

William Faulkner's 1955 Visit to Japan

by
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Forty years ago, on August 1, 1955, William Faulkner visited Japan to participate in a series of seminars on American literature. His three-week visit, sponsored by the U.S. State Department and coming as it did just three years after the end of the Allied Occupation, was an important step in the improvement of relations between Japan and America.

Faulkner, who had won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, had already acted as his country's goodwill ambassador on visits to Peru and Brazil, in 1954. In fact, soon after Dwight Eisenhower was elected President of the United States in 1952, William Faulkner's name was suggested to him by a staff member, as someone who might serve usefully on a proposed civil rights commission. As President-elect Eisenhower's executive assistant campaign manager and soon-to-be-appointed associate counsel to the president, Maxwell M. Rabb, wrote the president a memo dated 23 December 1952:

It would be dramatic to have a Southerner [on a civil rights commission]. William Faulkner, who won the Nobel Prize, was never used by the Democrats. He has never taken any position on civil rights except for a speech he made in Stockholm, to the effect that the time had come when he should come out of his shell on this whole question.¹

The Eisenhower Administration did, eventually, ask Faulkner to chair a domestic civic organization, the Writers' Group of the People-to-People Program, in 1956. But before that, the president asked Faulkner to attend the International Writers Congress in Sao Paulo, Brazil, along with Robert Frost, in order to "offset adverse publicity which the United States and some American agencies had received."² Faulkner enthusiastically agreed, and even commented, in a letter to his publisher in July 1954, that he hoped "to strike a blow of some sort for hemispheric solidarity."³

In view of the success of Faulkner's South American trip, the State Department asked if Faulkner would next participate in a literary seminar in Japan. Although a reserved and private man, Faulkner readily accepted the invitation to come to Japan, eager to do "anything . . . [to] help toward a better understanding of our country."⁴

And so at 8:45 on a Monday morning, Pan American flight 825 landed at Haneda Airport from Los Angeles, bearing the soft-spoken Southerner who had written

such novels as *Sartoris*, *Light in August*, and *The Sound and the Fury*.

Upon landing, Faulkner met briefly with the press at the airport. He was asked which "particular aspects of Japanese culture" he was most interested in, and replied: "Well, their delicacy, their intellect, their intelligence. They notice things." Asked if he had read any Japanese novels, Faulkner answered: "No, not since I was a young man. I remember a Japanese writer that I read when I was about twenty-two or twenty-three years old. His name I don't know."⁵

Faulkner was then taken to International House in Azabu by his embassy escorts. Soon, however, despite the enormity of the journey (it had taken nearly 24 hours to reach Tokyo from his home in Mississippi), and the oppressive heat, Faulkner was to begin his tightly arranged schedule with a visit to the Kabuki-za after lunch, where he watched a Japanese-American cast rehearse "The Teahouse of the August Moon." Next, Faulkner went to the Foreign Correspondents Club for a 4:30 press conference and cocktail party, followed by lengthy radio and television interviews. At the end of his first day Faulkner still had to attend a party given in his honor, and did so, if with a growing weariness, at what was beginning to seem like excessive attention.

Soon after, problems did develop, for by the following day the strain of the trip and the adulation had gotten to the 57-year-old author, and he cancelled a luncheon appearance that was planned for 170 guests. By 5:30 that day Faulkner felt barely up to attending a 90-minute reception planned for him by U.S. Ambassador John M. Allison and his wife. Before the evening was over, Faulkner would require emergency medical treatment. Only gradually was he able to strike a balance between his health and his densely packed schedule.

The tempo of his next two days in Tokyo was slowed: on August 3 he met with six members of Japan's P.E.N. Club at 2:00. Faulkner spoke of the similarities between his homeland and Japan: "The climate and scenery in Japan have much semblance to those in my native place, Mississippi." He also added that he had come to Japan "so that I could see Japanese culture and natural features with my own eyes and learn the real conditions of farmers in Japan."⁵

The following day Faulkner merely gave four consecutive 45-minute interviews, including one with the editor of *Bungei*. When asked for some encouraging words, Faulkner reiterated the message he gave in his Nobel Prize address: "Yes—to work, to believe always in man, that man will prevail, that there's no suffering, no anguish, that man is not suitable to changing, if he wants to, then to work hard."⁷ That evening Faulkner was finally able to leave Tokyo on a night train for the principal destination of his visit, the seminar at Nagano, where he would be for the next twelve days.

At Nagano, where he arrived early on August 5, Faulkner stayed at the modestly elegant Gomeikan Hotel, a ryokan easily accessible to the seminar site at the

Japan-American Cultural Center. Awaiting him were fifty Japanese professors and four American visiting professors, who expected Faulkner to participate in seven daily sessions, with the first to be held at 4:30 in the afternoon. As it turned out, these meetings would follow a question-and-answer format, since Faulkner was not expected to lecture.

He also met again with the press, on his first day in Nagano, and again was asked for his "impressions" of Japan and Japanese culture. Faulkner replied:

I think that your tradition is so much longer than our American tradition—you have had thousands of more years to train yourselves in culture and in intelligence, which we don't have, and any American will of course have an admiration for that. That's in your architecture, your poetry, your fiction, your behaviour. . . .⁸

He also added that he was introduced to Japanese poetry by his countryman, Ezra Pound.

Before he began his first meeting with the professors, Faulkner thought it wise to read a two-page statement to clarify what he felt was a misunderstanding of comments he had made at a Tokyo press conference. The press had reported that Faulkner believed America was a country without culture, "that we were all savages without intellect or spiritual tradition." This was not the case, he explained in Nagano: Americans, coming as they do from a newer society than the Japanese, might appear clumsy or awkward, yet from American culture have come artists devoted to "the universal truth of man's heart."⁹

At the next session Faulkner praised the delicacy of the Japanese culture, but then went on to add that "the Japanese is a man who has made a fetish of intellectuality, that he prefers that all the frayed ends of the idea be trimmed off, that it be complete and intact, and exquisite and refined. But . . . that leads one into an impasse, where all he's got left is intellectuality, there's nothing in it any more."¹⁰ The session then ended after a few follow-up questions and many long pauses.

Gradually, the tone of these meetings became less serious, and Faulkner made an effort to be affable, even encouraging the younger (and, thus, more reticent) professors to participate in the discussions. One of the American Embassy officials present later noted, "It might be said that Mr. Faulkner worked even harder [than the Embassy staff] and although he is unsociable by nature, he became the most sociable American at the seminar, all the while retaining most of the unpredictable qualities of his perverse personality."¹¹

While at Nagano, Faulkner was also able to visit nearby Zenkoji Temple, go for an outing on Lake Nojiri, and even watch a traditional archery exhibition where he was handed a bow and arrow and tried, though unsuccessfully, to hit the target.

At Zenkoji Temple, Faulkner had the opportunity to speak with the Temple's abbess, who asked him about religion, and which faith he studied. Faulkner told her

that he was “interested in all religions as a form of man’s behaviour. The scriptures that he lives under—I think all morality that make people behave is based on religion.”¹²

Taking a break from the seminar, Faulkner joined several embassy staff members for a Sunday outing on Lake Nojiri, on August 14. This locale Faulkner later described as follows:

The bowl of mountains containing the lake is as full of hard rapid air as the mouth of a wind-tunnel; for some time now we have been thinking that maybe it is already too late to take a reef in the mainsail: yet there it is. It is only a skiff yet to the western eye it is as invincibly and irrevocably alien as a Chinese junk, driven by a battered U.S. made outboard engine and containing a woman in a kimono beneath an open paper parasol such as would have excited no comment in a sunny reach of the English Thames, as fragile and invulnerable in the center of that hard blue bowl as a butterfly in the eye of a typhoon.¹³

Faulkner also took the time to meet with a Nagano citizens group, and told them that he had come as a private citizen. He explained that he wanted to take back to my country something of my visit in Japan with the Japanese people that would do what might be possible, that relations not between Japanese and Americans but between simple human beings might be the better for my visit.

I think we have had too much of people making speeches, making lectures to one another. I think what we need if we are to make this world any better for all of us is for people not to make speeches, lecture to one another, but to talk to one another.¹⁴

On his last full day at the Gomeikan, he complied with the innkeeper’s request and wrote a *shikishi* which, in later years, would be reproduced, along with a photo of Faulkner, on postcards, and sold locally. In his *shikishi* Faulkner wrote:

My admiration for
Japanese courtesy and generosity
has now reached a height which I did not expect.

Sincerely,
William Faulkner

Nagano 15 Aug. 1955.

The next day Faulkner left Nagano for Tokyo, stopping en route at Kyoto for four days. Faulkner stayed at one of the more lush ryokans in the city, the Tawaraya Inn, located in the Sanjo district. This inn has long been a favored stop of international luminaries, and in its guest book are the signatures of such former guests as Alfred Hitchcock and members of the Rockefeller family.

In addition to the obligatory press conferences and dinners given him by various Kyoto literary societies, Faulkner was able to visit a fellow Nobel laureate whom he had met in Stockholm in 1950, the physicist Hideki Yukawa. He was also the guest of honor at reception hosted by the president of Kyoto University, Yukitori Takikawa, who said of the novelist: "Faulkner is truly a giant among thinking men and persuasive writers."¹⁵

Finally, on Saturday morning, August 20, it was time to return on the Tsubame express to Tokyo, where Faulkner would spend three days before ending his Japanese odyssey. En route to Tokyo, Faulkner confided to his embassy assistant, Leon Picon, that he was troubled: "There's some problem lurking in the minds of these young people that I can't fathom. If I knew what the problem is I could offer a solution. But I don't know it."¹⁶

Gradually, after listening to the pessimistic questions of young people regarding the present age, Faulkner felt he grasped what troubled them. In response, he wrote an 900-word essay, "To The Youth of Japan," in which he expressed his hope that within the next few years—that out of your disaster and despair will come a group of Japanese writers whom all the world will want to listen to, who will speak not a Japanese truth but a universal truth. . . . The basis of the universal truth which the writer speaks is freedom in which to hope and believe, since only in liberty can hope exist—liberty and freedom not given man as a free gift but as a right and a responsibility to be earned if he deserves it, is worthy of it, is willing to work for it by means of courage and sacrifice, and then to defend it always.¹⁷

As a farewell gesture of appreciation, Faulkner suggested holding an autograph session at a Tokyo bookstore, and so spent an hour on Monday, his last full day in Japan, signing copies of a recently published translation of his selected short stories.

Then on Tuesday, August 23, at 6:10 p.m., William Faulkner departed from Haneda. In the closing lines of "Impressions of Japan," Faulkner wrote of his departure:

the aircraft lightens, a moment more and the wheels will wrench free of the ground, already its shadow back toward the overcast before the wheels are even tucked up, into the overcast and then through it, the land, island gone now which memory will always know though eye no longer remembers. Sayonara.¹⁸

Assessing Faulkner's twenty-three day goodwill mission, a writer for *Nippon no Kyoiku* observed, "Every Japanese—without any exception—was so attracted to him because of his Oriental, likeable, and sincere personality."¹⁹ This view seemed to be the prevailing one and, even a decade later a U.S. State Department representative still felt that Faulkner's visit "had done more to better Japanese-American cultural relations than any other single act of the department."²⁰

Notes

1. Francis J. Bosha, "William Faulkner and the Eisenhower Administration," *The Journal of Mississippi History* XLII (February 1980): 50–51. Maxwell M. Rabb, memorandum to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 23 December 1952, is part of the collection of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.
2. Joseph Blotner, "William Faulkner, Roving Ambassador," *International Education and Cultural Exchange* I (Summer, 1966), 3.
3. Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 368.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 383.
5. Robert A. Jelliffe, ed., *Faulkner at Nagano* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1956), p. 1.
6. Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 1546.
7. Jelliffe, p. 18.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
9. *Faulkner: A Biography*, pp. 1548–1549.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 1549.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 1561.
12. Jelliffe, pp. 134–35.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
15. *Faulkner: A Biography*, p. 1563.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 1564.
17. Jelliffe, p. 187.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
19. *Faulkner: A Biography*, p. 1566.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 1567.

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