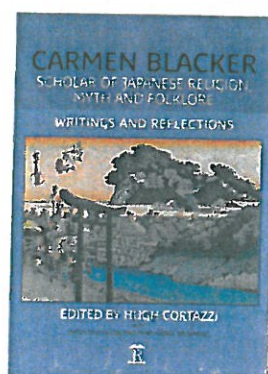


Carmen Blacker – Scholar of Japanese Religion, Myth and Folklore: Writings and Reflections

edited by Sir Hugh Cortazzi
with James McMullen and
Mary-Grace Browning

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Review by Jim E Hoare



I only met Dr Carmen Blacker (1924-2009) once, towards the end of her life, when she was already very ill. Although our only previous contact had been a somewhat scratchy exchange of letters over a possible contribution to a volume of Biographical Portraits that I edited, I found her easy to talk to and charming. Our main common ground was her first book, on Fukuzawa Yukichi, which had been published in 1964, as I started my own far less distinguished career in Japanese Studies. Reading this fascinating mixture of her diaries, more formal writings and reminiscences by those who knew her makes me wish I had known her better. Her companion and later husband, Dr Michael Loewe, and several former students and friends contribute memoirs. These inevitably overlap, but they bring out the many formative influences that made her what she was.

Clearly important was family life and school. It was through school that she met Julia Piggott. Carmen was already interested in Japan and the Japanese language but the meeting with Julia Piggott was to provide a strong boost to that interest. Julia, who had actually lived in Japan, was the granddaughter of F. T. Piggott, a legal adviser to the Meiji government and the daughter

of his son, Major General F. S. T. Piggott, twice military attaché in Tokyo. The friendship would last until Julia's death, and the encounter would consolidate Carmen's interest in things Japanese and eventually lead to her career in Japanese studies. General Piggott, perhaps recognizing a fellow enthusiast, encouraged her and provided her with formal training in the language. He was something of a controversial figure, who could see no wrong in the Japanese, but Carmen clearly regarded him with affection and benefitted from his training as her account of "Two Piggotts", published in 1991[1], makes clear.

Piggott's tutoring and her own efforts meant that by the time war came with Japan in 1941, she already had a good command of Japanese. After some intensive training in military Japanese at SOAS, she joined Bletchley Park. It was not a happy experience. She felt undervalued both in terms of salary and the work she was given. However valuable it might have been as war work, she did not enjoy the monotony of carding Japanese words that might just be useful in decoding. She was much happier when she moved back to SOAS as a special lecturer in Japanese, a move which also allowed her to enrol in a Japanese degree course; her fellow students included other future leading lights in Japanese studies, including Ron Dore. Although in those days her first in 1947 would have qualified her for a university post, she preferred to spend another two years studying the quite different field of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford. A scholarship at Harvard followed. But whatever else she was doing, her interest in Japan did not fade. A Treasury Scholarship finally took her to Japan soon after the fall of General MacArthur. Japan was still under post-war occupation and MacArthur, the Supreme Commander

of the Allied Forces, had hitherto refused to allow such visits. In Japan, she worked on the thought of the nineteenth-century thinker and educationalist, Fukuzawa Yukichi, founder of Keio University. This would become her SOAS PhD thesis and her first book.

She was however, moving into more exotic areas of study. In Japan she did not confine herself to libraries or the study of documents. She travelled and revelled in what she could do and see. More and more she was drawn into what would become her life's work into the realms of orthodox and esoteric religion, and myth. These were not abstract studies. She began visiting temples and shrines, participating in services and ceremonies, some most rigorous. It was a practice she followed well into her advancing years. It gave her a real insight into the more remote parts of Japan.

It also revealed how much the country had changed over the fifty years from her first arrival. Once pilgrims had travelled in decrepit trains and then hiked far into the mountains to reach their sacred destination. By the time of her later visits, all this had changed. Air-conditioned trains and buses provided modern pilgrims with a pleasant and comfortable experience. With the lack of sheer physical effort went some of the old beliefs. It was not necessarily a change of which she disapproved; after all, she took the air-conditioned buses herself, but her diaries record a clear sense of regret at the passing of the old ways.

Each reader will have favourites among the materials included. For me, Carmen's diaries, supplemented by autobiographical extracts from other writings, are the best part of the book. They take up about a third of the whole and the extracts have been largely limited to material related to Japan, including her wartime experiences. This is understandable, but it perhaps gives a somewhat distorted picture, for she clearly had many other interests that went well beyond Japan. Nevertheless, what we have gives a fascinating picture of a very full life. There is much on two esoteric sects with which she was involved. These were the *Ten-sho-kotai-jingu-kyu*, or "Dancing Religion", and the *Ryugu kazoku*, both ran by formidable ladies, the first by Kitamura Sayo (1900-1967), and the second by Furata (later Fujita) Himiko, the "Dragon Queen", as well

as on more conventional religious groups. The diary is full of casual encounters – meeting T. S. Eliot on a bus, for example – and strange experiences, among them visiting a clearly unexciting 'sex museum' in Shimoda with Hugh Cortazzi. The diary section also includes a selection of photographs; Carmen making friends with a cow was my favourite, while the last one, showing her with Michael Loewe after she had received the OBE in 2004 is the most poignant.

The third part of the volume reproduces some of her writings. For me, the most interesting were a series of pen pictures drawn from a variety of publications. These included three pioneering scholars of Japan, Chamberlain, Aston and Satow, Marie Stopes, Arthur Waley, and Christmas Humphries, as well as two very different Japanese, the eccentric scholar Minakata Kumagusu and the writer and painter Yoshio Markino. In deft phrases, she brings these very disparate figures to life. They also show that if she had stuck to intellectual history rather than religion, she would probably have had an equally successful academic career.

Sir Hugh Cortazzi in his notes to the preface, remarks on her failure to become a professor. As he says, she might well have done so when the University of Cambridge created a chair in 1984, but she preferred to concentrate on her research and teaching, which she preferred to the administrative tasks that then tended to fall to professors. Now she would probably have been offered a personal chair but it was different then. All the evidence is that she could have coped with the administration; it was largely due to her efforts, aided by Cortazzi, that Cambridge did not abandon Japanese Studies altogether. That they now thrive is a testimony both to her vision and abilities as an academic infighter. She did not need the professorial title. As this handsome tribute shows, her talents and abilities were clear.

[1] Carmen Blacker, "Two Piggotts: Sir Francis Taylor Piggott (1852-1925) and Major General F. S. G. Piggott (1883-1966)", in Sir Hugh Cortazzi and Gordon Daniels, eds., *Britain and Japan 1859-1991: Themes and Personalities*. London: Routledge 1991, pp. 118-127. [S](#)

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