Abstract of PhD thesis

Mediating Modernity – Henry Black and narrated hybridity in Meiji Japan

By Ian McArthur

Henry Black was born in Adelaide in 1858, but arrived in Japan in 1864 after his father became editor of the Japan Herald. In the late 1870s, Henry Black addressed meetings of members of the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement. His talks were inspired by nineteenth-century theories of natural rights. That experience led to his becoming a professional storyteller (rakugoka) affiliated with the San’yū school of storytelling (San’yūha).

Black’s storytelling (rakugo) in the 1880s and 1890s was an attempt by the San’yūha to modernise rakugo. By adapting European sensation fiction, Black blended European and Japanese elements to create hybridised landscapes and characters as blueprints for audiences negotiating changes synonymous with modernity during the Meiji period. The narrations also portrayed the negative impacts of change wrought through emulation of nineteenth-century Britain’s Industrial Revolution. His 1894 adaptation of Oliver Twist or his 1885 adaptation of Mary Braddon’s Flower and Weed, for example, were early warnings about the evils of child labour and the exploitation of women in unregulated textile factories.

Black’s kabuki performances parallel politically and artistically inspired attempts to reform kabuki by elevating its status as an art suitable for imperial and foreign patronage. The printing of his narrations in stenographic books (sokkibon) ensured that his ideas reached a wide audience.

Because he was not an officially hired foreigner (yatoi), and his narrations have not entered the rakugo canon, Black has largely been forgotten. A study of his role as a mediator of modernity during the 1880s and 1890s shows that he was an agent in the transfer to a mass audience of European ideas associated with modernity, frequently ahead of intellectuals and mainstream literature. An examination of Black’s career helps broaden our knowledge of the role of foreigners and rakugo in shaping modern Japan.
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by
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Note

I have followed the standard convention with Japanese personal names of using the surname first. With the names of non-Japanese nationals of Japanese ancestry, I have placed the surname last. Persons with stage names are referred to by the stage name. I have used macrons for long vowels in Japanese words, except in the case of well-known place names. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of original Japanese are mine.