

Modern  
Japanese  
Diaries

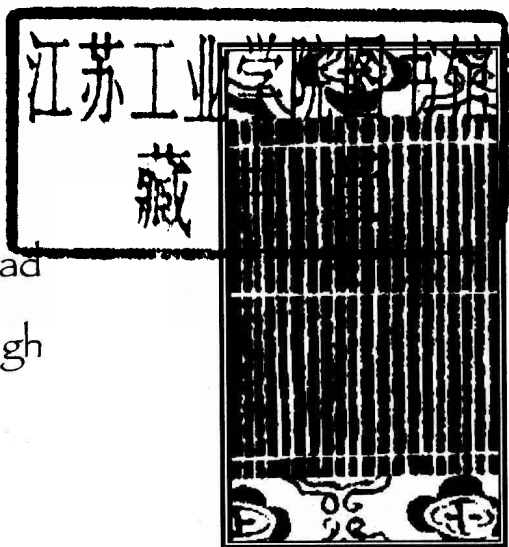
"This is an  
outstanding  
exploration of  
Japanese diaries."  
—*The New Yorker*

THE JAPANESE AT HOME AND ABROAD AS REVEALED THROUGH THEIR DIARIES

Donald Keene  
AUTHOR OF DAWN TO THE WEST

# Modern Japanese Diaries

The Japanese  
at Home and Abroad  
as Revealed Through  
Their Diaries



*Donald Keene*

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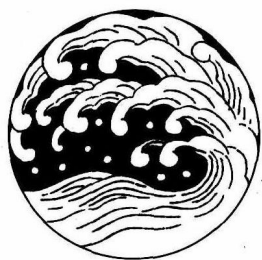
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## Preface

**T**he essays on Japanese diaries contained in this book originally appeared in the *Asahi Shimbun* four or five times a week for somewhat over a year. The pace of publication was hectic and, inevitably, errors crept into my text. In preparing the English version, I have taken advantage of the opportunity to correct those that I spotted.

The text is essentially the same as the one which appeared in Japanese, though I have not hesitated to add information that I thought might be helpful to readers unfamiliar with Japan and the Japanese. My account of any one of the diaries can be read independently, but various themes (such as travel abroad) link the different diaries and impart, I believe, a certain unity to personal accounts by men and women who wrote under strikingly different circumstances.

I have followed throughout the Japanese practice of calling people by their surnames followed by their personal names, rather than in normal Western order; but there is unfortunately a problem involved in this usage. Many writers were known by their literary names (*gō*), rather than by either their surnames or the names by which their mothers called them. I have referred to writers in the

way followed by Japanese today, rather than attempt to impose uniformity. Thus, Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai are called Sōseki and Ōgai (Natsume and Mori alone would be unintelligible); but Kume Kunitake and Iwakura Tomomi, who were not literary men (and therefore lacked well-known *gō*), are called by their surnames. I have also followed Japanese practice in referring to women who did not have a *gō* by their personal names, rather than their surnames. All this is confusing, I realize, but I believe it is preferable to follow Japanese usage, rather than impose alien ideas of order.

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## Introduction

I have used the word “modern” in this book to describe the diaries written by Japanese between, roughly, 1860 and 1920. Diaries of this period tend to cluster into groups written under similar circumstances. The journeys to America and Europe of various Japanese during the 1860s, the last years of the shogun’s rule, are very similar, regardless of how greatly the personalities of the diarists differed. Several diaries even have identical titles such as *Kōsai Nikki* (Diary of a Voyage to the West). Other diaries cluster around such events as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, or the Pacific War of 1941–45. Still others relate to the settlement of Hokkaidō or the assertion of Japanese control over the Ryūkyū Islands. All the diaries share a feature not true of many diaries of earlier times: because they were faithfully kept day-to-day, they rarely falsify the facts for literary reasons.

Even a diary that is intended to be no more than a truthful account may, however, contain fiction. Nothing prevents a diarist from changing an entry after the fact, or adding material with hopes of making the diary more easily publishable. For example, the principal diaries by Masaoka Shiki were published serially in a newspaper, and

he no doubt felt obliged to maintain a constant level of interest, even if this involved some fabrication. Again, various authorities doubt that the diary of Nagai Kafū, published after the conclusion of the Pacific War, was what he actually wrote in 1941-45; it would have been easy for him, if he so chose, to add expressions of hatred for the military once militarism had been rejected by the mass of Japanese.

It is hard for a person with literary gifts to keep from improving on the truth even when relating something that happened that day, and the temptation to embellish is all the greater when he describes the events in his diary. He may relate events that never really occurred, simply because life is generally not as artistic as the artist might desire. But even if we can demonstrate that certain diary entries must be untruthful, they may nevertheless reveal much about the diarist: as products of his imagination, they are certainly more important than the weather and other more mundane aspects of everyday life.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the ladies of the Japanese court kept diaries, often because they had no friend in whom they could confide. They were also, whether they realized it or not, addressing readers of future times, and lending immortality to events that would otherwise have disappeared without a trace. Courtiers of the time kept diaries for quite a different reason, to record events at court with a view to providing their descendants with information about precedents and other important matters. By the nineteenth century, however, the writing of diaries had become so common a feature of Japanese life as to require no special explanation. Most people kept diaries simply in order not to forget what they did on a certain day, perhaps with the vague expectation that in old age they would reread the diaries and enjoy the experiences afresh. Ishikawa Takuboku, the author of several of the most remarkable diaries of the modern period, declared in one of them, "Writing a diary is extremely interesting. It is interesting when one is actually writing it, but when one reads it again years later the interest is all the greater."

Takuboku had at least two other reasons for keeping diaries. The first was that he needed someone to talk to, and the diary served as a kind of audience for his perceptions. He grew up in a remote village in the north of Japan. The education he received there was surprisingly good, but as his intellectual interests deepened, he felt a distance separating him from the other inhabitants of Shibutami village, and this made him lonely. He wrote, "Shibutami is an out-of-the-way village, with not even a hundred houses, in the wilds of Michinoku. It is an extremely backward place where there is almost no one with whom to talk about poetry, a haunt of country bumpkins without one redeeming feature apart from its splendid natural scenery."<sup>1</sup>

Unable to discuss poetry and other matters that absorbed him with his friends in Shibutami, Takuboku turned to his diary for company. In general, the greater the alienation he felt from his surroundings, the more moving his diary becomes. But it took time, perhaps several hours on some days, to write his extensive diary entries, and in later years Takuboku was (consciously or not) faced with the choice of whether to express his emotions fully in his diary or to write poetry instead. In his last years, when he chose poetry, his diary was neglected, and the entries were no longer very interesting.

Takuboku had another reason for keeping a diary. As a modern man, living in an age when literature had increasingly become a commodity, he sometimes thought of his diary as raw material from which he would someday fashion works of literature. This use of the diary or journal is familiar in Europe, but I cannot recall an earlier Japanese example. Takuboku in fact wrote several stories in which he employed materials from his diary. In every instance the stories are less affecting than the diary.

Finally, on occasion Takuboku attempted to publish sections of his diary either as originally written or after giving the text some literary embellishments. This use of the diary was also new, but it soon became common in Japan, especially among writers of naturalist fiction. In this way the diary acquired new functions which it still retains.

It is harder to understand why many nonliterary people of Takuboku's time also kept extensive diaries. A few important statesmen recorded in their diaries private information that they could not openly disclose. They seem to have expected that historians would read their diaries; but many other diarists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recorded almost nothing more exciting than descriptions of the weather, or names of visitors and of people from whom they received letters. Only a scholar who was desperately searching for clues into the life of a particular person would find interest in these diaries. Why, we are likely to wonder, should busy men have spent hours each day writing down facts that might just as well have been forgotten?

The impetus to keep diaries went back to old Japanese traditions. It was as natural for these people to keep diaries as it is for Japanese today to take group photographs as souvenirs of an occasion. Whenever I travel in Japan I know in advance that such photographs will be taken, and sooner or later I will receive copies. They are occasionally useful when I try to recall the faces of people who have been helpful to me during a lecture tour, but what is one to do with all the photographs that accumulate in thirty years? And how is one to keep one's attention focused on a diary that covers thirty years if it is written in the factual style favored by most diarists? As I read such diaries, I always entertain hopes of making a discovery, and it sometimes does happen: after wading through page after page of boring details of daily life, each page as unmemorable as a group photograph of strangers, I will suddenly encounter something of exceptional literary or human interest. Those are the unpredictable moments that make the reading of diaries particularly exciting and exceptionally interesting.

My greatest pleasure in the diaries I have selected for consideration in this book has been the individual voice of the diarist. I have tried always to detect something that comes from the writer's heart, some statement that (even if inartistically expressed) makes me feel I

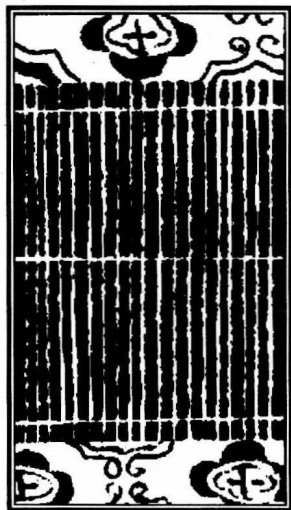
know the author and could recognize him or her even in a group photograph; and knowing one person well can sometimes make it possible also to know the world he or she lived in.

## Notes

1. Diary entry for March 4, 1906.



*The  
Early  
Missions  
to  
Foreign  
Countries*







## Diary of a Voyage to America

**T**he most important event of modern Japanese history, it goes without saying, was the opening of the country after more than two hundred years of isolation. This event is often discussed in terms of the arrival of foreigners in Japan, either as diplomats or merchants living in concessions in Nagasaki, Yokohama, and elsewhere. But even more important in terms of Japanese history is the fact that some people were given permission to go abroad, as members of diplomatic missions or as students of foreign learning.

A small number of Japanese had gone abroad even during the period of isolation. Most of them went involuntarily: they were fishermen whose ships were caught in a storm and driven to the corners of the Pacific. A few of the shipwrecked men were found by the Russians in Kamchatka and the Aleutian Islands and taken to Siberia. The Russians, eager for trade with Japan, had established a Japanese language school in Irkutsk at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the school depended on Japanese castaways for teachers. On several occasions the Russians attempted to "open" the country by returning castaways to Japan, but without success. The most