

RESEARCH NOTE: W. G. ASTON

Charles Trumbull

Haiku was “discovered” by Westerners shortly after the opening of Japan. The first mention of haiku—or *hokku* as it was still called at the time—in print in English was by W.G. Aston, a British scholar and consular officer who spent many years in Japan.

William George Aston was born near Derry, Great Britain (now Londonderry, Northern Ireland), on April 9, 1841. He studied classics and modern languages at Queens University Belfast before entering the British Consular Service. He was posted to Tokyo and Hyōgo and was consul-general in Korea, 1884–86. Upon his retirement in 1889 he was made CMG (Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael & St George); he died at Beer, East Devonshire, on November 22, 1911. Aston’s literary collection was acquired by Cambridge University Library and included 9,500 Japanese books, many of them rare.

Aston’s work is seminal for the study of Japanese verse and especially haiku. His academic works included *A Short Grammar of Japanese Language* (1869); *A Grammar of the Japanese Written Language, with a Short Chrestomathy* (1872, with a much-revised and expanded second edition in 1877); *A Grammar of the Japanese Spoken Language* (4th ed. 1888); *Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan* (1896); *A History of Japanese Literature* (1899); *Shinto, the Way of the Gods* (1905); *Shinto, the Ancient Religion of Japan* (1907); and numerous articles in *Transactions of the Asiatic Society* and other publications. *The Collected Works of William George Aston* was reissued in six volumes by Oxford University Press (Tokyo, 1997), and Aston’s publications in *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* were reprinted in *Early Japanology* (4 vols.; Tokyo: Yushodo Press, 1998).

Aston was the first to write a grammar of the Japanese language in English (1872). In the chapter titled “Prosody” in the second edition of that work, *A Grammar of the Japanese Written Language* (1877), he included the first haiku printed in English (203):

FUJI CONCEALED IN A MIST.

Kiri no umi
Idzuko he Fuji ha
Shidzumi nuru?

Into a sea of mist whither hath Mt. Fuji sunk?

OLD AGE.

Hito ni koso
Toshi ha yori nure
Haru no kusa!

It is only man who becomes aged, Oh thou grass of spring!

THE SUMMER-SHOWER.

Yufudachi ya
Ta wo mi-meguri no
Kami naraba.

Oh! if the summer-shower were only a god who should
 make his round of visits to the rice-fields.

Aston does not name the authors of these *hokku*. Further, they are not among the canonical works of the Japanese masters, which leads to the speculation that Aston himself might have composed them; if so, they would be the first haiku composed and published by an Englishman.

It is remarkable to note in this book Aston's straightforward and largely accurate description of the haiku, a clarity of vision and relative lack of adornment that was missing in the works of the scholars and translators who followed Aston and not regained until R.H. Blyth several decades later. It is also instructive that Aston presents the Japanese text in three lines, although his English translations are only partially poetic and are printed in a single line of prose. These three haiku accompany Aston's definitions of Japanese poetic forms:

Hokku . . . , as its name indicates, is the first part of a verse of *tanka*. It consists of three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, or 17 syllables in all. The modern varieties of poetry known as *Haikwai* . . . *uta* and *Senriu* . . . are chiefly composed in this metre, although the number of syllables is occasionally exceeded. As in the case of *tanka*, each *hokku* is an entire poem. . . .

The four kinds of metre described above are the only regular metres known as Japanese poetry. To the first three of these, viz. *Tanka*, *Naga-uta* and *Sedōka*, belongs all poetry recognized as classical. The admirers of *Haikwai uta* claim for it a quasi-classical character, but it is objected with much reason that nothing which deserves the name of poetry can well be contained in the narrow compass of a verse of seventeen syllables (203).

More influential than his books about Japanese grammar was Aston's *A History of Japanese Literature* (London: Heinemann, and New York: Appleton). First published in 1899, it was reprinted by the original publishers several times until 1953 and by Tuttle in paperback editions beginning in 1972. This was the first major overview in English of all of Japanese literature and was the only such work for several decades. As such, it was a major source of information about Japanese writing for many key English-language poets of the early years of the 20th century.

It was in [Amy] Lowell's library and heavily annotated in [Kenneth] Rexroth's, and may be shown to have been consulted by [Laurence] Binyon, [Edmund] Blunden, and [Ezra] Pound. The work is a possible source for Pound's knowledge of Moritake's 'The fallen blossom', and is among the earliest English-language accounts of haiku and the *nō*, though Aston's treatment of the former is patronising and of the latter incomprehending. ("Aston, W.G. Works.")

Furthermore, Aston's *History* was translated into French by Henry-D. Davray in 1902 and into Russian by V. Mendin in 1904 and was often cited as an influence by early continental haiku poets and scholars.

Most of what is of interest to us in Aston's *History* is found in "Chapter IV; Poetry of the Seventeenth Century—Haikai, Haibun, Kiōka." Here he writes,

The Haikai is a Tanka minus the concluding fourteen syllables, and is made up of three phrases of five, seven, and five syllables respectively, as in the following:—

“Furu ike ya !
Kawadzu tobi-komu,
Midzu no oto.”

It differs from Tanka, however in more than metre, being much less choice in addition in matter than the older kind of poetry. It admits words of Chinese derivation and colloquial expressions, and often deals with subjects which the more fastidious Tanka refuses to meddle with. (289)

If Aston's subtractive comparison of the haiku (which he calls *haikai* throughout) is inadequate and headed down the wrong path, his recognition of the haiku as divided into three phrases and presentation of the text in three lines is faithful to the internal structure of the original. Most early translators of haiku chose for their versions forms more palatable to Western traditions, such as couplets or quatrains. Aston's points about the differences between haiku and tanka are right on target too and remarkably perceptive.

Aston's translations hold up well, even more than a hundred years after they were made. They tend toward the scholarly and literary, rather than the poetic and fanciful, as was the case with many translators through the first decades of the 20th century. In the *History of Japanese Literature* Aston renders the Bashō haiku given in Japanese in the quote above as:

An ancient pond!
With a sound from the water
Of the frog as it plunges in.

We might prefer that the order of the presentation of Bashō's images not be transposed and that the sound of water not be so firmly linked to the frog, but the translation is still as respectable as most others that followed. Here is another famous haiku of Bashō's and one of Moritake's as translated by Aston:

On a withered branch
 A crow is sitting
 This autumn eve.

Thought I, the fallen flowers
 Are returning to their branch;
 But lo! they were butterflies.

When we revisit the work of W.G. Aston, the pioneer of haiku studies in Western languages, we cannot fail to be impressed by his clear comprehension of Japanese verse forms—his rather dim view of the capabilities of haiku notwithstanding—and the accuracy of his renderings of the poems into English. It is revealing, too, to realize how deeply our Anglo-American haiku tradition is rooted in the works of the early scholars and their careful translations of the Japanese haiku classics.

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