

The Japanese Trip

By Seumas-san

It sounds like a suitable title for a cassette by Max Boyce, but in fact this visit had nothing at all to do with rugby. For the past five or six years the Piping School in California has always had at least one Japanese student, the first one being Dr Masami Yamane, who is Professor of Mechanical Engineering in Waseda University in Tokyo. Masami is an apt pupil and has visited Scotland where he is perhaps best known for the "Tuning Trainer" which he invented and which is revolutionising the tuning of pipe bands at crowded contests.

Masami discovered after two years at Del Monte that he was unable to return one summer so he sent instead his son Atsushi, who is now developing into a very fine young player. In succeeding years we had Yo Matsuura, Tsuneo Nakata and then, last year, Toshinori Yumoto.

Over these years the piping group in Tokyo grew to a total of eighteen active players and so was large enough to have a piping school of its own. Masami invited me to teach for two weeks in March of 1982, but our respective University vacations did not overlap sufficiently so the visit was delayed until March of this year when, as a full-time piper now, I am free to travel as I wish.

As a result, the Piobaireachd Society Conference was barely over when I found myself on the Shuttle to London and catching the British Airways flight to Tokyo and Osaka in Japan. Flights across the Atlantic have become of fairly short duration in recent years, so it was without any great enthusiasm or experience of long journeys that I faced the eighteen hour trip. Fortunately a short stop at Anchorage in Alaska brought some relief, but the steady gaining of hours and the sudden loss of a day caused some confusion by the time Masami met me at Narita Airport. Another two hour drive and I had arrived at my abode for the next two weeks.

Japan is a fascinating and beautiful country. The culture is so different from European or North American. The scenery outside of the cities is breathtaking and a population of 110 million (13 million in Tokyo) makes for an economising of land usage entirely strange even to an inhabitant of Glasgow district.

As John Urquhart, the Australian pipe major of the band, pointed out to me, Japan is an exciting mixture of the very old and very new. There are plenty of old Japanese houses with low ceilings, sliding partition doors, tables a few inches from the floor and no chairs, and at the same time modern homes with all up-to-date appliances. In both cases however the old way of life is followed. Shoes off at the door is an excellent idea and should have a much wider application.

Food also follows the old style, with a super abundance of seafood, vegetables and rice. Raw fish is a particular delicacy and personally I enjoyed it to the full and felt much the better of this oriental diet.

Whisky of course is not unknown, imported Scotch or native Suntory, and this latter firm also produces a beer which goes down in large quantities.

The chief impression of Tokyo perhaps is of the large numbers of people, the multitude of cars without - except on occasions - traffic congestion, and the bewildering street system where, apart from the motorways, many parts of Tokyo have three level highways. Because of the shortage of land the side streets in suburban areas are barely wide enough for two cars to pass. Pavements or sidewalks are only marked with a white line because they have to be used at every meeting of cars.

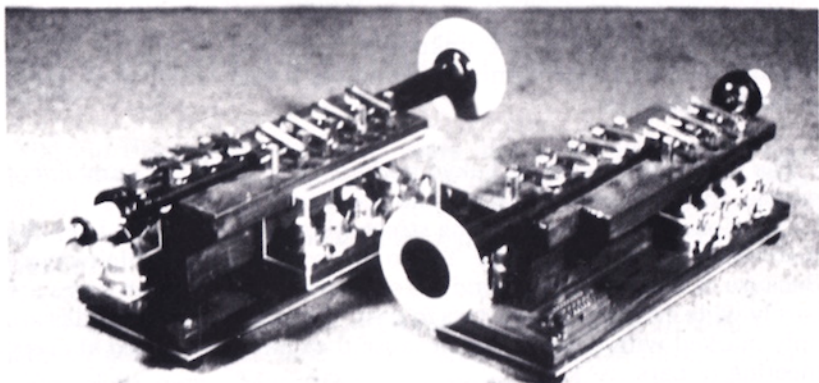
After meeting Masami's wife and daughter Aoki, and Atsushi again, I had my first Japanese meal followed by an early bed and a long lie.

Next morning Masami took me to see a Shinto Shrine, the old religion of Japan. Nowadays there does not seem to be much interest in religion - ever since the Emperor declared that he was not divine. The mixture of old and new was forcibly brought home when we went straight from the Shrine to Waseda University to have a look at Masami's research. Several research students were engaged in the important project of programming a computer, not merely to play bagpipe music, but actually to play a bagpipe and a set of drums.

Blowing the drones is easy enough, although the air has to be passed through a humidifier in order to get the conditions right for the cane reeds. Playing the pipe chanter is a different degree of difficulty but this has been successfully solved by a system of felt pads connected to electromagnets. The doublings, grips, etc., are

crisp and perfect, and as Masami pointed out, can be repeated indefinitely with no fear of a mistake.

It was interesting to note that the birl the computer produces (as good as any I have heard in my life) is the result of opening and closing the low A hole in a perfectly mechanical way. If any justification were needed for the straight-fingered birl then this is it.



Originally Masami had programmed the computer from the written book, taking gracenote values and note values more or less as they were given. Later however he found it necessary to "humanise" the computer by introducing slight variations in the timing. Also grips and doublings are not played the way the original writers of staff notation imagined. However all this is part of a publication which Masami will eventually present.

In the afternoon we visited a food exhibition where I first met John Urquhart. At the Dutch stall two young men played at intervals the Dutch bagpipe, which attracted a lot of attention. They explained what they were doing in English, which made me realise that many of the notices and advertisements are also in English. In fact there is about as much English evident in Tokyo as in Montreal.

The "English" stall was based mostly on different brands of whisky, all of them Scottish of course but none of the well known brands.



In the evening I attended the annual dinner of Masami's Scuba Club as his guest, and to my surprise it was held in a Chinese restaurant. There were about a dozen courses and unlimited supplies of beer. It is apparently not considered good form to help oneself to drink, so it is important to make sure that your neighbour's glass is kept full.

Next day was the start of the teaching which went on for three days in the usual manner of a summer school, with two exceptions. On Saturday afternoon I was invited to attend a presentation to Professor Toshio Namba, the President of American Academy

Lecturers of Nihon University. Professor Namba had just been appointed President of all the Burns' Clubs of the world, because he is one of the foremost authorities on the Bard and has written several books on the subject. We were all presented with a copy of the book - and a box of chocolates. My contribution was a few Burns' tunes and then the piobaireachd, "The Desperate Battle". The other entertainment consisted of a group of Highland dancers, all Japanese.

The other exception to the normal teaching routine was a visit to the Australian Embassy on Sunday afternoon. Unfortunately the rain descended in a drizzle rather reminiscent of Scotland, so the band's performance took place indoors, as did my recital.

Later a walk round the Japanese gardens of the Embassy showed us just how much we had missed because of the inclement weather.

By Monday morning most of the students were hooked on piobaireachd, so the chanter lessons and the band practice were contracted to allow for a study of the classical music. The dedication of the Japanese has to be seen to be believed. The day will surely come when some of them will visit Scotland and present a real challenge.

The next few days were spent in sight-seeing, principally a day devoted to Mount Fuji which must surely be the most beautiful mountain in the world - even better than the Buchaille Etive Mor. Due to an avalanche we were not able to drive very far up it, but the best views anyway are from a distance.

A volcanic outcrop which is still very active was our next port of call, although the sulphurated hydrogen discouraged a long stay. The gimmick is to buy eggs which have been boiled black in the bubbling mud and then eat them on the way down.

On the way up the mountain some young boys who caught up with us were greatly intrigued by my unusual appearance. One of them persisted in asking me lots of questions which unfortunately I was unable to answer but eventually he summed it up with a one word question which I recognised - "Ganjeeng?"

"Hai" said I, remembering to put the hands together and bow from the waist - which is not easy when you are climbing a mountain.

Masami told me that this meant "Foreigner" but I think it actually means "Foreign devil".

That evening was one of the most interesting of the trip when Masami and another member of the group (I think it was Osamu Hirose) took me to the Okinawa Restaurant in Tokyo. This is a traditional style Japanese place where the tired Samurai or businessman can relax over a long involved meal and enjoy the



conversation, the music and the dancing of the Geisha girls. Etiquette demands that one must enter rooms on one's knees, through the sliding partitions and wearing the mandatory slippers. I think the reason for the kneeling is that the old Japanese houses were so low in the ceiling, but though the thought crossed my mind I forgot to verify.

The table was only a few inches off the floor so the seating position was a bit cramping for one who has not done much squatting for a long time. Throughout the meal two Geisha girls knelt beside us at the table and served the courses, which were brought in on a tray by an older waitress, also on her knees. The Geisha girls also made sure

that the whisky, beer and saki glasses were kept full to the brim and I understand that they also indulged in elegant conversation to entertain and amuse the guests.

I of course was a big disappointment to them, for my witty patter was lost on them and vice versa.

After about two hours of the oriental delicacies we were invited to go to another room where we joined all the other guests in viewing a delightful display of singing and dancing by three of the Geisha girls. Seats on the floor were provided this time but these were just cushions with a very small back. The story of the song or the dance was explained to us each time by the Mama-san and translated for me by Masami. After that it was back to our rooms again and a continuation of the feast, but this time one of the other girls came in with a three-stringed guitar and a strange arrangement of clappers which are held in the fingers of one hand and played by the other one. Eventually this most interesting evening drew to a close and with many expressions of thanks and regrets, accompanied by a great deal of bowing, we took our leave.

Bowing is an integral part of Japanese life and is an indication of the essential politeness of the people. Farewells at a party for example go on for a great length of time; just to meet people in a corridor of the University for example requires mutual bowing, or presumably loss of face. I remember at Santa Cruz last summer meeting Toshinori as he was running to class with a bagpipe in one hand and the case in the other, yet in spite of the difficulties he managed to give a very creditable bow before he sped on.

A day spent in the company of Yoshifumi Mori and his charming wife was another highlight of the visit. We went to an outdoor museum of old Japanese houses and then visited their flat in Yokohama for some chanter lessons before going out to dine in, again, a Chinese restaurant. Here occurred one of the nonplussing moments of my visit, if not of my career. Feeling the need to "freshen up" as they say in Canada I inquired the way to the rest rooms, but when I arrived there two doors faced me, both with strange designs on them, one red and one blue. The problem was, which was which? However the solution was fairly simple - I waited until a young lady came along and went into one of them, and I went into the other.

To my considerable surprise, just a few moments later two Japanese ladies came in, pulling small children with them. How does one bow oneself out of such a predicament? Was I wrong or were they, or was it a free-for-all like having the old cailleach in a pissoir in Paris?

I think the answer was that the desires of small boys take precedence over the modesty of their mothers. Indeed in Japan generally it seems that the fair sex (even although they are all dark) play very much an inferior role to the men.



With the weekend it was back to the lessons once again, and already it seemed to me that all the pipers had made a lot of progress. Certainly they had learned their tunes and the band was playing better together. Apart from John Urquhart as Pipe Major there were two other non-Japanese in the band, Julie Fukuda who is an American girl married to a Japanese. She told me that she was dissuaded from learning to play the pipes in her native city because the local pipe band would not accept girls. She therefore wrote to the College of Piping to buy a chanter and Tutor and taught herself

and then when she beat some of the band members in solo competitions persuaded them that women's lib would be to their advantage.

The other was John Nicol, a Scot from Greenock who had learned his piping in the Boys' Brigade there. John works for Lloyds Register and is based in Yokohama.

On the Saturday evening Atsushi and I travelled by train to meet Masami in downtown Tokyo and visit a Sushi restaurant, which is a place where only raw food is served. The crowds of people walking (mostly men) and the fantastic neon sign advertising were the chief impressions. The station from which we emerged is the busiest in Tokyo and I was informed that the number of people who pass through it each day is equal to the total population of New Zealand, whatever that is.

The Sushi food was enjoyable and interesting - seahorse eggs, raw tuna, thin sliced tentacles of octopus, seaweed, rice and many other exotic dishes served across the counter by two expert slicers using a formidable array of flashing knives.

Somewhat to my surprise the television in the corner, in the middle of reporting a school graduation programme, suddenly gave out with "Auld Lang Syne", with Japanese words. Apparently they use several songs which have the same tunes as ours, including "Coming Through the Rye".

All too soon it was time to think about departing from the land of the rising sun. On my last night there a party was held in Masami's house, attended by all the pipers and many of their friends. Like all pipers parting ceilidhs, this was a great success, with all kinds of piping going on until the early hours.

The dreaded journey back passed off better than I feared, mainly because I had three seats to myself and slept most of the way. The memories of my first visit to Japan are all good, and I hope that I may go back again and help to stimulate this active piping centre which flourishes in a somewhat unexpected place.