



Hamish Ion, *American Missionaries, Christian Oyatoi, and Japan, 1859-73*

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THE FIFTIETH and one hundredth anniversaries of Protestant missions in Japan were accompanied by commemorative conferences and notable publications on Christian missions in Japan. Perhaps the most significant work to be added to the corpus on the and hundred and fiftieth anniversary is Hamish Ion's latest work *American Missionaries, Christian Oyatoi, and Japan, 1859-73*. The works produced on the former anniversaries provided largely uncritical views of the early missions using primarily Western sources. Ion's book, however, is one of the first works which critically evaluates this formative period by incorporating a variety of sources, including missionary biographies and correspondence, studies on the *oyatoi* ("foreign employees"), Japanese scholarship on Meiji Christianity, materials on diplomacy, and recent literature on women missionaries and education. Much of the literature on early Meiji Christianity has focused either on the foreign missionaries or their

denominations, or on the impact of the early Japanese converts on the development of Christianity in modern Japan. Though Ion deals primarily with the former, he also touches on the latter in relation to the Yokohama Band. He intentionally limits his scope to significant Christian *oyatoi*, who were employed at the time as teachers and disseminators of Western civilization, and to the American missionaries from the Protestant Episcopal, Presbyterian, and the (Dutch) Reformed Church. Overall, this work is a well-researched account of an important movement during the Bakumatsu/Meiji period. In addition to the body of the text, Ion has included valuable appendices and bibliographies including informative descriptions of every missionary, *oyatoi*, and convert during these fourteen years.

In this work, Ion claims that the ultimate goal of the Protestant missionaries and Christian *oyatoi* to Christianize Japan failed largely because they continued to face opposition from Japanese society, particularly from the Japanese government. Nonetheless, they made “significant advances during this period and the seeds they sowed with their educational and medical work helped to create an institutional base and a corps of Japanese converts vital to the growth of Protestant Christianity after 1873” (xii). As in Ion’s previous works on missionaries, in this book he shows great respect for these early Christian missionaries and *oyatoi*, but he does not view them uncritically. One of the refreshing aspects of this work is that, in addition to their achievements, Ion also presents some of the flaws of these figures. Few works discuss the animosity between James C. Hepburn and James H. Ballagh in Yokohama or between David Thompson and Christopher Carrothers in Tokyo. Ion also reveals how factors such as financial considerations, denominational competition, and family concerns affected their work. Ion’s frank and critical assessments of the missionaries and their contributions is a welcome change from the unalloyed hagiography of the past. In the case of William Elliot Griffis, Ion describes him as a difficult person who was “rather full of himself.” But he also acknowledges Griffis’s crucial role as an avid advocate of Japan and a writer who did more than anyone else to make these early pioneers known through his prolific writings (181–82).

The work is organized largely chronologically, though the chapters are also topically arranged within the overall chronology. For the reader who is unfamiliar with the time period, the abundance of names cited may be daunting, though Ion handles the range of characters and the connections between them with remarkable ease and familiarity. The initial chapter begins with an overview of the arrival of the American envoys and the first missionaries in the 1850s, and it ends with the response to the Namamugi Incident in 1862, when British nationals were killed by Satsuma samurai. In the following chapter, Ion focuses on the activities of the missionaries in Kanagawa/Yokohama amidst diplomatic wrangling, concluding with the first hopeful Protestant baptisms in Japan in the mid-1860s. He then devotes a chapter specifically to the educational, medical, and translation work of the missionaries amidst the turmoil of the Meiji Restoration. In the chapter laconically entitled “Persecution,” Ion treats the critical issue of the persecution of both Roman Catholic and Protestant

Christians, as well as the Western responses during these years. After this, Ion shifts to a discussion of the crucial role of the missionaries, particularly Guido Verbeck, in facilitating the overseas study of Japanese in America, as well as a brief look at Verbeck's role as an advisor to the government regarding the Iwakura Embassy. In the next two chapters, Ion demonstrates the slow growth of activity following the conclusion of the U.S. Civil War. First, he focuses on Christian *oyatoi* teachers who were active outside of the treaty ports—in Fukui, Shizuoka, and Hirosaki—as well as those in the Kaisei Gakko, the forerunner of the University of Tokyo. Then, he deals with the influx of important new individuals such as the American Board missionaries, as well as new mission opportunities in Osaka, Kobe, and Tokyo. In the final chapter, Ion highlights the culmination of the work of these missionaries and *oyatoi* in the creation of the prominent Yokohama Band of Japanese converts in 1872 and in the development of Christian institutions such as schools and churches.

Ion asserts that American missionaries were important catalysts in conversions, but that they were not as important as other surrounding factors such as “peer pressure, discussions, and explanations of Christianity among the inquirers themselves” (219). Though Ion superbly demonstrates how the missionaries were catalysts, the work provides less evidence for the second claim, mainly because he does not focus as much on the Japanese converts. Ion also suggests that the emphasis of much of the scholarship on explaining Japanese “conversion” can be misleading in assessing the long-term and more complex impact of many of the early American missionaries and *oyatoi* on Meiji Japan. This leads to a difficult issue in writing about missionaries: how does one evaluate their work? By their own lofty standards, they failed to make Japan a Christian nation. As Ion shows in mentioning the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Korea, it may not have been such an unlikely prospect for Japan at the time. Ion also points out that many of these figures—particularly Griffis—focused on the idea that Protestant Christianity was necessary to modern progress, and tended to neglect the central idea of Christ as a savior (a criticism he made over thirty years ago in an article about E. W. Clark as well; see ION 1977). I hope in the future that Ion and other scholars will further elaborate on this assertion in the light of the subsequent development of Japanese Christianity as well as the comparative development of Christianity other mission fields during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In his insightful conclusion, Ion elucidates some important issues and calls for further research. He recognizes that the legacy of Christianity in Japan—“far in excess of that which its meager numbers might suggest” (285)—can be seen in its impact on educational institutions, political and literary figures, and through such translation works as Hepburn's dictionary. However, Ion also claims that the “failure” to convert Japan to Christianity can already be seen in these initial fourteen years when there were “signs that Christianity would never make much progress in Japan” (265). In this work, Ion tries to move beyond stereotypes and facile evalu-

ations of Christian missionaries, and asserts that looking at their legacy “in black and white terms of acceptance or rejection” is too simplistic (285).

Ultimately, perhaps, there may never be a consensus on an assessment of the impact of Christian missionaries in the development of modern Japan. Perhaps this is inevitable for such a diverse and multi-faceted movement where it is often difficult to quantify and generalize the influence of people. As Henry Stout, Guido Verbeck’s successor in Nagasaki, wrote of Verbeck in 1869, “the half of his work and his influence has not been told” (EARNs 1997, 112). Ion’s contribution to the sesqui-centennial of Protestant missions in Japan, however, brings us one step closer to telling the story of their influence. It is an indispensable read for any scholar of the Meiji era or of Christianity in Japan.

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