

Afterword

Memories of Dr Carmen Blacker OBE, FBA (1924–2009)

On 14 November 2009, I made a short speech at a memorial meeting for the late Dr Carmen Blacker, held in Clare Hall, Cambridge. The programme of the meeting had been arranged affectionately by her husband Dr Michael Loewe, emeritus fellow of the college. As Carmen was a scholar related, in her idiosyncratic way, to Sansai Gakurin and the journal *Sansai*, I wish to share my thoughts about Carmen with *Sansai*'s readers. Here follows — with minor changes for publication — the text of the speech I gave on that occasion.

The news of Carmen's passing from this world reached me by email from Oxford one day later, on 14 July 2009. I received the news from Dr James McMullen, emeritus fellow of Pembroke College.¹ He happens to be in Japan at present, fulfilling a long-standing commitment to give a lecture at Keio, one of the universities where Carmen once studied. I heard that the lecture would be dedicated to Carmen's memory. James was one of Carmen's very early students at Cambridge, as some of you may know. He was a fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford, when I was a graduate student there and became my designated "moral adviser" during my time in Oxford. In his sad email, James wrote: "Carmen was a powerful presence in the professional lives of many... as well as a gracious friend." These brief words opened the floodgates of my memories of Carmen.

For me, conversations with Carmen not only stimulated my imagination but often proved to be sources of inspiration. Our discussions tended to be non-stop and breathless, pausing only for Carmen to write down a note. Her notebooks were always covered with beautiful *mingei* [Japanese folk-art] cloth, striped with diverse shades of indigo.

It was early 1986 when Carmen became one of the residents of Kyoto University Shugakuin International House, where, about a year before, I had begun my married life with Yoko. Carmen was invited by Kyoto University to hold a new visiting professorship of Japanese Studies. In the early summer of that year, Carmen, Yoko and I went to Shikoku Island to visit places associated with legends of the Heike clan warriors, who took refuge there after their tragic defeat in the Inland Sea battles of the late 12th century. Carmen seemed to have prepared herself mentally to be a pilgrim to the island. To my surprise, before each meal she

offered a prayer, in a whispering, high-toned voice. She had fully memorized the *Hanya-shingyô* (*Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*), taking a full two minutes, giving me the chance to join in intermittently when I remembered some passages like *Shiki soku ze kû*, *Kû soku ze shiki*, or *Gyatei gyatei hara gyatei*. During the journey, Carmen seemed to eat very little, leaving intact quite a few dishes and urging me to eat them up, saying: “Mottainai desu kara!” [If not eaten, it would be an impious waste of nature’s blessings.]

Towards the end of our journey, we decided to climb Tsurugi-San, one of the high peaks on the island. This venture had not been planned before our trip but somehow presented itself to us on the journey. On setting foot on the narrow path up the mountain, I was struck by Carmen’s rapid ascent. She certainly turned out to be a real mountain ascetic. Poor Yoko, swimming being more her forte, quickly abandoned her initial idea of accompanying us. I, despite being a former mountaineer, had to try my very best to follow the fluttering hems of Carmen’s trousers, which were occasionally visible ever further ahead through gaps in the increasing cloud.

Carmen’s bounding gait left a strong impression on me. It later reminded me of an anecdote concerning the Victorian “lady traveller” Isabella Bird. My poor memory fails to provide me with the source of this anecdote but it either appears in a biography of William Gladstone or I heard it from John Murray VII, the publisher, during a personal conversation in his historic office at 50 Albermarle Street, London. The anecdote is this: Gladstone had the chance to dine with Isabella Bird. Afterwards, the statesman remarked that he had met a lady with the nimble sure-footedness of a gazelle. Gladstone’s comparison further reminded me of Gertrude Bell, another famous traveler, who journeyed in the Middle East and North Africa, where gazelles were abundant. It occurs to me that a comparison between Isabella Bird, Gertrude Bell and Carmen Blacker might shed light on Carmen’s place in history.

One thing that I would like to say about Carmen, particularly against the background of increasing world instability caused by “free” globalization, is that she was a profound pacifist. She had a sense of deep sorrow about European history which was, in her eyes, full of wars and revolutions. According to Carmen, this continuous violence wiped out almost all folklore and local rituals related to the “other” world, the one inhabited by those benevolent but potentially, if ignored, malicious non-human numina. Japan, by contrast, has preserved a rich stock of this heritage in many corners of its society. “I am envious of Japan,” she once said to me when we talked about the polytheistic world with its various non-transcendental gods, where humans are continuously reminded to be modest. I guess that readers of her classic work, *The Catalpa Bow*,² must have been struck by the

author's occasional use of sharp words, such as "an aggressive secularism."

Today humanity finds itself at a critical stage of its history, when conventional notions of nature and humanity are under serious review — a result of the interaction between human greed and the modern sciences over the past few decades. A paramount question to be asked now is where in the world should humans be placed to achieve a harmonious coexistence within this planet's ecological community. To face this urgent issue, dialogue between different cultures is more necessary than ever and, on such occasions, Carmen's spirit will come back and join us — to use James' words — as a powerful presence and a gracious friend.

Here ends my speech. For those interested in Dr Carmen Blacker's scholarship, I would recommend the recent account by Peter Kornicki, 'Carmen Blacker (1924–2009) and the Study of Japanese Religion' in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, Vol. VII, compiled and edited by Sir Hugh Cortazzi (Folkestone 2010: 216–229). An official obituary, the publication date of which is yet to be announced, is under preparation for the British Academy by James McMullen. Both Professor Kornicki and Dr McMullen are members of the Advisory Council of *Sansai* as well as fellows of the British Academy.

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Notes

¹ I wish to express my renewed thanks to Dr James McMullen for his kind cooperation in preparing the above speech note with me during his stay in Japan in 2009.

² The book is subtitled 'a study of shamanistic practices in Japan.' It was first published by George Allen and Unwin in 1975; first paperback edn. in 1982, reprinted in 1989; Mandala edn. in 1992; third edn. published by the Japan Library in 1999, reprinted by Routledge Curzon in 2004.