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『日本帝国主義 1894-1945』

William G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945*, Oxford: Clarendon Press(Oxford University Press), 1987, x+279 pp.

W. G. Beasley is Emeritus Professor of the University of London, and has been writing on Japanese history for forty years. His early work was on the opening of Japan to the West. He went on to produce what is still the standard English-language work on the Meiji Restoration; and his textbook on modern Japanese history is one of the best available¹⁾. In all of these works Professor Beasley displays his consummate skill at synthesis and clear exposition, as well as his grasp of a wide array of primary and secondary materials. These qualities are equally prominent in his enormously impressive history of Japanese imperialism.

There are very few books in English which seek broadly to elucidate the nature of Japanese imperialism, rather than to examine Japan's relations with the Western powers in the imperialist period or to explore some other specific part of the subject. Two related books spring to mind which do present a wider analysis²⁾. Both of them, however, are compilations of essays by various authors rather than an attempt by one scholar to describe and analyse Japanese imperialism; and one was published several years after Beasley's book.

Thus, *Japanese Imperialism* fills a gap, and on one level the book can be seen as a well-crafted synthesis of the state of knowledge about the subject in 1985 (the date of the Preface). Beasley's analysis draws on a wide range of more specialist works by historians who have written in English, as well as works by Japanese scholars and the results of his own archival research, particularly using Foreign Ministry documents. He incorporates this array of material into a coherent picture of Japanese imperialism, whilst at the same time noting where the areas of controversy are. (And he does it beautifully: Beasley is a superb writer.) Thus the book will be

extremely useful to teachers and students of modern Japanese history, and indeed to those interested in other imperialisms, especially now that it has been published in paperback at a somewhat more affordable price than the original hardback.

In addition to providing a synthesis of views, Beasley is of course presenting his own analysis of Japanese imperialism. He declines, however, to contribute to a theory of imperialism, even though he paradoxically devotes his first chapter to an examination of the various existing theories. In fact, he specifically disavows any intention to choose between theories, believing that no one theory can provide a sufficient explanation of imperialism (p.12). He does not even believe that "the human impetus towards imperialism" needs explaining: "Men, acting individually or in communities, have always sought to establish dominion over others, where they could". What *can* be explained is the nature of imperialism:

What the character of a society, or the international circumstances with which it has to deal, does indeed determine is the timing and direction of the impetus [towards imperialism], the degree of its success and failure, the kind of advantages that are sought, the institutions that are shaped to give them durability. (pp. 12-13)

It is principally these matters, with respect to Japan, that Beasley examines in the book. They do not lead him to any grand conclusion. In the final paragraph he notes that "It is beyond question that the stages of Japan's imperialism reflected those of its economic growth" (p. 258), but he accepts that strategic considerations and external circumstance also played a part. He concludes that "imperialism is like the blind men's elephant: its nature depends on which part of it you study".

The book's value, then, does not lie in any examination of the theoretical implications of the Japanese version of imperialism, nor in a comparison of Japanese imperialism with any other version. Its interpretive framework is concerned rather with identifying the stages through which Japanese imperialism developed, and it is here that Beasley makes one of his most important points: Japanese

imperialism was not static.

Beasley divides the imperial period into three stages. Initially, Japan had no choice but to work within the framework imposed by Britain and the USA. From 1905 onwards, however, Japanese leaders sought "equality of esteem" with the Western powers, and did so not only by using the treaty port system as before, but also by acquiring spheres of influence. From 1930 onwards there was an attempt to create a specifically Japanese type of imperialism in East Asia and thus to reject the older, Western style of empire. For this purpose economic relations within East Asia had to be restructured and an 'Asian' ideology promoted.

As noted above, Beasley states that he wishes to avoid giving primacy to any specific "impetus" towards imperialism. It is to economic factors, however, that he turns most often when seeking to explain key changes in the style and goals of Japanese imperialism, particularly when treating the later period. Indeed, Chapter 9, entitled "Overseas Trade and Investment, 1895-1930", is a pivotal chapter in the book. In it he concludes that it was the growth of the Japanese economy by 1930 which brought Japan into competition with the Western powers in East Asia, though colonies, strategic considerations and changes in the international environment also played their part (pp. 140-41). It was economic tensions which led eventually to a Japanese rejection of the treaty port system and search for an international order in East Asia more suitable to Japanese needs (p. 123), though external circumstance in the shape of Chinese hostility to the unequal treaties was also crucial (p. 174). Of a later period Beasley concludes: "it is arguable that the failure of the Co-prosperity Sphere to fulfil the economic role assigned to it guaranteed Japanese defeat [in the Second World War]" (p. 249). He interprets the changes that took place between 1905 and 1930 in part in terms of the rise of 'economic' imperialism at the expense of the 'strategic' type (p. 253). In short, Beasley's analysis tends to support economic interpretations of imperialism, though he is unwilling to be too explicit about this and is always aware of the complex influence of other factors.

Aside from the changing nature of

Japanese imperialism, Beasley makes and sustains another highly significant point: that amongst Japanese there were different interest groups which, though all broadly 'imperialist', wanted different kinds of imperialism and eventually competed with each other. In this connection he not only points to the divergences in thinking between army and Foreign Ministry, which he says began to compete in the 1920s (p. 254), but also notes the subdivisions within the variety of groups usually subsumed under a label such as 'economic interests'. Like his emphasis on the shifts which took place between 1894 and 1945, Beasley's stress on competing versions of imperialism serves usefully to undermine the notion of some monolithic Japanese form of imperialism.

According to Beasley, the two main concerns of Japanese policy were to develop special rights in Manchuria and to exploit treaty privileges in the rest of China (p. 253). Each of these facets acquired a distinct power base within Japan. Manchuria was chiefly the concern of the army, colonial officials and those companies which were most active in Japan's dependent territories. On the other hand, exploitation of the rest of China was emphasised by the Foreign Ministry, and usually by banks and those firms involved in the export trade, for whom the treaty port system was convenient.

Japanese Imperialism, then, presents a lucid and stimulating treatment of its subject. It is also a very useful book in a quite basic sense. For example, few books these days set out the details and significance of treaty negotiations as Beasley does, and his trade and investment statistics, culled from several different sources, will be helpful to other researchers. One thing bothered me, however. In Beasley's discussion of 'co-prosperity' there is a certain emphasis on the element of co-operation with the rest of Asia, and very little on exploitation. This is perhaps preferable to the type of analysis which leaves no room at all for sincerely-held ideals among those Japanese connected with or commenting on overseas expansion, invariably interpreting such 'ideals' in the most cynical possible way. Nevertheless, one feels there is a dimension missing when the reality of empire for its chief victims is accorded only the

briefest and most dispassionate remarks, like these from the Conclusion: "It is impossible to read the record of Japanese actions without recognizing that in the last resort Japan commanded. When co-operation was not forthcoming, obedience was the only accepted substitute" (p. 256; no elaboration of the point is provided). Certainly, Beasley does not set out to evaluate Japanese imperialism in any moral sense, and he is not to be criticised for failing to do so. Other evidence suggests, however, that the Japanese willingness to resort to force, and the failure of 'co-operation', were much more common and much more important than Beasley's words

would indicate.

1) *Great Britain and the Opening of Japan* (1951); *Select Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy 1853-1868* (1955); *The Meiji Restoration* (1972); *The Modern History of Japan* (first published in 1963; 3rd edition, 1981). This last book has been extensively reworked and updated to produce *The Rise of Modern Japan* (1990).

2) Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie (eds), *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945* (1984); Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie (eds), *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895-1937* (1989).

[Sandra Wilson]

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