



Greg Robinson, ed. *Pacific Citizens: Larry and Guyo Tajiri and Japanese American Journalism in the World War II Era*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. xxxix + 295 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03672-9; ISBN 978-0-252-09383-8.

Reviewed by Carol Van Valkenburg (University of Montana School of Journalism)

Published on H-War (June, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

## Larry and Guyo Tajiri: Journalists for a Generation of Japanese Americans

One of the most defining voices of the World War II Japanese American experience was the *Pacific Citizen*, the publication of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). Its wartime editors, Larry and Guyo Tajiri, gave information, and a voice, to the relocated Japanese and others incarcerated in internment camps, though not all interned Japanese shared what they saw as the Tajiris' accommodating attitude toward the U.S. government's Japanese American policy. The *Pacific Citizen* was a critical source of information for Japanese confined to camps and for others scattered across the country, but also for opinion leaders and officials who set policies that shaped the Japanese American wartime experience.

For his thoughtful book *Pacific Citizens: Larry and Guyo Tajiri and Japanese American Journalism in the World War II Era*, University of Quebec associate professor Greg Robinson has scoured the *Pacific Citizen* to select well over one hundred columns and editorials from the ten years the Tajiris edited the paper, plus a few dozen writings, both prewar and postwar, that provide a full picture, especially of Larry Tajiri's political and personal points of view. It is less revealing of Guyo, only because while she was her husband's essential partner in the *Pacific Citizen*, she was not the public voice or face of the weekly publication. But both Larry and Guyo were seasoned journalists. Larry's interest was sparked in high school and furthered by a succession of jobs with both Issei (immigrant) and Nisei (second generation) newspapers. Guyo was born into journalism, a daughter of

a newspaperman in San Jose, and furthered her education by studying at the University of Missouri, San Jose State University, and the University of California, Berkeley. Robinson adeptly sets the stage for an examination of the later writings of the Tajiris by exploring their formative years in California and the evolution of their political perspective while Larry worked in New York as a correspondent for Japan's Asahi newspapers until the attack at Pearl Harbor ended his employment.

The Tajiris returned to California but their stay there was short-lived as the president of the JACL offered Larry and Guyo the job of editing the *Pacific Citizen*, which was moving its office to Salt Lake City. It was also morphing from a newsletter into a weekly newspaper to fill a hole created by the closure of most of the ethnic Japanese press when Executive Order 9066 forced the relocation of Japanese from the West Coast. Robinson thus sets the stage for the decision that was to inform both the Tajiris's tenure at the *Pacific Citizen* and the couple's reputation in a large part of the Japanese community. The JACL supported the federal government's relocation policy, arguing that cooperation would prove American Japanese were loyal to their adopted country. It was, Robinson notes, a decision that was vilified, especially among young Nisei. The policy provides essential context for Larry Tajiri's *Pacific Citizen* writings and is critical to an understanding of how some Japanese concluded that the hardships forced on them by the government should be endured, and how others saw it as ca-

pitulation to the racial hatred endemic in a nation of immigrants. It also offers a commentary on the tensions—frequently generational—between the Japanese culture of *ganbare*, or enduring what comes, and the new American culture of speaking out and standing up for one's rights. Scholars interested in the JACL role in supporting wartime exclusion policies and harsh treatment of disloyals will find only slight insight into the organization's official view, however, because while Tajiri does not express views counter to JACL policy, he does take pains to present a more nuanced perspective on the pressing issues of the era. As Robinson notes in his introduction, the Tajiri writings "complicate our image of the JACL, its politics and the meaning of its programs." (Larry Tajiri conceded after the war, in a 1950 column, "The Record Speaks," that criticism of the JACL as too conservative and ineffectual was largely valid, though he said it merely reflected the functionality of the Nisei themselves [pp. 210-211].) Still, the Tajiris are essential figures in any full examination of the Japanese American experience up to, during, and after World War II, and this book is the first to thoroughly appraise and focus on their perspectives and important contributions as the public face of a generation of Japanese Americans.

Robinson has divided his book into seven chapters, encompassing prewar writings, wartime columns, editorials and correspondence, news stories and letters written by Guyo, and postwar publications. Equally important as his selections for each chapter is his overview of what the passages represent and why he chose to include them. Robinson is masterful at providing context that will guide both seasoned historians and readers largely unfamiliar with the history of Japanese Americans from early in the twentieth century through the years following the war. Each chapter's detailed endnotes add a useful tool for readers wishing to learn more about the context, people, and policies that Larry or Guyo refer to in their writings. Robinson is expertly qualified to provide his wide-ranging insights into the Tajiris' work, having previously written two outstanding books focusing on the Japanese American experience, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (2009), and *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (2001), as well as co-authoring a book about Nisei artist and writer Miné Okubo, *Miné Okubo: Following Her Own Road* (2008). Since 2007 he has also written a regular column for the long-running Japanese American California-based newspaper and Web site *Nichi Bei*.

Robinson's selections from Larry Tajiri's prewar writing, primarily for *Nichi Bei*, highlight Tajiri's early

focus on racial prejudice, not just against Japanese and other Asian Americans, but also against African Americans. (He was silent, however, on the plight of Mexican Americans and on racially driven policies beyond American borders.) Robinson shows how Tajiri repeatedly pointed a finger of blame for racial discrimination at the propaganda spewed by the mainstream media, spurred on by politicians and businessmen who felt threatened by economic competition. In late 1943, when Japanese were hoping to be released from confinement in War Relocation Authority camps and allowed to return to their homes, Tajiri eloquently argues in "Mr. District Attorney" that not only were authorities thwarting their return, but were also fomenting racial unrest by trying to pit the African American community against the Japanese. Tajiri writes that the Los Angeles district attorney testified before the California state senate that three organizations had sent him letters "informing me that their members have pledged themselves to kill any Japanese who come to California now or after the war" (p. 53). Tajiri writes that since the district attorney knows the names of those making the threats, Tajiri has waited for more than a month to hear that charges were filed against them. It is, he notes, a crime to conspire to commit murder, but one that goes unpunished in California if the targets are Japanese. The same attorney subsequently broke the law against inciting a riot when he warned African Americans recently relocated to Los Angeles for work that the return of any Japanese, even those unquestionably loyal, would "create disorder and violence" and dislocate the African Americans (p. 53). Years later, he chides the Japanese community for succumbing to the same sort of prejudice. In a guest column in the *Pacific Citizen* in 1964, "Are You Being Played for a Sucker," Tajiri expresses his dismay at finding that a majority of Japanese Americans had voted for the repeal of California's fair housing laws, presumably for fear that they might be forced to sell or rent to African Americans (p. 261).

*Pacific Citizens* gives voice to the concerns of a besieged community, but the readings, while certainly sober, are anything but colorless or bureaucratic. Often Tajiri's prose is eloquent and artful. In his November 18, 1944, column "33 Months Since Evacuation," he enumerates the contributions of Japanese Americans since the war's outbreak. He writes particularly stirring about the all-Japanese 442<sup>nd</sup> American army unit:

Today, this week, this minute, thousands of Japanese American soldiers, incorporated as a unit in the famous 36<sup>th</sup> Division, stand with other Americans and their al-

lies of the Free French before the Belfort Gap in the foothills of the Vosges, while other thousands are scattered throughout the military establishments and battle stations which girdle the earth. They stand with other Americans on tiny atolls in the endless stretches of Pacific water. They have known the twin hells of Tawara and Saipan, the malaria-ridden heat of New Guinea jungles, and they write home of sunrises in the Solomons and of night fighting in the jungles of Burma. They have gone wherever the American flag has gone in the war against fascism.... And there are Japanese names on the white crosses, as one lieutenant wrote, in the bitter Italian hills. They have fought as part of famous fighting units, the 34<sup>th</sup> Red Bull division and Merrill's Marauders, and with the Texans of the 36<sup>th</sup>. And perhaps the most remarkable fact of all is that many of these men, who today in France, Burma, in the Marianas and on Leyte, stood in those long lines before the Army civil control centers in the uncertain spring of 1942 and were processed and packed off in buses and trains to what some believe were concentration camps for the duration. (pp. 59-60)

The most light into Guyo Tajiri's thoughts is shed in chapter 5, which includes her personal correspondence, brief profiles, and, most tellingly, her news stories from the 1949 trial of Iva Toguri d'Aquino, widely known as the accused traitor "Tokyo Rose." As Robinson notes in his introduction to the chapter, Tajiri initially presumed

d'Aquino was guilty, but her dispatches show a shift as the trial wears on to a point that puts d'Aquino's guilt in doubt. Her incisive column "What Price Slum Clearance?" carries through the Tajiris' constant theme of the pernicious effects of racial discrimination, in this case the side effects of urban renewal in pushing minorities out of their homes. It is, she notes, a new kind of mass evacuation.

The final passage in Robinson's book is a chatty column from January 24, 1965, that Larry Tajiri wrote from New York soon before his death. Robinson included it not only because it was Tajiri's last published work, but also because he says it gives a glimpse into the little-known Japanese community in New York. Yet it immediately follows one of Tajiri's strongest postwar columns, "Are You Being Played for a Sucker," the plea against the California fair housing repeal proposition. The latter reiterates a theme that defined the Tajiris' career—the erosion of society by racism that affects everyone—and would have made for a more satisfying final passage. But that is an inconsequential quibble. The writings selected and compiled by Robinson provide invaluable insight into a people and an era as reflected in the reporting and opinions of two important journalists. Anyone interested in the history of Japanese in America, in the treatment of minority races in a nation of immigrants, and in the policies that shaped and defined a volatile century will find this an interesting and satisfying read.

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**Citation:** Carol Van Valkenburg. Review of Robinson, Greg, ed., *Pacific Citizens: Larry and Guyo Tajiri and Japanese American Journalism in the World War II Era*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.

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