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Anne Walthall. *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xvi + 412 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-87237-7; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-87235-3.

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The Weak Body of a Useless Woman chronicles the life of Matsuo Taseko (1811-1894),[1] the daughter and wife of village headmen, who was also one of only six women awarded posthumous court rank for their activities during the Meiji Restoration. Her contributions to the Restoration movement were minor; as Walthall notes, “had she been a man, her deeds would have drawn less notice” (p. 1), and perhaps a good deal less notice. Since Taseko was a woman, however, she stood out and even became an icon to later generations of loyalists, who remade her in the image of “good wife, wise mother” as well as into a model of emperor-centered piety.

Matsuo Taseko grew up as a member of the rural elite in the Ina Valley region (in present-day Nagano prefecture). She learned to read and write, especially poetry in the courtly tradition. During her long life, she married, raised seven children (three more died in infancy), and cultivated silkworms, apparently contributing significantly to her family’s income. She became a disciple of the Hirata school of nativist studies, and thus a fervent support of the emperor and critic of the Tokugawa bakufu. In 1863, she spent a month hiding from the bakufu authorities in the Kyoto compound of the Choshu domain. Five years later, she housesat for Iwakura Tomomi, and in between, back in her home village, she provided shelter and aid to other Hirata activists in need.

As an elderly matriarch, she arranged marriages for her grandchildren and others and drew on her political connections from her days in Kyoto to find jobs for friends and relatives. In the meantime, she wrote copious poems, many, to an untrained reader, of doubtful quality, though they were apparently good enough to give her entree to circles that would otherwise have

been closed to her as a peasant woman. She exchanged poetry with, among others, a daimyo and an empress, whose poem to Taseko was one of her most highly prized possessions. Through it all, Taseko accepted, indeed embraced, the social hierarchy and gender distinctions of her time; recognizing that many activities were barred to her as a woman, she bemoaned the fact she was not born male, without challenging the rules.

The book treats Taseko’s life in four parts. The first one, “Life in the Ina Valley,” deals with Taseko’s life up through early middle age. Much of it addresses her education and poetry, with chapters describing regional politics, rural family economy, and the Hirata texts on women. The second two parts, “Kyoto, 1862-1863” and “Taseko and the Meiji Restoration,” turn to what might be described as her public life, though it is clear there was considerable overlap between “public” and “private” life. The last section, “Taseko in Modern Japan,” traces how her life has been treated by historians in the twentieth century.

This book does not fit easily into the standard tradition of biography, a fact of which Walthall is well aware. Taseko’s story is too unusual to illuminate the ordinary life, and her activities too unimportant for her life to help explain why critical events unfolded the way they did. It is an extraordinarily rich book, however, and provides much food for thought. Unquestionably it gives us a view of the Meiji Restoration that we have not seen before, but Walthall does not pursue the implications of this new view.

Most importantly, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman* adds depth to arguments already made in Tokugawa women’s and social history. As Walthall writes, “[m]uch

has been written about the life cycle of Tokugawa farm women and the constraints imposed [on them]...we know less about how women actually maneuvered within these limits and the leeway they had to craft themselves.... Without the added dimension of individuality and the opportunity to explore how specific women responded to their own situations, however, new knowledge about life patterns risks reducing their experiences to new stereotypes” (p. 7). In addition to giving us one clearly delineated face, which we can hope will be followed by others, Walthall fleshes out and helps clarify topics as diverse as rural poetry circles, information networks of rural entrepreneurs, how the Hirata school spread in rural areas, the political implications of poetic form, and the impact of the Meiji Restoration on the countryside, or on one part of it. She seems uninterested in pulling these various insights together into a grand conclusion, which is in keeping with the project of presenting Taseko’s life in all its complexity, without either pressing her into some mold or creating a new stereotype.

As a biography of an unusual and colorful woman, adding individuality to scholarship on nineteenth-

century Japan, this book succeeds admirably. It suggests much, inviting us to rethink many of our assumptions about more issues than can easily be listed, without pushing us to any hard and fast conclusions. With it, Walthall has made a valuable contribution to both women’s and social history.

Note

[1]. Matsuo Taseko is the name by which she is most widely known, and therefore the name which Walthall has chosen to use in the biography. As Walthall points out, however, Taseko signed herself Takemura Tase, using her birth family’s name rather than her husband’s, and omitting the “-ko” suffix so frequently appended to women’s given names. Throughout the book, Walthall refers to people by their given names once they have been introduced into the narrative, both to differentiate among those who shared a family name, and to be sure that men and women are treated on an equal footing.

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