

Is Reconciliation History?

This paper was presented by Phillida Purvis, co-founder of BCS, on 11th April 2002 at a seminar at Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, which was organised by Kosuge Nobuko of Yamanashi Gakuin University

I am neither a veteran of any war nor an academic who specialises in history or peace studies. Today I am speaking as an individual who has spent 20 years promoting Anglo-Japanese understanding and friendship. It is from this perspective that I view the nadir of relations between our two countries, during the Pacific War, and explore the question of whether those years of war should matter to us today, and if they do, what should we do about it, or is it past history and should never be referred to again? The central issue to me is one of reconciliation. Are we reconciled to our pasts and to each other? Does the term reconciliation have any meaning any longer?

Reconciliation can be interpreted in a number of slightly different ways. The most common dictionary definitions are 'to bring back to friendship or union' or 'to bring to agreement or contentment'. I believe that when we are talking about reconciliation over our two countries' encounter during the Second World War these definitions must be applied in three different ways, the first to reconciliation between individuals directly involved in the encounter, and those who surround them, the second to reconciliation between the people of the countries and the third to the countries themselves, as represented by their governments.

In the first case therefore only those protagonists of a dispute or enemies in a battle can be involved in reconciliation, as well as their nearest family members most directly affected and the process is one of acknowledgement, forgiveness and healing. In the case I am discussing, reconciliation between individuals has been achieved on various fronts, through a number of initiatives which have taken place, albeit belatedly, over the last decade. These include the work of AGAPE, the brainchild of Keiko Holmes, which brings to Japan Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOWs). These visits are given support by the Japanese Government who also fund Pacific Venture, which, similarly, arranges for the children and grandchildren of FEPOWs to visit Japan. The third major movement, with which I have been most closely involved, is the Burma Campaign Fellowship Group.

This is a unique organisation founded by a Japanese veteran, retired in London, who had vowed on the battlefields of Kohima to his dead comrades who surrounded him that he would forever work for reconciliation with Britain, not only so that their deaths would not be in vain, but also so that, at some time in the future, Britain and Japan could work together for the benefit of Burma over whose land they had fought. He was joined by a Welshman, also a veteran of the battle of Kohima, who held the simple belief that Christians should forgive their enemies, as taught by Christ, and who wanted to start a

school exchange in his tiny Welsh village with a school from a Japanese community. 2,500 children have now participated in exchanges between Kaya-cho and Aberystwyth. He went to Japan, at his own expense, to meet with members of the All Burma Veterans Association of Japan and from this seed was born the Burma Campaign Fellowship Group.

The three initiatives I have referred to have achieved a measure of reconciliation in the first category I mentioned, that is between individuals involved. The FEPOWs who have participated in AGAPE tours, for the most part, entered into a process of healing which has enabled them to shed the bitterness of years and achieve peace of mind. The children and grandchildren of FEPOWs, although themselves briefed not to mention the war while they are in Japan, bring back interest in and enthusiasm for Japan and tales of Japanese hospitality and kindness, which has reconciliatory results. Under the aegis of BCFG there has also been reconciliation between individual veterans who have met again in friendship and together undertaken pilgrimages to Burma for joint remembrance services to honour the war dead. The cemeteries of the British war dead in Myanmar, which I have visited when seeking the grave of a cousin of my mother's, are beautifully kept by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Incidentally, records of all Commonwealth War Graves are now fully detailed on the Commission's website. The Commission even upkeepes the graves of Japanese seamen, in Malta, from the First World War, when Japan and Britain were allies.

One of the most special achievements of BCFG, to my mind, is the collection over many years, of all the books written in English on the Burma Campaign and the establishment of the Burma Campaign Memorial Library at the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University. To this has now been added many Japanese language books on the Burma War. Through the many personal accounts contained in this library, and through the meetings, has come understanding. But there has been little attempt, through more formal discussion, to broaden that understanding. In addition, much as I have admired the veterans of BCFG and supported their endeavours, as a Committee member, I have always felt that the much more difficult challenge of reconciliation is that of the Far East Prisoners of War. Those who fought in the Burma War, on both sides, did so for many of the same reasons. Some were in the regular army, others were conscripted for war service. Most were very young men, and all must have been motivated by the belief that they were fighting to protect values they cherished, and, ultimately, their families, homes and countries. Both sides fought in a country which was not their own, although Britain held sovereignty over Burma at the time. Very many, we have gradually learned, bore no malice towards each other. If reconciliation, 50 years on, could not be achieved in these circumstances, between individual veterans, when could it ever? The only restraints on reconciliation have been the feeling that dead comrades would somehow be betrayed by reconciliation with the enemy.

By contrast, FEPOWs have had much more complicated memories to cope with as the majority had not experienced any fighting against the enemy on equal footing. They were taken prisoner, some soon after disembarkation, at the Fall of Singapore, which had been shamefully ill-prepared for attack, and even the dignity of honourable surrender, the

concept of which is enshrined in the Geneva Convention, was not allowed to them by an enemy who had been taught not to regard it. Many felt themselves, as a result, accused of cowardice. Through forced labour, maltreatment, untreated disease and starvation, nearly a quarter of the 60,000 allied prisoners of war died at the hands of the Japanese enemy, as well as 200,000 Chinese, Tamils and other Asian labourers. These are the wounds that have needed healing, which spread resentment and over which reconciliation has been needed. Some FEPOWs died young, of illnesses which their families believe were the result of privation, sometimes torture, in the prison camps. Some others mistreated their own families, just as children who are bullied in the school playground turn to bullying. Many would not talk about their experiences, or were given little opportunity as the war in Europe had ended several months earlier and people did not want to talk about war any longer. The collective experience on the Burma Railway, however, became, notorious. Friends and family, outraged and suffering on their behalf, perpetuated anti-Japanese propaganda, which had been spread as the war advanced. For two or three decades it was not uncommon to encounter people who boycotted Japanese goods, directly because of Japanese treatment of prisoners of war. As late as the early 1980s, when I myself first came to Japan, I was often asked by those of my parents' generation why I wanted to go and live in Japan.

Gradually, with time, this situation has, of course, improved. That generation with personal experience whose long-held bitterness my generation have no right to criticize, are rapidly dwindling. For the last twenty years the spread of connections between the two countries has been astonishing – first with the increase of Japanese investment in the UK, bringing with it large numbers of valued jobs as well as Japanese expatriates living all over the country. Celebrations of Anglo-Japanese relations in 1991, in the Japan Festival, in 1998 in Japan, with UK '98 and for this last year, in Japan 2001, which finished last week, have spread awareness and promoted exchanges, connections and ongoing relationships in the most marvellous way. The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, and the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, brought funding, from Japanese sources, to Anglo-Japanese activities, travel fares have come down, young people work, study and travel in both directions and the links are truly multi-levelled and multifarious.

Returning to my two definitions of reconciliation, and my three categories, I feel safe in affirming that our two countries, through the process of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, our two peoples, through the spread of Anglo-Japanese interests and the deepening of Anglo-Japanese friendship, and many, many individuals involved in the Second World War encounter with Japan, either through time, or one of the reconciliatory initiatives which I have described, have now been brought 'back to friendship'. Of those individual remaining veterans, who could never contemplate reconciliation, it is a fact that their days are now numbered, as they are eighty years of age, on average. I believe that the British Government's decision last year, which was long overdue, to take the responsibility, which became legally theirs with the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, for the payment of special gratuities to FEPOWs and Civilian Internees, will have eased much of the bitterness still remaining amongst FEPOWs towards the Japanese government.

The next definition was 'to bring to agreement or contentment'. Again, I believe, the San Francisco Peace Treaty demonstrated agreement between governments. On individuals, the same argument as above applies – either they have achieved agreement and contentment, or they have not, and the issue becomes immaterial on their passing. However, this still leaves the people of the countries in general. There may be friendship again between the two countries, but I cannot argue that we have been brought to agreement, or contentment, on war-time issues. There remains a huge gulf of ignorance, disinterest, and amongst those with more direct connections, perhaps even some disappointment that Japan has not been able to do what Britain's first war-time enemy, Germany, has so thoroughly done. This is to have a debate within their own society, but evident to all outside it, about what happened, why it happened and why it should never happen again. Of course, the Germans' war-crime was far worse; it was of genocide. Also the Jews have played a major part, I would argue, in spurring the German soul-searching. Japan has not had this lever, indeed the opposite may rather be true, forces outside Japan, the former allies, have worked together to ensure that, after the Tokyo war trials were concluded, Japan should not be blamed but rather helped to look forward, nurtured and supported as a new democracy and ally joining the fight for freedom against communism. Japan had no-one to blame, as the Germans had the Nazis, except militarism, and this may also have acted as a constraint on Japan, as must surely have been the fact that the late Emperor Showa lived until a ripe old age, and the Imperial Household Agency has always made sure that his name should not be brought into debate.

The object of my comments on this occasion, is not to examine any rights or wrongs of what may or may not have happened in wartime, but rather to argue that there is so little debate in Japan, evident to us, of those happenings, and so little exchange between us, about such happenings, that, as a result, we have barely achieved any understanding of them. It is in this sense that I would like to suggest, our two peoples have not been brought to 'understanding' and that it is, therefore, still valid to talk about reconciliation.

When I first began to work in Japan, I felt sure that all the facts must be out in the open and dealt with, nearly forty years after the end of war. I was astonished to discover, after a while, that this was not the case and that the whole issue had politely been put aside. All the societies and associations which promote friendship and understanding with Japan, as well as the Japanophile individuals, have firmly told me over the years that there is no place for raking up the past, it could be seen as discourteous and, further, might reactivate old antagonisms. The Japan Society, which runs seminars on any other Japan-related subject, may feel constrained by various circumstances such as the patronage of the Royal Family. Despite all of this, even in recent years in Britain, there has still been evidence of what I should describe as remaining antipathy towards Japan in some quarters. The prejudice, fed by the FEPOWs, hindered further research into the facts, although the availability of new archival material, released after fifty years, has shed new academic light onto the issue of treatment of prisoners of war. One such excellent example is the book on the Treatment of Prisoners of War co-edited by Kosuge Nobuko, as well as the joint Anglo-Japanese history project.

I believe that there would have been a greater desire in Britain to explore these subjects had there been evidence in Japan itself of an interest in doing so. It does not seem to us that there has been any encouragement of such a debate within Japan. Japan, of course, for so many years, has been so preoccupied with the job of rebuilding the economy that little time has been left for anything unrelated. Notwithstanding that pressing focus, I sincerely believe that this has been a failure on Japan's part. Not only must some sort of debate within Japan have been the cornerstone and stimulant of a process of healing for those involved in the war, a process, we now recognise, which is as valid for a nation as for an individual, but also this sort of debate would have enabled succeeding generations to understand for themselves the complexity and background to what went on. It was only when I was a post-graduate student at Tokyo University, on Japan's Foreign Policy, at a time when the question of Japan's involvement in PKO was being hotly debated around the campus, that I was struck with the lack of facts available to the Japanese post-graduates, in our seminars, compared to those fellow students from China, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore and Burma. The animosity from these countries towards Japan on this subject must be much allayed if they observed Japanese society facing the issues involved. It has direct implications for Japan's place in the world, now and in the future.

Speaking again from personal experience, I was also astonished at the campus rhetoric at the time that only went as far as to state that Japan is a peace-loving country with a peaceful constitution and therefore should not be involved in PKO. This seemed to me to display no understanding of the fact that there must be a price to pay for this inactive stance, in our interdependent and insecure world, the minimum being a thorough debate of why Japan has reached this position, rather than resting on the moral high ground of having been a victim - of US barbarity and Soviet Union inhumanity. This pacifist banner of humane and reasonable people has no doubt played its part in stifling discussion of war, as have, more deliberately, right wing revisionist groups.

It is all very well expressing disappointment at lack of understanding and lack of debate, but it is rather pointless, if not hypocritical to do so, without attempting to address the situation. It is for this reason that a number of people, in Britain and Japan, young and old, academics, veterans and ordinary citizens have come together, on the demise of the Burma Campaign Fellowship Group, because of the age of its members and its feeling that it has achieved its objective, to establish a new historical study group. The object of this Burma Campaign Society is "To encourage reconciliation and the spread and exchange of information about any aspect of Britain and Japan's encounter during the Second World War, and matters subsequently arising from it, especially those related to the Burma Campaign 1941 - 1945."

For those of us who have founded the Burma Campaign Society, reconciliation between Britain and Japan over what happened in the Pacific War remains an issue, because we have so much more to understand on both sides. Reconciliation between the protagonists, as discussed, to a greater or lesser extent has been achieved. There is little more to be done for those with first hand experience, as time is running out, although we do seek to involve the children and grandchildren, as far as possible. We believe that post-war generations can carry on a debate in a totally non-recriminatory environment. We bear no

responsibility for, nor can have the right to level any charges about, nor again should justify or apologise for war-time happenings. They are history. Our responsibility is rather to work for understanding and to promote friendship. This can be done in the name of reconciliation, in the most elusive of its definitions.