

Word Paintings of a Japanese Town

Junichi Saga, *Memories of Silk and Straw: A Self-Portrait of Small-Town Japan*.

Trans. Garry Evans and illus. Susumu Saga.

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Review by Harold Franklin McGee, Jr.

The reference to a self-portrait in the subtitle of this collection of memorates is apt. The purpose of a portrait is to convey a sense of the character, personality, and soul of a person, as well as their physical likeness. With this book, Dr. Saga has presented a vivid image of what life was like in the first three decades of this century in Tsuchiura, a town forty miles northeast of Tokyo. As with any portrait, there has been a highlighting of some features, and an obscuring—or deleting—of others by Saga's selection of memorates and by his informants' own memory editing. This is not to say that the editing process has been one of masking defects and blemishes; frequently it is the hard times and the difficult, maybe even brutal, decisions which are emphasized. The resultant portrait is more like the work of an Otto Dix than a John Singer Sargeant.

The book consists of fifty-eight memorates (25 of them by women) grouped under eight themes: "Around the Town," "Boatmen and Fishermen," "Shopkeepers and Tradesmen," "Women of the Town," "Geisha and Officers," "Life in the Countryside," "Crafts and Craftsmen," and "At School and at Play." These are introduced by Dr. Saga's description of the history of the community, his excellent discussion of the geographical and ecological changes precipitated by political decisions of central governments, and a brief description of how he built rapport with his informants and his recording practices. Saga is a physician who was intrigued by the stories his older patients told of their youth in a town which has undergone phenomenal economic and ecological change in their lifetimes. He began to record some of these memories on tape and then extended the interviews by visiting his informants in their homes.

In his effort to portray the extent of the differences between life at the turn of the century and today, Saga has emphasized the hardships of the earlier period. His informants perceive a greater disparity in wealth in the past which Saga uses to illustrate that Japan's

current prosperity is all the more remarkable because it was achieved in such a short period. Yet his informants also note the loss of a sense of community in the modern world, which Saga equates with the shift from local control of economic and political decision-making.

It is the stories themselves that make the book a valuable and enjoyable experience, however. One can form a much better appreciation of the expressions of hospitality of a contemporary Japanese department store when one recalls the accounts of the shoppers, and workers, who expected, or provided, meals and sometimes accommodation to customers at the turn of the century. The accounts of craftspeople whose attention to the production of a well-made product which reflected favourably on themselves and their employers helps one to understand the attention to quality products by contemporary manufacturers. However, the description of the ten-year-old girl who hauled several forty-pound bags of rice for milling before she was allowed to attend school each morning, a girl who loved school, but who was not expected by her parents to finish grade six because her labour was required at home, is a reminder that a concern with quality products does not necessarily entail a concern for the welfare of workers. Similar tales are told of boys who carried 180-pound loads of eggs several times a day, or of apprentice *geisha* who ran errands from early morning to late in the evening for their seniors.

The story that is most accessible to a Western reader will most likely be that of the "gangster." I am not sure whether this is because the subculture of organized crime is more homogeneous cross-culturally, or because the values of Japanese criminals are more generally Western. Perhaps it is because the gangster's story is one of romantic love which reinforces the Western notion of so-called "natural" behaviour. It is a story which obviously has appeal for the Japanese as well, since Dr. Saga has

written a book-length life-history of this person (which is also available in an English version).

Scattered throughout the book are illustrations drawn and painted by Dr. Saga's father, who took up painting when he was sixty. They are wonderful illustrations which enhance the verbal sketches of Saga's informants. In short, *Memories of Silk and Straw* is an informative and pleasurable read. I shall certainly keep my eye out for other works by Dr. Saga; I trust his other word paintings will be as exciting and as pleasing.

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