USE OF THESES

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THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE MEIROKUSHA

A Reassessment

by

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THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE MEIROKUSHA:  
A REASSESSMENT.  

SYNOPSIS.

This thesis is an attempt to reassess the nature and rôle of the society of bureaucrat-intellectuals known as the Meirokusha.  

It will be suggested that in itself the Meirokusha did not make such a significant contribution to the 'Civilization and Enlightenment (Bummei Kaika) Movement' of the 1870s as is generally assumed, more especially in Western works. Further, it will be claimed that too conscious and well-defined an aim, too unified and communally purposive a nature have been attributed to the society.  

The Meirokusha has attracted a great deal of attention from both Japanese and Western scholars, and is generally regarded as having made a vital contribution to the Bummei Kaika Movement. This thesis therefore begins with an introductory review of assessments of the Meirokusha that have been made by some leading Japanese and Western scholars, and which seeks to show in what way these assessments need to be modified.
The first chapter is then devoted to Mori Arinori, the principal founder of the Meirokusha. His early life and thought up to the foundation of the Meirokusha are examined in detail in order to ascertain and illuminate what were his principle motives in founding the society.

Chapters two, three and four demonstrate in the first place why Mori's aims in particular were unattainable, and in the second place why the current reputation of the Meirokusha cannot justifiably be accepted. These themes are respectively the 'nature' and 'rôle' of the Meirokusha alluded to in the title.

Chapter two is devoted to a detailed examination of Fukuzawa Yukichi, who, as the leading 'Enlightenment' figure, is of particular importance in any discussion of the Meirokusha's rôle. It will be seen that not only was Fukuzawa's dominant position the result of activities totally outside the scope of the Meirokusha, but that furthermore, he played a completely minor rôle within the society - except at its disbandment, of which he was the effective prime mover.

Chapter three is a less detailed discussion of the life histories and personal relations of the remaining members who contributed to the society's magazine, the Meiroku Zasshi. This chapter seeks to isolate what these men had in common which led them to join together in the first place, but also emphasises their essentially heterogeneous nature, which was undoubtedly a contributory factor in their subsequent inability to stay together. At the same time, it is seen that what
they did have in common was basically their already prominent position as leaders of the 'Enlightenment', a rôle which they again continued individually, after the break-up of the society. Thus it is seen that it was not the *Meirokuisha* as such which led the 'Enlightenment', but the *Meirokuisha* men individually and separately.

The final chapter comprises a history of the organization and activities of the *Meirokuisha* and demonstrates the haphazard nature of its development. The important point is made that what must be inferred as Mori Arinori's aims in founding the *Meirokuisha* were essentially incompatible with the human material he had at his disposal. And the highlighting of the continuing lack of agreement among the members on the central purpose of the society provides important justification of this view.

In the conclusion, a tentative redefinition of the nature and rôle of the *Meirokuisha* is attempted.
This Thesis is the Result of original Research carried out by Me while a Research Scholar of the Australian National University from 1965 to 1969.

I would like to offer my Thanks to the Australian National University, whose generous financial Support for three-and-a-half Years in Australia and Japan made this project possible; to all who assisted me in Japan, especially Professors Maruyama Masao, Oka Yoshitake and Nishida Takeshi of Tokyo University, Professor Hayashi Takeji of Tohoku University, and Assistant Professor Koizumi Takashi of Keio University; to my two Advisors, Professor Sydney Crawcour for linguistic Assistance in the early Stages, and Doctor Andrew Fraser for invaluable technical Guidance at the End.

I owe finally a particular Debt of Gratitude to Ishizuki Minoru, now of Kyōritsu University, for prolonged and indispensable Assistance in reading the Meiroku Zasshi.

Melbourne,
A.E. Housman:

Accuracy is a duty,
not a virtue.

Rilke:

Die Dinge sind alle
nicht so fassbar und sagbar
als man uns meistens
glauben machen möchte.

After having read English and Japanese survey histories of the Restoration period in which the more enlightened statements of the future oligarchs are seized upon, magnified and interpreted as the basic theme of the period, it is a sobering experience to delve into the... [Restoration History of Chōshū] in which such statements are but rare flecks of froth in a torrent of Confucian rhetoric.

Albert Craig.

The old bland confident general statements about whole groups of men, or classes, or nations ought to disappear from history; or if something of their sort must remain, and it is difficult to say anything about history, or politics or society without making use of general statements, they must remain under suspicion, as expedients which are convenient, possibly necessary, for use at the moment, but are not the best we shall be able to do in the way of truth.

G. Kitson Clarke.
PRELIMINARY NOTES

Abbreviations:  Appx. = Appendix
                Ch. = Chapter
                Ed. = Edited by, Edition or Editor(s)
                fp. = First published
                N. = Footnote

Other abbreviations used are standard.

Citation:  Ibid., Loc. Cit. & Op. Cit. have not been used;
a full citation is given for each note.
p. & pp. are omitted unless essential; the last
number in a citation is the page reference.
Titles of books and magazines are in Italics;
Magazine articles and sections of books are in
Roman, enclosed in single quotes.
A large Roman numeral immediately after a title
indicates the number of volumes in a work (or series).
Works cited more than once are given a code title
of capital letters, given at the first citation.
The code titles are listed on p.457 together
with number references to the bibliography.

Dating:  Dates before 1 January 1873 are given by the
Western year number, followed by the Japanese
style number for the month and day (in that order).
Dates after and including 1 January 1873 are
given in the normal manner. (Thus: 1 September 1875,
but 1870.5.3)

Japanese Words:  Japanese words, phrases, terms and
Institutions are
given in Italics throughout (except the bibliography),
but not names of people and places, which are in Roman.

Macrons:  Macrons to indicate long vowels in Japanese are
given in all cases except Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka;
and the latter are also given macrons when cited in
a Japanese context.

Names:  Japanese personal name order is followed throughout.
Kaiseisho is used throughout the main text to indicate
the school of Western studies, originally set up by
the Bakufu, and other wise known variously as:
Bansho(tori)shirabesho, Kaisei Gakkō, Daigaku Nankō etc.
Nihon is generally used rather than Nippon.
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INTRODUCTION

A SURVEY OF HISTORICAL ASSESSMENTS OF THE MEIROKUSHA BY JAPANESE AND WESTERN SCHOLARS: THE NEED FOR REASSESSMENT

Almost any history dealing with the early Meiji period makes more than a passing reference to the Meirokusha. Hence it comes as no surprise to find Professor Ōkubo Toshiaki, who has devoted a considerable amount of writing to both the Japanese Enlightenment Movement in general and the Meirokusha in particular, saying that 'the place in Meiji culture filled by the Meirokusha needs no renewed stress'. And in a more recent work, he gives the following poetic evocation of the society's importance:

The Meirokusha, its destiny linked with the new wave of Bummei Kaika thought, arose out of nothing like a summer wind, and like a comet was as suddenly extinguished. Its short life lasted barely two years, but in the manner of a comet it spread its tail over the history Meiji thought and exerted great influence.

Thus we learn that the Meirokusha, though short-lived, had an important and influential place in Meiji intellectual history as a protagonist of the Civilization and Enlightenment (Bummei Kaika) Movement. And Professor Ōkubo states even more specifically that:

it was the pioneer cultural society of modern Japan, and, as it contained the new intellectuals of the time, it was the focal point of the so-called Enlightenment Movement of the early Meiji Period.
A similar view of the pivotal importance of Meirokusha is given by another outstanding Japanese historian, Kōsaka Masa'aki, when he says that 'to analyse the nature of the Meirokusha is to know the intellectual class of early Meiji years, and, in one sense, of the first half of the era'. He is on identical ground with Professor Ōkubo when he characterises the Meirokusha as follows:

In July 1873 a group of intellectuals - the first really self-conscious intelligentsia in Japan - formed a club whose activities were to be of crucial importance in guiding Japanese thought. The period from 1873-1877 has usually been designated by Japanese cultural historians as the age of civilization and enlightenment. The Meirokusha was in the vanguard of the civilization and enlightenment movement.

The Meirokusha, then, is accorded in Japanese sources a most important position in this period of momentous change in Japanese history. It is credited with the leadership of this great movement which transformed the Japanese intellectual world of the 1870s.

Western scholars have followed the Japanese lead, and the most recent example of a continuing concurrence in this view by them can be seen in Joseph Pittau's book on Meiji political thought, where he writes:

The Meirokusha...was the nucleus of the movement for civilization and enlightenment. Many of the most influential and progressive thinkers and leading students of the West were members of the Meirokusha.... All were concerned with the problem of modernization and progress in social, political and educational fields. They discussed and disseminated their views through the organ of the society's journal, the Meiroku Zasshi.
These quotations clearly depict the Meirokusha as a group of new intellectuals who were of preeminent importance in the transformation of the general outlook of the Japanese. In the early Meiji period, this outlook escaped from the confines of a self-contained, feudal framework of thought to a fuller world awareness and willing receptivity to external stimuli. The intellectuals partly responsible for this change are seen as modernizers on all fronts, concerned particularly to educate the general run of their countrymen in whatever was necessary for Japan to achieve 'civilization' and 'enlightenment' (Bunmei Kaika, Keimō). And these new intellectuals are equated with the Meirokusha.

Elsewhere, Professor Shively, in an article on Nishimura Shigeki, one of the most important founder members, has this to say of the society:

There was nowhere more talk of "Civilization and Enlightenment" than in the Meirokusha, [formed] by the leading students of the West and the most progressive thinkers of the day to discuss problems involved in the modernization of Japan.

[It was] the society which assumed the leadership in the movement for enlightenment and intellectual advance.8

Thus far the image of the Meirokusha presented by both Japanese and Western authorities is deceptively definite. Whilst these quotations emphasize the importance of the society in the Civilization and Enlightenment Movement, however, they do little to clarify what the movement itself was. It is necessary to go
briefly into the nature of this movement, as a prior step to
investigating precisely what the Meirokusha is said to have done
within it, and how it is said to have done it.

The Bummei Kaika Movement, is a term which is used generally
to cover the first wave of enthusiasm for things Western which swept
Japan for over a decade after the Restoration. But it manifested
itself in two quite distinct ways, both on a popular and on a more
intellectual level. The former was symbolised by the adoption of
things from the West,...whether high-collars, fob-watches and
foreign words, or the telegraph and the railway. The intellectual
side of the Bummei Kaika Movement, however, was concerned with the
far more intangible issue of the transformation of attitudes. It
is, of course, with this latter aspect that the new Intellectuals
of the early Meiji period are associated. These men were naturally
most disdainful of what may be termed 'material' Bummei Kaika.
They would hardly in fact allow that this hallowed slogan could
have any meaning when applied to such a mere incidental as the
material side of civilization.9

So the early Meiji Intellectuals worked for a transformation
of attitudes, or, as they more frequently put it themselves, for a
reformation of the 'spirit' of the Japanese people. However, the
following two quotations will illustrate how this transformation
is ascribed not to the early Meiji Intellectuals as such, but
specifically to the Meirokusha. Professor Albert Craig says in his most illuminating essay on science and Confucianism:

The acceptance of Western science as Ri was...the beginning of a process by which basic concepts of the Tokugawa world-view were reinterpreted and in turn subverted, by having read into them a Western content. But it was only after the Restoration, in the writings of the Meirokusha... that this process was completed.

And Dr. Carmen Blacker, in her pioneering work on Fukuzawa and the Bummei Kaika Movement, puts the case even more succinctly:

This anxiety to reform the morale or spirit of the Japanese people became the basis of the movement during the early eighteen-seventies, known as keimō, or Enlightenment. The nucleus of the movement was the group of 'Western' scholars who formed themselves into the society known as the Meirokusha in 1873, and who disseminated their views through the organ of the society's journal, the Meiroku Zasshi.11

It is the Meirokusha, then, that is regularly quoted as being the principal factor in the spiritual reformation which took place in Japan in the 1870s. And the means by which this was effected are summed up in East Asia: The Modern Transformation, the most authoritative general textbook on modern East Asian history, which says that the Meirokusha 'through lectures and the publication of a magazine popularized many Western ideas'.12 A fuller description of these means, from Professor Shively again, runs as follows:

Their monthly discussion meetings and lectures, open to the public and attended by many government officials, were for several years perhaps the most important channel for the introduction of information and ideas from the West; and the activities of the group became even more important with the launching of their journal, Meiroku Zasshi, in 1874.13
Still, however, there remains a misleading sense of definiteness about the society. From the picture so far built up, few would quarrel with Sir George Sansom's characterization of the Meirokusha as 'a literary society for the encouragement of Western studies', but it is still not clear what aspect of Western studies. Though the implication is clear enough that the Meirokusha set out to, and did, introduce progressive ideas from the West, it is never stated specifically what these ideas were. The general idea of what the Meirokusha was, is typified in Father Piovesana's statement that:

Under the motto "Civilization and Enlightenment"
...this group of "Illuminists" (Keimoshugisha) take [sic] the lead in diffusing Western progressive ideas and customs throughout Japan.  

But it is perhaps the same author who comes closest to a precise definition of what these ideas were, when he later talks of:

...the leading role played by this group of "Illuminists" in spreading liberal and utilitarian ideas in early Meiji times...

The prevalent picture of the Meirokusha is now clear. It is of a group of intellectuals, knowledgeable about the West, who were worried about Japan's inferior position in the face of the West. For this reason, they formed a society to educate the public in the 'liberal' and 'utilitarian' ideas on which they saw that the power of the West was based. And as means to spread these ideas, they first held public lecture and discussion meetings, and later published a journal. This the society did with such success that
it may be characterised as the leader of the Enlightenment
Movement of the seventies. The name Meirokusha becomes almost a
synonym for Rummei Kaika.¹⁷

A reference back to Professor Ōkubo, however, introduces a
note of discord. The society whose activities 'were for several
years perhaps the most important channel for the introduction of
information and ideas from the West', 'lasted barely two years'.¹⁸
In fact, as a public influence, it lasted for twenty months, from
April 1874 until November 1875. This is the period covered by
publication of the magazine. For investigation reveals that only
the magazine can have had an extended influence upon the public.
Not only was the Meiroku Zasshi started as the record of a private
group and before there was any idea of public meetings, but this.idea of opening their doors to the general public was not mooted
until the society had been meeting for a whole year, and was then
tried as a brief experiment for two months between March and May
1875.¹⁹

These few simple facts of chronology clearly indicate that
the overall influence of the Meirokusha could not have been as
extensive as is generally assumed. Furthermore, the general
assumption that this influence was exerted as much, if not more,
through its public meetings as through its magazine is clearly
untrue.
it may be fairly stated that the origin of these misconceptions is undoubtedly the brief account of the Meirokusha written by Nishimura Shigeki, who, after Mori Arinori, was the society's principal founder. Nishimura's description of the foundation and activities of the Meirokusha, in his autobiography 'A Record of Things Passed' (Ojiroku), is the only first-hand account of the society's activities, and is thus frequently quoted as a source of information. Ojiroku, however, was not written until many years after the Meirokusha had ceased, and allowance has to be made for the inevitable weaknesses of memory. The pardonable exaggeration of an old man reflecting with pride on a life of achievement must perhaps also not be discounted. Even so, the relevant passage is very misleading if not balanced by the facts. To quote the account in full:

In the summer of 1873, the Satsuma man, Mori Arinori, who had returned from America, where he was Consul [Benrikoshi], sought an interview with me through the introduction of Yokoyama Mago'ichiro [?]. Mori recounted how in America scholars set up learned societies, each for their particular subject, where they both study communally and benefit the public by giving lectures. Whereas our scholars, he maintained, were individually isolated and never came together, for which reason they were of remarkably little benefit to the world. It was his wish that our scholars too, just like those of America, should convene together in learned societies, conducting their investigations in groups. Moreover, he thought the morals of our people had of late declined and that there was no knowing the depths to which they might sink. Nor was there anyone else who could remedy this than men of scholarship and wisdom. For these reasons, he said, he would like immediately to set up a society, in the first place to promote the
advance of learning and in the second place to establish a pattern of morality. I gave my assent to this and after some discussion between us, promised to talk it over with certain [other] well-known people in the capital. So I put the matter to Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nakamura Masanao, Kato Hiroyuki, Tsuda Mamichi, Nishi Amane and Mitsukuri Shuhei. They all came out in favour and so we met together for the first time, talked it over, and commenced monthly meetings of a speakers' club in the upper story of the Seiyoken, with the intention of getting the public to hear talks on politics, arts, science and so on. This was the first speakers' club in Japan. We called it the Meirokusha because it was founded in the sixth year of Meiji. Up till that time, Japanese scholars based all their learning on either Japanese or Chinese sources and knew nothing about the West. The things we talked about at the Meirokusha included many new Western theories, and the number of both government officials and scholars who came to hear was very great. Later, we brought out a magazine, calling it the Meiroku Zasshi, and this was Japan's first magazine. It continued for forty-two issues and then the [revised] Newspaper Code and Libel Laws were promulgated by the government. These restricted what we could discuss in the magazine, and very strictly too. So the members debated the matter together, and we stopped publication of the magazine. After this the Meirokusha actually increased its membership and continued to function altogether for about seven or eight years. But with the establishment of the Tokyo Academy [Tokyo Gakushi Kai'in], it broke up of its own accord.20

This account by Nishimura is not so much essentially false as misleading in its emphasis.21 It is misleading, however, to a considerable degree and in broadly three ways:

It unduly extends by implication the period of the society's influence on the public;

It lends a false air of unity and determination to both the society's aim and its means of attaining that aim;

And it overstresses the originality and uniqueness of the society.
Nishimura is most obviously misleading about the temporal extent of the Meirokusha's influence. The society lasted altogether, he says, about seven or eight years. In fact, the Meirokusha was not formally constituted until February 1874, when the rules were finally established, and its first confrontation with the general public was not until the following April when the magazine commenced publication. Furthermore, there is no surviving record of any public meeting after 1 February 1876, and even this was not open to the general public. Meanwhile, the last volume of the magazine, number forty-three, had been brought out as early as the preceding November. The society's life as an active public influence extends, then, on the most generous estimate for two years, from 1 February 1874 until the same date in 1876. Restricted solely to the lifespan of the Meioku Zasshi, as is more accurate, it lasted only one year and eight months, from April 1874 until November 1875.

Nishimura further states that the society was founded 'with the intention of getting the public to hear talks on politics, arts, science and so on'. Actually it was through the magazine that the society made its first impact on the public. As the fame of the society spread with the popularity of the magazine, however, more and more people desired to attend the actual meetings. On Mori's suggestion it was then decided to extend the existing practice of inviting friends of members as guests, by offering a
small number of tickets for sale to the general public. This was after the society had already met privately for one year, and the experiment lasted for two months. As for Nishimura's description of the topics for discussion, it was certainly never Mori's intention that the Meirokusha should deal with politics; nor does the society's first rule, defining its aim, make any mention of politics. In this respect, Nishimura is describing the actuality as it developed and not any initially and clearly conceived plan. Mori did have in mind 'arts and sciences' as topics of discussion - yet the Meiroku Zasshi contains scarcely a mention of any 'art' or 'science' outside the writings of the minor members Tsuda Sen (an agriculturalist) and Shimizu Usaburo (a merchant and amateur chemist). It will be established below from an examination of the first number of the Meiroku Zasshi that beyond a vaguely educational aim the society never did settle upon a specific goal.

Finally, the alleged originality and uniqueness of the Meirokusha as being 'the first speakers' club in Japan' which also brought out 'Japan's first magazine' entirely fails to fit the facts. The custom of making formal speeches before the other members was introduced in the winter of 1874, on the initiative of Fukuzawa, who had earlier that year established a proper debating society on the campus at Keiō University. And he himself relates with what opposition this idea was at first met by the
other members of the *Meirokusha,* particularly Morl. As regards the *Meiroku Zasshi,* this was neither the first magazine in Japan, nor even the first to introduce information about the West. The *Seiyō Zasshi* or Western Magazine, to give but one example, had attempted ten years earlier to perform a similar role. Thus for the last decade at least scholars had been actively concerned to propagate knowledge about the West. It is therefore an obvious overstatement for Nishimura to say that 'at that time Japanese scholars...knew nothing of the West'.

It is thus clear that the relationship of the *Meirokusha* to the *Bunmei Kaika* Movement requires reevaluation.

The first three chapters of this thesis are devoted to the early biography of the members of the *Meirokusha,* up to their participation in the society. Here it is attempted to establish firstly, the motives which led to the founding of the society and the aims with which it was conducted; and secondly, why it was this particular group of people that should have joined together, and what their general attitude to the society was. As an essential part of the latter, it is shown that their membership and work in the *Meirokusha* was very far from being the major part of their contribution to the *Bunmei Kaika* Movement.

The final chapter is an examination of the actual organization and history of the *Meirokusha.* And similar themes are followed here, where it is shown that the assertion of the great importance
of the Meirokusha must again be revised in the light of two significant facts: firstly, that it was never the Meirokusha's consistent intention actively to propagandize the public; and secondly, that, in so far as it did in effect propagandize the public, this was only through the magazine and not through public meetings.

The membership of the Meirokusha divides readily into two major groupings. The first, and more united, is called in this thesis the 'core group', and comprises all those connected with the Bakufu's school of Western learning, the Kaiseisho. These were:

Kanda Kohei,
Kato Hiroyuki,
Mitsukuri Rinsho,
Mitsukuri Shuhei,
Nishi Amane,
Sugi Koji,
Tsuda Mamichi, and
Tsuda Sen.

The second and more disparate grouping comprises the remainder, whose knowledge of the West was of different provenance and who are classifiable under no single neat heading. In contradistinction to the 'core group', these are called the 'outsiders'. They were:

Fukuzawa Yukichi,
Kashiwabara Taka'aki,
Mori Arinori,
Nakamura Masanao,
Nishimura Shigeki,
Sakatani Shiroshi,
Shimizu Usaburo, and
Shibata Shokichi.
It is symbolic of the essentially heterogeneous nature of the Meirokusha (a major factor in the short life of the society) that the two persons who require the closest attention in assessing the true nature and role of the society, are both 'outsiders'. These are Mori Arinori, the main founder of the Meirokusha, and Fukuzawa Yukichi, undoubtedly the greatest of the Enlightenment (Keimō) scholars.

These two men had certain important similarities to one another: they were both concerned about Japan's position vis-à-vis the West; they were both practical minded in their attempts to better that position; and they were both heedless of convention in their pursuit of this goal. But their respective importance in a study of the Meirokusha is fundamentally different. A study of Mori reveals what were the original ideas behind the Meirokusha; a study of Fukuzawa shows how these ideas did not, and probably could not, materialise. If Mori was the founder, Fukuzawa could almost be regarded as the destroyer of the Meirokusha. These two men are the subjects respectively of the first and second Chapters.