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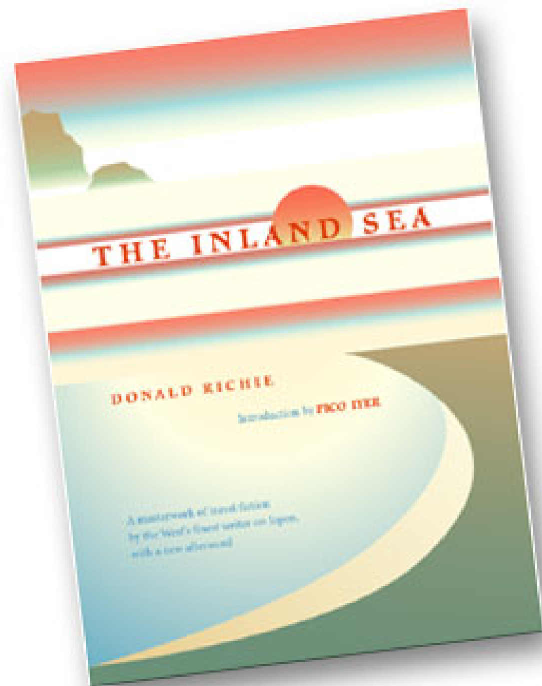
By Alexander Jacoby

He saw Ginza when it was a blackened plain but for the bombed-out Mitsukoshi department store, the Hattori Building and a handful of other structures left standing. He observed the city as it was rebuilt, and its people. He observed, and then he wrote.

Donald Richie at
Nihonbashi in 1947.

New Year's Day 2007 marks the 60th anniversary of the arrival in Japan of the Japan Times' longest-serving and most distinguished columnist, Donald Richie. Richie came to Tokyo as a civilian typist for the U.S. Occupation forces in 1947, less than 18 months after Japan's surrender in World War II. He soon became a film critic for The Pacific Stars and Stripes newspaper, before returning to the United States in 1949 to study film at New York's Columbia University. On his return to Japan in 1953, he began to write film criticism for The Japan Times. Apart from a stint as the first curator of the New York Museum of Modern Art's film department from 1968 to 1973, he has lived in Tokyo ever since.

Richie, 82, has written more than 40 books on Japanese subjects. He is the pre-eminent Western critic of Japanese cinema, having coauthored, with Joseph Anderson, The Japanese Film: Art and Industry -- the first book in English on the subject. He has written several subsequent film histories, as well as books on filmmakers Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu. His other books have covered many subjects, earning him a reputation as one of the most respected foreign commentators on Japan.



Chronicling an era of unprecedented change, as tradition gave way to modernity, Richie's work has been at once nostalgic and forward-thinking. His favorite among his own books, the travelogue "The Inland Sea," is a poignant tribute to "the last of old Japan"; by contrast, "The Image Factory" analyzes the fads and fashions which the Japanese have adopted in the urge to be modern.

Richie's writing has always focused on individuals rather than abstractions, and he has been acquainted with many of the leading figures of postwar Japan's cultural scene. He knew Kurosawa, whose work he did much to promote. He was a friend of controversial novelist Yukio Mishima, having entertained him in New York when the young Mishima visited the city in Richie's student days. Their friendship lasted until Mishima's dramatic suicide in 1970. These relationships, and others with Japanese both famous and unknown, form the basis of his book "Public People, Private People," reprinted this year under the title "Japanese Portraits."

Alongside his many books, Richie has continued to contribute regularly to The Japan Times, and still reviews books on a weekly basis. His career as a columnist for this newspaper has spanned more than 53 years, or almost half of its 110-year history. Readers throughout Richie's time have turned to his writings, both in The Japan Times and elsewhere, for perhaps the most consistently perceptive accounts in

English of Japan's postwar evolution. Tom Wolfe has called him "the Lafcadio Hearn of our time, a subtle, stylish, and deceptively lucid medium between two cultures that confuse one another." To several generations of Japanophiles, he has been a guide, teacher, mentor and friend.

Though a long-term resident, Richie continues to think of himself as a guest. For Richie as for so many expatriates, that status has offered the freedom to pursue his interests and inclinations in an environment which imposes few concrete expectations on its foreign residents. It is from the perspective of a sympathetic outsider that he has observed and interpreted Japanese society and culture.

Richie (front center) and other staffers of The Pacific
Stars and Stripes newspaper in Hibiya around 1948.

Among the particular strengths of Richie's writing is its quality of self-revelation. His subject is the relationship between the self and the environment; "The Inland Sea" is as much a meditation on his own place in Japan as on the lives of its people; while his recently published "The Japan Journals: 1947-2004" is both public chronicle and private confessional.

We celebrate Richie's 60 years in Japan by publishing this interview, conducted perhaps appropriately at a distance from his adopted home, during last year's Pordenone Festival of Silent Film in Sacile, Italy, at which Richie was a guest speaker, and which the interviewer helped to curate.

Tell me first about your life before you came to Japan.

I was born in a small town in Ohio in 1924. My parents were ordinary middle-class; my father ran a radio store; my mother was a housewife. They had one other child, my younger sister, to whom I'm still very attached. I had an ordinary bourgeois life, going to school, playing on the ball teams. The first notification that I was going to have a different kind of life was that my tastes were different. I discovered classical music; I became fond of art; I was fond of travel and reading travel accounts. In the meantime I was finding life stultifying, so when I graduated from high school, the first thing I did was leave home. I hitchhiked south and spent the summer in New Orleans, reveling in the exoticisms of the place. Then the war solved the problem by allowing me to travel widely. I was in the merchant marine from 1942 to 1945.

Ultimately Japan satisfied your travel bug.

In 1945, I was presented with a single option: going back to Ohio to start work. I discovered that the foreign service was looking for volunteers to go to the occupied countries. I filled out their papers and was allowed to choose between Germany and Japan. I had already been to Europe, and liked it, so I thought I'd go back. I chose Germany, and they, in their wisdom, sent me to Japan.

You went back to America twice. What finally made you decide to stay in Japan?

I decided very late; I like to have all options open. I knew that my work was there, my inclinations were there, and most of my emotions were there, but I didn't decide to live there until it became apparent that the main option was staying. At that point I embraced it.

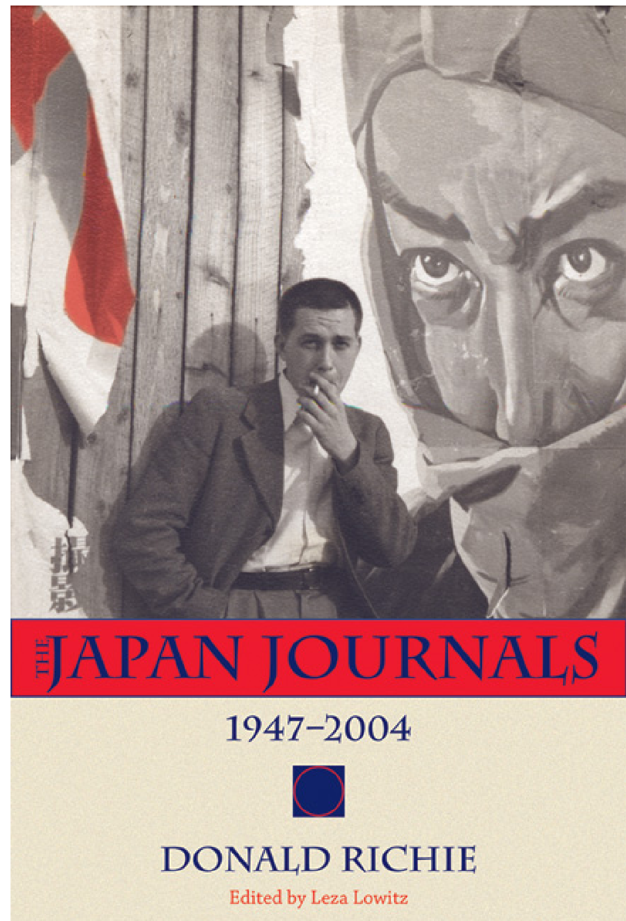
. . . There are places I'd rather live than Japan. I'm very fond of Greece, of Morocco, but in those places I'd die from a surfeit of pleasure or sunburn or something; I would not be productive. . . . People say, "When did you fall in love with Japan?" I never did; Japan is not lovable, but it's supremely interesting. I put a great emphasis on learning, and in Japan you learn something new every day.

Can you give an example?

U.S. MP directs traffic in Ginza without cars in about 1947.

When you first get there everything seems different. The assumptions that people work on are not those you grew up with. You learn a different method of thinking. I still wake up in the morning wondering what I'm going to learn today. And I always learn something; I watch someone doing something and suddenly understand why, by putting everything I've learned before together. When I first came, it was daily. The first time I saw geta [wooden sandals], I didn't realize you were supposed to wear them on your feet. What you learn becomes more subtle, more sophisticated, the longer you stay; but the process is the same.

You seem to have been more revealing about your sexuality in your recent book "The Japan Journals." Did that have any bearing on your decision to stay?



One of the reasons I stayed in Japan was that sexually I could fit in there. People don't judge by the kind of standards that were used in Ohio in the '30s. So I felt at home there; I felt free, in a way I couldn't in my own country. I don't think any person ought to be evaluated on the grounds of their sexuality. Sexuality implies a specific monolithic thing, and nobody's sex life is like that. It's difficult to put a label on yourself, and I think it's very wrong to do so.

One of the reasons I like Japan is that it doesn't label. So if I've become more confessional, it's simply that, heretofore, I thought that it was nobody's business. However, I did discuss it in

my journals. I had decided they were going to be published posthumously. Then three years ago I had a nearly fatal heart attack, and I realized that I wanted to put the journals out in the fashion that I wanted to see them. So I published them, and the world is treating it as though something's been divulged. It was all there, if you had eyes to see. How do I feel about it now? I feel a great deal of relief. It's a thing I don't have to think about anymore.

Was your friendship with Mishima Yukio influenced by that issue?

Mishima was, for his time and country, fairly open. When two stamp collectors get together, they have a certain camaraderie. They know the subject, and they can be at home with each other. It was that way with Mishima and me. We really never talked about the subject; but it was assumed that we knew.

Fog shrouds U.S. Gen. Douglas MacArthur's headquarters
in the Dai-Ichi Seimei Building in Hibiya.

You've known very many Japanese people, both famous and not. Who are the ones you remember most fondly?

There's no one I don't remember fondly. Memory is a sacred trust. But there are people that I miss. I never knew filmmaker Ozu Jiro very well, but not having him there makes you miss him. I've made friends who have died; naturally I miss them. Mainly, I miss the people who taught me things. Not necessarily teachers, and they can be older or younger than I am, but these are the people whose memory I cherish, and whom I continue to see, if they're still around. This includes all sorts of people: It includes one of the maids we had in the house, it includes students, bosom friends and casual acquaintances. But I would not have had any of these in Ohio.

Writing about Japan is full of generalizations, but you write about individuals. Was that a conscious decision?

It was not conscious. If it's valid now, one reason is that I didn't even think of it; I never knew these writings would be published. "The Inland Sea" started as a private journal. Naturally I chose things which appealed to me. I didn't do things which did not appeal, like study the culture. This strong interest in people is very natural in my case. It has to do with the fact that I'm interested in details, not generalities. The more I read of Nihonjinron [a genre of writing emphasizing the purportedly unique characteristics of the Japanese], the more tired I got. I don't believe in Nihonjinron, because Japan is composed of individuals.

You have been a pioneer in promoting Japanese film worldwide. When did you first see a Japanese film, and how did you respond to it?

When I got there, the Occupation was still in its infant stages, and very rigid. There were signs on the wall: "No fraternization with indigenous personnel." You had no way of knowing the Japanese; everything was off limits. The idea was to keep the occupiers and the occupied very separate. Of course this didn't last long, because people are people. In my case, it didn't last long because I wanted to know more about the Japanese. The only Japanese I knew were in American propaganda, with slanted eyes and

buck teeth and horn-rimmed glasses. I looked around, and there was nobody like that. So I wanted to find out about things. The way I had learned to find out about things was in the movies. When I was a child I was put in the theater simply to be kept quiet, so I grew up staring in wonder at the silver screen, and it became my alternate and preferred reality. So when I was presented with a new conundrum, an absolutely different kind of country, my learning method was to go to the movies and find out what it meant. . . . I would see one opaque film after another, and I would start learning.

You have lived through so many changes. Which change would you say is the most significant?

There used to be an affinity, a truce, between the Japanese and nature. The Japanese recognized the limitations of being human. You can see this in the poetry, in classical Japanese art: The idea that nature and man could live together. I've written about how, when I first got there, I saw some workmen building a wall, and there was a very beautiful tree with a low-hanging branch. I watched those men laboriously constructing a hole in the wall for the branch. Somebody asked me, "What is it you regret most about changing Japan?," and it's the same: I regret the loss of this affinity with nature. I suppose it's part of Westernization that it would be lost; now it's cheaper to tear down something than to conserve it.

Despite that regret, you've chosen to live in the most modern city in Japan. Did you ever think of relocating to an older city like Kyoto? What kept you in Tokyo?

One answer would be that I knew Kyoto would become the new Tokyo; that the Japan I admired, the symbiotic Japan, was doomed. The more honest answer is that I love the ambiguity, the anonymity of living with a mass of people. . . . I can define my solitary nature against this. I don't know whether I'd be strong enough to do that in the country. I'd become prey to all sorts of vulgar emotions like boredom. I don't like provincial Japan particularly. Some cities are beautiful, like Matsue, Shimane Prefecture, which Lafcadio Hearn liked so much, but people like Hearn are looking for a home. I've got a home: It's inside me. I don't need the reassurance of an outside thing.

The last line of your book "Tokyo" is that you are now living through what will be, in 50 years, someone else's golden age. What made the late '40s and '50s a golden age for you?

Lots of things. One, that I was absolutely new to it. Although I've never become jaded, I've become acclimatized. The freshness of the impressions made the '40s and '50s indelibly golden. Also, a lot of the changes that I deplore had not taken place. There was a kind of openness, an innocence; there was a general trust which is not to be seen now. When we ride in the subways we have the dour Tokyo face; we have people carefully examining their portable phones, not looking at anybody else; we have people plugging up their ears with Walkmans to keep human sounds out. In this great age of communication, people avoid communicating. It used to be like Thailand; people used to voluntarily smile at each other. I open myself to charges of colonialism, but I liked Japan best as a third-world country.

Even so, your writing does not tell Japan what to do. Travel writer Pico Iyer called you "the most gracious of guests." What has it taught you to be a guest for so long?

Probably some of it is just laziness. As a guest, you don't have to take the responsibility of being a host. But the common thing that you see -- Japan ought to do this, should do that -- is based on mental images which are constructed

of the country. Many of the early people who started writing books were missionaries, and it was insisted that they mess into other people's lives, giving commands. I don't come from a religious family, so I was spared this, and I learned how highly the position of guest was thought of.

You are regarded as someone who's interpreted Japan for non-Japanese, but what do your Japanese readers make of you?

I don't really have Japanese readers, because so few of my books are translated. Donald Keene's books are translated, because he is a true authority, and most readers want to be told how to think. I'm in no position to do this. I merely reflect on what I've seen; I don't really have answers. For me, the detail is the most important part; if you've understood the detail, you've understood everything. This is not something that the common reader looks forward to. So the books that are translated, for instance "The Image Factory," are books that are highly opinionated: This is what readers want.

Do you want to be better known in the country where you've lived for 60 years?

I don't know. Do I care what the Japanese make of me and think of me? I think I'm more ambitious actually; I want to be a world figure. I want to become emblematic of somebody who lived successfully someplace else.

Although you value the past, you seem very focused on the future. What plans or hopes do you still have?

I appreciate the past emotionally, but intellectually I am acutely interested in the present. That's what The Image Factory is about; in my new book on film, I tried to get the youngest and newest directors, because it's part of a continuing pattern. If I don't show that pattern, I haven't shown my subject completely.

As to your question, there's a lot of work I still want to do. I intend to stay in Japan, to do what I'm doing now, until I'm no longer able.

At your age, you must be concerned about your legacy. What are you trying to do about influencing the way you'll be regarded in the future?

One of the first things was to have the journals published. The way that I presented them is how I would like to be remembered. I'm making sure that the evidence will go on after me. My papers are being received by Boston University. I want people to have the material they need in case they're interested. That's about all that I care about. I have a place reserved for me in film history, in that I happen to be the one, with Joe Anderson, who first wrote about Japanese film. I'm working to make sure that at least some of my books remain in print. Naturally, at my age, you start sweeping the floor, looking into corners and putting things into boxes. That's what I'm doing now.

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