

Murder, Misunderstandings, and Might. Mid-Nineteenth Century Confrontation between Britain and Satsuma.

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This short paper is an attempt to give reasons for some of the discrepancies in the literature in English on two important events in Anglo-Japanese relations that occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. Accounts of and reactions to the Richardson Affair and Great Britain's 1863 bombardment of the city of Kagoshima in Southern Kyushu, are surprisingly conflicting. I will look at newspaper cuttings of the time, diary entries, and articles connected with the event, which in some instances, are written by people who witnessed things firsthand, and in others written long after. I intend to show how facts and figures have been distorted over time in attempts to reconfirm hegemony in two relevant spheres of influence; namely, the feudal base of Satsuma ruled by the Shimazu clan on one hand, and Victorian belief in British supremacy, particularly in terms of its Royal Navy, on the other.

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It is exactly 140 years since seven vessels under the command of Vice Admiral Kuper entered the waters of Kinko Bay, intent on forcing the powerful Shimazu clan of Satsuma into accepting their terms for reparations after the murder of a British merchant, Charles Lennox Richardson, a year earlier. Much of the literature concerning the event emphasizes how the destruction of the city helped bring about the fostering of cordial relations based on mutual respect between Satsuma and Britain, relations that have continued ever since. This viewpoint is certainly oversimplified if comments by both sides are scrutinized carefully. In order to understand the various reactions both at the time of the bombardment and in the important context of the years just after, leading up to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, it is necessary to place the bombardment in historical perspective. This is best achieved by concentrating firstly on the death of Richardson.

Background to the events of August 1863

In 1845 the British opened a settlement in Shanghai and from that year in particular they showed growing interest in opening up new ports in Japan by securing trading treaties with a country which was seen by many to be the key to a highly lucrative monopoly in global trading routes. Leaders in Japan were only too well aware of this and had noted with anxiety China's semi-colonization by foreign powers. Many of the local fiefdoms, sensitive to the threat of foreign invaders, had steadily increased their defenses and armaments in the years between 1840 and 1860. Satsuma was no exception, and under the directions of its Daimyo Shimazu Nariakira (1809-1858), had pursued an aggressive policy of Western learning which was implemented in the knowledge that the key to future self-determination lay in the modernization of the fiefdom, so that it could compete militarily and industrially with the powers that were seen as such a threat (Kadota and Jones 1990:5)

In this sense Nariakira, as Sakai points out, was far more enlightened than many of his peers, and certainly in direct contrast to his own father who was content to concentrate on internal Satsuma affairs. Nariakira 'was a realist who recognized that some trade concession must be made to minimize Western aggressiveness.' (1970:210-16). He also attempted to bring Satsuma up to date by building gun batteries in strategic places close to Kinko Bay in order to defend the town from a naval attack. Other developments implemented by Shimazu Nariakira, including iron smelting, armaments, ceramics and glassmaking, certainly helped in assuring Satsuma a vital part to play in national policy at this important juncture of Japanese history. According to Sakai (1963:55) it 'was the dynamic energy exemplified by these various enterprises, which enabled Satsuma to lead the Restoration'.

However, after the death of the Lord of Satsuma in 1858, a number of key men in the province started to embrace the ideals of the movement known as "Sonno Joi," which meant literally to 'Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians'. They saw clearly that their future lay in taking a stand against the growing number of foreigners trading in the treaty ports, and in particular against the ineffective rule of the Tokugawa Bakufu government which seemed intent only on appeasing the foreigners. The Sonno Joi adherents acted from a belief that the only way to secure their power bases for the future was to expel the foreigners and keep in place Japan's isolationist policy.

It has been suggested (Naito 1964) that "poor common people who were thrown into sudden distress created by a serious shortage of commodities" were among this movement's most vocal supporters. This flawed view follows the argument that excessive exports of Japanese staple goods had caused anti-foreign feeling, stirring up resentment in the lower samurai class and those classes further down the hierarchical system in Japan. This firstly fails to note that the lower strata of society was very often short of daily necessities and that

at intervals throughout Japanese history, famine was widespread (MacFarlane 2003:70-76), and secondly, that Sonno Joi was in particular a movement designed and orchestrated from above, not below. The most conservative elements among the outlying daimyo such as Shimazu Hisamitsu, who had taken over the helm of the Shimazu clan after Nariakira's death in 1858, were staunch supporters and attempted to consolidate their power by undermining the Tokugawa Bakufu's attempts to placate foreign powers through the opening of further trading ports.

“The Namamugi Incident”

It was into this complicated political arena that Charles Lennox Richardson set foot in 1862. A recently retired trader from Shanghai, he was visiting Japan before intending to return home to England. His death at the hands of Satsuma men on September 14th 1862 turned out to be the key event that led in August 1863 to the destruction of at least one third of Kagoshima City. As to the exact details of what happened on that day, the literature available is surprisingly inconsistent, considering the fact that there were numerous eye witnesses and many reports sent across the world to various newspapers within hours of the event happening.

What is certain about the “Richardson Affair” as it became known in English, or the “なまむぎ事件” in Japanese, is that Richardson was murdered while out riding with three companions, Mr. Clark, Mr. Marshall and Mrs Borrodaile. The two other men were wounded, but survived, and the lady had a lucky escape and was unharmed. What is also certain is that his assailants came from the retinue of the Daimyo of Satsuma, whose procession the British party came across on the road near the small hamlet of Namamugi. After this, the reports become unusually conflicting if more than one or two sources are scrutinized carefully. The reasons for this lie in cultural and historical misunderstandings every bit as careless as the one committed by Richardson himself.

The pro-imperialist views expressed as late as 1963 by Commander W.B. Rowbotham, a retired Royal Navy man, are perhaps a good place to start the investigation into the depth of miscommunication concerning the bombardment of Kagoshima. The commander was clearly a man who appreciated a healthy bit of gunboat diplomacy. In his view, the bombardment stemmed from the fact that Satsuma had refused to punish the killers and a ‘that for that’ policy (in other words, revenge for Richardson's murder) was a sensible and justified reaction. He went on to state that perhaps one of the problems with the world as it was in 1963, a hundred years after the event, was that this policy was rarely adhered to anymore, regretting the fact that “humanitarians today...display similar tendencies; their sympathies often appear to be more with the killer than with his unfortunate victim” (1963:273). So to his mind,

Richardson was an 'unfortunate victim', not least because according to Rowbotham he was cut down "before he had a chance to withdraw" (1963:275). The insinuation is that the attack was cowardly, not quite sporting, and certainly not the kind of violence that a true British subject could ever commit. The fact that in all likelihood a command to retreat was given by the Japanese retinue as a warning, but not understood by Richardson, since he knew no Japanese and was unfamiliar with Japanese protocol, are ignored completely in Rowbotham's version of events.

It is worthwhile comparing Rowbotham's views on Richardson with those of a Japanese journalist, Hiroshi Naito, writing at a similar time. Naito explains that Richardson and his party paid dearly for their ignorance of local customs. It was imperative for people not only to get out of the way of the procession, but also to prostrate themselves on the ground, and if on horseback, dismount and to pay respect. Naturally, a British subject of Victoria's Empire would have never thought of such behaviour, and although Richardson belatedly turned his horse around, he got caught up in the procession on the narrow road. To the samurai his action was seen as grossly insulting and so he was cut down (1964).

It is crucial to point out however, that this was not a racist attack in any sense. Any Japanese subject getting caught in the same situation would have suffered the same fate, to which Ryoma Sakamoto, a heroic figure in nineteenth century Japan could have attested only too readily. During his childhood, friends aged ten had been cut down in similar circumstances without any mercy, when they ran close to a daimyo's procession without showing due humility.

There are others who hold views similar to those offered by Naito, that Richardson was at best naïve in his conduct, and at worst condescending in his refusal to even worry about local customs. Beasley accuses Richardson as having often been 'high-handed and insensitive' (2000:44) to the Japanese, which while it may well have been a common trait in British subjects abroad in the mid-nineteenth century, was especially galling to the Satsuma men who felt themselves to be superior to the coarse vulgar barbarians. Ironically, within the strict system of rankings that the samurai were used to living out their lives, a merchant such as Richardson would belong to the lowest of the four classes "Shi-No-Ko-Sho", while it can be supposed in Richardson's mind, as a gentleman and British subject, the retainers who confronted him were far beneath him in social status.

In addition to his lack of cultural awareness, Richardson's inability to understand any Japanese meant that when a lead-off samurai ordered the group to dismount, he and his party failed to comply and rode on regardless. Francis Hall, an American trader who was living in Yokohama at the time of the incident and who kept a detailed diary on events within the treaty port claims that Richardson 'halted at the side of the road', but this seems unlikely and is not referred to in other accounts (2001:306). In any case, as already mentioned, failure to dismount was the first mistake. Merely halting, while mounted would not have been

sufficiently deferential for the samurai retainers of Lord Shimazu.

When they finally realized they were in a situation which might turn violent, Richardson's group attempted to turn their horses, but it was too late. The rigid customs of Japanese hierarchy meant the retainers had no choice but to attack in order to defend their Lord's honour, as well as perhaps, their own livelihoods. The fact that Japanese authorities had warned foreigners in the treaty port to stay off the road that day because feudal lords and their retainers would be passing along, only further shows either the blatant disregard for local custom or incompetence that Richardson and his group displayed on this occasion. Freer-Smith states clearly that 'strangers were cautioned to avoid the road', but makes the excuse that due to 'a confusion of dates', this warning was not heeded (1919:21).

The viewpoint of the insensitivity shown by Richardson and his group was amplified in many of the press releases of the time with suggestions that the group had shown arrogance and disregard for national customs, and thus in a sense had acted in a suicidal manner. While plainly hyperbolic in tone, in line with much of the reporting of the day, the sentiments certainly re-enforce the view that the 'Namamugi Incident' in itself was more of a cultural misunderstanding, than a catalyst for all out bombardment of a city.

Even the reporting concerning the manner of Richardson's death shows clear cultural misinterpretations. According to Naito, Richardson was 'slashed' and 'wounded twice in the stomach', while Satow suggests that the three British men in the group were set upon by samurai, who 'hacked at them with the sharp-edged heavy swords' (2000:48). After Richardson fell from his horse and was lying mortally wounded one of the samurai (Takeji Kaieda, according to Kadota and Jones 1990:24) gave him 'todome' or the coup de grace. For the Japanese warrior this was seen as an act of mercy, sparing the wounded man any more suffering. However, to the Victorian British public, it was nothing more than an execution, a point hinted at in Satow's account. 'His throat had been cut while he was lying there wounded and helpless' was the diplomat's view on the custom of 'todome'. Rowbotham, writing much later, kept the same tone as he described how Richardson was 'barbarously murdered' (1963:275)

After the murder, Satsuma refused or ignored Britain's demands for reparations. Constant stalling eventually led to Britain losing patience in pure diplomatic efforts for an adequate resolution to the crisis, and so on August 6th 1863 seven ships were sent to Kagoshima, the chief base of the Satsuma Lords in order to persuade the Japanese clan to punish the murderers responsible and pay the outstanding reparation of 25,000 pounds, or face the force of the British Navy.

The events of August 12th to 16th 1863

The British squadron, led by Vice-Admiral Kuper on the flagship Euryalus, and six other

ships arrived in Kinko Bay on the 11th August and anchored in about 14 fathoms at about 9pm that evening (Rowbotham 1963:277). According to Mounsey, Kagoshima was 'one of the most ancient towns in Japan'. It also had one of the best defenses of any Japanese town, and he noted that its arsenal was 'one of the largest in the Empire'. In addition, the armed classes of Satsuma were 'famed amongst all the clans for their military prowess' (1879:14). Despite this high praise, it seems unlikely that the leaders of the squadron were unduly worried. They certainly had respect for the capabilities of the Satsuma samurai, but had no intention of engaging them on land, and as is pointed out in more than one source, the majority of the seamen involved in the event, felt there would be an amicable settlement to the affair once the Lord of Satsuma saw firsthand the might of the British Navy arrayed against his town. The British ships had a total of 101 cannons at their disposal, and many of the Armstrong guns were thought to be the most efficient and devastating firepower available at the time. In hindsight however, they did not perform so well, and the British Navy 'reverted to muzzle loaders for some years to come' after the bombardment (Rowbotham 1963:278). Laird-Clowes suggests that it was the seven inch B.L. 110-pr Armstrong which caused so much trouble, and emphasizes how 'this engagement did much to discredit a type a gun which was then new to the navy (1903:199).

Furthermore, as Freer-Smith, who was aboard the *Perseus* as a young midshipman at the time, points out, 'the Japanese at that time not only possessed quite up-to-date artillery, but handled their guns with skill and bravery', (1919:24). This last point was re-iterated in official dispatches concerning the engagement with Satsuma's batteries when it was noted that 'the fire from the forts was very good and heavy' (Official dispatch to the Board of Admiralty from Vice Admiral Kuper, August 22nd 1863).

It is clear from the literature that most people on the British side regarded the mission as a fairly safe one. Hall points out in his diary entry for August 6th that 'the general impression is that this mission will have a peaceful result' (2001:346). Naito also confirms this when he quotes a French naval officer, Albert Ressin, who wrote in his 1866 book 'Une Campagne Sur Les Cotes Du Japon' 'that the British enlisted men firmly believed that their expedition would turn out a mere voyage to Kagoshima' (Mainichi Newspaper 1964). It seems clear that the British regarded Satsuma as tricky, without being too dangerous. Hall sums up the view of the foreigners in the treaty ports when he writes that 'the wily Satsuma... has been mocking the English with delusive hopes only to gain time' (2001:341). Overall though, there was general agreement that once British might in the form of its Navy had been understood by Satsuma, the clan would quickly back down and agree to British terms. This view tends to replicate the same lack of basic understanding about Satsuma, its pride and self-belief that Richardson and his group had failed to grasp a year earlier.

In fact, the Lord of Satsuma, Hisamitsu had been preparing for war for much of the previous twelve months as Kadota and Jones make very clear (1990:26). After the murder of

Richardson, which was praised by the Imperial Court, Hisamitsu took great care in following the tenants of 'Sonno Joi' by concentrating his efforts to 'expel the barbarian' by traditional means, which would show up the true spirit of the samurai and Satsuma. Western drills implemented by his predecessor Shimazu Nariakira were stopped. In their stead a school of swordsmanship replaced the defunct school of artillery in March 1863. In the following months forts and batteries were repaired or upgraded, and more cannons produced. He also commanded that light ships, 36 feet in length be built with the intention of using them to attack much larger warships. As Naito (1964) points out, these were mosquito boats designed for short-range bombardment. Because of the weather, they were not successful during the battle, but as a prototype for later Japanese naval craft, they were a sign of great military prowess.

The British were unaware, of course of these preparations on the part of Satsuma, so their faith in their warships' ability to produce the desired effect was understandable, though perhaps overly confident. The fact that Hisamitsu was willing to accept an engagement with British troops if attempts to try and stall the British through diplomatic measures failed, is highlighted by his decision on the 14th to evacuate old men, women and children from the town when it became clear that all negotiations had failed (Kadota and Jones 1990:27). Once he reasoned that war was unavoidable, determination to protect the hometown of Kagoshima on the part of his troops became even more resolute.

Between August 12th and 15th there was a great amount of negotiation that went on between the British side and the Satsuma messengers. No common ground was found. It seems the British were very wary of falling into a trap, especially after Hisamitsu sent death squads disguised as fruit sellers to board the ships on the 13th, and with Satsuma keen to prevaricate at every turn in the proceedings, by constantly making excuses of various kinds for their inability to agree to the demands of the British.

The event that broke the stalemate was the capturing of three Satsuma steamers at about 4.30 a.m. on the fifteenth. Kuper ordered a Captain Borlase to seize the steamers, with the intention of holding the valuable ships for ransom. To the Japanese, the intrusion onto their vessels was clearly provocative. In fact, Satsuma later claimed that as the capture of a ship was deemed in international law to be a hostile act, Britain was responsible for the onset of hostilities (Kadota and Jones 1990:26). However, the onus on where responsibility lay was shifted to Satsuma in Hall's conflicting view of the same events. He states clearly that 'Satsuma opened his batteries on the English fleet while quietly riding at anchor' (2001:347) which both suggests Satsuma's direct responsibility for whatever later befell them, as well as conveniently ignoring the incident in which the steamers were taken, although he does briefly include this information in a later entry. Rowbotham echoes these sentiments when he talks of the seizure of the ships by Borlase (sic). He mentions how the British had grown tired of the Prince of Satsuma's 'naïve' proposals and 'evasive attempts' to delay matters. The seizing

of the ships, he seems to suggest was a natural consequence of their reluctance to bow to British demands, and he makes clear that the noon attack by the Satsuma batteries was the first real hostile action to his mind, as he states that 'all the shore batteries suddenly opened fire without warning'. The implication here being that it was from this point on only natural for the British fleet to reply 'to this fresh outrage on the British flag' (1963:277).

In the ensuing battle, British ships pounded the shore emplacements and main buildings in the town, while Satsuma's 83 guns tried to inflict as much damage as they could on the invaders. The outcome after a long battle that took place as a typhoon raged, with heavy squalls and gale force winds making everything very difficult, was the destruction of a large part of the town incurred with considerable loss on the British side. In the literature there is again a great deal of conflicting evidence as to who actually won the day, and still more confusion when figures on damage and numbers of killed and wounded are examined.

Conflicting Figures

Rowbotham's figures are indicative of his pro Royal Navy stance and arrogantly one-sided viewpoint. He dedicates just one sentence to the British losses stating that 'The total British casualties amounted to 13 killed and 50 wounded.' (1963:278)

In contrast he writes at length on the damage inflicted to the town of Kagoshima, and suggests that the enemies casualties numbered 400 killed and 1000 wounded, though just where these figures are gleaned from, it is difficult to say. None of the works he quotes come from Japanese sources which makes his figures even more suspicious, as most sources in English refrain from giving numbers of casualties on the Satsuma side. Added to this, is the fact that he quotes Kagoshima's population at the time as being 40,000, while most other sources tend towards figures anywhere between 160,000 and 180,000. His conclusion concerning the numbers of casualties suggests a comprehensive British 'victory', but this is certainly debatable, especially when the obviously biased style of his writing is considered. In the end he suggests, in an overtly condescending style that Satsuma was only able to learn from its mistakes, by the rigid punishment that Her Majesties Forces had been forced to hand out, but that with hindsight, it was all for the best, as it helped Satsuma to recognize the superiority of all the Western inventions that were accepted wholesale after the bombardment!

"The result of this severe lesson was that the Prince of Satsuma, and all his clan, at last realized that Japan was not the strongest country in the world, and that there were other nations more powerful and more civilized. From that time onwards they ceased to regard foreigners with contempt and took an active part in furthering the introduction into Japan of Western machinery and inventions, and in employing skilled Europeans as instructors" (1963:278).

It is interesting to note that the style and use of language is almost identical here with that in Laird-Clowes' report written sixty years earlier, emphasizing how close Rowbotham's viewpoint remained to those of a previous epoch.

At least Rowbotham is accurate in the numbers of casualties he states. He has obviously read the very detailed reports of casualties submitted by Vice Admiral Kuper to the Board of Admiralty on August 22nd 1863, and his figures tally. Freer-Smith however, states (1919:24) that 23 British men were killed and 47 wounded. It is difficult to see where his figures come from, but at least he refrains from commenting on Japanese losses, which is sensible considering his less than reliable sources.

Hall, writing on August 27th 1863 is also slightly inaccurate in his figures, quoting 11 killed and 39 wounded at first, but then stating a few lines later that the day following the bombardment (August 16th) 'the dead (2 officers and 7 men) were consigned to their sailor's grave' (2001:349-50).

Finally at the end of his entry, he comes up with the correct figures, but again has no information concerning the Japanese casualties. His writing also smacks of pro Empire ranting at times, especially as he describes the bombardment and how the *Perseus* responded to aggression 'in beautiful style', how the *Racehorse* 'availed herself in true British style' and how Wilmot, an officer 'met a glorious death' (2001:349). Looking back 140 years after the event, it is clear to see how the term 'glorious' for having your head blown off at the shoulders has become redundant in the language.

Naito, writing on the 18th August 1964, states the death toll for the first day of the bombardment as being 13 on the British side and only 5 in the Satsuma forts. While the second figure seems remarkably low, it is no less absurd than other numbers and perhaps merely suggests the other side of the coin, namely a pro Satsuma view which negates the loss on their side in order to suggest a victory of sorts.

Reactions to the Bombardment

Whatever the true figures, reactions to the bombardment also fail to give much clarity to the event. Despite Vice Admiral Kuper's best attempts to deflect blame for the deaths of his men, there was a certain amount of hostile reaction to the bombardment in Britain at the time. Sir Ernest Satow, in his book 'A Diplomat in Japan' states very clearly that Kuper was well aware of the amount of damage he was inflicting on Satsuma. He says that 'rockets were also fired with the object of burning the town' and later that Kuper 'took credit for the destruction of the town'. He sides quite clearly with the view of Mr. Bright, a member of the House of Commons, who 'called attention to this unnecessary act of severity'. Satow like many others suggests that Britain's actions were not something to be too proud of. (2000:84-5). The Quarterly Review was critical of the high handed nature of Britain's policy with regard

to Satsuma, as was *The New York Times* which saw the bombardment of an act of barbarity, suggesting like others that it was nothing more than a simple exercise in gunboat diplomacy, that unfortunately for the Royal Navy cost them quite dearly in terms of lives lost. This is echoed by Barr, who states that 'a few certainties emerged from the affair: a number of people who were totally innocent- even ignorant- of Richardson's murder had been vengefully killed; a classic piece of gunboat diplomacy... had been perpetrated (1967:166). In a sense, the operation had been badly planned. As a result of these lack of preparations as well as the typhoon, and staunch defending by the Satsuma batteries, the British must have been disappointed in many aspects of the bombardment. Their guns were not as effective as had been hoped. They failed to get Satsuma to give up the people involved in the murder of Richardson, and casualties were high for such a short action. Satow again confirms these points diplomatically, when he suggests Kuper had allowed Neale, the head of the British Legation to interfere too much in what was clearly the jurisdiction of the Royal Navy.

There was a general feeling in Britain from some quarters that the whole event was merely a sideshow behind which the greater prize of new trade markets was inadequately hidden. This view had been put forward before the events in Kagoshima came to light, as can be seen by the July 4th 1863 edition of the *Illustrated London News*, which gave its readers the opinion that ulterior motives were behind much of what was going on in Japan.

"If a sarcastic enemy of this country were asked to define what was meant by the advancement of civilization by England, he would probably reply the opening of new markets for trade at the point of a bayonet. Although, as good patriots, we may reject the sneer, as men of common sense we must accept the fact."

Final Remarks

After the bombardment Satsuma, which had managed to claim a victory of sorts, and more importantly, had saved its reputation and honour in Japanese terms by its refusal to capitulate to British demands, began to look to the future. Realizing they had more to gain from friendship with Britain, there was a movement within the ranks of the samurai leaders to find a way to repay the British the financial reparations demanded of them. This was finally achieved ironically via a loan through the Bafuku, who many in Satsuma saw as the real enemy, rather than the foreign powers intent on trade. Many sources claim that the direct results of the bombardment led to a swift change in policy on the part of Satsuma. The gist is that, realizing they could never defeat the British in a full battle, they sought to embrace the technology they had witnessed firsthand during the bombardment, by starting a radical new policy in favour of Western technology.

This, as I pointed out at the beginning of the paper, fails to recognize the extent to which

the previous Lord of Satsuma, Shimazu Nariakira, had already taken on board many Western ideas before his death in 1858. In many ways, the post bombardment plans of Satsuma merely sought a return to the earlier beliefs of Nariakira's enlightened views, rather than the conservative traditional upholding of "Sonno Joi", which some in Satsuma had reverted to after Richardson's murder. Perhaps the simple truth behind the events of 1862 and 1863 are best summed up by the remarks of Kadota and Jones when they suggest that as 'neither side behaved in an unwarlike manner' it could be argued that 'the conflict was inevitable' (1990:35).

Certainly it seems difficult to see how, at that point in history, two such warlike powers as Satsuma and Britain, full of similar dynastic views about their inherent rights of hegemony, could possibly have found a purely diplomatic solution to the Richardson affair. Satsuma was a proud semi-independent fiefdom, ruled over continuously since 1196 by the leaders of the Shimazu clan. They saw themselves superior to the barbarian British invaders, just as the British themselves looked down on the native culture of Japan from their high pedestal of Victorian moral superiority. As I have outlined through a look at some of the literature concerning these events, there were a number of cultural misunderstandings that exacerbated the mutual distrust, and it was only with a return to the path originally sought by Shimazu Nariakira in dealings with Western powers, that Satsuma and Britain started to develop mutually beneficial relations in the aftermath of the 1863 bombardment.

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