

Michael Wise, Comp. *Traveller's Tales of Old Japan*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2008. 262 pp. ISBN 978-981-261-742-2.

Japan had been secluded from the rest of the world for so long that myths about it fuelled people's imagination. Some of those myths were dispelled by actual visits by outsiders but simultaneously others got constructed once people started reading the narratives of such visits. As a kind of prelude to this collection of travel anecdotes, the compiler quotes from St. Francis Xavier's impressions of Japan as early as 1549:

I really think that among barbarous nations there can be none that has more natural goodness than the Japanese. They are of a kindly disposition, not at all given to cheating, wonderfully desirous of honour and rank... most of them can read... they have not more than one wife... they are wonderfully inclined to all that is good and honest, and have an extreme eagerness to learn. (14)

This praise for a "barbarous nation" and its people by a religious person way back in the mid sixteenth century can be read as a kind of stereotypical imperialist construct that continued unabated even up to the late twentieth century resulting in the study of Orientalism as a specific critical genre initiated by Edward Said and other postcolonial critics.

In this anthology, seventy four early travellers from ten countries, mainly Europe and America, describe at first hand their many experiences of Old Japan from 1853 to 1923. They range from diplomats, tourists, sailors who stopped by as part of maritime expeditions and the whaling industry, members of the royalty, missionaries and others. In the preface the compiler explains why he selects this seventy year time span – a period he considers "the adolescent years of modern Japan" that fell between "two seismic events"(5) – namely the arrival of Commodore Perry with his squadron in 1853 demanding that Japan relinquish its seclusion, and the great earthquake in 1923 that destroyed Tokyo and Yokohama. To the foreigner, Japan was obviously a puzzle – a strange land where bizarre behaviour went hand in hand with courtesy and charm. Many Western traders condemned the Japanese as unreliable, and many Western travellers patronised their hosts as unsophisticated. Others, more clear-sighted, saw early on the potential and future success of the Japanese people. For example, a 1907 trip through China, the Philippines, and Japan "exactly doubled" (203) the American F. Dumont Smith's knowledge of the world. George Johnson, another American visitor, writes in details about a subject

usually not mentioned when travellers put pen to paper – namely the *benjo* or the toilet.

While some visitors loved Japan, others found it simply unendurable. A British Minister in the 1870s was reported to have described Japan as “a country in which all women dress from the waist downwards, and all the men from the waist upwards”; while an American statesman put the matter more bluntly, calling Japan “a country of nudity, lewdity and cruelty”(5). Some of the exotic experiences of the travellers in Japan include descriptions like visiting a public bath-house, staying with a Japanese family, eating a live fish, flirting with geisha girls, consulting a village doctor, an American travel writer Eliza Scidmore climbing Mount Fujiyama in a storm in 1891, dining with the Emperor, seeing the slums of Tokyo, meeting with hostile samurai and even witnessing hara-kiri. Some anecdotes are of more serious nature whereas a few are humorous and lighthearted as well. For instance, in the very last entry, Sir Valentine Chirol narrates how he got relief from severe toothache. Travelling in the countryside, he had to visit a young Japanese dentist on an emergency basis who tried very hard to pull out “the honourable tooth” but failed. On his third attempt “the whole house rocked for a moment” and this time the doctor was successful. Having displayed him the trophy, he made a profound bow, rubbed his hand over his knees, drew in a long breath and said, “I reckon the honourable earthquake did help” (246).

In her famous book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt uses two specific phrases – “contact zone” and “autoethnographic expression” that have become seminal in the discussion or analysis of any travel narrative. Pratt uses the term “contact zone” to refer to “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). The manner in which several Western narrators in this book under review reiterate their interaction with the Japanese people sometimes by coercion, inequality, and conflict seems to prove Pratt’s point that the divide between the two different races of people can never be eradicated. For example, The Marquis De Beauvoir, a young man of twenty-one went to Japan in 1862 as a simple tourist and wrote back home:

A few weeks ago, accordingly, after my first ride, I told you in my first enthusiasm that you must come here to find the most courteous people in the world; and now I am obliged to allow that it would be difficult to find oneself in the middle of a more hostile mob! (50)

The second point that Pratt makes about “autoethnographic expression” referring to instances in which colonised subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the coloniser’s own terms does not find

much representation in these narratives as all of them focus on the outsider's point of view. A very common trope that recurs in most travel narratives is the use of binaries – the Self and the Other, us and them, East and West, civilised and barbaric. Whereas some of these visitors to Japan emphasise their sense of wonder, there are also others who find the local customs and traditions inscrutable. For example, Laurence Oliphant, Private Secretary to Lord Elgin reaches Yedo (earlier name of Tokyo) to find, “to his astonishment, chairs, tables, and beds, in a city where all such articles had been previously unknown” (26), but he could not contain himself when he finds “a pair of sparkling eyes visible at two little peepholes expressly constructed” by the people of the adjoining house separated only by a paper screen. One can understand his surprise when he realises that “it was evident that a toilet, as performed by an English gentleman, was a spectacle which afforded intense amusement to the young ladies of the family next door” (27).

As a wealthy man, American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie was not easily impressed by lavish display; the gorgeous tombs of the tycoons failed to move him. But almost everything else he encountered during his two weeks in Japan in 1884 filled him with enthusiasm, and he wrote: “No country I have visited till now has proved as strange as I had imagined it.... All is so far beyond what I had pictured it that I am constantly regretting so few of my friends will probably ever visit Japan to see and enjoy for themselves” (89). A self-confessed tramp, Harry L. Foster came from Brooklyn, New York to collect experiences for a travel book and he too tells us how “among old travellers, the Japanese has the worst reputation of all the Orientals for his untrustworthiness ...” but in the next sentence adds, “even when the Japanese swindles you, he always does it so nicely and politely that you simply have to come back to be swindled again”(236). Lafcadio Hearn of Greek-Irish parentage married the daughter of a Samurai family and took Japanese nationality but remains puzzled by Japanese behaviour. He tells us how his cook who wore “a smiling, healthy, rather pleasing face” would always brood when left alone – “he never showed his *real* face to me; he wears the mask of happiness as an etiquette” (165) – and this is why he loved the people very much, more and more he knew them. One interesting entry comes from Raja Jagjit Singh of Kapurthala, Punjab, in Northern India. To him the countries of the Far East were as strange and wonderful as to any European. Being royalty he was well received in Japan, and was able to combine the pursuits of an ordinary tourist with formal engagements at Court.

Though travel has been primarily a masculine enterprise, women were not excluded. They also travelled, migrated, moved, often for the same reasons as men – their husbands or fathers or sons. Their writing, obviously different from men, were seen as narratives of their journeys and representation of their personal experiences resulting also in the female gaze. Mary Fraser, wife of the

British Minister, lived for three years in Tokyo and kept up a lively correspondence with home, emphasising that "... the ideals of the race have not changed, and I hope they never will" (158). One finds interesting details in the extracts from a journal written by Dr. Marie Stopes, primarily known for her work on birth control, when she went on an eighteen-month visit to Japan to further her interest in coal mines and associated fossils. In another narrative, Ethel Howard, previous governess to the Kaiser's sons in Germany tells us about her experiences of working in Tokyo as governess to the children of an aristocratic Daimyo family from southern Japan and how the Russo-Japanese war impinged even on their privileged lives.

Apart from customs, several entries focus on food as a strong cultural marker. Sometimes the travellers have also become the object of a reverse gaze. Charles Carleton Coffin of the *Boston Journal* arrived in Nagasaki in 1869 when Japan was in a state of civil war. While walking along the streets he comes to a public bath house where he sees "men, women, and children have laid aside their clothing, and are bathing together with as much freedom as a flock of ducks!!" (52) But soon he is perplexed by the manner in which the Japanese "hold themselves in high esteem and look upon foreigners as belonging to an inferior race" (52). He writes that soon he found a crowd following them to indulge their curiosity:

The women are greatly amused when they discover the hoop-skirts worn by the ladies of our party. They test the springs, gaze at the mysterious framework in wonder, and then give way to boisterous merriment. To them it is undoubtedly the most ridiculous arrangement in the world. (53)

After going through the multifarious experiences narrated in this anthology it becomes clear that travel extends the inward direction of autobiography to consider the journey outward. But whatever be the journey's motive, it changes both the country visited and the self that travels. An added attraction of this book is the pen and ink sketches that accompany many of the entries. Though some sketches of the Japanese men and women bear close resemblance to dark African natives thus enhancing the exotic element of Japan to the Western readers, others help the less perceptive reader visualise the uniqueness of the country being described. With its well documented glossary, and a historical time-chart included as appendix at the end, this book will appeal to serious and casual readers alike.

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