

The Inland Sea

Donald Richie

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It has been about 55 years since Donald Richie, the eminent writer on Japanese film and longtime resident of Japan, embarked on his months long journey through the Seto Inland Sea, that long channel between our beautiful Shikoku and the islands of Kyushu and Honshu. Though the world he explored and so thoroughly fell in love with is without doubt lost to time, what began as a travel diary from a trip in the early nineteen-sixties is still worth reading for those interested in Japan, in the rural Japan of the past, or fans of travel literature in general. Or maybe it is precisely because that world is gone that the book is most worth reading.

The Japan Richie visits and chronicles in *The Inland Sea* (1971) would be unrecognizable to the foreign tourist today, shuttled between crowded temples and grimy night-life districts, just as it would be to the vast swaths of Japanese pressed into the sprawling megacities. What Richie likes most is surely what would turn off most of these city dwellers: a perceived backwardness, a place stodgy in its conservatism.

Richie is a fine writer and often very humorous, but he too at many times comes across as excessively beholden to the past. He laments progress, apparently the great sin of twentieth-century man (never mind what it has done to lift people's standards of living and the comfort of their lives.) He bemoans the great cities, hedonistic in their convenience. He fears the construction of bridges.

It is a most tiresome conservatism espoused in *Inland Sea*, reactionary in its hatred of the new, valuing what was merely because that is how it had always been. He wraps this in a curmudgeonly environmentalism which will surely please many readers today.

Richie is at his best when he takes reprieve from dread and describes the truly breathtaking sights of the Inland Sea and the conversations with the people he meets there. His writing is illustrative in a way that it feels as if the reader is coming along with him, sitting beside him on a small ferry chugging across the calm water, leaning in to listen as Richie makes conversation with a merchant, or a fisherman, or sailor.

Whereas environmentalism may be popular now, Richie's descriptions of the Japanese people may be seen as problematic by some readers. I myself am little fan of sweeping generalizations across tens of millions of people, but Richie's observations are far

more nuanced than the standard "Japanese are shy," and show orders of magnitude greater understanding than the vast majority of tripe masquerading itself as amateur ethnography. Naturally, as the man had lived in the country for decades.

There are however a few factual errors in the book. Richie refers to the Murakami Suigun, that locally famous clan of seaborne warriors, as if it were one man and that was his name. He also refers to the Shimanami Kaido as one of the "longest suspension type" bridges in Japan. Of course the Shimanami Kaido is not a bridge but a system of bridges and highways across multiple islands. He is referring to the Kurushima Kaikyo. He also states that the Genbaku Dome or Atomic Dome of Hiroshima was the only building in the city to survive the blast. This is not true; it was not even the only surviving building in the epicenter of the bomb. It was one of a few buildings left upright though largely destroyed. While it was chosen to remain as a reminder, the others were torn down so that the city could be rebuilt.

There could be more. I only noticed these because I live here.

Foreigners in Japan will find the book especially relatable, as attitudes toward non-Japanese seem to have remained relatively unchanged.

The world and the times have changed though. One anecdote of Richie trying to seduce a 15 year old girl was particularly grimace-inducing to this modern reader.

Donald Richie passed away in 2013. He lived to see the future that he envisioned with grave concern: factories clogging the coastlines, bridges connecting backwater outposts to the mainland. Though the world Richie describes is lost to the annals of history, Richie's observations of the Japanese people, as well as his inspection of the man lost abroad, have proven to be more lasting than the world which spawned them.

As for our little corner of the Seto Inland Sea? There is an extended episode on Omishima in which Richie befriends a young priest-in-training at Oyamazumi Shrine. And Imabari? He stops by—and immediately catches a train for Matsuyama.