

(Special contribution) MISTER TIMELESS BLYTH
(特別寄稿) 永遠のブライス師

Alan SPENCE

アラン・スペンス

In December 2019 - mercifully before the coronavirus pandemic restricted travel - I was fortunate enough to spend three weeks in Japan (with funding from Creative Scotland) researching my next novel, *Mister Timeless Blyth*. This will be my third historical novel set in Japan, following on from *The Pure Land* (telling the story of trader Thomas Blake Glover) and *Night Boat* (based on the life of Zen master Hakuin Ekaku).

Mister Timeless Blyth is a fictionalised account of the extraordinary life of RH Blyth, one of the first popularisers of Zen in the West. Blyth was born in London in 1898. As a pacifist (and vegetarian) - unusual for those times - he was a Conscientious Objector in World War I and was sent to Wormwood Scrubs prison. On his release after the War he studied at University, married, and again unusually, took up a post teaching in Korea (which was under Japanese rule). There he discovered Zen to which he maintained a lifetime commitment. His marriage failed and his wife returned to London. He remarried (a Japanese woman) and moved to Japan where he met his teacher Daisetz Suzuki. He actually applied for Japanese citizenship but when the Pacific War broke out he was imprisoned in Kobe as an enemy alien. Remarkably, the first of his influential books - *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* - was published in Japan at this time. (He said his Japanese publishers - Hokuseido - had promised, and they kept their word). He still championed Japanese culture while speaking out against its distortion by the warmongers and militarists.

After the war, things moved rapidly for him. He was employed to teach at Gakushuin University and as a tutor to Crown Prince Akihito. Crucially, he had an important role in translating the Emperor Showa's 'Declaration of Humanity' - a speech which altered the course of Japanese history. Blyth was a trusted link between the Imperial Household and the occupying forces under General Macarthur, and the importance of his mediating presence cannot be overemphasised.

My novel dramatises these exchanges and brings out Blyth's role. Blyth continued to teach the Crown Prince and supported the Imperial family to forge links with the West (also encouraging them to appoint an American woman, Elizabeth Gray Vining to a teaching post).

Through the 1950s and in to the 60s Blyth's books continued to be published and to exert a great influence. JD Salinger mentioned him in his novels and he is acknowledged by many of the Beat generation - Ginsberg, Snyder, Kerouac - as stimulating their interest in Zen.

Blyth lived in Japan till his death in 1964.

The 'present' of my novel is the world viewed from his hospital ward in Tokyo where he watches on black-and-white TV the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics, interspersed with news of China's first A-bomb test and the escalating conflict in Vietnam. He looking back over his life, writing it down, trying to make sense of it all.

On my research trip I was welcomed with the utmost kindness and generosity, given access to an astonishing amount of archive material and historical documents - Blyth's books, papers, manuscripts, family photographs - in Tokyo and Kyoto, Atami, Kamakura and Gifu. I spoke to scholars and curators, and those with close ties to Blyth. It was quite overwhelming, and left me with a strong sense of the high regard in which he is still held.

My own debt to him goes back to the late 1960s when I first read his writings, in particular his four volume *Haiku* translations. They were a huge influence on my writing and my inner, spiritual life.

In these dark times, Blyth's spiritual search and his lifelong commitment to peace seem more important than ever, and perhaps there is no better time to tell his story.

Alan Spence is an award-winning poet and playwright, novelist and short story writer. With his wife Janani he runs the Sri Chinmoy Meditation Centre in Edinburgh. His books of fiction include *Its Colours They Are Fine*, *Stone Garden*, *The Magic Flute*, *Way to Go*, *The Pure Land* and *Night Boat*. Poetry collections include *Glasgow Zen*, *Seasons of the Heart*, *Clear Light* and *Morning Glory*. He is Professor Emeritus in Creative Writing at the University of Aberdeen, and in 2017 was appointed as Edinburgh Makar (Poet Laureate). In 2018 he was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun from the Government of Japan.

アラン・スペンス (Alan Spence, 1947-) 氏はスコットランドを代表する詩人・劇作家・小説家。アバディーン大学名誉教授。平成 29 (2017) 年にエディンバラ桂冠詩人に任じられた。エディンバラで夫人と共に「メディテーション・センター」を営む。作品は小説『夜の舟』、詩集『あさがお』『グラスゴー禅』、他多数。日本の文化・歴史・社会について長年に亘って欧米への理解促進に尽力、英語俳句集の出版をはじめ俳句の普及にも貢献され、平成 30 (2018) 年春には、日英文化交流への寄与により、旭日小綬章を受章されている。2019 年 12 月に来日。学習院大学を拠点に三週間、日本各地で R.H. ブライス関連資料を収集され、目下、『小説・永遠のブライス師』執筆中。