
Reviews of Books

Frederik L. Schodt, *Native American in the Land of the Shogun*

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In 1848, age 24, Ranald MacDonald left the whaling ship he was serving on and entered Japan 'when it was closed to the outside world'. It is a feat Frederik L. Schodt sums up in the last chapter of the book to be as great as 'an individual in our time deciding to go to the moon, alone, and somehow doing it'. Born of a Scottish father and a Chinook mother, this marginal figure in the history of U.S.-Japan relations deserves a more generous space in our consciousness because—to return to Schodt—'there is now a real need for heroes who can transcend national and ethnic boundaries', which the author insists MacDonald eminently qualifies 'in carving his own path in life, in an often unfriendly world'. This 'true cultural and racial hybrid' is a veritable Proteus, for by the next sentence he is transformed into the American Everyman who finally 'teaches us that ordinary individuals can indeed do extraordinary things'.

Native American in the Land of the Shogun is probably the largest literary red herring since Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*: a whale of a story minus the whale. The narrative of MacDonald's time in Japan actually begins on page 185 with the reader having to pass through a preamble on his last years (chapter 1), an account of the geo-political situation of his birthplace from the time of the French revolution to the American Civil War (chapter 2), the circumstances of three Japanese sailors shipwrecked in America that the subject never actually met (chapter 3), an account of his early education and early employment through the letters of a father he never once saw (chapters 4 & 5), as well as an extended narrative on the whaling industry at Sag Harbour (chapter 6) and in the Hawaiian islands (chapter 7). Whalers were then the vanguard of continental America's connection with Japan, routinely trawling the waters off its northern islands that provided the profession with some of its richest grounds.

If you are willing to wade through this to page 185, where the book rendezvous with its subject (rather aptly in chapter 8 as 'Rishiri Island: The Adventure Begins'), be warned that even then Schodt's whale appears only in spouts or a tail. From page 201, the promised subject is submerged beneath the author's own visit to MacDonald's point of first contact (i.e. Rishiri Island) on June 14, 1992—and from page 204 onwards through to the end of the chapter: the author's return in September 1998 'to commemorate the 150th anniversary of MacDonald's landing in Japan'. While the next chapter (i.e. 9) opens with MacDonald's Japanese adventure, at 'around ten in the morning, in early August 1848', it barely lasts two pages as the author takes a detour to the geographic and economic position of northern Japan today. The beast promised in the title does not in fact reappear until the last two pages of the chapter, that is, after a survey of the relationship between Japan and Russia from 1695 to 1811! Chapter 10—'Under Control of the Matsumae Domain'—ostensibly about MacDonald's confinement in a castle town in the southwest corner of Hokkaido, again features the obligatory few pages on MacDonald followed by the author's Japanese odyssey and another historical run-around. This time Schodt decides to flesh out the Ainu

revolt against the Japanese in 1456, seeing fit to return to MacDonald in Japan only after detailing the personal circumstances of all the other *gaijin* sailors in the country. With 9 of its 19 pages devoted to MacDonald's experience in Nagasaki, chapter 11 actually marks the longest point the book ever directly stays with the 'half-Chinook, half-Scot adventurer'. By Chapter 12, however, it is firmly returned to narrating around its subject: a fast-forward to the present followed by a rewind to a broader and more distant historical canvas (the focus here being the Japanese experience of the English language). By chapter 13, MacDonald is out of Japan. The book runs for two chapters more on the attempts during and after MacDonald's lifetime to secure his legacy.

MacDonald in Japan occupies less than fifty pages of the total narrative, and what little that Schodt brings up is put towards an extremely questionable end. In the immediate aftermath of his adventure, MacDonald had confessed to his friends how 'he thought every moment [that] they would chop off his head'. He also complained about how the Japanese forced him to tread on Christian imagery and referred to them as 'civilized savages' who must be 'taught to understand the right due to Christians'. This is in complete contrast to his autobiography, posthumously published in 1923, where he says he 'never did ... receive a harsh word, or even an unfriendly look'. Indeed, he goes on to claim that of all the peoples he has met, both 'civilized and uncivilized ... there are none to whom [he] feel[s] more kindly—more grateful— ... none whom [he] esteem[s] more highly'. The man who went to Japan in 1848 was very different from the one recalling his experiences as an old man. Noting this, Schodt highlights the 'mini love affair ... going on between North America and Japan' in the late nineteenth century: the context had changed and MacDonald had obviously changed with it. It is an instance of acuity that never quite reoccurs as the rest of the Schodt's book does not discriminate so finely between what is written at the time of his Japanese odyssey, from that produced thirty or so years later for the autobiography. This promiscuous mix of sources allows Schodt to impute to the young MacDonald ideas and motivations that belong to the older man, most notably the latter's notion of racial sympathy between himself as a Chinook and the people of Japan. By this sleight of hand, MacDonald's trip to Japan is made a search for roots rather than yet another example of the imperialistic opportunism of the time. That there is no actual evidence directly linking the young MacDonald with this cherished thesis is no obstacle at all to the author, who takes a speculative detour on the many books on Japan that MacDonald could or would or must have read to prepare himself for his historic entry. How could the young MacDonald be interested in meeting the people of Japan under these terms when he had removed himself from the Chinooks to such an extent that, as he admitted with some embarrassment to a friend in his old age, he had no idea of even their ceremonial dress?

Finally, how can anything in the book 'transcend racial and ethnic boundaries' when the author displays himself obsessed by the very issues of race and ethnicity? He betrays this by his formation of a title that flaunts two of the most sensationalised badges of racial identity. In the book itself, while digressing upon his own Japanese trip, he finds it necessary to place his companions into neat ethnic boxes: 'Jonathan Kahananui, a Hawaiian veteran of World War Two who identified with MacDonald's adventure and the Hawaiians in the story ... Homer Yasui ... of the famous Yasui clan of Japanese Americans, who early on had settled the Hood River area along the Columbia' etc. In chapter 8, which flashes the daguerreotype made of his subject in 1853, Schodt insists that the Japanese artist of the MacDonald Rishiri monument has etched 'his face ... a little broader, a little more Asian, with a flatter nose and smaller eyes'. Even if the Japanese see themselves in these terms today, it does not follow that they would hold a similar view in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, as a description, it surely cannot be imputed to Indians, or Arabs

or to Greeks—or does Schodt’s ‘Asian’ refer only to Japanese-looking people like ... what? The Chinooks?

Native American in the Land of Shogun is a confused work with many objectionable observations.

