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978-1-108-08162-7 - Nine Years in Nipon: Sketches of Japanese Life and Manners

Henry Faulds

Excerpt

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NINE YEARS IN NIPON.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory.

The Land—Its Contour—The Four Great Islands—Inland Sea—Rivers and Canals—Coast—Lighthouses—Harbours—The Black Stream—Climate—*Flora* and *Fauna*—Races.



JAPAN is the name usually given by English writers to a fertile and populous group of four great islands associated with a number of smaller ones, which lies in the far East almost where our artificial day begins, and whose people may perhaps therefore, not unreasonably, hope to form a natural link between those of East and West. Its area is rather greater than that of the United Kingdom, and may be about 150,000 square miles, much of which still lies waste and uncultivated, though apparently capable of tillage. About one-fourth is forest land. Japan is washed on the east by the sluggish rollers of the Pacific, and on the west by the seas of Japan and

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Okhotsk. The most westerly point is within an hour or two's sail of the Asiatic continent, and eastwards it is about 5000 miles distant from San Francisco. Comprising the crescent-shaped mainland, or largest island, which is not definitely named like the others—Kiushiu, Shikoku, Yesso, the Kurile Islands, and many others—it lies stretched from 24° to $50^{\circ} 40'$ N. lat., and from 124° to $156^{\circ} 38'$ E. long,—that is, speaking roughly, it lies diagonally in, and north of, the sub-tropical belt, and has northern points corresponding with Paris and Newfoundland on the one hand and southern ones placed like Cairo, Madeira, and the Bermudas; or again, it corresponds pretty nearly in latitude with the eastern coast line of the United States, adding Nova Scotia and Newfoundland; and the contrasts of climate in the latter island and in Florida are probably not more remarkable than those which are observed in the extreme northern and southern regions of Japan.

By the almost U-shaped Suez canal route the distance is nearly 12,000 miles from Liverpool, but by the slightly arched San Francisco route the distance is greatly lessened, much of it being practically still further shortened by railway so that the journey can be accomplished in a month.

The general shape of the mass formed by the four great islands, which lie closely together separated only by the narrowest straits, has often been poetically compared by native writers to the curved form of a dragon-fly in flight. Perhaps to the common-place mind of the western barbarian it may suggest the less romantic idea of a hen's foot with partly outstretched claws!

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II



The four islands are—

1. KIUSHIU (“the nine counties”), of an irregular double-wedge shape ; its obtuse wedge lying to the north and the acuter one to the south, the mass being placed nearly at right angles to the so-called mainland. The Bungo Nada, a dangerous strait opening from the Inland Sea into the Pacific, separates it from the next, or

2. SHIKOKU (“the four provinces”), an irregular crescent lying southward from and parallel to the western part of the “mainland,” having its concavity turned southward to the Pacific, while its convexity forms the southern boundary of the Inland Sea.

3. The (strictly-speaking) unnamed HONDO, or HONSHIU, or mainland is considerably larger than the other three islands combined. It is almost divided into two

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portions by the large fresh water Lake Biwa and two corresponding deep indentations on the north and south coasts respectively, or the bays of Wakasa and Owari. The western or smaller portion lying east-west is something like a human foot with its toes pointing westward, the hollow of the arch forming the north boundary of the Inland Sea. The remaining portion is somewhat like an inverted axe, its handle pointing due north and the blade touching the western portion just described.

4. YESSO, the northernmost island, lies close to the mainland, being separated from it by Tsugaru strait, which can be crossed in an hour or so. It bears no very fanciful resemblance to a gigantic ray fish, steering eastward, with contorted tail pointing to the mainland.

The chain of smaller islands trends from S.W., by N.E., forming a broken sinuous line with Saghalien—no longer politically a part of Japan—and the Aleutian islands.

Saghalien was a possession of some value, and in 1875 was ceded to Russia in return for the comparatively worthless Kurile islands, where sea-otters are obtained. The act of cession was very unpopular in Japan. The island is said now to contain about 4000 exiles chiefly of the male sex. They are sent by sea from Odessa, and the fatality on the way has been great.

The Japanese government seem to have a fairly good claim to the small but interesting group of Loochoo (Liu-chiu) islands, but it is hotly contested by China. The people have more natural affinity in language and customs to Japan than to China, and would be more benefited by control from Tokio than from Peking.

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The Bonins, called Ogasawara, were recently ceded by the British to Japan.

The most striking geographical feature of Japan is the Inland Sea, which is certainly one of the beauties of the world. It is a long irregularly-shaped arm of the sea, with tides and rapid currents, of variable width and no great depth, studded with innumerable thickly-wooded islands. It may be entered from the Pacific by two straits, —Linschoten strait and Bungo nada, the navigation of the latter in certain seasons being especially dangerous and difficult. On the northern side the Inland Sea is entered from the Sea of Japan through the strait of Shimonoseki, which very greatly resembles the Kyles of Bute in its narrow sinuous passage and surrounding scenery of most romantic beauty. This is practically the shortest way from Yokohama to Nagasaki, Mr. Griffis to the contrary notwithstanding, and is the route now taken by the mail steamers of the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company. This little question, however, led, in 1864, to much bloodshed and subsequent diplomacy, of which I shall have something to say in another chapter.

The crescent of the narrow mainland, if the largest of the islands may be so called, presents its convex side to the Pacific Ocean, while the concavity is turned towards the sea of Japan and the newly opened kingdom of Corea. It is pretty clearly divided into somewhat irregular north-western and south-eastern slopes, with well-marked climatic differences, by a grand central range of great height, broken here and there by the strongly marked individuality of a still living, or but recently extinct, volcano, the whole forming a rough back-bone flanked with

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many spur-like ranges, water-carved, and often beautifully terraced along the river valleys, but nowhere, so far as has yet been observed, showing any direct effects of glacial action.

The Central main line of railway is intended to run along the flanks of this rugged crest, far enough inland to be safe from attack by sea or destruction by flooding of the rivers, whose shifting beds form no very good formation for the long viaducts which would be required in another situation. Most of the larger rivers in the mainland curiously run a course tending almost north or south. The general contour of the land—its great narrowness—is such, indeed, that they must needs be short, but this direction gives them the greatest length possible. There are brief periods of excessively heavy rain, and so they are often then in fierce flood, carrying everything before them and leaving great plains of water-worn stones and gravel around their mouths, on which, after a time, soil has sometimes accumulated and great forests have grown. From their extreme shortness of course the chief commercial cities of Japan, even when placed on the banks of broad rivers, are always near enough to “taste the salt breath of the great wide sea.”

The geological structure of many of the rocks has also been favourable to the formation of numerous most picturesque waterfalls, which attract the traveller and have from ancient times been warmly admired and eulogised by native artists and poets. The rivers at a short distance from their outlets are rendered navigable chiefly by the courage, enterprise, and ingenuity of the boatmen, who are amongst the most daring and skilful in the world.

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Till recently little has been done to deepen river channels or protect their banks except in the interest of agriculture. In the lower reaches where broad alluvial plains of great fertility have been formed they are frequently intersected by numerous shallow canals for the most part of comparatively recent excavation, but some of them are many centuries old, and these, in the general absence of good roads, have been of immense service in keeping up cross communication throughout the country.

The detritus brought down by the heavy rains is, in some parts of the country, enormous, and is the result of the rapid weathering of certain exposed and easily disintegrated rocks. Those are nearly devoid of vegetation, and masses may be seen peeling off and visibly crumbling into dust. The beds of the rivers and the bordering tracts on each side in those regions have thus sometimes actually been raised above the average level of the surrounding country, and in crossing the bed of the river you have to climb up an embankment which has often been strengthened artificially by means of long "snake baskets" of bamboo, afterwards to be described.

Such *levées*, as geologists call them, are not unknown in other countries. They have been described to me by travellers as being common in the north of China, and there are examples in Italy and in the valley of the Mississippi.

One or two of the rivers of Japan, such as the Sumida—on the banks of which Tokio, the capital, lies, and which is almost as broad as the Thames at Westminster—are worthy of note, and at the present day many a fair modern craft on Western lines may be seen, under the

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cheerful tap of hammers, taking shape on their banks. Here it may be mentioned that any particular appellation given to a river in Japan holds good only for a limited part of its course, so that it changes its name perhaps four or five times from its birth amongst the cloud-capped, pine-shaded mountains to its final *nirvana* in the ocean. For example, the river which passes through the city of Osaka changes its name four times within the city limits!

The wide bays along the south-eastern coast are for the most part shallow, and a very slight elevation of the land would vastly increase the areas of the bordering plains, which are already very extensive. Such elevations have already notably taken place, as is shown by the presence of naturally deposited strata of recent sea-shells far above high water mark, while there are reliable indications that considerable elevation of the land has taken place even within the historic period.

In spite of their shallowness and rapid silting, some of the rivers of Japan are capable of being so improved as to admit of the passage of steam vessels of the largest size, and there are fine natural inlets and one or two spacious bays, which form natural harbours of great excellence.

To the wants of a large and progressive society, which nature has thus shown her readiness to favour, the Japanese Government are every year becoming more and more alive. What is still more promising, the people themselves, greatly more active than their neighbours in China, show a laudable desire to initiate and carry out such local improvements as may promise to secure the fullest advantage to the community from nature's lavish gifts.

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One of the most interesting and characteristic features of the Industrial Exhibition held in Tokio, in 1882, was the splendid display of local maps and models illustrative of achieved or proposed undertakings in engineering, such as embankments, canals, breakwaters, etc. Many of them were of real value, showed scientific insight as to the economical application of ways and means, and were, as might have been expected, very attractive merely as works of art.

Owing to geologically recent elevations of land the coast is usually steep and even precipitous. Its chief natural features, such as sunken rocks, capes, straits, entrances to bays and harbours, and the mouths of rivers, are now well-marked out with beacons, lights or lighthouses of modern construction. Some of the latter are of superior merit, and speak eloquently to the approaching mariner of the progress made in the country since the recent Restoration. I sincerely hope, in the interests of science, that the lighthouse keepers may be encouraged to use the good opportunity they enjoy of observing and recording the flight of birds during their periods of migration ; while they might also, as has been proposed, assist in forming a *cordon* of meteorological observers which might give valuable warnings to fishermen and sailors of coming typhoons.

The government surveyors seem to have followed our own charts for the coastline to begin with, and they are proceeding rapidly and carefully to fill in all needful details as to the interior. At Yokoska, in Yedo Bay, where the chief docks are, the coast tide is said only to

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rise about four feet on an average. In spring tides it rarely exceeds six feet, and in general the height of the flood-tide is never very great.

In no mere Tennysonian dream, it may be said—

“ . . . The mist is drawn
A lucid veil from coast to coast.”

This renders navigation in summer dangerous and difficult, and fogs are deemed by experienced sailors to be the great scourge of Japan. Indeed, those malarious cloud-banks, laden with infectious germs, as they can almost now be proved to be, are probably as dangerous to the landsman as to the mariner. While the large area of land lying under shallow water during rice cultivation may have some share in the formation of those dangerous mists, we must seek for a wider and more general cause, and that is readily to be found in the great current (or rather currents) of warm water passing into a colder sea, which is called the *Kuro shiwo*, or Dark Tide or Current.*

The yearly evaporation at the tropics of fully fourteen or fifteen feet of ocean water, causes the great equatorial current of the Pacific which moves westward at first, then splits into two streams, one of which curves northward towards the colder waters of the sea of Japan, but gives off minor eddying currents running at 30 to 40 knots around the greater islands of the empire. Where the cold waters meet them condensation of the water-laden air takes place with the resulting formation of great cloud banks. The

* Not “Black River,” as Réclus translates it in *The Ocean*. (English edition, p. 82.)