



The September issue of *The Japan Society Review* brings together a captivating selection of reviews that delve into diverse aspects of Japan's cultural, historical, and literary tapestry.

We begin with *In the Service of the Shogun: The Real Story of William Adams* by Frederick Cryns, which revisits the life of the famed English navigator who became a trusted samurai in Tokugawa Ieyasu's Japan. Cryns sheds new light on Adams' transformative journey, exploring the complex interactions between early modern Japan and the Western world.

In *The Shortest History of Japan*, author Lesley Downer presents an accessible yet comprehensive overview of Japanese history. Downer's brisk and engaging narrative takes readers from Japan's ancient origins through its rapid modernization, offering a concise but rich perspective on the country's evolution.

Next, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko's *Takaoka's Travels* transports us to a series of personal explorations that blend memoir, travelogue, and reflections on modern life in Japan. Shibusawa's writing is as much about Japan's

landscapes and towns as it is a meditation on the shifts in Japanese identity and place.

We then turn to *Mild Vertigo* by Kanai Mieko, a novella that masterfully captures the subtle yet poignant aspects of domestic life. Kanai's nuanced prose delves into the daily rhythms and existential reflections of her protagonist, resonating with readers as it examines themes of marriage, motherhood, and the passage of time.

In *I Would Meet You Anywhere: A Memoir*, Susan Kiyo Ito offers an intimate exploration of family, identity, and belonging. Through her personal journey as a Japanese American, Ito reflects on the complexities of cultural heritage and the universal search for connection.

Finally, Eleanor Burkett's *Washi Memories* is a tribute to the traditional Japanese art of paper-making. Burkett combines historical research with her own hands-on experiences, immersing readers in the tactile world of washi and celebrating its role in Japan's artisanal heritage.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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## Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

## Reviewers

Chris Corker, Laurence Green, Philip Meredith, Trevor Skingle and Shehrazade Zafar-Arif.

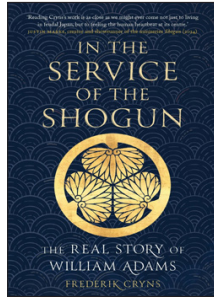
Image from *Washi Memories* by Eleanor Burkett

## In the Service of the Shogun: The Real Story of Williams Adams

by Frederick Cryns

Reaktion Books (2024)  
ISBN-13: 978-1789148640

Review by Trevor Skingle



The new FX series *Shogun*, based on the homonymous 1975 novel by James Clavell was released in spring 2024 and heralded a renewed interest in feudal Japan. It also led to a renewed interest in the character of John Blackthorne, which is based on William Adams (1564-1620), the English ship's pilot whose arrival in Japan on 19 April 1600 was destined to influence trade and the beginnings of the Tokugawa era (1603-1868). The worldwide popularity and the fans of the series are likely to have prompted this new and timely publication by Frederick Cryns, Professor of Japanese History at the International Research Centre for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. Prof Cryns is a longtime resident in Japan moving there from Antwerp, Belgium in 1989 and was also a historical consultant on the FX series.

Drawing on Dutch, English, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese sources, as well as new archival material from Jaques Specx (1585-1652), then head of the Dutch East India Company in Japan, the book places William Adams' encounters in the wider geopolitical context of the political intrigues of the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and English, the Western nations trading with Japan at the time.

The book begins with a potted history from around the time of Adams' birth, setting the context for his upbringing and apprenticeship, and his subsequent involvement in the fight against the Spanish Armada. Apart from some new information, the story of his involvement with the Dutch and his departure for Japan as part of their fleet, and the story of the fleet's encounters along the way, do not differ much from the accounts in other books. On the surviving crew's experiences in Japan, there is some welcome newly published information on Jan Joosten van Lodensteijn, one of William Adam's shipmates, a Dutch navigator and merchant. In other English-language publications, the details of Jan Joosten's life in Japan aren't developed as much, but here the narrative does justice to his story and legacy, which is almost on a par with that of William Adams.

In this regard, the book explains how the area around Tokyo station is named 'Yaesu' after Jan Joosten's Japanese nickname (which was the name of the canal where his house was situated), and includes a substantial open-air memorial to him and his legacy, with a bust of him in the station grounds, and a statue of the ship on which they arrived in Japan, *De Liefde*, just outside the station. The area where Jan Joosten's house was located, which is mentioned in the book, was between today's Babasakimon Bridge and the edge of the moat of Wadakuramon Gate in front of the Imperial Palace, and can still be visited today.

The book also deals with an incident in Nagasaki when the Japanese attacked the merchant ship, the *Madre de Deus*, in revenge for an incident in Macau when 50 Japanese were killed on the orders of the ship's captain, Andre Pessoa. The author claims that the ship was sunk by the Japanese. However, it was Pessoa who torched the magazine and sank the ship, not the Japanese. A small detail perhaps, but details matter when trying to construct a true narrative.

After writing about the arrival in 1613 of *The Clove*, the first English ship to land in Japan, there is a brief reference to the gifts given by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) to the ship's captain, John Saris (c. 1580-1643) for King James I (1566-1625). According to Saris's journal, in addition to ten folding screens (*byobu*), a *katana* long sword and a *wakizashi* short sword - all now lost -, there were (it is thought) the saddle and stirrups now in the Royal Collection, and two sets of samurai armour, one in the Tower of London Armoury Collection and the other in the Leeds Armoury. These details might have been mentioned not only for interest and to embellish the narrative, but also for serious fans who may want to follow the story on a physical journey.

There is some revealing new information about Adams's contract with the Dutch and their payments on his behalf to his English wife, and about the British East India Company's forgiveness of Saris's misdemeanours, whose affairs in Japan that led to his initial disgrace are not revealed in quite as much detail as in other accounts. It might also have been worthwhile for avid followers of this epic story to mention, after giving the year of Saris's death, 1643, that he is buried in All Saints Church in Fulham, London, where his tombstone can still be seen.

The latter part of the book skips over the stories of the confrontations with the Dutch, which are covered in some detail in other books. This leaves out an essential part of the story of Adams' life, one that

shows his extraordinary bravery, the rescue of three sailors prisoners of the Dutch. In September 1619 a Dutch ship, *The Angel*, sailed into Hirado with three prisoners on board; William Gordon (captain of the ship *The Hound*), Michael Payne (carpenter of the ship *The Samson*) and a Welshman called Hugh Williams. Cryns refers to the ship by its Dutch name *Engel* and states that it arrived on 21 September 1619, whereas other accounts (G. Milton/H. T. Rogers) give August 1619. However, William Eaton (a member of the British East India Company in Hirado, Japan) in his letter of 10 March 1620 to the East India Company confirms September as the month of arrival.

In his letter also dated 10 March 1620, Richard Cocks (1565–1624), head of the British East India Company's factory in Japan, confirms the rescue of the sailors by William Adams. William Eaton also confirms the facts, stating that it was 25 September when the English sailors were rescued by William Adams, with Cocks confirming the rescue of the Welshman 'the morrow' (the day after). Cocks also reports the subsequent violence and threats from the Dutch, as well as reports of another escape of three English prisoners (John Moore, John Jones and Edward Curwin) from Dutch ships the previous Christmas.

However, Cryns reports that 'the Engel brought several English prisoners of war to Hirado. When Adams heard of this he went straight to Specx and persuaded him to release them'. There is no reference for this in the book, but if this is fresh information from the newly discovered material of Jacques Specx, it would have been helpful to know the source, the context and any other directly related information to help clarify what happened. In the absence of this, it can only be assumed that if this was reported by Specx in this way, it was because he wanted a slightly more sympathetic historical view than that which might be given to William Adams for his bravery.

Occasionally, the book feels as if it has focused on context at the expense of biography. However, the latter part of the book lacks the detail that was underpinned in the earlier part by the extensive historical context. There is much to be said on the difficult commercial dynamics that Adams faced in the run-up to and immediately after Ieyasu's Osaka campaign, immediately after Ieyasu's death, and during the final years of Adams' involvement in trade in Japan. Nevertheless, there is an almost rushed feel to it, especially where it jumps from the almost insignificant references to the Anglo-Dutch conflict in Hirado to Adams' death.

On the other hand, while the subtitle 'The Real Story of Williams Adams' may indeed be a marketing reference to James Clavell's *Shogun*, the fictionalised version of William Adams' life, it also has an uncomfortable ring to it. "The Real Story", accompanied by the publisher's claim that this is the 'authentic' story of Adams' life, almost implies that other memoirs of Adams might not meet the 'standards' required of a factual biography. And while it certainly has a wide range of sources it is hardly, as the publisher claims, the 'first' or a 'complete biography'.

Moreover, in terms of the readers of the book, apart from scholars of Japanese history and serious aficionados of William Adams and his life, the other potential buyers of the book are likely to be fans of *Shogun* the novel and/or the TV series, who may not be aware of the connection between John Blackthorne and William Adams.

Unfortunately, for history buffs with some knowledge of the Treaty of Windsor (1386) who cannot understand why there was such a conflict between the English and Portuguese at the time, none of the publications on William Adams set the context by looking at the reasons behind it; that the pact of mutual support between England and Portugal established by that treaty was interrupted by the Iberian Union between 1580-1640, when Portugal was forced by Spain into hostilities against the English. As Cryns notes, but does not elaborate, 'Ieyasu was well aware that the missionary work and imperialism of Spain and Portugal were working in tandem'.

Where this book fits into the milieu of publications on Adams is something that must be left to the reader. There are shortcomings on William Adams' life that stand out in a similar way as those in some of the other books about Adams (for example, the occasional, or frequent depending on which book you are reading, instances where artistic licence has been taken to fill in the gaps in the narrative left by lack of evidence). However, despite the author's assertions that this account is entirely based on fact, there are some occasional minimal conjectures, which can be excused by the limited range of factual narratives available. It is an admirable and as far as historical accounts allow, as true an account as can be given the passage of a very long period of time.

Although in places the context seems to have almost overtaken the biography, this is still a very readable account with very welcome additional, relevant, newly published information. In this reviewer's estimation, this book is a refreshing addition

to the hallowed halls of biographical accounts of the truly remarkable William Adams, his life and many adventures and misadventures and later misfortunes,

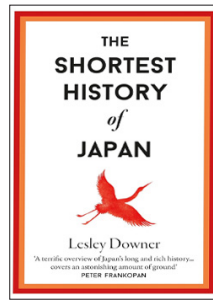
rather than, as the publisher's website states, 'downfall'. §

## The Shortest History of Japan

by Lesley Downer

Old Street Publishing (2024)  
ISBN-13: 978-1913083632

Review by Laurence Green



Lesley Downer will be most familiar to many for her many volumes - both in fiction and non-fiction - on the mysterious world of the geisha, with her *Geisha: The Secret History of a Vanishing World* seen as a definitive work on the subject. Originally released around the turn of the Millenium in the wake of the all-encompassing geisha boom instigated by the remarkable success of Arthur Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* and its subsequent movie adaptation, Downer's historical survey of this enticing world of art and beauty remains a clear entry point for those looking to learn more about a subject often muddled by misconception.

Who better then to expand that clear-eyed historical scope to the subject of Japan as a whole? *The Shortest History of...* series has been running for a while now, taking in locales ranging from England to India, as well as more thematic studies including Democracy, War and Economics. Their great success, in an age of short attention spans, Tik Tok and reading time invariably crammed into hectic commutes, is to pack what might in years past been presented in epic multi-volume historical tomes into snappy clear-cut surveys that not only tell the story of their events and key players with clinical precision but do so with an eye to bite-size chunks of narrative. This is history that can be consumed at a sitting, each chapter offering up a clear, self-contained passage of time told in a manner that allows the reader to come away with a fresh perspective on how it might relate to today.

What's important to note here is that Downer's "Shortest" history of Japan is precisely that, a history - those looking for a way into contemporary Japan and its many manifestations of popular culture are better served elsewhere. Of the book's 235 pages, it takes until nearly page 200 to reach World War 2, meaning the vast bulk of the historical narrative here places its focus squarely on Japan "of old". This is no bad thing - many of Japan's most labyrinthine subjects, eg. the rise and fall

of the samurai class, and its ever-changing capital cities - are given the attention they need here, and done so in a manner that breaks them down into manageable sub-sections.

Therefore, we get a pacey run-through of Japan's broad historical eras - Heian (794-1180), Kamakura (1180-1333), Muromachi (1333-1573) and so on, with each of these further divided into short segments that pick up the points in time that acted as clear pivots or points of note in that top level narrative.

Of particular clarity and interest are the many sections on Japanese religion, the import of Buddhism to Japan, and the theme of *Mappo* - or The Latter Days of the Law - occurring around 1052, when after a period since the Buddha's death, it was feared 'his teachings would lose their power and the world would enter an age of decadence, destruction and chaos'. The capital of Heian-kyo began to crumble and the surrounding vicinity became wasteland, plagued by thieves and beggars, as well as becoming a dumping ground for corpses and unwanted babies. Downer's prose is lucid and vivid with its imagery - illustrating memorably moments in time that feel unknowable to us 1000 years hence.

All this is supplemented by box-outs devoted to historical figures or themes of particular historical note, for example the 12<sup>th</sup> century woman warrior Tomoe Gozen, or the ever popular Friar Tuck-like figure Benkei, a giant mountain priest who serves his master Yoshitsune with loyalty until his final last-man-standing showdown, where he dies on his feet, his body pierced 'like a porcupine' by arrows as he holds off the enemy, allowing time for Yoshitsune to flee.

For those freshly under the spell of the lavish TV drama *Shogun*, Downer's history serves as a pitch-perfect primer to Japan; concise and eminently readable, but backed up with a clear depth of knowledge. This is no cheap-and-cheerful tourist booklet, to be crammed down on the flight to Tokyo, but rather the distilled essence of Japan as an object of study, built up over generations of scholarship and now re-fashioned into a more modest, manageable format. This might be the shortest history of Japan, but like the best of appetisers, it offers just enough to whet your appetite, priming the stage for further ventures into whichever aspect of Japan's multifaceted history best catches your fancy. §

## Takaoka's Travels

by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko  
translated by David Boyd

Monkey (2024)  
ISBN-13: 978-8988688709

Review by Chris Corker



In a sacred garden, a high-maintenance pig with the paws of a tiger poops out the digested dregs of human dreams, their foul smell a symptom of the melancholy of the land. 'How difficult life must be', laments its keeper, 'when there are only unpleasant dreams to eat'. One hope remains: a truly great dreamer must arrive and allow the animal to feast on their own vivid unconscious fantasies. While this story constitutes only one episode of many in the novel, *Takaoka's Travels* by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko itself thrives on dreams, blending both the wondrous and terrible into a work of enduring imagination.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the middle-aged Prince Takaoka finally makes a religious pilgrimage to India, a land that he has pined for since he was a child. His companions are two Japanese monks, the burly Anten and polymath Engaku, and Akimaru, a former slave girl disguised as a boy. While their journey lasts only a year, the characters find themselves on a number of unlikely adventures, with the book being split into episodes that are often accompanied by the introduction of mythical lands or beasts. Prince Takaoka was a real historical figure who made his own journey west before vanishing, but history here soon cedes ground to fantasy.

The obvious comparison for Takaoka's pilgrimage to India is the 16<sup>th</sup> century Chinese epic, *Journey to the West*, which is equally full of imaginary creatures, otherworldly feats and religious miracles. As with *Monkey* and *Pigsy* in that story, it is the companions who demonstrate the real strength and guile, while Takaoka, like *Journey to the West's* Tripitaka, is pretty useless in a fight and has a knack for getting himself into trouble. One thing he does have over his Chinese counterpart, however, is the ability to keep a level-head at such times, and perhaps even take glee in these various setbacks, which if nothing else are always eventful.

Indeed, Takaoka makes for an intriguing protagonist, not least because of his struggle between his Buddhist disavowal of the world of sensations and his attraction to the, sometimes carnal temptations on his journey (Shibusawa made a name for himself translating the fiction of the Marquis de Sade, and does not shrink from eroticism here). Takaoka even begins

to wonder at this tendency in himself: 'Doesn't this feel a little too good?... If I keep going like this, who knows where the pleasure will take me?' Usually, these pleasurable interludes return him to where he began, enacting a Buddhist cycle of renewal that allows for self-reflection.

While often joyous in its embrace of absurdity, at the heart of *Takaoka's Travels* is a spiritual journey in which the prince-turned monk tries to reconcile himself to the life he has lived thus far. This really comes to a head with Takaoka's foreshadowed death, a disquieting revelation described as 'an aerial root, finding purchase on a wall and burrowing into it, cracking it open little by little', but ultimately the prince's unflappable character allows him to find a form of divine resignation, viewing his demise with only a 'vague anticipation'. As translator David Boyd notes in his afterword, the encroachment of death in the novel mirrors real life, with Shibusawa himself suffering from a terminal illness while writing it; when the book won the Yomiuri Prize in 1987, the author had already passed away. While this means that both the part-fictional Takaoka and his part-creator are struggling with existential concerns, the seemingly effortless humour and imagination here means that the novel is never maudlin.

In fact, amongst the real events, places and extensive history that encompasses centuries of Buddhist belief, there is a fantastical and childlike playfulness in the novel, reminiscent of Lewis Carol, which prevents it from ever becoming dry in tone. This gently mocking – and sometimes fourth-wall breaking – voice is well-reproduced by translator Boyd, whose matter-of-fact tone always hides behind it a knowing grin.

The release of *Takaoka's Travels* is part of a collaboration between Stone Bridge Press and the literary journal *Monkey: New Writing from Japan*, which has been a pioneer in bringing new Japanese fiction to English-speaking audiences through translation (full disclosure: the author of this review has had their own translated work published in the journal). One can only hope that collaborations such as these continue to be successful, allowing English-speaking readers to have access to works of such unashamed, genre-challenging strangeness.

An array of unfamiliar names and an assumed knowledge of Buddhism can admittedly be a little overwhelming for the uninitiated, but none of this is necessary to enjoy the fantastical world that Shibusawa constructs in *Takaoka's Travels*. Replete with conversant sea creatures, alluring bird-women, giant ape bouncers

and horny dragons disguised as lightning, the book continues to engage with an exoticism founded on pure imagination. Dreaming, writes Shibusawa, is 'something at which the prince was particularly adept',

and so the author himself is keenly gifted at setting loose coquettish dreams that erotically entwine, bringing forth a world that never fails to deliver on wonder. §

## Mild Vertigo

by Kanai Mieko  
translated by Polly Barton

Fitzcarraldo Editions (2023)  
ISBN-13: 978-1804270387

Review by Laurence Green



In *Mild Vertigo* is a short, slim novel containing both multitudes, and a whole lot of nothing. The paradoxical fascination of the everyday mundane - the busy-body clutter and utter banal domesticity of a very particular kind of middle-class hum-drum existence. This is the life we experience through the eyes of Natsumi and her ordinary, oh so ordinary, life in a modern Tokyo apartment in the mid-1990s.

Living with her husband and two sons, her life on the face of it seems modest - she does the laundry, goes to the supermarket, visits friends and neighbours - rinse, repeat. Not much happens - but then, this is so very much the point of *Mild Vertigo*, the mind-numbing inconsequentiality of it all, and yet depicted with the bleakest, darkly observant humour Kanai Mieko can conjure up. In Natsumi's observations somehow something as matter of fact as a page-consuming list of what she spots in the supermarket (she knows its aisles so well she can map out the position of every item in her mind) takes on a laser-like incisiveness as it needles the uncomfortable power-structures and role of the conventional housewife within Japanese society.

*Mild Vertigo's* core format is that of the monologue. Natsumi's monologue; though her identity as a "character" within the book is largely subsumed within the endless scrolling torrent of words that spill from page to page with barely a paragraph break in sight. It's an almost but not quite stream of consciousness, as her interior and exterior, dialogue and description, merge in a clever kind of fictional reportage that feels all the more real because it's wholly comprised of the very stuff of everyday life. The world portrayed is absolutely Japan - but equally the vignettes of petty squabbles, divorces and drunken antics feel like something straight out of a soap opera; and thus are entirely universal in their ability to portray the human condition in all its mediocrity.

Natsumi's life appears to be a lonely one - her isolation in her confines of the housewife role are

probed and digested from every possible angle, whether through the commerciality of fashion choices and outright consumerism, to the seemingly endless need to feed the hungry mouths of her husband and kids. One of the novel's most innocuous but somehow saddest moments is the insertion of a shopping list for, amongst other things: 'Table-wiping cloths' and 'lunch-box snacks'.

In an urban metropolis like Tokyo, how do we pinpoint our place within the countless millions of other lives around us, all consumed by the same drives? The same impulses? For Natsumi herself, as a character, it is hard to say - but what *Mild Vertigo* does manage to do, at any rate, is paint into existence a kind of beauty from the assorted ugliness of the everyday. The novel begins to feel like a frozen vignette of a timeless Tokyo - 30 years ago, 100 years ago, now. Old movies portray a pre-war city that, aside from the mass adoption of all the electrical gadgetry we take for granted now, was not so very different from the Tokyo of the 90s or 00s. People act out the same stages of life, going through the motions, driven by a nagging sense of whether there's anything else - we are all characters on the city's stage.

Told in eight different segments, each takes as its focus a particular angle or lens by which to ultimately observe the same intermingling of the everyday. One gently mocks the 'good news' of a friend's marriage announcement arriving in the post and the endless list of anniversary gifts that will no doubt follow, year after year. Another pokes fun at advertisements in women's magazines: 'Is Being a Wife and a Mother Stopping You from Doing What You Want to Do?' - There is even a chapter that plays out like a kind of textual equivalent to a documentary film analysing an art gallery and its particular aesthetic appeal.

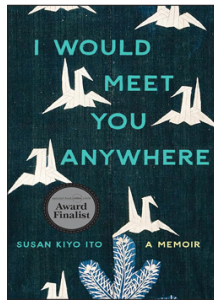
It's testament to Kanai Mieko's skill as an author, and Polly Barton's masterfully naturalistic translation that sees *Mild Vertigo* pull all these disparate elements together into a whole that feels like a stunningly straight-talking indictment on everything that makes up modern Japanese society and the position of the housewife within it. Linking everything together is Natsumi - not so much a character, but a vacuum for all of us to occupy. §

## I Would Meet You Anywhere: A Memoir

by Susan Kiyo Ito

Mad Creek Books (2023)  
ISBN-13: 978-0814258835

Review by Shehrazade Zafar-Arif



In this poignantly honest and intimate memoir, Susan Kiyo Ito recounts her journey as the mixed-race adopted child of Japanese-American parents, her journey to track down her birth mother as an adult, and how this affected the trajectory of her life.

Despite its heavy subject matter, the book has a surprisingly light-hearted tone, even verging into comedic in places - Ito's account of kidnapping a couple of mice from the lab she is working at provides a much-needed moment of levity after the tension of her academic struggles and her attempts to connect with her birth mother. Throughout my reading experience, I felt as though I was sitting across from Ito in a coffee shop, listening to her telling her story, slipping into tangents and reflections as one tends to in conversation.

At other times, it felt as though I was reading a novel rather than a memoir. In the preface, Ito talks about her choice to change names to protect the privacy of certain individuals in her life. Despite this, the memoir is full of vivid, larger-than-life characters, refreshingly real as well as endearing. I got particularly attached to Ito's adopted parents - well-meaning, loving, and fiercely supportive - and felt my heart break as I read about his death and her dementia. But Ito's biological mother, Yumi, was the most compelling - frustrating as she was charismatic, and I found myself almost reliving Ito's desperation for her affection and approval even as it spun further and further out of reach, holding out hope for that fairy-tale reconciliation even as she continued to disappoint Ito, and by extension, me as a reader.

Through her personal experiences, Ito sheds light on the complexities of the American adoption system and her challenges bypassing the barriers of closed adoption. There is a heart-breaking scene where Ito begs caseworker at the adoption agency where she was adopted from for details about her birth father, and the woman is only able to give her largely useless nuggets of information despite her obvious sympathy.

Lurking in the periphery, though it predates Ito's story, is the spectre of the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Yumi spent time in an internment camp, and though it is something she hardly ever speaks about in her appearances, the impact it had on her life and her decision to give up

her baby speaks volumes. In another painful scene, Ito's adopted mother Kiku is asked by other elderly Japanese-Americans she meets at bowling which camp she was in, leading to a moment of awkwardness when she admits she was spared from the camps by virtue of being on the east coast.

What I appreciated most was the honest and above all nuanced, shades of grey perspective Ito offered on the subject of adoption, particularly the often contradictory emotions of an adopted child: torn between loyalty to her loving adopted parents and an unrelenting, almost primal pull towards her biological family. Each time she encounters a member of her biological family, Ito marvels at and is overwhelmed by points of connection with them, from similar features to a love for ice cream. As such, any rejection from them, whether it's Yumi's insistence on hiding their relationship or the eventual breakdown of their relations, is almost unbearably painful. Despite the loving family she was raised in, Ito cannot shake the intrinsic sense of abandonment from being given up as an infant. This torment bleeds into various aspects of Ito's life, including her relationship with her parents and children, and her experiences of pregnancy, abortion, and miscarriage.

Particularly interesting was Ito's portrayal of her experience as a transracial adoptee, being half Japanese and half white while her adoptive parents are both *nisei* (second generation Japanese immigrants). Ito grows up acutely conscious of her differences from them, from her thicker, curlier hair to the colour of her skin, constantly feeling othered by her mixed-race heritage. Ironically, when she meets her birth father's family, she is struck by the realisation of how similar her experience would have been growing up with them, as someone who is white-passing but not quite white, always subject to the age-old question: *what are you?* Over the course of her life, she grapples with and eventually reconciles with and finds comfort in her Japanese heritage, from the familiarity of the language to a sense of catharsis in the art of Japanese taiko drumming.

Unlike a novel, however, the memoir ends on a slightly unfinished note, fittingly for a life that hasn't yet met its natural conclusion. There is no real resolution to Ito's relationship with Yumi, and both she and we the readers acknowledge this with a kind of bittersweet resignation. Above all, the end of the book finds Ito grappling with the decision to publish her memoir, knowing the cost and the impact it may have on her relationships with people in her life. It is a sobering and meta-textual acknowledgment of what it means to write a memoir, to put a piece of yourself out into the

world, lay your soul bare. But as Ito ultimately decides, her story needs to be told, for her own healing. She describes it as a bomb strapped to her body, taken the form of a manuscript. I admire Ito's bravery. She tackles

her memoir with clinical precision but also staggering self-awareness and - more importantly - self-forgiveness, in a way I, as a writer, would struggle to do. §

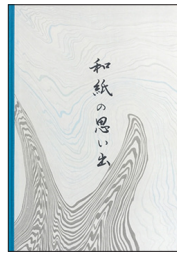
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## Washi Memories

by Eleanor Burkett

Old School Press (2023)

Review by Philip Meredith



The decorative binding of Eleanor Burkett's beautiful book on Japanese handmade paper, *Washi Memories*, gives a hint of what is to follow between the covers. The boards have been covered with *suminagashi*, a delicately marbled paper that employs the mercurial technique of floating coloured inks in a constant state of movement on a vat of water. The swirling, concentric rings of colour are captured and transferred at the moment that the sheet of paper is lowered onto the surface of the liquid.

Just as *suminagashi* alludes to the flow and movement of water that is essential to the marbling method, so does *nagashizuki*, the term that refers to the fluid movements of the papermaking technique that she goes on to describe and illustrate in her text. And like the *suminagashi* covers, the tipped-in photos in the book serve to capture the flowing movements of the papermakers and the liquid qualities of their materials in action.

Books containing samples of Japanese handmade paper are always a delight to look at and handle, but this publication is more than that: in some ways it recalls Jugaku Bunsho's *Papermaking by Hand in Japan* (Tokyo, 1959), or Timothy Barrett's *Nagashizuki; The Japanese Craft of Hand Papermaking* (Bird and Bull Press, 1979), in that both are written with a sense of personal involvement and anecdotal detail. But whereas Jugaku writes as an academic, and Barrett as a papermaker per se, Burkett approaches her subject with the sensibility of a paper / fibre artist and researcher who has for many years worked with, understands, and has a love of Japanese paper. Her feelings are apparent and run through her work which begins with her first encounter with the papermakers of Kamikawasaki when she lived in Fukushima, in Northern Japan in the 1980s. It resumes with a more recent visit to the same area and people in 2019 and records the changes that she sees in the papermaking community.

The book, with a foreword by paper historian Sydney E. Berger, contains Burkett's own observations

and comments, sometimes poignant, on her memories and interactions. The text is special in that, unusually, it also includes the commentaries and words of the papermakers themselves, in their own voice, which are supplemented by the superbly reproduced black and white photographs of the families and their workplaces from the 1950s. Each stage in the papermaking process is clearly delineated, documented and illustrated, and includes pertinent information on the specialities of the local production and the papermaker's regional vocabulary.

A craft with a history of many centuries, papermaking in Japan has sometimes been described as unchanging in many ways, but this account documents and describes the changes that have taken place in recent times and some of the factors that have led to them. It is an unfortunate fact that papermaking by hand in Japan has seen a gradual decline in recent years, but there has been an encouraging, although limited, return to the craft and production seen in certain districts. This is exemplified in the case of Kamikawasaki where, as described by Burkett, despite the cessation of activity in almost all households, there are papermakers who have returned or come anew to the craft. With the guidance of those who can teach them they are working to ensure its continuance.

An especial bonus are the eleven paper samples included in the publication that provide a tactile supplement to the written descriptions of the papers produced in Kamikawasaki. They include examples of the robust sheets primarily made for papering *shoji* windows, coloured, dyed and processed papers, as well as two examples of sheets printed for the wrapping and packaging of the finished product.

This is a book that will be of interest to paper researchers and historians, papermakers, fibre artists, paper conservators and anyone who wishes to learn more about the handmade papers of Japan and their production. On a technical note, the production of the book is impressive. Printed and published by the Old School Press in 2023 in an edition of 150 copies, it includes 30 tipped-in reproductions of black and white photographs, 11 samples of handmade papers and 2 packaging slips. The hardback quarto volume measures 28 x 20 cm. The *suminagashi* paper used for the covers was specially made by Sarah Amatt. §