

'The Japan Lights', by Iain Maloney

Review by Chris Perkins

IAIN MALONEY



THE JAPAN LIGHTS

'A rollicking road trip around Japan'
Suzanne Kamata

I must admit that, at first, I was a little confused about how to approach this book. On the face of it, it is a book about Japan's first lighthouses and the man who built them: Richard Henry Brunton. And that is what I expected. But while there is much in this book about Brunton, his efforts and his lighthouses, it is clear that Iain Maloney's intention with *The Japan Lights* was to do more than just history. While ostensibly the dual story of a nineteenth-century Scotsman's involvement in shaping Japan's infrastructure, and a twenty-first-century Scotsman's documentation of his achievements, it is also a book about peripheries and the outsiders, about a Japan that receives little attention at home or abroad, and about people who don't quite fit in trying to make a place for themselves in the world.

Maloney frames his book as a response to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan that devastated much of Tōhoku, and the subsequent nuclear crisis at Fukushima. As Maloney writes, this was a moment when many of us with connections to Japan felt a mixture of grief, horror and powerlessness in the face of the devastation wrought by the earthquake and a growing sense of anger at the unfolding nuclear disaster. Maloney writes that it was the experience of travelling to the affected areas six years after the event that inspired his lighthouse project,

and with it his research into the life and times of Brunton.

Indeed, the parallels between nineteenth-century lighthouses and post-war nuclear power stations are more obvious than they might first appear. Both were acts of modernisation, both were designed to illuminate Japan, both relied heavily on foreign technology and expertise, and both were sited on Japan's coastlines - far from the urban centres that became emblematic of Japan's rise, fall and rise again after the war. Both are also emblematic of the imbalance between Japan's cities and its peripheries: a fact the Tōhoku disaster brought into sharp relief.

The context of Brunton's story is the opening of Japan to the world in the late 1850s, after more than two hundred years of relative isolation, and the imposition of treaties on Japan by the West that forcibly opened up Japan's markets to international trade. These unequal treaties, so called because they were heavily weighted in favour of the West, required, among other things, that Japan build infrastructure - docks, buoys and lighthouses - to facilitate safe shipping. As with other such modernisation projects, the Japanese looked abroad for expertise and it was Brunton who was offered the post of Lighthouse Engineer to the Japanese Government.

After a period of intensive training in lighthouse engineering by the Stevensons of Edinburgh, Brunton and two colleagues sailed for Japan, landing in August 1868. In the meantime, a revolution in the name of the Meiji Emperor had taken place in Japan, which overthrew the Tokugawa system and brought to power a new government led by a clique of brilliant bureaucrats. It was a time of almost unimaginably rapid change in Japan, which makes Brunton's story all the more compelling.

The scale of Brunton's task, and the fact that he was largely successful at such a young age (he was only twenty-six when he arrived in Japan), is staggering. In less than a decade Brunton had designed and supervised the construction of twenty-six lighthouses in some of the most inhospitable areas of the Japanese islands, built telegraph lines and railways, established Japan's first school of civil engineering and, in a final flourish, produced Japan's first OS map. These achievements were undoubtedly due to his character. He was clearly exacting, inflexible, brilliant and enterprising. He was a serious man, uncompromising and absolutely convinced of the rightness of his ways.

But his character also seemed to be his downfall. Despite his contributions to Japan, and unlike many other foreign experts who formed rich and lasting friendships with their Japanese counterparts, Brunton remained an outsider. As Maloney reports, he was, by all accounts, dismissive of his Japanese hosts, uncompromising, and utterly convinced of the technological and civilisational superiority of the West. He complained bitterly about his Japanese colleagues and subordinates and disparaged Japanese society and customs. It is probably for these reasons that the Japanese did not renew Brunton's contract, despite his obvious aptitude. After barely eight years in Japan, Brunton returned to Scotland where he faded into the background. Maloney does not shy away from Brunton's faults, but neither does he hold Brunton to today's moral standards. The figure of Brunton he paints is complex, and all the better for it.

In visiting Brunton's lighthouses, Maloney sought to reclaim Brunton's story and place him back in the pantheon of those early Western supporters of Japan's rapid modernisation. But in doing so, Maloney also sheds light on Japan's forgotten peripheries. Many of these areas bear little resemblance to the postcard image of Japan to which we have become accustomed. They are coastlines that are variously industrial, desolate, or ragged; they sit alongside communities at the sharp end of Japan's demographic crisis. Of Sugashima Island, Maloney writes: 'There are no jobs here, little to offer beyond fishing or a long daily commute, so the young leave, the old die, and that's the end of it' (p. 133). One island he visits is littered with wreckage from the war: remnants of a memory that is also fading to the periphery. Some of the lighthouses have shops and museums, and it is clear that the locals are proud of them. Others stand silent, lights out and doors locked. Maloney explores these areas with curiosity and compassion, and in doing so helps us see facets of Japan that despite the lighthouses still remain in the shadows.

The last outsider is perhaps Maloney himself. Reading the book, one gets the sense of a man still negotiating his place in Japan. As an ex-pat, he reflects on his friendships as part of an ever-transient community, his difficulty in making himself understood even when speaking Japanese (a frustration widely shared), his complex relationship with Britain, and his struggle to reconcile the call for adventure with the comforts of routinisation with that come with middle age. In searching for Brunton and his lighthouses, I felt that Maloney was also searching for his own identity, and in writing the book he was codifying what it meant to

him to live well as an outsider. The result is a beguiling read that, despite the picture on the cover, is about almost everything but lighthouses.

The Japan Lights is published by Tippermuir Books

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