

Knowing by Going: The Iwakura Embassy and the Discovery of the Earth's Natural Environment

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Introduction

Knowing by going extends holds true beyond national borders. During the Edo period (1603–1868), Japan's knowledge about the outside world, including its physical geography and natural environment, was limited to hearsay and book learning. Beginning with the 1860 Japanese embassy to the United States to ratify the new Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation, it became possible for a limited number of Japanese people to see and experience the world first hand. On board the *Kanrin-maru*, the Japanese ship that accompanied the mission, was Fukuzawa Yukichi, who would emerge as Japan's most prominent westernizer in the early years of the Meiji period. Fukuzawa also accompanied the bakufu's embassy to Europe in 1862 and used his foreign experiences to write a book that challenged and informed many ordinary Japanese about "Conditions in the West," the title of his 1866 best seller. This paper focuses on the large and distinguished Iwakura Embassy that was sent around the world by the Japanese government in 1871–1873, only a few years after the Meiji Restoration of 1868.¹⁾

The chronicler of the mission, Kume Kunitake (1839–1931), was a young Confucian scholar, age 32 at the time, a former samurai from Saga in northern Kyushu. He had never been outside Japan and had no background in Western studies or languages. Kume travelled around the world with the Embassy and kept careful and copious notes which were later revised and published in 1878 in five volumes: *Bei-Ō Kairan Jikki* (An Actual Record of Travel Through America and Europe.)²⁾ As we will see, this record not only included observations of factories and other sites of industrial civilization, but expressions of amazement at the wealth and diversity of the natural environment of the world. It was also richly illustrated with over 300 copper engravings. The "knowing by going" experiences of Kume Kunitake and his discovery of the Earth's natural environment are the central concern of this essay.

On 29 August 1871, Prince Iwakura Tomomi (1825–83), an aristocrat and former court official who had come to accept the need to open Japan to foreign trade, was appointed foreign minister. Iwakura quickly announced plans to lead a special mission to observe Western countries at first hand and exchange views on treaty revision before starting to negotiate with the United States and the nations of Europe. The Embassy set off by steamship from the port of Yokohama on 23 December (1871),



Figure 1: Leading Members of the Iwakura Mission. From Left to Right: Kido Kōin, Yamaguchi Naoyoshi, Iwakura Tomomi, Itō Hirobumi, Ōkubo Toshimichi. Note that Iwakura, in formal Japanese attire, is nonetheless wearing leather shoes.

carrying letters from the Emperor Meiji to heads of state in foreign countries.

The leaders and members of the Iwakura Embassy were all fairly young, but they had had substantial government experience. Prince Iwakura (age 46) originated from the emperor's court and was an influential government minister. He was accompanied, as vice-ambassadors, by Kido Kōin (age 38), and Ōkubo Toshimichi (Satsuma, age 41), minister of finance, as representatives of the new imperial government. They were assisted by two deputy ambassadors: Yamaguchi Naoyoshi (age 29) of the Hizen clan and Itō Hirobumi (age 30), who came from the Ministry of Public Works. Itō was the most westernized of his senior colleagues. For two years (1862-64) he had studied in London as one of Japan's earliest students abroad; later in 1870, he spent 6 months in Washington DC studying the American national bank system. By virtue of the time he had spent overseas he was able to speak passable English and, as deputy ambassador, was often called up to deliver formal addresses at receptions.

In addition, there were some 45 clerks and commissioners, who were charged with writing specialized reports. In total, 108 Japanese embassy personnel left the port of Yokohama on the Pacific Mail steamship *America*. The Iwakura Embassy was a balanced delegation of progressive forces within the new Meiji Restoration government. There were also junior officials and students, including five young girl students, who would remain to complete their education in the United States.

Remarkably, while still recovering from a bloody civil war and headed by an inexperienced 21-year-old emperor, the new government decided to dispatch a great number of its leaders on an expensive and lengthy journey around the world. The two major goals of the Iwakura Mission were: 1) To visit countries with which Japan had been obliged to enter into treaties—the so-called unequal treaties—and explore



Figure 2: View of San Francisco (Golden Gate and Black Point).
(Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

possibilities for revision; 2) To inspect schools, colleges, hospitals, factories, military and naval bases and other institutions in advanced countries as useful models for Japan's modernization. In addition, as this essay will point out, the members of the mission were eager simply to see the world outside Japan, and learn about the physical geography of the rural, urban, and wilderness environments of different countries of the world.

The Embassy in San Francisco: The Usual Story

On the morning of 15 January 1872, the US-owned Pacific mail steamer *America*, after a 22-day voyage across the Pacific from Yokohama, arrived at San Francisco with its 108 Japanese passengers. Here is how Kume described the Embassy's first view of the United States:

15 January 15, 1872 [6th day of 12th month]. Fine. At first light this morning the sea fog was so thick that we could not even distinguish objects which were only a foot away from our eyes. The entire deck of the *America* was shrouded in mist. The captain [Doane] therefore ordered the paddle-steamer to heave-to in the ocean for a time, to await the dawn. With sunrise, as the mists began to lift, we could distinguish the mountains of California ahead. They emerged more clearly as the sun gradually rose higher. The *America* advanced slowly. Directly to the east two ridges of mountains parted to reveal a great natural gateway. Through it we could see sea, and steamships passing to and fro with smoke rising from their funnels, making a truly beautiful sight. This was the celebrated Golden Gate.³⁾

San Francisco was the mission's first stop on a trip that, by ship, train and horse-

drawn carriage, would take Kume and the Embassy members across continents, across oceans, into the icy north and into the tropics, over mountains, plains, and deserts. It was a truly eye-opening experience for these leaders of a new Japan, many of them who had never been outside of their country before—and representatives of a rising nation that had only recently relaxed restrictions on interactions with the outside world. As the spokesman for the group, Itō Hirobumi, put it in his speech in San Francisco: “The red disk in the center of our national flag shall no longer appear like a wafer over a sealed empire, but henceforth be in fact what it is designed to be, the noble emblem of the rising sun, moving onward and upward amid the enlightened nations of the world.”⁴⁾

Usual accounts stress the industrial and institutional knowledge gained by the members of the Iwakura mission during their trip around the world. Everywhere they visited factories, shipyards, schools, hospitals, museums, and centers of government. They marveled at the smoke rising from factory buildings in urban centers. The visit to San Francisco was typical. During their 15 day stay in the city, the Iwakura Embassy members were wined and dined, introduced to the mayor [William Alvord] and local dignitaries, and shown around schools and factories.

On 18 January, for example, they were shown around several local factories, and a zoological and botanical garden. This sort of schedule would be repeated in city after city, country after country:

Guides from city took us to the following factories. The Kimball Carriage Factory in Bryant Street, the largest such factory in the state, produces some 500 large and 1,200 small carriages each year. One hundred and fifty craftsmen work here every day. Steam-driven machinery facilitates production. The Mission Woolen Mill specializes in weaving blankets and carpets. The factory utilizes 1,200,000 pounds of wool a year, worth \$1,000,000. There were 100 white craftsmen, 240 Chinese, and 2 Japanese. The mill gave us a collation of wine and fruit.⁵⁾

Later, on 23 January 1872, the Embassy members made the first of their many school visits in America and Europe.

At ten o'clock in the morning we visited the Denman School for Girls [at Bush and Taylor streets]. The school was a four-storyed building, about 36 yards long by about 22 yards wide. Inside it were fourteen classrooms, with one teacher for every 28 students. The total number of students was 820. The school was built in 1864 at a cost of \$78,000, including both construction and equipment. It taught the usual subjects for a grammar school: reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, science, physics, general history, singing, and needlework. On this day a teacher played the piano and the girls sang the first verse of [Schubert's] ‘Rose Song.’”

An Alternate Story: Gaining Environmental Knowledge

In addition to these tours of factories and other sites connected with “civilization and enlightenment,” the members of the Iwakura Mission were able to gain a wealth of geographical and environmental knowledge. Perry’s visit to Japan in 1853 is often credited with the opening of Japan to the world, but it can be argued that the Iwakura Mission deserves credit for making people in Japan, as well as the members of the Embassy, more aware of the diversity of peoples, lands, climates, and ecologies that make up the planet Earth. Kume Kunitake proved himself a keen observer, and recorder, of the natural and built environments of the countries visited. And once published. Kume’s detailed report on the mission, the *Bei-Ō Kairan Jikki* proved to be popular reading. With fluid prose and the inclusion of over 300 copper etchings of iconic sites of manmade and natural beauty, many taken from contemporary travel companions such as *Appleton’s European Guide book Illustrated* (1870) as well as from souvenir illustrations bought along the way, Kume’s work was no dry official report; instead it served as a guidebook for a growing number of Japanese tourists eager to see the wonders of the world for themselves.

After two weeks in San Francisco, on 31 January 1872, the members of the Embassy set out by rail across the United States for Washington D.C. The Japanese delegates were immediately curious about what they saw outside the train windows. Kume kept a careful record of the natural scenery of the United States and all other countries the Embassy passed through. Here, for example, is an observation he made while he and the Embassy were travelling across the United States by rail from San Francisco, via Chicago, to Washington D.C:

It may be appropriate at this point to summarize what we observed about the opening up and development of the various states we saw on our journey from San Francisco [to Washington D.C.]. ... From the moment we left San Francisco, emerging from the tunnel in the Coast Ranges to see the great, empty California plains stretching to the horizon, we talked of little else but the actual conditions of the opening up of America. We were all impressed by the magnitude of this enterprise. When we saw rivers, we commented on their potential for transportation and irrigation. When we looked out over the plains, we noted the shape and character of fields and roads. When the train ran through hills and mountains, we wondered what minerals were being mined, or timber felled. When we passed through small towns and village stations, we noted something of the lives of the people in those communities. Everything we saw was connected in some way to the matter of development. In describing Nevada and Utah [Chapters 5 & 6] I mentioned the income from precious metals, and in the Rocky Mountains I described the railroad running through the wilderness. Crossing the Mississippi, I commented on transportation by water, while at Omaha I discussed Indian corn and immigrants. Everything we have seen has impressed us, including the construction of bridges, the repair of roads, the Mormon faithful pioneering in the desert, and the spinning and weaving of wool. All these activities have contributed to the taming of the wil-

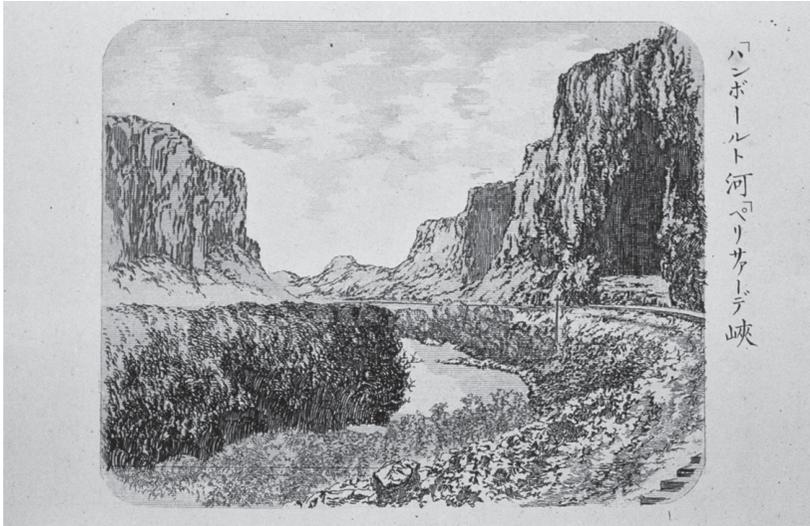


Figure 3: The Humboldt River in Palisade Canyon (Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

derness. Between Chicago and Pennsylvania, we saw that fields were well-cultivated, woodlands deep, and the population dense. People here were enjoying the fruits of development and civilization.⁶⁾

Kume was particularly impressed with the American wilderness. On 3 February he recorded his impressions of views out the train window as the Embassy travelled through northern Nevada:

We reached the village of Humboldt, where we stopped for twenty minutes to have breakfast. This region is now known as the Humboldt Wilderness; originally it was called ‘the American Desert.’ We were surrounded by scattered mountain peaks. Dry desert with sagebrush stretched in all directions to meet the sky at the horizon. The river meandered across the arid landscape in broken streams. No trees grew on the hillsides, no spring welled up in the canyons and no houses were visible in any direction. [The Chinese essayist] Li Hua, lamenting the dead on an ancient battlefield, wrote:

Endless desert
With no living soul in sight.
Girdled by a river,
And dotted with jumbled peaks.

That landscape of Li Hua’s rose vividly in my mind as I looked out over the barren Humboldt Wilderness.”⁷⁾

Travelling through wilderness proved an unusual experience:

From Utah Territory in the west through Wyoming lies the largest stretch of wilderness in the United States. Even with the train racing at full speed, we did

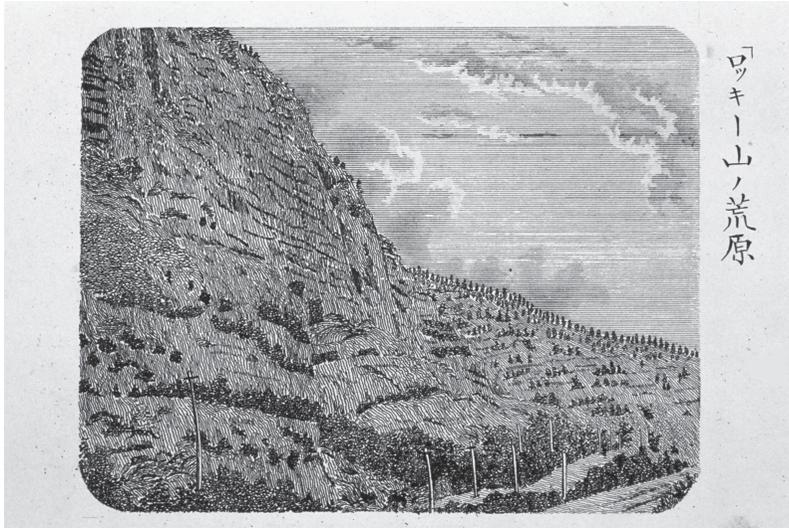


Figure 4: Rocky Mountain Wilderness (Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

not reach a major population centre until we had travelled for a full four days. Withered prairie grass and thick scrub stretched away endless as far as where the heavens met the horizon. ... You can imagine the kind of landscape it is. Although you may tire of hearing about the vastness of the United States, when you actually experience it, it is even more astonishing that you could believe.”⁸⁾

Whenever possible, Kume and other members of the Japanese delegation took advantage of opportunities to escape the urban centers and explore the countryside. For example, in the summer in 1872, taking a break from stalled discussions in Washington DC, the Japanese party embarked on a trip through the Northern States, visiting West Point, Albany, Rochester, Syracuse, and on to Niagara with its impressive waterfalls, one on the American side, the other close to Canada. Kume was clearly excited by the force of nature displayed by the rushing waterfalls and gave a vivid description of the American Falls:

Crossing the bridge, we ventured onto the island with its sparse, scattered pine trees. Here the larger and smaller falls poured down on both sides with a roar resembling a tornado. The water from both falls surged some distance out from the falls themselves to form a 160-foot-high wall of white water cascading into the gorge in one enormous sheet. Striking rocks, the water scattered like snowflakes and then rose into the air in a huge veil of mist. Sunlight striking the mist created the gigantic arc of a rainbow. The waters of the upper river ran in an inextricable turmoil of angry waves and roaring rapids. Where the falls poured into the gorge, bubbles rose, making a deep, roiling cauldron until the river raced away downstream.⁹⁾

In Great Britain and in the various countries in of Europe, and in various stops on

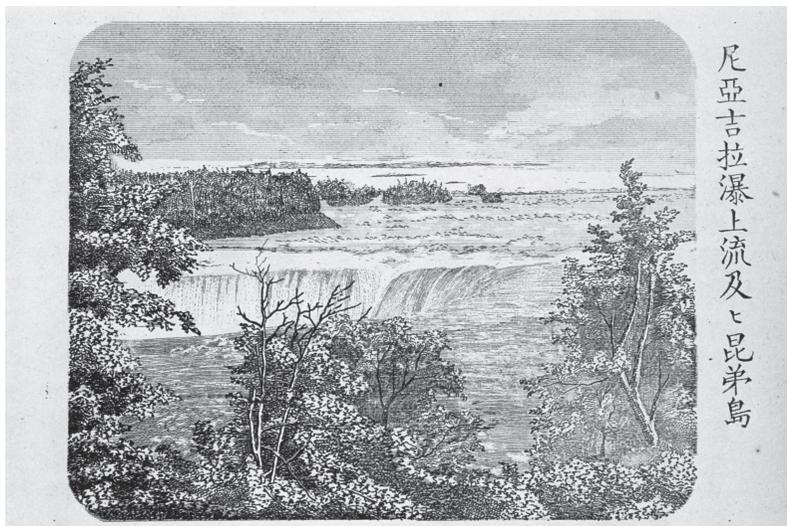


Figure 5: Niagara River Above the Falls and the Three Sisters
(Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

the way back to Japan, in Egypt, India, and Singapore, Kume continued to describe the beauty and power of the natural environment. In his detailed introduction to the four months the Embassy spent in England in late 1872, for example, Kume compared Britain to Japan, praising British industrial development, but never failing to make reference to climate and natural scenery.^{9,10)}

Although Great Britain is an island, its topography is continental in character. It lacks Japan's multitude of mountain ranges, with their numerous lofty peaks. England, in particular, is mostly low-lying: to the south of London it is simply one great plain. In the north, from Yorkshire to Scotland the country is hilly. Wales, in the west, is described as mountainous but the highest peak is no more than 3,700 feet. Scotland, however, does have much mountainous terrain, with occasional peaks as high as 7,000 or 8,000 feet. ... The landscape of Britain consists mostly of level fields. The rivers flow gently and are well suited to navigation. All told there are 1,200 miles of navigable rivers in the country. If we add to this figure the length of the canals which have been built for the transport of goods by boat, the total is 2,800 miles. ... A total of 35,000 miles of roads have been built. These are entirely surfaced with stone, thus obviating the problem of laming draught-horses. There are almost 150,000 miles of country lanes, all of which are wide enough for a horse and cart to pass along. The people of this country produce an economic surplus, which they use to achieve the greatest possible benefit for the country. The result of this can be seen in the country roads. Wherever we went we travelled on smooth, well-kept roads, even in remote mountainous areas.¹¹⁾

Arriving in Paris in December 1872, members of the Embassy visited several



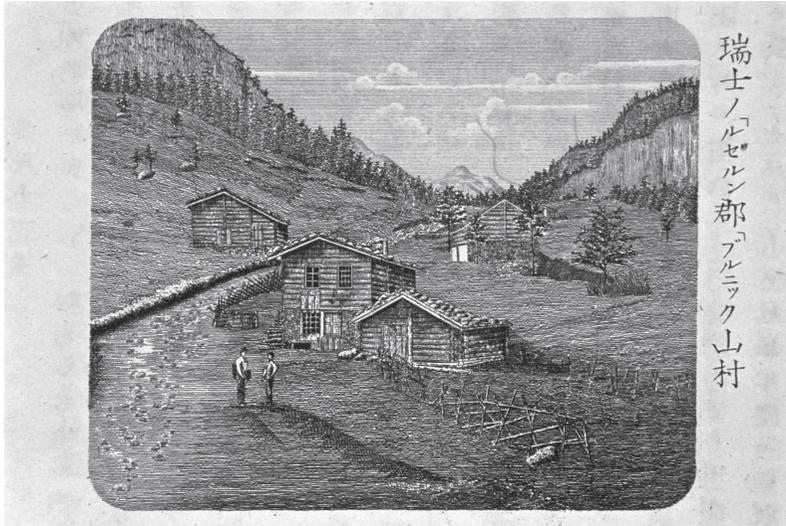
Figure 6: The Mountains of the Trossachs, in the Scottish Highlands
(Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)



Figure 7: View of the River Seine from the Château of Saint-Cloud
(Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

parks, including the Bois de Boulogne on the outskirts of the city. Kume wrote:

To the north-west of Paris is the Bois de Boulogne, the largest park in Paris and more famous even than Central Park in New York. Situated at the foot of Mt. Valerien in the suburbs north-west of the Arc de Triomphe, it covers an area two kilometers wide and twice this distance in length. Inside are ponds filled to



Figures 8: Mountain village at Brünig, canton of Lucerne, Switzerland
(Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)



Figure 9: View from the summit of Vitznau, in Switzerland
(Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

the brim with water, and chains of islands and waterfalls; the trees have mature trunks with sharply twisting branches, and the wind sighs through woods of pine-trees; the roads are paved so smoothly that they look like polished surfaces, and the grounds are cleaned so thoroughly that no dust is allowed to collect.¹²⁾

And in Holland, when they visited Leiden in February 1873, Kume was similarly

impressed with its well-tended landscape:

The road to Leiden led eastwards from the Hague Forest. Hemmed in on either side by dense woods of old trees, the wide route strewn with sand was an exquisite sight. There was much fine scenery on the way, for occasionally we came across wooded hills or streams of clear water, and we also saw the estate of a relative of the royal family which was kept in an immaculate state of repair. The fields we passed by farther on were also most delightful, with pastures barely a foot above sea-level filled with herds of sheep and cattle. Villages suddenly appeared among the thickets here and there, their [church] towers rising high above the treetops, and presently we arrived in Leiden after traveling for ten miles through some of the finest land in Holland.¹³⁾

Later at the end of March, on the way to St. Petersburg, in Russia, Kume was dumbfounded by the “hideous” sight of Russia’s vast uninhabited terrain: “Since the land covers a huge expanse and dwellings are few and far between, uncultivated land stretches as far as the eye can see. Apart from a few hamlets there was nothing to be seen in any direction, not even trees or shrubs. ... As the train travels farther to the north-east ... across the vast, empty plains, one gets a chilling, lonely feeling. Earlier we had travelled across the plains of America for three days and three nights, but this region felt more desolate.”¹⁴⁾

Russia’s under-developed landscape contrasted sharply with the idyllic Switzerland visited by the Embassy later in June 1873:

From the stern of the boat, the musicians’ charming melodies floated away on the breeze to drift across the lake, so light and airy as to put one in mind of [Taoist] immortals taking wing to rise up to Heaven. The snow and ice of Mount Blanc glittered, and by the town of Nyon mist shrouded the waters of the lake and the summer mountains were a hazy green. ... We sailed below the walls of an ancient castle [the Chateau de Chillon] near Vevey and finally arrived at Chambon, at the head of the lake. Just to the south of this point, the river Rhone debouches into Lac Lemman. On its way to the lake, it flows along a narrow plain with mountains on either side. The river is a torrent which scours this alluvial plain before emptying with a roar into an arm of the lake, foaming tumultuously and muddying the waters. The mountains which flank the river are precipitous, towering overhead like wild waves about to break.¹⁵⁾

Returning to Japan via the recently opened Suez Canal, Kume marveled at the arid desert landscape so different from anything they had previously experienced:

The city of Suez stands amid red earth along the shoreline of the harbor. ... Stretching dozens of miles to the north and west was a desert with no human habitation and no vegetation at all over vast areas. Yellow dust floated in the air, so that the light of the setting sun looked yellow. We were told that Cairo

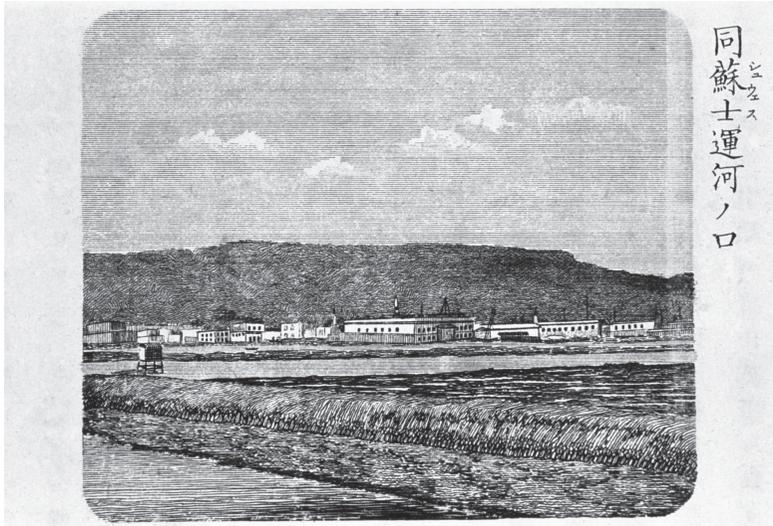


Figure 10: The Entrance to the Suez Canal (Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)



Figure 11: The Way of Life of the Egyptians (Courtesy of the Kume Art Museum)

lay on the other side of this stretch of desert. No mountains were visible, even on the distant horizon. ... This evening we saw in the slanting rays of the setting sun a band of natives on camels moving across the distant yellow dunes. The scene resembled a painting; it was a marvelous sight. ... In this region there is little rain. In most years no rain falls at all; there is just a torrential downpour every five or six years. The land is therefore barren and incapable of supporting vegetation.¹⁶⁾

Finally, as their ship sailed along the southern coast of Ceylon, Kume was impressed by its distinctive mountain landscape, which led him to think of landscape painting around the world:

Topographically, the whole of Ceylon consists of long chains of mountains with plains opening out among them. The foothills all slope gently upwards. The entire island is made up of this kind of scenery. There is no other landscape like this in the world, we were told. Everywhere, mountains rise up and water flows down, but the colours and features of the landscape are different in each country. In Scotland there are many mountains with picturesque forms. In Italy the mountains rise to towering peaks; in Germany the mountains have steep rocky slopes; the mountains of Arabia are stony and precipitous, with sharp and jagged profiles. In Ceylon, on the other hand, the slopes are gentle and there are many low, undulating hills. The more we saw of the fantastic variations of Creation, the more astonished we were. Japanese painters all regard it as artistically elegant to use traditional Chinese techniques of landscape painting to depict the [folded] mountains of Japan, but in fact their works do not match paintings done in the Western style in the accurate representation of reality. This is because Japanese painters are unaware that Japanese mountains have different forms from those of China. Realistic Western paintings of mountains, water, trees and cattle reflect the true appearance of the landscape, as well as the actual colours of the sky. As society progresses in enlightenment, painting, too, becomes more refined.¹⁷⁾

Conclusion

Kume Kunitake's record of the Iwakura Mission was published (in five volumes) in 1878 and proved to be an immediate best seller. Interestingly, 1878 was the same year that the Japanese translation of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 days* was published. People in Japan were eager to learn about the outside world and many, unable to go there themselves, turned to Kume's account—and not just to learn about factories and schools and hospitals, but to dream of crossing oceans, climbing mountains, exploring wilderness or vast uninhabited expanses of land. Kume's account provided a wealth of environmental knowledge that could only be obtained by “going there.”

Notes

- 1) Much has been written on the Iwakura Mission. In Japanese, see Tanaka Akira, *Meiji ishin to seiyō bunmei: Iwakura shisetsudan wa nani o mita ka*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2003; Nishikawa Nagao, *Bei-Ō kairan jikki o yomu*, Kyoto: Hōritsu Bunkasha, 1995; and Haga Tōru, *Iwakura shisetsudan no hikaku bunkashi-teki kenkyū*, Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 2003. In English, see Marlene Mayo, “Rationality in the Meiji Restoration: The Iwakura Embassy,” in Bernard Silberman and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Modern Japanese Leadership*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1966, 323–62; and Ian Nish, ed., *The Iwakura Mission in America and Europe: A New Assessment*, Richmond, Surrey: Japan Library (Curzon Press) 1998.
- 2) The original 1878 version (published in Tokyo by Hakubunsha) has been reprinted and edited with commentary by Tanaka Akira: Kume Kunitake, *Tokumei Zenken Taishi Bei Ō kairan jikki*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 5 vols, 1977–82. This essay includes quotations from the English translation

of the chronicle: Kume Kunitake (editors-in-chief, Graham Healey and Chushichi Tsuzuki), *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–71: A True Account of the Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary's Journey of Observation through the United States of America and Europe*, 5 vols, Matsudo: Japan Documents; Richmond, Crurzon, 2002. A condensed version has been published: Kume Kunitake (edited by Chushichi Tsuzuki and R. Jules Young; with an introduction by Ian Nish), *Japan Rising: The Iwakura Embassy to the USA and Europe 1871–1873*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

- 3) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–71: A True Account*, vol. 1, 60.
- 4) For the full text of Itō Hirobumi's speech, see Charles Lanman, *The Japanese in America*, New York: University Publishing Co., 1972, 13–15.
- 5) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–71: A True Account*, Vol. 1, 66–67.
- 6) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–1873: A True Account*, Vol. 1, 184.
- 7) *Ibid*, 126.
- 8) *Ibid*, 151.
- 9) *Ibid*, 292.
- 10) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–1873: A True Account*, Vol. 2, 11.
- 11) *Ibid*.
- 12) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–1873: A True Account*, Vol. 3, 41.
- 13) *Ibid*, 235.
- 14) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–1873: A True Account*, Vol. 4, 30–31.
- 15) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–1873: A True Account*, Vol. 5, 103.
- 16) *Ibid*, 280–81.
- 17) *The Iwakura Embassy, 1871–1873: A True Account*, Vol. 5, 312–13.