

That Lovable Old Issa

by Earle Joshua Stone

Much has been written about the two famous Japanese poets, Buson and Basho, however, we seldom find any extended writing about the third and extremely important poet, Issa. His name is derived from the Japanese word *ichi*, meaning 'one', and *cha*, meaning 'tea', which are shortened to the name Issa. This quaint old poet was born in a farmhouse in the ancient village of Kashiwabara in 1763.

Issa had a very sad life and finally died in a storage house or 'go-down' in 1827. He is indicated as one of the queerest and gentlest, while still most lovable of the seventeen-syllable poets Japan has ever produced. His full name was Kobayashi Tataro, which he used until he started writing serious poetry. At that time he changed his name to Issa.

Issa had lived a very lonely life after his mother died when he was two. He lived with relatives after that time, but his early verses show that he was still an extremely lonesome young man. Tradition records that at about the age of six years his loneliness was reflected in his poetry

Ware to kite asobeya oya no nai suzume which translates to:

*Come over with me
and together let's play
Oh, motherless sparrow.*

Living this somewhat solitary life, he spent time with various members of his family until he was thirteen years of age, at which time his father decided to kick him out into the world, and he walked to old Yedo, which is now Tokyo.

He lived about eleven years in Edo, spending his time in a temple, and little is heard of him until he was about twenty-four, when he began to write serious poetry. Issa returned to his hometown when he was about 38 years old. From that time on he travelled back and forth between his hometown and Yedo and tried to make himself acceptable to his family. They didn't receive him kindly or even invite him into their homes, so that by the time he was forty-nine he decided to leave the area permanently.

His sadness at this rejection is reflected in this poem:

Furusato ya yoru mo sawaru mo bara no hana.

*My native village
on approach and to the touch
a bramble rose.*

When he was fifty he decided to return to Kashiwabara to settle down. He married a twenty-eight year old woman with whom he had five children. However, all of these children died. When the last one, a little girl died, he wrote,

Tsuyu no yo wa tsuyu no yo nagara sari nagara.

*World like a dewdrop
though it's only a dewdrop
even so, even so.*

At the age of sixty-two, Issa married a third wife, having lost all of his previous wives and their children. Apparently this younger woman was a taxation on his health and strength, and did nothing to enhance his life. Continually dogged by ill-fortunes, his house burned down when he was 64, when he wrote the following poem:

Hotarubi mo amaseba iyahaya kore wa haya.

*Even a firefly's fire
if increased, heaven help us!
Well, well, heaven help us!*

Being without a residence, and his relatives not wishing him to return to them, probably not even recognizing him at this late age, he moved into the go-down warehouse of a friend in Kashiwabara. In 1827 he had another serious stroke from which he subsequently died. His last verse, written as he was dying was:

Tarai kara tarai ni utsuru chimpunkan.

*From infant bathtub
to burial tub changing
This utter nonsense!*

Old writing about Issa informs us that in his later years in Kashiwabara, he had built a small meditation hut on the hillside near Maruyama station. The hill later became a public park on which a small meditation temple was built and called Haikai-ji (playful composition temple), named after Issa's old hut. (So haiku was a game!)

Near the Meisen-ji temple cemetery is Issa's grave with a large and a small stone on it. The large stone has an inscription describing his importance to the community and the world, and the small stone, placed there in 1927, a hundred years after his death, was a memorial to him and his verses and other writings,

which had been collected by his admirers. At that time Japan was filled with books written in praise of this wonderful old man.

Issa was known for his sympathetic attitude towards the less fortunate ones around him, including the wildlife in his environment. Once in his wanderings Issa observed a frog fighting with a number of other frogs. He wrote this little poem of encouragement to that creature:

Yase gaeru makeru na Issa koko ni ari.

*You skinny frog, you
don't be beaten, don't give up!
Here stands Issa by you.*

One cool night in August, Issa was turning over in bed when he observed a cricket trying to get under the blankets to get warm. That prompted him to write this poem:

Nekaeri wo suru zo waki yori kirigirisu.

*I'm turning over
look out and give me room there
you cricket, you.*

Still another amusing incident encouraged him to write:

Yare utsu na hai ga te wo suri ashi wo suru.

*Wait! Don't strike that fly!
he's wringing his hands there
and wringing his feet.*

Anyone who has ever observed a fly at close range has seen this humorous action of the fly rubbing its forefeet together, and then the hind feet, which indeed appears to be a wringing of the hands in expectation of a blow.

While Issa was very young, he saw his father carrying luggage on what was then called the Hokkoku Kaido, or the North Country Roadway. We know that the daimyo with their long colorful entourage used this road to Edo from about 1611. Nojiri was one of the stations along the foot-highway, and was one of the eight important stopping places along the base of the mountain.

The richest daimyo in Japan at that time, Lord Kaga, travelled this road and part of Issa's father's job was to assist in the carrying of Lord Kaga's luggage. While he made the trip every year, Lord Kaga's train was so long that it never stopped

passing through the village from one year's end to the next. Issa wrote many poems about happenings during this spectacle. One is:

Umebachi no dai chochin ya kasumi kara.

*Great bulging lanterns
with crests on them of open plum
come out of the mist.*

The open plum blossoms of the crests was the jo-mon of Lord Kaga and appeared on all of his luggage and pennants.

One of the humorous poems that Issa wrote while observing the birds of the neighborhood on the road, picking at the horse droppings, is:

Suzume no ko soko noke, soko noke ouma ga toru.

*You baby sparrow
get out of that, get out of that
Milord's horse would pass.*

In his wanderings, Issa saw many scenes of rural Japan, one about which he wrote a poem. Seeing a farmer pausing in the fields for a breather while pulling radishes; the radishes being the large daikon, that monstrous stinking vegetable so well known in Japan, he wrote:

Daiko hiki daiko de michi wo oshie keru.

*The radish puller
pointing with a radish root
teaches me the way.*

One of Issa's favorite songs, while he wandered through the terraced rice fields, was:

Shinanoji ya ue noue ni mo taue uta.

*On Shinano ways
paddy above paddy rising
the rice-field planting song.*

While the stories about Issa do not mention in detail his various employments

while traveling, which were necessary to earn the small change needed to keep him alive, there is one poem he wrote which indicates a soft job.

Nebanashi no ashi de oriori naruko kana.

*From time to time with feet
sprawled out in noonday sleep
I pull the scarecrow string.*

Apparently this was a job for the weak, lame, and lazy, in which he laid on the bank of the paddy with a string tied to his toe and the arms of a scarecrow. An occasional pull between naps would scare off the scavenger birds.

While traveling in the winter, he often thought of the warmer southern climates, no doubt wishing he was there instead of the northern territories. He mentions that in this verse.

Shogatsu ya ume no kawari ni ofubuki.

*The New Year comes
and instead of plum blossoms
a great storm of snow.*

Issa wrote a poem about the houses of northern Japan, which at that time were little more than hovels. In the winter they were almost buried beneath the thick, heavy snows.

Sorihiki ya yane kara otosu todoke bumi.

*The snow-sled puller
drops down from the roof of the house
the letter he brings.*

These letters were sometimes dropped down through the smoke-hole and one had to be quick to snatch them before they fell into the fire-pit.

Issa was keenly aware of the landscapes through which he passed, and at one time he was so stricken by the size of the mountains apparently rising from the waters of a lake, that he wrote:

Kosui yori shutsugen shitari kumo no mine.

*From the lake
springing up into the sky
the clouded peaks.*

Of the cloud-covered Kurohime, which means 'black princess', he wrote of the softness of appearance and her feminine tradition thus:

Kurohime ya iroke zuita ka wata eboshi.

*Has Kurohime
turned to colored thoughts of love?
See her bride's headband.*

North of Mt. Kurohime, there is another mountain called Myoko, a very jagged peak which stands across the valley of the Seki River. Being impressed with the masculinity of Myoko, Issa wrote:

Yama kake ya shiranai kao shite shigi no tatsu.

*The mountain crumbles
and with a look of unconcern
up rises a snipe.*

While this has a double entendre, we believe it refers to a huge landslide leaving a bare spot on the mountain. About four miles from the Seki River Gorge, is a beautiful waterfall, called Nae-no-Taki, or Jishin-daki (earthquake waterfall). While old Issa was observing these magnificent falls, he noticed the misty spray hovering over some flowering cherry trees, and he thought them comparable to distant trees making a cloud on mountains.

A fan inscribed by Issa with the verse "Wait, don't strike that fly!...", and signed "The man, too, by Issa." To this he added the self-portrait.

This inspired the following:

Taki keburu soba de miru sae hana no kumo.

*Smokes the waterfall
and even seen close at hand
the cherry flowers are clouds.*

On a large green stone under the cryptomerias that surround the little shrine at Suwa, where he spent lonesome days as a child, is found carved this verse:

Matsu kage ni nete kuu rokuju yo shu kana.

*In the shade of pines
all in peace they sleep and eat
the sixty-odd clans.*

In spite of all the tragedies and ill health that beset Old Issa, we, with great love, remember this kindly man who wrote such magnificent poetry. Numbered among the triumvirate greats, his name will never be forgotten in Japan, and most likely will not be forgotten throughout the world.

(The above verses were selected from the *Osaka Asahi* published in 1929.)