Robert Burns in Japan

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ROBERT BURNS IN JAPAN

THE MEIJI ERA (1868-1911)

Immediately after the Tokugawa Shogunate restored power into the hands of the sovereign, Japan began to restore order out of chaos and to modernize as quickly as possible. The Meiji Restoration was the dawn of a new era. Its leaders were in general "samurai"1 of the old school, brought up in the feudal system. After the Restoration, however, this system fell into disuse. A new enthusiasm swept the country, carrying all before it. Two important victories, the Russo-Japanese War and the Sino-Japanese War, gave the Japanese people a new sense of destiny.

The vision of the leaders in the Meiji Era was of modernization, although their ideas were not at that time well organized. There remained, however, a conflict between the new democracy and the old feudalistic ideas. During this era modernization meant Europeanization of thought, and the country soaked up Occidental civilization like a sponge. With the help of western countries remarkable strides were made.

A new interest developed in the literature of these European countries and the United States; among the authors studied we find Robert Burns. The door to the study of Burns was opened by Chiaki Inagaki in 1881 when he and some comrades wrote a parody on "Auld Lang Syne" for a school graduation ceremony. Its success was immediate and today "Auld Lang Syne" is almost a synonym for Robert Burns in Japan. It is now the only song of parting used in Japan. In 1908 Shogun Sakai published an article on "Auld Lang Syne" in Eigo Sekai (The English Word). Another early translation was that made of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" by Yoshifumi Yamabe in 1892 which was published in the Japan Review.

The earliest critical work on Burns to appear in Japan was Masahisa Uemura's "The Peasant Poet Robert Burns" which appeared in the Japan Review (1890). In 1895 a well-known literary critic, Tateki

1 Samurais or bushi: during the feudal era, one of the class of military retainers of the daimyos (vassals of the Mikado).
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Owada, included a chapter on Burns in his Lives of Literary Men, a book which is still widely read in Japan.

In 1896, the Burns Centenary Year, there was considerable interest in Burns. Foremost among those who helped to spread his fame was Tetsuo Kunikita, who lectured frequently on him and gave public readings of his poems. Among Kunikita’s favourites was “My Heart’s in the Highlands” which he frequently recited. That same year he published “The Failure of Burns” in the National Companion, an article based on Carlyle’s Essay on Burns. “If we study the poetry of Robert Burns, we must be taught very deeply,” he wrote in An Honest Confession (1909). As Kunikita was then at the height of his fame he produced a powerful effect on the people; it is not too much to say that he was a major figure in diffusing the literature of Robert Burns during the Meiji Era.

The year 1902 saw “Husband, Husband, cease your Strife” translated by Isoo Yamagata in his Collection of English and American Poetry. This same year Kaiseki Matsumura included a chapter “Robert Burns” in his Critical Biography, Ryusui Ogata wrote “Sad Fame of the Poet Robert Burns” for Tragic History as it was, and Reisuke Kazama devoted Chapter 18 of his Self-Culture to Burns. By this time the poet was well enough known to be quoted in works not dealing specifically with literature. For example, Hosui Murō quoted “Nae man can tether time nor ticle” from Tam O’Shanter in a work entitled Human Economics (1902).

Mugen Ohara did a great deal to make Burns known to the Japanese reading public. In 1905 he included a translation of “To Mary in Heaven” in his New Translations of Western Poetry. The following year he published Selected Poems from Burns, the first book of translations of the Scottish poet. It contains 160 pages with the original text and the translation. There are thirty-two poems including such favourites as “To a Mountain Daisy,” “The Birks of Aberfeldie,” “To Mary in Heaven,” “My Heart’s in the Highlands,” “The Vision,” “A Red, Red Rose,” “The Song of Death,” “O Lassie, are ye Sleepin’ yet,” “There was a Lass, and she was Fair,” “Here’s the Glen,” “Lament of Mary Queen of Scots,” “Simmer’s a Pleasant Time,” and “O were my Love yon Lilac Fair.”

Totan Miyamori and Senryu Kobayashi again translated “My Heart’s in the Highlands” in their One Hundred English and American Poems (1909). This anthology, with notes, did much to familiarize the public with Burns’s poem.

Such was the interest in the National Bard of Scotland that Oson Sakurai visited the land of Burns and included photographs of Burns haunts in his European Tour (1909). At about this time also the Ency-
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clopedia of Literature included an article “Robert Burns” by Shukotsu Togawa.

Although scholars of this period had few texts, they enthusiastically pursued the study of Burns; it was their early work which made possible the growth of interest in Burns during the succeeding Eras. It is not overrating the poet to say that Burns exerted a hidden, but distinct, influence on Meiji democracy.

THE TAISHO ERA (1912 - 1926)

This short era (during the reign of the Emperor Taisho) produced one outstanding book on Burns—a selection of poems translated by Professor Yoshisaburo Okakura. It was published in 1923 by the Tokyo firm Kenkyusha, the oldest established publisher of English literature in Japan, in their Kenkyusha English Literature Series. Professor Okakura was an energetic scholar who had put the finishing touch to his education in England and Germany. An excellent philologist, the author took great pains over his work, adding copious notes and explanations. These helped greatly with the study of Burns in Japan, as the difficulty of understanding the Scottish dialect is very real to the Japanese student. This work, which was reprinted three times, remains one of the basic Burns texts and is widely used by Burns scholars and Burnsians throughout the country.

The last year of the Taisho Era saw the publication of three books containing items of Burns interest. The first of these was the translation by Professor Aizo Okamura of William Swinton’s Studies in English Literature, a work which was first published in 1880. Of course this book was destined for the intellectual class only, but it has had an important effect on its small circle of readers. A more popular work was A Collection of Stories of Genius in the World by Professor Kyoson Asahara which went into five editions. Burns’s humanity was highly praised in the brief treatment given the poet. Finally, in 1926 Professor Kenji Kaneko, who had written a thesis entitled “The View of Natural Beauty in Wordsworth and Burns,” published a series of travel sketches Uma no Koshami (A Sneeze of a Horse). His four-page section devoted to Burns gives a brief description under the title “The Peasant Poet of Alloway” of how this area appeared to Japanese eyes.

THE SHOWA ERA (1926 - )

The most important work in the early years of this era was A Treasury of English Literature (1928) compiled by Professor Yoshiyuki Ide. This important anthology has been instrumental in introducing English literature to Japanese students. It includes “The Cotter’s Saturday
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Night," "To a Mountain Daisy," "Is there for Honest Poverty" (For a' that, an' a' that) as well as Carlyle's Essay on Burns.

An edition of translations (printed, as with most editions, with the English and Japanese in parallel text) was published in 1934. These learned translations were made by Professor Tameji Nakamura and are still widely used. This same year a thesis, this time devoted entirely to Burns, was presented in the Department of Literature of Kyushu University—"On the Early Works of Robert Burns" by Tsuneo Takeyama.

Another significant addition was made to the literature on Burns in Japanese in 1937 when Professor Kinji Shimada published "A Study of English Literature in France: The Achievement of Auguste Angellier" in the literary bulletin of Taibei Imperial University. This long article (it extends over 102 pages) gave a detailed analysis of Angellier's famous Robert Burns: la vie, les oeuvres (1893, 2 vol.). Shimada's eloquent introduction of Angellier gave Burns students new information about the poet and especially a vital new insight into Scotia's Bard. The fact that Angellier was able to interpret Burns in terms of his own country added a further dimension to the poet for Japanese readers. Professor Shimada's brilliant essay is still widely read and studied.

The first year of the latter period of the Showa Era (1951) saw the beginning of a revival of interest in Robert Burns which is still in full force. The impetus to Burns study was supplied by an article of mine on "Auld Lang Syne" which appeared in the Crome, Come Club, an English-language magazine. Several of my translations with commentaries have since been published in such periodicals as Albion (the organ of the Albion Club), Yashu, as well as in anthologies. My Poems of Robert Burns, a bilingual edition with notes and commentaries, was published in 1959. It includes twenty-eight poems, among them such favourites as "Auld Lang Syne," "Afton Water," "My Heart's in the Highlands," "Coming Through the Rye," To a Louse," "Mary Morison," "Scots Wha Hae," My Love is like a Red, Red Rose," "Ae Fond Kiss," and "Epistle to a Young Friend." This last poem is very popular in Japan. A new translation of mine was published in the magazine Information for the Education of Youth (1961) for "Adults' Day" (January 15) which celebrates the attainment of a youth's twentieth year. The last stanza in particular appeals to the rational faculty in its readers. It is hoped that the advice to "Andrew dear" will be followed by many a Japanese "Andrew dear."

In 1960 I published The Lyric Poetry of Robert Burns in parallel text translation with notes. This work contains twenty-one poems, six of which were not included in my previous book—"The Vision," "To James Smith," "Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson," "Address to the Unco
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Good,” “Epistle to John Lapraik,” and “Tam O’Shanter.” This was followed in 1963 by The Gem of Burns, which includes fourteen new translations, again in parallel text with notes. Among the poems are “Address to a Haggis,” “To a Mouse,” “The Rigs o’ Barley,” “Green Grow the Rashes,” “Willie brew’d a Peck o’ Maut,” and “Halloween.”


I have also been interested in comparing our national haiku poet Issa (1763-1827) with Burns. Issa’s haiku poems are unsophisticated and deeply religious in substance. This formed the basis for a paper “A Comparative Study of Issa and Burns” which I read before the Comparative Literature Society of Japan in 1958.

Two other important pieces of Burnsiana remain to be mentioned. Dr. Yasuo Yamato, who is well acquainted with Scottish literature in Japan, edited Essays on Burns (1961) which contains several important articles: “Merry Devils” by Professor Osamu Miura, “Robert Burns” by Dr. Takeshi Saito, “ Expediency of Scottish Enunciation” by Professor Shigeshi Nishimura and others. The volume also contains poems translated by Professor Minoru Soda. Also in 1961 Tadashi Izonu published The Poet Robert Burns which is concerned chiefly with Burns’s country.

Finally, it may be of interest to know which Burns editions are most frequently used in Japan. By far the most popular edition of the poetry is that of the Oxford University Press, edited by J. Logie Robertson. We Japanese find the notes and glossary extremely useful. To supplement this we employ William A. Craigie’s Primer of Burns (1896) and, of course, Reid’s Concordance. The Encyclopaedia Britannica is much used for a source book of information on Burns; in schools where children are learning English the junior edition of this work is widely popular. William Jacks’ Robert Burns in Other Tongues (1896) has been frequently consulted by Japanese who are interested in how Burns’s poetry was translated in other nations. No mention is made by Jacks of the Japanese translations prior to 1896 noted above.
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By far the most frequently employed critical study of Burns is Carlyle's famous Essay. An edition of this work with notes and some of Burns's poems was published in 1931 and is still widely used.

These volumes are what we call "Gensho" meaning source books or originals. There are, as one might expect, no true originals of Burns in Japan. I have made an exhaustive search for manuscripts in this country, but without success.

Some idea of how well Burns is now known in Japan may be had from the manifestations and publications connected with the bicentenary celebrations of 1959. The most notable of these was the establishment, under the auspices of the British Council, of the Japan Caledonian Society. Two television programmes on Burns were broadcast and I prepared a talk "Burns and Japan" which was broadcast over the Scottish Home Service. Furthermore several newspapers carried articles on Burns. The fact that the mass media took up Scotland's Bard shows that he is now known not only to a few specialists in the literature of Scotland but to a broad segment of Japan.

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