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Hans Brinckmann: Bearing witness to Japan's postwar transformation

by Stephen Mansfield

When Dutch writer Hans Brinckmann arrived in Japan in 1950, he found the interactive social hubbub of Japan starkly different from the “Dutch awkwardness, gloomy winters, solid brick houses with closed doors and war-hardened people protecting their own interests” of his own country. His memoir “The Call of Japan: A Continuing Story — 1950 to the Present Day,” which is an expanded reissue of his 2005 title, “The Magatama Doodle,” recounts his personal experiences living here, first as a banker and later as a writer of poems, novels, essays and short stories.

The memoir covers the years of 1950 to 1974 and 2003 to the present, providing valuable insight into the country's economic, political and cultural shifts during those periods.

The Call of Japan, by Hans Brinckmann

320 pages

RENAISSANCE BOOKS

Before moving to Japan, Brinckmann spent time in a banking training course in Singapore, from where he rode in a propeller-driven DC-6 plane to Hong Kong. While there, he saw that the British colony was swarming with refugees escaping Communist China. He then proceeded to Tokyo's Haneda Airport. Driving from the wooden terminal building, he saw that history had left its mark on the road into the capital, its surface incised with potholes made from bomb craters and haphazardly packed with rubble. Among the sparse traffic, Brinckmann spotted “taxis and battered trucks and delivery vans,” most of them “burning coal or wood for propulsion.”

From Tokyo, the writer traveled by steam locomotive to Kobe, where he took up a position at the Nationale Handelsbank, one of a handful of foreign enterprises with the vision to invest in the idea of a resurgent Japan.

In “The Call of Japan,” Brinckmann vividly portrays the streets of Kobe, where he encountered blind masseurs, mothers with babies strapped to their backs, aproned housewives, tatami makers and street corners occupied by mendicant war veterans. He also recalls grueling hours at the bank, which were relieved with extensive reading, language study, cultural events and travel.

He was exceedingly lucky in striking up an early friendship with Kyoto poet Kenseki Shimaoka, who initiated him into the world of Japanese gardens, sacred sites, teahouses and hostess bars. It was around this time that the author took up Zen. Thirsting for the equivalent of “nonreligious spiritualism,” Brinckmann was grateful for Zen’s “unequivocal emphasis on direct experience rather than scriptures.”

Brinckmann is frank in acknowledging that for him the Zen ideal of detachment also helped numb his mind to reality. Some of the insistent negative forces he sought to suppress were the “nonstop apologizing, the emphasis of form over substance, the rampant commercialism, the repression of the ego, the deep-seated xenophobia (and) the facile disregard of wartime atrocities” that he found going on around him.

During his formative two decades in Japan, Brinckmann continued to immerse himself in his surroundings, even producing his first pieces of freelance journalism, including two articles that were published by The Japan Times in 1958. The writer also took a highly unusual step for non-Japanese at that time, engaging in a *mi-ai* (arranged marriage) with a young woman whose family’s prosperity was leached by the death of its patriarch and the draconian taxes and wealth-leveling land reforms of the postwar years.

Later, Brinckmann took up overseas postings in New York, London, Amsterdam and the Dutch-administered island of Curacao in the Lesser Antilles, but he returned for good in 2003, unable to resist the magnetic pull of Japan.

Although he has spent a significant part of his life here, Brinckmann expresses strongly conflicted feelings about Japan in his memoir, prompting me to ask if writing the book was an attempt at clarifying his impressions. Perhaps it was even a therapeutic experience?

“Writing the original book, as well as its new additions, helped me take a balanced view of Japan,” Brinckmann says. “In the end, I decided to return, as I felt the need to verify much of what I had written in my ‘Magatama’ memoir and add more recent impressions and sources.”



(https://cdn.japantimes.2xx.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/np_file_44874.jpeg)

With the passing of such literary and cultural luminaries as Donald Richie, Edward Seidensticker and Donald Keene, Brinckmann is one of the few remaining English writers who bore witness to the extraordinary transformative forces set in motion in Japan after the war.

As a photographer, memory has always seemed like a selective form of time-lapse photography to me. Curious to know Brinckmann's thoughts on the subject of memory, I asked him whether the past crystallizes or blurs with the passage of time.

“Writing helps to bring elements of the past back into sharper focus,” he says, “but memory alone cannot be relied on. I, therefore, rely to a large extent on the journal I've kept for most of my life and, to some extent, on reading Japan-related books, which sometimes trigger my own memories of past experiences.”

Brinckmann's work, in both this book and his other publications, represent an unflagging engagement with Japan that continues to this day. “The Call of Japan” is an invitation from a master storyteller to partake in sights and experiences unknown to later generations.