

Isabella Bird *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880)



Takayo Kano



Isabella Lucy Bird Bishop

Isabella Lucy Bird Bishop was born in Yorkshire, England in 1831, as the daughter of an Anglican minister. Her parents were both religious, and her family members were socially active and had a strong sense of social justice and love of humanity. Isabella suffered from spinal pain from childhood. In 1854 she traveled to Canada and the United States and published her first travel book, *The Englishwoman in America* (1856). Two more travel books followed from her 1872 trip to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii and the Rocky Mountains. Her travels in Japan, Hong Kong, the Malay Peninsula and Singapore during 1878 and 1879 resulted in *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880) and *Sketches in the Malay Peninsula* (1883). In 1880, her only younger sister, Henrietta, died of illness. In 1881, she married Dr. John Bishop, who also died 5 years later, in 1886. Thereafter, she devoted herself to medical

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missionary work. In 1889, she traveled to Kashmir, Tibet, and India, and built hospitals in Srinagar and Amritsar in memory of her late husband and sister, respectively. In 1890, she traveled to Persia and published an account of her travels the following year. From 1894, she spent 3 years in East Asia, traveling back and forth frequently between Japan, Korea, Manchuria, and China. During this time she wrote *Korea and Her Neighbours* (1898) and *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond* (1899). A trip to Morocco in 1901, at 70 years of age, was her last. She then fell ill and died in Edinburgh in 1904 at 72 years of age.

Isabella Bird first set foot on Japanese soil in 1878 (Meiji 11), when she was 47 years old, only 10 years after the upheavals of the Meiji Restoration, and 1 year after the Satsuma Rebellion. She stayed in Japan from May to December of that year, and spent 3 full months between June and September traveling in the Tōhoku region and Hokkaido. The itinerary was extensive. First, she left Tokyo for the Aizu Basin via Nikkō, then down the Agano River to Niigata, then from Kizaki and Oguni to the Yonezawa Plain, north to Kaminoyama, Yamagata, Kaneyama, Yokote, and Kubota (Akita), then inland again to Ōdate, Ikarigaseki, and Aomori (this part of the trip took 2 months). Then, after crossing the Tsugaru Strait to Hakodate, she traveled to Biratori to visit the Ainos. On the way back she stopped at Shiraoi, Muroran and Usu to visit Aino villages. Bird traversed Tohoku and Hokkaido mainly on horseback, and sometimes on foot, accompanied only by an 18-year-old male valet named Itō.

The record of this journey, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (“Nihon okuchi kikō” in Japanese), was published in England 2 years later in 1880 and quickly went into 3 editions within a month. The nineteenth century was an era when people’s interest in tourism grew to such an extent that it has been called the century of travel and travelogue. Moreover, Isabella Bird focused her efforts on describing Japan, which had only recently opened to the outside world in the latter half of the century; in particular, rather than the ports of Yokohama or the capital Tokyo, she focused on the true interior of Japan, where only a few Westerners had set foot. At that time, there were no railroads, nor were there any horse-drawn carriage roads. Being thrown off the back of a horse or falling into a hole was a common occurrence, and other unusual accidents challenged her day after day. It is no wonder that Bird’s travelogue became so popular: it was written by a Western woman who traveled by herself and undertook adventurous expeditions that were similar to *Around the World in Eighty Days*, a fiction by Jules Verne. This travelogue was especially welcomed by women. This is understandable, considering that it was still rare for a woman to travel abroad on her own, even in Western countries at that time.

Bird continued to walk and document what she experienced firsthand and on-the-spot at the inns where she stopped. In this book, her impressions of these travels are written in the form of letters to her sister in England. In fact, Bird had a sister, Henrietta, who was 3 years younger and bed-ridden. When the manuscript of this book went to the printer, she was her only remaining family member, but she died in June 1880, 4 months before the publication. The following year, Bird married her sister’s doctor, Dr. Bishop. However, her husband also died of illness 5 years later in 1886. In retrospect, Bird’s trip to Japan was a particularly memorable one.

From the beginning, Bird came to Japan with the intention of venturing into the interior of the country. While many attempted to stop her plan, as it was considered reckless, then British Minister, Sir Harry Smith Parkes, and his wife encouraged Bird and cooperated with her. At that time, foreigners were not allowed to travel freely in Japan, but the minister obtained a passport for her from the Japanese government, which allowed her to travel throughout Japan, north of Tokyo, and to Hokkaido, her ostensible objective being stated as “health, botanical research, or scientific investigation.” Mrs. Parkes also bought Bird a folding bed and chair, a rubber bathtub, oil paper to keep dry from rain, and other items.

In addition, there was one more thing that was absolutely essential on this trip: an interpreter and valet, to whom she would be entrusting her entire fortune and even her own life during the trip. After interviewing several Japanese, with the help of Dr. James Curtis Hepburn as an interpreter, Isabella selected an 18-year-old young man named Itō, who was less than 5 ft tall, who looked stupid and seemed cunning. He was an unpleasant man, but Isabella decided to hire him because he spoke English better than the others and had travel experience in northern Japan and Hokkaido. He was to be paid a high salary of \$12 per month.

It is quite interesting to see an ordinary young man of about the age of a college freshman, not trained in particularly strict ethics or morals, who, in his own way, earnestly serves his 47-year-old foreign mistress, even though he sometimes uses his wiles to take a rake-off or make use of her influence. Both of them are smart, so at first they devise various ways to find out each other’s true abilities and intentions. Gradually, they grow closer and more trusting of each other, and by the end of their journey, they are an exquisite duo. Reading with this process in mind is one way to enjoy this travelogue.

On June 10, 1878, they finally set out. In addition to what Lady Parkes had provided, their luggage included blankets, air pillows, emergency rations of chocolate, meat extract, brandy, Mr. Brunton’s map of Japan, several copies of the bulletin of the Asiatic Society of Japan, and clothing.

What bothered Isabella everywhere she went, besides mosquitoes, fleas, and lice, was the sheer variety of noises made by the Japanese. Prayers chanted in high-pitched tones, shamisen (Japanese string instrument) music, chatter, the sound of hot water being used in the bath, the singing of geisha, the growling of storytellers, and the clapping of clappers on the nightly rounds were “truly diabolical,” she complained. Besides that, something that Bird could not bear was people’s unabashed curiosity toward her. Numerous holes were punched in *shōji*-screen (Japanese-style thin semi-translucent paper) doors, and the *fusuma*-sliding doors to the room where she was sleeping were quietly opened. In Komatsu, in the Yonezawa Basin, when she was leaving the inn, there were 60 people inside the house and 1500 outside who had gathered to watch her.

However, she was no less curious than the Japanese. Of course, she was not as rude as them, but when she had a chance, she borrowed a *kimono* at a teahouse, put on a hood, and disguised herself as a Japanese woman to watch a funeral (This was at Rokugō in Akita Prefecture.). Later she said, “I found the restraint of the scanty ‘tied forward’ *kimono* very tiresome.”

This relentless curiosity led Bird to meticulously record, in 44 letters, the things that caught her eye, along with exact figures, such as bed and board expenses, numbers of people in a village, distances between villages, the temperature, the width of a river, the size of houses, and so on. According to Fujikawa Yoshiyuki, travel writers of the nineteenth century, in general, always did so (Tosho, November 1986, Iwanami Shoten). This was due to their having “had a strong sense of duty to travel on behalf of their readers; they tried to accurately express their visual impressions of the journey through the linguistic camera alone.”

So, what Bird faithfully captured with her “linguistic camera” is an interesting picture for us today. For example, she wrote the following about “the plain of Yonezawa,” which she saw as “a perfect garden of Eden”:

tilled with a pencil instead of a plough,” growing in rich profusion, rice, cotton, maize, tobacco, hemp, indigo, beans, egg plants, walnuts, melons, cucumbers, persimmons, apricots, pomegranates; a smiling and plenteous land, an Asiatic Arcadia, [...] mountain girdled, and watered by the bright of Matsuka[wa]. Everywhere there are prosperous and beautiful farming villages, with large houses with carved beams and ponderous tiled roofs, each standing in its own grounds, buried among persimmons and pomegranates, with flower-gardens under trellised vines, and privacy secured by high, closely-clipped screens of pomegranate and cryptomeria.

Bird’s description of the streets in front of the prefectural office in Yamagata City can be compared with Takahashi Yuichi’s oil painting, “Views of Yamagata City,” which he painted 7 years later, to see how accurately she had recorded the same location. Not only that, but Bird’s comment immediately after the description can be said to record what the painting could never depict. She writes, “At the Court House I saw 20 officials doing nothing,” meaning there was no work for them to do yet.

Bird’s depictions of children are also lively. For example, in Ikarigaseki, a forestry town with a population of only 800 people in Aomori Prefecture, she saw a group of boys, probably in the upper grades of elementary school, try to use 8 beetles to pull paper carts laden with grains of rice up a hill by connecting the beetles’ backs to the carts with strings. The boys also tried their best to set up a toy waterwheel in the waterway that runs through the town and turn a model threshing machine that they had made themselves. In spite of summer holidays, “in the evenings you hear the hum of lessons all along the street for about an hour.” The loud voices of children reading for review and preparation seemed to make a strong impression on Bird, the same thing she noted down during her stay in Nikkō.

But, regrettably, what she wrote about was not only those things that give one a sense of hope for the future of Japan. In her eyes, some villages seemed to have fallen into the depths of poverty, where “fowls, dogs, horses, and people herded together in sheds black with wood smoke, and manure heaps drained into wells.” People wore almost nothing. “The adults were covered with inflamed bites of insects, and the children with skin-disease.” She even noted that in terms of delicacy of habits, they are inferior to any savage she had ever seen.

The latter part of *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, describes her experiences staying with the “Ainos” (Ainu) of Hokkaido. This is a report on a place where information was much scarcer than in the Tōhoku region, and in this respect it represents an even

more valuable record. She is keenly aware of the sensitive aspects of the Ainu people's status under Japanese rule and of the problems they faced, and her writing style is careful, reflecting her sympathy although she tries to be as impartial as possible.

Now, what were Bird's qualities and abilities as an observer? Born the daughter of an Anglican pastor, she was a feeble and weak child who suffered from spinal pain and spent most of her 20th year glued to a couch. However, on her doctor's advice, she embarked on a trip to Canada and the United States at 23 years of age. Apparently, there were fleas and cockroaches as well as typhoid and cholera in her Chicago hotel, but somehow she returned to England in glowing health. From this trip came Isabella Bird's first travel book, *The Englishwoman in America* (1856). After a short time, her backpain returned in 1872. Therefore she again set out on a journey through Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and the Rocky Mountains in the United States. Her health was restored again, and she wrote *Six Months in the Sandwich Islands* (1875) and *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* (1879). Then, in 1878, when her back began to trouble her the third time, she chose Japan as her next destination.

Therefore, when Bird came to Japan, she was not an amateur tourist, but a professional traveler, so to speak. She was already well trained in withstanding the heat, cold, storms, and other natural hazards of travel, the filth and stench, the unpleasant vermin, and the "barbarous aborigines" that accompanied travel in the nineteenth century. She was not physically strong, but she had enough energy not to flinch at trifles. This trip to the backcountry of Japan was not without dramatic and shocking occurrences that surprised even her. But her eye for observation and her writing skills are always steady, fair, and humorous. In the end, this is what makes *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* so fascinating as well as a pleasant, interesting, and informative travelogue for us Japanese today.

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