

# GEORGE SANSOM: DIPLOMAT AND HISTORIAN†

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## I Introduction

In his memorable address delivered in 1956 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, Sir George Sansom remarked on those pioneers in Japanese studies who, though not scholars by profession, devoted their spare time and energy to the study of the Far Eastern country in which they happened to live, and so laid the foundations of modern Japanology: Aston, Satow, Chamberlain, Florenz and Charles Eliot. Some of them were, of course, diplomats by profession. Praising the extensive, accurate and penetrating works of these Founding Fathers of modern Japanology, Sir George recalled the golden days when “there was no point in hurrying to write despatches” (to the home government) “until just before sailing time,” and “it was even thought rather priggish to attend the Chancery in the afternoon.” And George Sansom described himself as “a small fossilized remnant of that race.”<sup>1</sup>

It is true that George Sansom belonged to the vanished race which could lavishly consume time in the study of some aspect of the society in which they lived without being “faced with quintuplicate copies of bits of nonsense, piles of misleading statistics and even the awful likelihood that somebody may disturb the studies by giving a call on the trans-oceanic telephone.”<sup>2</sup> However, he was by no means the small fossil he claimed to be; rather was he a vital bridge between the old race and the new.

After having spent many years in the study in depth of Japanese literature, making frequent visits to Kyoto and Nara, where the traditional beauty of the society was preserved, George Sansom published in 1931 a celebrated book, *Japan: A Short Cultural History*. The publication of this book, together with Sansom’s deep knowledge of Japanese society gained during his 25-year stay in that country, entitled him to be regarded as one of the Founding Fathers of modern Japanology.

With the ending of World War II, the center of Japanology in the Western world seems to have shifted toward the United States, gradually transforming itself from Japanology to Japanese Studies. George Sansom retired from government service, his final assignment having been British Representative at the Far Eastern Commission, and then accepted in 1948 the directorship of the newly established East Asian Institute at Columbia University.

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<sup>1</sup> School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; *Report of the Governing Body, Statement of Accounts and Departmental Reports for the Session, 1955–56*, pp. 79–84.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

I need not dwell on the significant role George Sansom played in building up Japanese Studies at Columbia, where a new breed of Japan specialists emerged, and research and teaching programs were expanded. A number of American specialists on Japan now active show in their work the intellectual influence of Professor Sansom. In addition, Columbia has grown into an important center for Japanese studies, competing with Harvard, Berkeley and Michigan. The "modernization" of Japan was the subject which attracted a number of capable American specialists in the 1960s, causing them to study the political, economic and cultural aspects of the modernizing process, and they produced several books on the subject. It was Professor Sansom who took up the theme of "modernization" in his book *The Western World and Japan* as early as 1950.

Sir George Sansom was not only a notable "old-fashioned" Japanologist, but also a forerunner of a new generation of specialists who tend to place more emphasis on the comparative study of Japanese society and politics. One characteristic of Sansom's method of analyzing and describing Japanese history was his use of comparisons with Western society, and this makes him unique among his contemporaries. Sansom produced his monumental three-volume *A History of Japan* when he was in his late 70s, demonstrating that he was no fossil.

My purpose here, however, is not directed toward George Sansom as an ex-diplomat-historian. I want to bring forward a less obvious aspect of his activities, namely the mark he made as a professional diplomat on the conduct of British policy toward Japan, in particular at the time of Japan's surrender.

## II *George Sansom as an "Anti-Appeaser"*

George Sansom had a deep love for Japanese culture and a warm regard for the Japanese people. These feelings did not, however, lead him to adopt a tolerant attitude toward the course of action the Japanese military took in China in the 1930s. Far from tolerating Japan's policy of expansion, he had viewed with increasing misgiving the road along which Japan was moving, and had seen the danger arising from the upsurge of militarism in Japan.

In 1934 there was a move for an Anglo-Japanese non-aggression pact sponsored by an influential British group, represented by Neville Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and his direct subordinate, Warren Fisher. It was a policy of conciliation with Japan, for the purpose of avoiding a naval expansion race and of reaching a *modus vivendi* in China by giving some political concessions to Japan in return for receiving its assurance of preserving long-standing British economic interests there. The need for conciliation with Japan was strongly felt among British ruling circles, and the idea of an Anglo-Japanese pact found supporters among influential people, including cabinet ministers, military advisers and business leaders.<sup>3</sup> Having met, in July, a seemingly favorable response from Foreign Minister Hirota to an initial sounding by the British Ambassador in Tokyo, hope developed among them of reaching an agreement with Japan to restore friendly relations. George Sansom, then Commercial Counsellor at the Embassy, finding himself in disagreement with the "appeasement" policy urged by Chamberlain and others, did not favor the pact,

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 6 in Ann Trotter, *Britain and East Asia, 1933-1937*, 1975.

which seemed, in his view, to recognize and approve of existing conditions in Manchuria and even in North China. Skeptical about far-reaching concessions made in the form of the Anglo-Japanese non-aggression pact, he wrote a memorandum in October and sent it to London.<sup>4</sup> The memorandum appeared to have some impact on government decisions regarding this question. At a cabinet meeting the following January, Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, expressed his respect for the memorandum. He said that Sansom was the “greatest living authority” on Japan, and his views on that country must be regarded as “authoritative.”<sup>5</sup>

George Sansom was generally skeptical about the efforts, which were claimed to be seriously being made in those days by the influential Japanese circles, to realize an Anglo-Japanese understanding. He wrote another memorandum dated September 22, 1936; “I fancy that at least one section of Anglophils—i.e. court circles, members of the old bureaucracy, bankers, etc.,—are actuated not only by genuine friendship but also by a hope that an understanding with England would strengthen the so-called ‘liberal’ elements in Japan and check the ‘fascist’ tendencies which they deplore. But I can not feel that foreign relations would be allowed to influence internal developments in any important degrees, and therefore I conclude that any general understandings given to us by Japan would have little effect . . . . I don’t suggest that the Japanese are given to breaking their promises. In my experience they are most meticulous in fulfilling obligations to the letters; but they have peculiar readings of the spirit of an understanding, and I am sure that we should find their interpretation of words co-operation and reciprocity very shocking.”<sup>6</sup>

As we have observed, Sansom was opposed to the British policy of “appeasement” toward Japan, but, in the mid-1930s, he did not abandon hope that Japan might change its course of action under the constraint of a basic fragility in her economic structure, and thus open the door for both countries to avoid a head-on collision.

It was the Marco Polo incident and the subsequent expansion of Japanese military activity on the Continent that struck a fatal blow to his slender hope for good Anglo-Japanese relations. As Sansom confessed to his intimate friend, Yukio Yashiro, it was “a feeling of distress such as a lover might have when he saw his mistress losing her mind” that pervaded his thoughts after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war.<sup>7</sup>

He had taken an increasingly pessimistic view of the fate of Japan, and one day, when Lady Craigie asked, “But the Japanese are certainly united?,” he took her breath away by saying: “Yes, and so were the Gadarene swine when they rushed over the cliff to destruction.”<sup>8</sup> This was certainly too gloomy an outlook to be appreciated by his superior, Sir Robert Craigie, the newly-appointed British Ambassador in Tokyo.

Sir Robert was more optimistic than Sansom, believing right up to December 1941 that the armed showdown could be avoided. He pinned his hopes on the Japanese “moderates,” thinking that they still exercised a powerful influence on Japanese policy.<sup>9</sup>

In Sansom’s eyes, Craigie appeared naive in overestimating the political strength held by the “moderates,” and their influence over the military. Craigie appeared also to lack

<sup>4</sup> Sansom memorandum on October 29, 1934, CAB 24 / 253.

<sup>5</sup> Simon note on January 11, 1935, CAB 24 / 253.

<sup>6</sup> Sansom memorandum on September 22, 1936, FO 371 / 20279.

<sup>7</sup> Katharine Sansom, *Sir George Sansom and Japan: A Memoir*, 1972, pp. 99–100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Craigie memorandum on April 23, 1943, FO 371 / 35957.

understanding of political dynamics in Japan. An “appeasement” policy toward Japan as urged by Chamberlain and Craigie was, in Sansom’s judgment, based on a wrong premise.

When the question of the blockade of Tientsin Settlement was brought up in the summer of 1939, Sansom, then in London on leave, wrote a memorandum in which he flatly rejected the policy of further concession advocated by Craigie.<sup>10</sup>

Sansom was of the opinion that there should be alternative courses of action open for the British government to cope with the situation in North China:

- 1) to evacuate all British nationals from North China;
- 2) to employ economic sanctions in retaliation for the Japanese action.

The main thrust of Sansom’s argument was accepted by Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, who inclined toward taking economic coercive measures and informing the Japanese government of the intention to abrogate the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation as a first step in that direction, following the action of the American government.<sup>11</sup>

This economic counter-measure was not, however, taken, chiefly because of the drastic change in the European situation toward the end of August 1939.

Sansom, the “anti-appeaser,” even advocated economic sanctions against Japan. At this point one could detect a similarity between Sansom and Stanley Hornbeck, an American scholar-diplomat, who helped to push forward, within the State Department, a policy of economic sanctions against Japan. In spite of this apparent similarity, there existed a great difference in their basic attitudes toward Japan. Whereas the former had retained a deep affection for Japan, the latter held some deeply-rooted anti-Japanese sentiments.

### III *George Sansom and the Defeated Japan*

As the Pacific War was approaching its end, George Sansom turned his mind to the diplomatic rather than the cultural scene.

The planning of control over post-war Japan had become a concern of the U.S. government as early as 1942. Two State Department committees were established during that year to study the planning. As the development of the war had insured a victory for the Allies in 1944, a plan of control and the occupation of Japan had been taken more seriously and discussed at the top level of the State Department. The Army and the Navy had by this time also become involved in the planning. Toward the end of the year there was a further planning development in respect of the post-surrender policy toward Japan in the setting up of a new committee called the State, War, Navy Co-ordinating Committee (SWNCC) the task of which was to reach agreement on the post-surrender policy among the three government organs involved. The Far East Sub-committee of SWNCC, in which George Blakeslee and Hugh Borton were key members, had during the spring of 1945 worked on the drafting of a series of documents touching upon various aspects of Allied control and occupation of defeated Japan. The most important one produced in this period was called “United States Initial Post-Defeat Policy Relating to Japan,” bearing the number SWNCC 150 and which was submitted to the SWNCC on June 11.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Sansom memorandum on August 3, 1939, *DBFP Third Series, Vol. IX*, 1955, Appendix, pp. 528–32.

<sup>11</sup> Foreign Office memorandum on August 21, 1939, *ibid.*, pp. 483–87.

<sup>12</sup> *FRUS, 1945, Vol. VI*, 1969, pp. 549–54.

The British government was far behind the U.S. government in taking up the question of post-war planning for Japan, and it was not until May 26, 1945 that Foreign Secretary Eden sent a memorandum to Churchill which read as follows: "We have reason to believe that the Americans have been doing a good deal of planning on this subject and that it is reaching an advanced stage . . . . If you agree, it is important that the study of the problems involved should be set in motion without delay. Unless we open discussions with Washington in the near future, there seems to be a real risk that American views may crystallize before we have time to influence them. The Chiefs of Staff are also in favor of this study being carried out at once and I suggest that it should be left to them and to the Foreign Office to arrange in agreement how the work can best be done."<sup>13</sup> On May 30, Churchill replied: "Yes, but pray report to the Cabinet."<sup>14</sup>

George Sansom, who had been in Washington since 1943 as an adviser on Far Eastern affairs to the British Ambassador, with the title of Minister, seems not to have been well-informed of the state of post-war planning for Japan within the U.S. government. It would seem that Sansom was taken by surprise when informed of the SWNCC-150 document by Joseph Grew, then Under-Secretary of State, on May 29. Sansom must have been upset not only by the nature of the planning, but also by the substance of SWNCC-150. The American idea as expressed in the document was certainly different from the direct military control over occupied territory such as was exercised over defeated Germany by the occupation forces of four powers acting separately. And at the same, it was different from indirect control.

Among U.S. leaders, some supported the idea of direct control being exercised over Japan as in Germany, particularly Henry Morgenthau, Secretary for the Treasury. However, the control system as envisaged in SWNCC-150, which was a result of efforts on the part of the Far Eastern Sub-committee to overcome harsh policies against Japan and to accommodate differing views, was neither that of direct military control over Japan, nor of indirect control in its real sense being exercised through the existing Japanese governmental machinery. It could be defined as a kind of intermediate type of control system.

Upon receipt of a cable communicating the contents of SWNCC-150, the British government found it necessary to reply immediately, expressing its own ideas as to post-war planning for Japan to the Americans before the contents were adopted as formal U.S. policy at top level. In the circumstances, the British government naturally turned to Minister Sansom, whose knowledge and experience would be most valuable on such an occasion and whose views deserved serious consideration in formulating the British attitude.

Responding to the request from the home government, Sansom wrote a long memorandum entitled *Policy Towards Japan*, dated June 20.<sup>15</sup> Its essential points had already been made in his brief memorandum dated June 9.

Sansom expressed his reservations about several points in SWNCC-150:

- 1) the Americans envisaged "a period of severe military government;"
- 2) the Americans seemed to foresee a total, prolonged occupation of Japan;
- 3) further, they contemplated a large-scale effort to dictate the nature of Japanese political institutions and to "re-educate" the Japanese people.

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<sup>13</sup> Eden to Churchill on May 26, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

<sup>14</sup> Churchill to Eden on May 30, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

<sup>15</sup> Sansom memorandum on June 20, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

Sansom claimed in the memorandum that "it should be possible to influence the course of events in Japan after defeat, without recourse by the Allies to protracted occupation and a costly machinery of internal controls, by using what, in the long run, will prove a more effective means of compulsion than prescription by the Allies of specific political and social institutions." "By exercising the positive power of controlling trade and the negative power of withholding treaties, the Allies should be able, if they remain united, to induce Japan herself to introduce such reforms in her institutions." Further, making reference to what happened in Meiji Japan, historian Sir George asserted: "It was by the exercise of sanctions of this kind that the Western Powers were able to secure the modernization of Japanese institutions." And, he argued, "the prospects of liberalization of Japanese politics might be improved if Japan, without any burden of armaments, were able to engage in some foreign trade as soon as possible and then direct her energies to the development of an internal market."

Sansom's memorandum was marked as gaining "the agreed view of our chief Japanese experts" (of the Foreign Office) and even if they said that it must be considered "in the light of various considerations such as the attitude of Russia and also our post-war strategic policy", *prima facie* the Foreign Office agreed with Sir George Sansom's views. Then it was remarked that "the Chiefs of Staff are in general agreements with the memorandum."<sup>16</sup> In this fashion, the main government organs involved in the formulation of British policy toward post-war Japan were likely to grant their general agreement to the Sansom memorandum. Moreover, it is interesting to note that a cable sent from the Foreign Office to the British Embassy in Washington on July 18 in order to transmit to the U.S. government the British view on Allied control over defeated Japan, stated "total and protracted military occupation, combined with the assumption of all the functions of government, is likely to be a strain on both manpower and physical resources," and in fact the Foreign Office totally accepted the ideas put forward by Sansom, even to the extent of using large parts of the memorandum verbatim.<sup>17</sup>

At this time the summit conference opened in Potsdam. By then a draft of the Potsdam Proclamation had been prepared by the Americans to deliver to the British leaders attending the conference. Having read the draft, Eden wrote a memorandum for Churchill on July 21: "I think we must accept this American draft. I hope, however, that the Americans can be asked to consider the amendments in the attached memorandum. The purpose of the amendments is to convert the document from a proclamation to the Japanese people to a communication to the Japanese government."<sup>18</sup> It turned out that the amendments were fully accepted by the Americans, and the final text of the Potsdam Proclamation was revised along the lines of the British counter-proposal. As a matter of fact, Eden's memorandum was based upon another prepared by Mr. L.H. Foulds (Japan specialist at the Foreign Office, who accompanied Eden to Potsdam) for him on the previous day.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that the amendments themselves were prepared by the same hand.

The amendments, it seems, were not intended to modify the text to any large extent, but to make minor changes in the wording so as to avoid the impression that the Japanese

<sup>16</sup> Bennett to Hollis on July 4, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

<sup>17</sup> Foreign Office to the British Embassy in Washington, No. 7570, July 18, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

<sup>18</sup> Eden to Churchill on July 21, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

<sup>19</sup> Foreign Office memorandum on July 20, 1945, FO 371 / 46447.

people were being addressed over the head of the Japanese Government. For example, the wording "Japanese people" was changed to "Japan" or "Japanese Government" in paragraphs I, IV and XIII, and there was a change in paragraph VII: "points in Japanese territory to be designated by the Allies shall be occupied . . ." in order to avoid the impression of "total occupation," and there was another such revision in paragraph X: "the Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people," apparently with a view to eliminating the suggestion of "dictating the nature of Japanese political institutions and re-educating the Japanese people" inherent in the American draft.

The amendments may appear to be minor, but in fact they implied a substantial change in the control system over defeated Japan, namely a shift from "intermediate military control" to "indirect control." One can detect here Sansom's influence in this process of changing the nature of the Potsdam Proclamation by two means: 1) the amendments were written by Sansom's colleague at the Foreign Office who knew about the Sansom memorandum and who favored the agreement reached at the Foreign Office on the basis of the memorandum, and 2) although Eden did not completely agree with the contents of the cable of July 18 and in particular was opposed to the first part of paragraph VII,——namely "Might it not be preferable also for the Allies, instead of suspending the constitutional powers of the Emperor, to work through those powers or through whatever state administration they may find in being in Japan"——, he accepted the rest of the text as the formal policy of the Foreign Office.<sup>20</sup>

Having received the British note on August 2, Blakeslee and Borton of the Far Eastern Sub-committee of SWNCC, started working on a revision of SWNCC-150 so as to integrate it with the Potsdam Proclamation and with the British note. The result was the drafting of SWNCC-150-II, a document which was adopted at the SWNCC meeting on August 12.<sup>21</sup> There was no reference to military government in this document, and the policy of indirect control over Japan was clearly spelled out here. Based upon SWNCC-150-II, "The Initial Post-Surrender Policy," which was finally sanctioned by President Truman on September 6, was formulated, to direct the GHQ in its execution of Allied occupational policy for Japan.

#### IV Conclusion

As a member of the delegation of the Far Eastern Commission which aimed at surveying the current situation in occupied Japan and exchanging views with GHQ personnel, George Sansom in 1945 made a visit of several weeks' duration, after a five-year interval, to the defeated and occupied Japan. He noticed there a number of "eager and well-intentioned young men who were not aware of the facts of political life in Japan" occupying key position of the GHQ, and engaging in the re-education of the Japanese people with "a somewhat irrational zeal." One thing that struck him was "their zeal in tracking down and examining a great number of what they described as 'secret societies'" and the apparent ease with which they found "parallels in kind if not in degree in their own or in any other

<sup>20</sup> FO 371 / 46447.

<sup>21</sup> *FRUS, 1945, Vol. VI*, pp. 582–84, 609–12.

modern society.”<sup>22</sup>

He was strongly critical of the reparations policy pursued by the GHQ, receiving the impression that “the Headquarters had a fantastic and mistaken idea as to the nature of these financial interests, which differ only in degree and not in kind from similar combinations in the U.S. and other highly industrialized countries.” After having listened to a series of lectures given by GHQ personnel and observed their activities, Sansom, as an historian-diplomat, somewhat alarmed by “their cheerful optimism,” could not help remarking: “I do not think they realize how deeply rooted and how strong is the Japanese intellectual tradition; they seem to think that Japan can be supplied with a new system of education as a tailor might furnish a new suit.”<sup>23</sup>

George Sansom was indeed one of the greatest historians and Japanologists the Western World has ever seen. Furthermore, the deep knowledge he had acquired through his lifelong, untiring study of the history of Japan and his penetrating observations, made a substantial contribution to his activities as a diplomat. George Sansom had not in any way become “a small fossil” either as an historian or as a diplomat.

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<sup>22</sup> Katharine Sansom, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151–54.