

A record of exchange as the Consul-General of Japan in Sydney (Edition 7)

Lismore and Ballina cities' connections with Japan: Through sister-city and friendship-city relationships

7 July

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On 21 and 22 June, I visited Lismore for the first time. Lismore is a regional city located in northeastern New South Wales, close to the Queensland border. In 1963, it became a sister city with Yamato-Takada in Nara Prefecture, and this was the formation of the very first sister-city relationship between an Australian and Japanese city. Every year on a Saturday around the winter solstice, Lismore holds a lantern parade, which includes a lantern from Yamato-Takada. For this reason, I received an invitation and attended the event. I took the opportunity to visit the Japan Centre at Southern Cross University and to meet with the local mayor. Lismore is also close to the tourist centre of Byron Bay and the Ballina Byron Gateway Airport, located in the neighbouring city of Ballina. So, when transferring through Ballina, I had the chance to meet with a councillor for Ballina and his wife. In this edition, I would like to write about the connections these two cities – Lismore and Ballina – have with Japan. (Regarding sister-city exchange between Lismore and Yamato-Takada, then Consul-General Kiya wrote about it in detail in his newsletter [here](#).)

● Ballina – gateway to the region

On my first day, 21 June, I arrived at Ballina Byron Bay Gateway Airport. At first, I thought it was strange to arrive there wondering, “Why isn’t there a flight to Lismore airport?” I was kindly greeted by Mr Phil Meehan, a councillor for Ballina, who explained that the Lismore runway was too small for larger aircraft, so Ballina’s airport had become the gateway for the region, including for tourism to Byron Bay. In fact, I was told that the airport is the second busiest regional airport in Australia. I also met his wife, Mrs Sue Meehan (also a former councillor), who has very actively promoted cultural exchange and peace education. A visit to Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial Museum, which documents the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, and the A-Bomb Dome Memorial spurred her to undertake activities to convey the history of the atomic bombing and the importance of peace to the people of Ballina, and it led her to deepen friendly ties with Hiroshima City. Ballina also has a long friendship with Hirakata City in Osaka Prefecture. Thus, I have expectations Ballina will become the 40th local government to sign a sister-city agreement with Japan. (Note: according to CLAIR (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations), for the purpose of its classification, sister-city agreements are considered to include documents of mutually agreed objectives to promote exchange across broad areas that have been approved by the two parties.) A final note about Ballina is that in winter you can spot many whales and it has become a popular place for whale watching. From Ballina, I headed to Lismore.



*With Cr Phil Meehan (Ballina Council) and
Mrs Sue Meehan*

● **Southern Cross University Japan Centre (Father Tony Glynn Japan-Australia Centre)**

From Ballina, I travelled for 30 minutes by car to attend a welcome party held at the Japan Centre at Southern Cross University (SCU) which is located in the eastern part of the city of Lismore. I was surprised to learn that the expansive SCU campus is home to more than 200 koalas, but turning first to the Japan Centre, I was warmly welcomed by SCU Adjunct Associate Professor Robert Smith (also president of the local historical society in Lismore), former Mayor of Lismore Vanessa Ekins, chair of the Japanese Centre committee and teacher Mrs Tazuko McLaren, flutist Bryan Hall, Japan Centre committee members and three students on exchange from Kansai University.

The formal name of the centre is the Father Tony Glynn Japan-Australia Centre, and while at the centre, I watched a video about Father Tony and his achievements towards Japan-Australia reconciliation in the post-war period. I also saw newspaper articles from Father Tony's time living in Japan and other memorabilia relating to him. The centre is also a venue for Japanese cultural experiences.

According to the SCU National Manager for Japan Kazuhiro Araki, SCU collaborates with close to 20 Japanese universities including Kansai University with which exchange remains active since students from Kansai University even volunteered at SCU's koala sanctuary. As a side note, SCU is a regional university and its sales point is not only being surrounded by nature, but also that compared to universities in large cities, the tuition fees are lower and the employment visa available to graduates lasts for three years, one year longer than for other university graduates.



At Southern Cross University's Japan Center (Father Tony Glynn Japan-Australia Centre) with Adjunct Associate Professor Robert Smith, former mayor of Lismore Vanessa Ekins, Mrs Tazuko McLaren and flutist Bryan Hall

● Lismore City

The lantern parade that Lismore City had invited me to attend was starting at 5.30pm, so before that, I went to meet the Mayor of Lismore, Cr Steve Krieg, to thank him for the invitation. It was after all a Saturday evening and our meeting was a casual greeting outside the council office. Mayor Krieg said that he was pleased that the sister-city relationship with Yamato-Takada had continued actively for over 60 years. He also told me that the city was facing challenges such as the slow progress rebuilding housing for those locals displaced by successive flood damage, and that he hoped Japanese high-tech companies would consider expanding into the area to develop local industry.

In 2022, Lismore was affected by flooding which reached a level of up to 14 metres, and in March of this year, cyclone 'Alfred' also caused flooding to approximately 30% of the city, although measures to protect against flooding had been strengthened since the 2022 disaster. Mayor Krieg was very interested to hear about flood mitigation in Japan, which is prone to flooding, and I thought there could be potential cooperation between Japan and Australia in the area of disaster management.

A few additional points I note about Lismore is that it is the major centre for education in the region, as represented by SCU, and it also has a general hospital. These factors, together with its agreeably warm climate, attract a lot of people who have moved from Sydney in search of a more relaxed lifestyle after retirement, and some have even come to grow macadamias in the suburbs of Lismore (by the way, macadamias originally come from this region).



With Mayor of Lismore Steve Krieg

● Carrying Yamato-Takada's mascot "Miku-chan" in Lismore's lantern parade

The lantern parade began at sunset. The parade is a local festival that was started in 1994 by Lismore artists with the aim of activating the region and increasing a sense of connection within the community. Nowadays, it is a winter tradition in Lismore watched by around 30,000 people. Lismore's sister-city, Yamato-Takada, donated a lantern of its city mascot, called Miku-chan, which was one of the lanterns in the lead group of around 50 lanterns. Councillors Gordon and Bing kindly took me from the place where I had made my earlier courtesy call on the mayor to the lantern marshalling area. There, we were joined by CLAIR Sydney Executive Director Manya Hiraki (note: he left his post on 28 June) and three Kansai University students I had met at SCU's Japan Centre, and together we carried Miku-chan through the centre of Lismore, and along the way, spectators welcomed us warmly. One of the exchange students from Kansai University at SCU went to Yamato-Takada Senior High School, and such involvement made me hope to see sister-city exchange among young people deepen further.



With Miku-chan, Cr Bing (2nd left), Cr Gordon and partner, and CLAIR Sydney Executive Director Hiraki (right)



Miku-chan processing through the city



*With Kansai University exchange student
Yuto Nishioka*

● The significance of Japan-Australia reconciliation in Lismore

The next morning, 22 June, I visited several war memorials located in the city centre. Located alongside the memorials to the First World War and the Vietnam War, there is a memorial to the Sandakan Death Marches which took place in the last part of the Second World War. This memorial commemorates the 1,787 Australian and 641 British prisoners of war who suffered and died on the marches or in the camps. Among the victims recorded on the memorial are the names of some 40 people from Lismore and surrounding areas. Reading this inscription, I reflected that establishing the first sister-city relationship in 1963 between Japan and Australia - between Yamato-Takada and Lismore - would not have been straightforward, and I thought about the efforts of Father Marsden from Lismore and of Fathers Tony and Paul Glynn. The Glynn brothers were younger students at the same local high school as Father Marsden, and they would carry on in his footsteps to work towards Japan-Australia reconciliation. I recalled meeting with Father Paul Glynn in December 2024 in Sydney and learning about Father Marsden and about his and his brother's work to achieve reconciliation (in 1953, Father Tony went to the Nara Diocese, and in 1955, Father Paul went to Yamato-Takada).

Next, I visited the home of Mrs Robbie Braithwaite on the outskirts of Lismore. Robbie's late husband Dr Dick Braithwaite wrote a book called "Fighting Monsters: An Intimate History of the Sandakan Tragedy" to grasp a full picture of his father's horrific experience as one of only six survivors of the Sandakan Death Marches. I also watched a documentary produced by Kazuhiro Yumoto, which won the Japan Commercial Broadcasters Association Grand Prix award. Entitled "78 Years of Reconciliation: a Bereaved Family's Journey [78年目の和解、遺族の軌跡]", the documentary was begun before Dr Braithwaite's passing in September 2016 and aired on SBC Shin-Etsu Broadcasting in 2024.

What the book and the documentary have in common is that they not only depict the horrific experiences of the Australian and British POWs and the local people at Sandakan, but they also look from the perspective of Japanese soldiers who were also victims. A case in point: the son of the man who was hanged as the person responsible for the death marches had been wanting to participate in the annual memorial service held at Sandakan in Borneo, but having

never even spoken with the Australian and British side, he had not been able to do so. However, the continued efforts of his younger brother to engage in dialogue with the Australian and British stakeholders eventually meant he was recently able to participate. Hearing these stories, I reaffirmed my belief in the importance of dialogue towards reconciliation and overcoming enmity between former foes.



*The Sandakan Death March Memorial
in Lismore*



A plaque on the Sandakan Death March Memorial

● Conclusion

Above, I have given an overview of my visit, however, I must also acknowledge the kind arrangements of Mrs Tazuko McLaren, who liaised with all the stakeholders. She moved to Ballina about half a century ago. At the time, in major cities such as Sydney, there was still anti-Japanese sentiment. Similarly in Ballina, just before she arrived there, the local Rotary Club was apparently divided about whether to accept Japanese exchange students, however, the opponents left the club and Japanese students were finally accepted. Sometime later, Mrs McLaren began teaching Japanese at the Northern Rivers Campus of New England University (today, Southern Cross University). From 2000, she organized Japan tours by the SCU choir “Isabella A Capella” and the money raised went to the establishment in 2014 of the Japan Centre (formally, the Father Tony Glynn Japan-Australia Centre). In 2018, her contribution was recognised with a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) and a Japanese Foreign Minister’s Commendation.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. It is an opportunity to pay renewed respect to all those who worked hard to achieve Japan-Australia post-war reconciliation, and to renew our own commitment to work towards further deepening friendship between Japan and Australia.