

The Real Last Samurai

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The middle of the 19th century was a time of great change in Japan. Known as the Bakumatsu period, it was the twilight years of the system of rule by the Tokugawa shoguns. When Commodore Perry's armed squadron appeared off Uraga in Tokyo Bay in 1853, his mission was to enter into both diplomatic and trade agreements with the government of Japan. He was confronted by a shogunate that was already under severe strain and who was being challenged from within. Harvests had failed causing famine and peasant riots and, together with economic and succession problems, the Tokugawa shogunate or Bakufu, had no idea how to handle this unprecedented situation. They were in a state of utter confusion with several western countries demanding trading treaties and were unable to enforce their own exclusion laws, which had kept Japan virtually free from foreigners for almost 250 years. They were certainly too weak to expel the "barbarians" by force. Whilst the samurai government may have had the best swords in the world, these were no match for the repeating rifles of westerners, who were just experiencing the industrial revolution back home. Many of the ordinary samurai, conservative by nature, passionately believed that the shogunate should expel the foreign barbarians who they saw as defiling their sacred land and few realised that such a policy was impossible to enforce. The attitude from the tozama daimyo (outer lords) may be summed up in a letter dated 14th September 1853, sent to the shogun by Nabeshima Naomasa, the lord of Saga in Hizen province. "Since" he wrote, "His Lordship is invested with the noble office of seiitaishogun (that is to say "great leader of the army for conflict with the barbarians") we humbly wonder if the expression seii ("conflict with the barbarians) would not betoken his real task unchanged for centuries" Such a direct response to an unprecedented consultation process, clearly expressed that no relations should be imposed by the outside world. At the same time the letter re-opened the question of the role of the shogun, by recalling his full title and thereby its ancient origins.



The daimyo Iie Naosuke who was assassinated for dealing with the foreigners on behalf of the shogun.



**The Sakurada Mon of Edo castle
where Iie Naosuke was assassinated in 1860.**

Indeed, those that supported the shogunate often put themselves in mortal danger as illustrated by the highest profile example, Iie Naosuke, the daimyo of Hikone. Naosuke, ruthless tairo or chief minister to the shogun, had made several treaties with other nations and on 20th March 1860, at the Sakurada Mon, the entrance to the shogun's castle in Edo (now the Imperial Palace, Tokyo) he was assassinated by 17 ronin (lit. "wave-men", meaning samurai no longer employed by a clan and therefore free to act on their own initiative) of the Mito clan. Those clans who were traditionally antagonistic to the Tokugawa, took up the anti-westerner cause and further used the Emperor as the focal point, stating that the shoguns had for centuries, usurped the imperial powers and they should be restored. Their slogan was "Sonno-joi" meaning "expel the barbarians and respect the Emperor" and they were known as the shishi, or "men of high purpose". It has been said that their desire to act decisively and without delay was much better developed than their judgement about actually what to do. Often the shishi became ronin in order that they might act freely and not compromise their feudal lords in any way.

Insights into the later samurai who partook in these events are both interesting and informative. The so-called Bakumatsu no Sanshu (the 3 Shu's of the Bakamatsu period) were named Katsu Kaishu, Takahashi Deishu and Yamaoka Tesshu and are well known as being loyal to the Tokugawa shogun at this time. All three were "Zen statesmen, public officials of the highest order, indifferent to money, power and personal glory" – quote *Sword of No-Sword* by John Stevens.



**The young and the older Katsu Kaishu,
a samurai and an important figure in the Meiji restoration.**

Katsu Kaishu was born in 1823 into an impoverished samurai family in Edo (present day Tokyo) and advanced by the study of Zen Buddhism and swordsmanship, becoming head of his fencing school at the age 21. He was proud that he was able to face many life threatening events during his later life without having to draw his sword, but as he was also an expert at jujitsu he was not totally defenceless. His sword was a katana made by the famous 19th century swordsmith, Suishinshi Masahide. This swordsmith preached a revivalist policy of returning to the style of swords from the golden age of swordmaking in the 13th century and founded what is now termed the Shinshinto (new new) period of swordmaking (1780-1868). As he realised that Japan had to modernise, Katsu Kaishu studied Western science and technology but continued his daily practice of Zen and swordsmanship. He was the captain of the boat taking the first samurai diplomatic mission to America and is credited with being the founder of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Politically he was the most important and influential of the Sanshu.

The second “shu”, Takahashi Deishu is probably the least famous of the three. He was born in 1835, also into an Edo samurai family and was related by marriage to the third “shu”, Yamaoka Tesshu. Deishu’s family were skilled at soe-jitsu or spear fighting and Deishu became head of his school. He was appointed as the shogun’s personal spear fighting instructor and he developed a close relationship with the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, also becoming involved in the politics of the day. After the Meiji restoration in 1868, Deishu followed his master into retirement. Although he was offered several jobs in the new government, he devoted himself to the Zen pursuits of poetry, painting and calligraphy until his death in 1903 at the age of sixty-three.

The last of the “shu’s” was Yamaoka Tesshu a hatamoto or direct retainer of the last shogun. He began learning swordsmanship as a young boy and spent many hours of each day meditating in the Zen fashion and practising his kendo (lit. “Way of the Sword”). He is probably best known in the West for the vast amount of calligraphy that he produced in his lifetime. Such calligraphy is a visual expression of his Zen and personality and is greatly admired to this day (an exhibition of Tesshu’s calligraphy was held at the V&A in London in 2008). Tesshu and his fencing school are barely believable today. To fight 200 competitions in a single day was not unheard of and practice took place every day. His dojo or practice hall was called Shumpukan (trans. Hall of the Spring Wind) which was taken from a poem stating that the “cutting action of the sword was like lightning flashing in the spring wind”. The dojo was not simply a gymnasium, but a holy place where the spirit was

forged. Today there are many kendo dojo both in Japan and elsewhere (including my own) named Shumpukan and there are even a few shopping malls so named in Japan.

In January 1867, during the restoration of the Meiji Emperor, the Imperial army under the command of Saigo Takamori, a low-ranking samurai from Satsuma province, having beaten the shogun's troops at the battle of Toba-Fushimi, advanced along the main road, the Tokaido, from Kyoto, the Imperial capital, towards Edo, the last bastion of shogunate forces. Tesshu was now part of the personal guard of Tokugawa Yoshinobu who met with his advisors to discuss their next move. Whilst others procrastinated, Tesshu advised a direct approach to the enemy and was appointed to go and negotiate on their behalf. He then marched directly into Saigo's camp, ignoring the lines of hostile troops, without being challenged and met the leader of the Imperial army. He agreed with Saigo that the shogun's castle at Edo would be peacefully transferred to the Emperor as was the transfer of power. (Although Tesshu undoubtedly faced great personal danger in boldly going to meet Saigo, he is considered by many to have been merely a messenger from Katsu Kaishu, who was the real negotiator of the terms at a later meeting with Saigo. Considering the greater political importance of Kaishu, this seems to be the more credible scenario.)

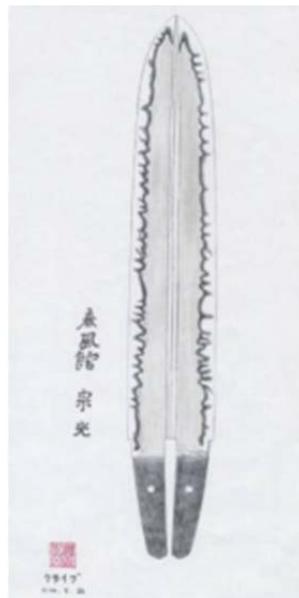
Although some of his retainers accompanied the shogun into retirement, others including Tesshu took positions in the new Meiji government. Always a prolific drinker and womaniser, Tesshu eventually contracted stomach cancer which he did not allow to interfere with either his daily kendo practice or his Zen meditation. On 19th July 1888, he assumed the formal meditation position known as zazen, bade his family farewell and died. One of his students immortalised this by immediately painting the seated figure.



A formal portrait of Yamaoka Tesshu (1813-1888).



Yamaoka Tesshu died in the act of Zen meditation seated in the zazen position on 19th July 1888. This tear stained portrait was immediately painted by his pupil, Tanaka Seiishi.



Oshigata of an early 20th century blade by Munemitsu, also inscribed with its name "Shumpukan" (oshigata by the author).

Little is written about actual swords owned by Teshu, but he is known to have been presented with a 13th century Bizen Ichimonji blade that was named Kamewari-ken (pot cleaving sword). This sword's name is derived from Ittosai (founder of the Itto-ryu fencing school) who was a disciple of the Shinto priest-swordsman Oribe. The sword was in Oribe's shrine and one day he dropped it over one of the large pots used to store the sacred saké. The blade cleaved the pot cleanly in two and later Oribe made a present of this magnificent blade to his promising pupil, Ittosai. A few nights later the shrine was raided by bandits and Ittosai, using the still unmounted sword, quickly dispatched seven of these ruffians. One of the bandits tried to hide in one of the large pots in the shrine, but Ittosai cut cleanly through both the pot and the bandit. The sword was subsequently given to Ittosai's foremost pupil and heir, Ono Tadaki and was then passed down to successive headmasters of the school, until eventually it came to Teshu when he was appointed head of the Ono Itto Ryu school of fencing. He had no heir himself, and according to a document by Deishu, on his death the sword was put into the care of the Nikko shrine. However, it is no longer there and may have been lost in one of the several fires at Nikko.

Although there were skirmishes in the provinces throughout the next year, eventually the entire country was brought under Imperial control. The final resistance took place on the 4th July 1868 when some 2-3,000 ronin, still loyal to the deposed Tokugawa shogun, occupied a temple on a hill in Ueno (in present day Metropolitan Tokyo.) Having been up all night shouting insults and trying to provoke the imperial police and soldiers, the hill was surrounded by overwhelmingly superior forces, who eventually eliminated the "unsubmissive elements". In true samurai fashion, they fought with their swords to the last man.



This emotive lithograph depicts the last stand of the Tokugawa supporters at Ueno on 4th July 1868. A torn copy is kept at the Memorial Museum in Ueno and this is another copy from the author's collection.

Sakamoto Ryoma, another important figure of this time, was the son of a saké manufacturer. Born in 1835 he was a low ranked samurai from Tosa province and began learning swordsmanship locally at the age of ten, later studying at the famous Chiba dojo in Edo. Active in royalist circles in Tosa, he left the province and became a ronin in 1854, having seen Perry's landing the previous year. He managed to broker a military alliance supporting the imperial restoration, between the clans of Satsuma and Choshu, who had previously been antagonistic to each other.

It is thought that for a time he gave up wearing a sword and instead carried a Smith and Wesson pistol, with which he successfully fought his way out of the Teradaya Inn in Kyoto, when ambushed there by shogunate troops. When he went first up to Edo, however, he wore a very large katana made by Minamoto Masao. Masao was part of the Kiyomaro group and so this would have been a brand new sword at the time. Large swords, often in han-dachi (half-tachi) mounts were very fashionable with the young royalists and were known as Kinno-to or "Emperor-supporting swords".

Swords such as this were good battlefield swords but not very practical in the confined spaces of urban areas. Considering this, Sakamoto, who was being constantly attacked by shogunate supporting factions, started to wear a blade by Mutsu (no) Kami Yoshiyuki, given to him by Saigo Takamori. This sword was much shorter and lighter and far more suitable for the prevailing conditions, but it was this sword that he was wearing when he was finally assassinated in the Omiya inn in Kyoto in 1867.



Sakamoto Ryoma ((1835-67) owned several swords of very high quality and died one year before the Meiji restoration.

When he died, he left a sword by Soshu Masamune that was generally acknowledged by all as being a superior sword. It is believed that, after his death this sword was taken away by his close friend from Choshu, Miyoshi Shinzu, and its whereabouts today are unknown. Another item was a daisho, (matched pair, one long and one short sword) the daito (long sword) inscribed “Bizen Osafune Shurinosuke Morimitsu” and the shoto (short sword) “Yukimitsu”. This was passed on into the Okanoue family, into which his sister had married.

As mentioned above, at the time of the restoration, the Imperial forces were commanded by a samurai from Satsuma named Saigo Takamori (1823-1877). He is reputed to have been a connoisseur of swords but seems to have had no desire to own any particular swords, rather he borrowed or lent some and held others in trust for friends and acquaintances. However, the list of swords he is said to have owned included blades by Rai Kunitsugu (a late 13th century, Yamashiro smith) Tegai Kanenaga (Yamato school, early 14th century) and Shizu Kaneuji (pupil of Masamune, early 14th century). He was rewarded for his support of the Imperial cause by being presented with a daisho both blades signed Muramasa. This was quite appropriate, as swords by Muramasa had a bloodthirsty reputation and were considered particularly unlucky for the Tokugawa family and were therefore favoured by the royalist supporters. Although the short sword was genuine, surprisingly the long sword is thought to have been a forgery. Another sword that he owned was presented to Saigo by Prince Sanjo Sanetomi (the first Meiji government Prime Minister). This sword seems to have been a copy of a famous old blade that was an heirloom of the Taira clan. Named Kogarasu-maru (little crow) the original double edged blade is now part of the Imperial collection and in Tokyo National Museum. It was extensively copied in the 19th century and favoured by the royalist faction and this is what was owned by Saigo.



**This sword has a saya (scabbard) ribbed and lacquered bright red.
Red saya such as this were the favoured saya of the young shishi from Satsuma province.**



**The famous statue of Saigo Takamori in Ueno Park in Tokyo.
He is accompanied by his dog and is depicted
as wearing his wakizashi by Izumi (no) Kami Kanesada.**

In May 1873 he was named commander of the new Imperial Japanese Army and had a sword by the Yamashiro (Kyoto) swordsmith, Minamoto Saemonjo Nobukuni (1394-1428) mounted into a western style sabre mounting. Four years later this complicated character, disillusioned with the new government that he had helped create and the erosion of samurai rights and privileges, was in open rebellion. The so called Satsuma rebellion of 1877 was the last occasion on which the samurai fought in their traditional armour and used their swords in pitched battle. Legend has it that Saigo died by his own hand on the battlefield and although he was shot in the hip and beheaded by a close colleague, post-mortem evidence does not support the seppuku story. Saigo left behind a short sword by Izumi (no) Kami Kanesada, popularly known as a Nosada. It is this sword he is depicted as wearing on the famous statue in Ueno Park, Tokyo.



This happy band of men are the two sons of the Satsuma daimyo and retainers of the clan.



This group of young Satsuma samurai study a modern map of Japan but found it difficult to adjust to the changing circumstances. Immediately after posing for this photograph they went off to join the rebel forces and were all killed soon after.

The Shinsengumi was an elite corps of fanatical shogunate supporters and was by no means solely comprised of samurai, although a large proportion was of this rank. Many were expert swordsmen and one of their main commanders was named Kondo Isami (1834-1868). Originally a farmer he trained in swordsmanship and is reputed to have owned a sword by Nagasone Kotetsu who is considered as being the finest swordsmith of the shinto or “new sword” period of swordmaking (1600-1780). Kondo is said to have been very pleased with the sword’s performance in combat, but there remains some doubt that the blade was actually the genuine work of Nagasone Kotetsu. According to the late sword authority and writer, Yasu Kizu, the blade may have actually been made by Kiyomaro, the greatest shinshinto swordsmith and roughly a contemporary of Kondo, but there remains an element of doubt and disagreement. In April 1868, Kondo was caught and beheaded by the imperial forces on the unproven basis that he was the one to have assassinated Sakamoto Ryoma! The arguments regarding the authenticity of his sword still continue and no conclusion has been reached.



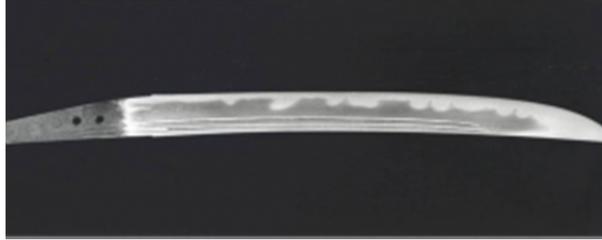
Kondo, originally a farmer became a master swordsman and a commander in the Shinsengumi, a fanatical shogun-supporting corps.

There were a number of fatal attacks on Westerners in the 1850's and 1860's. Mostly these were attacks in or near to the foreign concession or "treaty ports" that had been forced onto Japan by the treaties with the technically advanced powers. Often these incidents could be put down to perceived insults and the clash of cultures and customs. Mostly the attacks were enacted by individuals and misfits and were committed with swords, but we have no information or details on the swords used themselves. Arguably the best known incident took place in the newly opened port of Kobe in February 1868, when a column of samurai from the Lord of Bizen found it necessary to go through the city. They were on their way to Osaka in support of the Imperialists forces who were gathering against the Tokugawa clan. As they went through the town the advance guard called out the customary order "Shita ni iro!"- Down on your knees" – whereupon all of lower rank were required to bow low enough for the forehead to touch the ground.

A few foreigners stationed at the edge of the town refused to bow whereupon an American was attacked by one of the samurai but managed to escape. This was followed by two French marines who crossed the line of the procession and again managed to escape serious injury from the samurai attack. It was then that Taki Zenzaburo, an officer of the advance guard of the Bizen troops, gave the order to open fire. The foreign troops rallied quickly and returned the fire. It appears that nobody on either side was either badly wounded or killed. Much of this might be accounted for because the Bizen troops had only taken delivery of their new firearms on the previous day and the sights had yet to be zeroed and adjusted!

Notwithstanding the lack of injuries, the Japanese authorities decreed that Taki Zenzaburo, who took full responsibility for his orders, should commit seppuku (ritual suicide vulgarly also called hara-kiri). This was to take place at the Eifukuji Temple at night, as was the prevailing custom, in front of witnesses from each of the foreign legations at Kobe, as well as the Japanese Governor of Hyogo Prefecture. Seven foreigners attended as official witnesses including A.B.Mitford (Lord Redesdale) of the British Legation who graphically described the ceremony in his book *Tales of Old Japan*. In acknowledgement of his presence, Mitford was presented with a tanto (dagger) by the Japanese authorities.

This tanto is an attractive 16th century Mino blade by Kanefusa and it may even be the actual tanto that was used in the seppuku. I have been fortunate to study this blade on several occasions as, donated by Lord Redesdale, it now forms part of the British Museum collection. It is a fine hirazukuri (flat surface) tanto with a wide and active hamon (hardened edge) in his own particular style, known as "Kanefusa midare".



This 16th century Mino tanto by Kanefusa, now in the BM, was presented to Lord Redesdale for being an official witness to the seppuku of Taki Zenzaburo.

As well as the samurai of the Bakumatsu period, the events are reflected in the attitude of some of the swordsmiths. There is a sword in my collection signed by a little known swordsmith named Shigehide. The sword is quite long (74 cms) and rather more slender than many of that time, but it retains the "heaviness" often associated with shinshinto blades.

Born in 1808, Shigehide was of samurai rank and a retainer of the Omura clan, whose fiefdom was in Hizen province. The daimyo of the Omura clan were Christians and had been since the 1600's and they supported the royalist cause.

Shigehide and his fellow clansmen grew up in close proximity to Nagasaki, where foreign ships had been allowed to berth from the early 1600's (Only the Dutch and Chinese had been allowed to trade from a small island in the bay named Deshima. As it was a man-made island, the shogunate was able to maintain the myth that no foreigners were actually trading on Japanese soil!). To Shigehide and his compatriots, it had become apparent from the quantity of warships and marines constantly coming and going, that conflict was inevitable in the near future and that the Omura's fiefdom might come under threat. The young samurai of the clan felt that this necessitated that they have a swordsmith of their own clan, who they knew they would be able to rely on. Like all other clans the Omura daimyo were required to spend time in Edo every couple of years under the so-called Sakin Kotai or alternate yearly attendance law. Shigehide accompanied the daimyo's procession on six different occasions and whilst in Edo studied swordmaking under the master swordsmith, Naotane, the chief pupil of Masahide, for a total of 1500 days. Back home he made many swords for his comrades who considered that he was quite skilled and supported him in his efforts rather than rely on those outside of the clan to provide their weapons.



Oshigata of katana signed “Shigehide” and dated Kaei Gan Shu (autumn 1848) oshigata by the author.

Shigehide is known to have made swords for Matsubayashi Iizun and Watanabe Noburo, both well known as Kin-no or “Emperor supporters” in this Bakumatsu period. (Matsubayashi was a very well educated man and became head master of the Omura han’s school at the age of 21. Watanabe was an eccentric with a peculiar sense of humour. He used to walk the streets at night with a lantern suspended on the tsukagashira (end of the handle) of his sword – “to bring light into the dark world”! A diminutive man he had a small wheel attached to the kojiri of his saya (the butt end of his scabbard) so that it could drag along the ground as he walked, apparently an idea that had been introduced early in the Edo period!)

Shigehide’s youngest son Sukesaku was an aspiring swordsmith and Shigehide wanted him to study the craft in neighbouring Satsuma province. The loyalist clan of Satsuma had recently defeated the Tokugawa at Toba-Fushimi (see above) and their fortunes were in the ascendancy and it even seemed possible that they might replace the Tokugawa family as shoguns in the near future. Shigehide thought that if his son could become a Satsuma swordsmith, then his future prospects might be much better. The Naminohira swordsmiths, who worked only for the Satsuma clan, were an ancient and very conservative group of swordsmiths. They adhered to a rule known as Isshi-soden, which meant that the secrets of their trade could only be transmitted to one son or a single student. Under these circumstances it required the personal intervention of the lord of Omura with the lord of the Satsuma clan, for Sukesaku to become a pupil of Yukiyasu, the 63rd generation Naminohira swordsmith. This would seem to indicate the political importance of the appointment was fully understood by the lord of the clan and it was implemented in 1868. The Naminohira workshop was near Kagoshima bay on the far side of Sakura Jima volcanic island. Unexpectedly, Sukesaku was found dead at his residence on the 23rd May, 1870. He had committed suicide with a tanto and this greatly shocked both his father and teacher, Yukiyasu. It emerged that he had experienced some financial difficulties which put a great mental strain on him. As he was a representative of the Omura, he had been paid 108 ryo from clan funds as his annual living expenses. This is not such a large sum but seems to have been an unbearable burden to Sukesaku. It was compounded by the fact that he was the Omura clan’s representative in Satsuma and he had borrowed money from the other han, which he was unable to repay as quickly as he had thought he could. His living expenses were sent from the Omura han, as he was their student, but unfortunately, out of the 108 ryo sent as his annual expenses, 34 ryo turned out to be forgeries!

Sukesaku's elder brother, Shigemasa, was making swords alongside his father but had to stop working as a swordsmith when the Haitorei edict was enacted by the new government, finally banning the wearing of swords in 1876. It is not known where Shigemasa and his family went after this time as his grave is not with Shigehide and Sukesaku at the Hongyaji.

The above interesting and detailed account of a relatively unknown family of swordsmiths, casts interesting light over the trials and tribulations of the time. The pressures put on swordsmiths were immense and the banning of sword wearing caused problems that were to last for decades, right into the 20th century.

The same period in history mirrors the early development of photography and many of the personalities were captured for posterity in this manner. Further, the last shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, is described by an English diplomat and translator in Japan named Ernest Satow as, "He was one of the most aristocratic-looking Japanese I have ever seen, of fair complexion, with a high forehead and well-cut nose – such a gentleman"

The changes brought about by these usually young men from relatively low social backgrounds, brought about fundamental changes to the country which are still felt to this day. Surprisingly, families that still trace their lineage back to supporters of the Tokugawa shoguns, often still have something of this emotional attachment. Currently, Tokugawa Yasuhisa, great-grandson of the last shogun Yoshinobu, is a patron of sword related traditional Japanese arts. In fact the writer has met him on several occasions socially in Japan and we are on first name terms!

I have found the following useful in researching for this essay.

Sword of No-Sword by John Stevens.

The Art of the Japanese Sword by Kurihara Kawachi and Masao Manabe.

Meiji 1868 by Paul Akimitsu.

Saigo Takamori by Charles L Yates.