

TALES OF SWORDS BY RON GREGORY

THE TO-KEN SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN

for the Study and Preservation of Japanese Swords and Fittings



Hon. President: B. W. ROBINSON, M.A., B.LITT.

Secretary: H. M. HUTCHINSON, 141 Nork Way, Banstead, Surrey

PROGRAMME 85

MARCH - APRIL 1975

EDITOR - TONY GIBB

25 Dorville Crescent,
London W.6.

NEXT MEETING

Monday, 2nd June, 7.30 p.m. at the Princess Louise, High Holborn. To get there:- underground to Holborn, turn west, cross Kingsway and the P.L. is 50 yds down on the left-hand side.

COMMENT

We find ourselves nearly half way through 1975 and maybe it is a convenient time to look at the Japanese sword scene with relation to the To Ken Society of Great Britain.

The title sounds impressive; to anyone that is, that never or seldom attends meetings. For the majority of regular attending members a feeling of gloom seems again to be spreading. Not only are meetings badly attended but we seem to have more and more meetings with very little to talk about. Where Oh where have the British sword collectors gone. Have they all committed "Sepuku" or have they retired from public life on the profits of sword deals. Wherever they are they do not seem to turn up at meetings. There are many faces that I remember but, alas, are now conspicuous by their absence.

Given another year To-Ken meetings will consist of the committee and nobody else and as the committee is comprised mainly of dealers the Society could aptly be re-named as the To-Ken Chamber of Commerce!

Anyway this can easily be remedied by a little more support from members. It is not that difficult to spare one evening a month and I am sure most members could if they wished bring a few more swords and associated items to talk about.

It would be a pleasant change if we could get away from values of swords and actually look at them. Speculators, as we know, can make vast profits but they can also make vast losses. Even selling swords at auction has its draw-backs with high commission rates, V.A.T., and a certain country auction room making a separate charge for reading signatures. So why don't we just enjoy looking at, and studying, our swords for their own sake, instead of seeing a cash register.

But now to report on our last two meetings.

The March meeting consisted mainly of a talk by Richard Marriott-Smith on Gendai-To. This was in some respects similar to a recent talk given by Bill Gray but a little more detailed. Richard brought along a fine show of modern swords with all sorts of variations in construction and decoration, e.g. horimono. One sword which fascinated everyone was a tachi which had a modern blade. Later we were told that even the Koshirae was modern. (Yes, there do seem to be a lot of top condition tachi in the London auction rooms).

Richard is a good talker and a general question and answer session took place with Richard supplying the answers. A good meeting which was a little more relaxing than the tension of the day's sword dealing - but that is another story.

The April meeting which was to be on Bizen blades had a very poor turn out which was probably just as well as both speakers failed to turn up. The result was that a few members sat around and chatted for a while and then retired to the bar. Mr. Gibb (not me) of Clapham brought along a pleasant 62 plate Kaputo which we all admired. I believe this has now found a new owner.

As regards the next meetings it is really up to the members.

TALES OF JAPANESE SWORDS: Newspaper cutting passed on by Ron Gregory.

"I have outlived my honour" said Hidetsugu Toyotomi, the ex-Shogun to his retainers upon his receipt of an order from the great Taigo, his uncle, condemning him to death. "I have outlived my honour, not because I hesitate to die, but because I waited for his messenger. Had I killed myself before his arrival I should have been suspected of taking my own life lest

my suspected betrayal might be established. I accept the Shogunate command in order to establish my innocence".

Hidetsugu Toyotomi, suspected of having made a secret plan against Great Taigo, his uncle, had been confined on Mt. Koya, the Mecca of Japan's Buddhism. On July 15th 1595, Great Taigo sent Masanori Fukuchima carrying his Shogunate message condemning Hidetsugu to death. Several of his faithful retainers offered to commit self-immolation, but Hidetsugu discharged all his retainers, except three young pages who insisted upon accompanying their ill-fated master to death. They were Sanjuro Oka, 18 years old, Shudono, 19 years old and Mansaku Fuwa, 17 years old and the ex-Shogun handed them three swords called "Yoshimitsu Awadaguchi", "Kuniyoshi Awadaguchi" and "Toshiro Shinogi", respectively, with which to commit suicide.

"I am coming soon after you" the ex-Shogun said to the three pages. "Go in peace all of you".

"Excuse us for going before you", each of the three pages said "we will prepare the way for your honourable arrival in the other life".

After witnessing the calm self-immolation of the young men, the ex-Shogun took up his sword made by Masamune, the best swordsmith Japan has produced and then turning to Lord Sasabe he said:

"Now you assist me in my committing suicide".

In Japan harakiri is committed by cutting the front sideways and the Kaishakunin or seconder cuts the head of the suicide off. When the ex-Shogun had cut his front sideways he made a sign by raising his left hand to tell Sasabe to wait (..... missing words) Hidetsugu cut vertically to (..... missing words) on his front, and then (... missing words), his head off to complete his suicide. Hidetsugu Toyotomi was twenty eight years old when he killed himself.

The sword with which Lord Sasabe completed the suicide of the ex-Shogun Hidetsugu was called "Surf-Rider" (Nami-Nori) from an incident which took place at a certain ferry. Two travellers had a quarrel over a trifle. One was a little more reasonable than the other, and did not care to waste his time. So he began to wade across the stream, paying little attention to the angry words of the other, who struck at him from behind. The man, however, waded on for some distance till he dropped dead, his body parting in two. Hence the name of "Surf rider".

The three swords with which the pages committed their

self-immolation are still preserved as family treasures in the families of some local peers, though "surf-rider" has been lost

FIRE FLIES

In the second month (February) 1336, Takauji Ashikaga took refuge in Kyushu, where he was accorded with warm reception at the hands of the local chiefs, excepting Lord Kikuchi, the royalist who turned a strong front against him. A decisive battle was fought at Tatara between Kikuchi and Ashikaga.

Three brothers of Daiguji (Shinto priest) of the Aso shrine fought bravely under Kikuchi. It was a losing battle for Kikuchi and the three fought desperately at a disadvantage. All was well - nigh over with the three brothers. So the two elder brothers persuaded the youngest Korezumi by name to retreat. The death of the three would have meant the extinction of their family, and in our feudal days nothing was regarded a greater disgrace upon a samurai than the extinction of his family. With great reluctance, Korezumi obeyed. On coming to a quiet place he took a rest on a stone, and looked at his sword, the blade of which, as nicked as a saw, eloquently spoke how desperate the battle. There Korezumi took a nap and in a dream he saw numberless fire flies perching on the nicked blade of the sword. When he awoke, however, the blade had been mended and Korezumi attributed the mysterious mending of his sword to the protection of the deity of the Aso Shrine, of which his fathers had been the priests.

This sword, which was called "Fire-Flies" on account of the incident, was made by Kunitoshi Rai, who died in 1344 at the age of 105 years, and it was specified as a National Treasure of Japan a few years ago.

SUMO

Sumo conjures up visions of enormously portly Japanese gentlemen, staring balefully at each other across the contest area, and coming together like a couple of fleshy steam engines in a head-on collision. The facts, like many things Japanese, are rather more complicated, and again, like many things Japanese, its roots go away back into the past.

In fact Sumo has its roots right back in the misty age of mythology, when an ordinary mortal named Takemina-Kata-No-Kami challenged the champion of the divine pantheon Takemikazuchi

to a wrestling match. The winner was to be the undisputed owner of the Japanese islands and Takemikazuchi, possibly because his divinity loading the odds in his favour, emerged victorious. This story illustrates that great importance was placed on martial prowess from the earliest of times.

More factually, the Nihon Shoki (record of ancient events) says that combat Sumo (Sumai) as opposed to the present day sport of Sumo, began on a beach at Izumo, in what is today Shimane prefecture. In the presence of the Emperor Suinin in the year 23 B.C., the undefeated champion, Tajima No Kehaya, met the contender for the title Nomo-No-Sukune of Izumo. In the brutal fight that followed the challenger Sukune beat the champion Kehaya. It is recorded that Sukune kicked Kehaya, from a standing position, breaking the unfortunate champions rib-cage and knocking him to the ground. Not content with this he trampled on his opponent inflicting further injury on him, namely crushing his hip bone. The injuries proved fatal for Kehaya but enabled Sukune to claim the title and become the recognised founder of combat Sumo, properly known as Sumai.

It must be remembered that, unlike today, when all Budo is either a competitive sport, or at the best, a means to enlightenment through moving meditation, the aims of Bujitsu were to become proficient in combat. Sumo today for instance, as a sport does not require anything more than to beat one's opponent within the rules laid down. The object of Sumai (the combat or Bujitsu form) was to gain complete submission from whence one would, either bind the enemy, or more often despatch him with a sword. The subtle difference should not be too difficult to appreciate.

With Chinese and Buddhist influence creeping into Japan, certain religious elements found their way into the art and many of the more dangerous techniques fell into disuse. The art achieved Imperial patronage and annual tournaments were held in the Imperial presence. Great honour was conferred on successful wrestlers and many became guards at the Palace. The sport also became very popular with the ordinary people until late Heian times (794-1185) when the Emperor Nimmyo issued an edict saying that Sumo should revert to its original combat form (Sumai) and be considered to be part of the national fighting spirit. This took place roughly at the same time as the Samurai (warrior) class became aware of its potential power as a ruling elite, and the Taira and Minamoto clans were sharpening their swords in preparation for a hundred years of internal strife and civil war. The warrior class saw that Sumo was an ideal practice for combat and adopted it forthwith. Sumo developed into Kumi-Uchi (Sumo adapted to

grappling with armour) which synthesized the strong legs and close hip techniques of Sumo.

As the age of wars progressed, more and more of the great military clans eagerly sought expert Sumo wrestlers to train their warriors in their art and in both the Muromachi period (1392-1573) and the Momoyama period (1573-1600) Sumo attained its zenith as a combat form.

Like the production of swords and many other Bujitsu (combat) forms, the great peace that was the Tokugawa period (1600-1896) transformed Sumo into the Budo form that we know it today. The end of war meant that swords were made for their aesthetic rather than practical value and Kendo became a means for training for duels and mental exercise. In the same way Kyudo (archery) became less a means to hit a target and it mattered more the method that it was done, and that the correct mental attitude was present. This was the age that Cha-No-Ryo (tea ceremony) and Ikebana (flower arrangement) came into fashion and by the same token, Sumo wrestlers stopped trampling each other into the ground and formalised the sport much as it is today.

The popularity of the sport waxes and wanes with the popularity of the Yokuzuna (grand champions) possibly the greatest of whom was the recently retired Taiho. There are usually only two Yokuzuna around at any given time and one must win several tournaments to gain the coveted title of Yokuzuna. There are six tournaments a year and to win one will gain you the Emperor's Cup. A Yokuzuna would be a very experienced Sumotori (one who practises Sumo) and would be considered to be brilliant and unbeatable which makes it strange that there are usually two.

Sumotori train in 'stables' known as Heya under the supervision of a manager called Oyakata. The Oyakata exercises a strong disciplinarian hold over his proteges, that would make the strictest judo coach look benevolent. The most important control, other than training is the Sumotori's diet which has been described as 'Studied over-eating'. Although they appear enormously fat, a Sumo in top condition is about 6 feet tall and can weigh anything between 16-20 stone, their stomachs and thighs are usually rock hard.

The sport requires strength and agility mainly in the legs and thighs and without these a Sumotori will remain cannon fodder for those climbing to the heights of Grand Champions..

The contest area, called the Dohyo is a circle about 15 feet in diameter bounded by a straw rope. The two contestants crouch, facing each other, with their hands on their knees and

proceed to stamp on the ground glaring at each other. This is to scare off any demons or devils that may have come to upset the contest, but I suspect it is also a form of psyching one's opponent.

At a word from the referee, traditionally garbed, the contestants come together with a mighty crash. The object is to persuade one's opponent to touch the Dohyo with anything other than the soles of his feet, or to leave the circle entirely. This objective may be obtained by any means other than gouging the eyes, pulling the hair, punching or kicking in certain sensitive parts of the anatomy.

A contest seldom lasts more than 30 seconds, anything longer being considered a great test of stamina and strength. There are no rounds as the amount of energy expired in the duration of a contest is enormous.

When a wrestler is considered good, he, unlike Western boxers, who can wait four or five months for his next contest, must often fight every day, when even at 30 seconds a contest means that they have to be pretty fit.

An interesting story is told of a Commodore Perry of the U.S. Navy who, in 1853 at gunpoint forced Japan to open her doors to foreign trade after 250 years of isolation. He came bearing a letter from the U.S. President to the Emperor. The Japanese, having been forewarned of his approach by spies from Okinawa and not wishing to be intimidated and lose face to the brash barbarians, arranged among other things, to have many of the nation's top Sumotori on hand. If they did not convey, with their size and strength the fighting spirit of Japan, nothing would. Apparently undaunted Perry returned the following year and was again met by, among others, Sumotori of the day. It is recorded that on this occasion some of Perry's men challenged the Japanese champions but did not win a single match. After these events, wood block prints circulated widely throughout the country showing Sumo beating the barbarians.

As can be seen through this brief essay, Sumo has filtered into almost every aspect of Japanese history. It has been used in a semi religious context, as a weapon and form of training during a period of war, as a political expedient on the arrival of Perry, and as a national sport for the enjoyment of the populace. Even in the second World War, Sumo wrestlers travelled the country, stiffening the civilians' backbones and keeping up the national morale.

I have practised Sumo at a Judo club and find it great fun. A circle of judo belts forms the Dohyo and two

judoka stripped to the waist are the Sumo. It is good training and very exhausting. The correct technique can sometimes overcome brawn but I am afraid right is might usually. It is unlikely that the dedication, time and facilities for training will ever be available outside of Japan, and therefore it will probably never become an international sport.

Clive Sinclair
(2nd Dan Judo).

Malcolm Hutchinson has observed (and I think he has a point) that in the last programme "Chogi" is defined as "Clover tree blossom pattern" and that of course there is to his knowledge no such thing as a clover tree. The term should, he suggests, be "clove tree". Any observations?

OSHIGATA

A reminder to members who may have difficulties in reading tang inscriptions due to inadequate references; if they care to send a rubbing (oshigata) of the tang addressed to Alan Bale, 46 West Close, Woodthorpe Road, Ashford, Middlesex, he will check it for them and send them all available information he has on the smith or inscription. Please remember to make a careful rubbing of the whole tang, both sides, not just the inscription.

NEW MEMBERS

F. Serra, 17 Pierremont Crescent, Darlington, Co. Durham
P. Couch, Jefferson County Court House, Sheriffs Dept.,
716N 21st Street, Birmingham, Alabama 35203, U.S.A.
Hashime Saito, 1600 Stokes Street, No.23, San Jose, Calif.95126

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

J.A. Brewer to: 8 Hackworth Street, Dean Bank, Ferryhill, Co. Durham
V. Harris 17 Balmoral Crescent, West Molesey, Surrey
A.R. Crichton 41 Royal Road, Lord Byron Place, Edmonton,
Alberta, Canada

RESIGNED

M.J. Webb, S.W.6.
Major L.C. Holzman, M.D. U.S.A.

AMENDMENT TO PROGRAMME No.84

B. Carver and A.A. Kingdon have not resigned.