

BOOK REVIEWS

My Korea: 40 Years Without a Horsehair Hat. By Kevin O'Rourke. Folkestone, Kent, England: Renaissance Books, 2013. 314 pp. (ISBN: 9781898823094)

For anyone who may wonder what South Korea was like before “the birth of Korean cool” (a review by this writer of Euny Hong’s book so titled appears in the previous issue of *Acta Koreana*), *My Korea* is an excellent resource. If you’ve ever read traditional Korean literature in English translation, you’ll know Kevin O’Rourke as our finest all-around translator—prose and poetry, past and present—as well as a gifted poet in his own right.

The subtitle refers to the gauzelike headgear that no Korean gentleman in olden times would be caught without. And O’Rourke is being modest—he’s actually logged fifty years in the Land of the Morning Calm, albeit spending summers on the southeast shore of his native Ireland. That O’Rourke lacked the horsehair hat may suggest at first glance that he felt like a stranger in a strange land. In fact he “discovered very early that Korea gets in the blood.” And the lifeblood of this literary memoir is poetry—poems by O’Rourke himself and numerous translations he’s done over the decades, of vernacular lyrics as well as poetry in Chinese written by Koreans (*hansŭ*) spanning 1500 years—by my count well over 200 works, more than enough to justify the inclusion of *My Korea* among assigned texts for any university course involving Korean literature, culture, or civilization. The book contains story translations as well—that of Pak Chiwŏn’s eighteenth-century “Hŏ saeng chŏn” is especially lively—along with anecdotes ranging back to 1964, the year young O’Rourke arrived in Korea as a Columban father.

In 1982 O’Rourke became the first foreigner to earn a Ph.D. in Korean literature from a Korean university. He subsequently taught at Kyunghee University in Seoul. But the book is less about his professional life and more about his life of engagement with the heart and soul of Korea. Ironically, then, the

longest chapter in the book, stretching out to eighty-seven pages, concerns “The Confucian Monolith,” by which O’Rourke means the half-millennium Chosŏn period, in which neo-Confucianism was the orthodox ideology. Ironic because neo-Confucian orthodoxy “inculcated a way of life that eschewed passion. Reason was the supreme faculty; imagination (also feeling and sensation) was suspect. The emergence of a rigid moralism was inevitable. It affected every aspect of life, and continues to do so to the present day.”

Fortunately there was a remedy in place—*hŭng*, which O’Rourke defines as “excitement generated by the apprehension of beauty.” It is this excitement that flows through *My Korea* from the first chapter (about life in Korea in the 1960s) to the last (about O’Rourke’s engagement with the Korean language). And fortunately there were writers, ranging from Yi Kyubo in the Koryŏ period (918–1392) to Sŏ Chŏngju in the twentieth century, who refused to be bound by neo-Confucian constraints. The frequent banishments to which Korean literati were subjected by kings swayed by factional competition for favor liberated the imaginations of men like Yun Sŏndo, author of the *sijo* cycle *The Fisherman’s Calendar*—one of O’Rourke’s finest achievements as a translator. The professional entertaining women known as *kisaeng* left us with poignant *sijo* that sing of lives that offered emotional freedom but not necessarily security. And earlier, before the Chosŏn period, we have songs from the Koryŏ period (918–1392), such as “Spring Pervades the Pavilion,” that are as passionate as anything from modern Korea. These poems and songs fill the pages of *My Korea*.

Of special interest is the chapter on “Korea’s Greatest Asset”—its women, who are “beautiful, fearless, and intensely loyal.” Until very recently women’s voices were virtually absent from the patriarchal tradition of Korean recorded literature (as opposed to Korea’s oral tradition, which remains viable primarily because of women’s voices). Today it is women who dominate Korean fiction and a woman, Kim Hye-sun, who is by far the most imaginative poet in Korea. And it is in large part female idol groups who are driving the international success of K-Pop music, a new-millennium manifestation of the venerable performance tradition that is the essence of Korean oral literature.

Lest prospective readers think they are in for a sentimental journey through an idealized landscape, O’Rourke is quick to point out, in the introduction to the volume, that “the Korea I know and love has mixed liberal doses of the ugly with the beautiful.” In this context he cites the late Pak Wansŏ, one of the most beloved of modern Korean writers, who in her works painted an unvarnished portrait of her society as well as the alter ego protagonist of her autobiographical fiction. The choice is apt in that testimony rings as true in *My Korea* as it does in the stories of this most testimonial of contemporary Korean fiction writers.

Especially sobering is the paragraph in chapter 2 on the “martyrs”—the Columbans who lost their lives during the Korean War, including three victims of the 1950 massacres in Taejŏn whose remains have yet to be recovered.

We have to go back to 1964, and the publication of *Korean Works and Days* by Richard Rutt, an Episcopalian clergyman and also a translator of note, to find a memoir of similar scope and significance by a Western resident in Korea. If you like what you read and hear in *My Korea*, you’re in luck: help yourself next to one of the dozens of book-length publications of O’Rourke’s translations—his most recent, *The Book of Korean Poetry: Chosŏn Dynasty* (2014), earned him the 2017 Daesan Foundation Translation Award—and feel for yourself the metaphorical tug on the string of your fishing pole.

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