



ISABELLA BIRD AND JAPAN:

A Reassessment

by Kiyonori Kanasaka (translated by Nicholas Pertwee)

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■ When Isabella Bird, the 19th century author and traveller, visited the Rocky Mountains in 1873, she fell in love with one Jim Nugent, who was subsequently shot 'by Griff Evans, whom she also knew well from her time there'. We hear no more about Mr Evans, but that's not the end of Nugent, who later appeared to Bird in Switzerland: dressed 'in trapper's dress', he bowed to her and disappeared. Throughout her life, he was constantly on her mind, Kiyonori Kanasaka tells us. 'This is my assumption, based

on... more than 20 years of research... during which I have, as it were, built up a daily correspondence with Isabella.'

It's not unusual for a biographer to identify closely with his subject; in this case, that identification borders on obsession. Which makes for an intriguing read. Bird, by any standards, was an unusual woman: born to a clergyman in North Yorkshire in 1831, she had, we're told, a lively way of expressing herself and an acute social conscience. Both found form in her travel-writing, which made her something of a celebrity, and in 1878 she visited Japan for the first time. Though her stated intention for doing so was that the country possessed 'sources of novel and sustained interest... [to] a solitary health-seeker', Kanasaka is convinced that Bird was directed in her travels by Sir Harry Parkes, the British government's representative in Japan, her mission being to explore the degree to which old customs remained entrenched in the country's interior even while the major cities were absorbing Western influence at an unprecedented rate. His minutely detailed analysis of Bird's Japanese travels in this – one of his many studies of Bird's life and work – will ensure that even the most energetic sceptic willingly concedes his point.

MICK HERRON