

# Nitobe Inazo and *Bushido*

By Sato Masahiro

## I

The year 2000 marked the 100th anniversary of the publication of Nitobe Inazo's (1862-1933) *Bushido – The Soul of Japan*, which he wrote in English. Ceremonies were held all over Japan to commemorate the event. The Nitobe Foundation, which has been steadily carrying out a succession of fine activities since its foundation in 1984, held a grand commemorative event in the northern city of Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, where Nitobe was born, to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication. The foundation invited Tweed Roosevelt, great-grandson of former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, to take part in the activities. It was a well chosen invitation, for President Roosevelt had acted as the intermediary in negotiations between Japan and Russia that led to the Treaty of Portsmouth, which concluded the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. At the event, Tweed Roosevelt gave a speech titled "How Dr. Nitobe Changed World History" and scholars from around the world had an international symposium on "What Dr. Nitobe Would Hope for in the 21st Century," and a memorial essay contest for university students throughout Japan was organized. In addition, the Nitobe Seminar House was established in Towa-cho, Iwate Prefecture.

In Tokyo, the United Nations University organized a symposium (sponsored by the former Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Yomiuri Shimbun) to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication. Lectures on *Bushido* and Nitobe were also held in many other locations, including Sapporo (Hokkaido), Mito (Ibaraki Prefecture), Osaka, Hiroshima, Zentsuji



Nitobe and his wife Mary with the current ¥5,000 note in the foreground

(Kagawa Prefecture) and Iwate Prefecture's Higashiyama-cho and Hanamaki. The lectures were held at a wide range of places, including universities, community colleges, churches, clubs and junior high schools.

Nitobe originally wrote *Bushido* in English while in California, and it has since been translated into Japanese many times. The first Japanese version was made in 1908 by his friend Sakurai Oson. A second translation was made in 1938 by Nitobe's disciple Yanaihara Tadao (available in the Iwanami Library of Classics), and four translations came out after World War II. Each of these translations was based on the 10th revised and enlarged edition of 1905. Kyo Bun Kwan, a leading

Christian publishing house in Tokyo and the publisher of a 23-volume and two supplementary volumes set of the complete works of Nitobe, marked the 100th anniversary of *Bushido* by publishing another translation. Translated by myself, this latest effort is based on the first careful comparison of the first edition and the revised 10th edition.

*Bushido* was published in 1900 by a small firm in Philadelphia called Reeds and Biddle. Nitobe was 37 years old at the time, and the book was a mere 127 pages long. Right after the book came out, Nitobe went to Taiwan, then Japan's newly acquired colony, to take part in an effort to improve the sugar industry there. His studies of the sugar industry took him all over the world, from the United States to Europe, and from Egypt to the Indian Ocean. He returned to Japan in 1901. There he discovered that a pirated version of *Bushido* was already being published and even went through several editions in Japan in English.

Within a few years of its publication, the book was translated into German, Polish, Bohemian and Marathi (a language used on the Indian subcontinent), and not long afterwards more translations came out in French, Norwegian, Hungarian, Russian, Chinese, Greek and Arabic. The book has now been translated into more than 30 different languages. Even including novels, it has probably been translated into more languages than any other book by any post-Meiji Japanese author. (Meiji period: 1868-1912)

Why would *Bushido* be so well received all over the world, and even today still be considered as required reading for anyone wishing to understand Japan? Why would Nitobe Inazo, who was trained in agricultural policy and agricultural economics, write such

a book? And why would he write it in English, no less? To find the answers to these questions, one must take a closer look at the life of young Nitobe Inazo.

## II

Nitobe was born on Sept. 1, 1862 as the third son of Nitobe Jujiro, a samurai retainer of Nanbu *Han* (feudal domain) centered on Morioka. In addition to two elder brothers, he also had four older sisters (he was the youngest child in his family). The Nitobe name had been known since medieval ages in Japan. Throughout much of the Edo period (1603-1867), the Nitobe clan's fiefdom had received 700 *koku* of rice per year, and even in the waning days of the shogunate it was still a 200-*koku* fiefdom, thus the Nitobe were a genuine samurai household. Both his father Jujiro and his grandfather Tsutou worked to open up new land for cultivation in the domain's Sanbongihara (modern-day Towada, Aomori Prefecture). Nitobe's father and grand-

father dug a tunnel and used water from Towada Lake for irrigation, thus turning the barren land around Sanbongihara into a beautiful rice field. The two men also drew up plans for a city. But Nitobe Jujiro's obvious talents landed him in trouble with incompetent superiors, who cut Jujiro's career short through slander. Jujiro died in his anguish when Inazo was just five years old. Nitobe, raised by his mother Seki, eventually went to Tokyo to study English, staying at a clothing shop run by his uncle Ota Tokitoshi, who adopted the boy. In 1873, Nitobe enrolled in a famous Foreign Language School in Tokyo (it would later become the University Preparatory Academy). Then in 1877 he enrolled in the Sapporo Agricultural College (SAC), which had been established in 1876 to train personnel for the settlement of Hokkaido. He graduated from the college in 1881.

Nitobe entered SAC at the same time as Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930; who went on to become an independent Christian missionary) and Miyabe

Kingo (1860-1951; who became a botanist and was eventually given the prestigious Order of Cultural Merits). He was first to sign the "Covenant of the Believers in Jesus," established by William S. Clark after his much-celebrated year at SAC, among students in the second class, and Nitobe was baptized as a Christian the following year. Following graduation he worked as a civil servant for the Hokkaido Development Agency, helping with the settlement effort, as required of all SAC graduates at that time. His post was later eliminated by reform, and in 1883 he began undergraduate studies at the University of Tokyo. It was during his interview for admittance to the university that Nitobe, in response to a question from Toyama Masakazu, uttered

the famous phrase, "I wish I would be a bridge across the Pacific Ocean." These words were to shape the rest of his life.

Young Nitobe withdrew from the University of Tokyo after just one year, however, and went off to study at Johns Hopkins University of the United States, where he would remain for three years. While in the United States he was appointed a SAC assistant, and was sent at once to Germany, where he spent four years studying at three different universities. He received a doctorate, got married to Mary Patterson Elkinton (an American), and returned with his wife to Japan in 1891, where he spent seven years as a professor at SAC. In addition to teaching 19 hours of courses per week in a wide range of subjects at SAC, he also served as principal of the private Hokumei High School, worked as a technical advisor to the Hokkaido Agency to assist in the still-new settlement effort, and participated actively in a number of cultural organizations. The heavy workload resulted in a mild nervous breakdown (writer's cramp). Nitobe took a sabbatical and then retired from academic life in 1898.

Upon the advice of Erwin Bältz, a German doctor serving as personal physician to the Meiji Emperor, Nitobe went together with his wife Mary to recuperate in the United States. While resting at Hotel Del Monte (now extended and rebuilt as the Graduate School of the U.S. Navy) in Monterey, central California, Nitobe wrote *Bushido – The Soul of Japan*.

## III

Nitobe's reason for writing *Bushido* is stated clearly in the preface to the first edition. While studying in Germany, he visited the Belgian legal scholar Emile Louis Victor de Laveleye (1822-92) for two days in the fall of 1887. During a stroll with de Laveleye, the conversation turned by chance to the subject of religion. The Belgian was surprised when Nitobe told him that religion was not taught in Japanese schools, and stopped dead in his tracks to ask again, "No religion! How do

Photo : Kyo Bun Kwan



Nitobe, Miyabe Kingo and Uchimura Kanzo (from the left) around 1883

you impart moral education?" Nitobe was at a loss for an answer, and the question always remained in his mind.

His American wife also had many questions about the behavior and thought of the Japanese people. In formulating his responses, Nitobe gradually formed the idea that it was *bushido* (or the way of the samurai, means literally "Military-Knight-Ways") that underlay the traditional Japanese spirit. Happy to find himself with free time thanks to his convalescence, he wrote *Bushido* to explain his ideas on the subject.

*Bushido* was thus written during a period of convalescence in the United States, virtually without any Japanese reference materials at hand. He did make use of the local library in the United States, but West-coast libraries in those days could not have had many books on Japan. Working under such adverse conditions, rather than consulting books and other written records, Nitobe must have relied on knowledge picked up here and there since childhood from legend and storytellers, combining what he knew of the samurai lifestyle with the deep knowledge of Western religion, history and philosophy that he had acquired during a lifetime of rigorous academic work. *Bushido* was most definitely not a scholarly tome.

Many rigorously researched works did come out after Nitobe's *Bushido*, which met with considerable critical success in Japan and abroad. The University of Tokyo professor Inoue Tetsujiro (1854-1944) compiled a multi-volume work on *bushido* in the closing years of the Meiji reign, and during the reign of the Taisho Emperor (1912-1926) the Zen monk Nukariya Kaiten (1867-1934) published *The Religion of the Samurai* in the United Kingdom. These are just two of the many well-done studies published in the ensuing years, but all of those academic works have since faded into oblivion. Only Nitobe's book still stands as a classic today, a full century later. Why should that be?

#### IV

I can think of eight possible reasons.

(1) First, the word "*bushido*" was almost never used in Japanese at that time. The term does appear right at the beginning of *Hagakure*, a book about the samurai spirit that was published during the Edo period in the Saga domain, but it was not until later years that *Hagakure* became widely known. Nitobe had not read it. What Nitobe called "*bushido*," people in the Edo period called "*shido*" or "*budo*" (see, for example, works by Ihara Saikaku [1642-1693; *Budo Denraiki*] and Daidoji Yuzan [1639-1730; *Budo Shoshin-shu*]). Indeed, some critics have even charged that Nitobe fabricated the term "*bushido*" and its definition. Today, however, the word "*bushido*" exists in every country on the planet. It is listed, for example, in the Concise Oxford Dictionary.

(2) Second, anyone researching the way of the samurai today is over a century removed from their subject. They have no personal experience of it. Nitobe, on the other hand, was born to a samurai clan. At the age of five he sat at a ceremony of wearing a sword at his side. Although just a child, he knew the weight of the sword. He grew up in an authentic samurai atmosphere. His background could not but lend power to his writing.

(3) The samurai that Nitobe referred to in *Bushido* to illustrate his points were the heroes of theatrical works, folk tales and legends. As such, they were well known to average Japanese people. As the classical embodiment of Japanese legends, they enhanced the persuasiveness of Nitobe's work.

(4) Writers in the Meiji period quoted many ancient poems to illustrate their points. This made their narrative extremely readable and created a strong resonance in the minds of their readers. Nitobe also translated many ancient Japanese poems in *Bushido*, and he adroitly threw in English and Latin

poetry as well. (Yamamuro Gumpei [1872-1940], founder of the Japanese branch of the Salvation Army, made similarly effective use of ancient Japanese poems in writing *The People's Gospel*.)

(5) *Bushido* is a small book. The first edition only runs to 127 pages, and even the revised 10th edition of 1905, to which Nitobe added some 20%, and which includes a long, superbly written introduction by William Elliot Griffis (nine pages in the Tuttle Edition), still falls well short of 200 pages. The book is divided into 17 chapters which provide succinct discussions of everything from the historical roots to the future of *bushido*, as well as the cardinal virtues of the samurai way of life: rectitude, courage, benevolence, sincerity, honour and self-control. It would be impossible to get as vivid a picture from a 500-page book.

(6) The book is also very humorous. He compares the "patriarchy" of *bushido* with what he playfully terms the "avuncular government" of Uncle Sam (the United States). He speculates that Adam and Eve, after breaking their covenant with God and getting banished from paradise, must have been very sad to realize that there hadn't been a gentleman in the Garden of Eden. This type of refined humor must have gone over very well with Anglo-Saxon readers, who tend to appreciate humor in their writing.

(7) And most important of all, Nitobe demonstrates enormous breadth of scholarship in the book, taking inspiration from Japanese, Chinese and Western sources. From the East he draws upon *The Analects of Confucius*, *Mencius*, *Lao-tzu*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Koran*. At the same time, he also affluently draws upon Western philosophy, historiography and literature. He discusses the ideas of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Democritus, the Stoic school, Descartes, Bacon, Hegel, Spencer, Marx and Nietzsche, and writes knowledgeably about the literature of Homer,

Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Carlyle, Tennyson, Longfellow and Whittier. Such historians as Hesiod, Tacitus, Plutarch, Gibbon and Momsen all make appearances in the book. English Bible quotes abound. He manages to mention 250 figures from both East and West without introducing complexity. He was able to accomplish this feat because he clearly knew his subject matter inside and out.

(8) And finally, *Bushido* appeared at just the right time, between Japan's wars with China and Russia. Japan, the fastest-modernizing state in Asia, defeated China, Asia's "sleeping dragon," and followed up by trouncing Russia, a great empire spanning Europe and Asia, at both land and sea. The entire world was agog at Japan's impressive victories. To argue precisely at that time that the Japanese spirit was based on *bushido*, the way of the warrior, had a very convincing ring to observers throughout the world. That is why the book was so quickly translated into so many different languages. The smaller oppressed nations of Europe (such as Poland and Hungary) were greatly heartened by Nitobe's narrative, and the peoples of Asia saw in *bushido* an example that they might follow. The world was ripe for the message contained in *Bushido*.

## V

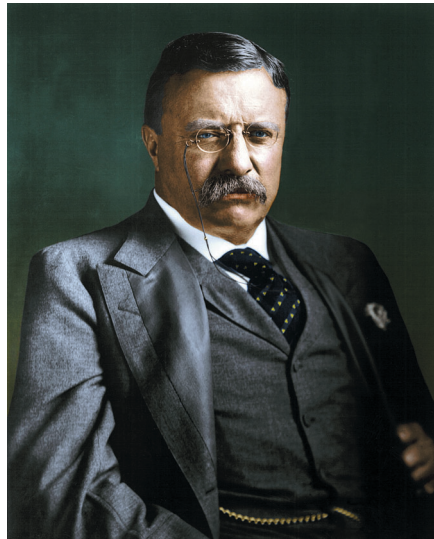
But *Bushido* played a still greater historical role in the United States, and by extension, throughout the entire world, for it was this book that prompted Theodore Roosevelt to actively mediate peace talks between Japan and Russia.

Quite unlike the wars of the Showa era (beginning from the Manchurian Incident of 1931), the Japanese government began thinking of ways to end the war with Russia almost as soon as the hostilities broke out. It dispatched Harvard-educated Kaneko Kentaro (1853-1942) as a special emissary to enlist the aid of the United States, which did not have any territorial ambitions in Asia. Kaneko, who had known

Roosevelt since his days at Harvard, met with the president. To help Roosevelt get a better understanding of Japan, Kaneko gave him a copy of *Bushido*.

Despite his heavy schedule, President Roosevelt was in the habit of reading

Photo : Archive Photos / APL



Theodore Roosevelt actively mediated peace between Japan and Russia

an entire book per day, and sometimes would even read three. A formidable speed reader, Roosevelt promptly dispatched *Bushido* and was deeply impressed. The First Lady also acquired her own copy of *Bushido* and read it herself. The president bought another 30 copies and distributed them to colleagues, friends and acquaintances, strongly advising them all to read it.

Roosevelt was so impressed by the book not just because he agreed with the values discussed in it, but also because of a terrible tragedy that he had suffered in his own life.

Elected to the New York State Assembly at just 24 years of age, he suddenly lost both his wife (during childbirth) and his mother (from disease). Brokenhearted, he withdrew from politics and left the hustle and bustle of New York behind, retiring to a ranch in North Dakota to heal his wounds. There he got to know real-life

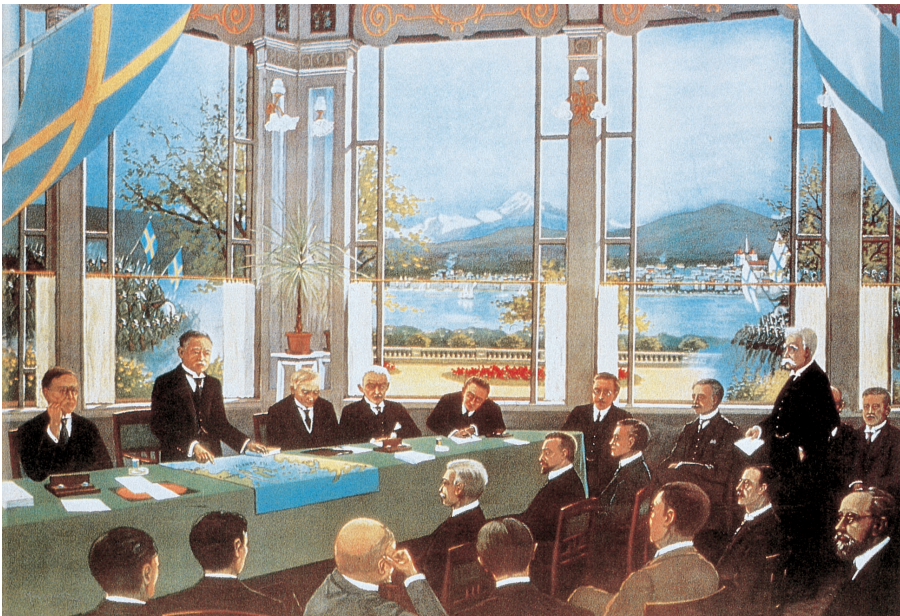
cowboys, and came to identify strongly with the cowboy spirit. After returning to political life, he wrote a book about cowboys.

Upon reading the copy of *Bushido* given to him by Kaneko, Roosevelt was thunderstruck by the similarities he saw between Japan's 700-year-old samurai tradition and the cowboy spirit that had grown up in just 50 years. Neither the samurai nor the cowboy had any desire for needless conflict, but should the need arise, they were both capable of running any risk. Both valued loyalty to one's superiors. Neither would ever tell a lie. Both demonstrated complete sincerity. Both placed the highest possible value on honor. Both had great regard for self-control, and considered courtesy and common decency very important. Both cared greatly about their weapons, and would keep them by their side day and night.

That is why Roosevelt worked so hard to facilitate peace talks between Japan, the homeland of *bushido*, and Russia. In this he succeeded, and for his efforts was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Many things in life that seem to be the product of mere chance are not actually so. Somewhere far behind the scenes, beyond our understanding, a force is at work, determining when illness and accident shall strike, and when a loved one shall die. Nitobe was able to write *Bushido* only because he overworked himself to the point that he was forced to quit his job at SAC and convalesce in the United States. Roosevelt was able to appreciate the book so keenly precisely because he lost the two women he loved most at the age of 24 and retreated to the American West, where he got to know the cowboy lifestyle. Nitobe's illness, Roosevelt's loss of two family members – these two seemingly unrelated happenings on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean combined to bring about peace between Japan and Russia, and catapulted Nitobe and *Bushido* to international fame. Nothing in this world happens purely by chance. Everything is guided by the hand of Providence.

Photo : Morioka Memorial Museum of Great Predecessors



Nitobe (second from the left) arbitrating a territorial issue at a conference of the League of Nations

## VI

Although *Bushido* sought to explain the spirit that fed the development of moral values in traditional Japan, it did more than just peer back into the past. I believe the book contains at least three arguments that have deep relevance to 21st-century Japan and, indeed, to the entire world.

First, the book argues that “the spiritual values of every nation on earth are rooted in that nation’s traditional culture.” Modern Western civilization is not the world’s only civilization. Western Christianity is not the world’s only teaching about truth. The history of every single nation on earth represents one page in the history of mankind, and is of irreplaceable value. These things Nitobe believed 100 years ago, when Western civilization had arrived at its full flowering. Nitobe’s ideas remain a forceful argument in favor of a certain type of attitude that we should maintain in today’s world, where globalization is proceeding apace and different nations and ethnic groups live in constant contact with each other, for *Bushido* calls upon us to recognize the value of each nation’s

existence, to humble ourselves, learn from each other and support each other. There is an especially urgent need for this sort of attitude when it comes to religion and ideology. Nitobe’s way of thinking offers us a way out of the dilemma of our modern times.

Second, Nitobe argued that “no matter how different any two cultures may appear to be on the surface, they are still cultures created by human beings, and as such have deep similarities.” When a Japanese person hands a gift to someone, he/she derides the gift as a junky little trinket, while an American gift giver will gush about how nice the gift is. On the surface, these behaviors seem poles apart, but in both cases the gift giver is showing his/her esteem for the other person. This book focuses on Japanese *bushido* and Western chivalry, but the same things could be said regarding any aspect of any other pair of cultures. The same basic human spirit is shared by all of mankind, and this shared spirit is the foundation of peace.

And third, Nitobe argues that “the heart of the Japanese people will never change, no matter how things may seem to change on the surface.” Nitobe

believed that by combining with greater teachings, *bushido* would make a great contribution to all of humanity. The way of the samurai is not something peculiarly Japanese, but is something of universal value to the entire human race. The people of other nationalities are also capable of appreciating its worth.

Out of a desire to make *Bushido* which contains this important truth a bit more accessible to today’s youth, I have made a new translation of the book. I’ve added 640 footnotes to shed a bit of light on the facts, people, places and historical incidents mentioned in the book, and I’ve also compiled a detailed index.

Nitobe was named Under Secretary-General of the League of Nations, which was established following World War I, and he served for seven years in this position, working to further the cause of world peace by promoting mutual understanding. After finishing his service at the League of Nations, Nitobe returned to Japan in 1927 and became Advisory Editor of the *Osaka Mainichi Shimbun* in 1929. In this capacity he contributed frequent articles to the English *Osaka Mainichi*, appealing to people in both Japan and abroad for peace. At the same time, he also served as chairman of the Institute of Pacific Relations. He used this position to work for mutual understanding among the peoples of the Pacific region. He died on Oct. 15, 1933, after attending its fifth conference in Banff, Canada. In the Nitobe Memorial Garden on the campus of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, a brief description of his life is inscribed on a copper tablet affixed to a four-meter-high stone lantern.

*Apostle of Goodwill among Nations*

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