
Henry Adams in Japan

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I would like to present how Adams and his company were confronted with the New Japan (the Meiji Japan) during their stay of three months. The Education of Henry Adams ... the ultimate in biographies and the book upon which Adams' fame rests ... is no use in this point. There is no mentioning of his Japan trip. We have to consult his letters from Japan.

In 1886, in the middle of hot summer, Henry Adams arrived in Japan. Just half a year ago, his wife had killed herself, and this in turn had almost killed Adams. professor Blackmure, who had visited this country and lectured about Adams, told us that the professor himself had been the first to discover suicide note of Mrs Adams. That was addressed to her sister and not to Adams but insists that nothing that Henry had ever done hurt her. But this is the central tragedy of his life, though he never referred to this event in his literary life. Adams continually referred to Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres and The Education of Henry Adams as a literary experiment: He wrote, "the two volumes go together, as I think of them, and the one is meaningless without the other." The experiment in literary form, Adams stressed, was a medium for his efforts to write history according to laws derived from the physical sciences.

Had Adams got the education of Buddhist contemplation of the infinite in Japan, this might well become one of his laws derived from the physical sciences. In Japan "energy is a dream of raw youth" this is his version derived from Buddhist "law of energy." "Dream" is a key word translated by Adams into Japanese mode of life. He tells in this way:

“...Life is a dream and in Japan one dream of the nursery.” As for the description of the Meiji Japan, the word is hardly the best word. Adams’s attempt to wed his historical senses derived from the physical sciences ... inertia contra personal energy in this case... with Japanese history of Meiji does not succeed here.

As he was creating Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, Adams was particularly interested in 12th-Century Europe. Though the parallel between 19th-Century Japan and 12th-Century France were by no means precise, it was the implications of an economic and aesthetic revolution which interested Adams, and it was these which were visible in 1886. The tragedy was that Adams was blind to them.

Japan was one of the frequent subjects in Adams’ circle. Adams’ reaction was certainly emotional enough, and there are various hints that Japan disappointed him more deeply than the surface dissatisfaction of his letters might indicate. Both he and John Hay had known something of Japan. In Esther (a portrait of Marian Adams) there are many references to the country ; in Democracy, the heroine’s determination to “go to the end of the world” is reminiscent of the final pages of John Hay’s The Breadwinners where “the end of the world” is identified as Japan : we can further refer to La Farge’s answering the young reporter’s question with the statement that he and Adams were in search of Nirvana ...and young man’s quite prophetic answer that ; “It’s out of season.”

They devoted first one week to Tokyo and Yokohama. Under the guidance of Bigelow and Fenollosa, Adams tried to spend all the money given from John Hay on all kinds of Japanese fine arts enough to load the steamer with them ; while Bigelow and Fenollosa clang like misers to their misera-

ble hoards. His branch of historical inquiries has not proved rich : for Japan was the place to perspire in the summer. (Energy is a dream of a raw youth.) The advice from Adams to Hay is quite amusing ; "Forget," he says, "all your previous education in the matter of food, houses, drains, and vehicles." The first step of his Japanese education was living on boiled rice, or in houses without walls except of paper, or in cities absolutely undrained, and going miles of dusty road in "Jinrikishaw."

In the first paragraph of the first letter from Japan he announces himself amused, and this theme appears again and again in later letters : Adams was determined to be entertained. Adams wrote : "Positively everything in Japan Laughs. The jinrikisha men laugh while running at full speed . . . The women all laugh, but they are obviously wooden dolls, badly made . . . I have not yet seen a women with any better mechanism than that of a five-dollar wax doll . . . Everything laughs, until I expect to see even the severe bronze doors of the tombs . . . open themselves with the same eternal and meaningless laughter, as though death were the pleasantest jest of alll."

Here is a brother of American travellers that might appear in Mark Twain's Innocent Abroad. Another brother was John La Farge who had come to Japan with Adams. He was an artist and after seeing Japan showed himself in his excellent An Artist's Letter from Japan to have been as open to Japanese mind as Adams was closed. La Farge's "charm", Adams wrote, "is that whether energetic or lazy he has the neatest humor." La Farge's slightly quixotic humor was great benefit during uneventful one-month stay at Nikko. Once in Nikko, Adams set out to enjoy himself. Everyone else was working. Mrs Fenollosa had two households to keep up and Bigelow assisted her. Earnest Fenollosa was deep in communications with the Japanese goverment, attempting to save pre-Tokugawa temples, and pre-Tokugawa Buddhist statuary. La Farge was sketching and keeping notebooks. Only Adams had nothing to do. So he wrote letters and shopped.

Shopping served as Adams' ostensible purpose for being in Japan. He wrote, "...Every day new bales of rubbish come up...mounds of books ; tons of bad bronze ; holocausts of lacquer ; I buy literally everything that is merely possible," In Tokyo and Nikko (namely before somewhat stern Bigelow and Fenollosa), Adams' attitude was by no means original. A little stand-offish guidance of Bigelow and Fenollosa pictured Japan as empire of courtesy which no European can learn to track out. The tragedy of Adams' position in Japan was that, in 1886, he was offered a ringside seat at precisely similar spectacle. He was so appalled by the Japanese-ness of Bigelow and Fenollosa that his notion that Japan is a promised land (Nirvana) become annoyed by the fact that actually it is a nursery land.

It was only later, on trips to Samoa, the Fiji Islands, and Tahiti, that Adams has learned from La Farge's instruction to look at the landscape from the inside. But only once Adams looked at the landscape from the inside : when taken to the baths at Yumoto and treated to a glimpse of mixed-bathing, he looked about and found "one pretty girl of sixteen, with quite a round figure and white skin. I did notice that for the most part, while drying herself, she stood with her back to us." But his was only one moment : after that he "took no further interest in the proceedings." Nikko had the single advantage of being a lazy place. Energy was a dream of a raw youth. Coming down from Nikko and arriving Yokohama, troublesome work was waiting : between the high rates of Pacific Mail and the severity of the San Francisco Custom House, Adams was forced to send most of the things by tramp steamer around to New York. At the beginning of September, Adams and La Farge visited Kamakura and the beach of Enoshima, bringing camera and sketchbook with them.

Kansai district is what Adams calls "Japanese interior." The branch of his historical inquiries was not rich again : he wrote ; "One Japanese

Interior is highly amusing, but the joke is not rich enough for two." The only branch Adams and La Farge had not yet exhausted was that of the dances. They were in hot pursuit of the Butterfly Dance in the temple's gardens. They jounced in Kurumas, rattled through temples ; asked questions and talked Japanese, or listened to it. They expected to become masters of the Japanese science. Adams is right when he says "I have learned so many new facts of which I am ignorant, that I could fill winter evenings with my want of knowleade." Much of his condemnation strikes one as just : of his Kyoto geisha party he said : "for an exhibition of mechanical childishness I have seen nothing to equal it ..." Yet he took no further interest in Japan's proceedings between the medieval and the modern. Had he true Japan in hand from the inside, we might have had an Asiatic Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.

In the letter dated 25th of August, Adams observed : "I can't say 'let's return to our sheep, for there are no sheep in Japan..." Adams could not conquer a feeling that Japan was an archaic society with the exception of one living creature... sheep. The word "sheep" can be translated into what we call "a living value of the race." Adams has seen much and heard much since landing , but everything affirmed that there were no vacancies for his historical "sheep" hunting. Adams' departure from this unhappy hunting ground was 12th of October. Fenollosa and Okakura sailed in the same steamer, travelling under orders of Japanese government as two pilgrims searching the model of Japanese art school abroad.

Professor Blackmur revealed in the said lecture that Henry Adams often quoted in the letters a Latin phrase of which translation goes "though the whole world fall." Adams in 1886 could not substitute this phrase for such a main sentence as "Glory be to Art," because he could not compose aesthetic theory in Japan ; or as "Glory be to the Virgin," because after

seeing Japan only mystery left to penetrate was China. He meant to start for China, but he could not. His cynicism came before the Virgin even in the midst of Japan travel in its most favorable form.

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