

Japan Library: Pukapuka

By Jillian Yorke



Author Jillian Yorke

The Vision

I have always been deeply attracted by both books and Japan, for as long as I can remember. Indeed, it was a book that first sparked my fascination with Japan, in a British childhood where there were few opportunities for any other kind of Oriental interaction — though I don't recall its title. So I am delighted to be bringing together these two personal passions through the establishment of the Japan Library: Pukapuka at our home in Mackaytown, Waikato, New Zealand, located less than two hours from the international airport in Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city. We hope that offering free public access to a wide selection of Japan-related literature, written in both English and Japanese, will help promote Japanese culture locally and nationally, as well as providing a literary respite for Japanese people living in or visiting New Zealand, where they can relax physically, be inspired intellectually, and feel refreshed spiritually, in a mentally stimulating yet naturally tranquil environment.

This project, about to reach fruition, is the culmination of a great deal of planning, effort and expense on the part of my life partner Hitoshi Morishita and me, with the support, encouragement, and contributions of many others. In a deeper sense, it is also the result of the interaction of various other forces at work: my need to “have Japan with me” even while I am not physically in the country; his wish to

create a practical, useful way for the Japanese and Kiwi cultures to meet, that is more lasting and ongoing than the usual “Japan Day” or “Japan Week” type of events; and our mutual desire to “share Japan with the rest of the world” and to improve the level of international understanding of Japan (and *vice versa*) and to develop Japanophile New Zealanders. The last point seems vital in this era when interest in Japan in New Zealand appears to have waned, while there is a

steadily increasing leaning towards China, no doubt reflecting the current economic realities and demographics of New Zealand. Having spent more than half my life in Japan, and now being based in New Zealand, I call both countries “home”. I care deeply about the future of both, and the relationship between the two. One fundamental way to improve and enhance this relationship is through books, which can educate and edify the mind, sadden and gladden the heart, and illuminate and inspire the soul of the reader.

The Power of the Pen

Hitoshi and I met in June 2007, and decided to develop a “Japan Library” in New Zealand, an idea that had been germinating in his mind for a long time. We have been working towards the actualization of this concept ever since. On Sept. 17, 2009, an article written by Naofumi Kuchiki, a veteran journalist, appeared in the “Kono Hito” (“This Person”) column of the mass-circulation *Tokyo Shimbun*, and was then reprinted in other editions in the Chubu and Hokuriku regions. I was interviewed for this article in Hibiya Park in central Tokyo, during my lunch break from work (at the Public Relations Office of the Minister's Secretariat at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry), on a very windy day. Although Hitoshi and I had not yet fine-tuned our library plan, and in spite of the very limited time Kuchiki-san and I had together, the resulting article has played a pivotal role in the history of our library. It was read by millions of Japanese people. In one edition, the announcement of the new Hatoyama administration and the article about our library were on the same page, bringing even more publicity.

The reader reaction was amazing. We received letters, emails, and many donations of books from a large number of people in response to the article. These books were sent to my home in Nishi-Tokyo, where I stored them under the house, and today, several years later, they form the core of our new library. We will always be grateful to these generous donors. Some sent books they had authored themselves, while a few sent only one book that was especially meaningful to them. Some had happy memories of past visits to New Zealand or else held fond dreams of wanting to come here in the future. Some have said that they will visit our library one day — for some, it could even comprise the main purpose of a special trip to New Zealand. Some who contacted us then have stayed in touch. As well as 1,806 books, we received various other Japan-related items such as CDs, *origami* paper, and bookmarks.

Photo: BAYLEYS



Our home, the location of the Japan Library: Pukapuka.

Photo: Tokyo Shimbun

Encouraging Reading

According to the latest census (2013), New Zealand experienced 2.7% economic growth in 2012 (measured by real gross domestic product), the largest annual increase since 2007. Hopefully, this positive growth will encourage more overseas travel by Kiwis, including to Japan. But those who are unable to travel to Japan in person can always come for a virtual

unique fusion of Japanese and New Zealand cultures. The kauri (*Agathis australis*) is an ancient, native New Zealand tree that is highly valued for its strength, beauty, hardness, and straightness, making it particularly suitable for ships' masts. Unusually, its leaves grow straight from the trunk. We have two kauri trees on our own property; they are fast-growing and fascinating to observe. As well as the wood, kauri gum is also highly prized. According to *The Kauaeranga Valley* by Allan Berry (2007), the first record of Pakeha (European) use of the kauri tree was in 1772 when it was used for a ship's foremast. Berry describes how ships coming from England had two missions — to deliver a shipload of “convicts” to Australia and Tasmania, and then to pick up a load of kauri timber to take back on the return journey, “to be used as spars for His Majesty's ships.”

Tane Mahuta (“the god of the forest”), the largest kauri in existence, has a diameter of 4.4 meters and a height of 17.7 meters to the first branch. In pre-European times, the felling of trees was strictly controlled by the Maori, and *karakia* (prayers) were offered before their use. Sad to say, the European settlers did not honor or follow the Maori tradition of respect for and veneration of natural resources, and New Zealand's kauri forests were thoughtlessly decimated in the ensuing years. In recent times, however, with the far greater environmental awareness, the few remaining kauri trees are closely protected and it is illegal to fell them.

Fortunately, we were able to obtain some from a friend who works in the timber industry, from a kauri in his Coromandel forest that was blown down in a storm about 25 years ago. David cut the fallen kauri lengthwise with a chainsaw. Three pieces about 70 cm by 70 cm by 8 meters were winched by tractor to the ridge top one at a time, then pulled together down the ridge for milling — a tough, tricky job, since the kauri had fallen in steep, tangled terrain. A lot of it was unusable, but David cut out pieces for us from the rest. We have made our library shelves out of these beautiful planks, and used no nails or other means of fixing the shelves in place, only kauri planks and supports.

When we calculated the expected approximate weight of the books to go on the shelves — in the meantime Hitoshi and helpers had carefully weighed and measured each book that we had received — as well as that of the shelves themselves, it came to a total of 3.16 tons. Concerned about this extra load on our home's floor, we have had our house foundations specially strengthened, with joists added directly under the positions where we later placed the shelf supports. The joists were further supported by jack-studs which in turn rest on thick square concrete pads. According to David, who did the work, these structural adjustments will make the foundations more than strong enough to bear the required weight.

Library Name: Pukapuka

The Maori people traditionally had no written language, only oral traditions. According to Allan Berry, 87, an avid local historian and expert in Maori history and culture, as well as the honorary curator of



This newspaper article elicited an amazing response.

Japan experience here at our library. Unfortunately, the census did not include data about reading habits, but we hope that the establishment of our Japan Library: Pukapuka will encourage and stimulate further interest in reading and books in general, not only those about Japan.

After looking at 103 properties in New Zealand, we finally decided on this one and acquired it on Sept. 1, 2009. The house is situated on four acres of land with varied terrain in a peaceful location surrounded by hills and greenery. The Japan Library: Pukapuka has been set up in one of its rooms. Although we are six kilometers from the nearest town (Paeroa), our home is a short drive from the cities of Auckland, Hamilton, and Tauranga. Rotorua, too, well-known to Japanese tourists for its thermal attractions, is not far away. We hope that this convenient location will encourage people to come to visit our library from various different places, once they know about it.

At the time of our move to New Zealand shortly after buying the property, neither of us yet had a permanent residence qualification. As a result, it cost a substantial sum of money to bring all the books into the country, since we had to pay considerable taxes and import duties. The immigration authorities, incredulous that anyone could actually own so many books — and convinced that, if we really did, it must be for some commercial purpose — opened every single box and checked their contents with infra-red detector equipment. Even though we had nothing to hide, it was a relief when they finally released and “passed” all the boxes, and we were able to get them safely delivered to our home.

Shelves of Kauri

As the material for our library shelves, we had set our hearts on kauri wood. Though expensive and hard to obtain, the kauri symbolizes New Zealand. We wanted to make the library a true reflection of the natural environment it is located in, and to create a



Photo: Author

Hitoshi hard at work setting up the library shelves.

our library, there are records of written Maori words as far back as 1814, at the beginning of European contact. These words and phrases were often terms for things that had never been encountered or experienced by Maoris before, such as books, or *pukapuka*. With the wonderful resurgence in Maori language, awareness and culture in recent years, it is now much more common in New Zealand to see signs and explanations written in both Maori and English. The country itself is even named in both languages: New Zealand, and Aotearoa (meaning Land of the Long, White Cloud), surely something quite unusual in the world.

In the Auckland City Art Gallery, we recently came across a sign for *Whare Pukapuka*, meaning “House of Books”, at the entrance to a library. For our part, we decided to include the Maori word for books in our library name in order, once again, to reflect the library’s location and New Zealand base. I met several Maori people during my long residence in Japan, and they were all very proud of their culture and eager to spread knowledge and awareness of it in Japan. I hope that some of them will be able to visit our library and enjoy its contents, which may evoke some memories of and stir reflections on their own time in Japan — and perhaps inspire them to go back again.

Read Japan

An exciting development occurred on Oct. 12, 2012, when our library received the honor of being selected as one of the recipients of the Nippon Foundation’s Read Japan book donation program of “100 Books for Understanding Contemporary Japan” — a project to support overseas libraries in their efforts to promote Japanese literature and culture. The catalogue accompanying the books describes in detail the 100 books chosen and explains the thinking behind their selection — by a committee of 10 people with an extensive knowledge of Japan and with diverse backgrounds in

business, academia, media, government and NGOs. As Nippon Foundation Chairman Yohei Sasakawa writes in the catalogue’s introduction, “Books can be an inspiration when it comes to enhancing our understanding of other cultures, and for making our own culture more easily understood by others.” The catalogue divides the collection into five categories: politics/international relations (23 books); economics/business (19), society/culture (15); literature/arts (25), and history (18). Sasakawa-san has kindly agreed to personally write the library name on a piece of kauri that we took to Japan for the purpose, to be hung up at the library entrance.

These 98 books (two of the 100 were not available) formed the core and the beginning of the English section of our library. To them we have added the books that were donated as a result of the newspaper articles and thereafter, plus many from both of our own personal collections, as well as a few I have found in local antique shops. Although the majority of the books in our library are written in Japanese, many can be enjoyed by non-Japanese readers as well, since they are highly visual, with a large number of illustrations, photographs, or artwork. Some also have partial translations, with English sections or summaries accompanying the Japanese text. I am now delightedly rediscovering these books, including some that I have owned for many years, but that have taken on a new lease of life now that they are part of the Japan Library: Pukapuka.

The Books

Now the shelves are up, we’ve been gradually sorting the books. The types of books in our library vary widely, reflecting the preferences and tastes of the many donors or previous owners. There are a substantial number by “representative” Japanese authors such as Yukio Mishima, Ryotaro Shiba, Natsume Soseki, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Osamu Dazai, Kenji Miyazawa, and Yasunari Kawabata (which remind me of my days at university studying Japanese literature — these were the authors we



Photo: Author

Our neighbor Kevin water-blasts the verandah leading up to the back entrance of the library. Boxes of books can be seen in the background.

read then), as well as a fair selection of more modern ones. Also well-represented are *Nihonjinron* (“What are the Japanese?”) type of works and those comparing Japan with other countries. Guides introducing Japanese people to “Western culture” — as well as the opposite — give an interesting historical perspective, reflecting the standards and prejudices of the times when they were written.

After being roughly divided by size, the books currently on the library shelves fell naturally into the following categories: history; economics, politics, and business; travel; Buddhism; nature; aimed at children; art and exhibition catalogues; haiku; language (dictionaries, Japanese grammar, linguistics, study methods, other languages); manga; literary series (by renowned Japanese and non-Japanese authors); encyclopedias; health; golf; and cooking. Other possible categories that I am considering adding include: social issues and social theory; mental health, telephone counselling, and suicide; Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Fukushima (the atomic bombs, nuclear power, and nuclear accidents); women, feminism, and female authors; study guides and reference works; Japanese culture (such as introductions to ikebana, Noh, and Kabuki); *mukashi-banashi* (old tales of Japan); novels and fiction. The final categories will depend on how the sorting goes, what we add from now on, and what we find as we look more closely at the contents of the current collection. All duplicates have been taken out: that is, there is only one copy of each book in the library. Since the space is somewhat limited, we may have only some of the books on display at any one time, and change what is on the shelves from time to time, to ensure that all of the books are eventually circulated. We will probably decide not to allow some of the older, more precious books to be taken out of the library — they will have to be read on-site. We also intend to restrict the use of the library to adults, since we want it to be a place for serious study and reading pleasure, and not a play area for children.

Looking at all these books anew, now they are freed from their stay of several years in boxes in our garage, I feel deeply touched by the kindness of strangers — all the thought, consideration, and effort that went into choosing, packing, farewelling, and sending all of these special books to us. It is an endless pleasure for us to enter the library and to be in the presence of this cornucopia of treasures, like a gift that we can keep on opening again and again, discovering something new each time. We are excited about sharing these literary delights with a wider audience. The library is also steadily developing a powerful presence of its own. Augmenting the works on offer is an ongoing process, with a box of books from Japan arriving just recently. Among its contents were a set of *Jarinko Chie* manga by Katsumi Haruki that I found pleasantly addictive. Japanese visitors to our home often contribute a book or two. Our latest addition is *Joshinki (The Goddess Chronicle)* by renowned author Natsuo Kirino, which I am currently reading. Although the total number of books is not all that large, the range of topics and variety of books and genres on the library shelves is considerable.

Future Plans

We hope to organize various gatherings at the library, such as a monthly discussion group or book club, as well as holding specialized workshops on aspects of Japanese society and culture. Japanese seasonal touches will be followed, for example, with displays of *hina-matsuri* dolls and *koi-nobori*. Our aim is to further interest in the culture of Japan as well as its literature. The official opening is tentatively slated for April 2014.

We are currently working on creating regulations for the library, with the aim of keeping a balance between carefully protecting the library and its assets, and having a basically open, all-welcome policy. A website is planned. We envisage that members of the New Zealand academia, particularly those at the various universities in nearby Auckland and Hamilton, will find our library both of interest for their personal pleasure and of use in their academic studies.

Come and Visit!

Books can be a powerful key to further understanding of both the particular and the universal, and an inspiration to get to know the subject or country better, and perhaps even to visit it oneself. We believe that this library has the potential to serve as “diplomacy as a means of furthering Japanese culture”. Although I lived in Japan for over 30 years, I am still on an ongoing journey of discovery about Japan and the Japanese psyche, and always will be. One of our goals in establishing the Japan Library: Pukapuka is to create more people in New Zealand who have a deep interest in and broad knowledge of Japan as a whole, rather than of just one particular aspect. This seems essential for greater mutual understanding.

Use of our library is free (though financial and literary donations are both welcome), but by appointment only. All readers of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* are very welcome to visit. If you find yourself in New Zealand, please do drop in! For more information, please contact the author at: japanlibnz@gmail.com. JS



Photo: Author

The first books on the shelves. It's beginning to look like a library!

Jillian Yorke resided in Japan for over 30 years before moving her base in 2010 to New Zealand, where she continues to work as a Japan-related translator, writer, and editor.