

Bookshelf

The Best of Japan

Published by Kodansha Ltd.
1987, Tokyo
288 pages; ¥4,800

More than 250 products and services judged worthy of the 1986 Nikkei Award for Excellence are profiled in this large-format book featuring a balance of industry surveys, product information and fine color photographs. Even a brief glance through the pages of the book's various sections gives the casual reader a good idea of the virtues of artistic refinement, practicality, function and sensibility found in contemporary Japanese product design.



The Nikkei Award (made by the leading Japanese economic publishing group Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc.) is based on product originality, design, effective use of high technology, success in the market, cost performance and impact on society. Nikkei journalists screen the thousands of new products they cover during the year and a list is presented to a jury of nine distinguished panelists with academic and industrial backgrounds.

Ten different categories of products and services are covered, including industrial and consumer materials; machinery; information and communications equipment; financial, insurance and entertainment services; and cars, watches, home appliances and cameras. Prior to the unveiling of the award-winning products in each category, a summary of recent trends in the category is presented.

Most of these summaries of trends are very well-written and informative.

In his introductory comments, Takashi Mukaibo, professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo, points out that when carbon fibers were introduced U.S. engineers immediately looked for military and aerospace applications whereas their Japanese counterparts set about making lightweight golf clubs and tennis rackets of the new material. Mukaibo stresses the need for Japanese companies to address the commercial marketplace rather than big-ticket government-funded contracts. This need to appeal to hard-to-please customers drives Japanese companies to shorten the lives of products and introduce new and upgraded products on a brisk schedule.

Most of the products surveyed in this book are imaginative and innovative. A few examples are a combined compact disk and laser disk player from Pioneer Electronic Corp. and self-heating canned sake from Toyo Jozo Co. Other products represent the very latest in high technology, such as Fujitsu Ltd.'s high-electron-mobility transistor (HEMT); NEC Corp.'s 32-bit microprocessor (in its V-series); and Mitsubishi Electric Corp.'s artificial-intelligence workstation, called MELCOM PSI, which was developed as part of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry's fifth-generation computer project. Some of the most impressive award-winning products are those that break new barriers in cost-effectiveness.

A few years ago the development of an inexpensive copier for home use seemed unlikely. But Canon Inc. was able to develop such a small and handy copier priced under ¥100,000 (about \$690 at the rate of ¥145/\$). A few of the new products and services seem ingeniously simple, including Nippon Rent-A-Car Service's "Freeroad" showroom which displays the various types of cars available for rent.

An imaginative combination product-and-service is Hotel Nikko Osaka's overnight stay program which involves instruction in the use of word processors.

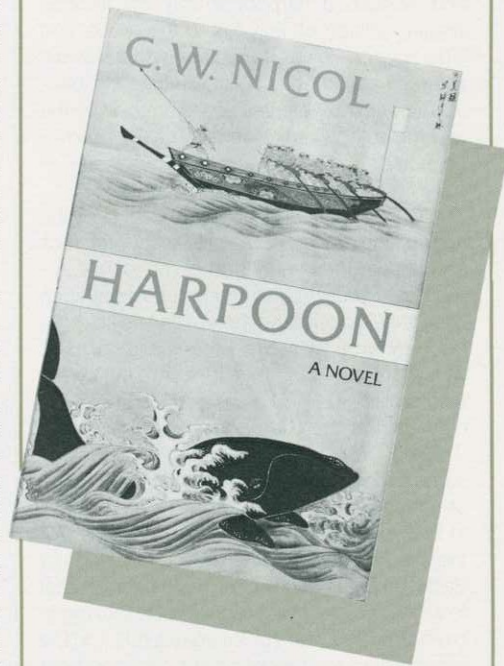
Both the Ark Hills complex in Tokyo and the Suntory Hall, located within the new complex, were recipients of 1986 awards. The Ark Hills complex (located between Akasaka, Roppongi and Kamiyacho subway stations) was recognized for its progressive allocation of space for business, residential, hotel accommodations and other uses.

One of the most striking points of the book is the notion that Japanese companies are facing increasingly formidable competition for market share at home. Firms must constantly offer innovative products to keep up with their competitors, and subtle differences in design are often the key to attracting a wider range of consumers. The book will appeal to a variety of readers ranging from artists to advertisers, and from businessmen to specialists involved in R&D of new products.

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Harpoon

By C. W. Nicol
Published by André Deutsch Limited
1987, London
506 pages; £11.95



This book by Canadian-born C.W. Nicol has been translated into five languages, Japanese among them.

The main reason that this adventure novel has attracted such attention is that it deals with whaling—and the International Whaling Commission has mandated an end to commercial whaling as of 1986. Even the taking of Antarctic whales for scientific research purposes as specifically approved under the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling has had to be stopped in 1987 in the face of the American Magnuson-Packwood Act designed to deny any nation that continues whaling access to fishery resources within the United States' 200 nautical mile economic zone. Whale meat has been an important source of animal protein for Japanese since the 8th century; and now it has disappeared from the Japanese table forever. It is not so much that the IWC and the antiwhaling groups have ignored this centuries-old tradition—a tradition that is immortalized in the 8th-century *Manyoshu* anthology—as that they never even understood these customs well enough to ignore them.

Thus this book by Nicol—who lives in Japan and is well-known here for his understanding and affection for Japanese ways—has been welcomed by many Japanese as a stout defense of whaling by a Euro-American.

Even putting aside the satisfaction of finding someone who supports Japan on the whaling issue and judging *Harpoon* in comparison with other Japanese novels in this same historical-fiction genre, this book is still well worth reading. Just as there is fierce technological

competition in the interdependent international economy, it looks as though we are in for equally fierce literary competition.

The story is a good read, centering on the two protagonists Matsudaira Sadayori, scion of the Tokugawa-loyalist Matsudaira family, and Jinsuke, a harpooner from the famous whaling village of Taiji. Set in the 1860s and '70s, *Harpoon* gives its two main characters a splendid backdrop of political intrigue to function in. Their adventures are enhanced by the way the author weaves in his wealth of knowledge about 19th-century Japanese life in Tokyo, Kyoto and even rural villages.

It is clear from this novel that Nicol sees the antiwhaling movement as extremely intolerant, and this is undeniably part of the story's appeal, yet *Harpoon* also reminded me of such Japanese historical adventure novels as *Jinju-no Umi* and *Satsuma Hina-yasha*, both of which are set in the mid-19th century, by the very prolific and very popular Yo Tsumoto. It is only natural that *Harpoon* should resemble *Jinju-no Umi*, since they are both set in the same period and both draw on the widely documented disaster that befell the whalers of Taiji in 1869, but *Harpoon* has additional interest for the way Nicol weaves in the tale of Matsudaira Sadayori as he evolved from a *bakufu* loyalist to a staunch ally of the rebel forces seeking to overthrow 250 years of Tokugawa rule and the way he depicts Jinsuke's transformation from a rustic whaler to an international trader.

Harpoon also represents a reversal of the usual literary positions. In the past, Japanese novelists sought to emulate Western styles and motifs. Yet in preparing to write *Harpoon*, Nicol read numerous works by Yo Tsumoto and drew on their spirit to create a new line in English. He has created a new genre in Japanese fiction—the Japanese historical novel written by a non-Japanese with a Japanese perspective. At the same time, this development is indicative of the great intermingling taking place among literary styles and subjects worldwide.

While I can understand his affection for Japan and his publisher's desire to want to put the work into Japanese, I am afraid that many Japanese readers will have trouble with parts of the book. The depiction of the revolutionary thinker Yoshida Shoin as a mere rabble-rouser, for example, will probably draw fire from more than Japan's right wing. There are also problems with the way the nobility and samurai classes are presented, since this seems to lean too heavily on the similarities with European chivalry. As such *Harpoon* is good on the action, but a little weak in social background fabric.

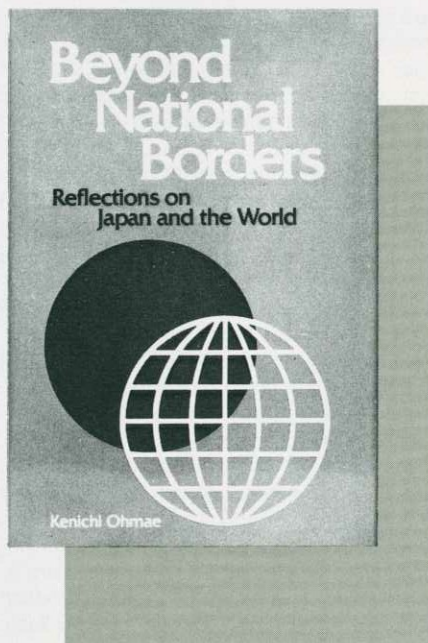
Even so, *Harpoon* ranks right along with *Satsuma Hina-yasha*, and it is well worth reading their differing versions of the great battles. The contrast is striking, and will likely be grist for dozens of dissertations.

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Beyond National Borders: Reflections on Japan and the World

By Kenichi Ohmae
Published by Dow Jones-Irwin
1987, Homewood, Illinois
128 pages; \$16.95

We have come to expect fresh, provocative interpretations from Kenichi Ohmae. As managing director of the Tokyo office of McKinsey & Company, Inc., the management consulting firm, he is perfectly situated to observe and report on the dynamic Japanese economy.



Our hopes are disappointed in this book, however, because many of the themes are drawn from Ohmae's fascinating *Triad Power* (1985) or his articles in the Western business press. Indeed, the repetition would be Bide-nesque if the author were not reprising himself. Other topics are the oft-heard litany of popular pundits in Japan.

Beyond National Borders is a translation by the author of a book he wrote in Japanese which was published in 1986. The adage about lawyers who represent themselves also holds true for authors who render their own writing into a foreign language. Errors of English usage abound; there are more stylistic howlers than boutiques in Harajuku. That a book so carelessly edited was produced in the United States suggests that the blight of indifference to quality has spread from the manufacturing sector to publishing.

Readers unfamiliar with Ohmae's earlier work and willing to overlook the countless infelicitous expressions will find that he writes with authority about how the international market-

place works. Ohmae explains the importance of common lifestyles and consumer preferences in the advanced industrial nations—a market of 630 million persons—to corporate marketing strategies. Here the outsider gets a free sample of the expensive advice McKinsey & Company provides its clients: They are urged to get inside protectionist walls.

Ohmae rejects humbug from Tokyo or Washington. He deftly demolishes Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's campaign to get each Japanese to buy \$100 worth or more of U.S. imports. And the author's artful analysis of sales by U.S. subsidiaries producing in Japan to the Japanese market punctures the strident claims of American politicians that this market is closed. He also shows that the monthly announcements of merchandise trade statistics, usually showing huge U.S. deficits and Japanese surpluses, are more a media event than a reliable indicator of bilateral imbalance.

A short section on the limitations of Keynesian economics opened the eyes of this fugitive from Economics 1. The conventional model no longer works—because the world economy is now a “system of interdependent units” and increasing unemployment is virtually inevitable—and ad hoc quick fixes are doomed to failure.

As a rational internationalist, Ohmae deplores knee-jerk nationalism and hectors his Japanese audience about the danger of emotional, groupist ripostes to U.S. trade pressures. He attacks the collective excuse-mongering that characterized Japan's response to Hitachi and Mitsubishi spying on IBM. Perhaps Ohmae's message and that of others has had some effect. Reactions to Toshiba Machine's illegal sale of high technology to the Soviet Union were notably less paranoid than in the IBM affair.

Yet Ohmae brews some near-beer nationalism of his own. He believes that U.S. scholars have misled the American public about the causes of Japan's massive trade surpluses. These allegations against unnamed (mostly) rascals contribute to Japan's search for scapegoats—“We are misunderstood and somebody else is to blame.” To say, as Ohmae does, that “the theories of the Peter Druckers and Ezra Vogels... have created Japan, Inc.” is flip but not fair. Most people would acknowledge that the Ministry of International Trade and Industry had *something* to do with that image. This charge follows another extraordinary statement about “the biggest barrier to U.S.-Japan communications—the idea of ‘Japan, Inc.’” Oh? Everybody is entitled to their hit list, I suppose, but mine starts with this kind of reductionism.

One of Ohmae's comments deserves a spirited response from U.S. labor: That average American employees are less enthusiastic and “gifted” than Japanese. Ironically, the multitude of English errors in this U.S. book are perverse proof of his charge.

Frank Baldwin
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