

An Account of a Memorial Gathering for Bill in Tokyo
Saturday, October 31, 2009*

So in the end, it was five of us: Kate Nakai and her husband Yoshiyuki, Barbara Sato, Shirley Sun, and myself. We were lucky for the fine, crisp autumn day, and departed from the subway stop (new since 1962 of course) near the apartment that Bill and I shared that year. We visited the site of the apartment, which had been replaced and somewhat improved but still anchored to the adjacent home of the landlady Takizawa-san. We then meandered down the hill by which Bill and I had biked to school every weekday in 1962-63.

We had a lovely lunch on the campus of Waseda University under towering trees in autumn colors, and then proceeded up the hill to Wakeijuku, where the Stanford Center had then been located. By marvelous coincidence, it was also a day of reunion for the alumni of Wakeijuku, a dormitory for college students from provincial Japan studying in Tokyo. (Bill actually hated the dorm, where he was first placed, hence his escape to share my apartment.) Some of the Wakeijuku alumni were from our generation, and we were able briefly to share distant memories and take a mutual photo or two.

We began our service on the stone terrace behind the main building of Wakeijuku, amidst the clatter of final cleaning-up after the alumni gathering. Things quickly quieted down, and our tiny group was able to settle into a calm and isolated space of its own.

I started with a reading of selections from "Hohiron," interspersed with thoughts on why that piece meant a lot to Bill, and how much Bill himself was like Gennai, a man of "spirit" whose talents were inadequately recognized by his contemporaries.

Kate read from Bill's translation of Shiga Naoya's "At Kinohira" (Kinohira nite), a piece that she had already read before arriving in Japan in 1962, in her Japanese language class with Ueda Makoto. She skillfully chose selected passages, followed with a reading of Bill's own thoughts about the essay and its revelations about how we all face death.

Shirley read the opening paragraphs of Shiga's "An Accident" (Dekigoto), a fine evocation of a summer day in Tokyo that Bill's translation captured perfectly. Barbara chose Shiga's "Manazuru," including Bill's own shrewd analysis of the psychoanalytical meaning of the story. (One of the many rewards for me of preparing the service was to appreciate as never before the power of Bill's selective and even ironic uses of Freud, something that comes out strongly in his "Manazuru" reading.)

Then Barbara read Psalm 150, with its celebration of music as praise, followed by Kathleen Ferrier's rendering of Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" on a small but effective battery-powered set of speakers that I had acquired for the occasion. Finally, I read Peter Grilli's memoir in its entirety. I think that the entire service took about 50 minutes.

We then walked north to Japan Women's University, where the three ladies who had spent their year in the dorms there were able to enter the campus and see how much (or how little) had changed. Then by cab to Shinjuku for a tempura dinner at the Tenjiku branch on the south side of Shinjuku station.

Although I had hoped to pull together a more fully documented report, I'm sure you can understand what a very emotional day it was for all of us, during which our common love for Bill worked to bring all of us back together in new and unexpected ways. By remembering him, we learned so much about him that we should have known before--and also a lot about ourselves.

*Excerpted from a letter by Henry Smith, Columbia University, to Bill's sister, Jill Bixler.

Peter Grilli, who was unable to attend, wrote a letter for the occasion, from which a section is excerpted on this site.