

The Story of a Sleeping Beauty

A 100-Monme Hand Cannon for the Bugyo Magistrate to Lord Mizuno

Outline

It is rare that the complete story of a pre-1870 Japanese Tanegashima matchlock is known. This present Ozutsu 'hand cannon' however, is signed in detail, and can be traced with some degree of certainty back to its very creation in late Edo Osaka Japan, then through its later travel to the United States, and afterwards to a long sleep in a castle in Ireland. After awaking, this 26-kilogram monster gun finally came full circle to complete a 75-year circumnavigation of the globe. If the fairy tale continues like this, it will be fired for the first time in over 150 years, to commemorate the new main gate at Tottori Castle in March of 2021.

Background

It might be easier to start right at the beginning, but for us this story starts somewhere in the middle with the discovery of this gun in Castle Matrix in Ireland. Originally built in the 1400s, the castle has had a romantic history, falling into ruins until repurposed into a family home, and then a hotel in more recent years. Now once more it is becoming neglected, the woods gradually surrounding it, as in the story of the Sleeping Beauty. There was a collection of Japanese artefacts inside, rusting and molding away in a vast pile, and the whole lot was owned by the widow of a United States Colonel, John Joffre (aka 'Sean') O'Driscoll. According to an article in Eire's *Independent* Newspaper, this Irish-American Colonel O'Driscoll was an aide to General Douglas MacArthur while accepting the surrender of the Japanese in 1945.

During his six years residence in post-war Japan, he collected Japanese works of art and military artefacts such as swords, armour, etc. He was probably present when Dr Honma Junji and Dr Kanzan Sato pleaded with MacArthur to recognize the historical value of Japanese swords, and to somehow save the best of them from their stipulated destruction. Luckily, the legislation was altered and works of artistic merit and spiritual significance were to a degree exempted. When this same former aide, Colonel Driscoll retired from the military and from other reputedly 'colourful' forms of service in 1961, he bought and restored Castle Matrix, near Rathkeale in Limerick, to house his collection. He lived there with his family, among his precious collection until his death in 1991.

In 2017, parts of the collection came up for sale, and this rusty old hulk of a 100-Monme gun lurked there in the shadows among the haul of mysterious 'treasures'.

Castle Matrix, Limerick, Ireland



The key to the castle door



The rusting hand cannon



(Luckily the iron was not heavily pitted, and the lockwork was still in working order. Mr Koike, being an expert in rust, took his time slowing and stopping the red rust.)

The muzzle surround



Tanegashima Matchlocks, general explanation. What is a 100-Monme gun?

(Gun sizes were categorized by weight of the lead ball, 1 Monme weighing 3.75 grams.)

Japanese matchlocks appeared in all sizes after the relegated swordsmiths had mastered the basic remit of Western guns and learned how to manufacture them. Long slim smallbore Hosozutsu guns were relatively simple and inexpensive to make and could be used for target practice or hunting. Larger more expensive guns were used by the Ashigaru regular footsoldiers on the battlefield and were usually referred to as 6-Monme guns (about 1.5~1.6 cm bore). Both these types were produced in large quantities. Matchlock pistols were also produced, but in smaller numbers, the difficulty of managing the matchcord meaning that they were never really considered practical, certainly in almost any other country worldwide.

Much rarer was a 10-Monme gun, which might be owned and fired by a well-to-do Bushi (Samurai). With a lead ball weighing 37.5 grams, 1.9 cm in diameter, they were surprisingly powerful. As the traditional Japanese battlefield became increasingly dominated by guns, demand grew for larger and more powerful types. 15 Monme, 20 Monme, then 30, or 50 and even 100-Monme made their appearance. All hand-held, massively heavy, and unthinkable in the West. The lord of a castle and fief could only afford so many of these bigger guns, however, and an examination of extant castle armoury inventories shows that they contained far fewer of these latter. Although examples of larger hand-held guns of 200 Monme or even 1 Kan (1,000 Monme) were eventually produced they were extremely rare, and terribly impractical, heavy and cumbersome.

Early 20 Monme guns were so heavy that it took two ashigaru to carry one into battle, and smiths found themselves in a battle for customers, vying with each other to refine their art to produce lighter guns but at the same time offering larger bore. While it was said that the 30-Monme was perhaps the best mix of bang for your buck, i.e. balance of weight and power, anything above that required special physical strength, courage and balance to lift and fire.

An average Japanese castle might have been permitted to hold one or two of the very largest, the 100-Monme. There were schools of gunnery specializing in tricks of firing these monsters. It became clear in due course however, probably during the sieges of Osaka in 1614/15, that 'Bohiya' 棒火矢 rockets or baton rounds were good for taking castles. This Bohiya was a stout wooden rod, the rear end of which you could push down about three inches into the muzzle, as far as the base of the three metal fins or flights. The shaft was wrapped with oil-soaked rope and set alight (allegedly just by the explosion of the charge). The nose had a heavy iron pointed tip. You could point your hand cannon into the sky, and fire them off, placing your iron-tipped fire arrows to smash down onto the castle tiles and rafters and to set fire to the buildings. In place of traditional iron or round lead shot (somewhat larger than a golf ball), these 'Bohiya' rockets became fashionable among the various gunnery schools.

To source a genuine 100-Monme hand cannon in Japan today is not an easy task. There are some in private collections or in museums. Although there are over 20 active full-armour reenactment groups, who are by Japanese law permitted to use real old matchlocks (no replicas are allowed), very few of them fire or even possess a real 100-Monme.

Now it just so happened that the Bishu Okayama Castle matchlock troop 備州岡山城鉄砲隊 used to fire a 100 Monme, but this had been sold, and we were down on firepower. Another one was sourced from Kumamoto Castle in Kyushu and for a couple of years the owner would be given pride of place. His was the last and heaviest blast of every display, as we worked our way up through all the guns we were demonstrating, i.e. rare matchlock pistols, 6 Monme regular guns, then 10 Monme, 20 Monme, 30 Monme...etc. This gentleman retired, and in a betrayal of the expectations of the crowds of loyal fans, Okayama Castle's troop was once again completing their display with a blast from the still relatively large 50 Monme, but unable to place a cherry on the cake with the magic number 100.

A break in the clouds

As it happened, towards the autumn of 2020, Peter McCafferty, co-founder of the Token Society of Ireland (Japanese sword society), was in a position to oversee the sale of this monster from Castle Matrix. Despite interest from around the world, Ian Chapman of the UK Token Society stepped in, to kindly act as Atlas, a bridge so that Piers Dowding of the Okayama Matchlock troop could put in an urgent plea for special dispensation. Piers is to date the only non-Japanese in Japan that has been taken in as a full regular member of a blackpowder Samurai troop firing line.

Peter occupying his wife's kitchen preparing to box the baby



So, this was the proposition. It was not anyone's naked desire simply to own such a gun. (Actually, in an ideal world anyone would love to own it!) A new and active life with a matchlock troop was what was on offer. Despite probably much better financial offers, would it not be possible to sidestep any competitive bidding process and repatriate this hand cannon for firing anew in front of Japanese crowds? Well, Ian and Peter saw eye-to-eye, and Peter felt somehow good about this idea. Money is something indeed, but not always everything!

At the Japan end

The benefactor and overall leader of the Okayama matchlock group, a Mr Ohmori, kindly fronted the money and kickstarted the process. Peter lovingly wrapped it and boxed it and sent it off at the beginning of October 2020. This near 40-kg box flew under Covid conditions to a very suspicious customs in Stansted, then to Paris Charles de Gaulle, then Belgium and China. The plane was probably loading and offloading cargo, but after what seemed like ages, (some two or three weeks) it arrived at Kansai International Airport. In the meantime, we (Piers and Mr Ohmori), had been frantically

contacting the authorities for written permission to stop the gun at customs and start the official registration process. No one in authority seemed to know, or to be able to explain the proper process. The danger was that it really could have been taken away and destroyed with any glitch in the paper trail. Japan takes its sweet time with these things, (to phrase it diplomatically).

A day was fixed for a month later, and we were asked to go to Kansai Airport to complete the paperwork. A three-hour drive one-way. The Osaka Education Committee turned up to measure and record the gun. With warehouse workers, customs officials, the six-person group from Osaka and three of us from Okayama, we opened the box and pulled her out to gasps of surprise from people who had mostly never seen one of these. They would not let us take it away, however, so we returned to Okayama and paid the import tax and filled out more paperwork which we sent back to the airport.

About ten weeks after the gun had been shipped, it was finally delivered to Okayama, and on the allotted day for examination taken to the police station for official registration at last. A brand-new card.

The process of restoration was therefore started. It was completely stripped down, and the rust was gradually treated in a sympathetic way by a metal artisan, (actually a Shirogane-Shi or Habaki maker), our local NBTHK Chairman and Nihonto sword Sensei, Mr Koike.

At last (mid-February 2021) I received photographs of the special box that has been built for it, weighing around 7 kilograms, meaning the whole thing with ramrod now weighs about 33~34 kg.

We are booked to fire her at the official opening of the new main gate for Tottori Castle in early March, the first time she will be fired in perhaps 150 years or more.

Stripped down



To the roots

The gun is signed and dated, and there is a silver Omodaka (water plantain, arrowhead) family Mon or crest on the top of the barrel. Versions of this crest were used by several families, but the best known of them is the Mizuno family.

Date: 嘉永三年庚戌初冬 Kaei 3, Kanoe-inu, Start of winter 1850

Mei: 鍛 三重卷張 Kitae (forged steel) Sanju Makibari (Triple helix bound)

干時奉行 大原重斯 Kanji Bugyo (Magistrate of the time), Ohara Shigeshi

撰泉界住(Made by) Settsu/Izumi/Sakai resident,

芝辻長左衛門邦考作 Shibatsuji Chozemon Kunitaka

The signature is beautifully cut in cold chisel work. Strangely, the wood of the stock remained fitted so tightly to the barrel that there was very little rust around the Mei. It happens that the dedication in the Mei under the barrel is to a one-time Bugyo to the Mizuno lords. The Fudai Mizuno Daimyo family were for a time seated in Fukuyama Castle in the west (Hiroshima), but were then moved to Yuki City in Ibaragi in the east of Japan. Ohara Shigeshi was Bugyo Chief

Magistrate for this Yuki Han (Clan). The Iwami no Kami Mizuno Fukuyama branch find their ancient origins in Nara, and their Bodaiji temple marking their beginnings was officially the former Hokiji Temple and Saigu Jinja. Hokiji Temple no longer exists.

There is today still some annual ritual in the locality, but there is a rather phallic standing stone with a Waka poem carved into it, dated 1842, set up by Ohara Shigeshi. The poem carved there about an old Sakura tree was by the famous early Heian writer and ‘playboy’ Arihara Narihira (825-880) who allegedly once eloped and sought refuge there. There is a note to say that Ohara Shigeshi was a ‘man of Tobu’, or points east, indicating Ibaragi. So, it seems certain that it was indeed the same Mizuno family Bugyo who ordered this massive gun. He must have been very well-to-do.

How and where Colonel O’Driscoll found it in impoverished post-war Japan, we will probably never know, but after a 75-year absence, and a complete voyage around the world, this gun is finally back home, breathing new life.

Messages continued to flow backwards and forwards at every step of the gun’s journey back home. With heartfelt thanks to the chain of people who facilitated its repatriation, particularly Peter McCafferty.

(Piers Dowding is a translator, and member of the NBTHK, the Okayama Castle Matchlock Troop, Japan Armo(u)r Society, UK Token, etc.)

Safe back home, ready for a new life of action



Part of The Mei, showing quality of execution



The Mizuno family Mon

