

Title

Lives, deaths and precarious worlds

Noreen Jones (2002), *Number 2 Home: A Story of Japanese Pioneers in Australia*, Fremantle Arts press

Toyofumi Ogura (1948/1997), *Letters from the End of the World: A Firsthand Account of the Bombing of Hiroshima*, translated by Kisaburo Murakami and Shigeru Fujii, Kodansha USA (original version in Japanese『絶後の記録: 広島原子爆弾の手記 亡き妻への手紙』中央社)

Name

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I have chosen to write about two books firstly because their existence and contents meet in the person of Joseph Clement Kisaburo Murakami (1927-2022), who as a child lived in the small Japanese communities of remote places in northwestern Australia, the society depicted in one of the volumes, then as an adult Nikkei “return immigrant” in Bubble-era Tokyo co-translated the other volume into English. These books are also conjoined by experiences of the war, which brought an end to the world portrayed in *Number 2 Home*, and utterly overturned the lives led by Joe Murakami and Ogura Toyofumi 小倉豊文, respectively—in Joe’s case until December 8th 1941, and in Ogura’s until August 6th 1945. For both men, the world as they knew it ended on those dates.

Marginality can be contemplated in relation to both these texts and individuals: Joe Murakami, as an Australian of Japanese heritage who emigrated at age 35, was to some extent a culturally peripheral figure for most of his life, while Ogura sought to “renounce the world” by becoming a Buddhist ascetic after what he had experienced in Hiroshima. Although dissuaded from doing so, he was gradually rendered a peripheral voice (along with many thousands like him), in effect an echo of a discomfiting recent past pushed to the margins of political discourse, in a Japan where economic regeneration, nuclear-based energy sufficiency and even re-armament for “self defense” were prioritised by LDP administrations under U.S. patronage. From at latest the mid-1970s, further memorialisation of the suffering caused by deployment of nuclear weapons and assent to calls for acknowledgment of the ethical case for reparation were beyond consideration for both sides of the Japan-US alliance.

Number 2 Home is one of just a handful of books in any language about the Japanese presence in prewar Australia. While confining itself to Western Australia (hereafter W.A.) as a colony then a state, it attempts to document the range of circumstances and activities among Japanese migrants and indentured labourers from the 1880s through early 1940s, when almost every person of Japanese nationality or heritage was forcibly interned in rural camps in distant eastern Australia. Until the infamous Immigration Act of 1901 (the instrument for the so-called White Australia Policy), Japanese men were able to come to Australia to work, settle and even “naturalise” as British Subjects. Women also came, though they faced restrictions in W.A. from the late 1890s due to laws aimed at hampering further growth of the sex industry, in which Japanese women had been prominent in many regions of the state, in some cases with considerable financial success. Yet even after 1901, the fundamental importance of Japanese labour in the pearl shell industry (hereafter “pearling”) meant that broad exemptions were given to thousands of young men who came hoping to earn far more than they could for comparably tough labour in rural Japan.

The author of *Number 2 Home*, the late Noreen Jones (1932–2021), was a meticulous and enthusiastic self-trained historian whose two books shed important light on aspects of Australia-Japan historical relations and the Japanese communities of W.A.¹ Though not an academic, her work was and continues to be cited and respected in the academy, and well beyond it². As suggested in the choice of words for *Number 2 Home*’s sub-title “A Story of Japanese Pioneers in Australia”, the people she documented were marginal figures in two conspicuous ways: they were ethnic Japanese and therefore were regarded as Asiatic foreigners in most contexts, even if they had migrated before 1901 or were second generation Australian-born—individuals entitled to British Subject status; even the latter people were seen through racial lenses and often treated as second-class Australians. And they mostly lived in regional sites within W.A., in other words in “pioneer towns” on the margins of a territory that was then among the most peripheral places of white settlement in the British Empire (on par with places like Alberta or Manitoba in western Canada).

Over twenty years on from when Jones composed the Preface to her book, in January 2002, it still makes moving and illuminating reading. In 1961 she and her husband moved from the comfort of white suburbia near Perth to the multi-faceted discomfort of tropical Broome, then a town “at one of the lowest ebbs in its history” (10) with a population that had shrunk to just 1,200 people. At that time only a quarter of Broome’s residents were of European descent, that is, “white”, while most of the other three-quarters were of mixed Asian, Aboriginal and European descent. The setting yielded Jones an experience of ethnic minority status that deeply affected her thinking about Australian society and history: “being part of a European minority group within the country of my birth ... had far-reaching effects on my subsequent life and career” (11). She acknowledges that pivotal change of perspective as what subsequently enabled her to carry out the labour of research and writing over several years from the late 1990s through 2001.

And what labour it was! The sheer scope of the Bibliography is vivid testimony to the time and resources Jones devoted to ensuring her coverage of the prewar Japanese communities was both broad and as accurate as possible. All of the then-available relevant English-language books and articles are there, but most impressive are the primary sources, including many documents in national and state archives, nine sets of cemetery records, Japanese local municipal records translated for Jones, and 20 oral history interviews carried

out in W.A. and Japan (in Wakayama and Ehime Prefectures).

Old photographs reproduced throughout each chapter of the book are further testimony to Noreen Jones' thoroughness, and moreover, her ability to win the trust and support of individuals in Australia and Japan who had received precious photos from members of their families but were willing to donate the originals to collections put together by Jones, and/or give permission for their reproduction. Those images are well chosen for their power to draw us into lives portrayed in the text. Perhaps the richest set of images is that of life in the Japanese community of Broome between around 1920 and 1941: young indentured male workers in the pearling industry, of course; the boarding houses they lived in during 'lay-up' months when pearling was not possible; the elaborate entertainments mounted in celebration of Japanese holidays and imperial Japan's victory over Russia in 1905; leading entrepreneurs and business owners, including of course Joe's father Murakami Yasukichi and other men who now have streets named after them in the town; the Japanese Society's elegant clubhouse; and families such as the Murakamis themselves, the Fukudas and the Chinese-Japanese Chi clan³.

Joe Murakami told me he had met and corresponded with Jones several times in the years that led to her book's publication. That correspondence of course is acknowledged in the Bibliography (215-16), but their meetings are also brought to life in the text, most movingly in an account of a get-together with Rita Fukuda. As two "Japanese" who had grown up in 1920s-30s Broome and Darwin, Joe and Rita both spoke English as their first language with "the clipped Broome accent" that Noreen appreciated from her years of living in the town, and they interacted as older Australian expatriates with "a hug and a handshake" (63), even there in the patients' lounge of a Tokyo hospital.

In most chapters the text is a sequence of portraits, including vignettes of people whose only presence in the documentary record is in files kept by the security and military bodies responsible for monitoring "Japanese" from the late 1930s, then interning them and considering their cases for release or deportation. In addition to the indentured workers in the pearling industry who repeatedly renewed contracts, there were some other professionals who were able to stay for decades, including fishermen, market gardeners, cooks, laundrymen, sex workers (*karayuki-san* 唐行きさん) and small business owners. But as the narrative of many ordinary and extraordinary lives continues, readers feel the weight and significance of such an accumulation of detail: Apart from the evidence that Japanese settlement and labour were fundamental to the growth and prosperity of several important towns, one is surprised at the extent to which Japanese migrants were part of broader everyday life, even among Anglo-Celtic Australians. This was a time when systemic racial discrimination was manifested in the White Australia policy, and in laws controlling domestic life, specifically so-called "miscegenation" through co-habitation of Asiatic men with Indigenous Australian women. Jones conclusively demonstrates that, although legally and administratively relegated to the margins of mainstream Anglo-Celtic society, Japanese in prewar W.A. were "founding members of the migrant population" (196) no less than people of many other nationalities and ethnicities.

Turning now to the book Joe himself laboured in co-translating, Ogura's 絶後の記録：広島原子爆弾の手記 was the first widely circulated eye-witness account of the destruction of Hiroshima, appearing in November 1948 then going through multiple re-printings in the next six months and selling widely among Nikkei populations in North

and South America⁴. Although written by an academic historian, it is not an analysis of what led to the disaster (except perhaps with respect to the city of Hiroshima itself, in parts of chapter/Letter 13, as I mention below) or how Japanese people or authorities responded. Rather, it is a personal account based on words originally put down for solely personal reasons: It takes the form of a series of thirteen letters that Ogura addressed to his wife, Fumiyo, over a nine-month period beginning in November 1945, soon after her death from radiation exposure.

My formal interviews and informal talks with Joe were “supposed” to be about memories of music and performance in prewar Broome and Darwin. I had no conversations with him about the circumstances in which he’d been asked, in the mid-1990s, to work with Fujii Shigeru on translating this text. Perhaps Fujii was a colleague or friend who initiated the idea, knowing that Joe’s work included translating, editing, and writing English documents as a regular employee of a prominent Tokyo energy firm. I don’t even know what Joe thought of the original Japanese book, though I could tell how proud he was, as a Nikkei heritage person who had migrated at 35 and then had to learn to read Japanese, to have seen the translation project through to publication by a prestigious internationally-known publisher of books on Japan. In light of what I know about his life, however, I can make these inferences: As a man who had lost most of his teenage years to internment after the events of December 1941, Joe was a committed opponent of war as a means for resolving conflicting positions among governments. He probably regarded Ogura’s text as important in being a searingly powerful demonstration of the suffering that war can lead to. At the same time, the tragic events recounted in the book in effect put an end to the war and consequently afforded Joe freedom after nearly 5 years of confinement in the Tatura camp. Moreover, I think Joe may have been not unaffected by the format of the text, as a series of long letters to a spouse who had died from the effects of radiation exposure, as well as some appended letters to and from children sent to the countryside for their safety during the last months of the war. Joe never married, and I know nothing of his private life, but he is on record as saying that for him and his brothers in Australia, one of the lasting effects of their internment and the anti-Japanese sentiment prevalent in society for nearly two decades after the war was a kind of social incapacitation: “[w]e never [...] engaged in the social activities necessary for the development of normal social competence. We didn’t dare ask any girl for a date because we would surely have been rebuffed” (letter of 1988, as quoted in Nagata 2017:144). The intimacy of the medium through which Ogura recounted what took place in August 1945 may have figured in the impression the book made on Joe.

I have asked quite a few Japanese friends, aged from 22 to 78, whether they know of Ogura’s book (which remains in print in a 中央公論新社文庫本 edition), and to my surprise thus far not one of them has said yes! Perhaps the scenes described are just too frightening and disturbing for the book to have retained a wide readership among people who have no actual memories of either wartime or the calamities in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One must steel oneself to read of thousands being burned alive under fallen wooden debris, of toddlers pouring water into the mouths of their mothers’ corpses, of people whose skin had been flayed, leaving the internal layers exposed to mid-summer sun like “carcasses you see hanging in butcher shops”(54), and of still “squirring” lumps of flesh that were all that remained of the torsos of human beings.

Ogura’s writing style was described as “very unsophisticated” (甚だ素朴な書き方) in a preface to the original

edition, but I would rather call it a clinical account, describing what passed before Ogura's eyes and entered his ears, including numerous phrases of direct speech—standard Japanese representations of exclamations and questions blurted out in astonishment (and very likely in Hiroshima region dialect) by people around the writer. The narrative focuses on conveying detail in depiction, without entering into attempts to characterise the emotions of so many suffering individuals. Thinking more about the way in which all 13 chapters (letters) in the text are addressed to Ogura's dead wife, I can see how one might position this narrative in relation to the rite of *chinkon-barai* 鎮魂祓い, in which a spirit is finally laid to rest by means of telling (chanting, singing or otherwise performing) the story of how they met their death. Given Ogura's original intention to seclude himself as a monk, there is a sense in which his chronicle, presented to all Japanese three years after the disaster, could serve such a purpose for the tens of thousands of deceased.

Here and there in the letters, Ogura puts aside detailed description and turns to brief introspection. He considers the extent to which people not in the military or the bureaucracy had been kept ignorant of the progress of the war. Moreover, he writes with regret about a *willful* self-deception on his own part, given that there had been just enough information available for one to form the rational conclusion that the conflict had not been going Japan's way and defeat was inevitable. And at one point he describes giving vent to anger as he was walking through the ruins of what had been the commercial centre of the city: "the endless scenes of devastation had stirred up an indescribable rage in me. Who had started this pointless war? [...] Didn't they realize that in a war they could expect people to use ... even atomic bombs?" Given that his drafts had to pass through the hands of the Occupation's censorship officials, one might regard the third of those sentences with some skepticism. Remarkably, however, I find only a handful of passages that could be interpreted somewhat cynically as pandering to the vanity or pride of the conquerors. Elsewhere, as in the final letter (number 13), Ogura briefly casts on Hiroshima the eye of a scholar of Japanese history who was also well versed in the Christian scriptures, seeing the city as Japan's Sodom and Gomorrah, doomed because "its development and modernization [...] were undertaken for the sole purpose of increasing its military power."

Both the books I have written about here had their origin in the end of "a world" and the smashing of communities by state military actions in which the lives and rights of individuals were considered wholly expendable. Ogura Toyofumi lived through and remarkably survived that, while Noreen Jones came to know what had happened to the Japanese in her home state as she took up and pursued investigation of a people whom histories had largely overlooked. It seems Ogura's name is now little known, and the purported case for further rebuilding Japanese military capability renders voices of the "Hiroshima and Nagasaki never again" movement increasingly faint in Japan of the 2020s. In Australia at this same time the prewar social contributions of Japanese and Nikkei people (people who were marginalised, then interned and in some cases eventually deported) are being discovered by and made known among younger generations⁵. I'm sure Joe Murakami would have seen the irony of that, perhaps feeling that while his parents had contributed vitally to the making of Broome's and Darwin's prosperity, he for his own part contributed to conveying Ogura's precious account to the world.

¹ Her other published volume is *North to Matsumae: Australian Whalers to Japan*, University of Western Australia Press, 2008.

² See, for example, <https://www.nikkeiaustralia.com/noreen-jones-1932-2021/>

³ For the record, Joe Murakami corrected the caption of a photo on p.83, writing into my copy of the book that the image is in fact of his mother and twin younger brothers just after their birth. I note that the same correction had been made by editors in preparing the 2003 Japanese translated edition, 『第二の故郷：豪州に渡った日本人先駆者たちの物語』 創風社出版

⁴ Other accounts in Japanese and German were held by Occupation authorities, but none were published until much later.

⁵ An important vehicle for that is the Nikkei Australia group's website: <https://www.nikkeiaustralia.com>

Reference

Nagata, Yuriko (2017). "A Nikkei Australian Story: Legacy of the Pacific War". In *Migrant Nation*. Paul Longley Arthur (ed.). Anthem Press: 137-150.