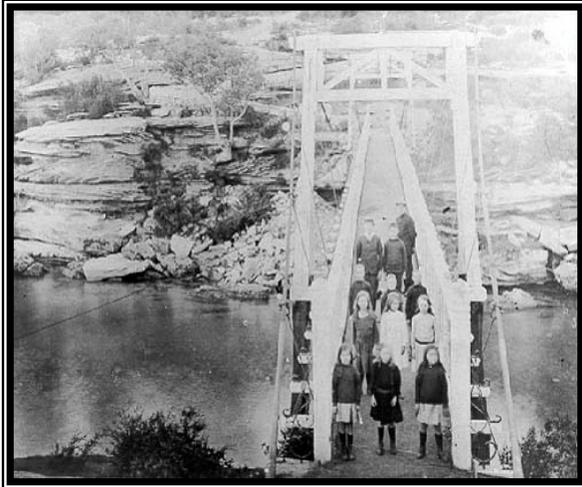


Woollahra Library Local History Centre



Japanese Antarctic Expedition



In 1911 a Japanese scientific team engaged on their first Antarctic expedition was forced by poor weather conditions and other difficulties to spend the winter in Sydney. The expedition had set sail from Tokyo in November 1910 in the 204 ton schooner the *Kainan Maru* and the commander of the 27 member team was Lieutenant Nobu Shirase.

The *Kainan Maru* entered Sydney harbour on the 1st May 1911 and after attempting to make camp in a number of harbourside locations the team eventually settled in the Parsley Bay Reserve.

One former resident of Parsley Bay was a small boy of four or five at the time and he remembered the Japanese carrying their supplies to a *place pretty near where the road that leads into Parsley Bay now* and then making camp in the scrub. He recalled that the team was equipped with huts – demountable wooden structures that collapsed to become flat and were then bolted together in situ. These huts were apparently quite comfortable.

The residents of the immediate area appeared to have been on friendly terms with the Japanese, with the visitors putting on a performance of martial arts for the locals. The small boy above remembers practically living at their camp. The view of Vauclose Council, as taken from their minutes, seemed to be one mostly concerned with the sanitary arrangements of the camp.

However the general fear of Asian influence was highlighted in the Sydney press of the time, and much was made of the fact that the expedition's camp was so close to the South Head fort – with rumours that the party included several secret military service agents. Professor Edgeworth David of the University of Sydney, himself an Antarctic explorer, provided a voice of sanity amidst these rumours and exaggerations, defending the team as fellow scientists. On returning to Sydney in 1912 after reaching the Antarctic Lieutenant Shirase presented Professor Edgeworth David with a samurai sword in gratitude and goodwill for all his assistance. The sword is now displayed in the Australian Museum, Sydney.

The concern over the intentions of the expedition abated and the team went about refitting their ship. Shirase and some other members of the team returned home to raise extra funds and soon after their

return to Parsley Bay the expedition left for the Antarctic in November 1911. The former resident recalled that many of the people of Parsley Bay went onto the cliff behind Reid's shop to farewell the Japanese visitors.

This same family's Queensland cattle dog, named Derby, had become very popular with the camping expeditioners – so much so that the family presented the dog to them when they left. Although the dog was taken on board and the ship had begun to set sail, it was suddenly decided that Derby with his short hair would be ill suited to the extreme cold of the Antarctic. So a boat was lowered and rowed back into Parsley Bay to return the dog.

The small boy who remembered the party camping in the reserve was to have a second encounter with the 1911 Antarctic team. When he was visiting Japan in 1955 he discovered that the staff member on the hotel reception desk where he was staying had been the business manager of the Antarctic expedition.

In March 2002 Woollahra Council unveiled a commemorative plaque that marked the ninetieth anniversary of this first Japanese Antarctic expedition led by Lieutenant Nobu Shirase and the shelter the team took at Parsley Bay. A delegation from the town of Konoura, the birthplace of Shirase, attended the unveiling.

Sources

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- Oral history interview with Mr Robert Hilliar recorded 16th June 1993. Woollahra library oral history collection.
- Couch, Shelli Ann "Unique Samurai sword exchanged for food and maps in 1912" in *Sydney Morning Herald* Saturday 11th 1992, p.22.

Other Resources

- The Story of the Shirase sword by Colin Macgregor, viewed 22.09.03
<<http://www.amonline.net.au/archive.cfm?id=403>>
- The Shirase Antarctic Expedition Memorial Museum, viewed 22.09.03
<<http://www.media-akita.or.jp/akita-pioneers/shirase2E.html>>
- Nobu Shirase, viewed 22.09.03
<<http://www.media-akita.or.jp/akita-pioneers/shirase1E.html>>

A note on the photo: Mr Robert Hilliar donated the above photograph to Woollahra Library. A member of the expedition stands behind the children on the suspension bridge of Parsley Bay.



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