

On the Lighter Side of the Old English Newspapers

Nagasaki is the cradle of English-language journalism in Japan. The Nagasaki Shipping List and Advertiser, which was founded here in 1861 by British entrepreneur William Hansard, was Japan's first English newspaper. Hansard moved his business to Yokohama after only a few months, but Nagasaki subsequently saw an almost unbroken succession of other English newspapers until 1928 when the presses finally fell silent. Preserved today at Nagasaki Prefectural Library and other institutions, the English newspapers of Nagasaki provide fascinating insights into events in the Oura foreign settlement and into Nagasaki's role in domestic and international affairs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One aspect of the newspapers that rarely receives attention is their humor. A large number of jokes and humorous stories can be found scattered amid the articles and advertisements. These were probably added as filler and now, as then, elicit more groans than laughs. But there is also a wealth of little articles that were written in all seriousness but have become singularly amusing after the passage of as much as 130 years.

Notifications have been posted in the native town during the week, warning all who still persist in shaving their heads, that they will be severely punished if they do not discontinue the practice after this date. The police have received instructions to report all delinquents to the Saibansho [Court House]. It is estimated that about 300 non-conformists to the new regulations are now living in the native town, setting the authorities at defiance with their shaven crowns.

Girls are also forbidden to sing or play on the Samseng [shamisen] and other musical instruments, when riding in the Jinrickishas.

(The Nagasaki Express, Feb. 15, 1873)

The Custom-house officials have been distinguishing themselves again. A foreigner, who has just shipped off for Europe two live deer, two bears and a pair of wild pigs, was required to pay five per cent duty upon them, and the same even upon their food. The latter, at any rate should be free. My informant assures me that the officials even insisted upon stamping the poor beasts, and after some trouble succeeded in their object! If so, I hope someone will import something a trifle more vicious—say a little alligator, a small tiger or a few young rattlesnakes. Some thousands of bags of wheat are now being shipped, and the Custom-houseobstructives insist upon stamping every one of them, and some boards being required to construct a ventilator for the hold in which the grain is stowed, the shipper was required to pay duty on them.

(The Nagasaki Express, Nov. 8, 1873)

Advertisements

CHOLERA – The latest researches of the most eminent scientists of the day have clearly demonstrated the fact that TOBACCO IS A GERM DESTROYER. It is in the form of smoke, however, that it is MOST EFFECTIVE.

(the first half of an advertisement for “Manila Cigars” in The Rising Sun & Nagasaki Express, June 3, 1891)

A PERSON CURED of Deafness and noises in the head, of 23 years' standing, by a Simple Remedy,

will send a description of it free to any person who applies to J.H. Nicholson, 5 Old Court House Street, Calcutta.

(The Rising Sun & Nagasaki Express, Nov. 28, 1888)

I, William Smith, hereby give notice that I will not be responsible for any debts contracted by my wife, Mary Smith, in my name.

(The Nagasaki Shipping List, May 21, 1896)

During the stay in Nagasaki of the ship Dunboyne, Captain O'Neill received a request from the master of a vessel lying at a neighbouring port to engage three seamen and despatch them to that place. When the men had been secured, the following telegram was forwarded by Captain O'Neill: "Sending three men per – O'Neill." The recipient's feelings and language may be imagined when the message reached him in this form: "Sending three men per – one ill."

(The Nagasaki Press, Jan. 29, 1902)

At a dinner party in town last August, there were two sisters present, one a widow who had just emerged from her weeds, and the other not long married, whose husband had lately gone out to India for a short term. A young barrister present was deputed to take the widow in to dinner. Unfortunately, he was under the impression that his partner was the married lady whose husband had just arrived in India. The conversation between them commenced with the lady's remarking how extremely hot it was. "Yes, it is very hot," returned the young barrister. Then a happy thought suggested itself to him, and he added, with a cheerful smile, "But not so hot as the place to which your husband has gone." The look with which the lady answered this happy thought will haunt that unhappy youth till his death.

(The Rising Sun & Nagasaki Express, June 17, 1876)

A man walked into a grocer's shop and handed to the assistant a paper containing some white powder. "I say," he asked, "what do you think that is. Just taste it and tell me your opinion."

The grocer smelled it, then touched it with his tongue. "Well, I should say that was soda."

"That's just what I say," was the triumphant reply. "But my wife said it was rat poison. You might try it again to make sure."

Professor John Stuart Blackie of Edinburgh being suddenly called away by an important summons one day, posted this notice on his classroom door for his students: "Professor Blackie will be unable to meet his classes to-day." Some waggish student came along and rubbed the "c" from the word "classes." The Professor reaching the university that evening, saw the erasure, chuckled, and promptly erased the letter "l." His students afterwards had great respect for their teacher.

Jack London was once introduced to a celebrated musician. "I, too, am a musician in a small way," said London. "My musical talent was once the means of saving my life." "How was that?" the musician asked. "There was a great flood in our town in my boyhood," replied London. "When the water struck our house my father got on a bed and floated down the stream until he was rescued." "Well?" said the musician. "Well," responded London. "I accompanied him on the piano."

An amusing incident occurred when some through passengers were leaving the Empress of China

for a short trip ashore on Monday morning. One athletic looking but weighty gentleman, with a distinctly Scotch name and who might have turned the scales at about 250 pounds, took a jump of about 3 or 4 feet from the lower platform of the gangway into a fragile sampan below. To his immense amazement and to the utter discomfiture of the sampan man, he went clean through the flimsy but buoyant craft, and sat for a moment with his feet in the harbor and the rest of him plugging the horrid hole they had made. While the stranger was thus occupied, the owner of the craft wailed like a cow and vented a torrent of native water-front billingsgate, which latter was wasted upon his fare.

(The Nagasaki Shipping List, May 21, 1896)

Japan may be considered one of the greatest of military powers, but it is remarkable how little evidence there is of it in the everyday life of the nation. Although Nagasaki is a garrison town, with the exception of a few officers, no soldiers were to be seen in connection with the visit of the Crown Prince. A similar event in England would have filled the town so honoured with troops who would have been employed to line the streets, acting at once as guards of honour and special police. In Nagasaki, however, the distinction of lining the route was given to the students and school-children, both girls and boys, and the effect—if not imposing—was decidedly pleasing. To Europeans, the idea of a member of the Royal family being received in silence would be distinctly novel; the louder the cheering and more numerous the brass bands, the greater the loyalty according to Occidental notions. In Japan the contrary obtains; as the exalted personage passes, voices are hushed and the only greeting is a respectful inclination of the head....From the point of view of the majority of spectators, the Japanese method has decided advantages. The English method—ladies waving their handkerchiefs and gentlemen their hats—usually results in only the front row of spectators catching a glimpse of the royal visitor, those behind seeing nothing more enthralling than a medley of arms, hats, etc., etc. In Japan, as the front rank bows, those in the rear see the object of their loyalty and then salute.

(Cherry Blossoms: The “Nagasaki Press” Monthly, October 1907)

“On the Lighter Side of the Old English Newspapers.” *Crossroads: A Journal of Nagasaki History and Culture*, no. 1 (Summer 1993), 75–82.