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EMPEROR OF JAPAN

MEIJI AND HIS WORLD, 1852–1912



DONALD KEENE

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Donald Keene



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW YORK

Columbia University Press wishes to express its appreciation
for assistance given by the Japan Foundation
toward the cost of publishing this book.

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Keene, Donald.

Emperor of Japan : Meiji and His world, 1852–1912 / Donald Keene.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-231-12340-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-231-12341-9 (paper : alk. paper)

1. Meiji, Emperor of Japan 1852–1912. 2. Japan—History—Meiji period,
1868–1912. 3. Emperors—Japan—Biography. I. Title.

DS882.7.K44 2002

952.03'1'092—dc21

2001028826



Columbia University Press books
are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6

p 10 9 8 7 6

To the Memory of Nagai Michio (1923–2000)
Friend and Teacher

PREFACE



At the northern end of the Goshō, the grounds surrounding the old imperial palace in Kyōto, just inside the wall marking the perimeter, there stands a small house. In the early years of the Meiji era, when American missionaries were first allowed to reside in the old capital, they used the house for a time to store their furniture and other belongings while they searched for a domicile. Today it attracts little attention, even though it is one of the few houses belonging to the nobility to have survived not only the conflagration that swept through the Goshō in the middle of the nineteenth century but also the dilapidation and destruction following the move of the capital to Tōkyō in 1868.

Outside the fence that protects the house and garden from intruders is a small wooden marker inscribed *Sachi no i*, the Well of Good Fortune, and inside, barely visible over the top of the fence, is a more considerable stone monument. These two reminders of the past are all that alert the visitor to the fact that the building possesses greater significance than as an example—a very unimpressive example—of nineteenth-century traditional Japanese architecture. In fact, Emperor Meiji¹ was born in this house in 1852, and (according to unreliable tradition) he was first washed in water from the Well of Good Fortune.²

Meiji was born in this inconspicuous building rather than in the imperial palace itself because his mother, Nakayama Yoshiko, had been obliged by custom to leave her quarters in the palace when it became evident that she would soon give birth. It was traditionally believed that a birth polluted the building

where it occurred, and for this reason children of the emperor were normally born near their mother's house, often in a separate building that was likely to be destroyed when no longer needed. Ironically, this little house has lasted longer than the elaborate residences of the nobility that once surrounded it, vying proud roof against roof.

In preparation for the imperial birth, Yoshiko's father, the acting major counselor Nakayama Tadayasu, had erected this "parturition hut" next to his own, more substantial dwelling. He at first attempted to persuade his neighbors to let him use land they were not actually occupying, but even though the child who was to be born might well become the emperor, he was refused by all and, in the end, had to build on his already crowded property. Like many other nobles at the time, Tadayasu was too poor to pay the costs of even so modest a structure—two small rooms with a bath and toilet attached—and had to borrow most of the money needed for the construction.³

Although the house is itself unimpressive, it is strange all the same that the birthplace of a deified emperor, whose shrine in Tōkyō, the Meiji jingū, attracts millions each New Year and many thousands of worshipers even on quite ordinary days, should be the object of so little interest and treated so casually. Only recently has the little house, badly neglected over the years, been given new tiles for its roof. This unmitigatedly utilitarian dwelling, with bare boards on the floor and not a trace of ornamentation anywhere, hardly suggests that this is where a prince was born who became Japan's most celebrated emperor.

The indifference displayed toward Meiji's birthplace characterizes also, in a curious way, general knowledge of the man: even Japanese who believe that Meiji was the greatest Japanese ruler of all time may have trouble recalling a single accomplishment that might account for so glorious a reputation. Meiji is associated, of course, with the "Meiji Restoration" of 1868, the beginning of Japan's modern history, but he was only fifteen when it occurred and, at that age, was obviously incapable of making a significant contribution to the Restoration or to the momentous changes that immediately ensued. His name is associated also with victories in wars with China and Russia and with the securing of an alliance with England, although his role in these events was surely that of a benign presence, not that of a formulator of policy or military strategy. Yet it is also true that throughout his reign and even much later, he inspired men to perform extraordinary deeds of valor. There was no question in the minds of the men who effected the changes of the new regime that he was the guiding spirit.

The general lack of knowledge of the man is not the result of any large-scale suppression of evidence. There is ample documentation for almost every occurrence of Meiji's life from his birth to his death. The official chronicle, *Meiji tennō ki* (Record of the Emperor Meiji), lists, on a virtually day-to-day basis, not only events in which he directly participated but relevant occurrences in

the world around him. Many books and articles recalling Meiji's daily life and personality were published after his death by people who knew him, but these books somehow fail to leave much impression. As the first emperor ever to meet a European, he figures also in the journals of foreign dignitaries who visited Japan. Their accounts, less inhibited than those by the comparatively few Japanese who were admitted to his presence, are of particular interest for their candid descriptions of his appearance from the time he first appeared before the public; but even they tell us little about the man.

In addition to the host of facts in the twelve closely printed, stout volumes of the official record, there are innumerable legends and anecdotes about Meiji, notably the gossip concerning such subjects as his amours and the amount of liquor he consumed. There are even people who proudly claim to be illegitimate descendants, usually with only the flimsiest of evidence. Indeed, so much material is available that it might seem that the only requirement for a scholar who intended to write a well-rounded biography was patience; but Meiji's biographers have rarely succeeded in the most essential task, creating a believable portrait of the man whose reign of forty-five years was characterized by the greatest changes in Japanese history.

It may be that the biographers, whether or not they are willing to admit it even to themselves, have reached the frustrating conclusion that the personality of Emperor Meiji had no greater depth or complexity than the pieces of paper printed with his portrait, the conventionalized image of a monarch before which his subjects bowed in reverence without ever wondering what might lie beneath the surface. In order to illustrate their contention that Meiji had a "human" side, biographers often relate anecdotes suggesting that underneath his impassivity he felt great affection for his consort or that he thought constantly of his people or that he possessed a wonderful sense of humor; but such anecdotes are seldom memorable or even believable. Debunking critics of more recent times tend to portray Meiji either as a cipher who was incapable of performing the acts attributed to him or, conversely, as a ruthless tyrant whose actions betrayed his indifference to the welfare of his subjects. They are probably equally mistaken, and their efforts only deepen the mystery of Meiji's abiding fame and the immense number of his worshipers.

Unlike Queen Victoria, his near contemporary, Meiji kept no diary and wrote virtually no letters. Meiji's father, Emperor Kōmei, left many letters, most of them filled with the passionate anger that developments in the world had aroused in him; but the rare surviving letters of Meiji are without interest. Apart from his signatures on state documents, hardly anything in his handwriting survives.¹ There are very few photographs, perhaps no more than three or four altogether, although many less exalted Japanese of his day were frequently photographed. The portrait paintings made both while he was alive and after his death, whether showing him inspecting a silver mine or presiding over a

conference on drafting a constitution, were effigies not meant to be literally accurate, the work of artists who had probably never had so much as a glimpse of Meiji's face.⁵

One way of knowing Meiji, apart from the official records and the unofficial, sometimes untrustworthy, reminiscences of his chamberlains, is by reading the poetry he composed. It is estimated that in his lifetime Meiji wrote more than 100,000 poems. Despite the conventional language and imagery that marks them all, they contain bits of autobiographical interest and suggest his feelings on various occasions; but the documents for which he is best known—the rescripts on the army and on education—were composed by other men, and it is difficult to find in their wording anything of Meiji's personal beliefs.

The testimonies written after his death by people of the court who knew him are unsatisfying and sometimes mutually contradictory. One man recalls that Meiji was an unusually healthy and active boy, somewhat of a bully perhaps, a champion sumo wrestler in his youth. Another man, who knew him equally well, contends that as a child Meiji was delicate and prone to illness, testimony that makes one question accounts of his prowess at sumo. The story that Meiji fainted the first time he heard gunfire has been repeated by many biographers but denied by others. When faced with such contradictions, a modern reader tends to suspect the worst—that although Meiji as a boy was in fact sickly and timid, his biographers invented anecdotes that made him appear to have been a sturdy little son of Yamato. But can the man who many years earlier served as Meiji's playmate have been lying when he recalled how regularly Meiji used to thrash him?⁶

These contradictions are not confined to his boyhood: his intelligence, judiciousness, concern for his people, and other qualities befitting a sovereign have been questioned by recent scholars. To cite a minor example of such contradictions: Is it true that (as one chamberlain stated in his memoirs) Meiji not only received a dozen or more Japanese and foreign newspapers every day but examined them assiduously?⁷ Or is it true (as another chamberlain claimed) that during the early part of his reign, Meiji read the headlines but later on did not even glance at a newspaper?⁸ There also are contradictions in his reported daily behavior that make it extremely difficult to decide what he was really like. If, as often mentioned, he was simple in his tastes and so reluctant to spend money on himself that his uniform was patched,⁹ how does this square with his reported penchant for diamonds and French perfume?¹⁰

It is difficult to feel that one knows Meiji even after plowing through the twelve volumes that record every day of his life. We know precisely when he set foot outside the Goshō for the first time, but what we really want to know is not the hour but the impression produced on him when he emerged from the walled enclosure that had been his entire world and (like Shakyamuni Buddha before him) saw, for the first time, poverty, illness, and death.

Those who knew him personally praised his fortitude, his evenhandedness, and other admirable qualities. Even if we accept their praise as literal truth, we would like to know how it happened that a prince, raised mainly by ignorant women and devoted to the traditional, elegant pastimes of the nobility rather than to the use of weapons, a descendant of many generations of monarchs who had never participated in warfare, is remembered above all as a soldier, a man rarely seen out of uniform?

When writing about Meiji, it is often difficult to keep one's attention focused on the man himself because he was surrounded by officers of extraordinary ability and vividly contrasting personalities. Historians tend to discuss Meiji's reign in terms of these men, leaving only a ceremonial role for the emperor in whose name their glorious achievements were performed. Yet surely it would be unfair to attribute Meiji's extraordinary reputation solely to his having been, quite by chance, the emperor at a time of cataclysmic changes. In a more negative view, his youth and inexperience unquestionably helped the architects of the Restoration; one can easily imagine how their work would have been impeded at every stage if Meiji's father, Emperor Kōmei (whose hatred of foreigners was implacable), had not providentially died at the early age of thirty-six. But Meiji was also capable of making important decisions even while he was young; for example, his intervention prevented the invasion of Korea advocated by Saigō Takamori and a majority of the other ministers. On many later occasions, Meiji's actions—notably his repeated tours of the country—helped create in his subjects an awareness of Japan as a unified, modern country. To label Meiji a mere cipher is as inappropriate as to dismiss Queen Victoria in the same terms.¹¹

Meiji's first name, Sachinomiya, or Prince Sachi, was given to him by his father a week after the infant's birth. He was later known as Mutsuhito, the name that appears on documents he signed throughout his reign. Meiji, the name by which he is now normally known, was his posthumous designation; it was also the *nengō*, or reign-name, used in Japan instead of Western chronology. Until the adoption of "Meiji" as the name for Mutsuhito's entire reign, the *nengō* was traditionally changed several times during the reign of a single emperor—at two fixed points in the cycle of sixty years, or when a series of natural disasters were attributed to an inauspicious *nengō* or when some prodigy of nature required recognition in the calendar. The name Meiji, meaning "enlightened rule," was the *nengō* used for his reign from his first full year as a sovereign, 1868, until his death in 1912. It is now used also to characterize the whole of Japanese culture during a period of rapid and sometimes violent change.

I shall attempt in these pages to find Emperor Meiji, a man who was born in a country that for centuries had refused almost all contact with the West but who in his lifetime saw Japan transformed into not only a world power but also a member of the community of nations.

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Chapter 1



There are two portraits of Emperor Kōmei (1831–1867). The first, often reproduced, shows him sitting on a raised tatami (the *gyokuza*, or jeweled seat), dressed in court costume and wearing the distinctive headgear of an emperor, a hat with a tall, projecting plume-like band. His oval face, turned somewhat to the right, is composed and utterly without expression, in the typical manner of formal court portraits. Nothing (except perhaps the angle of the plume) indicates that this portrait was painted in the nineteenth, rather than, say, the thirteenth century, and no attempt was made to suggest in the depiction of Kōmei's features his long suffering during an unusually turbulent reign. Judging by this portrait, Kōmei differed little from his ancestors, the emperors of the previous 200 years, most of them figureheads who contributed little to the nation. During their lifetimes, their existence was unknown to most Japanese; today even their names have been forgotten. Kōmei, however, despite the blandness of his features in this portrait, is distinctly remembered.¹

The second portrait creates quite a different impression. The face reveals a strong personality of which wrath seems to be the principal component. Kōmei was indeed angry throughout much of his life. His surviving letters and other documents make it plain that almost every development during his reign infuriated him, and his response to each was not merely anger but frustration over his inability to prevent the impending changes in the government and society.

Kōmei was born on July 23, 1831. His father was Emperor Ninkō, the 120th

emperor according to the official chronology. His mother was not the emperor's consort but a *gon no tenji*, or lady of the bedchamber, the daughter of the nobleman Ōgimachi Sanemitsu. Officially, however, Kōmei was considered to be the empress's own child. As the fourth son of Ninkō, he normally would not have succeeded to the throne, but all his elder brothers had died by the time he was born. The mortality rate among children of the imperial family at this time and even much later was astonishingly high. Of Ninkō's fifteen children, only three lived past their third year; of Kōmei's six children, only one (Meiji) survived him; and of Meiji's fifteen children, only five lived to be adults.² It is not clear why the mortality rate should have been so much higher at the imperial court than among contemporary Japanese peasant families;³ but it has been ascribed to various causes, such as excessively early marriage (the heir to the throne normally married by his sixteenth year), the backward state of medicine as practiced by the court physicians, and the unhealthy, gloomy atmosphere prevailing in the palace. Perhaps also—though this is rarely suggested—the extremely limited choice of women of the nobility as mothers of imperial children tended to promote inbreeding.

Especially after the beginning of the eighteenth century, emperors did not live long, although there were a few exceptions. Sakuramachi died at thirty; his successor, Momozono, at twenty-one; Go-Momozono, at twenty-one; Ninkō (Kōmei's father), at forty-six; and Kōmei himself, at thirty-six. Accession to the throne was accordingly early: Kōmei's grandfather, Emperor Kōkaku, ascended the throne at nine; his son, Ninkō, at seventeen; Kōmei, at fifteen; and his son, Meiji, also at fifteen. Under other circumstances, the accession of an inexperienced boy emperor might have created severe problems in the country's administration, but in fact it hardly mattered to the Japanese state whether the emperor was a venerable exemplar of monarchical wisdom or a mere child; he took no part in the government, and his only public activities were the performance of prescribed rituals and ceremonies.⁴ The shogun did not have to ask the emperor's advice when planning a course of action, and once he had made a decision, he did not seek the emperor's consent. This situation would change with Kōmei.

Kōmei grew up in the Goshō, the area in the center of the city of Kyōto (about 220 acres) where the buildings of the palace were situated and where most of the *kuge* (nobles) lived; this was the imperial family's entire world. According to Higashikuze Michitomi (1833–1912), it was the policy of the shogunate to cloister the emperor as if he were some sort of living god removed from the world of mortals, and it was strictly forbidden to inform him of new or unusual happenings.⁵ Higashikuze, who was selected to be Kōmei's playmate when he was ten years old, related in his old age everything he could remember about Kōmei's boyhood, fearing that unless he set down his remembrances, the old traditions might be lost forever. His memory was extraordinary, extending to minute details of the many ceremonies he witnessed—exactly who was pres-

ent, how they were dressed, what gifts were offered, and so on. Here is his account of a typical ceremony:

On the seventh day of the sixth month, his ninth birthday,⁶ there was the ceremony of “first reading.” It was not that the prince had never read anything before he was nine. He had in fact already read the *Classic of Filial Piety* and the *Great Learning*—Takatsukasa, the general of the left, was his tutor—and the ceremony was purely a formality. The prince sat at the middle level wearing an ordinary court costume, his sleeves held back by threefold purple cords and laced trousers with violet hexagonal patterns. The middle counselor Koga Takemichi brought forward a desk and placed it before the prince. Then Kiyohara Arikata of the third rank came forward and seated himself before the desk. He read the preface to the old text of the *Classic of Filial Piety* three times. The prince immediately afterward read through this text in the same way. Kiyohara of the third rank withdrew, and Koga, coming forward, removed the desk. The prince then withdrew to the inner quarters.⁷

The education of a prince consisted largely of reading aloud, with the aid of a tutor, Confucian texts such as the *Classic of Filial Piety*. At first he would read the words without understanding their meaning, but eventually he would be able not only to read texts in classical Chinese but to compose poetry in that language. Calligraphy was an equally indispensable attainment of a prince, and the selection of the proper calligraphy tutor was a matter of crucial importance. Finally, a prince was expected to be able to compose Japanese poetry in the classic verse form, the *tanka*.

Apart from these elements of a traditional education, a prince seems to have learned little else from books—perhaps no more than the essentials of Japanese and Chinese history and geography. Some emperors were fond of reading Japanese fiction, and others enjoyed such entertainments as the *bugaku* dances performed at the court as they had been for a thousand years; there are records also of *nō* being performed in the imperial palace. But these avocations were considered to be merely diversions, distinct from the serious study that the shogunate had enjoined on the imperial household as its principal occupation.

In 1615 a code of approved behavior for the nobility was drawn up by the former shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, his son Hidetada (the titular shogun), and the nobleman Nijō Akizane, who had served as *kampaku*, or chancellor. This code, known as *Kinchū narabi ni kuge shohatto* (Regulations for the Imperial Palace and Nobility), consisted of seventeen articles, presumably in imitation of the Seventeen Article Constitution drawn up by Prince Shōtoku in 604. The first and most important article enjoined the emperor and his courtiers to devote themselves to scholarship and the arts. The emperors of the Tokugawa period seem to have taken this to heart: scholarship (the study of a limited number of

Confucian classics) and the arts (chiefly *tanka* and calligraphy) were the central elements of their education. The Confucian classics were studied not in the hopes that a prince might one day rival scholars of the Tokugawa period in reinterpreting the texts; it was enough for members of the court to be familiar in general with the teachings of Confucius and to be able to quote his words at appropriate times. The remainder of the seventeen articles dealt with specific matters, such as appointments to court offices, inheritance of property by nobles, precedence among the various noble houses, and the treatment of members of the nobility who had entered priestly orders.

Even if they resented the supremacy of the shogunate and recalled nostalgically the distant past when the emperor reigned supreme, most emperors and members of the aristocracy did not chafe under the regulations to which they were subjected. The world they lived in was tiny, but they seemed unaware of its limitations, and matters of the most minute concern could occupy their minds for decades. Even those who resented the interference of the shogunate in their lives and the presence in Kyōto of officials sent from Edo who monitored their every action were well aware that they could not survive without the annual stipends the shogunate paid them.

In the case of the lower ranks of the aristocracy, the stipends they received were often insufficient to maintain their households even at a modest level, and many resorted to working on the side, preferably at pursuits that were not considered to be demeaning, such as making copies of the calligraphy of old masters or painting cards for the New Year's game of *karuta* (cards); they counted on the appeal of their illustrious names to sell their handiwork. The family of Iwakura Tomomi (1825–1883), who emerged as the most prominent noble of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods, was so poor that they had to rent their house as a gambling den, taking advantage of their immunity as nobles from police regulations. But even the poorest of the nobles were proud of their lineage and their social status, and they were respected by society as a whole, although some of them, as we know from the testimony of the nobles themselves, behaved outrageously, stopping at nothing in their desperate eagerness to make money.⁸

The poverty of the emperor and the court has often been exaggerated, especially by popular historians who have fabricated tales of the drastic expedients to which even emperors resorted merely to stay alive. In fact, they lived reasonably well, even by the standards of the daimyos of the time, whose wealth similarly tends to be exaggerated.

The life of an emperor during the Tokugawa period must have been extremely boring, however. Apart from the consolation of nocturnal pleasures (Gomizunoo had thirty-seven children and Gosai, twenty-seven), each day seems to have been occupied mainly with ceremonies, repeated identically from year to year. But perhaps the aspect of an emperor's life that we would find most oppressive was the narrow confines of the area in which he could

move. This had not always been true. Although the emperors never traveled very far from the Goshō, they made occasional imperial progresses to different parts of the city. For example, in 1626 Gomizunoo was entertained for four days at Nijō Castle, the official residence of the shōgun in the capital. But from 1632, the year when the shōgun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651) began to rule in his own right after the death of his father, Tokugawa Hidetada, the shōgunate did not permit the emperors to leave the Goshō. On a few occasions, it is true, fires in the Goshō might compel an emperor to take refuge at a temple elsewhere in Kyōto, but it is not much of an exaggeration to say that the successive emperors were prisoners of the state.

Abdicated emperors were freer to travel outside the Goshō. The Shugaku-in, in the hills northeast of the city, was originally built about 1650 as a pleasure resort for the retired emperor Gomizunoo. It was visited from time to time in later years by other abdicated emperors, but it had not been used for many years, and when the retired emperor Kōkaku requested permission in 1823 from the shōgunate to visit the Shugaku-in, hasty repairs had to be made before the visit could take place. The occasion passed splendidly:

The cloistered emperor Gomizunoo was the first to visit the tea pavilion of the Shugaku-in, at the foot of Mount Hiyoshi. The cloistered emperor Reigen had also frequently stopped here. After the death of the cloistered emperor Reigen in 1732, for a period of about a hundred years, the place fell into rack and ruin, and the imperial visits ceased. In the autumn of 1824, the military were commanded to make fresh repairs, and reverting to their old practice, they performed this service. Accordingly, on the twenty-first day of the ninth month of 1825 the retired emperor [Kōkaku] paid his first visit. The route he took was as follows: he left the Goshō by the Seiwa-in Gate, proceeded to Masugata, crossed the Kamo River, and then rested a while at Nitta Yamabana. Great crowds of people cheered him, shouting "Banzai!" They filled the streets, gazing at him reverently. Truly this was proof of an auspicious reign.⁹

Although emperors who had abdicated and entered priestly orders were allowed this degree of freedom by the shōgunate, this was not true of reigning emperors; from 1632 until 1863, when Kōmei went to worship at the Kamo and Iwashimizu Shrines, the successive emperors hardly ever left the Goshō, and then only because of some disaster. None of them had seen the sea or Mount Fuji or the city of Edo, where the shōguns reigned. During his entire lifetime, an emperor would never have seen more than a few hundred of his subjects, and virtually none of the Japanese would ever have had even the barest glimpse of him. The people of Kyōto were, of course, aware that the emperor lived behind the walls of the Goshō, but except for such rare occasions as when the retired emperor Kōkaku visited the Shugaku-in, they never saw even the palan-

quin in which he was borne, let alone the man. He was invisible to all but a handful of high-ranking courtiers, a presence behind curtains who excited awe and reverence but who was remote from the world of human beings.

Higashikuze Michitomi was one of the very few at the court for whom the future emperor Kōmei was both a human being and a friend. He recalled Kōmei's proficiency in his studies: "He was able to read the Four Books and the Five Classics¹⁰ without difficulty and learned enough even to lecture on them. He did not study Japanese books very much, but he received instruction in composing *tanka* from his father and composed them every day. His poems were extremely good. In *gagaku* [music] he received instruction from Hamuro, the major counselor, and he was a skillful player of the flute."¹¹

Kōmei was officially named the crown prince in 1840, when he was in his tenth year. Higashikuze recalled that before the ceremony, imperial commands had been issued to seven Shintō shrines and seven Buddhist temples to pray that the ceremony would not be interrupted by wind or rain.¹² The actual ceremony took place in the Shishinden (Hall for State Ceremonies). At the conclusion, the emperor presented the prince with the *tsubogiri no goken*, the sword indicating that the recipient was next in the succession.

Higashikuze did not actually become the prince's companion until 1842, but he knew from reports how Kōmei looked on that occasion two years earlier: "His hair was arranged in the *agemaki* style, divided on top to left and right in loops over his ears, in the manner of the hair of the two boys in attendance on Prince Shōtoku in the famous portrait. This was because he had not yet had his *gembuku*."¹³

Probably Higashikuze knew of this ceremony only from other people, but he was present for Kōmei's *gembuku*, or initiation into manhood, the second most important rite of the prince's life, which began on May 11, 1844, with the ceremony of blackening the prince's teeth. Kōmei disliked this so much that he had to be forced. (It is not hard to imagine the thirteen-year-old boy squirming and perhaps shrieking as the nasty black liquid was rubbed against his teeth.) The next two days were spent rehearsing the ceremony. As Higashikuze explained, "This was something that happened only once in an emperor's lifetime, and there were so few people who could remember what had happened the previous time that everybody had to consult books during the rehearsals."¹⁴

Before dawn on the day of the ceremony the prince was dressed in his costume for the occasion. All the nobles wore formal robes with trailing skirts and carried broadswords inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The emperor appeared, followed by a woman attendant bearing the crown prince's crown. Inside the Hall for State Ceremonies, the officers of the Imperial Palace Keeper's Bureau (*tonomoryō*) opened the curtains. The crown prince's tutor led him to the platform, whereupon the chancellor, Takatsukasa Masamichi, came up beside the prince. Kujō, the minister of the right, supported the prince's train. At this solemn moment all the nobles prostrated themselves. Those of lesser rank did

the same outside the building. The minister of the center, Konoe Tadahiro, placed the crown on the prince's head, and Koga Takemichi, the acting middle counselor, bound his hair. Konoe again came forward, removed the crown, and left. Koga came forward and rearranged the prince's hair. When this was done, the prince withdrew to the inner quarters and changed his costume.¹⁵ The ceremony was over.

Emperor Ninkō, Kōmei's father, died at dawn on February 23, 1846. Nobody expected him to die: he was in the prime of life (only forty-six years old) and was endowed with an exceptionally strong constitution. He had been suffering from nothing worse than a cold, but one day when he got up to go to the toilet, he discovered that he could not stand. He was supported by court ladies, but they were not able to hold up the heavy man, and he had to crawl to the toilet. On the way he had a fatal attack. His death was not immediately announced; instead, it was stated that he was so severely incapacitated he wished to abdicate. But an emperor could not abdicate without the permission of the shogunate. A fast messenger was therefore sent to Edo by the Kyōto deputy *shoshidai*,¹⁶ but Ninkō had died long before the reply was received.

The emperor's death was formally announced on March 13. One week later, there was a simple ceremony to mark Kōmei's succession to the throne, and on the following day Ninkō was placed in his coffin. Then, on March 30, it was announced that the lady-in-waiting (*miyasudokoro*) Kujō Asako (1834–1897) had been named *nyōgo*, the highest rank of court lady below the empress, signifying that Kōmei now possessed the equivalent of a wife.¹⁷

Most of the events described in the official record of the early years of Kōmei's reign have little historical importance. There were memorial services for the late emperor Ninkō, purification and other Shintō rites, an eclipse of the moon, a cockfight—all reported with equal thoroughness and a wealth of citations. Perhaps the most important event was the opening of instruction at the Gakushū-in (a school for children of the nobility). The entry for October 19, 1846, by contrast, leaps from the page: "Word of the coming of foreign ships having reached the capital, the emperor sent a message to the shogunate on sea defenses."¹⁸

This was the first expression in centuries of an emperor's views on foreign policy and could only have been the result of extreme consternation on the part of the fifteen-year-old Kōmei (or his advisers) on learning of the threat of foreign intrusion. The entry for June 9, 1847, is in the same vein: "The counselor Nonomiya Sadanaga was appointed as the imperial envoy to the special festival of the Iwashimizu Shrine. He was asked especially to pray for peace and tranquillity within the four seas, at a time when foreign warships have intruded into Japanese waters."¹⁹

This was the first of many prayers that Kōmei would offer to the gods, asking their assistance in ridding Japan of foreign intruders. Never in his lifetime, however, did Kōmei see any foreigners. Indeed, he probably knew next to noth-