

Kenji Miyazawa Country

When I first encountered Kenji Miyazawa's stories, they struck me as unremarkable. I knew he was born and died in Hanamaki, Iwate Prefecture (1896-1933), where he became a teacher of agriculture at a local high school, writing stories and poems. His lyrical, slightly dark works would eventually reach an international audience with their use of mythic, folk and Buddhist elements in visions of life where humans, animals, and natural phenomena closely interact. But I still questioned the great critical and popular acclaim they received.

At that time I wasn't interested in fables or children's tales and lacked the cultural awareness to appreciate Miyazawa's social criticism, its subtlety. After more than a decade of living in Japan, his stories have come to be among my favorites. The change in my thinking, however, was sudden.

Know the Environment, Know the Person

It came during a magazine assignment in Hanamaki. Having finished my assignment before deadline, Toshio Obara, friend of a friend acting as my guide, suggested we tour sites related to Miyazawa. I accepted for lack of a better idea.

Quite knowledgeable about Miyazawa and surely aware of my disinterest, he avoided the many Kenji Miyazawa hot tourist spots. Toshio took me on what he called "a search for Kenji's soul," visiting farmlands outside the city.

Our first destination was Miyazawa's favorite haunt - where he also brought his agricultural students - a place the writer referred to as Hanamaki's English Coast.

There the Kitakami and Sarugaishi rivers meet, the exposed white shores of their confluence resembling Dover Strait. More important than noting the resemblance, Toshio pointed out, was to see the close dependence some farmers still have with the place. Then his explanation was cut short. A group of elementary school students surrounded me, I suppose as a novelty, hoping I might speak to them.

Their teacher apologized for the outburst and told me they were from a small local school, on a field trip looking for subjects that might have inspired some of Miyazawa's stories.

Curious to know how Kenji is taught in Hanamaki, I bombarded the teacher with questions and soon was invited to attend their afternoon class. I accepted, wondering whether there would be time to visit the sites Toshio had in mind.

The one place he had in mind was off the beaten track, and we'd have to move fast to go there and make class on time.

On the way to this secret place, Toshio informed me that Ihatov (Miyazawa's Esperanto word for Iwate Prefecture) has some peculiarities that shouldn't be regarded lightly. Farming in Ihatov, for example, is very hard, and the year Kenji entered school is remembered as a time of famine, when many died of starvation. Today many farmers cannot work the land during hard winter months and, unable to find jobs in the city, are forced to leave their homes and move to a local farmer's hot spring.

Farmer's hot spring accommodations are very simple and rather strange by today's standards. They often consist of a few common rooms, one bath shared by women and men, and a few home appliances like gas burners most guests pay ¥25 to use for a limited time to cook their meals, and not much more.

Farmers often spend long stretches in this kind of spa, spending most of their time talking. I can imagine this as the birthplace of many of today's folk tales, perhaps once a rich source for

Miyazawa's poems and stories.

Inspired to Discover a World Within

We left the hot spring and moved on to the school. Afternoon class was in session, and the students were taking turns reading at random from different Miyazawa tales - or so it seemed to me. In fact, students were to read their favorite parts and place them in the context of their field trip. I was highly impressed by the children's enthusiasm and imagination, and soon was drawn into a world within, unknown to me till then.

It seems that the experiences I had of the writer's haunts and key places in Hanamaki helped open my mind, and like Alice I found myself stepping into a marvelous land, the universe of Kenji Miyazawa's fables. It's a country, a rural world, inhabited by humans and creatures and forces and demiurges bound together by universal consciousness with a common intent - harmonious living for all beings, recognizing the interdependence of every entity.

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