Centennial for Japan

The Prince, aboard the President Wilson, shook off his six chamberlains, mingled easily with fellow passengers, dined at the captain's table, ate American dishes, held a Martini at cocktail parties (but was not seen to drink it), played pingpong and mahjongg with pretty American and Chinese girls. Said one of them later: "He was just like any other 19-year-old kid."—*Time*.

IT was pure coincidence that the journey of Crown Prince Akihito of Japan across America to be the guest of Queen Elizabeth II at her Coronation should have occurred when it did. The date of the Coronation was the only governing factor. In planning the Prince's tour it is unlikely that anyone in or out of Japan noticed that it would coincide, almost to the month, with the hundredth anniversary of the event that ended Japan's jealously-guarded isolation from the rest of the world.

On July 8, 1853, beacon fires flamed on every hilltop around the Imperial city of Yedo (now Tokyo) as the first squadron of steam-powered warships ever seen in Japanese waters sailed boldly into the bay, their guns trained threateningly shorewards.

With a consignment of merchandise and mechanical toys, backed with loaded guns, Commodore Matthew Perry, U.S.N., had come to "persuade" Japan to open her doors to the world.

There had been earlier attempts. Japan had been "opened up" in a fashion as early as the 6th Century, when Chinese-Korean craftsmen and artists had been brought into the country, to have a profound influence on Japanese life. But it had been mainly a one-way traffic: once in Japan they remained for good.

They brought with them a disdain for warfare and a great faith in Buddhism, then catching hold of all the Orient. Leading Japanese nobles were quick to adopt the new religion, and after a while the Emperor himself followed suit. Outstripping his courtiers in devotion, he became so obsessed with study and worship that he withdrew from official life, whereupon an ambitious family, the Soga, seized control of affairs. This began the system of dual leadership, with the Emperor as figurehead and a Shogun as virtual dictator of the land, that was to last until after Perry's visit, centuries later.

An attempt to "open up" Japan by invasion and conquest was made in the 12th Century by Kublai Khan. He assembled a great invasion armada for his amphibious attempt. At a critical time a great typhoon struck, scattered the vessels and enabled the Japanese to repel the invaders. From then, the Japanese have spoken of the "Divine Wind" —*Kamikaze*, the name they used for their suicide air squadrons in World War II.

In 1542 a ship from the Portuguese colony of Macao on the Chinese mainland was blown off its course and wrecked off the coast of Japan. The rescued sailors were well treated by the Japanese, returning their hospitality by making the Western World's first contribution to Japanese culture—teaching the use of firearms. When they got back to Macao they spoke so warmly of the Japanese that Portuguese traders began a tentative connection with Japan.

COMMODORE PERRY meeting the Imperial Commissioners at Yokohama — an illustration from the narrative of Perry's expeditions to the China Seas and Japan

The traders were followed by Saint Francis Xavier and other priests, who also received a warm welcome and were able to make converts rapidly. This was partly due to a genuine acceptance of Christianity by many Japanese, partly because enterprising Japanese merchants saw in the encouragement of the new religion a step towards the promotion of overseas trade.

For the Shogun Nobunaga, Christianity had further uses. By encouraging it he was able to bring its followers on to his side in his struggle against the Buddhist priests who resented his growing power. He built churches for the Jesuits and influenced many Japanese to become converts.

Unfortunately for the missionaries and their followers, Nobunaga committed suicide, and his place was taken by his former servant, the "Japanese Napoleon," Hideyoshi. At first, he, too, seemed to favour Christianity. But when Franciscan priests started to arrive to set up in opposition to the Jesuits he believed he detected the beginnings of a Spanish plot to conquer Japan. Taking no chances, he turned on the Christians, drove out the priests, destroyed the churches and massacred the supporters of the faith.

Steps were taken to isolate Japan once more. Orders were given for the burning of any further Portuguese vessels to reach Japan. Japanese subjects were forbidden to go abroad, and it was made illegal to build any ship large enough to sail as far as the coast of China.

A delegation of Portuguese merchants, sent to Japan to plead for the restoration of trading rights, was massacred as an example to others. But soon after the restrictions were eased slightly to allow Dutch merchants to trade. These favoured ones were subjected to severe and humiliating conditions. Confined to a tiny island in Nagasaki harbour (it was partly of artificial construction and therefore, the Japanese reasoned, not strictly a part of their native land), they were not allowed on the mainland except once yearly to make a compulsory pilgrimage to Yedo, to pay tribute to the Shogun.

For the next two centuries the only other ships allowed to enter Japanese waters were American vessels under Dutch charter. The acceptance of American vessels probably encouraged the American Government to consider making its own overtures to the Japanese.

There was another reason for American interest. In trying to maintain isolation the Japanese were overstepping the bounds of humane conduct. Shipwrecked sailors who swam for safety to the Japanese coast were being imprisoned and ill-treated. When the American ship Morrison was sent in 1837 to pick up sailors reported shipwrecked off Japan she was fired on. An American naval officer, Commander Biddle, sent to negotiate for trading arrangements in 1845, was insulted and pushed into the sea by a Japanese soldier.

In the interests of American pride, action was needed. Other motivating forces were the possibilities of good trading connections, and the need for friendly fuelling and watering bases for whaling vessels and other ships making the long voyages across the Pacific.

Since humble application was unlikely to succeed, force, or threat of it, was the chosen method. Even here, a mild line was taken until Commodore Perry, entrusted with the mission and displeased at the timidity of the American State Department's message to the Japanese, insisted on writing his own orders, submitting them for approval before he sailed. In these instructions, addressed to himself, he described the Japanese as weak, semi-barbarous, and enemies of mankind, and warned them that "if any act of cruelty should hereafter be practised upon citizens of this country, whether by the government or the inhabitants of Japan, they shall be severely chastised."

This was the tone of the message he brought with him into Uraga Harbour, in Yedo Bay, on July 8, 1853. Poorly-armed Japanese troops, members of an army softened by a century of peace, were rushed to the capital from hundreds of miles around; but their show of strength was not nearly sufficient to deter Perry. He presented his government's demands, and left.

It was the end of Japanese isolation. Though no treaty was signed until Perry's second visit, the next year, though the gains America made in the treaty were small in practical worth; though internal disputes over the admission of foreign traders were to boil up into further acts of hostility towards unwanted "barbarians"; and though these same disputes were soon to become the cause of the end of the Shogun system which foreign influence had been responsible for starting in the first place—the way had been opened for Japan to end her centuries-old seclusion.

The first hundred years have been chequered ones, to say the least. They have seen Japan transformed from a hermit nation, a feudal despotism, to a dominant world power, expert in the trades and techniques of the West, ambitious and confident enough to bid for mastery of all Asia. They have seen her checked and restrained, decisively conquered, and occupied for the first time in her history. Now they see her embracing democracy and struggling to regain advantages sacrificed by her own folly.

—J. M. D. Hardwick