

BOOK REVIEWS

LOTUS MOON: The Poetry of the Buddhist Nun Rengetsu. Translated by John Stevens. Weatherhill, Inc., New York, 1994.

The multi-talented Buddhist nun Ōtagaki Rengetsu (1791–1875) has long been a notable figure in Kyoto history. Her early life was unusually tragic after surviving two husbands and suffering the loss of several children, she took Buddhist vows at the age of thirty-three. In some ways her bohemian lifestyle as a nun thereafter is comparable to the monk Ryōkan. Writing poetry and making pottery became part of her practice—not merely hobbies but daily forms of personal expression and livelihood bound into one. A major asset of this book is that Stevens included a number of poems shedding light on Rengetsu's realization of Buddhist ideals.

The pocket-size (4 × 5 inch) book begins with a brief biography and introduction to Rengetsu's poetry. This is followed by 113 waka, interspersed with 18 black-and-white illustrations of actual works (pottery, paintings, and poem cards). The photographs are unfortunately rather dark as well as tiny and therefore do not present Rengetsu's artistry to its best advantage. This flaw, however, is compensated for by Stevens' judicious selection of poems. In order to preserve the flavor of Japanese anthologies, he arranged them according to season, with miscellaneous poems appended at the end. The volume concludes with Rengetsu's death verse.

Stevens' translations capture the freshness inherent in these unassuming verses. The simplicity and clarity of Rengetsu's waka, as well as the universal imagery (mostly nature), make them easy to appreciate. In addition, they provide us with more intimate glimpses of her daily life than can be gleaned from biographies, and demonstrate her passion for writing poetry.

Taking up the brush
Just for the joy of it
Writing on and on,
Leaving behind
Long lines of dancing letters.

The information in standard biographies concerning her activities as a nun is rather vague, but Buddhist sentiments abound in Rengetsu's poetry. The depth of her awareness is revealed in several verses, such as the following two examples.

Clad in black robes,
I should have no attractions to
The shapes and scents of this world;

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST XXVIII, I

But how can I keep my vows
Gazing at today's crimson maple leaves?

Perfectly aware,
Not a thought,
Just the moon
Piercing me with light
As I gaze upon it.

In the introduction Stevens states that Rengetsu's poetry "celebrates the things around her and the emotions she experienced in her daily life as an artist, as a Buddhist practitioner, and as an emancipated woman". While his selection succeeds in showing the first two aspects of Rengetsu's persona, the poems included here do not reflect much about her experiences as a woman. The issue of a specifically feminine viewpoint in Rengetsu's poetry therefore still remains to be explored.

It was probably an editorial decision not to include a list of sources beyond the *Rengetsu-ni zenshū*. However, a short bibliography would have been useful even though the Inklings editions are geared toward a popular rather than a scholarly audience. In addition, there could have been a notation informing readers that there are many problems concerning Rengetsu's biography, such as the true identities of her natural father and mother, and the number of children she bore. By presenting one view, such as that her mother was a geisha, and other anecdotes as fact, Stevens' text is slightly misleading. To correct a minor error, Rengetsu's early years were spent at Chion'in, not Chion'ji—both are Jōdo sect temples but located in different parts of Kyoto).

In sum, the strength and merit of the book lies in Stevens' sensitive translations, which now make Rengetsu's poetry available to a Western audience. The pocket-book format invites leisurely perusal and is appropriate for Rengetsu's poems, which were often inscribed on tea wares and intended to be savored in quiet moments.

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