

## RESEARCH NOTE: HARRY BEHN<sup>1</sup>

Charles Trumbull

Henry Behn (called Harry) was born September 24, 1898, in McCade, near Prescott, Ariz. He spent his youth in mining camps and early showed a talent as an illustrator and painter. He attended high school in Phoenix and after graduation found work as a travelogue cameraman. He then attended Harvard University, graduating in 1922. He taught writing for a while at the University of Arizona before moving to Los Angeles, where he was briefly active in community theater and in 1923 became a scenario writer for silent motion pictures. He was quite successful in this line of work, collaborating with director King Vidor on films that included *The Big Parade* (1925) and *The Crowd* (1928) and with Howard Hughes on *Hell's Angels* (1930). At the same time Behn was also writing for himself and published *Siesta*, a book of poetry, in 1931. Later he worked as an artist for the Public Works Art Project and traveled to paint in the West, including trips to the Grand Canyon and to Glacier National Park, where, he relates, the Blackfoot Indians invited him to join the tribe.

After the mid-1930s Behn turned his attention to writing for children and young adults.<sup>2</sup> One account states:

Harry Behn wrote and translated poetry, especially haiku, for children and drew on the poetic heritage of Robert Louis Stevenson in his use "child's voice" as well as what critics called "a thread of transcendentalism." He retained his American "roots" by focusing on images and words contemporary American children would understand and emphasized the "wonder of nature" in his works and invited children to imagine "beyond" the poem.<sup>3</sup>

His *The Little Hill*, a collection of poetry, was published in 1949. Behn also illustrated many of his books and won awards for his illustrations. His books for older children and young adults included *The Faraway Lurs* (1963). He also wrote a book for teachers, *Chrysalis: Concerning Children and Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

When Peter Beilenson of Peter Pauper Press died in 1962, work was not completed on his fourth volume of haiku translations, *Haiku Harvest*, and Behn was enlisted to complete the project. Helaine V. Dauphinais interviewed Behn in connection with her master's thesis in 1973 and describes Behn's coming to haiku as follows:

*Haiku Harvest* is Behn's first collection of translations of Oriental haiku. he did them quickly, and when they were published he found himself dissatisfied with them. he then undertook the task of polishing and improving those same translations. For 1-1½ years he read Oriental literature and philosophy extensively to acquire a better understanding for the poems. *Cricket Songs*, 1964, and *More Cricket Songs*, 1970, are the two collections of haiku translations that resulted from his study. The poems they contain are those contained in *Haiku Harvest*.<sup>4</sup>

Behn did not know Japanese, so it is all but certain that for his books of haiku he was reprocessing texts of Japanese haiku that had been translated by another person. No indication has

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<sup>1</sup> Published in *Modern Haiku* 37:3 (autumn 2006), 75-80.

<sup>2</sup> For a consideration of Behn's early work, see Sister Marie Cecile, S.S.J. "Harry Behn: Wizard of Song and Lore." *The*

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<sup>3</sup> "Biographical/Historical Notes." *Henry Behn Papers, 1932-1973. Finding Aid*. Children's Literature Research Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis. Information about the Behn papers is available at <http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/html/clrc/clrc0108.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Helaine V. Dauphinais. "A Study of Harry Behn's Poetry for Children." Masters Thesis, Southern Connecticut State College, May 1973, 19. Typescript in the Henry Behn Papers.

been found, however, of the first-round translations on which he based his poetic versions. The haiku texts for *Haiku Harvest* would surely have been selected by Peter Beilenson, who had begun work on the final version before his death. A publisher's blurb from Peter Piper Press about 1960 says that *Haiku Harvest* was "translated into poetic English from the literal Japanese by Peter Beilenson,"<sup>5</sup> though this is unlikely, as Beilenson did not know Japanese either. Dauphinais's assertion that Behn's two *Cricket Song* books contain the same haiku as those found in *Haiku Harvest* is true for the first volume, and that was surely the source for the 82 haiku translated in *Cricket Songs*. *More Cricket Songs*, however, contains 29 new haiku in addition to 54 from *Haiku Harvest*. About 50 haiku in *Haiku Harvest* were not picked up by Behn for either of his own works. Perhaps Beilenson and Behn were working from a larger set of "pre-translations," and Behn availed himself of the leftovers from the Peter Pauper Press series for *Cricket Songs*. Two haiku in *Cricket Songs* and one in *More Cricket Songs* are Behn's own compositions.

The marked-up galleys of the two books and a comparison of the final volumes show that indeed Behn made major revisions of most of the haiku from *Haiku Harvest*, although a few are the same. His work, by and large, was an improvement over the earlier publication, but his emendations were not made on the basis of reference to the original Japanese (or retranlations). Rather they seem to have drawn on his own substantial skills as writer and poet. Here is one of the more transfigured versions from the books under discussion, a haiku of Onitsura's (remember that all the haiku in the Peter Piper books were set in small capitals and had a broken second line):

EVEN STONES IN STREAMS  
OF MOUNTAIN WATER  
COMPOSE  
SONGS TO WILD CHERRIES

*Haiku Harvest*

Even stones under  
mountain waterfalls compose  
odes to plum blossoms.

*Cricket Songs*

For the Onitsura haiku, the Japanese is *tanimizu ya \ ishi mo uta yomu \ yamazakura*, where *tanimizu* means "ravine water" and *yamazakura* is "mountain cherry," so it would appear that Behn is moving away from a more literal reading of the Japanese toward a version that sounded better to him according to English poetic criteria. The Japanese text does not indicate that the song or ode is written *to* the flowers. Rather it is simply a second, independent image. This is clear in R.H. Blyth's translation, though Blyth inverts the original order of the images and uses "also" in a way that implies that both the cherry and the rocks were singing:

The wild cherry:  
Stones are also singing their songs  
In the valley stream.

*Haiku II, 330*

Both of Behn's versions are 5-7-5.

Here is another much-changed translation by Behn, this one a haiku by Shiki, *tsuki ichi-rin hoshi mukazu sora midori kana*:

ONE PERFECT MOON  
AND THE UNCOUNTABLE  
STARS  
DROWNED IN A GREEN SKY

*Haiku Harvest, 57*

A full moon comes up,  
and stars, stars uncountable,  
drown in a green sky

*More Cricket*

<sup>5</sup> Clipping in Behn Scrapbook 3. Henry Behn Papers.

In *Haiku in English*, Harold G. Henderson translates it as follows:

One full moon,  
stars numberless, the sky  
dark green ...

Only one haiku by Issa is included in *Cricket Songs*.

It is not clear if it was Behn's idea or not, but *Cricket Songs*, his first solo book of haiku translations, was issued on the children's book list of the publisher, Harcourt, Brace & World. He was, after all, an established author of children's prose and poetry. The blurb inside the front cover suggests that "Behn ... has created a book that will delight young readers and perhaps stimulate them to write their own haiku"; otherwise, there is no indication that this is a book intended for juveniles. The book was extremely well received by the book publishing, library, and school communities. *Publishers Weekly* (Feb. 26, 1964) called it "an unusually nice gift for reader-writers age nine and up"; *Book Week* (May 10, 1964) reported that it was "a distinguished book, a permanent contribution to the poetry shelves; and the *New York Times Book Review* placed it on its list of Year's Best for Juveniles. Reviewing the book for the *New York Times* (March 15, 1964), Barbara Wersba pointed out that *Cricket Songs* was "for all ages," but continued that "few children will remain unmoved," and the *Kirkus Bulletin* (Feb. 26, 1964) concurred: "Although the format suggests it, this is not necessarily a juvenile book." Other positive mentions appeared in publications as diverse as *Child Life* (June–July 1964), the *ALA Booklist* (April 15, 1964), and the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*.

*More Cricket Songs* was equally well received. The *Phoenix Republic* (April 4, 1971) wrote, "The author has put years of research and study into these poems of fixed literary form," and *Kirkus* (March 1, 1971) called the book "genial and inviting."

Behn did not write much about his understanding of Japanese haiku, so it is difficult to discern what he was trying to accomplish in his translations and publications or to understand his aesthetics. In one short passage of a letter (August 17, 1970) to Margaret K. McElderry, his editor at Harcourt Brace & World, Behn expressed his reaction to *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, which was edited by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite (Hammondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1964):

I rushed to get their enormous collection and cannot understand how so many poems from centuries can all sound so alike. Also, to me, the text was an example of pedantry I have seldom encountered.

Alice [Behn's wife] asked if I was sure this is not a display of professional envy. It is not. There is a long list of so-called translators who leave the poem mired in [pidgin], or simply not penetrated at all. Millions of haiku have been and still are written. The few good ones are good only when they reveal 'satori', an illumination. Bownas & Thwaite seem intent on concealing this illumination even in the great ones."<sup>6</sup>

Behn died in Greenwich, Conn., on Sept. 6, 1973.

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<sup>6</sup> Harry Behn to Margaret [K. McElderry], Aug. 17, 1970. MF 75, folder 7 (Correspondence with Publishers). Henry Behn Papers.

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- The Harry Behn papers are housed at the [Children's Literature Research Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis](http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/html/clrc/clrc0108.html) (for a description of this resource see <http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/html/clrc/clrc0108.html>).