



The Inland Sea

Donald Richie

Yoichi Midorikawa, Photographer

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The Inland Sea of Japan, described by Donald Richie, is “a nearly landlocked, lakelike body of water bounded by three of Japan’s four major islands,” a place where “history lives and superstition is truth.”

This is a welcome reissue of the book Richie published in 1971, which has been celebrated as a classic in travel literature. He was 88 when he died in 2013 after living most of his adult life in Japan. One can only wonder if he ever overcame his feeling of foreignness that he poetically described half a century before.

“I live in this country as the water insect lives in the pond, skating across the surface, not so much unmindful as incapable of seeing the depths,” he wrote. “This is because I am not Japanese and can barely imagine what it must be like to be so ... but I should guess that the feeling is very special.”

His encounters with the people who live on the scores of islands in the Inland Sea provide lessons in civility and unapologetic provincialism. He delights in the variety of landscapes the islands present, from sublime flatness to rocky ruggedness, each with a distinctive temple.

He praises the seeming simplicity of many Japanese lives and bemoans the Westernization of Japan’s major cities, even as he confesses confusion over unfathomable complexities, such as, to pick one down-to-earth example, why the Japanese language has fifty-three words for prostitute.

THOMAS BEVIER (Winter 2016)

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