

Secret Tales of the Nagasaki International Cemeteries

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Hendrik Duurkoop never saw Japan. The Dutch East India Company official sailed from Indonesia in the summer of 1778 but died on board ship before reaching the company's trading post on Dejima Island in Nagasaki Harbor. His remains were buried a month later in the Dutch Cemetery at Goshinji, a Buddhist temple on the hillside overlooking Nagasaki Harbor.

Duurkoop's grave-stone is now the oldest European grave marker in Japan, and it is still lying in the shade of the huge camphor trees behind Goshinji. The carving of an hourglass with wings at the top of the stone seems to tell visitors not only about the impermanence of worldly existence but also how this and the hundreds of other foreigners' gravestones in Nagasaki have carried messages over almost four centuries.

From Fishing Village to International Boomtown

Nagasaki was a remote fishing village when Portuguese ships arrived here in 1571 to establish a base for trade and missionary work. During the following two decades, the Portuguese exerted a powerful influence on Japan, most notably by introducing guns and revolutionizing the style of Japanese warfare. But national leaders concluded that missionary work was a prelude to colonization, and in 1614 they ordered the exile of priests and the destruction of all churches. Finally, in 1639, all Portuguese and their families—including Japanese wives and children—were expelled from Japan and all traces of their stay here carefully erased.

In 1641, the Dutch were granted permission to move their trading post to the man-made island of Dejima in Nagasaki Harbor on the condition that they refrain from missionary activities. Dejima thus became the only point of contact between Japan and the West—a status that it retained for more than two centuries thereafter.

The Chinese also obtained an official trade permit and settled in Nagasaki around the year 1600. At the peak of Chinese activity here a century later, as many as 190 Chinese ships were visiting Nagasaki annually and one-sixth of the town's population hailed from the continent.

Mingling with the merchants, stevedores and wharf runners were men of letters and Buddhist priests who had fled during the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in the early 17th century. Chinese Zen masters like Yinyuan (Ingen) and Jifei (Sokuhi), whose first steps were in Nagasaki, brought a new breath of life to Japanese religion and left a lasting mark on traditional arts such as calligraphy and ink drawing.

Located beside the Dutch Cemetery at Goshinji Temple, the Nagasaki Chinese Cemetery now contains some 230 gravestones, the oldest of which belongs to a merchant named Jian Jianglan who died here in 1627.

The next wave of foreign influence came in 1853 when Rear Admiral Putiatin of the Russian East Asian Fleet led his squadron into Nagasaki Harbor to seek the formation of a trade pact between Russia and Japan. The visit came only a month after Commodore Matthew Perry forced his "black ships" into Uruga Bay and demanded the opening of Japan's doors to trade with the United States.

Japan signed trade agreements with Russia, Britain, France and the United States in 1858, and the

Chinese and Dutch in Nagasaki soon found a growing number of other foreigners in their midst. By the turn of the century Nagasaki had grown into a prosperous trade port with busy Chinese and European quarters, a coaling station and watering hole for foreign navies, and a popular stopover for tourists seeking a glimpse of “exotic Japan.”

In both physical design and cultural content, the European quarter in Oura took after its older counterpart in Shanghai, and like Shanghai it spawned new styles of architecture and dress and a new genre of music and literature based on the meeting between East and West. One of the most famous examples is Giacomo Puccini’s “Madame Butterfly,” a tale of love and betrayal set in Nagasaki that has drawn tears from countless opera audiences since its debut in 1904 and continues to inspire new works, two recent examples of which are the stage hits “M. Butterfly” and “Miss Saigon.”

Guard Me While I Sleep

On the flip side of all this international activity was an increasing need for burial space. After the signing of trade agreements in 1858, new cemeteries were opened one after another to meet the demand: two at Goshinji Temple in 1859, one near the Oura settlement in 1861, and one in Sakamoto on the outskirts of the city in 1888.

Just as the stones bear dates spanning four centuries, the stories of the people buried in these cemeteries read like an account of the colorful and turbulent history of Nagasaki.

Gustav Wilckens came to Nagasaki in 1861 and formed a partnership with another American in a food importing business. He died in 1869 at the age of 37 and was buried in the international cemetery at Goshinji Temple. The only other information available about him is an unusual inscription on his gravestone. Carved on the side of the stone in small Japanese characters are the words “Tamagiku of Tsunokuniya.” It seems that Wilckens’ sweetheart, a courtesan at the geisha house Tsunokuniya in Nagasaki’s red-light district, paid for the gravestone as a tribute to her departed lover.

On August 5, 1867, Robert Foad and John Hutchings—both 23 year-old crew members of the British warship *Icarus*—joined their shipmates on an excursion into the neighborhood where Gustav Wilckens had fallen in love. Instead of love, however, they fell into a drunken stupor and were left by their friends to sleep it off on the sidewalk. Hours later the two were found lying dead in a pool of blood, their bodies mangled with the characteristic gashes left by Japanese swords.

The British consul lodged a complaint with the Shogunate in Edo, vehemently criticizing its failure to ensure the safety of foreigners in the treaty port and demanding the capture of the criminals. But the investigation dragged on, severely straining Anglo-Japanese relations, until a year later when it was discovered that the culprit had been a samurai of the Chikuzen Clan of modern-day Fukuoka Prefecture and that he had committed suicide by harakiri shortly after the killings. The matter was settled by the payment of reparations to the bereaved families, but it was already too late for the Shogunate. The incident had not only weakened British trust but had also revealed the sorry state of the old administration. In that way it played an instrumental role in the Meiji Restoration of the following year.

Little did Foad and Hutchings know as they departed their ship that they were going to change Japanese history and become a permanent part of the Nagasaki landscape.

Rebecca Wetherell did not expect to stay long either. The young wife of British merchant-marine captain R.H. Wetherell, she joined her husband on a routine trip to Nagasaki from Shanghai in 1891. The ship was an iron-frame sailing vessel called the Cape City, with 200 tons of ballast in the hold and orders to take on a cargo of Nagasaki coal. Wetherell ordered the ballast removed by local stevedores, expecting his cargo that afternoon. But before the coal arrived, a gust of wind made the ship lean over and within minutes it capsized and sank in full public view. One of the witnesses was a British woman who—according to an account published in the English newspapers—watched the accident from the window of her hillside house with a pair of opera glasses.

Everyone on board was tossed into the water. Some swam to shore and others held onto floating debris while rescue boats rushed to the scene. But Rebecca was missing, and despite several desperate attempts to locate her, her corpse was eventually found in the sunken wreckage.

As if the death of his wife and the loss of his ship had not been enough, Wetherell was arraigned on charges of negligence and saw his mariner's license revoked by the British consul. The name of R.H. Wetherell soon faded from memory here, but it is certain that the unfortunate captain never forgot his star-crossed visit to Nagasaki.

About five paces from Rebecca's gravestone is a section containing the graves of some 30 Jewish people who died in Nagasaki during the late 19th and early 20th century. One belongs to Sigmund Lessner, a merchant of Austrian nationality who ran a successful import shop and auction house in the European quarter and also assisted in the foundation of Japan's first synagogue here in 1895. A generous contributor to local charities and an active participant in social events, Lessner was one of the most respected foreign residents of Nagasaki. But the outbreak of World War I and his Austrian passport brought an unexpected upheaval. Complying with government orders, Lessner and other citizens of countries at war with Japan closed their businesses and kept a low profile during the fighting. Lessner managed to reopen his store in 1919, but he died the following year at the age of 61. His wife Sophie left Nagasaki shortly thereafter, and now the gravestones at Sakamoto International Cemetery are all that remains of the former Jewish community of Nagasaki.

The great distance between Japan and the native countries of the people buried here—not to mention the almost total neglect of the gravestones—only enhances the atmosphere of sadness in the international cemeteries. Particularly heart-wrenching are the inscriptions on the gravestones of children who were left behind by their families decades ago.

Jean Neeson was going on three when he sailed from Shanghai with his parents in 1906. Like many other Western residents of China at the time, the young family came to enjoy a summer holiday in the mountain resort of Unzen near Nagasaki. But tragedy awaited. Jean died of a sudden illness at the resort and was carried to Sakamoto for burial. A short poem, now almost completely hidden by moss, is inscribed below his name on the tiny gravestone:

*Father, Mother, God loving me
Guard me while I sleep
Guide my little feet up to thee*

Victor Pignatel was only 17 when he came to Nagasaki from his native Lyon, France in 1863 to join the import and export company founded earlier by his father. He took the company over when his father died in 1870 and even served as acting French consul for several years. But later he

abandoned his business and severed all his social contacts. During the last years of his life in the 1920's he became a kind of celebrity by walking around downtown Nagasaki in a woman's kimono. Children accosted him with shouts of *seiyo banzo* ("Western bum" in Nagasaki dialect) and threw stones at his dilapidated house in Dejima. It was not until after his death in 1922 that the reason for the eccentric behavior came to light. It seems that as a young man, Pignatel had fallen passionately in love with a geisha named Masaki and that after much courting he had finally managed to persuade her to marry him. But Masaki had died of pneumonia a few years later, and grief drove the Frenchman into a life of seclusion. He was found dead in his house some 40 years after Masaki's death, lying with his head on a worn lacquerware pillow—the kind used only by Japanese geisha.

The most famous person buried in Nagasaki's international cemeteries is undoubtedly Scottish merchant Thomas B. Glover, who came to Japan in 1859 and lived here for more than five decades. Glover made enormous contributions to this country as it changed from a feudal backwater to an industrial and military giant. Among his achievements were the construction of Japan's first modern coal mine, slip dock, railroad and telephone line, and the introduction of everything from the first ironclad warships to equipment for the mint that produced the first yen. He was also one of the founders of the Japan Brewery Co., predecessor of Kirin Brewery Co. (the mythical creature on the Kirin label still wears the bushy mustache said to have been included as a tribute to the Scotsman).

In the years prior to the Meiji Restoration, Glover helped young samurai rebels smuggle themselves out of the country and study abroad. One was Ito Hirobumi, who went on to become Japan's first prime minister. In 1908, Glover was awarded the Second Class Order of the Rising Sun from the Japanese government. He died in 1911 at the age of 73, a legend in his time.

Thomas Glover is famous in Japan. But historians have all but ignored Kuraba Tomisaburo, Glover's son born out of wedlock in 1870 to a Japanese woman named Kaga Maki. After studies at Peers' School (Gakushuin) in Tokyo and the University of Pennsylvania, Tomisaburo took a position with the British firm Holme, Ringer & Co. in Nagasaki. He served subsequently as a bridge between the Japanese and foreign communities and made many important contributions to the local economy. He was a man of both Japan and Britain, and his linguistic talents and warm personality gave him a passport to both worlds.

But World War II wreaked havoc on his life. Considered a potential spy by the Japanese military, he was forced out of the Glover house in 1939 because it overlooked the Mitsubishi shipyard where the colossal battleship *Musashi* was taking shape. The attack on Pearl Harbor—Tomisaburo's worst nightmare—occurred, with painful irony, right on his 71st birthday. Then during the war the son of the man who had helped build the Japanese armed forces was hounded by the *kenpei* military police and forced to remove himself completely from business and social circles. His wife died in 1943, making him the last living member of the Glover family in Japan.

On August 26, 1945, only days after the obliteration of the northern part of Nagasaki by an atomic bomb and Japan's surrender, Tomisaburo strangled his dogs and then hung himself to death. It is likely that the imminent landing of the occupation forces and the prospect of having to take sides by either offering or refusing his cooperation drove him into despair. Hastily cremated along with thousands of atomic bomb victims, his remains were buried in the family plot at Sakamoto International Cemetery.

The Flavor of Old Nagasaki

World War II brought the international activity of Nagasaki port to a near standstill, and few of the foreign residents of the European quarter returned to their former homes. As a result, the unique, eclectic atmosphere of the city turned into a kind of romantic afterglow that, although steadily fading, has made Nagasaki one of Japan's most popular postwar tourist venues.

But the momentum of change grows stronger with each passing year. The traditional wooden buildings remaining in central Nagasaki are now like little patches of history in a forest of high-rise condominiums and office buildings. Chinatown has been embellished with colorful Chinese-style gates and facades, but few of its current residents hold Chinese citizenship or remember more than a few words of the language spoken by their grandparents. Aside from the municipal tourist attraction called "Glover Garden," meanwhile, about all that remains of the former European quarter is odd sections of brick wall and stone pavement and a few clusters of buildings preserved as cultural assets.

Perhaps only in the international cemeteries, where the gravestone inscriptions are still clearly legible, has the flavor of old Nagasaki come down through the decades intact.

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