



**John D. Meehan.** *The Dominion and the Rising Sun: Canada Encounters Japan, 1929-41.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006. xvii + 288 pp. \$104.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7748-1120-0; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7748-1121-7.



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## Canada Looks to the East

Trade has always been the primary focus of Canada's official relations with Japan, with immigration concerns factoring into the equation in the early years. Thus tomes on economic related themes are plentiful, while a search of any university library turns up only a handful of books on Canadian-Japanese foreign relations. Fewer still deal with the interwar period, as most of the literature of this period is preoccupied with affairs on the European continent. To help remedy this dearth of scholarship, John Meehan's book, *The Dominion and the Rising Sun: Canada Encounters Japan, 1929-41*, is a welcome addition.

While Canadians, particularly missionaries, clearly encountered Japan before 1929, Meehan uses the creation of an official Canadian legation in Tokyo in 1929, and the declaration of war in 1941 as the boundaries for his study. The 1930s were a pivotal decade in the Far East, and Meehan follows the path of Japan from ally to global menace. Meehan freely admits that his work does not address the Japanese perceptions of Canada, which in itself would be an interesting study, albeit one very difficult to document in this period. Nonetheless, his work goes beyond Canada's relations with Japan, and deals

with the diverging interests in the Far East of Canada's most important allies, the United States and the United Kingdom. British policies generally tried to conciliate Japan, whereas the Americans gradually took a harder line. Where these policies came into conflict, Canada, Meehan posits, "would defer increasingly to its southern neighbour" (p. 8).

Since the early 1880s Canada maintained diplomatic offices in London, but Tokyo was only the third official overseas legation, behind Washington and Paris. Establishing relations with Japan was considered an important step on the road to dominion autonomy for Canada, and one not entered into lightly by the ever-cautious William Lyon Mackenzie King. Meehan sets the stage for Canada's diplomatic arrival in Japan, and deals with the myths about the Orient that were pervasive in Canada at the time. Immigration was a pressing domestic concern in Canada, particularly in British Columbia, which saw Japanese immigration limited to 400 persons a year, and later reduced to only 150. However, the primary focus of Herbert Marler, Canada's first Minister Plenipotentiary—not Ambassador—to Japan, was trade promotion.

Canadian businesses looking to the Orient generally preferred Japan as an economic partner as its strong central government provided for a stable investment climate—something that was distinctly lacking in China. It also provided a strong bulwark against communism, which led Canada missionaries and business interests in Japan, for the most part, to view Japan “in a positive light”—at least in the beginning (p. 25). Missionaries in Korea and China tended to hold somewhat different perspectives of Japanese imperialism, yet in the late 1920s and early 1930s most Canadians were preoccupied with issues closer to home to take much notice.

Events in Asia, however, came to the forefront with the crisis in Manchuria. Unable, for domestic reasons, to take action in the Far East, Britain and the United States were also unwilling to forcibly denounce Japan for fear of playing into the hands of the increasingly strong nationalist element in Tokyo. When compared to China, Japan was still considered to be the more stable ally, though the Japanese invasion of Manchuria alerted Canadians to the growing tensions in the Far East. Opinions on the issue of Japan’s actions, however, were divided. While Marler was very sympathetic to Japan, and its stated aims and objectives in Asia, this contrasted with the opinions of his deputy in Tokyo, Hugh Keenleyside. Meehan also chronicles the Canadian press reaction to Manchuria with some editorials deploring the blatant Japanese attack, while others perceived that it brought “order out of chaos” (p.73).

The discussion in chapter 4 of the failure of the League of Nations to deal with the crisis between Japan and China provides a good overview of Canada’s actions at Geneva. Canadian efforts were “predicated on the need to maintain Anglo-American harmony” and “sought a middle ground between [America’s] moral condemnation and Britain’s reluctance to isolate Japan” (pp. 57, 79). Yet the Canadian government’s lack of a clear policy and conflicting public statements only managed to alienate “nationalists in China, militarists in Japan, and internationalists at home” (p. 95).

Requisite to any discussion of Canada and the Manchurian Crisis is a discussion of C.H. Cahan’s fateful speech that acknowledged Japan’s “legitimate interests in the region” and went so far as to question the validity of China’s membership in the League. Cahan’s speech caused quite a stir, and, while the British were content pursuing a conciliatory approach to Japan, the Americans, and particularly the Chinese, were shocked by Cahan’s remarks. Ottawa had never intended for Cahan to

take such latitude with his speech. It was simply a case of “Ottawa’s unclear directives and poor communications with Geneva” (p.91). Yet when the Japanese minister in Ottawa called on O.D. Skelton at External Affairs to express his gratitude for Canada’s support, Skelton did not clarify the position reasoning that “[we] had better keep at least one friend for the time being” (p. 90). Meehan has done a good job encapsulating the episode into a concise five or six pages, and draws out an interesting, and often overlooked, conclusion: “Cahan’s views, as repugnant as they seem today, had a wider resonance within Canada at the time. Like Marler, he was stating publicly what many, including Skelton, believed privately about collective security. Not a single delegate at Geneva, Cahan intimated to a Canadian advisor there, was prepared ‘to give a man or a gun or a ship’ to defend League principles in the Far East” (p. 91). In what might be considered to be uncharacteristic behavior for a Canadian politician, Cahan was stating publicly what most people were thinking.

As Japan became politically isolated on the world stage, Canada continued to pursue economic and cultural relations. Claims of complicity in Japanese expansionism were levelled against some Canadian companies, and these firms—particularly those dealing in minerals such as nickel and other raw materials—undeniably benefited from trade with Japan. By the late 1930s, however, “trade was no longer a source of prestige but rather a thorn in Ottawa’s side,” but Meehan admits that “the case for complicity was difficult to substantiate” (p. 200).

Meehan follows the rising wave of militarism and xenophobia in Japan throughout the 1930s that ultimately escalated into war with China in the summer of 1937. The effects on Canada were incremental but, with the United States and the United Kingdom divided on how to deal with Japanese expansionism, at no time was the Canadian government willing to take a stand. Much as in Europe, Mackenzie King’s primary focus was to keep Canada out of war at all costs. It was not a heroic stand, but it was practical. It was around this time in the late 1930s that public opinion in Canada uniformly began to accept the threat posed by Japan in the Pacific, and preparations were slowly, and quietly, made in case of war. While accepting that Canada’s influence in the Far East was “minimal,” Meehan posits that Canada “could have made some impact on decision makers in London and Washington” (p. 169). Yet taking a stand against Japan would have obligated Canada, at least morally, to participate in any collective action against an aggressor. Hopes for collective security had long since been dashed, and Canada was unwilling to undertake such a bold and

forceful policy except as a last resort.

In covering the path to war in the Pacific, Meehan identifies the almost exclusive Eurocentric bias of the literature pertaining to Canada, and for the most part it goes across the board. With some notable exceptions, few studies attempt to combine the prelude to war in both Europe and Asia. Yet without this dual understanding, neither is completely satisfactory. Meehan's coverage of events is detailed and illuminating, but it is only half the story. And, for most Canadians, especially decision makers of the day, Adolf Hitler was seen as the immediate, and most dangerous, threat to world peace in the late 1930s.

Meehan's scholarship is solid and good use has been made of official Canadian documents, newspaper reports, and missionary sources from the era. For the most part, Meehan does a very good job weaving the political, social, and economic issues into an engaging narrative. British and American archival material, however, might have helped to present a clearer picture of the intricacy of

London and Washington's policies towards the Far East, as well as relations with each other. China—in its dealings with both Canada and Japan—also comes across as a bit one-dimensional given the complexity of its domestic situation with various factions vying for power in the interwar years. Yet it is, perhaps, not far off the perceptions most Canadians held of China at the time.

Meehan presents a case study of how Canada responded to Japanese imperialism and sheds light on Canada's, at times misguided, perceptions and policies towards Japan during an important time frame. While it may not offer any "new insights" into Canada's diplomatic coming of age, Meehan's work is a good companion to the established literature focusing on Europe and reinforces the global nature of Canada's compulsive drive to try and facilitate relations between London and Washington. His easy writing style allows him to convey the factual information while bringing to life the personalities involved, making this an enjoyable and useful addition to the literature at hand.

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