

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Francis Hall. *Japan through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, 1859-1866.* Edited and abridged by Francis G Notehelfer. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 2001. v + 465. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-3867-5.

Reviewed by Roger Chapman (Bowling Green State University)

Published on H-US-Japan (October, 2001)

The Aftermath of Perry's Visit (or Cutting a Journal Down to Size)

The Aftermath of Perry's Visit (or Cutting a Journal Down to Size)

Francis Hall (1822-1902), born and raised in New England, started a successful book-selling business in Elmira, New York, fell in love, married and shortly afterwards became a widower, and then eventually made his way to Japan. There he helped create the trading house of Walsh, Hall & Co., living in the port cities of Yokohama and Kanagawa during the transition between the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. Hall also served as a foreign correspondent for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, which published nearly seventy of his dispatches from Japan. More importantly for posterity's sake, Hall kept a journal documenting his stay in the country from November 1859 to July 1866.

After living more than two years in Japan, Hall made the following assessment: "I believe [that] in its own isolation Japan was very slowly improving...." adding, "...the Japanese were slowly drawing in to themselves knowledge of a better life and civilization existing beyond their shores. They had books of sterling value that they could read, they had in a hundred imported articles, in instruments and results of art, mechanical skill, improved ways of the healing art, tangible evidences of the value of Western civilization. Thus I am often led to think that had Perry never opened Japan to the West and the Dutch remained a century longer at Desima that Japan would have improved in civilization steadily if not rapidly; nay more, I sometimes think—considering the

character of the people..." (p. 271). Such is the kind of material found in Hall's journal—thoughtful and candid commentary, keen observations with judicious balance, yet mixed with the writer's cultural myopia; on one hand, sympathetic toward the Japanese, while on the other, always certain of Western superiority.

Amazingly, for over a hundred years the journal of Francis Hall, consisting of 885 ledger-sized pages, remained in quiescence. In 1983 the journal was purchased from a Palo Alto, California book dealer by the Fine Arts and Special Collections Department of the Cleveland Public Library (Cleveland, Ohio) to become part of the holdings of the John G. White Collection of Orientalia. An archivist at the library contacted Princeton University Press, which in turn got in touch with Francis G. Notehelfer, professor of history and director of the Center for Japanese Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. After a Herculean effort, Notehelfer edited the journal and wrote a useful background essay on the life of Francis Hall. In 1992 it was published as a work of 652 pages,[1] with a hefty retail price of \$49.50.

Now Notehelfer offers a condensed, paperback version of the journal, in a smaller format and some 200 pages shorter, all at a cost forty percent less than the 1992 hardcover edition. Although in the preface of the first book Notehelfer writes, "To cut this text to my own preferences and prejudices would be to do both Hall and his modern reader a disservice,"[2] this time, apparently, there is the idea that an abridged version is warranted

for allowing greater accessibility to students as well as the general reader.[3] Even so, the book remains a costly purchase. Serious researchers, of course, will insist on using the 1992 book. Notehelfer admits that cutting a text, especially a primary source, is “risky,” but adds, “Because a number of longer sections have been telescoped, the reader may wish to consult the complete work...” (p. xi). The cutting was extensive, judging by the reduction of pages and the different size of type (the first book consists of a larger page format as well as a *smaller* typeface). Even Notehelfer’s introductory essay, a sketch on the life of Francis Hall, has been reduced to half of its original size. Another change consists of endnotes (a little less than 400), whereas the first volume features easier-to-read footnotes (about 550). In comparing the two volumes, one can observe differences in the journal where paragraph breaks occur. Anyone intolerant of *Reader’s Digest* will likely have philosophical problems with this abridgement.

Hall’s journal, in certain respects, served as a futures notebook to record materials the writer later used for composing articles, which were primarily published in the *New York Tribune*, but also the *Elmira Weekly Advertiser* and the *Home Journal*. According to Notehelfer, the latter portion of the original manuscript has fewer entries than the first half. The assumption (unproven) is that Hall became too busy with his business activities, so wrote his dispatches straight from the cuff. (Strangely, the journal does not shed much light on Hall’s business dealings in Japan.) To compensate for the sparser recordings, Notehelfer augments the journal text (the 2001 edition as well as the one published in 1992) with articles Hall wrote for the *New York Tribune*. Anyone with the mindset of strict provenance will wish the journal had been maintained in its original form because otherwise any citing of this edited work raises questions of whether the specific reference is actually from the journal itself or an inserted newspaper dispatch. Perhaps the newspaper articles should have been included as an appendix. (The book’s subtitle, it should be pointed out, only specifies a journal, not news reports.) On the other hand, if Hall’s journal was essentially a writer’s sketchpad then perhaps there is no harm in inserting articles, since they are clearly labeled as such.

All of the above quibbling aside, the publishing of Francis Hall’s journal is an invaluable service. Hall’s journal records life in Japan from a foreigner’s perspective only five years after the signing of the Treaty of Kanagawa (1854), negotiated by the American naval officer Matthew Perry, which opened the country for trade

and diplomatic relations with the United States. Most of the extant sources of this kind were written by missionaries and teachers, but very few by businessmen. Moreover, Hall’s journal provides a picture of the treaty-port life in rich detail. He was mostly interested in daily life and political events. Overall, it is apparent that Hall liked Japan as well as Japanese people. He seems to have been a keen and, at times, kindly observer. Notehelfer rightfully describes Hall as an “ethnographer, demographer, sports writer, social observer, economist, student of children, diplomat, and savvy trader in turn” (p. xi). Notehelfer fortifies the journal with useful endnotes, offering clarifications and commentary, as well as follow-up sources in both English and Japanese.

Historians will greatly appreciate the insights Hall’s journal shed on the chaotic times leading to the Meiji Restoration. His recordings are that of raw gleanings of rumors and gossip circulating in the expatriate community restricted to the periphery of the treaty ports. Hall records the unrest of the period, such as the journal entry for 28 February 1861: “...the whole land is in a disturbed condition and full of mutual jealousies and feuds among the princes” (p. 205). Ironically, he was also preoccupied with the Civil War taking place back in the United States. After news of secession in America reached Japan, the price of raw silk fell by one fourth, “much to the astonishment of the Japanese who were unable to understand so sudden a depression” (p. 216). On 24 June 1862, Hall wrote, “For several days past our ears have been full of rumors of disturbances in Japan, even so serious as their threatening revolution” (p. 297). Here he records that *ronins* (armed outlaws) were in Miako demanding reforms, which Japanese officials were dismissing as untrue accounts. On 24 December 1863, Hall noted reports describing Edo as “under a thorough system of terrorism from the supremacy of the *ronins* over the laws” (p. 360).

Hall’s depiction of Townsend Harris, the first U.S. minister to Japan, is illuminating as well as quite unflattering. Here the reader discovers how the diplomat was not respected by most of the American community in Japan. Many Americans outright spurned his request to observe Thanksgiving Day (p. 176). From Hall’s description, Harris was a bon vivant and egotist who spoke with a “rolling volley of words” (p. 158). After the 1861 assassination of his interpreter, Henry Heusken, the American ambassador was depicted as pacing inside his residence “like a mad man with a pistol in each hand” (p. 199).

The journal also captures the humanity of when a person lives abroad for an extended stay. First there

is the honeymoon period, which is followed by disenchantment. The “look of the country ... is inviting” (p. 33), Hall wrote from the ship when first entering Japan. “Yokohama had all the newness of a western town or a New England factory village” (p. 34), he observed in the freshness of the moment. “No rice can be better than the Japanese” (p. 38), he later added. However, he was obviously unimpressed with the first meal prepared in his new home: cooked fish “dripping with oil ... unscaled and unviscerated” (p. 40). After living in Japan for nearly a year and a half, Hall could happily boast, “In chop sticks we were beginning to be expert” (p. 211). There is the usage of “Japs” for the first time in the journal, for the entry of 9 June 1861 (p. 227), but this is probably more casual than derogatory. Whether or not such be the case, by 27 October 1863 there is evidence of culture shock, when Hall writes (on his forty-first birthday) these melancholy words: “Why do I linger a weary lonesome life on foreign shores? What happiness remains if I return? I am a suicide in that I have lifted my hand against my own happiness” (p. 353). One must remember, and the journal makes this very clear, the constant threat to foreigners, real and imagined, which added to the stress of everyday living. For example, Hall’s entry for 4 January 1861 states, “...reports thicken about our ears of coming harm to all foreigners” (p. 193).

Hall was sometimes perplexed by what he saw, especially the widespread prostitution. Watching a daughter be sold as a prostitute by her mother (“at the shambles of sin”), Hall was struck by how the event was “done as a matter of course” with little sense of shame or wrong (p. 39). (The reader should wonder how, less than a week inside the country, Hall was able to culturally determine whether or not the mother felt shame.) Prostitution is a problem mentioned throughout the journal. He also observed that visiting foreigners often treated Japanese women rudely. There is a scandalous entry of 31 January 1861 regarding Townsend Harris who allegedly requested officials to find him a woman to sew buttons on his clothing, but when they brought him someone for that purpose, he is said to have replied, “What did you bring that old hag for, I don’t want her to sew buttons on, I want to + + + +” (p. 199).

The journal is quite eclectic, as it is the work of an intelligent and curious observer. There are references to sorcerers (p. 269), Shinto altars (p. 271), numerous fires (pp. 61-64, 194, 207, 252, 263, 266), the cheerfulness of the Japanese rebuilding after a fire (p. 253), the arrest of Japanese who had visited a Catholic mission (p. 273), the attack of the English Legation at Edo (p. 231), the festi-

val of Emma, the prince of devils (p. 270), the visit to the Kamakura Daibutsu to see the famous bronze statue of Buddha (p. 253), cases of revenge (p. 264), the assassination of Henry Heusken (pp. 194-199), *hari-kari* (p. 205), foreigners and their snowball fights (p. 268), acupuncture (p. 203), old burial grounds (p. 84), wrestlers (pp. 76-78), outdoor urinals along the Edo road (p. 46), children’s games (p. 71), etc.

The text is enhanced by photographs and illustrations, of which many were obtained at archives in Japan. What is missing is a photograph of a leaf from the actual journal itself. Considering that this work was abridged for making it more accessible to general readers, the lack of a glossary is unfortunate. A glossary, explaining some key transliterated words, would have aided the casual reader as well as the hurried researcher culling specific information. (Fortunately, the index does offer parenthetical definitions of many italicized words.) A timeline could have been added to anchor the text in the context of important events of Japanese history. Also, a listing of the articles Hall wrote on Japan would have been appropriate, considering the absence of a bibliography.

Noteholfer had to decipher Hall’s transliterations from the Japanese, a daunting task since when Hall arrived in Japan there was not yet a standard method. (In the original, Hall’s journal refers to Japan as Nippon, Nippon, Nippon, etc.) Hall’s handwriting added to the problem of variances in the romanizing of Japanese. More problematic is the fact that Hall often used initials when referring to individuals, to which Noteholfer issues the following warning, “As may be imagined, this does not facilitate accurate identification, and while I have worked hard to identify as many individuals as possible, some have remained anonymous, and in other cases there is always the possibility of error” (p. xi). Such pitfalls are inevitable, but the reader needs to be careful.

Japan Through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, 1859-1866, will prove to be a useful text for many years to come. For the student being introduced to Japanese history, the journal offers an interesting account of what was a complicated period of time. This abridged edition would be useful for an undergraduate and graduate history class; however, the price is somewhat expensive. Researchers will need to rely on the complete edition, which is entitled *Japan Through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, Kanagawa and Yokohama, 1859-1866*. Francis G. Noteholfer is to be commended for his work in producing both volumes. Also, the archivists at the Fine Arts and Special Collections

Department of the Cleveland Public Library are to be congratulated for their vision in acquiring the original manuscript.

Notes

[1]. *Japan Through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, Kanagawa and Yokohama, 1859-1866*, ed. F. G. Notehelfer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[2]. *Ibid.*, xiii.

[3]. In actuality, both the 1992 and 2001 editions are *not* the complete journal. For example, almost all of the entries regarding weather and temperature are deleted from the most recent book. But even the first volume has weather recordings deleted from the latter half of the entries. In the preface of the first book, Notehelfer casually states that there were “one or two areas in which I have exercised my editorial privileges” (p. xiii), but he does not specify what the second “area” might be. Incidentally, although many historians may regard notations about the weather as unimportant, researchers studying the issue of global warming may have an opposite point of view.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Roger Chapman. Review of Hall, Francis, *Japan through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall, 1859-1866*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. October, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5563>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.