

Christopher Benfey, *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics and the Opening of Old Japan*. New York: Random House, 2003. xviii + 334p. @25.95. ISBN: 0-375-50327-7.

Reviewed by Daniel A. Metraux

Christopher Benfry, a professor at Mount Holyoke College, presents a fascinating account of the encounter between Japanese and American intellectuals throughout the Meiji Period (1868-1912). Benfry introduces us to some of the leading cultural figures of the day including Herman Melville, Kakuzo Okakura, Isabella Gardner, John Manjiro, Henry Adams, John La Farge, Lafcadio Hearn and Theodore Roosevelt and presents carefully detailed portraits of they influenced and in were in turn influenced by both cultures.

Benfry argues that when the United States entered the “Gilded Age” after the Civil War, there was a “tremendous vogue” for all things Japanese including an intense interest in art, culture and religion. No region of the United States was more enamored of Japan than New England. This affinity is hardly surprising since New England had sent merchant and whaling ships into Asian waters—past Java and Japan, and on to Shanghai And Calcutta—since the later 1700s.

Boston’s intellectual elite from the mid-1800s and early 1900s had an intense interest in Asian philosophy and religion. Emerson and Thoreau had looked to Hinduism and Buddhism for sustenance as early as the 1840s and in subsequent decades a growing number of the city’s thinkers and writers, “deeply disaffected by the vulgarity and superficiality of American culture” in the decades following the Civil War, turned to Buddhism and to travels to Asia to find what some of them considered to be superior civilizations or traditions.

Many of these aristocratic New Englanders

discerned in the traditions of Old Japan an alternative social order of hereditary aristocracy, austere religion, and aesthetic cultivation. In the self-sacrifice of the samurai, they detected the stern ethos of their own Puritan forebears. (Were they not themselves, amid the corrupt governance of the Gilded Age, leaderless *ronin* search of a cause worth fighting for?) In the martial arts of judo and archery, they discovered something like that soldiery virtue lost in an age of soft prosperity – the “Gilded Age” of American millionaires. And in Zen austerity and reserve, they found confirmation of their own recoil from Victorian excess and ostentation. In old Japan, in short,

they thought they glimpsed a Golden Age, a world they were eager to visit before it disappeared. (p. xiv)

The irony, of course, is that just as Bostonians were falling in love with Old Japan, Japan was reinventing itself as a modern state, evolving in a quarter century from a feudal backwater to an international power. Yet while Japan was modernizing itself, Henry Adams and artist John La Farge traveled across Japan collecting art, studying Japanese and Asian religious themes, and visiting an endless array of temples. Lafcadio Hearn studied traditional Japanese folklore and Buddhism and introduced both to the West in his hugely popular books. Edward Sylvester Morse became the world's leading expert on Japanese marine life and architecture and whose publications on the topic strongly influenced later architects as Frank Lloyd Wright. Astronomer Percival Lowell wrote books on Japanese culture and religion while spending ten years in the East.

Isabella Gardner and Ernest Fenollosa came to Japan as collectors and students of Japanese art and returned with large collections that today grace the Gardner Museum and the Gardner Museum and Boston Museum of Fine Arts. We meet Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow who lived in Japan for many years studying the country's art, religion and martial arts and who later returned to Boston to run the Japanese art collection at the Museum of Fine Arts and to introduce his close friend, Theodore Roosevelt, to jujutsu

The President became an ardent practitioner of the sport and greatly admired many aspects of Japanese culture. We also get an in-depth view of Kakuzo Okakura whose *The Book of Tea* remains a good seller even today. We follow Okakura as he traveled with Fenollosa across Japan collecting religious and other art objects, and observe how he later played a critical role in building the Buddha room in the Gardner Museum and in building the outstanding Buddhist collection in the Museum of Fine Arts just across the street.

Other scholars have written articles and monographs about the experiences of some of these individuals in Japan a century or more ago. What makes this book so rewarding is how Professor Benfey integrates these people as a group and shows how their activities and encounters influenced each other. Fenollosa, Gardner, Okakura, La Farge and Adams knew each other, but it is only here that we can see how their work on Japan was affected by their interactions. Even more fascinating is our introduction to lesser-known figures such as Mabel Loomis Todd, the first woman to climb Mt. Fuji and one of the first Western figures to express

an interest in Ainu culture and religion, and Fenollosa's young beautiful wife Mary who strongly influenced Hearn with her interpretations of Japanese Buddhism.

Professor Benfey's meticulously researched and elegantly written study provides a very clear depiction of two nations that became fascinated with each other as they both came of age in the midst of the imperialist era. This sense of fascination, though marked by periods of great anger and violence, continues today. The student of Japanese history and religion, however, will have a much clearer sense of how this sense of wonder grew by reading *The Great Wave*.