

Collecting and Studying Old Japanese Picture Postcards in Canada, By Hans E. Gruen

Background: I have been interested in Japanese history and culture for more than 40 years and have resided in Japan several times, partly as visiting researcher at the University of Tokyo. My studies there concerned mainly historical aspects of botanical and horticultural exchanges between Japan and the West. While travelling I usually bought postcards showing scenery, buildings and art at many of the places visited. These modern cards, together with photos and diaries, served mainly as reminders, and were not meant to form a collection. In fact, at first I had no interest in postcards as such, and did not even begin to acquire old cards until after I left Japan for the last time in 1986. What got me interested in old cards were the images they provide of Japan in the late Meiji period, a period of great interest for my studies. At first I searched only for views of parks and gardens, especially in Yokohama, but then broadened my interest. Since about 1991 I have been buying cards at shows and directly from dealers almost entirely in Canada. Long-term connections with some dealers were very helpful in enabling me to build up a significant collection in relatively few years, despite the fact that I live in a fairly small city where I am probably the only collector of old Japanese postcards.

Time Frame: The time frame of my collection is 1900 to the late 1930s, but I am interested mainly in private picture postcards from the early 1900s. I collect both unused and used cards. Most of the former are in excellent condition, but used, datable cards are more valuable for study, although they are often not as well preserved as unused ones. I was also able to acquire more than 100 unused cards from the collection of an American general who had been stationed in the Philippines and who had travelled extensively in Japan in 1909. He had the laudable habit of pencilling the dates of his visits on the backs of cards he bought at various places.

Topics: Most of my cards show landscape views, scenes of the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, trades and occupations, and women and children. Additional topics in the collection are emperors, Westerners in Japan, plants, Japanese gardens outside Japan, decorated cards and ship cards. Cards with views of Yokohama and Tokyo predominate, but all except two of the 47 prefectures are represented. I have not yet found any pre-WW II cards from Akita or Okinawa. I don't collect patriotic or military cards, except official ones of philatelic interest. Also I don't collect postcards from the occupied territories, although I have some views of Dairen and Port Arthur.

Explanatory Notes: It is unsatisfactory to merely collect old postcards without knowing something about them. For that reason I add explanatory geographical and historical notes to most of the cards and include transliteration into Roman letters as well as translations of most Japanese captions. Captions printed in English, where given at all, are often even less informative than those in Japanese, and may be quaintly misspelled on older cards. Also included in the notes is the publisher or printer, or both, found mainly on the address side. I could only accomplish this fairly laborious but challenging task because I had already assembled a large reference library on Japan for use in other studies. A major

obstacle is my rudimentary knowledge of spoken and written Japanese. Luckily, I found a translator who could read many of the Chinese characters (*kanji*) on old cards. Also, I became familiar myself with often-repeated terms in Japanese captions and with some place names. Various Japanese-English and kanji dictionaries are used. Very important is a name dictionary, especially *Japanese Names and How to Read Them* by A.J. Koop and H. Inada (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London and Boston, reprint 1985). This book has been reprinted several times and is indispensable for Westerners who wish to read old kanji used in personal/religious names, geographic/place names, titles of royalty and officials, and names of temples and shrines. The English transliteration in this work is somewhat old-fashioned because it was originally published in 1923, but that does not detract from its value. The name dictionary by P.G. O'Neill (1971) is not as useful as the above publication for deciphering postcard captions because it lacks place names.

For the explanatory notes I rely mainly on references in English and also several Japanese sources, especially those concerning picture postcards. General works in English include guidebooks, atlases and maps, historical dictionaries and the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (9 volumes, 1983). Older guidebooks are often more useful than recent ones for finding places which were later incorporated into cities, and for locating buildings which disappeared long ago. I use *A Handbook for Travellers in Japan* by Basil Hall Chamberlain and W.B. Mason (John Murray, London, etc., 1894, 1907), *Terry's Japanese Empire*, etc. by T. Philip Terry (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, etc., 1914), and successive editions of *Japan The Official Guide* (titles differ slightly) issued from 1933 onwards, first by the Japan Government Railways and then by the Japan Travel Bureau.

Local guidebooks and city histories are also consulted, but unfortunately few have been published in Western languages for other than major centres. Atlases and maps are indispensable. By far the most useful atlas proved to be *Japan The Pocket Atlas* published at the time of Expo '70 (Heibonsha, Tokyo 1970). The text is in English but all place names in the detailed index are accompanied by the Japanese writing. I found this atlas more useful for locating places on old postcards than the three modern bilingual atlases published by Kodansha in 1991-3 (Japan, Tokyo, Kyoto-Osaka) or the huge but unwieldy *National Atlas of Japan*, which is only in English. Street maps are also used but bilingual maps are rare, as are maps in English for smaller centres.

Information on the history of individual buildings and specific localities in Yokohama and Tokyo can be found in many sources in English and Japanese. I will mention only a few books which refer specifically to postcards. Architects, construction dates, building costs and other information is given in *Machi. Meiji Taisho Showa E-Hagaki ni Miru Nihon Kindai Toshi no Awami 1902-1941- Kanto-hen* (English title: *Townscape of Japan 1902-1941, The Changing Face of Cities as Seen Through Picture Postcards* (Vol. 2), edited by Kunio Miyajima (Toshi Kenkyukai Mitsuhiko Ogata, Tokyo, 1980). Based on postcards collected by Ogata, this large volume was the only one published in a projected series.

A beautiful book about Yokohama postcards is *Yokohama E-Hagaki* edited by Masatoki

Han-zawa (Yokohama Grafica, Yurindo, 1991). It is based on the collections of Neil Pedlar and G. Davis. Pedlar's collection is deposited in the Yokohama Archives of History. Pedlar himself published a pamphlet in English, *The Golden Age of Yokohama on Postcards* (1980), and another out-of-print work I have not seen: *Pedora Korekushon/Yokohama E-Hagaki* (Yurindo, Yokohama 1980). I suspect that it contains material also included in the other publications just cited. Pedlar also added a short chapter on Japanese postcards to another of his books, *The Imported Pioneers, Westerners Who Helped Build Modern Japan* (Japan Library, Sandgate, Folkestone, Kent, 1990).

Postcards concerning the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 are described and illustrated in disturbing detail in a remarkable volume, *Ishii Toshio Korekushon E-Hagaki ga Kataru Kanto Dai Shinsai* edited by Matsuo Kimura and Toshio Ishii (*Ishii Toshio Collection, Picture Postcards Tell About the Great Kanto Earthquake*, Takushoku Shoko, Tokyo, 1990). Postcard images of Tokyo reconstructed after the earthquake are pictured and described in *Shinsai Fukko Dai Tokyo E-Hagaki* edited by Nobuyuki Kondo (*Picture Postcards of the Earthquake Reconstruction of Great Tokyo*, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 1993). Takayuki Komori assembled a vast collection of postcards representing practically all topics encountered until WW II. He included samples of his collection in a large book, *E-Hagaki Meiji, Taisho, S/iowa (Picture Postcards 1901-1945 from Komon Collection*, published by Kokusho Kankokai, Tokyo, 1978.)

Some of my early cards show Japanese subjects but were published in Europe and the United States. An excellent, beautifully illustrated book appeared recently which discusses postcards that depict non-Western cultures. Titled *Delivering Views, Distant Cultures in Early Postcards*, it is edited by Chitraud M. Geary and Virginia-Lee Webb (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington & London, 1998). It contains an interesting chapter by Ellen Handy, *Japonisme and American Postcard Visions of Japan, Beauties and Workers, Cherry Blossoms and Silkworms*.

As far as I can determine, postcard magazines are not available in Canadian libraries or for that matter in most American ones. I have not subscribed to any such magazines because I've heard that articles on Japanese postcards are rare and in any case would be unlikely to provide the information I seek. However, I am a member of the International Society for Japanese Philately, which publishes the excellent scholarly magazine, *Japanese Philately*, now in its 53rd year. The president and chief editor of this society is the retired historian Dr. Robert M. Spaulding, whose areas of expertise include Japanese postal stationery and private postcards. Over the years this magazine has published numerous articles on government-issued postcards of every description and a smaller number on private picture postcards. Especially comprehensive has been the coverage of Karl Lewis (1865-1942), the prolific Yokohama publisher of cacheted covers and picture postcards.

Preservation: I keep my cards in three-ring binders in archival quality Vario stock sheets (216 x 280 mm, Lighthouse, Germany). Used cards are kept in clear sheets with two pockets where both sides can be seen. Unused cards are kept in black-backed sheets with

four pockets. Each pocket accommodates a postcard together with a typed explanatory note considerably reduced in size on a copier. A ringbook holds slightly more than 60 stock sheets plus a small number of black pages inserted as background after clear sheets. This storage method is relatively expensive and by no means perfect, because the cards can shift somewhat in the pockets and the filled binders are heavy. Cheaper stock sheets, such as are used for photographs, occupy less space but are too flexible, and the pockets are too small to accommodate an explanatory note below the card. Despite the disadvantages of stock sheets I prefer them to keeping cards in separate plastic envelopes in boxes where they are not readily visible and are easily displaced.

View cards are grouped by prefectures roughly from north to south. Some individual prefectures are allotted two or more ringbooks while others are combined in single books. Separate books are dedicated to the other topics. Decorated cards, including ship cards, are kept separately, except for those with views of identifiable places.

Studies: Geographic location and historical background are not the only challenging features of Japanese postcards. I am also interested in assembling information about the early history of postcard production in Japan, publishers, and production methods, including the colouring. In that connection it is important to date cards. This is possible only as an approximation except for relatively few private and government cards issued for special events. Although many early publishers of private postcards are known, information about them is sketchy, to judge by Japanese sources. It is extremely unlikely that publication dates for their cards can be found. Postmarks, dates of messages, and issue dates of stamps on many used cards must be correlated with changes over time in the characteristics of the cards to establish approximate limits of publication dates applicable also to unused cards. Characteristics being examined in this connection are the format of the view side, the colouring, and the presence of dividing lines, frames, and forms of inscriptions printed on the address side.