

Travel Guides, Travelers and Guides: Meiji Period Globetrotters and the Visualization of Japan

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Abstract

With the opening of Japan during the Bakumatsu and Meiji periods, travelers poured into the country, eager to experience for themselves a culture that had previously been, until only recently, entirely closed to them. The end of Japanese exclusion also corresponded with the beginning of large-scale international tourism. The “globetrotting” international traveler became a feature of Meiji Japan, and while these travelers were being introduced to Japan by native Japanese guides, some of them produced first-person narratives of their experiences here which subsequently served as guides for readers back home. These narratives were illustrated with images that helped to create a visual culture that dominated Western impressions of Japan. The following is a partial transcript of the keynote address given at the Japan Association for Interpreting and Translation Studies’ 15th annual conference held on September 13th 2014, which looked at English-language guidebooks for foreign travelers to Japan during the Meiji Period. The visual record illustrating other travel narratives – from circumnavigators like cyclist Thomas Stevens and rival journalists Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland, to photojournalist Herbert G. Ponting, and children’s fiction author Edward Greedy – was also considered.

Introduction

Today, I’d like us to consider a particular set of visual images: those that can be found in the travel narratives of foreign travelers who came to Japan during the Meiji Period. The reason I’m interested in these travelogues is because, in an age before the lavishly illustrated travel guides that we know today, they functioned as guides to readers around the world, helping readers visualize Japan, and helping them form a distinctive image of Japan, one that was, for the most part, picturesque and peaceful, safe and tranquil, traditional and unchanging, and finally, gracefully feminine. While this image wasn’t a false one, it wasn’t entirely full either, overlooking as it did other aspects that also characterized Meiji Japan, namely its breathtakingly speedy modernization, industrialization and militarization.

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As with any journey we will meet some fascinating travelers along the way: a small, sickly woman with hidden reserves of strength; another woman in love with cherry blossoms; two ladies racing each other around the world, and another circumnavigator making his journey in a particularly unusual sort of way; finally, we'll meet a photographer about to embark on one of the most spectacular failures of the early 20th century. Through their visual record, perhaps it is possible to see Japan as they saw it, or rather as they wanted us to see it.

Guidebooks



Thomas Cook's first guided tour in 1841 began what I think we can call the age of large-scale commercial travel. By the 1880s, it was in full swing, and a traveler interested in foreign travel could choose from a number of different travel guides, some focusing on particular destinations, and others providing more general advice. Thomas Knox's *How to Travel* definitely fell into the second category, offering "hints, advice and suggestions to travelers by land and sea all over the globe." Although Knox meant to give general advice, his book turned out to be both wide-ranging and remarkably specific. It had chapters on "Traveling with Camels and Elephants," "Traveling with Reindeer and Dogs," and, particularly pertinent to Japan, "Traveling with Man-power – Palankeens, Jinirikishas, and Sedan Chairs." He even

had a helpful chapter titled "Traveling Without Money – Round the World for \$50." (Knox, 1881). This can only be matched by Robert Luce's tips, in his 1897 book *Going Abroad? Some Advice*, on how to rent an apartment in Paris for \$180 a year.

For much of the Meiji Period, the *sine qua non* of travel in Japan, for English speakers at least, was Murray's *Handbook*. The John Murray publishing house dominated English-language travel literature throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. Beginning in 1891, the handbooks were co-authored by the noted Japan specialist, Basil Hall Chamberlain. As we can see from the pages introducing Atsuta Shrine and Nagoya, the handbooks were text-heavy, somewhat daunting perhaps to a 21st century globetrotter accustomed to travel guides with luscious, glossy illustrations – illustrations so enticing that they might leave the unsuspecting traveler somewhat underwhelmed when standing in front of the real thing.

Advertisement for MEIDI-YA, featuring text such as 'Provision and Wine Merchant', 'The Japan Brewery Company, Ltd.', and 'The Lowest Market Rates'.

Tsurukichi, a well-respected translator, interpreter and guide in his day. Early in Ito's career he played a prominent role in this book, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: An Account of Travels in the Interior Including Visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrines of Nikkō and Isé* by Isabella Bird.

Isabella Bird

Two words that often come up when reading about Isabella Bird are intrepid and indomitable. These are not two words, however, that one might associate with her when simply looking at her. She was rather short and plump; actually, she was rather unassuming. She was born in Scotland in 1831, and throughout her life she was bothered by health problems. When she was 19 she had spinal surgery, which, in the age before anesthetic, must have been fairly ghastly. At one point she complained of suffering from

neuralgia, pain in my bones, prickly pins and needles in my limbs, excruciating nervousness, exhaustion, sore throat, swelling of the glands behind each ear and stupidity.

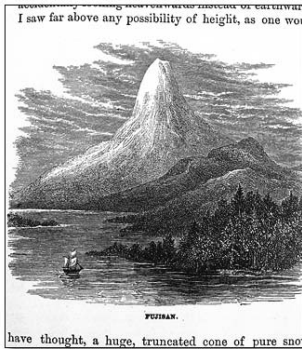
The usual remedy for these ailments is not to travel around the world. But that's exactly what she did. When her doctor recommended that she go abroad, perhaps expecting that she would go relax at a spa on the continent, Isabella Bird set out, and became one of the most intrepid and indomitable travelers of the 19th century.

The moment she set foot on the first steamer that would carry her abroad, she set her life in a pendulum swing that would alternate between frailty and fortitude. At home, where she was bound by the gender restrictions and expectations that encumbered most Victorian women, she was frail, sickly and the list of her ailments seemed to go on and on; but when she was on a boat heading for parts unknown, she usually started to perk up. An obituary put it more succinctly, calling her "an invalid at home; a Samson abroad."

She turned her travels into books. She published over fifteen of them. They became some of the best selling travel literature in history, making her a celebrity at home. Her lectures drew audiences numbering in the thousands, a fact that the Royal Geographical Society couldn't overlook when considering to take her on as member. The move was remarkably controversial, though. Naysayers couldn't countenance the possibility of allowing a woman -- a *woman!* -- into the hallowed halls of the society. She was finally made a member in 1892, the first woman ever to be accepted as a member. The naysayers had their way after she died, however, and another woman would not be accepted into the Royal Geographical Society until 20 years later, in a new century.

She climbed Mauna Loa, the tallest volcano in the Sandwich Islands, now Hawaii, making her only the second woman to do so in history; she trekked over 8000 miles through China, and was almost killed by an

angry mob in Peking; she fell in love with a one-eyed desperado in Colorado. She also travelled from Yokohama to Hokkaido the hard way: on “unbeaten tracks.”



Foreign tourism to Japan was at the time a very recent development. The treaty port at Yokohama had opened to foreign trade less than twenty years earlier, in 1859. Initially, foreigners in the treaty ports were almost exclusively diplomats, merchants and sailors. Rapidly, however, their ranks swelled to include a new breed of traveler: the "globetrotter": international travelers with time to spare and money to spend. These travelers were excited to experience the newly opened Japan. At first the movement of foreigners was restricted to the treaty ports and their immediate surroundings. In 1874, however, the new Meiji government opened the entire country to any foreign traveler with a passport. Most foreign travelers, however, didn't stray beyond well-traveled routes, or "beaten tracks", as Bird put it. Destinations along these paths included Tokyo and Nikko close to Yokohama and further afield, along the Tokaido, Kyoto, Nara and Osaka.

Bird's plan was somewhat more ambitious. Her plan was to travel the “unbeaten tracks” of Japan, from Yokohama, through the northern parts of Honshu and then to Hokkaido, making her the first non-Japanese woman ever to do so.

Bird arrived in Japan on May 21st, 1878. Her first encounter with Mt. Fuji left a deep impression:

For long I looked in vain for Fujisan, and failed to see it, though I heard ecstasies all over the deck, till, accidentally looking heavenwards instead of earthwards, I saw far above any possibility of height, as one would have thought, a huge, truncated cone of pure snow... from which it sweeps upwards in a glorious curve, very wan, against a very pale blue sky, with its base and the intervening country veiled in a pale grey mist. It was a wonderful vision, and shortly, as a vision, vanished (Bird, 1880).

This is one of the first illustrations in her book, showing readers a strangely conical Mt. Fuji. Bird correctly refers to it as “Fuji-san,” although in the coming years the term “Fuji-yama” would also become common among foreigners. Mt. Fuji, of course, became one of those images indelibly associated with Japan itself, and one that would contribute to its image of picturesque tranquility. In Bird's account it seems almost magical, appearing and then disappearing again.

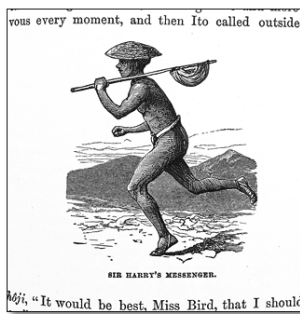
With the help of James Curtis Hepburn, long-time resident of Japan and father of the Hepburn system of romanizing Japanese, Bird interviewed candidates to be her interpreter and guide. Many were rejected

due to their poor English. Of the three remaining possibilities, one was rejected because he was too much of a dandy, another seemed to reject Bird when he understood where she wanted to go, and a third might have been chosen had a young man not arrived suddenly without an appointment or references.

Bird's first meeting with Ito was inauspicious:

He is only eighteen, but this is the equivalent of twenty-three or twenty-four with us, and only 4 feet 10 inches in height, but, though bandy-legged, is well proportioned and strong-looking. He has a round and singularly plain face, good teeth, much elongated eyes, and the heavy droop of the eyelids almost caricatures the usual Japanese peculiarity. He is the most stupid-looking Japanese that I have ever seen, but from a rapid furtive glance in his eyes now and then, I think that the stolidity is partly assumed (Bird, 1880).

The comments are harsh, particularly to an audience today, and while one can't defend Bird for writing them, perhaps it is possible to consider that she understood the precariousness of the situation that she would be in. She would be Ito's employer, but for much of their journey she would also be entirely at his mercy. In the earliest part of the book, she is often concerned that he will "squeeze" her, or overcharge her for goods and services procured on the road, and then pocket the difference. Her concern comes to the very heart of the relationship between the employer and the guide -- or the translator or the interpreter, for that matter: the issue of trust. Because an employer is often in a position of complete ignorance, he will often wonder -- until proven otherwise -- whether he is being taken advantage of.

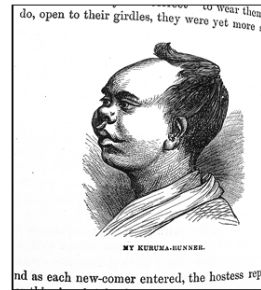


Luckily for Bird, Ito proved to be not only dependable, but invaluable. He always managed to find food as well as lodging for them both. (Although at times neither were ideal: Fleas were a constant problem. In one rural farmhouse where she was lodging, Bird describes snakes that were so fat from eating the plentiful rats that when they slithered up into the ceiling rafters and fell asleep, they would occasionally come tumbling down onto her bed.) They traveled through areas where Japanese had never seen a foreigner, and so dispersing crowds -- which were, to Bird's surprise and relief,

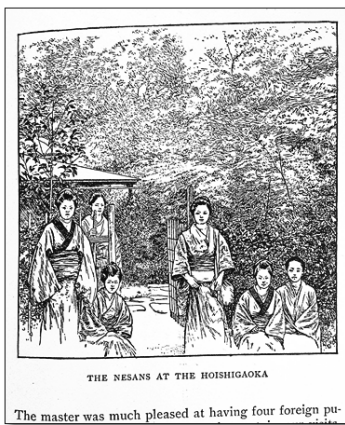
never aggressive -- became one of Ito's important tasks. Some locals, however, proved more difficult to disperse. One elderly gentleman demanded to know whether Bird was a man or a woman because nothing about her appearance could indicate to him which she might be. Another group of children assumed that Ito was the owner of a traveling circus and that Bird was his performing ape.

Throughout the journey, Ito proved himself to be quick-witted, resourceful and energetic. In many ways he was the prototypical "Meiji Man." Bird gives us little information about his background, however,

referring to him only by a single name. Here, I think, is another of the inherent problems with the work of the interpreter-guide or translator: While their role is crucial, they are often expected to do it in the shadows, unseen. At times, it can seem like a thankless job. If we are to assume that this is indeed a picture of Ito, it was obviously taken many years after his association with Isabella Bird. What did he look like when he traveled with Isabella Bird? We will probably never know. Although she provides pictures of the British consul's messenger, and one of her rickshaw drivers, she gives us no picture of Ito, one of the most important players in her story.



Eliza Scidmore



I'll linger here on the *kurumaya* because the *kuruma* or *jinrikisha*, or as it came to be known among foreigners, the rickshaw, became one of those images indelibly associated with Japan throughout the world. Travelers to Japan would invariably ride in them, and they could buy souvenir photos to show friends back home. They could even buy “gag” photos poking fun at the typically Japanese experience.

By the late 19th century, the rickshaw had become so associated with Japan that it functioned as something of a metonym, leaving potential readers of Eliza Scidmore's *Jinrikisha Days* no doubt what sort of travelogue they might be getting themselves into after a simple glance at the title. Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore was born in the state of Iowa in the United States in 1856, and grew up in the state of Wisconsin. Both had been states for only about ten years at the time, and were still really on the frontier of the nation. This, along with the fact that her parents had been missionaries, might have instilled in Scidmore an interest in travel to remote regions. In 1883, at the age of 26, she went to Alaska by mail steamer and the resulting account of her time there, *Alaska, it's Southern Coast and the Sitkan Archipelago*, published in 1885, was the first travelogue to deal with the area and remained a popular guidebook well into the 20th century.

Two years later, in 1885, Scidmore made her first trip to Japan, following her brother, a career diplomat who had been posted here. *Jinrikishaw Days* is the narrative of her travels throughout Japan, along paths somewhat more beaten than the ones Bird traveled.

Although the book is heavily illustrated, featuring over 30 images, for the most part they fall into a fairly narrow set of themes, all of which present Japan as tranquil, peaceful, non-threatening and to a large extent,

feminine. Landscapes, gardens and floral themes predominate. When people are present in the pictures, they are most often women, and those women are most often young. Of the 18 pictures that feature people, 11 feature women, 8 of those exclusively. (We can contrast this with the 8 pictures featuring men, and the 5 that feature men exclusively.) I would suggest that none of the images of women are portraits of particular women, however, but rather they are props, representing female "types": occupations or social positions. (Scidmore, 1891)

If we take a look at the pictures that only feature men, we can find two of them are portraits of gentlemen that Scidmore met and writes about at length in her text. (This is the Kabuki actor Ichikawa Danjuro IX, here referred to as "Danjiro") Others are pictures of either craftspeople or laborers.

The images are interesting as much for what's absent as what's present. We have no portraits, for example, of the political leaders behind the Meiji period catchphrase "*Bunmei Kaika*" and the extraordinary social, cultural and economic transformation that the phrase implied. No pictures of the industrial leaders who fueled the engines behind that transformation; no images of the generals or officers who transformed Japan's army and navy -- in less than a generation -- into the superpower of the region, and not a single picture of even one of the thousands of soldiers who had, less than a decade before the book's publication, marched into China, or the Korean Peninsula, or into the island that we know today as Taiwan, helping to expand the Empire of Japan.

Another surprising omission in *Jinrikisha Days* is that in all the landscapes and pictures of gardens and flowers, there isn't a single picture of a Japanese cherry tree and the blossoms that Scidmore came to love. If she is remembered at all today it is as the woman who brought the *sakura* to Washington DC. After years of lobbying, her efforts finally paid off and a planting ceremony was held on March 27th, 1912. Today over 3700 cherry trees line the Potomac River's Tidal Basin, and attract 1.5 million people to the nation's capital for its annual National Cherry Blossom Festival.



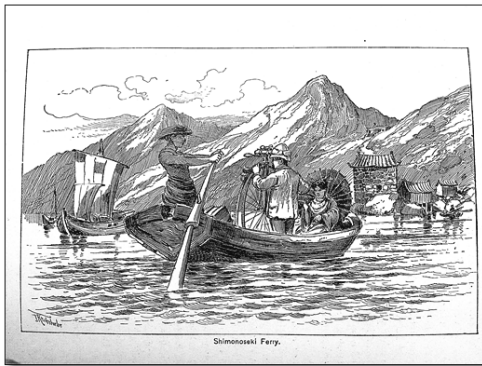
Both Isabella Bird and Eliza Scidmore spent a significant amount of time in Japan during their lives. Two women who came to Japan in 1889 and 1890 stayed only briefly, but were at the center of one of the most talked-about media events of their day. Nelly Bly and Elizabeth Bisland worked for rival New York publications, and were racing each other to circumnavigate the globe, Bly heading east and Bisland heading west. Their story is fascinating but within the parameters of this talk they will be mentioned only in passing because neither of the accounts that the women produced were illustrated. Bly never returned

to Japan, but Bisland did a number of times after having fallen in love with the country and its people. She wrote very lovingly about Japan. Today we remember Bisland perhaps less for her swift circumnavigation than for the fact that she became the editor of her good friend, Lafcadio Hearn's, papers after he died.

Thomas Stevens

Perhaps the winner of the sweepstakes in going around the world in the most unusual manner was Thomas Stevens, who did it on a "penny-farthing." It was two British coins common during the 19th century that, because of their relative dimensions, lent their names to the "penny-farthing" or "high-wheeler" bicycle. Stevens' circumnavigation (or as he called it, "circumcycling") of the globe was sponsored by *Outing* magazine which had been founded to popularize exercise, sporting and bicycling and the healthy lifestyles that they were believed to promote.

Of course Stevens couldn't simply ride non-stop around the world. At times he had to use his penny-farthing to help him pole-vault over small bodies of water. Larger bodies of water, like oceans, required crossing by boat. But for the most part it was Stevens on his bike.

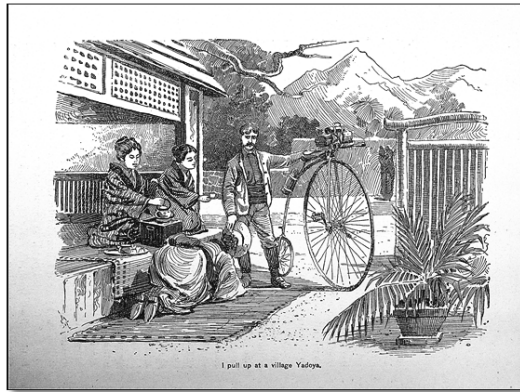


The resulting account of his travels, *Around the World on a Bicycle*, came out in two volumes: volume one from San Francisco to Teheran and volume two from Teheran to Yokohama.

On the cover of Volume Two we have a figure, perhaps an idealized image of the author himself, with wings at head and foot signifying him as Mercury, the Greek god of travel and boundary crossing. (Stevens, 1888).

Stevens rode eastward from San Francisco, so he came to Japan at the very end his journey. It was a fortunate way to finish because he adored Japan. "Happy people! Happy Country!" he exclaims at one point. He helps his reader visualize Japan by providing illustrations that show it as, again, peaceful, picturesque and feminine. Here we have Stevens riding a ferry in Shimonoseki with a young kimono-clad woman, her Japanese parasol echoing the round wheel of his penny-farthing. Another image shows him leaving his inn, and another racing the ubiquitous rickshaw, with a young Japanese woman looking on.

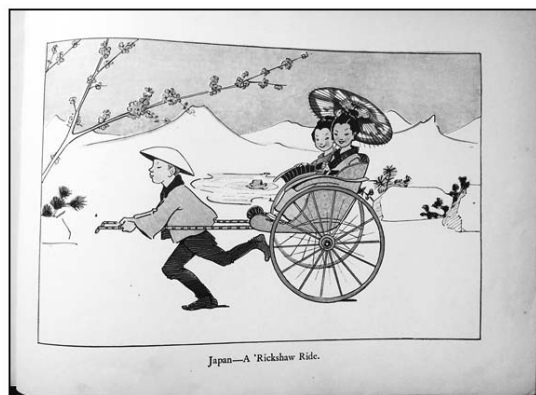
The apotheosis of the penny-farthing on the cover of Stevens' book is ironic in that by the time the book was published in 1888, the penny-farthing was already becoming something of an anachronism -- the reason being that they were incredibly dangerous to ride. The power is applied directly to the pedals of the large front wheel, demanding that the rider's center of gravity is almost directly above the front axle.



This means that any bump or obstacle in the road (if there is a road) that stops the bicycle will send the rider flying over the handlebars. A fall off a penny-farthing usually meant that a rider would land on his or her face, and that could be (and often was) fatal. In the mid-1880s the “safety” bicycle began to be popular. It had the important innovation of a bicycle chain, which allowed the rider to sit back at a safer distance from the front wheel, the handlebars and a face-landing. The safety bicycle soon replaced its predecessor in popularity and the penny-farthing quickly faded into history, a symbol of a bygone age.

Edward Greey

Around the world, children in the late 19th century could learn about Japan at an early age, and the images used to help them visualize Japan were many of the same images we have looked at today. In her 1898 children's book *All the World Over*, Edith Farmiloe introduces Japan with familiar images: young kimono-clad women, holding parasols and riding in a rickshaw, with a Mt. Fuji-like silhouette in the background (Farmiloe, 1898).



Edward Greey was the author of a number of books for young people featuring Japan. He was an Englishman who came to Japan with the first official British delegation under Lord Elgin in 1855, and after that served on the diplomatic staff of the British consul. So he was very familiar with Japan and Japanese culture. It's curious, however, that in the introduction of his book *Young Americans in Japan*, he suggests that he is an American and was with Commodore Perry's mission when the United States first made contact with Japan in 1853. Perhaps this isn't entirely surprising considering that at the time of the book's

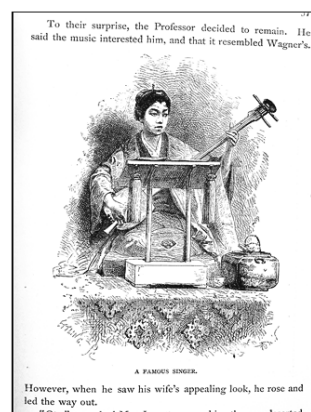
publication that Greey had relocated to New York and had established himself as a Japanese art dealer. Perhaps he felt that introducing readers to Japan through his books would allow him to introduce new customers to his business. To further bolster his credentials as a "Japan hand", Greey signs his name in kanji characters.



Greey's *Young Americans in Japan* is different from the other works considered here because it's a work of fiction. It's a fictionalized travelogue following the Jewett family from the United States to Japan, where they travel from Nagasaki to Tokyo and where the father of the clan eventually takes up a teaching position. They're guided on their journey through western Japan by this fellow, their Japanese friend Oto Nambo, who has until recently been studying medicine in the United States. This narrative convention allows Greey first to introduce aspects of Japan and its culture through the eager and curious eyes of the family, and then allows him to provide an explanation through the Nambo character. In the process, Nambo becomes a rather intriguing character. He is a westernized Japanese who is nonetheless enthusiastic for his American friends to understand Japan and learn to love it (Greey, 1882).



The book is extensively illustrated and I think this served two important purposes for Greey. First, a heavily illustrated book was expected to sell better than one that was not. The illustrations served another important purpose, however, and that was to help Greey



construct his narrative. He went about writing the story in a rather unusual way: Instead of writing the story and then finding appropriate illustrations that could accompany the text, Greey first would find images from a variety of different sources and then write the story around those images.

The source Greey most often lifted from was Aime Humbert's *Le Japon illustre*, published originally in French in 1870, and later translated into English as *Japan and the Japanese Illustrated* in 1874. For example, we have this illustration from *Young Americans in Japan*, of "A Famous Singer." Here is

Humbert's original. It shows a woman playing a shamisen. In Greey's story it accompanies a passage in which the family goes to see this famous entertainer. The children find the performance amusing, the mother finds it distressing, but the father is intrigued by it, commenting that the music reminds him of Richard Wagner (Greey, 1882).

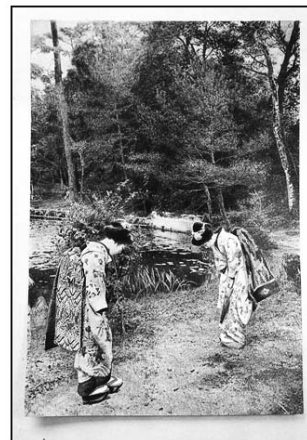
Another illustration Greey appropriated directly from Humbert was "Streets of Tokio, New Year's Afternoon." As he did with the picture of the shamisen player, Greey has not only reprinted the illustration, but he has completely recontextualized it. In Humbert, it simply illustrates a holiday street scene. In Greey's story, however, it describes the boisterous scene outside the family's new home.

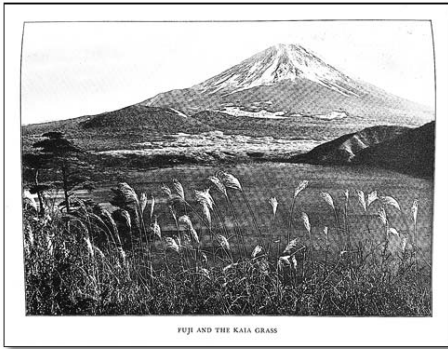
Another source Humbert borrowed from was the Bakumatsu Period photographer, Felice Beato. For example, Beato's "Betto", or groom became in the Greey's story the family's grooms, taking care of the horses. Initially, the children of the family are concerned, mistaking their tattoos for some sort of terrible skin disease.

Herbert Ponting

We will conclude by moving from Felice Beato, one of Japan's first professional photographers, to Herbert Ponting, who was already quite famous as a photographer when he came to Japan at the end of the Meiji Period. By his own account, he stayed in Japan for three years during which time he had taken enough photographs to fill two small volumes: *Fujisan* and *Japanese Studies*; and one much longer volume, *In Lotus-Land Japan*, a book which would become one of his most successful. On the cover we can see two of his favorite Japanese subjects: Mt. Fuji, and a young Japanese women. Of the 107 photographs reproduced in *In Lotus-Land Japan*, eight are full-color, and-in plates. Over half feature young kimono-clad Japanese women, and 17 are focused specifically on Mt. Fuji (Ponting, 1910).

Although Ponting doesn't seem to have kept a notebook, his book often describes the lengths he went to in order to achieve the desired effect in particular pictures. In this photo, "Fuji and the Kaia Grass," there were two elements that Ponting felt were critical to getting the composition just right: Mt. Fuji had to be unobscured by clouds and the grass in front had to be perfectly still so as not to appear blurred. A consummate perfectionist, Ponting writes that it took him over a dozen trips back and forth from the nearest village before he could take this picture of a cloudless Mt. Fuji resting on the still grass in the foreground.





Like many artists before and after, Ponting was obsessed by Mt. Fuji. He provides pictures of it alone, from Lake Shoji, Lake Motosu and from the waterfalls at Shira-ito.

Another picture, featuring young women holding Japanese umbrellas and riding in rickshaws, required that Ponting ask two of his *kurumaya* to block either side of this road while he was setting up and taking the photograph. Apparently, the

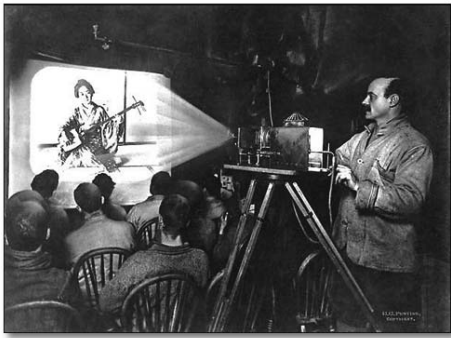
increasingly agitated crowds at each end of the street attracted the attention of the police who told him that he was obstructing traffic, and would he kindly stop, and who then imposed a fine on him, his *kurumaya* and the young women. Ponting writes that he paid all of the fines and that the total came to only six shillings.

Interestingly, the day that *In Lotus-Land Japan* was published, Ponting set out on an expedition that in many ways defined his career. He had been asked by Robert Falcon Scott to be the official photographer of the “Terra Nova Expedition,” to the Antarctic, which had an official goal of scientific exploration, but which was also, unofficially, considered to be a race to the South Pole. During this expedition, Ponting created some of the most strikingly beautiful images of the Antarctic ever put on film. He never made it to the South Pole, which, as it turned out, was fortunate. When Scott and his team finally did make it to the Pole they found out that they had been beaten there by the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Increasingly inclement weather conditions and physical debilitation also prevented their return. Scott and his team are presumed to have died in Antarctica in March of 1912.



Scott’s death came at the end of what many call the “Heroic Age of Arctic Exploration.” Soon the world would be engulfed in a war that would call into question the very idea of heroes. In the summer of 1912, the Emperor Meiji died, bringing to an end his eponymous era.

The final image presented here is of Herbert Ponting entertaining the members of the Scott expedition aboard the Terra Nova with a “magic lantern” (an early projector) presentation of his photos from Japan. In many ways this image embodies much of what has been discussed here. It is a picture of a traveler becoming a guide. For a group of men heading toward the stark and inhospitable South Pole, Ponting’s



interpretation of a tranquil and gentle Japan must have seemed like an alluring vision indeed. For us today, who know their fate, it is all the more poignant.

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