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BOOKS

The earliest Japan-U.K. ties

By Vicki Beyer

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On a hill overlooking Yokosuka Harbor on Miura Peninsula, a short walk from Anjintsuka (Anjin's Grave) Station, is a grave marked "Miura no Anjin and wife." In Hirado, on a small island off the northwest coast of Kyushu, on a hill that would have a fine view of Hirado Harbor were it not for a small woods, is a grave marked "William Adams." Nearby is a bit of stone cut from the gravestone of his wife, Mary, who is buried in England.

Miura no Anjin is the Japanese name of William Adams. One man, two graves, two wives. Sounds like an interesting story.

I picked up *Samurai William* thinking that it would fill in some of the blanks in my knowledge of Will Adams, better known to most Westerners as Blackthorne, the shipwrecked pilot of the James Clavell novel *Shogun*.

Alas, *Samurai William* is not a book about Will Adams, although it basically ends with his death. Rather, it is a well-written book which pulls together the stories of several fascinating and similarly situated men and offers some explanations of the environment, at home and in Japan, that shaped their lives.

The bulk of the book deals with English attempts to trade in the Orient and with the trials and tribulations of the first English trading post in Japan, which was established by Capt. John Saris in Hirado in 1613, and headed by Richard Cocks until it closed in 1623, shortly after Adams' death. Adams' role in the life of that trading post is described, but it is not the main subject of the book.

Adams, an Englishman, arrived in Japan in 1600 aboard the Dutch ship *Liefde* with 23 fellow

Samurai William: The Adventurer Who Unlocked Japan

By Giles Milton

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 368 pp, \$24

mariners. Milton sets the stage for Adams' journey and arrival in Japan by first relating the story of Portuguese traders who had been shipwrecked in Japan in 1544 and since that time had been actively trading and spreading Christianity.

Milton then tells the story of a failed English attempt to reach China by sailing north in the 1580s, so we can appreciate why Adams' fleet chose the course it did across the Atlantic and the Pacific. Finally, we get the story of Adams' 20-month voyage to Japan.

It was a disastrous trip. This makes for very good reading as we learn how miscalculations and hostile natives resulted in insufficient provisions, illness and death. Spanish and Portuguese competition, as well as storms in the Pacific—which had only been first crossed by Europeans in Adams' lifetime—claimed the *Liefde*'s four sister ships. It was a severely crippled *Liefde* that drifted to Japanese shores.

It could be said that Adams was a very lucky man. He managed to survive a horrific voyage and arrived in Japan at an opportune time, just as Tokugawa Ieyasu was making his move to become the ruler of all of Japan. Ieyasu and Adams somehow managed to hit it off.

Ieyasu saw that Adams could be of use, as Ieyasu wanted to engage in overseas trade and learn about the rest of the world but did not trust the Portuguese missionaries who were his primary point of contact up to Adams' arrival.

Adams, who clearly had an aptitude for languages, learned to speak Japanese and hence became an information source for Ieyasu. He also built some trading ships, using the *Liefde* as a model.

Ieyasu recognized Adams' skills and importance to him by making him a samurai and giving him an estate on Miura Peninsula.

Although Adams felt that he could not leave Japan, he did manage, eventually, to write to agents of the East India Company in Indonesia urging them to try their luck trading in Japan. When this message reached the directors in London, they authorized a voyage to Japan to establish a trading house.

The Englishmen who made the trip were shocked when they met Adams. He spoke, dressed and acted Japanese, and was clearly distressed by the crude behavior of the English. Nonetheless, his loyalty to his compatriots compelled him to help them meet Ieyasu and eventually gain trading privileges.

Milton's descriptions of Adams' horror at various acts by the English will be familiar to any foreigner long resident in Japan who tries to help newcomers adjust to life here.

The English traders seemed, in many instances, to be completely unable to understand Japanese ways and, more surprisingly for traders, also seemed unable to understand the types of goods the Japanese might want to purchase from them. Although the English traders learned to live quite comfortably in Japan, it is no surprise that the trading house failed in less than a decade.

Ultimately, Japanese politics forced the closure of the trading house, but it is unlikely that it could have survived for very long without Adams there to act as a bridge between the English and the Japanese. The culture gap was simply too wide.

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