
Reviews of Books

Simon Winchester, *The Man who Loved China*, New York, Harper Collins, 2008, 316 p. ISBN 978-0-06-088459-8 (Published in the UK as *Bomb, Book and Compass*) & Donald Keene, *Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, 196 p. ISBN 978-0-231-14440-7

Ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism* there is need to proceed warily in any reading and ingesting of ideas about "Asian" cultures. It is therefore something of a relief to read two books that don't transgress the ideological boundary by "othering" their topic. "The Man who Loved China"¹ is a sympathetic biography of Joseph Needham, the greatest sinologist of the last century. "Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan" is Donald Keene's autobiography, its subtitle aptly indicating the centrality of Japan in his life. Keene is famed for his work on Japanese literature, both in commentaries and translations.

Both books reveal their subjects' profound attachment to the country of their intellectual adoption. Keene states: *I sometimes think that if, as the result of an accident, I were to lose my knowledge of Japanese, there would not be much left for me. Japanese, which at first had no connection with my ancestors, my literary tastes, or my awareness of myself as a person, has become the central element of my life.* Joseph Needham's heart was also in China as the title of that biography asserts. The country became central to his intellectual and moral concerns for the last fifty-eight years of his life.

Needham is best known as the author of the 25-volume *Science and Civilization in China* and his biographer, Simon Winchester, brings to the present task, the same enthusiasm and brio that characterized his earlier biographies of James Murray and of William Smith. All three were men of extraordinary energy and influence, and perhaps with Darwin, amongst the last great Englishmen moved by the empiricist spirit of the eighteenth century Enlightenment and the nineteenth century desire to collect and classify all knowledge. Winchester is also known for his account of William Minor's contribution to the OED in the form of reference slips², an account that presumably spurred him to his greatest work; on Murray and his dictionary under the fitting title, *The Meaning of Everything*.

Needham (1900-1994) came from a middle-class London family and was a highly-regarded biochemist in Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. In 1924 he married another scientist, the anatomist Dorothy Moyle. From the start their union was understood as "open", a dispensation that led to a subsequent relationship that changed his life. By the age of 39 he had published two books, the second on embryology and

¹ This refers to the American title. The English title is the more sensational *Bomb, Book and Compass*, referring to three notable Chinese inventions. That title no doubt alludes to Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

² Minor had been committed to an asylum for murder, a sentence apparently mitigated by his insanity, yet from there he contributed more literary references to Murray's great project than any other single contributor.

morphogenesis had gained him international recognition. This could be said of many academics of course, but Needham's reputation was such that Richard Dawkins, for example, refers to him as the last great polymath. In 1937 several Chinese students came to study in Needham's laboratory and through them he developed an interest in classical Chinese. He was taught its orthography by one of them, Lui Guizhen, who soon became his lover, subsequently his lifelong companion, and fifty-two years later, his wife. For the next 50 years China became his principal interest. He developed his own system for learning its characters and methodically compiled many notebooks of vocabulary. He is said to have learnt about 5,000 characters eventually and to have developed an energetic, but idiosyncratic writing style. He soon moved beyond language to an interest in Chinese politics, as these were the years following the Japanese prosecution of war against China in 1937. Needham took to the streets handing out pamphlets encouraging a boycott of Japanese goods. His sympathy was clearly with the Communists, as he had declared himself a socialist and humanist much earlier, in a stark rejection of the ideology under which he had been raised and of its class-ridden assumptions. His prominence in scientific circles and vocal advancement of the need to help Chinese science in its wartime struggle resulted in his being recommended by the Royal Society for the position of director of the Sino-British Science Co-operation Office in China, from 1942 to 1946, a post actually setup just for him.

He reached China early in 1943 and was officially attached to the British Embassy in Chongqing as a diplomat and accredited to the Nationalist government of Chiang Kaishek³. By this time the government of China had moved to Chongqing (in the South-western province of Sichuan) beyond the reach of the main Japanese forces. The post was all Needham could have wished for and it afforded him perhaps the most exciting years of his life. His official job was to help the scientific research activities of the dispersed Chinese universities⁴, but he was also able to collaborate with the Chinese historian Wang Ling and together they also set about collecting documentation and examples of China's earliest science and technology. He was astounded and delighted at what he saw of the ingenuity of contemporary Chinese scientists in improvising and using discarded and unlikely materials to maintain their research and run their laboratories.

Chongqing itself pleased him despite the privations of war. Its location allowed him the chance to make two long expeditions, one north-westwards beyond Gansu to the oasis of Dunhuang and the other eastwards towards the coast of Fujian, mostly collecting artifacts and texts. This being wartime meant that transport was of the most primitive kind, but the rugged conditions suited him well. Marooned for a time at Dunhuang, he visited the Mogao grottoes from which, earlier in the century, the infamous explorer Aurel Stein had plundered thousands of priceless manuscripts and removed brilliant 7th century Buddhist frescoes, which now lie in shameful seclusion in the British Museum. The principal object plundered was the so-called Diamond Sutra, the earliest example of printed text in existence, confirming China's claim to have invented printing six centuries before it emerged in the West. These objects and texts documented the core of the transmission and evolution of Buddhism as it moved from India to China. On this expedition he met and became a lifelong friend of Rewi Alley, perhaps the most famous and respected of several noteworthy westerners in China in that period⁵. On these and eight shorter expeditions he estimated that he had travelled about 30,000 miles through China, seeing nearly all but the far west (Xinjiang) and north-east of the

³ The corruption of the nationalists was quite apparent to him, confirming his support for Mao, and while in China he met and became a long time friend of Zhou Enlai. This contact enabled his visits to the country after 1949.

⁴ Most universities in eastern China had re-located in the south-west along with industries and the government. Amongst his achievements Needham was able, despite the ongoing war, to secure needed scientific material from the West and have it air-lifted from Burma to Kunming, this being the only supply route available.

country (then under the puppet Manchuko governate). On his return to England he commenced his great work, which thereafter consumed the better part of his next forty years. The other part of this life was devoted to embryology, the fledgling UNESCO, political activities in the advancement of the cause of Chinese revolution and administrative duties at Cambridge in his role as Master of Gonville and Caius.

Winchester belittles his subject to some extent for his political views, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight and through a lack of an understanding of the extent of the West's vitriolic stance against Mao's revolution. Throughout his life Needham held solid and courageous left-wing views and was a contributor to leftist causes. This made him an unpopular figure in the USA and probably cost him honours and recognition that might otherwise have come his way. Despite this he is said to have been the only living Englishman to have been a Fellow of the Royal Society, Fellow of the British Academy and have held the royal gong, Companion of Honour. The term "larger than life" seems trite⁶, but it accurately describes Needham. Winchester manages to convey the physical, intellectual, emotional and moral strength of this extraordinary man. Yet at times he seems mildly censorious of his subject's personal behaviour, such as his indulgence in a *ménage à trois* for most of his life.

This review must only cover a fraction of Needham's life. Winchester though covers it in great detail, leaving one only wishing to hear more. The book has interesting photos and some illustrations of Needham's travels in China. It has a useful bibliography and index, and the appendix lists more than 300 inventions attributed to the Chinese by Needham. What remains unanswered is the conundrum known as Needham's question, notably, the reason for the failure of China to move from its brilliant inventions to a full-scale industrialised society. It is certainly a book one would want to re-read.

Donald Keene's book is in many ways the antithesis of Winchester's. To begin with, it is smaller and fits beautifully in the hand. One is immediately well disposed to read it or even put it in a pocket to read on the train. The other is bulkier and much less comfortable to hold. Keene's is also printed on a glossy and whiter paper, in a more agreeable and readable typeface⁷. Keene's page is more easily read, having 55 character spaces to the line compared with 70 (closer to the limit of readability) in the other. Stylistically too the books are wide apart. While Winchester writes in a sophisticated journalistic and lexically dense⁸ style as fits his topic, Keene writes with beautiful simplicity⁹. His *Chronicles* were originally serialized in an English-print Japanese newspaper leading one to think that the intended audience might have been Japanese as much as English speakers. He does not use chapters, but rather divides his account into 42 sections, averaging 4 pages each.

Keene's childhood memories were not particularly happy, principally because of a bad relationship be-

⁵ The New Zealander, Alley, is still one of the most praised and respected Westerners from that period of China's history. He was deeply involved in setting up re-located factories and schools beyond the reach of the Japanese forces.

⁶ At least we can spare him ephemeral fame by not using the word "legend".

⁷ Winchester's printer's font is ugly and distracting. A font should be an imperceptible medium, but in this case it is not. Upper-case characters are proportionately much larger than lower-case and the ascender heights appear equal to the x-height. None of the numerous fonts on my computer can adequately illustrate this here. The numeral 1 appears annoyingly as cap. i (I).

⁸ Lexical density is a measure of readability based on the proportion of different words to the total number of words in a text. It is also known as type-token ratio. The lower the ratio the higher the demand on vocabulary knowledge.

⁹ His style leaves the reader thinking that it might have been influenced by the language and literature of his adoption, if one can surmise from the style exhibited in English translations of Japanese literature.

tween his parents and a loneliness due to his clumsiness at sports that set him apart from other boys¹⁰. They were leavened somewhat by stirring events such as the trip he made accompanying his father to Europe at the age of nine. Although he had perceived even then that his father was not a successful businessman, they did the trip in style, by liner in first class and across Europe staying in first class hotels and dining in good restaurants. This trip sparked his interest in languages. His life changed after being accepted into Columbia University in 1938 at the young age of 16. By chance he sat next to a Chinese boy, Lee, and they became friends, dining together each night. To this he attributes his subsequent career as it aroused his interest in Chinese writing, which Lee had begun to teach him¹¹. For him it was an epiphany similar to Needham's in the revelation that a simple group of elegant strokes could carry such visual meaning and cultural information. As Keene remembers it "each character was like a postage stamp that I pasted in the album of my memory". As well as ancient Greek he studied Japanese under a charismatic teacher, Tsunoda-sensei, whom he has remembered for the rest of his life. Keene conveys well the stimulating academic atmosphere of pre-war Columbia. Its great teachers became conscious role-models for his subsequent lecturing career¹². Shortly after America had entered the war, Keene bought a remaindered set of Arthur Waley's translation of *The Tale of Genji*. It evoked for him a "magical...distant and beautiful world". The antagonisms of Genji's world "never disintegrated into the violence" he perceived in his own world¹³. For Keene the books became "a refuge for all I hated in the world around me".

Keene graduated during the later stages of World War II and joined the US Navy's Japanese Language School. From there he began his wartime career, which mainly involved reading captured documents and later interviewing Japanese POWs in Okinawa, Guam, Hawaii and China. His chronicles of that time belong to that genre of wartime story-telling that emphasize the general chaos, personal incompetence and farcicality exhibited in warfare. In interviewing Japanese captives he soon developed a sympathy for their plight and when he later went to Japan he tried to contact their families. At the end of the war he traveled home from China via Japan, contriving to spend a week there as part of his flight from the hated job of war-crimes investigator. For Keene this was a kind of homecoming, and despite the desperate situation of post-war Tokyo, he saw at last the country that had been deep in his thoughts since encountering Genji.

After being demobilized, Keene went back to Columbia to study further for the MA, again under Tsunoda¹⁴, yet all the time harbouring a strong desire of returning to Japan. This was impossible in post-war conditions however, and in compensation he seriously considered moving to Chinese studies. Having met Harvard students of Japanese in his wartime job he decided instead to move there to continue his studies, a move approved of by Tsunoda as *henzan*, the moving from one centre of Buddhism to another to advance one's studies. Amongst others, Keene met Edwin Reischauer, then an assistant professor¹⁵. He again took up Chinese as well, under the teaching of a leading scholar William Hung. With his GI scholarship

¹⁰ He mentions in passing a sister who died when he must have been 10 years of age.

¹¹ Being from Canton (Guangzhou) his friend Lee was unsure of standard pronunciation so speaking was not much a part of the lessons.

¹² One of these, Mark van Doren, is mentioned in the autobiographies of many other former Columbia students.

¹³ Keene had become attached to pacifism before the beginning of the European war.

¹⁴ He claims that Tsunoda was "mercilessly exploited by Columbia, although evidence is not adduced for the claim. Keene was Tsunoda's only student for some time pre-WW 2. Many language teachers in classes of thirty would appreciate such exploitation.

¹⁵ Reischauer was later to become John Kennedy's ambassador to Japan, and marry Matsutaka Haru, the author of the engaging biography, *Samurai and Silk*.

rights due to end he began to look for a job teaching Japanese, but only one was available, in Maine. This was a move unthinkable to a New Yorker.

Instead he applied for and got a fellowship to Cambridge, where he intended to study other languages, but was there discouraged from learning Arabic and Persian by a don who suggested he'd better not bother the professors of those subjects. He continued with Japanese for the degree of AM, the university not having recognized his earlier degrees. He was also asked to teach Japanese in the university. Cambridge turned out to be a marvelous experience for him; in later life he speculated about whether he should indeed have made his career there. He loved the intellectual life of the university, its architectural beauty, bicycles, and its closeness to London's musical life and opera in particular. He attended Bertrand Russell's lectures and had a weekly beer-drinking arrangement with him¹⁵. He also met Arthur Waley, "a genius", who was then at London University. Waley, it seems, had never visited Japan, anticipating a disappointment that he might find it nothing like the world of Genji.

On his return to Columbia one summer he searched for ways of getting back to Japan and eventually succeeded in gaining a fellowship that gave him a year's study there. This suited him beyond all prizes and began his intimate connection with the country and its contemporary men of literature¹⁶. He was disappointed with the opportunities Kyoto University offered him, noting that most professors were so poorly paid that they had to take many jobs elsewhere and seldom turned up for lectures. He enjoyed living in Kyoto however, in some part because he found the perfect accommodation in a detached house in an old part of Higashiyama, to which he returned on every subsequent visit. He extended his year by another during which he spent more time in Tokyo, gradually coming to meet all the important writers and commentators of the day. The greater part of his chronicles is then taken up with his engagement with Japanese literature and its practitioners, many of whose works he translated into English. He soon became a prominent medium of contact between Japanese and Western writers and publishers, an active member of PEN and advisor to prize-awarding committees. In this role he was the foremost supporter of Mishima for the Nobel Prize in literature and for other prizes. He takes some blame for both Mishima's and Kawabata's suicides, tragedies that he believes were connected to the prize. In Kawabata's case Keene thinks that that author felt that Mishima should have got it¹⁷. He also describes the last months of Mishima's life and the premonition he had leading up to the event.

For most of his life Keene has managed to spend at least the summer break from Columbia University in Japan. He had purchased an apartment in Tokyo where he spent every Christmas season in a regular round of visits with friends. He conveys the sense that Tokyo was more of a home to him than New York and he would have lived in Japan permanently it seems, but for the fact that he did not like Japanese breakfasts. In the chronicles he seldom mentions anything about his life in New York or at Columbia after the

¹⁵ He comments on Russell's speaking an "eighteenth century English", a curious observation and one not made by any others. It flies in the face of all evidence from extant (recorded) talks given by Russell. He may have been misled by Russell's precise, highly pitched and inflected yet clearly enunciated speech. Russell's writings are also direct and accessible.

¹⁶ Unlike Joseph Needham, who always preferred the company of young women, Keene seldom mentions any women except his mother, Maria Callas and the wives of his friends. It seems quite apparent that the literary world of Japan in that era was dominated by males.

¹⁷ Keene believes that the vote against Mishima was fostered by an American critic, who assumed Mishima to be a young left-wing radical.

sixties¹⁸.

No review can do justice to this beautiful book: one has the sense of listening to the author telling it in person. The tone is modest and even self-effacing. Keene nowhere reveals the fact that he has published more than twenty monographs on Japanese literature, culture and historical personages, and many notable English translations of Japanese writers. He compares himself unfavourably with Waley: "I...had hoped to become the second Waley. Unfortunately this didn't happen"¹⁹. His opinions are gentle and he admits to a failure at times to understand of his Japanese friends' behaviour and motives. His reticence extends to an extreme modesty in revealing much about his deeper self, perhaps a relic of a withdrawn childhood. His strongest words are confined to deploring the continuing degradation of the cityscape of Kyoto.

The book is particularly important for students of Japanese literature since at least half of it is devoted to discussion of its writers, and may well document details previously unknown. Incidents described in the text are supplemented by many small illustrations by a Japanese artist, Akira Yamaguchi. They are pleasant and decorative, but generally unnecessary and in some cases slightly puerile. There is a fine set of photos at the end and an abbreviated biographical list of the 60 or so Japanese mentioned in the text. There is no index, so chasing up details compels the reader to delve into the text again, which is no hardship.

Michael Herriman

¹⁸ His only reference to the university concerns the strikes and upheavals of the late 60s and early 70s.

¹⁹ Waley was equally a scholar of Chinese and wrote and spoke in at least four other languages, including Ainu.

Reviews of Books

John Lie (2008) *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 229 p, ISBN 9780-520-25820-4

In his 2004 sociological text, *Modern Peoplehood*, John Lie analyses the popular constructions of race, ethnicity and nation that bind people into communities of belonging. Following in the well-worn tradition of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," Lie situates cultural identity firmly in the tenets and principles of European modernity, with its post-Enlightenment binaries which privilege individuality, rationality, democracy, industry and learning. Furthermore, and following the arguments of globalisation social theory which have become popular in recent years, Lie uses examples of transnationalism and diaspora to show the modern reality of multiple and complex personal identities. Faced with a revisionist history of nineteenth and twentieth-century global flows that emphasises movement and miscegenation over stability and purity, isomorphic nationalism and the essentialist myth of singular identity is ousted in favour of post-modern and postcolonial fragmentation.

Lie's most recent text, *Zainichi (Koreans in Japan): Diasporic Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity*, his latest in a trilogy of books on Korean migration, continues his study of inclusion, exclusion and categories of belonging. Read as a follow-up to *Modern Peoplehood*, it is certainly interesting to consider the applicability of such theory to the Asian context. Lie, who was born in Korea, educated in Japan and the United States, and is now Professor of Area Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, is well placed to undertake such a task. Lie's inside-outside position is highly valuable in Japanese sociology and anthropology, a field dominated by Western academics. While high profile publications by foreigners do bring much needed cross-cultural nous to the discipline, there is the inevitable bias of assuming Western academic discourse wholly adequate to explicating Asian contexts. Lie's analysis of *Zainichi* negotiates this difficulty.

Lie's close study illuminates the complex and nuanced experiences of over 100 years of movement of peoples between Japan and the two Koreas. His frequent use of Korean, Japanese and *Zainichi* fiction, both texts and writers' background and position, brings depth to the expression of identity and culture that I often find lacking in "pure" anthropology based on interviews and other such empirical research. In fact, Lie's approach is fitting, considering that postcolonial analysis is most developed in the field of English literature, only belatedly extended into other ex-colonial languages and regions, including South-East Asia. The breadth of his reading makes this a valuable contribution to Asian literatures, giving much-needed publicity to Korean and *Zainichi* writers little known in English. In presenting characters and themes that are often ambivalent, ambiguous or even contradictory in their stances towards *Zainichi* experiences, the literary examples help advance Lie's thesis that the term *Zainichi* does not designate one homogenous, cohesive group identity. Rather, his focus on individual histories proves the reasons for Korean immigration to Japan to be much more diverse than the usual understanding of coerced labour during the period of Japanese colonial rule. In fact, Lie is quite blunt in dismissing the "poor-me-ism" of indignant victimisation that remains integral to narratives of colonisation throughout the world. While Lie's position is contentious, as it

nullifies the postcolonial endeavour for recognition, rights and restitution, it serves his purpose of deconstructing the ethnic essentialism that lumps together all Zainichi into a metanarrative that Japan finds difficult to deal with.

Lie retains a carefully neutral tone throughout the book: he does not condemn the self-serving politicking of pro-repatriation groups Soren and Mindan, nor the Japanese government support of North Korea propaganda, which was considered an expedient way of off-loading Korean nationals from Japan. The author only lightly touches on the controversy over fingerprinting foreign residents, even though Lie himself was involved in the protest. By contrast, he devotes considerable time to two of the largest issues associated with Zainichi; passing and naturalisation. A source of considerable trauma for many colonised peoples, passing is generally accepted to be a no-win situation that perpetuates racism and exclusion by the very fact of not addressing it head on. The difficult choice for Zainichi to use their Korean or Japanese names reduces ethnicity to pure semantics, an either-or label that many resist by changing their names several times during their lives. By the same token, the dilemma for many Zainichi to give up their Korean identity cards for Japanese citizenship may seem a practical step for people committed to living in Japan, but is often seen as a symbolic rejection of family and collusion with Japanese discrimination, and is a decision often accompanied by guilt and a sense of betrayal. Lie shows both issues to be embedded in what he calls Japanese “disrecognition” of the Zainichi presence. The issue of recognition or assimilation is pivotal to all minority discourses in Japan, yet it is difficult for Lie to argue for or against passing and naturalising as Japanese on one hand, or proclaiming Zainichi identity on the other, when he also rejects Zainichi efforts to band together to project a cohesive group identity.

Instead of an either-or dichotomy of chosen allegiance, Lie argues for an emerging “post-Zainichi” era, which recognises an individual’s identity as plural, shifting and complex, and thus promotes the possibility of hyphenated identities such as “Korean-Japanese.” He supports his argument by pointing to the declining incidence of overt Japanese discrimination of Zainichi in recent years. Lie offers many examples of successful Zainichi in academic, political and economic circles, while simultaneously pointing to Zainichi fiction, films and soap operas that portray positive or unproblematic Zainichi-Japanese relations and relationships. This transition, for Lie, is a natural outcome of the waning historical memory of colonisation and first- and second-generation experience. Here, Lie’s version of postcolonialism differs significantly from the way the term is employed by most minorities claiming recognition. For Lie, the “post” is akin to “after,” a dissolving of the problematic rather than its constant remembering in the present. This passing of historical memory allows the focus to rest firmly on contemporary contingencies and aleatory movements that make up the global flow of diaspora and transculturation.

Although convincingly argued, a difficulty with Lie’s argument might be found in his facile use of terminology that does not quite sit comfortably in the Japanese context. While Lie clearly explicates his conception of Zainichi identity as separate from either assimilated Japanese-ness or focused on repatriation to Korea, he spends altogether less time on his title’s terms diaspora and postcolonialism. Perhaps these concepts have long been integrated into Western academese, however, they become potentially problematic when applied to Japan, a nation purportedly monoethnic and insular. Although such tenets underpinning *Nihonjinron* are unofficially acknowledged as *passé*, on the official record, Japan has yet to recognise internal multiculturalism or adequately deal with its colonial past. Thus, for example, the fact that Japan remains the only OECD nation that refuses dual citizenship, and thereby rejects the possibility of recognised multiculturalism, renders problematic Lie’s claim for a hyphenated Korean-Japanese identity. Further paradoxes of terminology—or perhaps of Lie’s academic perspective—include the applicability of Western concepts of selfhood, individuality and free expression of cultural identity in Korean and Japanese societies which are founded on different religious, familial and political structures of meaning, obligation and loyalty. This uncomfortable equation relates to a criticism commonly levelled at globalisation theory: it pays

too much attention to the kind of inter-national voyaging of white middle class liberals (to which Lie aligns his own experience) rather than to the migrant workers, exiles and refugees who make up the vast majority of human population movement, and whose motivations and constraints are rarely made at the individual level.

One of the strengths of Lie's book is his ability to situate Zainichi experience in an international context, drawing on an impressive and apposite range of thinkers and contexts, including Max Weber, Frantz Fanon, Albert Camus, Malcolm X, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatterri, Zionism, Israeli diaspora, American civil rights activism, the Los Angeles riots and indigenous peoples' movements. At the same time, however, such Western orientation can only be used in contrast with many of the Korean and Zainichi novels and novelists cited throughout the text. Indeed, Lie identifies such an East-West difficulty in his text's closing pages, where he compares Korean diaspora in the US to that in Japan. His quick enumeration of similarities and differences both within the communities themselves and between each other finally finds too many divergences and exceptions to make a meaningful comparison or tidy conclusion. As one of the very few sociological texts dedicated solely to Zainichi, however, Lie's book offers a well-rounded insight that allows its contradictions to stand, and therefore activates the kind of debate of ethnic minorities necessary both in Japan and abroad.

Melissa Kennedy

Reviews of Books

David Crystal, *Txtng. The Gr8 Db8*. Oxford University Press, 2008. 239 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-954490-5. \$13.57

Texting, the curtailed writing peculiar to mobile telephone communication, also known as *short messaging, short mail, SMSing, text messaging* etc., is a genuinely unique linguistic phenomenon, but not because of the novelty of its distinctive language features. According to David Crystal, the author of a new book on texting, most of them are not new at all and existed long before the advent of mobile phones. But one of the reasons which make texting exceptional is the multitude of attitudes and sentiments – from fear and antagonism to fascination and enthusiasm – which this new language managed to generate within the short space of a decade. The other noticeable peculiarity of texting is that, although there has been a huge amount of research done on the subject, there are no decent, in Crystal's opinion, publications about texting available to the general public. Filling this void is the author's principal motivation in writing *Txtng. The Gr8 Db8*; another is answering the most common question connected with texting – is it good or bad for language, and for literacy in particular?

The concern about texting is quite understandable – if one takes a look at the statistics, provided in the book. The phenomenal growth in the usage of mobile, or cell phones, accounts for billions of subscribers, all potential users of texting. Crystal quotes the accumulated estimates that indicate that, in 2008, over 3 billion people, half the world's population, had a mobile phone subscription. The technical requirements of most phones limit the maximum size of the message to 160 characters for the Latin alphabet and 70 for Unicode encoding, used in Chinese and Japanese writing. Thus, the sheer number of people, who of necessity have to resort to economical writing, makes texting indeed a global phenomenon, which has attracted a lot of academic and popular interest. The surprising thing, however, is that “little reliable information about the language of texting has become public knowledge” (Crystal, p.7). This, as a result, has given rise to an extensive popular mythology about texting, the most widely spread concern of which is that texting fosters a decline in literacy. Crystal, a well-known advocate of texting, deals with this myth right away: texting “is not a bad thing,” and with this “flag nailed to the mast,” as he puts it, he sets off on his mission to demystify the mysterious language.

The first myth Crystal addresses is the “weirdness” of texting, specifically the use of nonstandard features, contractions and abbreviations, which make messages incomprehensible. Following his argument, this is not entirely true, though some young people do indulge in shorthand just for the sake of originality. In most cases the messages are sent to be understood, and the majority of texters show a striking “tacit respect for the standard conventions of the writing system” (p.19). The tendency to maintain intelligibility in texting is proved by the research, cited in the book, which shows that less than 20 percent of the studied text-messaging corpus displayed abbreviations of any kind. Further proof is Crystal's own observation of the consistent use of apostrophe, a relatively recent feature of the language, the omission of which rarely leads to misunderstanding, while its use is clearly a feature of the conventional writing.

Another faulty belief, in Crystal's opinion, is that texting has distinctive and novel linguistic features,

such as logograms (the use of single letters, numerals, and typographic symbols to represent words, parts of words, or noises associated with actions), emoticons (typographic devices used to represent some visual images, facial expressions, in particular), different abbreviations, such as initialisms, shortening, and letter omission, and nonstandard spelling. The author attempts to provide some analogues to these characteristics of texting from much earlier texts and even draws a parallel between logograms and ancient rebuses. This leads him to the conclusion that the language of texting is “neither especially novel nor especially incomprehensible” (p.53), and, in fact, “texting may be using a new technology, but its linguistic processes are centuries old” (p.27).

While sympathizing with the author’s advocacy of texting, it is worth noting, however, that the previous statement seems over-generalized. Some of the characteristic features of texting, such as abbreviations and nonstandard spelling, are indeed quite old. Also, throughout history writers occasionally employed logograms and hieroglyphs similar to modern emoticons. Furthermore, Crystal makes a point mentioning that these idiosyncratic linguistic features attributed to SMS writing are less frequently used in texting than in other formats of electronic writing, instant messaging in particular. Still these arguments are not sufficient enough to deprive texting of its originality and novelty, the quality, further reinforced with a feature genuinely unique for texting alone – writing without spaces, as in the cited “9-word epic”: *iydkidkwd*– “if you don’t know I don’t know who does” (p.54).

Moreover, Crystal’s agenda of rebuffing “media hysteria about the novelty (and thus the dangers) of text messaging” leads him to downplay another important distinction of texting – omission of vowels for the sake of reduced writing. No other type of electronic communication, not even instant messaging, utilizes this kind of shortening to the same extent that texting does. Arguing against the novelty of texting, Crystal puts vowel omission in the same group with long-standing lexical processes of contraction and clipping and cites *Mr, Mrs, Sgt, Lt*, etc., as “antecedents” of the obviously new phenomenon. But such old abbreviations are extremely rare occurrences in traditional writing and are products of more complex abbreviating processes connected as well with the changes in the pronunciation of these words. They all have different histories and do not compare to the consistent method of vowel omission in texting, displayed, for instance, in the following Crystal’s example: “*f u cn rd ths thn wats th prblm?*” Moreover, the author’s stance against the novelty of such contraction technique as vowel omission contradicts his own observation that it is texters, who “have evidently intuited a basic principle of information theory: that consonants carry much more information than vowels” (p.26), and therefore the latter can be easily omitted without impeding comprehensibility of message.

Thus, while agreeing with Crystal that most of the linguistic processes employed in texting are indeed old, it is still plausible to perceive it as an innovative language. Its novelty is especially evident in the ingenuity with which texting exploits all devices and mechanisms of linguistic arsenal to adjust to new communicative requirements, and in the next chapter, “Why Do They Do It?”, Crystal reveals the reasons why such a unique way of writing has developed. The matter is that the mobile phone keypad, besides the technical constraints of the medium mentioned above, was not originally designed for language: it was intended to cope with numbers, not letters. Moreover, none of the existing phone systems is linguistically sensible, since, as the author emphasizes, none takes elementary letter-frequency considerations into account. Therefore, in such a context, any strategy of efficient inputting of graphic symbols was bound to succeed. Crystal, however, points out yet another factor stimulating texting. It is the drive to be playful, “upping the ante,” which ultimately leads to the emergence of SMS poetry and mobile literature.

Another attempt at demystifying texting is presented in Chapter 5, “Who Texts?”, which is about texters, but only partially. At the beginning, the author quotes the research, which validates the conventional belief that texters are predominantly young people. Representation of other age groups, which use texting, is obviously not significant enough for Crystal to discredit yet another “myth” about texting. With mobile

phone communication being such a universal phenomenon, it is not surprising that various people of various ages, both women and men, at a certain point and to a certain extent may use some of the techniques of shorthand writing. Still, as expected, teens and young adults comprise the most numerous and enthusiastic users of SMS, with more than 85 percent of this age group sending text messages on a daily basis. With research confirming the public image of who texters are, it is not surprising that the chapter very soon changes its focus to the reasons why all these people text. Among the key advantages of this mode of communication the author lists economic considerations (an SMS message is less expensive than voice interaction), social factors (social belonging, prestige), communicative strengths of the medium (direct, immediate, personal, unobtrusive) and so on. He also makes an interesting observation that texting is actually a blessing for our modern society with its increased pressures on time and short attention span as it allows for multitasking and more direct communication, devoid of conventional conversational routines and rituals.

The favorable image of texting is further reinforced in the next chapter about a wide range of informational and social functions that texting performs. Among the latter, the reader will be amused to learn about *keitai* dating in Japan or the development of texting as a ludic literary genre (i.e., circulation of jokes, riddles, chain messages, etc.).

Similarly engaging is the chapter on texting in other languages, on how people make the keypad work to handle their language's individuality. It is supported with the extensive Appendix B, which lists some text abbreviations in eleven languages (Appendix A covers English text abbreviations). The few pages allotted in the book to the subject are definitely not enough for any serious cross-linguistic comparative study, therefore certain tentative conclusions that Crystal reaches by looking at text abbreviations in other languages remain unsubstantiated. He believes that a major feature of the international texting scene is code-mixing of English and native textisms and, according to him, it has reached a degree at which English "seems to have cramped the creative style of young texters in their own languages" (p.131). While this statement requires support by more representative data, his examples definitely show that linguistic processes of abbreviation are universal and take place in all languages. After all, faced with similar kinds of communication problems, as presented by mobile technology, people try to solve them in a similar way – by adapting language to the needs of the new technical circumstances.

In his conclusion, Crystal returns to the grim prophecies of the linguistic evils unleashed by texting, stating that there has never been any clear evidence of the detrimental effects of texting on literacy. His survey of available research and examination boards' reports shows that examples of text spelling and abbreviations in students' writing are occasional and sporadic and do not significantly interfere with students' academic performance. On the contrary, he believes that mobile communication promotes reading and writing, even though in a somewhat curtailed way. Similar to the lack of sufficient proof of the negative effects of texting, his evidence of its beneficial outcomes is also unclear and insufficient, and, obviously, more research and data are needed to pass a final verdict on texting and its effect on conventional writing. What is beyond any dispute, however, is that since certain spillover of texting into academic writing does exist it is up to teachers to help students understand and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of texting.

Finally, for better or worse, texting is an objective linguistic phenomenon and it is here to stay, at least for some time. Crystal provides a clear and comprehensive snapshot of how language is adjusting to the new demands of modern communication and why texting should be regarded as a form of language development, rather than its deterioration. The author succeeds in putting this message across to the general public for whom the book is written and who will also appreciate the witty cartoons on texting and texters by Ed McLachlan. However, it also raises many issues for fundamental research and poses a number of serious questions that both linguists and educators still need to address.

Irina Averianova

Reviews of Books

Barry Natusch. *Who says what, where, when and why: Context in conversation*. 2008. NAN' UN-DO PHOENIX. ISBN 978-4-88896-402-9.

Who says what, where, when and why: Context in conversation offers a series of real conversations and interviews with commentaries. Supporting photographs and original drawings help establish the context. Many of the conversations included in the book are about conversation. It is a book about how people talk to each other, about who is speaking about what to whom. The author is experimenting with the ways the spoken word, tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language can be represented in another medium: print. Drawing from linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, functionalism, art and media, Barry Natusch offers his comments on each conversation and invites the reader to think about the reasons people are saying what they are saying, and the way they are saying it in different social contexts. The author provides Internet links and keywords after each conversation and commentary, so that the reader can search for further information and read available blogs on the topic. The book is designed for the general public, for anyone who enjoys “good conversations” and is interested in “what is going on under the surface” of what is said, or wants to know how future reported speech could look. It can also be useful as a resource material for teaching conversation in context and sociolinguistics to university students.

The book is composed of two main parts, Epilogue, References, and Index.

Part One, *Conversations about the theoretical approach*, includes conversations of the author with the editor, colleagues and friends. These conversations highlight and explain the form and content the book took.

Part Two, *The conversations, contexts and comments*, includes conversations between people of different age, gender, and occupation. It is composed of eight thematic sections.

Section 1, *Origins of human language: Signals*, offers conversations on human interpretation of animal signaling and discusses the origins of human language.

Section 2, *Functionalism: Steering conversation and people*, introduces and discusses the ways people start a conversation, express their feelings, explain things, collaborate, tease, persuade, control others, and structure their conversations.

Section 3, *Sociolinguistics: Who, what, where, when and why*, focuses on sociolinguistic aspects of conversation. The author illustrates the idea that the way people interact with each other may vary according to their age, gender, identity, relationship and changing fashions in communication.

Section 4, *Psycholinguistics: Language learning, identity*, explores the field of psycholinguistics and language acquisition. It discusses the problems of language learning in old age, foreigner talk, and non-verbal communication.

Section 5, *Diversions: Superstitions, symbols, messages, puzzles and jokes*, includes conversations on superstitions, symbolic words, pun, humor, etc., and discusses their role in society. It also illustrates various attitudes and reactions to these words expressed by different people.

Section 6, *Storytelling: Narrative structures and monologues*, suggests the ways to “unlock oral his-

tory” in a conversation, to write and rewrite stories, and to tell them effectively.

Section 7, *Beyond conversation: Talk as performance*, discusses the social and political roles of various genres of speech and art, the ways the texts are created, performed and interpreted by people of different age, gender, and cultural background.

Section 8, *The past and the future: Reported speech, issues, and media*, illustrates how people’s opinions, tastes, judgments and behavior are linked to their political, social, and professional identity. The author also discusses the role and value of traditional and modern genres of speech for different generations of people.

The final conversation, in Epilogue, offers some comments and impressions of the book expressed by the author’s acquaintances. Barry Natusch suggests that future books may be designed as multimedia packages and hints that his next book will be a multimedia project with a film version of the book on a DVD. He concludes *Who says what, where, when and why: Context in conversation* with a question for the readers: “Is it the future of books? Multimedia packages?”

The author does not give any final answers to the questions he offers to the readers, but he invites them to an interesting on-going conversation about human communication and the role of society and new media in language development and use. One of the unique features of the book is that it is written in “oral” English but (in contrast to blogs) the text is accurate, free from errors, and easy to read. The author succeeds in making printed conversations “sound” like oral speech. Reading the book gives an impression of being involved in a real conversation with different interesting people who think, feel, and speak in their own unique way. You can tell that the author is a skillful communicator himself. Barry Natusch knows how to make a conversation interesting, stimulating and pleasant, and invites the readers to enjoy it, too.

Tetyana Sayenko