This issue focuses on a selection of Japanese writers in translation, from the current poster-boy of Japanese fiction, Haruki Murakami, to the rarely translated historical novelist, Shiba Ryōtarō.

Any country’s literature is essential to a broader understanding of its character and history. The great Japan scholar and translator Louis Allen once wrote:

In order to know a nation fully you have to go beyond knowing the way it expresses itself in its laws, its military behaviour, and its political systems. You have to know the way it talks about itself unconsciously and through its fiction. In other words, the fiction of a nation is as important as the facts of a nation if we want to know it properly.

Viewed in this light, the continuing translation of Japanese novels into English is vital work and this issue presents a broad cross section of translated work, including 1Q84, Murakami’s latest surrealistic blockbuster novel; The Winter Sun Shines In, reflections on the life of poet Masaoka Shiki by the scholar Donald Keene; a 2013 translation of Schoolgirl by the short-lived writer Ozamu Dazai, and Clouds above the Hill, an historical epic based on the author’s experience of the Russo-Japanese War.

Introducing this array of great literary exports is an article by our editor Sean Curtin, who joined others in celebrating the very first British vessel to sail into Japanese waters, 400 years ago this June. So began a cultural exchange that continues to this day.

Jack Cooke, June 2013
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**Britain & Japan – 400 Years: A Voyage Through Words and Music**

**Tuesday 11 June 2013**

All Saints Church Fulham, 
Bishops Park, London, SW6 3LA

**Review by Sean Curtin**

**Britain & Japan – 400 Years**

was an absolutely brilliant 
evening of uplifting music, verse and spectacle to mark 
four centuries since the UK and Japan initiated official 
ties. When John Saris, commander of *The Clove*, sailed 
the very first British vessel into Japanese waters on 11 
June 1613, he could not have ever dreamt that four 
hundred years to the day we would be celebrating a 
violent relationship which has stood the test of time 
greatly enriched both countries. Saris spent his 
final years living in a house just behind All Saints Church 
in Fulham, where he worshipped and also where he 
is buried. This special association made the magnificent 
old church the perfect location to celebrate this unique 
ocassion. The current vicar, the Reverend Canon Joe 
Hawes, commented ‘I think it most appropriate that 
the event marking this significant voyage is happening 
here.’

The Japan 400 organizers created a truly memorable 
evening of visionary content to mark this pivotal 
milestone and remind the two nations of the deep 
and long-lasting nature of their friendship. The lyrical 
evening was divided into six well-crafted sections which 
together attempted to recreate different stages of Saris’ 
epic voyage. Each segment succeeded in capturing 
the essence of a particular phase of *The Clove*’s long 
journey. Using a combination of inspiring music, 
moving verse, singing interspersed with dancing, and 
visual imagery, the past was conjured back to life. It 
was a magnificent show with high production values 
and a fantastic venue which allowed the audience to 
feel a sense of connection with Saris and his time. On 
ocassions it was a moving experience which made one 
reflect on the immense dangers seafarers faced. Many who set sail with 
Saris never returned and it took a gruelling two years 
for the ship to make its way from England to Japan. 
*The Clove* departed on 18 April 1611 but did not return 
until 27 September 1614, arriving in Plymouth.

The evening was anchored by Japan 400 Co-
Chairman, Nicolas Maclean with Keichi Hayashi, 
Japan’s Ambassador to the United Kingdom, giving 
a thoughtful address to launch proceedings. The first 
part of the music fest was entitled ‘Setting the Scene: 
Music of 1611–1613’ and gave the audience a taste of 
period tunes with some excellent performances.

As part of the effort to rekindle a link with Saris and 
take the audience back in time, the current Lord 
Salisbury, whose ancestor advised King James I on 
the voyage, outlined *The Clove*’s mission as part of 
the second section. Following this reading the tempo 
shifted up a gear as the third segment, entitled ‘The 
Mission’, burst into life. Pianist Noriko Ogawa gave an 
impressive performance of Debussy’s *L’Ile Joyeuse*. This 
was followed by a spirited reading of John Masefield’s 
*Sea Fever* by David Warren after which it seemed the 
evening was on full throttle with a non-stop succession 
of impressive performances by various artists. The 
electrically audience were encouraged to join in a 
lively sea shanty section. As the atmospheric 
church resonated with glorious music and singing, it really 
did feel that one was participating in a very special 
event. After an intermission the fourth part, entitled 
‘Arrival’, sprang off the blocks with a lively music and 
dance routine which included local school children. It 
was a stunning visual scene which led into another 
series of dynamic musical performances and thought 
provoking readings carrying the audience into the 
final two segments of an incredible commemorative 
evening.

Every single performer and organiser deserves the 
upmost praise for what was a real tour-de-force. This 
fantastic concert is just one of the events Japan 400 
has organized to highlight this important anniversary 
year. This evening and other events have made a 
significant contribution to bilateral ties by making us 
re-examine the genesis of our partnership with Japan 
and rediscover how things all began.

**1Q84**

by Haruki Murakami

**Vintage, 2012**

**464 pages**


**Review by Chris Corker**

Haruki Murakami’s most recent novel *1Q84*, the title 
being a nod to Orwell’s *1984* (the Japanese nine being 
read kyū, was released in two stages, Books One and 
Two coming out a week before Book Three. While I don’t agree that *1Q84* is quite 
the Magnum Opus that others have claimed (I feel that 
*Wind-up Bird Chronicle* may yet retain that title), it is 
as infinitely readable as so many of Murakami’s 
other works.

On her way to kill a man in a Shibuya hotel, 
Aomame is forced to take a shortcut from 
the bridge, climbing down a ladder. After the 
man is dead, Aomame begins to notice subtle 
differences around her, indicative of what 
she decides must be a parallel universe. At 
the same time, Tengo receives a rough but 
promising manuscript from a young girl who 
he later discovers is dyslexic. When he visits 
the girl to ask for permission to re-write the manuscript, 
he finds that her family are part of a religious 
commune, which the girl herself escaped from. The 
rumours are that everyone there is being brainwashed 
and conditioned into emotionless robots. This is the 
intriguing setup to a story that combines elements of 
detective stories, horror and the supernatural, as the 
two main characters become entwined in matters 
above their heads.

The story is nicely set up and starts to flow well. I have 
 to say that I’ve never been a fan of the alternating 
perspective of storytelling, a technique that other 
authors stretch to the limits of usefulness, as it feels 
as a padding technique. It does, however, in this case 
give us an interesting pace shift and allows us to share 
the frustrations of the characters as they search for 
each other in vain.

Tengo is, in a lot of ways, the archetypal Murakami 
protagonist. A thirty-year-old misanthrope, detached 
from the workings of society, without a real job, 
without a real relationship, not really knowing the 
destination he wants to take in his life. What’s different 
about Tengo, however, is that he seems so much more 
selfish than the usual type of protagonist employed, 
making him harder to relate to as a result.

The other main protagonist, Aomame, is a real 
conundrum. Her motivations for doing what she does 
seem to lack a little weak (the lady is a woman who 
just happens to do such extremes herself) and even at the end of the 
novel, I found it difficult to muster any sympathy for 
er. She also seems overly fascinated with her own 
body (perhaps a slightly masculine interpretation of 
a female protagonist – I am yet to be convinced by 
Murakami’s female characters).

In terms of the storyline, I can divulge very little without 
spoilng the plot. One of the more atmospheric 
recurring scenes features a spectre-like 
NHK (the Japanese BBC) 
collection officer who 
slams on the doors of apartments in a brilliant 
metaphor for a guilty 
conscience. I also found 
the New Religion plot to 
be very intriguing, with 
a fulfilling conclusion, 
which is more than can 
be said of the novel as a 
whole, which ends 
vaguely.

The subject of New 
Religions is one that 
is far from a dead in Japan 
and, even now, new 
religious organisations similar to Aum Shinrikyo (a 
subject that has also been delved into in Murakami’s book 
*Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the 
Japanese Psyche*, which documents first hand reports 
of the Sarin Gas attacks) are still going strong, with 
member contributions funding their operations. 
The claims of these organisations, much like the nature 
of the magic realism that Murakami employs, are 
difficult to believe and understand, but easy to accept 
and often ensnare the unsuspecting. This also is the 
strength of Murakami. It isn’t always clear why he does 
something, and often there seems to be no reason 
at all, but his books are addictive nonetheless. I took less 
away from 1Q84 than I did his other works, but it still 
had me eagerly turning the page.

Would I recommend it as an entry point for non-
Murakami aficionados? No, I wouldn’t, but it is still a 
pleasant read where Murakami veterans will find 
elements of the things that made Murakami such a
beloved author, and this work also gives us hope for his next novel, the long-windedly titled Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and the Year of His Pilgrimage, which was released in Japan only recently. This is a shorter work which was adapted from a short story, much in the way Norwegian Wood was adapted from Firefly, and may be a more accessible book for newcomers to the Murakami canon.

I've been a Murakami fan since my first year at university. At the time I was trawling through book after book of clearly defined Thriller, Crime and Horror, shamelessly adhering to archaic conventions set down decades ago. Finally, I came to a book with a pure white cover featuring a picture of a black kitten. The name, Kafka on the Shore, was bizarre enough to interest me and I flipped over the book to read the synopsis. It was totally different to any premise I had read before, and intrigued still have me eagerly awaiting each new work like TQ84.

The Winter Sun Shines In, A Life of Masaoa Shiki
by Donald Keene
248 pages
Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi
Professor Donald Keene, who is now a Japanese national and lives in Tokyo, is the doyen of western studies of Japanese culture and history. He began to study the Japanese language more than seventy years ago and has written some thirty scholarly and very readable studies of a wide variety of aspects of Japanese culture, in particular Japanese literature through the ages.

His latest book describes the life and works of one of the most significant poets of the Meiji period, when Japanese literature, in response to the revolutionary changes then taking place in Japan, adopted new forms and styles. Shiki Masaoa (正巌 子隅) is best known as the leading haiku poet of the modern era, but he also, as Keene explains, wrote tanka, modern poems (shintais), novels and essays as well as a Noh play. His life was a short one (1867-1902) and for much of it he suffered from debilitating and painful ailments.

Keene gives an interesting and informative account of Shiki’s life and the many literary figures, including the novelist Natsume Soseki with whom Shiki came in contact during his brief career.

Shiki was born in Matsuyma in Shikoku. He was the son of an impoverished low ranking samurai. He was temperamentally unsuited to the subject and soon turned to literature and aesthetics. He forced himself to overcome his physical weakness and became intrigued by baseball. The following haiku composed by Shiki in 1890 reflects his enjoyment of the game:

Harukaze ya
mare no naretaki
kusa no hara

Spring breezes -
How I’d love to throw a ball
Over a grassy field.

He took up journalism and determined to become a writer. Despite the handicap imposed by illness he acted as a war correspondent in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 for the nationalist newspaper Nippon. It was highly critical of the way in which the Japanese army treated war correspondents as equivalent to private soldiers. But his primary interest was literature.

Shiki founded the haiku journal Hototogisu whose creed was shasei which meant that haiku must reflect real life rather than the idealized world. Haiku ‘must include the ordinary and even ugly elements of daily life.’ Keene in his introduction quotes the following haiku written by Shiki in 1896 as an example of shasei:

A path through the fields.
Insect cries, I create
A path through the fields.

Among haiku by Shiki, quoted by Keene, the following ‘is notable not only for its sensitivity to nature and the seasons, typical of Japanese poetry, but also for its unusual combination of imagery’:

From the diary entry, where the young protagonist begins by talking about certain events that have influenced her life such as the war and the death of her father, only to then be sidetracked on some minor detail and to go off on a tangent, giving us a glimpse into her psyche.

It’s obvious that the protagonist is a person, much like Dazai, who is struggling with their role in their particular class. Dazai, who felt great resentment for the ease of his father and the luxury of his social status, was never on good terms with his parents, or in many cases his siblings. He was even a member of the Japanese communist party, whose ideal would certainly see Dazai’s class dragged from their pedestal. These acts of self-flagellation were a constant feature in Dazai’s years and he finally succumbed to them in 1948, when he committed suicide after several unsuccessful attempts.

The girl in the story seems to be in the same state of conflict as Dazai, not only with her class but also with her emotions, which are so often juxtaposed with how she is supposed to behave. During the course of the story, she struggles to adopt these affectations that more often than not represent the polar opposite of how she really feels. Like Dazai, she believes privilege to be a curse:

‘...before I knew it that privilege of mine had disappeared and, stripped bare, I was absolutely awful.’

She is also in a constant state of self-analysis, where every action that she considered a failing is logged and serves as source of shame. Even as her train seat by the door is unashamedly taken from her by a man (an action that is still easy to witness in modern Tokyo), the protagonist, after pointing out his impurity, still manages to allot some of the blame to herself:

‘When I thought about it, though, which one of us was the brazen one? Probably me.’
The novella is a form that hasn’t enjoyed the same success in the west as it has in Japan. There is no escaping the fact that this book is very short, despite the fact that it is the original version of Schoolgirl, and one that seems to represent a bestselling novel, but in terms of detail and depth it goes way beyond even what is generally understood as being an historical novel. It is instructive to compare it with War and Peace, which, despite Tolstoy’s own denial, may be taken as an archetypal example of such a novel. This is centred around a number of fictional characters against the background of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia; many of the protagonists, e.g. Prince Andrei, are directly involved in the action, and some non-fictional characters, e.g. Prince Speransky and Marshal Kutuzov, also appear. In the case of Clouds above the Hill on the other hand, all the characters are non-fictional; in this case the historical events are illustrated through the three central characters, in particular the Akiyama brothers. There is consequently a large cast of characters who serve as vehicles to advance the action; one surprising virtual absentee is the Meiji Emperor himself who puts in a minor appearance only late in Volume II.

In contrast to Tolstoy’s philosophizing, Clouds above the Hill is enlivened by frequent pithy observations, such as ‘The hardest part of foreign relations is the diplomatic language’ ([Vol. II, page 44] ‘Or ‘The military profession justifies not just killing enemy soldiers but even more so, killing one’s own.’ ([Vol. II, page 385]).

Despite the wealth of detail the book contains, it is fast-paced and the momentum accelerates as the action progresses. As far as I can see, without reference to the original Japanese, the translation is also excellent.

As with any high-quality work, any errors, however minor, become more prominent by contrast with the remainder. I shall confine myself to mentioning the following: It was the English navy which defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, not the British, as this was well before the Acts of Union of 1707 and indeed the Union of the Crowns of 1603 ([Vol. I, page 307]). The Spanish war with Japan: the most prominent example of such failings is Major General Lichi Kōsuke’s not seizing the unfortified 203-Metre Hill overlooking Port Arthur at the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War. The consequence of the subsequent consignment of thousands of troops to their inevitable death in trying to capture it only after it had been heavily fortified is a recurrent theme of the book; Shiba is highly critical of Nogi, who has generally enjoyed the reputation of a war hero. Sadly, the author has not always been as careful with dates, perhaps the ultimate way in which the carnage of the WW1 was foreshadowed; in the author’s words ([Vol. II, page 206]) ‘The fort at Port Arthur became a vast pump that sucked up Japanese blood.’

Russia’s attitude to Japan was generally one of overconfidence, grossly underestimating Japan’s potential.

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form of Christopher Columbus is Cristóbal Colón, not Cristóber Colón. Vladivostok is better translated as ‘Rule the East’ (the usual rendering) or even ‘Control the East’ rather than ‘Conquer the East’, which is quite wrong and gives a misleading impression. Finally I am somewhat puzzled by the statement [Vol. II, page 304] that Napoleon received no formal training, i.e. military, when in fact he attended the military academy at Brienne-le-Château from 1779 to 1784 after which he trained in the École Militaire in Paris, graduating in 1785.

Clouds above the Hill will be essential reading for anyone with an interest in Japanese history, in Russian history and in the history of the 20th century in general. Readers of Volumes I and II will doubtless look forward to the publication of Volumes III and IV in November with the keenest anticipation.

**Aesthetic Strategies of the Floating World**

by Alfred Haft

Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2013

216 pages

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi

Alfred Haft works at the British Museum as a project curator in the Japanese section of the department of Asia. He is also a research associate of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures (SISJAC) at Norwich. This book is based on his Ph.D thesis and inevitably is more likely to be of interest to the specialist art historian than the general reader, but the book, which is copiously illustrated with reproductions of relevant Japanese prints in full colour, nevertheless has much to offer to anyone interested in the art and culture of the Edo period.

It is not possible in a brief review to give an adequate summary of Haft’s scholarly analysis of the three terms in the title to his book. But readers will note that in his introduction he explains that his study is largely built round the concepts behind the term gazoku which may be translated as the refined and the mundane. In the concluding section he sums up the terms mitate as ‘analogical juxtaposition,’ yatsushi as casual adaptation and Fûryû as standards of style, although such simplified translations fail to convey the complexity and nuances of these terms.

In chapter one he brings out some of the implications of the term yatsushi in the Edo period. It was for instance used for a man of higher social status who had come down in the world. He ‘endured his reduced circumstances in an easy going manner and eventually met with a happy end [p.39].’

He notes that one version of mitate involved the bundling of elements of the everyday world (household objects) into an organizational relationship modelled on a component of high culture (nature studies) i.e the combination of high and low culture.

Fûryû was ‘the ideal of elegance,’ which is such an important element in so much of Japanese culture, but as Haft points out the term came in the eighteenth century to be used as a euphemism for kôshoku or eroticism. Prostitution was a major element of the floating world. It was, he notes ‘running rampant near the entrance gates to Edo’s many shrines and temples, and even on properties allotted for use by the shogun’s own retainers [p.29].’

In discussing the use of these terms in the Edo period Haft looks at the Japanese pastime of writing linked verses and haikai. For the haikai poet mitate denotes ‘the juxtaposition of two objects viewed to have a similar shape [page 91].’ This leads him into a discussion of humour in Japanese poetry and art. He notes that the ‘culture of Edo Japan was alive with humor [sic], adaption, appropriation, innovation, unexpected juxtaposition, classicism, didacticism and continuity – a diversity of approaches spurring artistic growth in an ambitious range of directions [p.173].’

Haft’s book sheds much interesting light on life in the Edo period. The samurai were the elite but the ‘floating world’ was as much their world as it was that of the merchants and commoners. Actors may have been in theory outcasts but they were depicted by artists such as Shunsho Katsukawa [勝川 春章] in refined actor portraits.

Haft’s chapter four entitled ‘Harunobu’s Textual Pictures’ is a stimulating introduction to the colour prints of this outstanding artist. If I had to choose one Harunobu Suzuki [鈴木 春信] print from this book it would be the following print from the Honolulu Academy of Arts in which a young woman wears a robe with dangling sleeves. As Haft notes ‘Her slender form is characteristic of feminine beauty in ukiyo-e produced during the late 1750s-60s’.