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Book Review: The Great Wave

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BOOK REVIEW

THE GREAT WAVE
Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan

By CHRISTOPHER BENFEY
New York: Random House, 2003. 332 pages, $25.95

reviewed by Andrea Kempf

Christopher Benfey is a cultural historian who has published several books in which he explores unexpected influences on writers and artists that have transformed their work into something unique. In *Degas in New Orleans*, he pursued the thesis that the artist's short visit to his relatives in the United States influenced him more than his associations in France ever did; in *The Double Life of Stephen Crane*, the author makes claims that Crane shaped his life to imitate the events in the stories which he wrote. Now comes *The Great Wave*, in which Benfey looks at the effects of Japanese culture on a variety of nineteenth-century American intellectuals and, conversely, explores America's influence on the transformation of Japan into an industrial power, engaged by all things Western.

It is all too easy to find fault with Benfey. In the first paragraph of his introduction, he refers to Japan as "a tiny and backward country, a spray of inconsequential dots on the map of the Pacific." His book is loaded with these sweeping and often unsupported generalizations. In a chapter on the scholar Kazuko Okakura, who was Isabella Stewart Gardner's mentor and also introduced the tea ceremony to New England society, Benfey links Frank Lloyd Wright with Ezra Pound, Martin Heidegger, and T. S. Eliot as individuals who were influenced by things Japanese and were also synonymous with the rise of fascism. And while the connection of the last three names with fascist and anti-Semitic ideas is well documented, the inclusion of Wright is somewhat mysterious. Some of the other Kierkegaardian leaps of faith include the following: Melville through his adventure tales like *Omoo* and *Typee*, Benfey claims, ignited a fever in readers like the artist John LaFarge, the historian Henry Adams, and the writer Lafcadio Hearn that would only be satisfied by immersion in Japan; the Russo-Japanese war could be viewed as a contest between judo and Western-style warfare; Amy Lowell's imagist poetry was the result of her brother's infatuation with Japan; and it is remotely possible that Emily Dickinson's writing, if not directly influenced by Japan, is Japanese in nature, anyway.

On the other hand, Benfey is an engagingly fluid writer whose descriptions

of his American misfits like Hearn, LaFarge, Isabella Stewart Gardner, and the astronomer Percival Lowell, among others searching for a more authentic world than their own, are exceptionally interesting, and it cannot be denied that he tells a great tale. The Japanese whose lives he explores are unknown in our country. For example, there is the teenage Japanese fisherman Manjiro who was lost at sea and then rescued and adopted by a New England sea captain who took him home to Fairhaven, Massachusetts, where the young man received an education. Later, when Manjiro was able to return to Japan, he was elevated to the rank of samurai, and served as the shogun's translator and negotiator with Admiral Perry, translated Bowditch's *New American Practical Navigator* into Japanese, and eventually became the subject of a Noh play.

The chapters about the Americans describe individuals eager to collect everything of value that Japan had to offer, bringing art and artifacts back to the United States for preservation and display in museums and private collections. Benfey attributes this rapaciousness to Darwinian principles. Japan was rapidly evolving into an industrialized society whose ancient traditions, literature, arts, and crafts would, through natural selection of the dominant Western cultures, be lost unless these altruistic Americans preserved examples of "Old Japan." But the Americans were also importing ideas: many turned to Buddhism for religious solace; Japanese art provided new ways of looking at the world; its architecture, an escape from the overly ornate buildings that characterized post–Civil War taste; Japanese poetry introduced a simplicity of style, coupled with vivid imagery that piqued the imagination of writers who were ready for a change from elaborate Victorian language.

If the reader views *The Great Wave* as an introduction to how some Gilded Age Americans embraced Japan and its culture, the book is well worth reading. Asian scholars will have issues concerning Benfey's depiction of Japanese religion, history, and culture, particularly since his sources are primarily the writings of the selfsame Americans who are his subjects. Nonetheless, the book is fun to read and full of little-known tidbits of gossip and information about American intellectuals at the turn of the century and how the idea of Japan captured their collective imagination.

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