

William E. Griffis *The Mikado's Empire* (1876)



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William Elliot Griffis. (Source: Fukui City History Museum)

William Elliot Griffis was born in 1843 in Philadelphia, U.S.A. An aspiring pastor with writing skills, Griffis had developed an interest in Japan during his studies at Rutgers University (1865–1869) through his acquaintance with Japanese students such as Yokoi Shōnan’s two nephews. His connection with the Dutch Reformed Church in the U.S., which had been sending missionaries to Japan since 1859, led him to come to Japan in December 1870 to teach chemistry at a domain school (*hankō*) in Fukui. Due in part to the abolition of domains and the establishment of prefectures (*haihan-chiken*), Griffis moved to Tokyo’s Southern University (one of predecessors of the University of Tokyo) in 1872, before his 3-year contract expired. Seeing the real “feudal Japan” in Fukui, albeit for a short period of time, gave Griffis a rare and unique perspective both he himself and others would appreciate, and

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served to encourage his subsequent activities as a connoisseur of Japan. After returning to the U.S. in 1874, Griffis entered a seminary and served as a pastor for many years, but his primary vocation, so to speak, remained the same: to help the Americans understand Japan and the Japanese through writing and lecturing. He revisited Japan in 1926–1927, towards the end of his life, and died in 1928. In addition to his main work, *The Mikado's Empire*, he is the author of numerous books on Japan, including biographies of other foreign missionaries and diplomats with close ties to Japan.

Judging from how energetically Griffis gathered research materials during his residence in Japan, he seems to have planned to use his stay to write a book about Japan from early on. *The Mikado's Empire* was published by Harper & Brothers, a New York publisher, in 1876, around 2 years after his return to the United States. Since then, the book has gone through several editions, the last of which was the 12th edition (1922), and it served as a significant source of knowledge about Japan for Westerners for many years.

Although the first edition is the one covered in this commentary, a comparison of the table of contents with the ninth edition published in 1900, to which I happened to refer, shows that Book I, which deals with the history of Japan, and Book II, which summarizes Griffis' observations and research during his stay in Japan, are identical to the first edition. It is therefore safe to say that, aside from the appendices placed at the end of the book, the main body of *The Mikado's Empire*, Book I and Book II, remained in circulation until much later, almost exactly as they were in the 1876 first edition. It is impressive that a book written at a time when foreigners had little access to information was still considered relevant as late as 1913.

However, for today's readers, *The Mikado's Empire* seems old-fashioned in many places, especially Book I, which mostly deals with Japanese history. The reason may be that Griffis was influenced by Japanese texts such as Rai San'yō's *Nihon gaishi* ("Unofficial History of Japan"), as well as the views of Japanese people he encountered at the time. Book I, though written by a foreigner, is based on the obviously historical view of *kōkoku shikan*, that is, on an emperor-centered historiography, with its scathing condemnation of the Hōjō clan as usurpers of the power of the emperor, the rightful ruler of Japan (p. 151; page numbers are based on the first edition; the same hereafter). Therefore, many of Griffis' evaluations of events and personalities may not satisfy today's readers.

It is also noticeable that many (but not all) of the mythological descriptions in *Kojiki*, or The Record of Ancient Matters, and *Nihonshoki*, or The Chronicles of Japan, are adopted as historical fact as is evident in Book I of *The Mikado's Empire*. Griffis' confusion of myth and history has been criticized since the publication of the first edition. In fact, Griffis refers to this himself in his preface to the second edition, which is also included in the ninth edition.

There are many other questionable statements and factual errors, such as the theory of the Ainu origin of the Japanese, a theory that today is not given any credibility. In short, Book I of *The Mikado's Empire*, entitled "History of Japan, from 660 B.C. to 1872," may have been very useful at a time when there were few similar books, but Japanese readers may not find it so today. The only exception is

the last chapter, Chapter 28, which deals with the Meiji Restoration, where Griffis' own views are expressed somewhat more.

Book II, Personal Experiences, Observations, and Studies in Japan, 1870–1874, which begins with first impressions of Japan and primarily consists of Griffis' own observations, is more relevant today than Book I. When Griffis arrived in Yokohama on December 29, 1870, it was a little over a decade since the opening of the port. As such, there is something in Book II to satisfy our curiosity and desire for knowledge about the vanished Japan of the early Meiji era.

For example, soon after arriving in Japan, Griffis went to Tokyo to visit Guido Herman Fridolin Verbeck, a missionary who would later help him realize his assignment to Fukui. Verbeck was working at Daigaku Nankō (later the University of Tokyo) at the time. Griffis' description of the university, where students still tying a chonmage (topknot) were eager to learn Western languages and disciplines, is of interest. It is said that foreign teachers of the time were a complete mixture of chaff and grain, and that there was more chaff than grain. Griffis writes, "The Japanese had very primitive ideas concerning the fitness of men [foreigners] to teach [...]. The "professors" first obtained were often ex-bar-tenders, soldiers, sailors, clerks, etc." (p. 371).

As seen in Book II of *The Mikado's Empire*, it is noteworthy that, upon his arrival in Japan, Griffis became aware of the assassination of two foreign teachers at the Daigaku Nankō. For Griffis, who had developed a negative image of Japan on his way to Tokyo after seeing two fresh heads hanging from a prison gate and a Christian prohibition sign that had yet to be removed, the incident could, at worst, have given him a definitive image of Japan as a barbaric country.

However, two American missionaries explained the circumstances to Griffis in such a way that increased his sympathy for the Japanese. The missionaries explained that many such incidents indicated a problem on the part of the foreign victim. An account of the event in the *Autobiography of Takahashi Korekiyo (I)*, edited by Uetsuka Tsukasa (Chūkō Bunko, 1976, pp. 83–88), indicates that the two teachers from Daigaku Nankō were attacked because they were walking with a Japanese mistress, which aroused antipathy. Griffis' interpretation was that foreigners were responsible for the so-called assassinations and that these incidents were due to the "the effect of causes which neither fair play nor honor could justify" (p. 377). This interpretation seems valid in this case, too.

Griffis' Japanophilic attitude is also well expressed in his articles of "The Bombardment of Kagoshima" and "The Shimonoseki Affair," which are placed at the end of the book as appendices to *The Mikado's Empire*. For example, in "The Shimonoseki Affair," Griffis thoroughly criticizes both the bombardment of Shimonoseki by the powers (Britain, France, the Netherlands, and the United States), that took place at the end of the Edo period, and the subsequent collection of compensation, as barbaric acts with no basis in international law. He also characterizes Alcock, the British minister at the center of the case, as "the apostle of murder and blind force" (p. 595). *The Mikado's Empire* is interspersed with his shrewd observations from a Japanophile perspective (as opposed to the general Western view of the time), which are among its interesting elements.

Nevertheless, Griffis, like the majority of Westerners at the time, was in some ways a firm believer in West-centric beliefs. For example, the last page of Book II (p. 578) clearly shows that Griffis believed in the superiority of Western civilization in comparison to Japanese civilization and in the superiority of his own Christian religion, to Japan's religion.

When I read *The Mikado's Empire*, I sometimes encounter passages that make me uncomfortable as a Japanese reader, and I realize that this is often because Griffis' writing betrays the arrogance of a person who believes in his own superiority.

The Mikado's Empire is a surprisingly unoriginal book. Even in Book II, which is supposed to be primarily a record of his personal observations, there are unexpectedly few unique observations. Further, a great many of the illustrations in *The Mikado's Empire* were taken from Alcock's *The Capital of the Tycoon*. (Some are noted as taken from Alcock's *The Capital of the Tycoon*, but others are not.) For example, the illustration "Gonji in a Brown Study" on page 445 of *The Mikado's Empire* is borrowed from the illustration "Japanese page in attendance" in *The Capital of the Tycoon*, Vol. 1, Chapter 4. (Gonji was a boy who worked under Griffis' servant in Fukui, and he used to watch Griffis eat meals "in a brown study," according to the text.)

His method of presenting irrelevant illustrations as something he has actually seen and heard suggests that Griffis was probably more likely to take material from other people's writings, adapt it, expand it, and embellish it with literary rhetoric, than to write faithfully from his own experiences and observations. In Book II, which is supposed to be a coherent account of his experiences in Japan, Griffis inserts research chapters such as "Japanese Proverbs." The life-sized Griffis, struggling with debt repayment, loneliness, and sexuality as a single man in a foreign country, that emerges from Edward R. Beauchamp's painstaking study on Griffis, *An American Teacher in Early Meiji Japan* (1976), does not appear at all in *The Mikado's Empire*.

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