

Who Let the Historian In? Or, How I Found a Home in FELC

presented by

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at the

William F. Sibley Memorial Symposium

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Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to:

*EALC and the Committee on Japanese Studies for supporting today's symposium;

*Norma Field for conceiving and organizing this event, complete with "reserve reading assignments" plucked from the collection of Bill's published writings. Leafing through some of her selections, it was a pleasure to recall and to savor Bill's wry turn of phrase, whose elegance and refinement often concealed trenchant critiques of contemporary scholarship on topics ranging from Japanese literature to political thought;

*Sarah Arehart for her careful attention to logistical matters, and for her patient replies to my string of emails about lodging arrangements, local transportation options, and so forth.

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In a more general way, I am also grateful, at this particular moment in my personal life and professional career, for the opportunity to circle back—both literally and figuratively—to a place that looms large in my own narrative, and to reconnect—figuratively in the case of our dearly departed friend, mentor and colleague, Bill Sibley, and literally in the case of those of you here today—with the people who helped to make the time I spent here some 30 years ago so stimulating and rewarding.

It is especially poignant for me to address you in this particular setting: the Coulter Lounge in International House. First, because "I House" was the first place I called home when I arrived at the University of Chicago in 1978 to begin graduate study in what was then called the Department of *Far Eastern* Languages and Civilizations (FELC). Second, because I came to know Tom and Alice Coulter (whose portrait, currently obscured by the projection screen, adorns the wall behind me) very well after I landed my first job following graduation in 1985. During my three-year stint as executive director of the Japan American Society of Chicago, Tom—who had recently retired as president of the Chicago Association of Commerce and

Industry—patiently mentored and helped me make the transition from the Ivory Tower to the “real world” of non-profit administration.

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The title and topic of my intended remarks this morning (I can't call them “prepared remarks,” unless three pages of hastily scribbled notes qualifies as “prepared”) grew out of the ambiguity inherent in Norma's charge to the presenters (scholarly exegesis or personal reflections?), and out of my tenuous relationship to the two categories—“translation” and “literary studies”—that she hoped would provide some coherence to our collective enterprise. Let me apologize, at the outset, for undermining her best-laid plans. Forced to make a choice, I opted to be placed in the “translation” group; fortuitous for all of us, since I can get my comments out of the way early and, with any luck, by the time Ted Fowler wraps things up late this afternoon and you've had a few drinks, you will have forgotten everything I said! But I could just as easily have chosen “literary studies” because, in truth, I do not identify myself with either camp.

It is precisely this fact that I decided to make the focus of my remarks about Bill and, more broadly, about the graduate program that he and other key professors provided guided me through between 1978 and 1985. This requires that I begin with two embarrassing confessions. (Thank goodness neither Bill nor my other principal advisors—Harry Harootunian and Tetsuo Najita—are here to witness them!) The first is that I was not called to the U of C by a burning desire to learn at the feet of these intellectual giants. At the time I was sending off grad school applications from Kagoshima, Japan, where I had been working for two years, I had never heard of Bill, and I had come across Harry's and Tetsu's work only in passing. Rather, my choice of the U of C rested more on the fact that it was within a day's drive of the university in southern Ohio that my fiancée was set to attend on a one-year fellowship!

The second confession is that my decision to seek admission to the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations (now East Asian Languages and Civilizations) did not spring from a passion for either translation or literary studies. From the outset, I knew that history would be my principal academic focus; and in my defense, I did ask Harry whether it therefore made more sense for me to switch my affiliation to the Department of History. (Harry's answer was, “Six of one, half dozen of the other.”) Instead, my choice of FELC over the History Department was based on a crude, calculated, and misplaced notion that a degree from the former would somehow expand my job options down the road.

As a result of my naïveté, poor Bill and his colleagues in FELC found themselves stuck with an unrepentant historian in their midst; one whose interests in the history of modern Japanese educational thought, politics and practice seemed far removed from the rarefied study of old texts written in *kobun* and classical Chinese. At some other institution this mismatch could have been disastrous. What made it work for me was, first, the unabashed commitment to interdisciplinary

study that was shared by Bill, Tetsu, Harry and other members of the Japanese Studies Committee; and second, Bill's extraordinary patience and dedication to his students. No one ever tried to change my mind or made me question my decision.

Make no mistake, Bill paid a heavy price for his generosity when it came to working with me. For example, I recall that toward the end of my first semester in his Advanced Japanese course, he invited each of the students to bring in an excerpt from any Japanese language source that interested us, and the whole class would be assigned to read and translate these together. At the time, I was trying to slog through a rather tedious essay about the Japanese educational bureaucracy, so I mercilessly forced Bill and my fellow students to share the pain of reading dry historical prose on a boring topic. Shiga Naoya or Natsume Soseki it was not!

Two years later, exhibiting similar generosity, Bill acceded to my request to be the third member of my dissertation committee. Given that the topic was (what else?) Meiji education—it was understood that he would “round out” my committee, with Tetsu and Harry serving as principal advisors. If Bill ever had any second thoughts about taking on this particular assignment, he kept them to himself.

While Bill thus bore the burden of our mentor-mentee relationship, I reaped the benefits. Although I had no aspiration—not to mention talent or disposition—to become the next great translator of Japanese fiction, the approach to translation and attendant technical skills that I learned from Bill have been invaluable in my own work. It was Bill's insistence upon felicity as well as accuracy that still prompts me to double- and triple-check all of my translations—of educational speeches, essays, excerpts from textbooks and the like—before sending the galley proofs of a manuscript back to the publisher. And it was Bill's probing questions about text and context in his course on *The Tale of Genji* many years ago that I continue to draw upon whenever I ask my own students to read and discuss works of fiction as sources of historical knowledge and cultural insight.