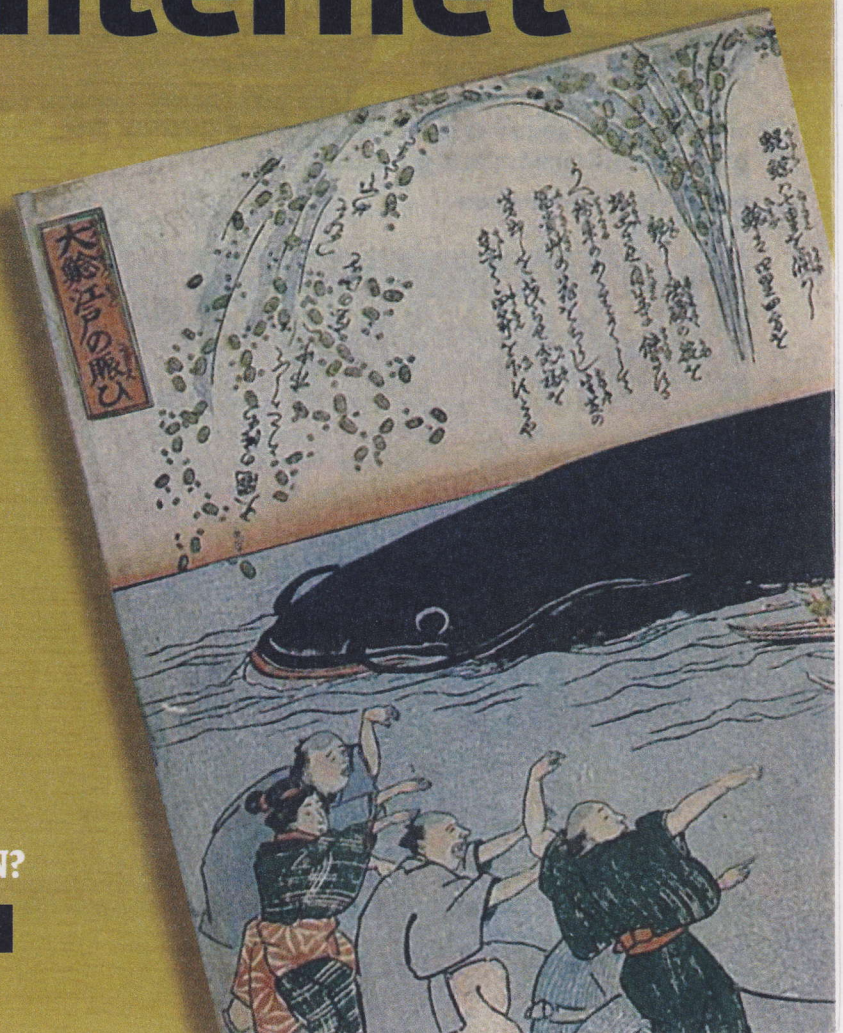


Reporting Japan: From Marco Polo to the Internet Age

TEXT: HL STONE • IMAGES: KS

SINCE THE COUNTRY'S FIRST CONTACTS WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD, JAPAN HAS INSPIRED FOREIGN WRITERS TO PICK UP THE PEN AND REPORT WHAT THEY HAVE SEEN. OVER THE CENTURIES THE COLLECTIVE OUTPUT HAS BEEN PROLIFIC, BUT THESE REPORTERS HAVE BROUGHT VARYING DEGREES OF CLARITY AND INSIGHT TO THEIR WORK, SO WHO DO WE START WITH WHEN WE WANT TO READ ABOUT THE REAL JAPAN?



Take a moment, dear reader, and look carefully at the publication in your hands. Kansai Scene may focus on what is new in the Kansai region, but as a source of reporting on Japan, it is part of a tradition that stretches back to reports by Marco Polo of an ancient land to the east of China that was filled with gold and friendly people. Today, getting information on Japan is as easy as logging on to a blog, and one need not wait for Venetian merchant ships to bring news of what is happening in Japan. Yet it is thanks to intrepid past foreign correspondents from all walks of life that we who live here are able to confirm, or debunk, what Japan is 'really like' when in conversation with those who have never been to Japan yet feel that because they read certain books or follow certain media, they understand the country.

Any list of influential Japan-based foreign 'correspondents' over the years, decades, and centuries is sure to be incomplete and heavily biased in favor of the author. That said, with the benefit of hindsight, some correspondents clearly have contributed more than others to our understanding of Japanese history, if for no other reason than their works are among the few that still survive. Here then, is an arbitrary top 10 list of correspondents and publications that anyone interested in historical and modern foreign 'reporting' on Japan might peruse, enjoy, and recommend to budding Japanophiles.

1. THE DIARY OF RICHARD COCKS: Cocks was an Englishman who lived in Japan from about 1613-1623 in Hirado, where the English had established a trading post. His diary records life in Japan during one of the most critical periods in the country's history, just as the Tokugawa era was beginning and Japan was expelling most foreigners. Cocks tried his best to make a go of the trading post, but would return home in disgrace. With the end of his diary, English language reporting direct from Japan would cease for nearly two and a half centuries, until the arrival of the Americans in 1853.

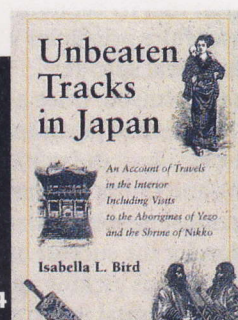
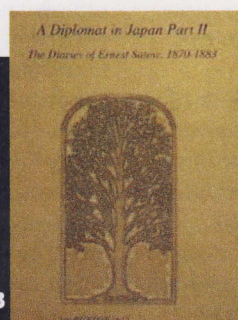
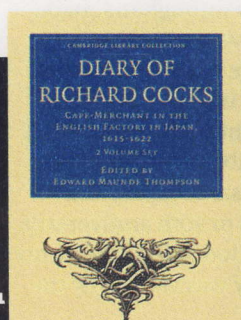
2. THE EXPEDITION OF COMMODORE WILLIAM PERRY: Perry's account of the 1853 expedition that opened up Japan to the West is a *tour de force* that is, by turns, a diplomatic record of negotiations with Japan's leaders, a scientific study of Japan's natural wonders, an anthropological dissertation, and a social commentary. Even more astonishing to 21st century readers is that it was a government document, ordered prepared by the US congress in an age when people read government documents with interest and without surprise that they could be written clearly and intelligently.

3. SIR ERNEST SATOW, A DIPLOMAT IN JAPAN: Between 1862 and 1883, Satow served with the British Legation in Tokyo and became one of the West's foremost interpreters of Japanese language, history, and customs. Arriving just a few years before the Meiji Restoration, Satow watched the country's struggles to shake off the centuries of isolation and embrace the technology and customs of the West. This account of his time in Japan is a detailed account of those turbulent years, and remained one of the most influential works on Japan well into the 20th century.

4. ISABELLA BIRD, UNBEATEN TRACKS IN JAPAN: If Satow was the consummate insider who moved comfortably among statesmen, generals, and members of Japan's imperial family, Bird was the consummate outsider. Arriving in Japan in 1878, the intrepid and fiercely independent Bird shocked her countrymen and women, and her Japanese hosts, with her determination to travel to the Tohoku and Hokkaido regions accompanied by only an interpreter. Many thought her mad, and warned of disease, rough roads, and bands of thieves who would waylay her. Undaunted, she journeyed to Hokkaido where she met with the then somewhat mysterious Ainu people, recording their customs. At least a century ahead of her time, Bird's account was 19th century travel writing at its fine

5. THE WRITINGS OF LAFCADIO HEARN: An argument can be made that vagabond writer Lafcadio Hearn is the most influential foreign writer on Japan ever. Few foreign observers of Japan then, or now, were as prolific in their writings on this country, and Hearn's observations of long ago are still read by students of the country today. His taste for the morbid combined with his reputation, at the time and afterwards, as an apologist for all things Japanese, have made him controversial among scholars and modern observers of Japan. His approach also formed the basis of the "nihonjin-ron", or the "the theory of being Japanese", debate, a racist pseudo-science promoted by ruling elites in both the US and Japan that has been discredited by serious scholars but is still trotted out by the corrupt, the cynical, and the ignorant to justify Japanese behavior.

6. EDWARD HOUSE, EDITOR, TOKIO TIMES: Long forgotten until James Huffman's superb 2003 biography, *A Yankee in Meiji Japan*, Edward House was a Boston journalist who arrived in Japan in 1870 and knew Satow, Bird, and Hearn. One of the Meiji era's most colorful



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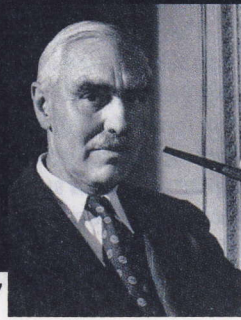
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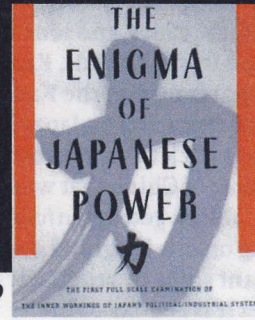
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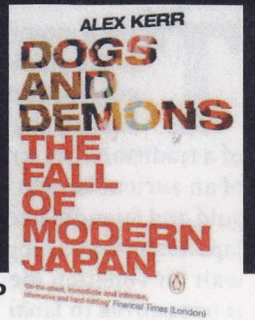
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characters, House was, like Hearn, a writer who fell in love with Japan and would spend the rest of his days defending its actions. A friend of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, House's acid tongue and barbed comments echoed the latter in his criticism in the pages of the *Tokio Times* and elsewhere of the kind of Westerners then coming to Japan. He was also a vigorous opponent of the treaties Japan had signed with the West, which granted extralegal residents to Western residents. House's sharp wit, enraged and passionate editorials, and stubborn defense of what he believed to be right stood him in marked contrast to the other foreign language newspapers then (and now). His influence on how the outside world saw Japan is harder to judge. But for a time in the late 19th century, his opinions, articles, and editorials were required reading for foreigners and Japanese.

7. JOSEPH GREW, TEN YEARS IN JAPAN: Grew served as ambassador to Japan between 1931 and early 1942, when he was repatriated to the US after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. His diary, which appeared during the war years, is believed to have been heavily 'edited' for publication. But the account he gives of negotiations in the months leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack was taken as gospel by the immediate postwar generation of Western scholars, diplomats, and journalists who came to Japan. Only long after the end of World War II, when the US government began declassifying diplomatic cables, did a more complex picture emerge. But Grew's account remains the basis on which many Americans today continue to view Pearl Harbor and the events leading up to it.

8. CHALMERS JOHNSON, MITI AND THE JAPANESE MIRACLE: In the postwar years, conventional wisdom in the West held that Japan's rapid recovery was due to the country's embrace of US-style democracy and Anglo-American style free market capitalism. Generations of Western scholars, journalists, business titans, and diplomats who dealt with Japan all believed this to be true. But by the late 1970s, it became clear that Japan was doing something different. But to suggest that its economy was fundamentally not based on *laissez-faire* principles was to risk personal ridicule and professional suicide.

Enter US scholar Chalmers Johnson. Once a student of China, Johnson turned his attention to Japan and discovered that Tokyo's bureaucrats, especially at the ministry of international trade and industry, and China's communist party had more in common than most people realized. His assertion that a major reason for the success of Japanese firms was because the ministry was picking and choosing winners and losers by directing capital investments to

certain industries seems obvious in 2010. But it flew in the face of conventional theory three decades ago. Johnson was vilified and even labeled anti-Japanese as he attempted to tell people that, no, Japan was not "just like America". Today, his ideas are taken for granted among virtually all economic writers on Japan, save a few troglodytes in the Murdoch press.

9. KAREL VAN WOLFEREN, THE ENIGMA OF JAPANESE POWER: If Johnson was a heretic among economists (at first) van Wolferen was the *bête noir* of political classes for his assertion that, no, Japan was not a fully functioning parliamentary democracy and, in fact, unelected bureaucrats and others in the little knitting circle known *Kasumigaseki* had sweeping unofficial powers that made proactive leadership from Japan all but impossible. A journalist who had lived in Japan for nearly three decades when he published the book in 1989, Van Wolferen endured the wrath of older Japan Hands but influenced a generation of younger ones, who saw that his version of Japanese politics was a lot closer to reality than the one being taught at western universities.

10. ALEX KERR, DOGS & DEMONS: Like Van Wolferen, Kerr had long been resident in Japan, in this case Kyoto and rural Shikoku, when he penned his work on what went wrong with Japan in the high growth era of the 1960s and 1970s, and the go-go years of the infamous bubble economy of 1986-1991. An unsparing, critical look at the economic and social woes Japan experienced in the 1990s (and continues to experience today), Kerr summarized far better than any foreign journalist ever did what the cause of the problems really were. This was because, unlike most foreign journalists, Kerr was able to see the Japan beyond the bright lights and fancy restaurants of Tokyo.

There are any number of publications those familiar with Japan will immediately recognize as being absent from the above list, most notably Ruth Benedict's classic *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. But when it comes to how Japan was reported or analyzed through first-hand experience, and when it comes to how contemporary journalists and commentators from the West view Japan, the above works from those who lived in Japan (Benedict never did) or were historically important visitors stand out. Many Kansai Scene readers are, no doubt, contemplating their own book on some aspect of Kansai or Japan, and when this magazine celebrates its 20th or 30th anniversary, it will be interesting if their work is included in some future article on how Japan in the 21st century was viewed by the outside world.