INTRODUCTION

In the 7th century of the Christian era, Japan, as one incident in the general assimilation of Chinese civilisation which then took place, adopted the Chinese calendar, in which years are counted in chronological periods of irregular length, distinguished from each other by specific names—*nengo* or year names. In 1872, subsequent to the abandonment of the Chinese in favour of the European system as the foundation of the national civilisation, the old calendar was replaced by the Gregorian, though not in its entirety. A formal recognition of the Christian era would have been inconsistent with the reverence that was due to the Emperor as the acknowledged descendant of the Gods of Heaven, and to the national religion of which he was the head, and it was therefore decided that while days and months should henceforth be reckoned on the Western model, the old system of year-counting by *nengo* should be retained. Under it a name, usually one of good omen, such as "Great Honour," "Heavenly Virtue," "Tranquil Peace," "Great Prosperity," was chosen at the beginning of each period

and the successive years were described as the first, second, etc. years of that period until the time came when it was arbitrarily terminated and a new one adopted. There was not even a remote approximation to uniformity in the length of the periods. Many only continued for one year, while three exceeded 20 and one 30 years.

In the year following the accession of the late Emperor the occurrence of his birthday was signalised by the inauguration of a new period to which the name of Meiji—Enlightened Government—was given. It was, at the same time, decreed that in future there should be only one chronological period in each reign and that it should coincide with the length of the reign, with the exception that, as a new period has, through all ages, always been reckoned from the first day of the year of its adoption, each should in future begin on the 1st of January preceding the sovereign's accession and close on the 31st of December preceding his death. The period of Meiji —the longest in history—dates from January 25th, 1868, that being New Year's Day under the old (Chinese) calendar, till December 31st, 1911, and is almost synchronous with the late Emperor's reign. In this volume we propose to tell the story of the evolution of Japan from an unknown and impotent Asiatic state into one of the acknowledged Powers of the world, which took place during the

period of Meiji, in the reign of the Emperor Mutsu Hito. It is the story of one of the most eventful reigns of any period or of any nation in the world's history, a story which is full of the most pregnant lessons of what can be achieved by an intelligent and courageous people, working with whole-hearted patriotism, under the leadership of a liberal and enlightened sovereign.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL SKETCH

BEFORE proceeding with our main task it is necessary that a short sketch of the history and polity of Japan should be given in order that our readers may be enabled to have a clear understanding of the social and political conditions of the Empire at the beginning of Meiji. The first Emperor was Jimmu Tenno, who founded the Empire and ascended the throne in the year 660 B.C., little more than a century later than the founding of Rome. From him, all the subsequent occupants of the throne traced their descent in an unbroken line, and as Jimmu was the direct descendant, in the fifth generation, of the Sun Goddess (Tenshō Daijin), who herself sprang from the creators of Heaven and Earth, all

his successors have claimed through him a divine descent, a claim which has been accepted with unquestioning faith by their subjects in all times, which the most extreme spirit of modern materialism has not yet affected, and which is as devoutly acknowledged to this day by the most advanced student of Huxley or Schopenhauer as it was by any of the sages of old.

Jimmu's successors, throughout twelve centuries, were all sovereigns in reality as well as in name, all taking an active and vigorous share in their government, but from the seventh century of the Christian era they permitted the executive power to fall into the hands of the leading family among their courtiers, the Fujiwara, who, like the Emperors themselves, claimed divine origin, their remote ancestor having descended from Heaven in the train of Jimmu's progenitor, the Sun Goddess's grandson; they also, like the Emperors, survive to this day. For four hundred years the Fujiwara conserved to themselves all the executive authority of the realm until it was wrested from them by the leaders of a race of soldiers, who, while the later generations of the Fujiwara were, in the ease and luxury of the Court at Kioto, sinking into the condition of idle and incapable voluptuaries, had been hardened by continuous military service against the Ainu, the savage autochthons of Japan, in those days still numerous and

powerful on the northern frontiers of the lands that had been colonised by the followers of Jimmu and their descendants. The greatest of these leaders was Yoritomo, who succeeded at the close of the twelfth century in making himself dictator of the Empire, under the title of Sei-i-tai-Shogun or "Barbarian-repressing-great-General," which was conferred on him by the Emperor. The title, abbreviated in common use into Shogun, was one which had previously been frequently conferred on generals in command of armies in the field, but it signified only military authority and it lapsed with the termination of the special command for which it was given. Yoritomo gave it a new significance. He assumed not only the military but the civil power and retained the title for life. He established his residence at Kamakura, a town about 30 miles from Tokio, which quickly grew into a large and populous city and became the real capital of the Empire while Kioto, the home of the legitimate Emperors, was only so in name. There he administered, as the *de facto* sovereign, the government of the Empire while the provinces were held and governed by his relatives and adherents, soldiers who had fought by his side and who owed all their fealty to him alone.

This was the beginning of the systems of dual government and of feudalism in Japan which lasted from the time of Yoritomo (1192—1199) until the

accession of the late Emperor. At Kioto there was always the Emperor, the legitimate sovereign, the acknowledged source of all authority and the sole fountain of honour, surrounded by a small retinue of courtiers, who were known as Kuge, many of whom sprang from the Imperial family, and all of whom claimed an origin and descent that were only less illustrious than those of the Emperor. Both Emperors and court were entirely dependent on the Shoguns for their means of support, which were for many long centuries provided with such parsimony, that all were practically sunk in abject poverty. On the other side, the Shogun's courts, first at Kamakura and afterwards at Yedo, with an interval between the two at Kioto, in the very shadow of the Emperor's own palace, were maintained in the utmost Imperial splendour; the national executive was entirely in the hands of the Shoguns and their ministers, and all the land in the provinces was parcelled among feudal lords—the daimio—the majority of whom sprang from soldiers of fortune who were rewarded by successive dynasties of the Shoguns with the grants of large estates, the spoils of almost unceasing civil war.

Yoritomo's own direct descendants did not long hold the great office which their progenitor had won. It fell in turn to other military adventurers during the succeeding four centuries, the last and the greatest

of whom was Tokugawa Iyeyasu who became Shogun at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The system, inaugurated by Yoritomo, was brought to its highest perfection by Iyeyasu, who, in the measures he took to secure the retention of the Shogunate in his own family and the peace of the realm, showed that he was a constructive statesman of the highest order of genius, and he was ably followed by some of his earliest successors. So successful were he and they, that throughout 260 years, during which his descendants occupied the throne of the Shoguns at Yedo, their authority was never once questioned and the country under their government, which, for five centuries prior to the accession of Iyeyasu, had been almost continuously desolated by civil war, fought with no less bitterness and savage cruelty than those which characterised the wars of Europe in the same periods, enjoyed profound and unbroken peace, and its people, according to the descriptions of European writers, who saw and studied them, should have been one of the happiest in the world.

To this picture there was another side. During the last half of the sixteenth and the first quarter of the seventeenth centuries Japan freely admitted to her harbours European ships, which found their way to the Far East, and Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English traders were in turn welcomed by her. Jesuit and other missionaries of the Roman Catholic

Church followed the first Portuguese and Spanish traders and their proselytising efforts, carried on with equal zeal and ability, met with such success that, within one century from the landing of the first missionary, there were said to have been over a million native converts to Christianity of all classes of the people. Unfortunately the zeal of the missionaries outran their discretion and gave rise to the suspicion that proselytism was merely an antecedent step to territorial aggression threatening the political independence of the Empire, and as the suspicion grew to certainty, the whole attitude of the Government changed both to Christianity and to Europeans. Christianity was extirpated by persecution as ruthless as that of Nero. Missionaries were put to death or expelled. Traders too were expelled, an exception being made only in favour of the Dutch, a small colony of whom were permitted to remain under the most humiliating conditions, closely interned in the little island of Desima in the harbour of Nagasaki, where they carried on a trade which, though hampered by vexatious restrictions, brought them enormous profits. All other Europeans were forbidden to approach the shores of Japan or to land on pain of death. And not only were Europeans forbidden to land in Japan, but Japanese were, under equally severe penalties, forbidden to go abroad. None who did so was permitted to return. Throughout the middle ages

the Japanese had shown themselves bold and adventurous seamen, making their way both as pirates and traders not only to China and Siam, but in some instances across the Pacific to Mexico. Now they were forbidden by their own authorities to build any ship larger in burthen than 500 Koku (50 tons) and from the day on which the edict which forbade them was issued their traditional maritime spirit was gone, and the national seclusion, which it was the policy of the early Tokugawas to effect, was complete.

For 220 years Japan was cut off from all the world. She had her own high degree of social and artistic civilisation, refined and picturesque in all its elements, but while Europe was advancing with giant strides in industrial, military and political science, Japan stood still and her internal state in the middle of the nineteenth century showed no material advance on what it had been in the early part of the seventeenth. She was contented in herself and with her own acquirements and neither knew nor cared for aught that was happening in the outer world.

Internally the country was crushed under one of the most iron systems of feudalism that the world has ever seen. The Shogun was the feudal superior, though nominally only as the mandatory of the Emperor. A third of the whole Empire was under his direct rule and the revenues were paid into his Treasury. The remainder was shared among 260

feudal lords, all of whom varied in strength, wealth and influence in proportion to the extent of their domains, but all alike enjoyed complete legislative and executive autonomy within their own boundaries, an autonomy which did not even exclude the right of coinage. All maintained armies of hereditary soldiers —samurai—whose allegiance was due only to their own immediate feudal lords, for whose sake every samurai was always ready to sacrifice without a murmur life, liberty, name, family or property. Each lord, in his turn, owed allegiance to the Shogun, from whom he received his investiture on succession, whose approval he had to obtain in marriage and adoption, and to whom he was obliged to render military service when called upon. All lived in regal splendour and independence in fortified castles on their own estates, and in no less splendour in great palaces in Yedo, where they were obliged to pass part of each year. The sole occupations of the samurai were those of arms, literature and the administration of their lords' estates and revenues, and both daimio and samurai combined to form the governing and aristocratic class and with their families numbered some two million souls. Beneath them, divided by an unfathomable social gulf, across which none could pass, was the subject and plebeian class, divided into three orders, farmers, artisans and traders, in number about thirty millions, whose sole