

# Edward Seidensticker *Low City, High City: Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake: How the Shogun's Ancient Capital Became a Great Modern City, 1867–1923* (Tokyo Shitamachi Yamanote 1867–1923)



Shōichi Saeki



Edward Seidensticker

Edward Seidensticker was born in 1921 in the U.S. state of Colorado in the western part of the United States, and studied English literature at the University of Colorado. When the Pacific War broke out and the United States Navy, where he began his journey with the language. He came to Japan as an information officer after the war, and was stationed in Sasebo. Subsequently, he studied at Columbia and Harvard University, and after serving as a foreign service officer for several years, he began his life as a researcher of Japanese literature, and a translator. Majoring in Heian era literature at the graduate school of the University of Tokyo, he translated *The Gossamer Years* (Kagerō Nikki). From there, he became an educator, serving in successive positions at Sophia University, Stanford University, the University of

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Shōichi Saeki passed away before the publication of this English language edition.

Chapter author affiliation as of March 1995.

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S. Saeki (✉)

University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

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Michigan and Columbia University. Having gained an established reputation for his subtle and sharp translations, he proceeded to tackle successive works deemed to be impossible to translate. These included *Some Prefer Nettles* (Tade Kuu Mushi) and *The Makioka Sisters* (Sasameyuki) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and *Snow Country* (Yukiguni) and *The Sound of the Mountain* (Yama no Oto) by Kawabata Yasunari. A famous anecdote is how Kawabata, upon receiving the Nobel Prize, credited the translator with half of that achievement. Seidensticker's work as a translator also covers works by Inoue Yasushi, Mishima Yukio and Yasuoka Shōtarō. He also established himself as a critic and essayist, releasing the likes of "Kafū the Scribbler," a biography of Nagai Kafū, as well as "Gendai Nihon Sakkaron," "Igyō no Shōsetsu" and "Watashi no Nippon Nikki." In 1975, he completed the full translation of *The Tale of Genji* (Genji Monogatari), an endeavor that took him over a decade and earned him the Third Rank of the Order of the Rising Sun in July of that year. With life in Tokyo and an affection for its downtown area having become part of him, he took up residence in Yushima, spending half of every year in Hawaii. Edward Seidensticker passed away in 2007.

Tokyo is a city that sports a mysterious vitality and has recovered remarkably from multiple calamities and destruction. Living there brings its flaws to the forefront, but it is a charming place that is difficult to leave. The comment by American historian Charles Beard, who said, "Rather than being a city, Tokyo is nothing more than a massive aggregation of villages," is often extolled. However, Seidensticker states in this work that this viewpoint had in fact already been documented in 1879 by the man known as J.R. Young, who accompanied General and Mrs. Ulysses Grant to Japan. Seidensticker's position is that such a witticism cannot explain the city fully. In this book, he illustrates the face of Tokyo and its realities from various aspects. Seidensticker opens this work with the following: "There was foreboding in Japan on September 1, 1923. The morning was warm, heavy, as most days of later summer are, with the shrilling of locusts. The mugginess was somewhat relieved by brisk winds ... The city was awaiting the *don*, the 'bang' of the cannon which since 1871 has been fired at noon every day in the public plaza." He continues, "At one minute and fifteen and four-tenths seconds before noon, the great earthquake struck." He is of course referring to the Great Kantō Earthquake. As illustrated by the work's subtitle of "Tokyo from Edo to the Earthquake," the city from the year of the eve of the Meiji Restoration to 1923, the year of the great earthquake, is the theme of this work. Edo, which had become Tokyo following the Meiji Restoration, had undergone dramatic change. At the same time, the vestiges of old Tokyo firmly remained here and there across the city. To illustrate how that was entirely wiped out, Seidensticker begins his work with a depiction of "the end." As he puts with conviction, "The great loss was the Low City," and "The vigor of Edo was in its Low City." "Low City" and "High City" are juxtaposed in the title of the work, and it is the former that is naturally emphasized throughout. One feels compelled to acknowledge the exceptional uniqueness of theses on the culture of the Low City, or downtown area of Tokyo, by an American author.

The fires given such names as "the flowers of Edo," is also given detailed treatment here. Seidensticker writes, "But Kanda has in modern times been the

best place for fires. Of five great Meiji fires after a central fire department was organized in 1880, four began in Kanda, two of them within a few weeks of each other in 1881.” He continues with this quote by Edward S. Morse, who taught zoology at the University of Tokyo and discovered the Ōmori Shell Mounds (see the chapter on Morse in this volume): “The more one studies the subject the more one realizes that the first impressions of the fireman’s work are wrong, and a respect for his skill rapidly increases.” Seidensticker follows this with: “Fire losses declined as Meiji gave way to Taishō. An accompaniment, or so the children of Edo often saw it, was a loss of harmony in traditional architecture. Kafū lamented it, and so did the novelist, playwright and haiku master Kubota Mantarō, who may be numbered among Kafū’s disciples.” Seidensticker does not forget this quote by Kubota, of his recollections: “*Hinomi* (rooftop fire-watching stage) was not only a memento of Edo, so ready with its fires. In the days when the godown style was the ideal in Japanese architecture, the *hinomi* was, along with the board fence, the spikes to turn back robbers, and the eaves drains, an indispensable element giving form to a Japanese house. And such fond dreams as the thought of it does bring, of Tokyo under willows in full leaf.”

Seidensticker adds his own thorough observations to those recollections: domestic and commercial architecture in Edo “was almost always of wooden frame construction ... In Edo, there were several kinds of roofing. The more affluent merchant houses were heavily roofed with dark tiles, while humbler dwellings had thatched or shingled roofs, the best kind of fuel for the fires that were always getting started. The wooden fronts of the unpainted houses and the shops of Edo, often with delicate lattices over the windows, turned to rich shades of brown as they aged, and the roofs were of neutral tones to begin with. Only an eye accustomed to austere subtleties could detect the reposeful variations upon brown and gray which a Low City street must have presented.” Surely this illustrates his keen Japanese eye and meticulous descriptive powers.

It would be overly hasty to dismiss this work as a simple recollection, or a piece of nostalgia fondly remembering things that have been destroyed. To be sure, the point of emphasis of the work is the Low City culture of yesteryear, and the author leans heavily toward understanding and reproducing what things actually were like there. This does not mean, however, that he neglected to point out changes in the times, and the issues that Tokyo faced as a city. This book is comprised of the following chapters: (1) The End and the Beginning, (2) Civilization and Enlightenment, (3) The Double Life, (4) The Decay of the Decadent, (5) Low City, High City and (6) The Taisho Look. Seidensticker traces historical progression almost chronologically from around the Meiji Restoration up to the Great Kantō Earthquake. As a whole, he does not aimlessly slide into praise of the past, or nostalgia, but instead provides highly balanced theses on Tokyo that fully leverage his objectivity and perspective as a non-Japanese individual and outsider.

As shown above, in addition to a wealth of information and quotations woven into each chapter, the way the details are presented is highly witty and refreshing. For example, when explaining the year 1889, the year in which the first city council was elected and the very year in which the Meiji constitution was promulgated, the

author points out that among those elected as councilmen were Fukuzawa Yukichi as well as Yasuda Zenjirō, founder of the Yasuda conglomerate. Moreover, the voters were made up of “three classes ... divided according to income,” and it was the poorest class of voters that elected Yasuda. Seidensticker writes, “The Meiji system, local and national, could hardly be called democratic ... rather large numbers of people, without reference to pedigree, had something to say about how they would be governed. Meiji was a vital period, and gestures toward recognizing plebian talents and energies may help to account for the vitality. The city suffered from ‘happy insomnia,’ said Hasegawa Shigure, on the night the Meiji constitution went into effect. Her father made a speech. The audience was befuddled, shouting, ‘No, no!’ when prearranged signals called for ‘Hear, hear!’ and vice versa, but it was happy, so much that one man literally drank himself to death.” Seidensticker follows this with the subtle comment: “It is an aspect of Meiji overlooked by those who view it as a time of dark repression containing the seeds of 1945.” His way of casually pointing this out makes the reader want to shout out, “Hear, hear!”

Seidensticker opens one particular explanation with: “Nihombashi occupies the choice portion of the land earliest reclaimed from tidal marshes, the first Low City.” After tracing the development of the Low City and High City since the Meiji Restoration, based on various areas, he states, “Today there is an illuminating confusion in defining the boundaries of the Low City. The affluent of the southern and western wards tend to think that all of the poorer northern and eastern wards are Low City. In fact, however, they straddle the ridge line that originally divided the two, and the Hongō and Yanaka districts were significant artistic and intellectual centers in Meiji, most definitely a part of the High City.” Seidensticker continues with a reference to the deep-rooted change that came about in literature and drama. “Of the difference between the traditional and the modern in literature, many things can be said. The popular literature of Edo had not been very intellectual. The literature known as modern, with its beginnings in the Rokumeikan decade, the 1880s, is obsessively, gnawingly intellectual. If a single theme runs through it, that theme is the quest for identity, an insistence upon what it is that establishes the individual as an individual.”

Yet, when Seidensticker comments that in fact, these intellectual matters “were concerns of the High City ... The growth of the High City in size and influence has made Tokyo more of an abstraction and less of a community,” there is no questioning where the empathy of the author lies. Unsurprisingly, this is nothing less than a lamentation for downtown Tokyo—an elegy for an eradicated culture—despite the objective style of his writing. There lies the root of his personal touch in this work. One may consider it a tribute to Nagai Kafū, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō and Kawabata Yasunari whom this unique and renowned translator had treated with considerable care. In the preface to this work, Seidensticker casually writes, “...if this book carried a dedication, it would be to the memory of Nagai Kafū.” This book was indeed a presentation of theories on Tokyo and modern culture written under the guidance of Kafū, the author of *Fairweather Clogs* (Hiyori Geta).

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