

Interview of Meredith McKinney by Kathy Kituai

Travels With a Writing Brush is the sort of book you take to a favourite place to read, along with a thermos of tea, and settle in to turn each page leisurely. The term 'slow cooking' is familiar with most of us, but how often do we indulge in 'slow reading'? I'm sitting on a bench in the Australian Botanic Gardens, and explain to Meredith McKinney, the author of this book that this is how I am reading hers.

'That's the way I wrote it,' she exclaims, 'Slowly. It took seven years to translate and collate. I couldn't move to the next story until I could let go the one I'd just written.'

It stands to reason that to translate travel literature in a book that spans a thousand years --- from the Manyoshu period to Basho --- could take a long time. Her book is well researched, contains miniature essays prior to each chapter, a smorgasbord of maps, illustrations, glossary, index, translations notes and an introduction. Meredith is no stranger to research and translation. She studied at the Australian National University, 1969 - 1973, has a PhD on Saigyō Hoshi (1118 -90) and nineteen books of translation to her name. As well as *Travels With a Writing Brush*, Meredith's translation for Penguin Classics include *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon, *Essays in Idleness* and *Hojoki* by Kenko and Chomei, and two novels by Natsume Soseki.

'What are you up to in the book,' she asks. 'Are you dipping into it or reading chronologically?'

I read Manyoshu (first entry) followed by Bashō's diary (the last), but the real enjoyment is in the reading of each extract in order of time.

'As it happened in real life.' That's how she wrote it. 'Are you up to Sogi and the account of his death?'

At this point, I shuffle through my notebook, find what I'd written on *The Death of Sogi by Socho*, and read it to her: 'This, above all of the entries I've read thus far, bought me to tears. I really sobbed and sobbed --- and felt I'd journeyed with them. Time did not exist as I read.'

Snap! She's nodding as she looks at me. 'It's as if I wrote his death with my own words.'

Like Meredith, touched by the account of Sogi's death, I defy anyone reading his confession of shame at not being an elite poet, not to be moved. He was an adored poet, yet this bothered him.

We read in the introduction: 'My own translations attempt to honour the literary qualities of the writing, while simultaneously aiming as far as possible to remain faithful to the linguist level of the text'. A high standard, indeed, to set.

'It was hard. I don't write poetry.' She shifts in her chair, settles into a more comfortable position. 'Translating you have to have a feel for language and translating is *all to do* with language ... it's almost impossible to translate Japanese poetry into English. English requires a subject. But you don't have a subject in Japanese ... there is no 'I' ... and this is where the difficulty lies. Translating haiku into English requires an 'I'. You virtually have to pull the poem apart the way you would a jigsaw puzzle, and try to put it back together again.'

I'm impressed. Her passion is refreshing. 'Is this because it's in a another language or because it's written in Japanese?'

'Because it is Japanese.' We both laugh. The way travel is approached by the Japanese is not the way it is experienced or understood in the west.

'What I tried to do was put readers into the position of what it is like to travel outside our cultural expectations. We are taught (in the west) to bring everything back to *me*,' and she points to herself to make her meaning clear. 'I wanted readers to move beyond the known ... beyond anything they have ever experienced. I had a growing concern when I began to put this book together because ... (she pauses) ... as much as I searched for reasons as to why classical Japanese poets and those in the west travelled, for the love of me I couldn't find anything they had in common.'

Meredith travels a lot to Japan. What draws her there?

'That's easy – I lived in Japan during most of the time between 1974 and 1998. Every time I go back, I'm returning home.'

Sadly this is getting harder the more time passes. Japan is changing. What I seek is no longer there.'

Has she taken any of the journeys in this book? And if so, did she do that in order to deepen each account while translating them?

'Yes I did many years ago, but not just in order to write. I love old roads. Many of these roads don't exist anymore.'

We view Tokaido through the eyes of twelve-year-old Sugawara no Takasue's daughter, when it was little more than a rugged track, not the super expressway it is today. This and indeed every extract in *Travels With a Writing Brush*, are all the more important because they record the way Japan was so long ago.

Was writing this book also a journey of sorts? And was she lonely while putting it together?

'I don't know what loneliness is ... even though I didn't have anyone to talk to about the book as I wrote. The essence is not only about solitary travel but the sociability poets sought and enjoyed ... renga (communal linked verse) for instance ... the joy they experienced in making a poem together. That was most unexpected.'

Reading *Travels With a Writing Brush*, takes us beyond our expectations. Was there anything she would do differently now that the book is published?

'Yes, I'd take fourteen years to write it, not seven. ... I'd like to have written more fully about Noin.'

As numerous and vast as are the research books available at the Australian National Library, the information needed to write a fuller account on Noin's travels would have to be sought elsewhere.

'Actually', she adds, 'I'd like to do it all over again, it was such an enjoyable process to undergo'.