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A bridge to the near north: Henry Black (1858-1923) and Dr Ian McArthur (1950-)

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A Case of Resurrecting Henry Black (1858-1923):

Why was there a sudden revival of interest in him in the 1980s?

Toshi Asakura-Ward

Introduction

My study examines the discourse around Henry Black, a Meiji-era *rakugo* performer known as the “blue-eyed storyteller” as a part of the wider trend of interest in the earlier history of Japan’s international contact. In this presentation, my concern is the resurgence of interest in Black in the 1980s. It was inspired by the work of Ian McArthur, an Australian scholar who began research on Black in 1983. I thank Ian for allowing me to interview him and to use his photographs.

Who was Henry Black?

Some of you may already be aware of Black from reading Ian’s book. Briefly, for those who don’t, Henry James Black was the larger-than-life Australian *rakugo* storyteller who lived in Japan from 1865 to 1923. He became the first foreign-born practitioner of *rakugo*, a distinctive form of Japanese storytelling with over 400 years of tradition. He was born in 1858 in South Australia¹ and moved to Japan with his family when he was 7 in 1865; he became a Japanese citizen in 1893 and remained there until his death on 19th September 1923. At the height of his success, in 1891, he adopted the stage name Kairakutei Black I.

¹ McArthur, *Henry Black*, 3.

However, after his death, his life was utterly forgotten until a 1977 Japanese history of *rakugoka*, the storytellers, mentioned his name.²

Black made two significant contributions in Japan. First, he told adaptive translations of English and French novels in Japanese. He attracted audiences by using Japanese names and places to give the stories of Victorian London or Paris a local relevance. Through his performances, he brought the notion of European modernity to Japanese audiences.³ Second, he was instrumental in making the first voice recordings in Japan in 1903. When Fred Gaisberg of The Gramophone Company from London visited Japan to record traditional Japanese performing arts, Henry was his interpreter and facilitator.⁴

I first learned about Black in 2013 when McArthur's book was launched at Kinokuniya Sydney. As I read more on Black, I became aware of the interest in him that emerged in the 1980s. Just why this might have come about is the focus of my paper today.

***Monumenta Nipponica* and Literature**

My literature review and recent interview with McArthur led me back to my central question: Why did interest in Black emerge in the 1980s – 6 decades after his death? Like McArthur, I feel that Henry Black became a cultural bridge between Australia and Japan. Therefore, I will embark on the task of interrogating possible reasons for this resurgence of interest.

² Sasaki and Morioka, *The Blue-Eyed Storyteller*, 134.

³ McArthur, *Henry Black*, 250-252.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

There have been 8 studies on Black published since the 1980s. While the two English titles were scholarly works, the Japanese books were written for general readership to promote a public level of awareness on Black.

The first article on him appeared in *Monumenta Nipponica* in 1983. It was written by the Japanese humour studies professors Sasaki Miyoko (1931-2017) and Morioka Heinz (1932-) entitled ‘*The Blue-Eyed Storyteller: Henry Black and His Rakugo Career*’. It covered Black’s career and concluded that Black was admired by Japanese commoners through his performances.⁵

In the following year, 1984, Kojima Teiji (1919-2003), a writer on Japanese performing arts and *sumo*, wrote *快樂亭ブラックー文明開花のイギリス人落語家* [Kairakutei Black: British Storyteller of Cultural Enlightenment]. He described Black’s life from childhood to his successful career as a ‘British’ storyteller. Although Sasaki and Morioka told McArthur privately that Kojima plagiarised their book, they did not accuse him openly to allow more publicity for Black.⁶

Then, in 1986, Sasaki and Morioka wrote *快樂亭ブラックの「ニッポン」ー青い眼の落語家が見た「文明開化」の日本と日本人* [‘Nippon’ of Kairakutei Black: Japan and Japanese of ‘Cultural Enlightenment’ that the Blue-Eyed Rakugoka Saw]. They focused on Black’s careers in relation to Meiji Modernisation, the turbulent time of change. They attempted to add to *Nihonjinron*, or the discourse on Japan, through the eyes of Black

⁵ Morioka and Sasaki, ‘The Blue-eyed Storyteller’, in *Monumenta Nipponica* 38:2, 162.

⁶ Author’s interview with McArthur.

describing Japan and its people in Meiji Era. They praised Black as a unique ‘entertainer of cultural enlightenment’.⁷

In 1992, Ian McArthur (1950-), then an Australian journalist in Tokyo, wrote *快樂亭ブラック—忘れられたニッポン最高の外人タレント* [Kairakutei Black: Forgotten Nippon’s Best *Gaijin Tarento*]. McArthur’s book is personal and semi-fictional as he attempted to recreate the atmosphere of Black’s time by visiting Black’s birthplace in North Adelaide, as well as places where Black lived and visited in Japan.

In 1997, Kojima wrote *快樂亭ブラック伝* [Chronicles of Kairakutei Black] to retell Black’s life and legacy, which once again focused on his biography.

McArthur also published a number of articles in academic journals such as those in *Japanese Studies* in 2002 and *Japan Forum* in 2004.⁸ In 2013, McArthur wrote *Henry Black: On Stage in Meiji Japan*. This is the first book on Black published outside of Japan as a culmination of 30 years of research. This historical study focused on Black’s life and hybrid identity as contributing factors for bringing European modernity to Japanese commoners.

Commemoration and Study Group

Following their article in 1983, Professors Morioka and Sasaki lobbied to celebrate Black’s life and contributions to Japan. They led the movement by raising funds for a memorial metal plaque, organising and sending invitations for the first annual

⁷ Sasaki and Morioka, *快樂亭ブラックの「ニッポン」*, iii.

⁸ ‘Australian, British, or Japanese?: Henry Black in Japan’ in *Japanese Studies*, 22: 3, 2002, 307-318. ‘Henry Black, Rakugo and the Coming of Modernity in Meiji Japan’ in *Japan Forum*, 16: 1, 2004. 135-164.

commemoration.⁹ By 1985, they formed a group called *shinobukai* (偲ぶ会, The Group to Remember) to hold annual commemorations of Black with journalist Oizuru Yoshiya (生出恵哉, 1934-), and Yokohama YMCA secretary Ohtou Hiromichi (大藤啓矩, 1937-2009). In September 1985, they hosted the first annual Henry Black commemoration at Yokohama Foreigners' Cemetery. About 120 people attended including scholars, Henry's adoptive family, diplomats, storytellers and the media.¹⁰

Oizuru had also contributed to the resurrection. He was born in Yokohama and spent the last 15 years of his career with *Mainichi Shimbun* at its Yokohama Office. Prior to forming the group, he had written a history of Yokohama and a book on the Yokohama Foreigners' Cemetery. In 1984, he documented about 140 foreigners at rest in the cemetery including Henry Black and his father, John Reddie Black.

Ohtou was also an active local historian. He was a devout Christian and secretary of Yokohama YMCA who assisted with the establishment of Yokohama Protestant History Studies Group (横浜プロテスタント史研究会).¹¹ In 1988, he contributed to the emerging interest in earlier foreign residents in Japan by publishing two books about missionaries who had advanced friendship between America and Japan. Since retiring from the YMCA, Ohtou dedicated himself to ground maintenance, research and promotion of Yokohama Foreigners' Cemetery.¹²

⁹ Sasaki and Morioka, '『快樂亭ブラックの「ニッポン」』裏話,' in *徬書月刊* 93, 1993.

¹⁰ Sasaki and Morioka, *快樂亭ブラックの「ニッポン」*, i.

¹¹ Imamura, '80周年記念の感想' in *The Y's Men's Club of Yokohama Bulletin* 1: 733 (2011), 2. Hanashima, '大藤啓矩さんを偲ぶ' in *横浜プロテスタント史研究会報* 46, 7. 10 April 2010.

¹² Hanashima, *ibid.*, 8.

Following the first commemoration, *shinobukai* renamed itself as *Kairakutei Burakku Kenkyukai* (Kairakutei Black Studies Group) with Oizuru as president. They planned to publish a small pamphlet for each commemoration in order to avoid the memorial to becoming predominantly a festive event.¹³ And, it seems that Oizuru coined the term *Burakku kenkyuka* (researcher) when he introduced the guest lecturer for the second commemoration.¹⁴ From 1986 to 1993, they published this annual journal as a pamphlet to distribute to the commemoration attendees. Each volume contained about 8 short articles contributed by scholars, journalists, writers and so forth. In the editorial note of the seventh issue, there is no mention of the publication ceasing, but this was to be the last issue. As Oizuru revealed in the editorial note of the second issue of the journal, the group struggled to fund the publication and its dissemination.¹⁵ Also, the journal seemingly struggled to sustain the number of articles contributed for each issue. In a recent interview, McArthur told me that he did not know why the publication ceased although he kept in touch with Sasaki and Morioka through *nengajo* (New Year's Greeting card) and met them during family trips to Tokyo.¹⁶ But, the financial challenge coupled with decreasing content seem sufficient reason.

Ian McArthur

As we can see in the photo at the top right, McArthur was invited to tell about his experience of finding Black and writing his biography to the audience gathered at the 1992 commemoration. The picture at the bottom right shows the Australian Ambassador to Japan,

¹³ Oizuru, 'Burakku Kouki,' in *Kairakutei Burakku Kenkyu 1*, 17.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Oizuru, 'Burakku Kouki,' in *Kairakutei Burakku Kenkyu 2*, 17.

¹⁶ Author's interview with McArthur on 31 May 2017.

Sir Neil Currie, laughing with San'yūtei Enraku V. Enraku was the most prominent storyteller in the late 20th century, a member of the guild which Black had belonged to since 1884. As McArthur pointed out, it was a diplomatic act for Ambassador Currie to preserve the memory of Black.¹⁷ I argue further that the ambassador's attendance officially claimed Black as an Australian who became a cultural bridge between Australia and Japan. At the time of the commemoration, the Australia-Japan relationship was successful in economic terms, and Australia was seeking to strengthen cultural ties with Japan also. Another sign of the increasing interest in the Australian-Japanese link in the 1980s. One I remember from my own childhood, was Japan's fascination with Australia's frilled-neck lizards.

Yokohama

Now, it is crucial to mention the role that Yokohama played to understand the cultural climate of Japan in Black's time as well as in the 1980s. When Black arrived in Yokohama Port by ship in 1865, he was 7 years old. This was just 6 years after the Japanese government strategically opened Yokohama Port to the foreigners in 1859. It was a time of serious political disruption and change – 3 years before the final battle that threw out the Tokugawa regime and brought the Meiji emperor to the throne, and Japan, having learned from China's experience, confined foreigners away from the nation's capital. As we can see in this painting, Yokohama Port was a foreign enclave, filled with foreigners with their naval marching bands. The bands and the clothing are indicative of their effort to preserve their Western culture.

¹⁷ McArthur, *Kairakutei Burakku*, 16-17.

A movement to study Yokohama's past began to emerge in 1984. Suzuki Takashi (鈴木隆, 1946-), the president of the publishing company Tangram, started to advocate for Yokohama Studies (and Yokohama Studies Association). This was just a year before the first commemoration of Black. He knew Oizuru and held lectures together to further their cause of bringing attention to the rich past of Yokohama.¹⁸

Atmosphere of the 1980s

Black posed one core question for me. The Meiji government employed thousands of foreigners.¹⁹ A few of them such as Lafcadio Hearn, Ernest Fenollosa, and Edward Morse become famous even during their own time, but most did not. Among thousands of foreigners who had lived in Japan in the late 19th century, why did Black receive so much attention in the 1980s?

The 1980s was the decade of Japan's strong push for its internationalisation. During the decade, Yokohama was promoted as Japan's gateway to the outside world through several events and developments such as Yokohama Exotic Showcase in 1989. That, according to official statistics, attracted over 13 million visitors. This was more than 4 times the population of Yokohama back then. This attendance recognised people's interest in the city's past as an international gateway, the primary port of Meiji modernity, and signalled a vision of its future in facilitating Japan's global prosperity.

¹⁸ Suzuki's naming of Yokohama Studies was inspired by 古賀十二郎 (Koga Jujirō, 1879-1954), the founder of Nagasaki Studies as area study. https://www.tangram-net.com/fr_yokohama.html List of publications on Westerners who lived in Japan are listed here. <http://rainichi20072.blog106.fc2.com/blog-date-200707.html>

¹⁹ See Jones, *Live Machines*.

In the climate of promoting Yokohama as the gateway to the outside world, Black, an early and long-time resident of Yokohama, received much attention in the 1980s. There were of course other foreign residents of Japan given attention at this time.

Since 1986, the year following the first commemoration of Black, an annual Scidmore Cherry Blossom Group remembering Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore (1856-1928) has been held at the Foreigners' Cemetery every April. Scidmore, a travel writer, visited Japan between 1885 and 1928. She was instrumental in lobbying for the cherry blossoms planted in Washington D.C. symbolising the friendship between America and Japan.²⁰

In 1987, Yokohama Archives of History compiled a pamphlet of photographs taken by Felice Beato (1832-1909), an Italian-British war photographer who lived in Yokohama between 1863 and 1884. He was an influential photographer who left a lasting impact on photography in Yokohama. Thus, this is another example of the revival of interest in foreigners in Japanese history in the 1980s. That is, Black was part of a more general revival of interest around this time, his name brought into the discourse by the history of *rakugoka* and the work of the scholars above. Once his fame began to circulate, it was useful to others such as the diplomats, journalists and so forth.

In Japan, a wider public level of awareness for Black started after McArthur's Japanese publication in 1992 entitled *Kairakutei Black: The Forgotten Japan's Best Foreign-Talent*. The title is a reference to the Japanese term *gaijin tarento*, the many foreigners with fluent Japanese who appeared on the Japanese television programs by the 1990s. McArthur's book reminded a general Japanese audience that Black was the first of those 'odd' *gaijin tarento* in Japan a century earlier than those who succeeded in the Japanese entertainment

²⁰ <http://a-un.art.coocan.jp/yokohama-bunkon/jigyoyo/004.html>

industry.²¹ The interest in foreign-born entertainers in Japan at that time was one of the factors contributing to the emergence of interest in Black. All these seem to have led to a special issue of a Japanese magazine *Hosho Gekkan* (衍書月刊) featuring Black and his father John in its 93rd issue published in 1993. It included articles by Sasaki, Morioka and other Black experts.

Legacy Beyond 1980s

Until Black's contribution was publicised through such publications and the annual commemoration, the bridge between Australia and Japan was largely viewed as an economic one. Following Japan's rise as one of the world's most affluent nations by the 1970s, Japan became both economic and political partner for Australia. Thanks to Black, a cultural bridge was recognised in the 1980s in the midst of the Japanese public fascination for the many foreigners appearing on the television speaking fluent Japanese.

Among such foreign 'talents', there emerged Fukuda Hidefumi who appropriated the title of Kairakutei Black II and lineage in 1992. Fukuda was the son of an American soldier and a Japanese mother, born in Tokyo in 1952. As we can see in the photo, he is dressed in Japanese traditional clothing – kimono – but one printed with the Union Jack, a reference to Black's British ancestry, not his own American heritage. Fukuda's adoption of the title was controversial, but even the controversy served to raise public awareness of the original Black. In Oizuru's opinion, McArthur was one worthy to claim the title of Black II.²²

²¹ McArthur, *Kairakutei Burakku*, 17-18.

²² Oizuru, 'Burakku Kouki,' in *Kairakutei Burakku Kenkyu* 7, 15.

In 2010, French comedian and storyteller, Stephane Ferrandez, approached McArthur about Black. This resulted in McArthur presenting his talks in France, Germany and England with Japan Foundation funding in 2011. He spoke about Black's contribution to Japanese commoners through adaptive translations of European literature into *rakugo*. In 2013, McArthur published a French article based on his talk in Paris in a Japanese Studies journal in France called *Cipango*.²³

Conclusion

I have provided an overview of my project with a focus on the resurgence of interest in Henry Black in the 1980s. There were several reasons for the movement. The academic interest in Black led to efforts to commemorate his life and to disseminate the knowledge of him through journals. The 1980s was marked with the revival of interest in foreigners who lived in Japan in the Meiji Era and now lie at rest in Yokohama Foreigners' Cemetery. This revival of Black received a further boost because it coincided with the public fascination with the *gaijin tarento* on Japanese television. Cultural diplomacy of Australian Embassy and the city of Yokohama were also factors fostering a wider interest in Black. Now, a greater awareness of Black became pervasive through the performers who extended his legacy. I hope that this study will add to the current discourse about foreigners in Japan.

²³ In medieval mythology, an island off the eastern coast of Asia, perhaps modern-day Japan. A poetic name for Japan, used by Italian trader and explorer, Marco Polo (1254-1324). Zipangu.