

Posted to Tottori: Professor Michael Screech's Memories of Rural Post-war Japan.

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Professor Michael Screech

The Reverend Dr. Michael Screech, BA, DLitt, FBA, FRSL, was an Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford and Honorary Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford. In 1992, he was honoured as a Chevalier in the French Legion of Honour in recognition of his literary works, and his translation of Montaigne's *Essays* has been widely recognized. He was born on May 2, 1926 in Plymouth, England, and died on June 1, 2018, aged 92.

Professor Timon Screech

Professor Timon Screech is Michael Screech's son, and I would like to extend my sincere thanks to him for having checked this paper at each stage of writing. His ideas, insights, and corrections made the article.

Timon Screech gained an early interest in Japan by hearing about his father's experiences, and after a BA in Oriental Studies (Japanese) at Oxford University, he took a PhD in the History of Art at Harvard. Since 1991, he has taught the History of Japanese Art at SOAS, University of London and has been a visiting researcher at various Japanese universities including Waseda and Gakushuin. He is a Permanent Visiting Professor at Tama

University of the Arts and is a globally renowned expert on the culture and art of early modern Japan.

Introduction

Michael Screech was a British intelligence operative who was posted to occupation Japan in February 1946 at the age of only 20. This article, based on a personal interview carried out on February 3, 2017,ⁱ will tell the story of his association with the small provincial Japanese city of Tottori. In doing so, it provides a valuable and rare, probably unique, source of oral history from the point of view of a foreign soldier, of whom there were very few, in immediate post-war Tottori City, capital of Tottori Prefecture and part of the historical region of *San'in* which stretches along the northern coast of south west Honshu, Japan's main Island. The Tottori hinterland is dominated by mountains, and so it has always been relatively cut off from other population centres, relying largely on maritime links, both within Japan and internationally. It is to this day the least populous Prefecture in Japan.ⁱⁱ

In 1943, Michael Screech commenced studies in French and Latin at University College London (UCL), but WWII was raging and as was customary, after only a year of study was called up to do his national service. As a naturally talented linguist, he was chosen to enter military intelligence at Bletchley Parkⁱⁱⁱ and later a SOAS^{iv} affiliated Japanese Language School in Bedford,^v where, between 16 October, 1944, and 13 April, 1945, he studied Japanese intensively, learning at least 1200 Chinese characters (Jarvis, 2005, p.204), and was graded Class II.

This Japanese was of course technically and militarily focused:

If anybody asked me what a daisy was, I wouldn't know. But if they

want to say 'within 5 weeks we brought down 13 aircraft,' I'd do it in a second. It was very much a military vocabulary we had, and I had to develop the other one gradually.

It took, the now Sergeant, Screech some time after arriving in Japan to develop more colloquial language abilities.

Journey from Britain

The journey from Britain to Japan was far from straightforward in the immediate post-war years and was considerably complicated by the fact that Sergeant Screech's unit was misdirected twice through administrative incompetence. On the first occasion, he was mistakenly sent to the Pioneer Corps, which instead of being about 20 minutes drive away from the Ditchley Park headquarters,^{vi} where he was supposed to have been sent, was 130 miles away in North Wales. It took a fortnight before the error was discovered and corrected, meanwhile the frustrated young men were kicking their feet. They eventually took ship for India.

On arrival in India, they should have been sent to the Wireless Experimental *Centre* in New Delhi which was the Indian outpost of Bletchley Park (Smith, 2005) where the main British Empire Japanese intercept station and decoding section was based. However, it was mistakenly decided to send them over 400 miles out of their way to the Wireless Experimental *Depot*, at Abbottabad on the Kyber Pass, (now in northern Pakistan) where Soviet, not Japanese, radio transmissions were monitored. It must have been a long and hot journey, albeit with stunning views, and all for naught. By the time the error had been sorted out, The Empire of Japan had surrendered and the result was of course that Sergeant Screech arrived too late to be engaged in any actual warfare. Instead, he was posted to the naval city of Kure, in

Hiroshima Prefecture, as a member of the Field Security Service, part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF).^{vii}

Kure

The Allied forces which comprised US and British Commonwealth contingents, had expected to arrive in a very hostile country, but within a short period of time, it was quite obvious that occupying Japan was not going to be as difficult as had been assumed. As Professor Screech put it, ‘the Japanese wished to end the war, and they were going to keep the peace.’

As a British soldier in Kure, Michael Screech found that the local people were already well disposed towards him, due to the history of close naval and industrial cooperation between Britain and Japan after the Meiji Restoration and particularly during the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902-1923.

Nearly everybody in the older generation [i.e. all Japanese naval officers before the war] had been [in Kure] during the *Nichi-ei domei* [Anglo-Japanese Alliance] and were favourably disposed to the British navy.

Many in fact had spent a lot of time in Britain and were to some extent distinctly Anglophile in their outlook. Furthermore, the positive ties and memories did not only go one way. Screech reported current camp gossip that suggested:

Churchill was very fond of a number of Japanese admirals, and kept in touch even during the war. I only give you that as a bit of tittle-tattle, but it was believed.^{viii}

Screech found it difficult to describe his arrival in Kure. As one of the

largest military facilities in The Empire of Japan, it had been subject to concentrated aerial bombing in the last months of the war, and by August 1945, 70% of the city had been destroyed. The harbour was also littered with semi-submerged sunken hulks, the last major ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy had been sunk there in a series of air raids in July 1945.

But of course, the destruction in nearby Hiroshima was a horror beyond even this:

You see it's difficult: all I have is this great picture of arriving in Japan and being stunned by the destruction in Hiroshima

Michael Screech had grown up in Plymouth, a naval city like Kure in southern England, where he had had first-hand experience of heavy Nazi air raids and destruction in 1940/1 when he was 14.

It took nine days and nights for the Germans to knock [Plymouth] out. And even then about a third of the city was still properly remaining, perhaps half overall.^{ix}

He had also seen the effects of heavy urban aerial bombing while at University College London in 1943, and therefore, Sergeant Screech, in fact, had ample experience of bombed cities. But, even his own experience and foreknowledge, could not prepare him for what he saw when he arrived in Hiroshima, the contrast with his previous experience was that it had all happened in seconds and of course the destruction was far greater:

And it was difficult to take that on board. You just had to sit there for a while.

It was... I do get the feeling, when the Japanese talk about the affair now, they sometimes trivialise it by making it a kind of natural development of horror, from America, whereas I find it's the other way around, it was the constant reminder of *individual* horror.

Every tree stump, cracked stone and charred timber was an individual tragedy for Screech.

One incident stood out in Screech's mind, an incident that illustrates the utter destruction and civilian pain:

I got to know the [former] Japanese Ambassador to Australia, and he sent me a note saying "could you meet me?" And I said of course I could, so I went down, and he said there's an order to confiscate one of the few standing houses between [Kure] and Hiroshima, and we really do need it for the wounded. So I got the details, went to the top Australian man, who was immediately helpful, and said, yes, we could deal with a Nissen hut,^x and did that, bought in a Nissen hut, and [the house threatened with confiscation but which the Japanese needed for the wounded] remained as it was.

Thanks to Screech's intervention the Allies used a pre-fabricated building instead of commandeering the surviving habitation being used as a hospital. Acts such as this, as well as Japanese language ability ensured that Michael Screech made a significant number of genuine Japanese friends within his first three months.

Tottori

Screech's Field Security Service unit comprised five people, and was

initially expected to stay in Kure for the duration of the occupation. However, it was not to be. The Sergeant Major, whom Screech remembered as a 'very nice, fatherly sort of man' was found to be working a black market with a group of local Japanese civilians. The scandal that ensued when it was discovered meant that the unit was split up and removed from Kure, and so it came to be that Michael Screech was sent to Tottori, a rural city, far removed from the main centres of military activity and a place about which he knew next to nothing.

He travelled by train from Kure, through the mountains that cut off the northern coast of the main Japanese island, Honshu, from the southern, and on arrival at Tottori station, commandeered a taxi to travel to his new home, Tottori Castle.^{xi}

When I was told we were going to be based in Tottori Castle, I imagined some big one with one little room at the back, but no on the contrary, the castle had been subject to considerable – not restoration, so much as repair. ... We occupied the lot. The nicest area was the third floor looking out over the city, and we really did have a very enjoyable time.

Tottori Castle is a classic example of a Japanese mountain castle, the lower sections of the mountain are well fortified on three levels, but the donjon itself is on top of a very steep mountain, highly difficult, almost impossible, to climb, even today. It was a virtually impenetrable fortress. Screech's reference to the 'third floor' means the top level of the lower section, which is perhaps at about 50-70 metres of elevation above the road.

When Michael Screech arrived in Tottori, the castle had already been commandeered by the US Army occupation forces, who had patched up the damaged lower sections of the castle and added pre-fabricated buildings as

accommodation for their soldiers. These would have been in addition to the wooden barracks used by the Imperial Japanese Army prior to and during the war.



Tottori Castle today. Professor Screech was accommodated on this site. Photo by the author.

The military jeeps were left on the road, some distance from the entrance to the castle grounds itself and the steep climb up to the third ramparts must have kept Michael Screech very fit. Although he did not mention it, perhaps due to a memory lapse, he would also have walked passed the *Jinpukaku*, a magnificent European style house built in 1907 to accommodate the man who would soon become the Taisho Emperor in 1911 when he visited Tottori. Today it is a museum, but having been extensively repaired after a 1943 earthquake, it was being used as a local government building in Screech's time.^{xii}

Michael Screech felt that the people of Tottori had a general feeling that they'd been lucky that the war hadn't caused the wide-spread destruction

experienced elsewhere.

I wouldn't say it hadn't hit them hard, but they seemed to be able to manage it, whereas in Hiroshima, of course, there was complete and utter destitution was a result.... But it was not like that in Tottori at all.

The massive 1943 earthquake had caused considerable damage to the castle remains and city 3 years before, but as Screech noted, these were now patched up and in a reasonable state of repair. Recovery was well underway.



Tottori after the Great Earthquake of 1943.

As soon as I was there, the Japanese [in Kure] wrote and said, "What a lucky man you are. That's a place we like to go for holidays."

That did not mean that there was not hardship. Many local people

remember this as a time of hunger and suffering. In the city, food was scarce unless there were farming relatives to provide it. Jobs were also in short supply and the net inflow of Japanese refugees from newly-liberated former Japanese imperial possessions and de-mobbed soldiers returning from the battlefield meant that already strained resources became more limited as families accommodated extra relatives.^{xiii}

The Occupation Forces had powers to employ any labour they needed. And Screech remembers that this ensured that they had a wonderful, ever smiling staff in their castle residence. Apart from the employment itself, the staff, who addressed Screech as ‘Sukurichi Gunsou,’ (Sergeant Screech), received extra food for themselves and their families. The British and Commonwealth forces in Japan depended largely on Australia for their supply of food and the Australians provided far more than was actually needed. Many of the local people were subsisting on anything that they could get their hands on so excess food was given to the household staff. Screech remembers feeding around a dozen people on a regular basis in his residence. There was also the opportunity to give treats, sweets and peanuts, to local children. Who Screech described as ‘kawaii’ or adorable.

That did not mean, however, that Michael Screech was unable to enjoy some of the locally produced food, he particularly enjoyed the *mikan* (satsuma oranges).

They were so delightful. [The local people] very often brought [*mikan*] as little presents.

The severe conditions meant that even the wealthy ruling classes had to at least present themselves as sharing the difficulties of the general

population. This resulted in regulations about entertainment and working meals. Any local or national employee could only eat or entertain at the public expense, if a representative of the Allied occupation force was present, and so the very small number of British and Commonwealth soldiers present in Tottori were invited out almost three times a week to all the nicest places; Sergeant Screech of course enjoyed this very much and he also remembers the local cuisine as being excellent.

This useful arrangement only became slightly complicated during election times, when everything had to be seen to be straight and legal and a member of the occupation personnel could not be seen to be partial to any one side.

But there was no question about it. They were straight and legal. The Japanese did [the democratic election process] very well.

In Michael Screech's view, the locally based British and Commonwealth members of the occupation forces were preferred to the Americans because they were unimposing and would simply smile and let the Japanese get on with planning Tottori's future with verve and energy.

Daily life in Tottori

Michael Screech was a young man who, due to his position as a soldier in an occupying force, found himself in a privileged position among the elite of a foreign city. It is perhaps not surprising that he remembers daily life in Tottori as being very pleasant. But it was not only the higher ranking people whom he was in contact with, he was made to feel welcome by the local people and was politely treated at all times.

It wasn't the Tottori that you have now. It was a much smaller place.

People would stop and greet you and talk to you in the street. It was sometimes a bit boring. University students still wearing the old fashioned uniform like a soldier would stop you and say “honoured Sir, may I discuss in your national language.” And I must say when that happens to you twenty times in one day, you wish you didn’t have the ‘national language’. There was a huge desire to learn English. And it dominated everyone.

Sergeant Screech was helped in his work by a retired school teacher from one of the local high schools (probably Nishi-ko, which is situated immediately below the ramparts of the castle) who read the local and national newspapers with him twice a week to help in his Japanese language study and understanding of current events. Since this was a voluntary exercise, Screech always slipped the teacher (whose name he sadly does not recall) a certain amount of food.

The situation in Tottori was very different from Screech’s Kure posting where there had been extensive problems to deal with and daily interaction with the Japanese authorities. Tottori was much quieter, although it was not absolutely problem free. In May 1946, for example, 20 boulders were placed to block a road used by Occupation Forces in the nearby town of Kurayoshi and in June 1947 (GHQ8 cited in Roehner, 2009, p.147), a train carriage carrying Occupation Forces personnel had a stone thrown at it. A window was broken, but no-one was hurt (GHQ8 cited in Roehner, 2009, p.199). These incidents were not remembered by Screech, but he did recall wider work with the other Occupation Forces and that he had a daily liaison meeting with a US Army Colonel Van Der Sweep.

There were also a small number of Indian soldiers who were there as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force. They worked closely

with Screech, although were accommodated separately within the castle. Screech remembers them as being, understandably, preoccupied with the coming independence and partition of British India; as soon as the news of Indian and Pakistani Independence^{xiv} came, they wanted to go home.

Later the British troops would learn, although British government propaganda tried to suppress the news at the time, what the Indians already knew, that India was in chaos and people were being massacred and displaced in huge inter-community violence. In fact just over a million people had been murdered in only the first weekend of independence (Kahn, 2017). Although the soldiers from the Indian subcontinent in Tottori can hardly have been aware of the numbers, they did feel that the place they needed to be was India or the new Muslim state of Pakistan, and not Japan. They wanted to get back home to build their new nations and there was a restlessness among them.

As his official duties were not as demanding as in Kure, Screech was able to get to know the area around Tottori a little. The sandy nature of the locality, Tottori Prefecture's eastern end is dominated by impressive sand dunes and sandy soil, left an impression on him. Likewise, the local connections with people like Lafcadio Hearn^{xv} who had lived down the coast in Matsue, the capital of the neighbouring prefecture of Shimane, were of interest. Hearn was one of the first people to teach French literature, albeit in English translation, at Tokyo University and this resonated with Screech, who later became a famous professor of French at Oxford.

Living in Tottori had its surprises too, on one occasion when a large fire broke out, Screech was impressed with the professional way in which everyone reacted.

The people of Tottori had their jobs to do and started putting it out, but

the high horse was the group of nurses who ran, in military style, all the way into Tottori in case their services were needed. They of course were clapped by the Tottorians. I stood up and just saluted to show something.

Despite the lack of real action, one duty that Screech could perform was to show respect, especially when the remains of fallen soldiers were being returned to their relatives.

Whenever I knew that they were coming, I would make a point of being down in town. And salute the ashes [of deceased Japanese soldiers] as they went by. And that was certainly appreciated... By and large, [the bereaved, who were mostly children] were taking these sort of cardboard square boxes, with ashes of their parents I was pleased I did little things like that.

It was not just in respecting the war-dead that Michael Screech tried to understand and empathize with the people he was living among in Tottori. As a young intellectual, Screech actively sought out encounters for intellectual exchange and ways of understanding Tottori and Japan better, particularly the time and place in Japanese history in which he found himself.

I wish that I got to know the university earlier. One of the men [...] lent me a couple of books which were going amongst the university students, and they were very interesting. There was one called *Kike wadatsumi no koe* ... (きけ わだつみの声) ^{xvi} and it took me a long time to read, but you got into the minds of what it was [like to be] a young man, like myself, but on the wrong side of the pale, and how you dealt

with the war, and how you dealt with the end.

As a young student he was also keen to understand as many facets of Japan as possible, including the motivations for the war, in which most of his Japanese friends and acquaintances had until recently been fighting, through talking to the people whom he met on the ground:

One of the few things I remember [of a Japanese person] criticizing another country was [a friend] who said, "We were all disappointed when we arrived at the South Sea Islands. They had absolutely no culture at all."

Michael Screech asked this man directly.

I asked point blank: how on earth did he defend ... how the Japanese beat up, actually, the countries that they were claiming to liberate. And they were really hated for it. And he simply shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I can't give you any explanation for it."

With hindsight, these comments on Japanese imperialism, coupled with the miss-governance and mass-murder that occurred at the end of British rule in India, affords us a chance to reflect on the evils and perils of imperialism in general. Not just Japanese imperialism. Although history has taken longer to judge the British Empire, academia has now uncovered numerous instances of imperial wrongdoing (Fitzgibbon, 2011), and similar happenings sadly take place to this day in the name of 'freedom.' One need look no further than the Iraq War and its aftermath.

Perhaps readers are also reminded of the words of George Orwell in

The Road to Wigan Pier, ‘in order that England may live in comparative comfort, a hundred million Indians must live on the verge of starvation.’

Farewell to Tottori

In 1947, it was time to say farewell to Tottori as the BCOF wound down its presence in Japan. As Screech and his colleagues left Tottori Castle for the last time to return to Kure and then England, the staff who had looked after them during their residence at the site engaged in a very public show of emotion.

The house servants were really moved by emotion and started to cry, and rushed down the hill to see the last part of us before we left the [parade] ground and turned to the right. It was a very curious experience.

Professor Screech’s time of residence in the beautiful prefecture of Tottori was only two years, but his memories of daily life give us a valuable lens into a time and place that does not receive much outside attention. These years also helped create the foundation on which he helped to build later intellectual bridges between Britain and Japan, which contributed to a renewing of the deep and lasting friendship between these two countries after the terrible discord of the 1930s and early 1940s.

This Article

This article is based upon an interview of several hours in English, Japanese and French, between Professor Michael Screech and Thomas Lockley which took place on February 3, 2017 by telephone. The words in the article are as far as possible Professor Screech’s own, any editing has

been done with as light a hand as possible, and certain details have been added for clarification and background where necessary. At the time of interview, Professor Screech was 90 years old and it is possible that some memories may be misremembered.

Acknowledgements

I would like to firstly thank Professor Michael Screech for being kind enough to share his memories so freely and his son, Professor Timon Screech for making the introductions and supervising the writing of this article. Professor Screech sadly passed away on June 1, 2018, aged 92.

Professor Misa Hirashima of Toyo University in Tokyo, who has previously published a paper Professor Michael Screech's time in Japan was also extremely helpful and supportive of this project and I would like to thank her immensely for her time and enthusiasm.

Finally I would like to thank my mother in law, Masae Kinoshita and her mother, Toshiko Nakahara for regularly sharing their past memories of Tottori, including during the time that Professor Screech was in residence. Sadly, they never met.

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Endnotes

- i The article also draws extensively on the previous research done by Professor Misa Hirashima of Toyo University, Tokyo, which was published in Japanese (Hirashima, 2012).
- ii The population in 1946 was 557, 429. In 2005 it was 607, 012 (Ministry of Internal Affairs Statistics Bureau, 2009).
- iii Bletchley Park was a key site for the British intelligence services during WWII, particularly well known for code-breaking.
- iv School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- v The Bedford Japanese School was in operation from February 1942 until November 1945 under the auspices of the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire and SOAS, University of London during WWII. It trained its 225 graduates in the Japanese language to counter the severe shortage of Japanese speakers in the British armed forces (Kornicki, 2017).

- vi Ditchley Park and its Georgian mansion were commandeered during wartime as a military headquarters and as a safe country residence for the Prime Minister Winston Churchill.
- vii BCOF was the joint Australian, British, Indian and New Zealand military forces in Japan, from 21 February 1946 until the end of occupation in 1952. It was responsible for the occupation of the western prefectures in the Chugoku and Shikoku regions and headquartered at Kure.
- viii Winston Churchill was known as a pro-Japanese politician. In November 1941, shortly before the outbreak of war, he said he 'had always been a sentimental well-wisher to the Japanese and an admirer of their many gifts and qualities, I should view with keen sorrow the opening of a conflict between Japan and the English-speaking world.' (Seki, 2007, p.9)
- ix Plymouth suffered more damage than any other city of its size during the air raids of WWII. During the raids of April 1941 which Professor Screech is referring to, 590 civilians were killed, and countless more injured. 1500 homes were destroyed and 15,000 damaged (Gill, 1993, p.260; Quigley, 2012, p.89).
- x A type of easily assembled pre-fabricated building invented by Major Peter Norman Nissen in 1916.
- xi Tottori Castle was originally built during the 1570s, and besieged by Hashiba Hideyoshi twice during his campaign against the Mori clan on behalf of Oda Nobunaga, in 1580 and 1581. The second siege was famous for its length, the garrison held out for 200 days. When at last they surrendered they were in the final stages of death by starvation and Hideyoshi, in a perhaps uncharacteristically charitable action, ordered that the defeated men be fed. They jumped on the food and many of them ate so much that their bodies couldn't take the stress and they died from shock.

Tottori Castle entered the hands of the Ikeda family after the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. They remained as rulers of the area until the Meiji restoration in 1868, and even afterwards remained in residence at the castle. By 1944 the family had fallen on hard times, and could not repair the damage from the great earthquake of 1943. They instead gave the castle and the whole mountain on which it is built, Kyushozan, to the people of Tottori.
- xii The biggest event during the war had been the great earthquake of 1943 which had caused terrible destruction, 7485 of the city's dwellings, and 1083 people lost their lives (Earthquake Research Committee of the Headquarters for Earthquake Research Promotion, 2018).
- xiii Personal testimony of Nakahara Toshiko and Kinoshita Masae, local residents.
- xiv Pakistan initially comprised East Pakistan and West Pakistan. East Pakistan

gained independence under the name of Bangladesh in 1971.

xv Lafcadio Hearn was an author who was born in Ireland, but became famous in Japan under the name Koizumi Yakumo. He wrote books about contemporary Japan and his collecting of folk tales, in particular ghost stories ensured they were preserved for posterity.

xvi きけ わだつみの声 was a collection of letters written by Japanese student soldiers who died during World War II, or afterwards as a direct result of the war.