

Speech at the Reception to celebrate
the unveiling of the Williamson Monument
and 150 years of UK-Japan academic exchange
beginning with the Choshu 5 and the Satsuma 19

by H.E. Keiichi Hayashi,
Ambassador of Japan to the Court of St James's,
at the Embassy of Japan

2 July 2013

My Lords, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Japanese Embassy this evening. A particularly warm welcome to those who have come all the way from Japan.

We have gathered here to celebrate the passage of 150 years since a group of brave young men from Choshu, or what is now Yamaguchi Prefecture, risked their lives in defying the prohibition on foreign travel in effect at the time to travel to the UK. Their purpose was to absorb knowledge of the UK's advanced technology in various fields in the cause of their country's modernisation.

The arrival of these five men, who were soon followed by a group of 19 men from Satsuma, or the present-day Kagoshima Prefecture, marked the beginning of modern-day academic exchange between the UK and Japan. These pioneers later became national leaders in various fields and made a tremendous contribution to the quick transformation of Japan from a divided feudal state into a modern industrialised power.

The Choshu Five and the group from Satsuma were allowed to pursue their studies mainly at University College London thanks to UCL's open-minded academic policy. However, coming from Japan in 1863 with little knowledge about the UK, its language or culture, they were faced with tremendous difficulties even before getting started. They seemed to have almost nothing to prop themselves up with but their relentless sense of mission.

Fortunately, however, they found Professor Alexander

Williamson and his wife Catherine as their, as it were, guardian angels, who took them under their wings and tried to make their lives in this 'strange' but marvellous country as comfortable and meaningful as possible throughout their stay. Later they even took care of a young student who had contracted fatal tuberculosis, nursing him at their own home until he drew his last breath and then arranging his funeral.

I gather that many of the people present here joined in a wonderful ceremony at Brookwood Cemetery a few hours ago, where a monument to pay tribute to the Williamsons was unveiled. At the ceremony, not only as Ambassador but also as someone from Yamaguchi Prefecture, I had the honour to unveil the monument and read out a king-sized letter of gratitude from none other than Prime Minister Abe, who is also from Yamaguchi and wished to register his gratitude to Professor and Mrs Williamson for their care and support of these students. The framed letter was presented to the UCL Provost Professor Sir Malcolm Grant on behalf of the Williamsons and is now on display in this ballroom.

In January 2011, when I returned to Japan for an annual conference, I was invited to the City of Hagi, Yamaguchi, to give a speech about the UK-Japan relationship. On that occasion I declared that, hailing from the province of the Choshu Five, I wanted to celebrate the 150th anniversary of their arrival in the UK while serving as Ambassador there.

To tell you the truth, I was not so confident that I would still be around in the same post, nor could I have imagined that Mr Abe, also from Yamaguchi, would be

part of the celebrations as Prime Minister two and a half years later. Surely it is a coincidence... or is it? It could be a piece of magic brought about by the Choshu Five, as they included Japan's first Prime Minister, Hirobumi Ito, and the first Foreign Minister, Kaoru Inoue.

At any rate, I find it quite fortuitous that we can today celebrate the memory of these pioneering students and their guardians with the participation of so many people and in such a high-profile manner, because we do want the world to know more about the great achievements of these wonderful people.

Today's ceremony and subsequent events will highlight the Williamsons' unstinting love and devotion for the young aliens from afar, offered entirely without prejudice, as well as the self-sacrifice and courage of these students in overcoming relentless waves of hardship for the sake of their nation. I hope that the students' exploits so long ago will inspire the young people of today, particularly in Japan, to become more outward-looking and proactive in serving the public good.

Before concluding, allow me to remind you that today's event was made possible thanks to people involved with the Serbian Orthodox Church. In the Church's section of Brookwood Cemetery they came across, then kindly preserved and subsequently looked after the graves of those young Japanese students who had sadly succumbed to illness while studying in the UK. For this act of humanity may I therefore thank the representatives of the Church and the Serbian Government, on behalf of the Government and people of Japan and all those present here.

Last but not least I would like to thank our co-host Three Wheels Temple, UCL and all the other relevant organisations and individuals for their robust support of the events to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Choshu Five and the beginning of academic exchange between Japan and the United Kingdom.