

Review by Fumio Hojoh. *The Gissing Journal*. Volume XL, Number 4 (October, 2004): 32-37.

Mitsuharu Matsuoka (ed.), *The World of Gissing: In the Year of the Centenary*, Tokyo: Eihosha, 2003.

This useful volume was published to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Gissing's death. The cover displays Gissing's portrait against a dark sky broken by streaks of orange light from the sun, which hangs half above the horizon. It may be a moment of sunrise, but some would take it as a moment of sunset. Whichever it is, setting the portrait against such a glowing sky makes Gissing look like a prophet. But if he is a prophet, what is his prophecy? It is by no means a simple message that can be summarized in a short paragraph. The book reveals him in his ambivalence and complexity.

The book's subtitle, in a faithful English translation, is *Attempts to Investigate his Whole World*. In Japan, as in other countries, Gissing has been known best as the author of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*; indeed, *Ryecroft* was so beloved by readers who were high-school or university students before and after World War II, and read it as one of their English textbooks, that it has eclipsed his other works. The present book's editor, Mitsuharu Matsuoka, says in his preface that it is his wish, as well as the wish of his co-authors, to show Japanese readers the many various and versatile aspects of Gissing.

Of the 15 chapters, 11 are written by relatively young Japanese scholars. One of these 11 chapters covers Gissing's short stories; each of the others deals with a single significant work. The other four chapters are by the so-called founding fathers (or might they better be called brothers?) of the *Gissing Journal* and, through it, Gissing studies: Pierre Coustillas, Shigeru Koike and Jacob Korg. Korg's two chapters, on the life of Gissing and on those novels and novellas not covered elsewhere in this book are Japanese translations of previous publications, while Coustillas's chapter on the history of Gissing criticism is a translation of the paper he read in abridged form at the Gissing Conference in London last year. Koike's chapter on Gissing and Dickens was written especially for this book. Matsuoka acknowledges in his preface how much we owe to the academic achievements of these three predecessors.

In the chapters by Japanese authors, the first few pages are devoted to a fairly detailed account of the plot of the novel under consideration, or to a summary of content in the case of a book like *By the Ionian Sea*. This is very helpful not only for newcomers to Gissing's world but also to those familiar with his works, because names, dates, places, and incidents often slip from memory and are not

always easy to track down.

Following the summary, each author presents his or her reading of the novel. Because these are the most interesting sections, it seems appropriate to give a brief description of their content, even though such short descriptions cannot, of course, cover an author's entire argument.

The Japanese authors are all university teachers. Instead of including their titles and affiliations, however, let me just add Ms. and Mr. to their names, for Gissing would be pleased to learn that, among the scholars following the founding fathers, we have women as well as men. What follows is the table of contents and brief descriptions of some chapters.

The Editor's Preface (Mitsuharu Matsuoka)

Message to Japanese Gissingites (Pierre Coustillas)

Gissing Bibliography (Mitsuharu Matsuoka)

Ch. 1. The Life of Gissing (Jacob Korg)

Translation of "George Gissing," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Ira B. Nadel and William E. Fredemann.

Ch. 2. A Cavalcade of Gissing Criticism in the Last Hundred Years (Pierre Coustillas)

Translation of Coustillas's paper on the subject as mentioned above.

Ch. 3. *The Unclassed* (Ms Harumi Kuramochi)

H. Kuramochi relates the novel to the social problems of the latter half of the nineteenth century: the poverty of the lower classes (mentioning some of the movements to improve their living conditions); the difficulties poor women faced in supporting themselves; and the decline of traditional Christian faith. She points out that even though the novel depicts ruthless realities, it is not entirely pessimistic in its approach to the two main characters, Osmond Waymark and Ida Starr, unlike the situation in *Workers in the Dawn*.

Ch. 4. *The Nether World* (Mr. Saburo Kuramochi)

This essay begins by surveying the history of political unrest centered in Clerkenwell, the scene of *The Nether World*, and discusses how the place, together with the death of his first wife, inspired Gissing to write the novel. S. Kuramochi also argues that while the novel faithfully reflects the lives

of working people, each worker is given his own personality and values, instead of being presented as a stereotype.

Ch. 5. *New Grub Street* (Mr. Mitsuharu Matsuoka)

The contemporary circumstances that alienated “unpractical” writers from Victorian society are discussed. Then Matsuoka argues that although Gissing makes use of his own experiences as an unsuccessful novelist, he is both critical of, as well as sympathetic to, those writers’ idealism and aloofness. He adds that Gissing is also ambivalent about educating the poor. Indeed, his ambivalence toward all aspects of Victorian society is what post characterizes Gissing, Matsuoka says.

Ch. 6. *Born in Exile* (Mr. Ryota Kanayama)

Kanayama poses a question: Is Godwin Peak a mutant or a creature controlled by heredity (referring to Darwinism, eugenics, and such works as Théodule-Armand Ribot’s *L’hérédité psychologique*). Godwin’s downfall is due to his lower middle-class background as well as to his hypocrisy, he argues; a person of higher social class could have overcome the handicap of such hypocrisy. Thus Peak’s tragedy is due to his social situation rather than to heredity. Gissing who, unlike Peak, had a firm intellectual belief in himself, seems to be exorcising his former self by presenting his double in Peak, Kanayama says.

Ch. 7. *The Odd Women* (Ms. Mihoko Takeda)

Takeda focuses on Monica, who is situated on the periphery (or beyond safe boundaries) of London at the end of the century, and whom she regards as a “female flaneur.” Takeda proceeds to analyze what she calls Monica’s hysteria, suggesting that it arises because she is forced into the traditional female stereotype mould, while in fact she is torn between heterosexual love and her interest in Rhoda. Takeda concludes that, in spite of his sympathetic insight into the situation of women in Victorian society, Gissing’s view of women is both progressive and conventional.

Ch. 8. *Sleeping Fires* (Ms Ayaka Komiya)

This short novel is exceptional among Gissing’s fiction because of its happy ending, Komiya says. Unlike the heroes of Gissing’s other novels, who repulse the realities around them and assume escapist attitudes, Edmund Langley ultimately finds his happiness in everyday life. Komiya discusses the influence of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám* on this novella on the basis of internal and external evidence.

Ch. 9. *The Whirlpool* (Ryoko Ota)

Ota takes up some of the problems which beset the main characters and approaches the novel by juxtaposing alternative choices: whether one should marry or enjoy a life of celibacy; whether one should live in a flat or in a house in the country; whether or not a man should have an occupation; whether a woman should be a housewife or have a career of her own. She pays special attention to the treatment of flats and houses, relating them to the novel's theme. In her final section she considers the novel in the context of adultery literature.

Ch. 10. *By the Ionian Sea* (Mr. Yukimitsu Namiki)

Namiki examines how reading ancient Roman history motivated Gissing to travel to Calabria and inspired him to write *By the Ionian Sea*. He also compares this book with travel writing by other authors and concludes that what distinguishes *By the Ionian Sea* is the images of ancient Greece and Rome which Gissing is perpetually reconstructing, even from slight associations, in his mind's eye, and Gissing's interest in the contemporary people he encounters in the course of his travels.

Ch. 11. *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (Mr. Noriaki Kato)

Kato points out, quoting from other critics, the melancholy tone, aloofness, and nihilistic attitude seen in *Ryecroft*. For all that, he argues, *Ryecroft* lets its readers share its protagonist's experiences and gives them chances to review their own values and way of living.

Ch. 12. The Other Novels (Jacob Korg)

A translation from *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*.

Ch. 13. The Short Stories (Mr. Masahiko Yahata)

Gissing's representative short stories -- such as "The Day of Silence," "Raw Material," and "The Light on the Tower" -- are introduced with their plots and themes. Frustration and defeat are the repeated context of these stories, but Yahata says some of them seem to suggest that, amidst disappointment and illusion, people can be blessed with modest hope and happiness.

Ch. 14. Gissing and Dickens (Shigeru Koike)

Gissing's books and essays on Dickens are introduced, with particular attention to *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. Koike claims that, in spite of his unpretentious and unsystematic approach to Dickens, Gissing was actually breaking new ground and presenting what have now become some of the basic concepts about Dickens.

Ch. 15. Gissing Information Resources (Mitsuharu Matsuoka)

Chronology of Gissing's Life and Works

On the whole, the essays which I have introduced above are challenging and stimulating, although a few tend to be more a general introduction to a work than a personal reading of it.

The last chapter is a marvelous contribution to Gissing studies that provides a variety of information about academic tools: international conferences on Gissing, relevant institutes, and Gissing on the Internet, book-shops specializing in materials by and about Gissing, in addition to Japanese translations of his books, and books and articles on Gissing by Japanese researchers in particular. Matsuoka has already made a great contribution by creating digital versions of Gissing texts, and his efforts have been widely appreciated by all Gissingites in other countries. Indeed, the entire book will benefit specialists in English literature more than the general readers for whom this work seems to have been originally intended.

It has to be admitted here that the book's stance is rather ambiguous in that regard. The editor chose to deal with those novels that have Japanese translations, obviously keeping in mind those general readers who have to depend on translated texts. In each article, however, those passages quoted from the original text—which are essential in following the argument—are printed without Japanese translation (except in Chapter 14), which makes me suspect that the book is, after all, meant to be appreciated by readers who are already students of the subject and do not have to depend on translations. If so, it is regrettable that such important novels as *Demos* and *The Emancipated* were not allotted individual chapters, although they are taken up in Chapter 12. Given the present difficult situation surrounding the publication of academic books, however, I do not intend to criticize the editor. If all the quotations from the original texts had been translated, or more chapters added, this book would have become too voluminous to be published at a moderate price. I can well imagine the compromises which Mr. Matsuoka had to make.

We might say that things have remained unchanged since the days of *New Grub Street*, and that if we are to be “practical,” the best way to introduce general readers to Gissing is to have one of his novels made into a TV drama, with a popular star as the hero or heroine. On the other hand, many things have changed greatly since then, literature among them; it no longer relates itself to contemporary reality in the way Gissing's works do. Thus, all in all, this is a difficult age for efforts to invite the average reader into Gissing's world. For that reason, it is all the more delightful that Japanese scholars have commemorated this centenary by placing this garland of a book before his grave.

-- Fumio Hojoh