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## Reviews of Books

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Yuko Midori, *Igirisu jin wa risou ga osuki*. Kinokuniya Shoten, 2002. 212p. ISBN 4-314-00911. Yen 1600

*Igirisu jin wa risou ga osuki* ("The English who love ideals") is a departure from many of the books about Britain written for the Japanese market. The country of Peter Rabbit and, more recently, Harry Potter, is often described in words revealing a fervent Anglophilia. For example, Lady Toshiko Marks (once married to Michael Marks, grandson of the co-founder of the retail group Marks and Spencer), has extolled all things British in a series of books with titles like *Otona no kuni igirisu to kodomo no kuni nihon* ("Grown-up Britain and juvenile Japan") and *Yutori no kuni igirisu to narikin no kuni nihon* ("Britain, land of comfort and nouveau riche Japan"). Culinary revisionism could be an apt description of *Igirisu wa oishii* ("Britain is delicious") in which another Anglophile, Nozumi Hayashi, takes the reader on a tour of England's gastronomic wonders. *Igirisu jin wa risou ga osuki* by Yuko Midori, seeks to restore some balance to what she sees as an excessively rosy perception of Britain held by many Japanese.

According to Midori, a short-cut to understanding the English (Midori explicitly states that her book is primarily about the English or *ingurando jin*, as opposed to *igirisu jin* or the British as a whole) is possible once you appreciate two things about them; they are both *akirame no warui* ("they find it difficult to resign themselves to a less than favourable situation") and *omedetai* ("they are quite happy to walk around smiling in the dark"). This pronouncement on the English character may sound harsh, but Midori's diagnosis was reached after a long period of close observation: she has lived in England for over 15 years, and now resides in a leafy suburb of London with her English husband. Over eleven chapters, Midori illustrates how the two previously mentioned flaws in the national character can be held responsible for many of the country's misfortunes.

The woeful state of Britain's NHS (National Health Service) is the subject of the book's opening chapter. The NHS was established after the war to provide citizens with free, comprehensive health care from the cradle to the grave. It was an idealistic concept, but it lived up to its ideals when those paying into the system and the users existed in some kind of equilibrium. Midori, drawing on her own experience caring for her elderly mother-in-law, criticizes the contradictions in today's NHS with people forced to wait for up to three years for a hip operation, while breast enlargements and sex change operations are, she states, carried out as priority. Even with the NHS on the verge of collapse in some areas of the country, the government would not contemplate charging patients for hospital food (as they do in Japan) or requiring payment from those who have not contributed to the system. The English, as the title of her book suggests, are fond of ideals, and reluctant to accept when an ideal is shown to be unworkable or flawed (this is the *akirame no warui* aspect of their character). Midori argues that maintaining the illusion of an ideal system, where everyone receives care, is paramount. That is why, Midori maintains, the NHS continues to provide free artificial insemination for "lesbian mothers" while old people die waiting for essential treatment.

Even when they get the chance to realize their ideals, the English are still not content because they believe that everyone has the right to pursue *kanpeki na shiawase* (“perfect happiness”). Midori illustrates this point with the story of a couple who took the local health authority to court after the woman gave birth to three children. The free fertility treatment they had received on the NHS had been too successful, and they claimed it was the responsibility of the local authority to help pay for the cost of the “extra” children.

In another chapter, Midori describes the obsession with houses in a country where someone is not really considered a fully-fledged member of society until they have stepped onto the property ladder. Even with astronomically high property prices, the English are loath to abandon their quest for the perfect residence (this may explain why Londoners are presently buying houses with no down payments and 100% mortgages). Moreover, as the expression “first time buyer” suggests, English people regard houses as an investment; people buy and sell as they move towards their ideal residence. Midori points out that in Japan, where buying a house is regarded as *issho no kaimono* (“a once-in-a-lifetime purchase”), there is no need for such an expression.

Midori scours every aspect of English behaviour in support of her thesis. In a chapter entitled “*ganso kyogyubyo no kuni ni manabu?*” (“Can we learn from the country that gave us mad cow disease?”), she takes a disparaging look at English vegetarians. These people gain sustenance from nut loaves and vegburgers; vegetarian food in the guise of meat. Midori argues that this is because even vegetarians do not want to be denied the English culinary ideal of “meat and two veg”.

There is also a chapter on VJ Day (Victory Over Japan Day), a memorial event that most Japanese visitors to the UK are blissfully ignorant of. She argues that criticism of Japan’s conduct in the war, which invariably resurfaces on the pages of British press in the weeks preceding VJ Day (August 15), again stems from the desire for an unattainable ideal. Should Japan apologize every year to the Asian countries it occupied and to the British whose POWs it mistreated? Yes, if Japan, like the English, believes in the possibility of *riso no senso* (“an ideal war”). No, argues Midori, if we contend that “an ideal war” is an oxymoron.

Why are the English so set on ideals? One reason she considers is that the English, unlike the Japanese, do not have an ingrained appreciation of teachings of *Hojoki*. The *Hojoki*, a book written in the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century, extols the virtues of the Buddhist teaching *mujo*, the belief that everything is transient. Midori suggests that having had their wooden houses destroyed and many lives lost by frequent earthquakes, fire, and floods, the Japanese have a deep-rooted *mujo*-outlook on life. This in turn has made them better able to accept the inevitable and resign themselves to adverse situations. In contrast, the English, in their brick-built homes, where, as the expression goes, they feel “as safe as houses”, do not find comfort in the words *shikataga nai* (“it cannot be helped”).

The picture Midori paints of the English contains some of the negative elements that are often attributed to the Japanese. For example, she offers a retort against those foreigners who bemoan the insularity of the Japanese by pointing out that most English people have minimal knowledge of Japan. The *nihonjin ron* (talking about the Japanese) genre of books may extol the uniqueness of Japanese culture, but the English, argues Midori, also have an inflated sense of their own importance. In support of her assertion, she relates the famous anecdote about how the BBC (in the era before the Channel Tunnel) would broadcast weather reports warning that *Europe* had been cut off due to fog.

At times Midori’s argument seems over-stretched. She asserts, for example, that the fact organ transplants, illegal in Japan until 1997, were permitted so early on in the UK shows the English believe that *risou no shakai dewa, donna ningen mo shinu beki dewa nai* (“in an ideal society no one should die”). In addition, although she draws on sources from a variety of newspapers, many of her references are from the *News of the World*, a sensationalist tabloid. Although providing ammunition for her argument, such articles from the tabloids very often do not give a balanced picture of reality.

Midori may on occasions lapse into tabloid-like hyperbole, but overall *Igirisu jin wa risou ga osuki* is an interesting, up-to-date analysis of the English which also offers insightful comparisons between two island peoples. It is also written in a wry, witty style. It was refreshing to read an unambiguous critique of a society (even if it is my own) in Japanese, a language that is all too often cloaked in vagueness.

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