

BOOK REVIEWS

JAPANESE PILGRIMAGE. By Oliver Statler. William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1983; pp. 250. ISBN 0-688-01890-4.

Surprisingly little has been written in English on the phenomenon of pilgrimage in Japan, and Mr. Statler's new book is in fact the first full length study of the subject. He has brought it out at a very opportune moment. During the last few years something approaching a vogue for pilgrimage has made itself felt in Japan. We have had quite a spate of scholarly books and papers on the subject of *junrei*, some of which even attempt to apply to the Japanese scene the full range of Victor Turner's ideas on *communitas*, structure and anti-structure. The bus companies which conduct you round the celebrated pilgrimage circuits have been doing an unexpected surge of business, and no one can fail to have noted the strange proliferation in recent years of the miniature pilgrimage circuits, by which those too busy to accomplish the real pilgrimage can acquire the same merit in a fraction of the time.

It is good therefore that the English reader can know more of the subject, and Mr. Statler's book fulfils a real need. It does not, however, attempt to cover the entire field of circuits, holy mountains, special shrines and temples. Mr. Statler chooses rather to concentrate solely on what is undoubtedly one of the most interesting pilgrimage routes in Japan, the Eighty-eight Places of Shikoku.

The Shikoku pilgrimage is also the longest in Japan, the round of the eighty-eight temples covering some nine hundred miles and taking the average walker some two months to accomplish on foot. The Shikoku pilgrims, known by the special name of *henro*, believe all eighty-eight holy sites and the journey round them to have been founded by the notable saint Kōbō Daishi. Kōbō Daishi it is who presides over the holy journey and all who follow in his footsteps, who is constantly present as their invisible companion, and who at the last will heal their sicknesses and grant their petitions. Throughout the whole circumambulation, Kōbō Daishi is remembered in legend, in symbol, in memorial stones and

plaques, in the votive tablets of grateful pilgrims.

Ever since 1968, when he made his first pilgrimage on foot, Mr. Statler has devoted months and years to the study of the Shikoku circuit. He has consulted with experts at Kokugakuin University, he has had hundreds of pages of Japanese translated for him, he has delved into the life of Kōbō Daishi and into the records of former pilgrims ancient and modern. Above all, he has accomplished the round, uncompromisingly on foot, on several occasions. He knows, therefore, from inside and direct experience, what it is like to be a *henro*, knowledge denied to those who merely ride round in comfortable buses, or who even more merely sit at home and read.

The book he has written after so many years of study sets out primarily, he tells us, to "fathom the meaning" of the Shikoku pilgrimage. It is principally the story of his own pilgrimage round the eighty-eight temples, accompanied by a Japanese friend called Morikawa. But in the course of his account, rambling and episodic, are excursions into history, geography and folklore. While walking along the sea coast, or climbing steep mountains, he pauses to tell us of the life of Kōbō Daishi, of the activities of the *Kōya hijiri*, (those wandering holy men who during the medieval period spread the cult of Kōbō Daishi throughout the whole of Japan) and of the legends associated with various temples.

He tells us of the *henro-baka*, or graves of pilgrims who died anonymous and exhausted in the course of their journey; of the custom of *settai* or almsgiving to pilgrims; of the vivid scenery through which he and his companion passed; of a series of letters to Kōbō Daishi from a wronged wife who, as she walked, became progressively less bitter; of the extraordinary Chicago professor Frederick Starr, who performed the circuit in the 1920's, and of the strange woman writer Takamure Itsue who set out in 1918.

For all this, and for so interesting a personal account, one is grateful to Mr. Statler. But at the same time one cannot fail to be exasperated with him. With a little more trouble, he could have given us so much more valuable and useful a book. As it is, he seems beset by a pussyfoot anxiety lest he overburden the reader with too many names and dates. Time and again he fails to put a name to a mountain, a prince, a town, a temple. Time and again he quotes from a diary or an old guidebook without telling us what it is. "The chronicles say. . . ." What chronicles? "A scholar has noted . . ." What scholar? And the beach he tells us of on p. 223, where every May hundreds of turtles land, lay their eggs in holes and return to the sea, where, oh where can it be?

Nor does he hesitate to slide into his own imaginary evocation of an episode or a personality, without a word of warning to the reader that what he is now reading is historical fiction. On p. 130, for example, he relates in story form a visit to a village by one of the 'holy men of Kōya'. "At the gate he jangled the rings on his staff and began to chant . . . the headman's wife tried to keep her in the shadows

but the holy man could not help noticing a nubile daughter. . . . The headman and his wife both seemed to be snoring. He heard a rustle and she was beside him. His hands were all over her . . . She was hot and eager . . ."

Vivid though such writing may be, in a manner scarcely possible with mere documentary prose, it is not until right at the end of the book, in the Postscript, that Mr. Statler tells us of these excursions into fiction. Using a translation of Gorai Shigeru's *Kôya Hijiri*, he writes, "I have dramatised the stories of historical figures such as Joyo, Chogen, Butsugen, Gyosho and Saigyo, and based on Gorai's work I have created fictional characters to represent hundreds of anonymous holy men."

Mr. Statler is perfectly entitled to write historical fiction. Our objection is that he does not tell us when he is doing so. Fact melts without any warning into invention or speculation. We really do not know sometimes whether the incidents he describes or the literary works he quotes are genuine or not. For all we know they may have been invented by Mr. Statler for dramatic effect.

But he has given us a book about the Shikoku pilgrimage full of warmth and sympathy, and full of information which has not been assembled before. He makes us want, this very next spring, to take the time off to walk the nine hundred miles, and for this and for his very personal book, anyone concerned with religion in Japan must be grateful.

CARMEN BLACKER

GRASS HILL: Poems and Prose by the Japanese Monk Gensei. Translated by Burton Watson. Columbia University Press, New York, 1983; pp. xxxiii + 116 with introduction, translator's note, and appendix. ISBN 0-231-05606-0.

This slender volume contains a selection of translations from the literary work of the Nichiren priest Gensei (1623-1668), including eighty pages of poetry in Chinese, twenty pages of prose selections, and an appendix consisting of eleven Japanese *waka*. It is the latest in a series of translations from the Chinese and Japanese poets by Burton Watson, formerly professor of Chinese at Columbia University.

Gensei was born in 1623 and died after a long struggle against illness in 1668. Besides his copious religious and scholarly works on the Nichiren teachings, Gensei produced during his short lifetime a considerable body of literary works in both poetry and prose. While he has never been what one could call well known