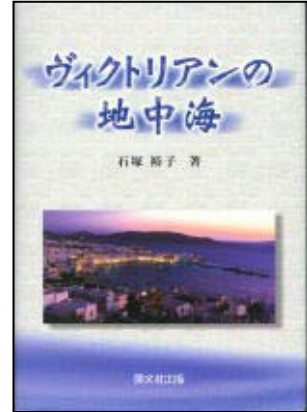


Book Review

Hiroko Ishizuka, *Victorian no Chichukai [The Victorians in the Mediterranean]*. Tokyo: Kaibunsha Shuppan, July 2004. iv+259p. 2,800yen.



This book is an erudite compilation of researches on several Victorian authors and their relationships with the Mediterranean undertaken over the past decade by Hiroko Ishizuka (Professor of English at Kobe University, Japan), initially encouraged by Prof. Pierre Coustillas. Ishizuka has long been absorbed by the question of why foreign lands were so often described in British novels as captivating settings. Although an island country like the United Kingdom, Japan has produced far fewer novels depicting foreign countries in this way. So, Ishizuka wondered what was special about this apparent fascination, particularly for Victorian novelists and particularly in relation to the Mediterranean.

In her epilogue, Ishizuka explains that Professor Coustillas recommended John Pemble's *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) when she first met him in Lille in 1990. Although Pemble's book - which argued that the British traveled to the Mediterranean in pursuit of culture, health, pleasure and spiritual inspiration - at first served Ishizuka as something of a bible, she gradually separated herself from that text. The Victorians she targeted are rather different, as suggested by the contents page of her own book:

Chap. 1 – Gaskell's Roman Holidays

Chap. 2 – How Disraeli Rediscovered the Mediterranean

Chap. 3 – Dickens in Italy

Chap. 4 – George Eliot, History, and the Mediterranean

Chap. 5 – The Journey to Death: Gissing and the Mediterranean

Chap. 6 – Sherlock Holmes beyond the Mediterranean

Chap. 7 – E. M. Forster and the Seduction of the Mediterranean

Chap. 8 – John Singer Sargent as a Cosmopolitan Painter

Through in-depth analysis of these Victorians' fascination with the Mediterranean, Ishizuka's original work offers new and clarifying views of many contemporary social problems.

The first Victorian novelist that attracted her attention on the subject was Elizabeth Gaskell, who fled to Rome in 1857 from the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, though she could not be aware of the ensuing storm of a threatened libel action. Arriving at carnival time, then meeting and conducting a platonic love affair with a young American art history scholar named Charles Eliot Norton, Gaskell's experience of Roman otherness was euphoric. However, Ishizuka goes beyond the simple contrast of restriction in Britain and liberation in Italy to indicate the difference between 18th century pastoral nostalgia and 19th century materialistic reality in certain of Gaskell's works. This chapter, and the book itself, were born from a paper read at the 1993 AGM of the Japan Gaskell Society, where Prof. Shigeru Koike, impressed with her presentation, suggested she write a series of papers on this theme for publication.

The Gissing chapter begins with a felicitous, albeit short, description of Gissing's life, foregrounding three major issues: his expulsion from Owens College for theft, his imprudent marriage with Nell, and his second stormy marriage with Edith. What made Gissing's Mediterranean passion so intense, Ishizuka argues, was his strong childhood love for the classics and the later frustration of those yearnings by his expulsion from academia and the impoverishment attending his disastrous marriage. These comments do not surprise us, but Ishizuka's unique perspective emerges though her quoting Thackeray and Robert Graves on the boredom they felt with rote learning of the classics in school. Had Gissing followed an academic life, according to Ishizuka, his Mediterranean passion would not have been so strong. The more one's passion is

restrained, the more it is aroused.

Gissing made three journeys to the Mediterranean in his life. While critical opinion has tended to identify the first of these with a liberation following the death of his first wife, Ishizuka sees here the emancipation of the novelist from ascetic writing. Not a day passed but he wrote something for a living, so that it became, for this hack writer, a liberation from the penance and poverty of the preceding eight years. Ishizuka is right in underlining the importance of the change in Gissing's finances. Accepting Smith, Elder's offer of £150 for *The Nether World* in Paris, for instance, enabled Gissing to go beyond Paris to Italy.

Always diligent, Gissing studied Roman culture and art during his sojourn in Italy, wishing the days were much longer. Many of his letters reveal how deeply impressed and excited he was by the Mediterranean, as well as his identification with Virgil, Horace, and Cicero. Ishizuka finds here Gissing's desire to reclaim his lost college days, when he would have been educated as a classical scholar.

When Gissing returned to England he neglected the theme of poverty he had earlier pursued, his worldview having been altered, according to Ishizuka, with direct access to the history of other lands. Hence Gissing's *The Emancipated*, a story of middle-class life set in Naples. It is well known that the idea of Cecily Doran, one of the novel's heroines, occurred to him when he looked at Raphael's *St. Cecilia* in Bologna. Indeed, Ishizuka points out the importance of paintings as theatrical stage properties. Witness a large reproduction of *St. Cecilia* in the Naples room of the other heroine, Miriam Baske. In the painting the patron saint of music takes no notice of broken musical instruments at her feet and raises her face in ecstasies toward a chorus of angels appearing through a hole in the clouds. In Ishizuka's opinion, this painting suggests Cecily's mentality already informs Miriam's room. A deeply emotional experience in Italy breaks the sorcery of narrow-minded Puritanism in Miriam, while it works the magic of unbridled passions on Cecily. Ishizuka argues that Cecily's deluded elopement with Miriam's brother Reuben reveals her failure to perceive the reality at her feet, and then suggests that Cecily's disappointment after returning to

London might represent a sequel to Raphael's painting: St. Cecilia, dropping her eyes, would find the broken reality of this world.

Gissing's second Mediterranean journey included Greece, and it is generally believed that Reardon's reminiscences of half a year's Mediterranean journey in *New Grub Street* was based on Gissing's own experience. Reardon talks of "moments in Greece and Italy; times when [he] was a free spirit, utterly remote from the temptations and harassings of sexual emotion." I suspect Gissing's intense and oft-noted sexual desires could not be repressed when he was unable to bear the penance and poverty. But what motivated Gissing to write *Sleeping Fires*, Ishizuka maintains, is a lingering desire for the lost position of classical scholar. Perhaps he hoped that he could regain this, and a peaceful life, through the novel. Observing his strained relationship with Edith, Ishizuka affirms that Gissing's crying for the moon is given expression in the story's ruined 42-year-old hero. Overcome with his youthful passions, Langley forgets the present altogether, but finally decides to "shake off this sorcery of Athens, and remember it only as a delightful dream." Ishizuka claims, however, that this decision is not consistent with Gissing's own situation. The Mediterranean was not necessary for Langley in the end, whereas it remained the novelist's emotional mainstay till he died. Gissing's life was full of poor choices, and *Sleeping Fires* is read by Ishizuka not only as a book of self-examination but as a vending of frustrations.

When Gissing finally parted with Edith in 1897 and left England for his third journey he was fighting lung-congestion. In his correspondences some critics find an increasing sense that the end was near. Ishizuka regards *By the Ionian Sea* as a swan song, and finds a great heart amid this consciousness of death – a forgiving spirit he showed in his acceptance of everything as it was: "All the faults of the Italian people are whelmed in forgiveness as soon as their music sounds under the Italian sky." In fact, I think Gissing's forgiving nature, which did not impute sin to those he met in Italy, has much to do with that sense of humor pervading English literature which we see for example in *The Tempest's* Prospero.

For Ishizuka *By the Ionian Sea* is not a travelers' guide to ancient remains but rather a description of Gissing's mingling with the local people. She says Victorians had something unhappy in common: they felt bitterly disillusioned and alienated by the society they had built for themselves. Gissing writes in his letter of 20 October 1889: "if my life is to be a lonely one, I must travel much." Ishizuka's apt citation seems to justify her conclusion that the Mediterranean passion has much to do with the theme of alienation in Gissing. I would add that as one draws closer to the end of one's life, one travels in a circle that approaches the beginning. It is natural that Gissing's consciousness of death should have inflamed his passion for the Mediterranean, that old world which was the imaginative delight of his boyhood.

The Victorians in the Mediterranean makes us feel the vastness of Ishizuka's research panorama. To my regret, want of space prevents me from covering the other seven chapters of the book that discuss so many Victorians. It is even more unfortunate that the book is available only in Japanese. Let us hope Ishizuka publishes it in English in the near future.

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