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Off the beaten track with Isabella Bird

Nonfiction

Isabella Bird and Japan: A Reassessment
Kiyonori Kanasaka
Translated by Nicholas Pertwee
256 pages
RENAISSANCE BOOKS

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Isabella Bird was a tenacious traverser of continents, prolific Victorian era writer and the first woman awarded membership to the U.K.'s Royal Geographical Society.

Wait, who?

As famous explorers and all-around great names go, Bird's is one that probably never showed up in history class. A shame, because the further you delve into Kiyonori Kanasaka's "Isabella Bird and Japan: A Reassessment," the more you wonder just why Bird is not a household name.

One reason among many that makes Bird so impressive is that the majority of her 1878 trip to Japan took place beyond Tokyo and Yokohama. Thanks to a host of government connections, she was able to visit locations non-Japanese individuals were barred from during a period when international travel was gradually gaining popularity in the West.

"At the time when the 'ordinary' foreigner was not permitted to go outside a 25-mile (40-km) range of five treaty ports and two open cities, Bird went even further out into what was then termed the 'Interior' and accessed Ezo (Hokkaido) and



Isabella Bird's "Travelling Restaurant," from Vol. I, p.17 (Letter D). UNBEATEN TRACKS IN JAPAN VOL. I, AUTHORS COLLECTION

Ainu territory," Kanasaka writes.

Bird trekked all the way from Yokohama to Hokkaido in the midst of summer, recording her experiences in a series of letters to her sister and friends that would eventually become "Unbeaten Tracks in Japan."

If slogging through the heat and humidity wasn't Herculean enough, she was also plagued by poor physical and mental health ailments, present since her childhood. Insomnia, depression and nervous breakdowns were a large part of why doctors suggested she pursue an active, outdoor lifestyle — something Bird clearly took to heart.

Her writings certainly left an impression on Kanasaka. A professor emeritus of geography at Kyoto University, Kanasaka first read a Japanese translation of "Unbeaten Tracks" as a doctoral student in 1973. Since then, he's published his own full Japanese translation of Bird's book and "In the Footsteps of Isabella Bird: Adventures in Twin Time Travel," comprising photos chronicling his globe-trotting quest to retrace her journeys.

In "Reassessment," Kanasaka declares that his goal isn't just to inform readers about Bird, but to challenge previously accepted truths about the explorer and her expedition. The whole thing was less of a wanderlust-inspired romp of happenstance and more of an orchestration of cultural encounters that allowed Bird to experience as many different aspects of Japan as possible.

Attending a wedding was one of the more obvious arrangements, but one occurrence that could easily be breezed past without considering it as anything more than an endearing anecdote was Bird watching children play various games in Ikarigasaki Village in Aomori. The kite flying and *iroha garuta* word card game she observed were traditionally played during winter, not summer when she passed through.

Even the letter format of "Unbeaten Tracks" is a bit of a half truth. Kanasaka comments that it was more of a stylistic choice and it would have been impossible for Bird to actually send the majority of her letters during her journey, not to mention an enormous headache if any went missing.

However, learning this doesn't cheapen or betray any admiration of the expedition.



Above: Isabella Bird's "Fujisan, From a Village on the Tokaido," from Vol. II, p. 307 (Letter L1D). Left: Isabella Bird in a photo taken in July 1896 at A. Farsari & Co. in Yokohama. UNBEATEN TRACKS IN JAPAN VOL. 2, AUTHORS COLLECTION, COLLECTION OF THE NIKKO KANAYA HOTEL



Kanasaka's relentless dedication to details transforms the book's sleepier portions about supply logistics and travel law into an eye-opening foundation for his breakdown of just how much preparation was required on a government-to-individual level to make Bird's journey a success. The whole reading experience is comparable to peeking behind the curtain to find a fuller cast of characters and the forces that revolved around Bird.

Kanasaka's active pursuit of establishing context is extremely heartening, more so because he openly says his research

was conducted on "scientific lines" and avoids trying to examine Bird through lenses such as post-colonialism, cultural studies and feminism. "These methods actually do more to hide the meaning of past events," he argues, "which makes appropriate research that clarifies them all the more necessary."

Bird and her "eagle-eye," as Kanasaka describes it, had two main objectives: collect information about the Japanese in narrative form for her readers and observe possible opportunities for Christian missionaries.

Kanasaka doesn't share his thoughts on her missionary work or the frequent use of "savage" to refer to the Japanese and Ainu people, but his sections on her servant-interpreter Tsurukichi Ito fill that space. Japan was Bird's first trip to a non-English speaking country and although Ito is an invaluable figure, not much is known about him or how his life panned out after accompanying Bird. The sections — much like the rest of the book — feel too brief, but are still satisfying because of the straightforward answers they provide.

Although I don't advise reading "Reassessment" before "Unbeaten Tracks," it's surprisingly accessible. Bird's life oftentimes reads like an adventure story, but learning about its unglamorous technicalities doesn't dim her narrative, it colors it even richer.