

Engelbert KAEMPFER, *Kaempfer's Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed*. Edited, translated, and annotated by Beatrice M. Bodart-Bailey. xiv + 546 pp. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999. Cloth \$64.00. ISBN 0-8248-1964-0; Paper \$34.95. ISBN 0-8248-2066-5.

ENGELBERT KAEMPFER was one of that admirable species known as "intrepid explorers." He pursued knowledge not from the armchair but by exposing his body to the stress of long journeys and sojourns in Russia, Iran, and East Asia, at all times exhibiting intrepid curiosity, great powers of observation, and disinterested scientific objectivity. These virtues are reminiscent of his contemporary Leibniz, who followed his career with interest. The greatest product of his labors is his *History of Japan*, published in English translation in London in 1727. The first lengthy description of Japan by a Westerner, this best-selling work fixed the image of Japan for Europeans, and was known to Voltaire, Oliver Goldsmith, Kant, and Goethe. Now the work is made accessible as never before in a translation from the original manuscript by a scholar perhaps uniquely equipped for the task.

Kaempfer is not a literary artist, but his unvarnished account of life in the Genroku period grips one by its transparency, as if a window had calmly opened on that remote yesterday and brought it directly under our gaze. His meticulous descriptions and evident respect for empirical detail inspire confidence. He contemplates facts without any touristic or moralistic height-

ening: "At the entrance to Shinagawa, the execution ground was an ugly sight for the traveler: several human heads and disfigured bodies were lying thrown together with cadavers of dead beasts. A large emaciated dog was rummaging with its hungry snout in a decaying human body" (p. 348). His love of knowledge was so great that it could thrive even on painful and humiliating experiences. In his audiences with the Shogun (Tsunayoshi), he had to parade like some exotic animal and demonstrate European methods of singing, dancing, greeting, kissing, and "innumerable other monkey tricks" (p. 365; see pp. 409-13). He makes no literary capital out of this, interested only in telling us all he has learned about the interior of the Shogun's castle.

There is some *ira et studium* in his account of the relationship between the Dutch merchants and "this exceedingly suspicious nation" (p. 188). The "Christian century" in Japan had a bitter aftermath: "The reason for the harsh changes we were made to suffer was mainly the profession of the Christian religion, which was regarded as a plague besetting the country; the painful and costly extermination of so many thousand subjects more and more embittered the court" (p. 211). The Dutch put their cannons at the service of the Japanese against Christians in Shimabara in 1638. In 1641, "having assisted in the confinement of the Portuguese by word and deed" (p. 211), they were themselves confined in prison-like conditions in Deshima, where they suffered mistrust, contempt, harassment, and increasing exactions, all of which they bore for the financial gains, as Kaempfer bore it for the sake of science. Though he was in Japan at a time of peace, prosperity, and cultural flowering (September 1690 to October 1692), he saw the dark underside of Tokugawa rule. Smuggling was a capital crime in Nagasaki, and Kaempfer was forced to witness the execution of two petty offenders. With his invaluable Japanese servant he stood close to the condemned men and noted their final conversation: "You should really be ashamed of yourself to show such fear." "I am just saying a little prayer." "You had time to pray earlier. Now it is useless, except that it will make you blush with shame if the Dutch see it" (p. 223). Kaempfer mentions the practice of executing the children of criminals along with them (deplored by humane Confucians such as Kumazawa Banzan) and the use of the bodies of the executed for sword practice (heartily approved by the author of the *Hagakure*).

The tiny opening to the West, allowed purely for trading purposes, did not allow for hospitality to inquiring scholarly minds. But Kaempfer was undaunted, finding among the Japanese a curiosity to match his own and reveling in the spectacle of their lives. His account of the various kinds of traveler on the Tōkaidō: massive processions of territorial lords, pilgrims, priests, beggars, vendors, prostitutes (pp. 271-79), reads like a stray page of *The Canterbury Tales*. His account of Japanese religions (Shinto, pp. 103-21; Yamabushi, pp. 122-26; Buddhism, pp. 127-31; Confucianism, pp. 132-34) is not inhibited by any strong theological distaste. This tolerant outlook gave considerable offense in Europe. He thinks more highly of Confucian ethics, which he compares with Seneca and the Ten Commandments, than of Shinto theology, "one enormous, incomprehensible, monstrous fable" (p. 105), "wretched and sparse," "incredibly naive" (p. 108) and in need of supplementation from

Buddhism. He remarks, without disapproval, that “they have neither hell, Cimmerian darkness, nor an unhappy state of disembodied souls in addition to these Elysian fields and places of happiness. As a result, they have no other devil except the fox of superstitious commoners” (p. 109). Seemingly devoid of religious zeal or anti-religious odium, he patiently sketches the hand mudra of the Yamabushi (p. 125) or recounts the history of Buddhism in much the same spirit as he counts the houses in the towns he visits or details the varieties of birds and insects.

Though “his benchmark remains mostly Europe” (p. 20), Kaempfer cannot be taxed with a disabling Eurocentrism or “Orientalism,” perhaps due to his lack of or suspension of ideological passion. This first full-scale Western gaze on Japan is a triumph of lucid observation and of judicious information-gathering. It is salutary that Kaempfer has now been made readily available as a unique historical document, a valuable work of reference, and a remarkable model of cross-cultural understanding achieved under unpropitious conditions.

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