

[Download ebook] Two Japanese Novelists: Soseki and Toson

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Edwin McClellan

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Edwin McClellan : Two Japanese Novelists: Soseki and Toson before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Two Japanese Novelists: Soseki and Toson:

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Some information on Toson, but little substance. By Angry Mofo You'd figure that, of all people, Edwin McClellan would have some interesting insights into the writings of Natsume Soseki. McClellan translated two of Soseki's novels (including *Kokoro*, the most famous of them all) and made a career out of studying Japanese literature. However, insight is the one thing missing from this slim, slight book. Instead, there's a lot of weirdly strident, preemptory criticism. Take a look at this: *I Am A Cat*: "Strictly speaking, it is not a novel but a series of episodes, quite unequal in merit, loosely strung together. As a whole, therefore, it cannot be regarded as a truly serious work." (15-6) *Botchan*: "The style has a certain crudeness which...prevents the novel from having much depth." (19) *Autumn Wind*: "...on the whole awkwardly and didactically written...it is fairly obvious that when writing it, Soseki had confidence neither in himself nor in the reader." (26) *Sanshiro*: "It is...an extremely dull work. It has almost no plot and is exasperatingly uneventful." (31) *Light And Darkness*: "...the most tedious of Soseki's later novels...it lacks passion. There is not a line in it that touches one." (59) Maybe McClellan felt that he had to say something critical to make his book more balanced, but instead it just makes it look odd that he would bother translating the works of such a "flawed" writer. The tone improves later on, when McClellan gets to his two favourite Soseki books (*Kokoro* and *Grass on the Wayside*, naturally), but it still leaves an unpleasant aftertaste. McClellan has a way of projecting his own reaction to the books onto his audience. He

grandly asserts, "Sanshiro...is too young to move us, however," and then, "we know that he is the kind of youth for whom life holds nothing but profound disappointment." (32) Then, again, "for all its polish, Sanshiro fails to move us." (34) Who's "us," kemosabe? My own reaction to Sanshiro is the exact opposite of McClellan's, so I found his tendency to speak for "us" especially annoying. McClellan writes, "One cannot but feel that [Soseki] would have written a more interesting novel had he made Hirota, not Sanshiro, the principal character." (34) For heaven's sake, why? Hirota gets enough dialogue in the book to show that he is basically a well-read dilettante. He makes sweeping pronouncements with an air of authority (one of the first things he says to Sanshiro is, "Japan is going to perish"), but he never develops any of his aphorisms or opinions into a coherent argument or system of thought. If you've ever wondered why Hirota sits around doing nothing for the entire book while his disciples flounder around comically, trying to get him a job, it's because the status quo suits him just fine. He doesn't have a prestigious job, but he doesn't have much responsibility either -- he can keep up his image as an unappreciated intellectual without ever having to live up to the expectations that "appreciation" would create. Sanshiro, by the way, looks very good when compared to Hirota. He's one of the healthiest characters in Japanese literature. While he is naive and inexperienced with women, my sense from the book was that he will turn out fine in his life, precisely because he doesn't pointlessly over-intellectualize everything. But McClellan doesn't stop to discuss any of these issues; he makes his assertion and moves on. He spends three pages on Sanshiro, four on *The Gate*. Often, his analysis consists largely of quotes from the books, without much actual discussion. As a critical analysis of Soseki's work, this book has very little value. The other novelist, Toson, fares a bit better. He gets an average of seventeen pages per novel in McClellan's book (as opposed to Soseki's five). But then, the criticism starts anew. *Broken Commandment* "begins rather crudely" (80), "the introduction...is rather too explanatory" (81), the book "collapses in the end in a heap of tasteless melodrama" (81). Regarding Toson's next novel *Spring*, "we feel...that he has no right to be making such solemn announcements so suddenly." (97) There's that "we" again! The story once again "fails to move us" (98), and McClellan concludes that "*Spring* is a failure." (100) Toson's fourth novel *A New Life* is "as conspicuous a failure as *Spring*." (124) *Before The Dawn* is "written in a style so bereft of ornament that its determined inelegance sometimes begins to seem unnecessary; it is too frequently interrupted by extended historical discourses...and of the many characters that appear in it, not one...seems to emerge as a fully rounded personality." (137) Sure, McClellan finds things to praise about Toson, but these often have the flavour of back-handed compliments. *Spring* is "an historically important work." (100) Too bad it's such a failure, eh? *The House* is Toson's "most successful work," but that's "from the purely technical point of view." (101) We are also told that "in the scheme of the novel, neither the incidents nor the persons have much significance in themselves." (101) Now, granted, all of this may well be true, but this is a poor way to convince one's audience to start paying attention to a writer they've never heard of. In my mind, the book's only major virtue is that it presents a few biographical facts and a brief bibliography of Toson, who remains very obscure outside Japan. However, McClellan's take on Toson might actually turn you off from ever reading anything by him. The book also seems to be the only English-language critical text on Soseki in print (which is basically why I read it), but the content of the criticism leaves much to be desired.

Two writers, Natsume Soseki and Shimazaki Toson, invented the modern Japanese novel. Soseki is the eccentric novelist who appears on the 10,000 yen note. His contemporary, Shimazaki Toson, brought to Japanese fiction a lyricism previously seen only in poetry and nature writing. As revered today as they were during their own lifetimes, these two writers boldly established the novel as a major literary form in Japan.

About the Author Edwin McClellan received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, where he was chairman of the Department of Far Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He wrote several articles and translations of Japanese literature.