fire to foreigners’ houses eventually led to the bombardment of Kagoshima by the Royal Navy in 1863, and of Shimonoseki by a squadron of ships from Britain, the United States, France, and Holland in 1864. These two towns were, together with Kyoto, the chief nests of the fanatic loyalists of the time. The price of