

# Photographic Relationships in James Murdoch's *Ayame-san*

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## Abstract

James Murdoch (1856-1921) was an English teacher, a journalist and a novelist who wrote books about Japan. This work discusses the pictures in his novel *Ayame-san: A Japanese Romance of the 23rd Year of Meiji (1890)* (1892) by comparing them with those of his other works published in the same year. It considers the relationships between the pictures and the story, as well as reality and fiction, to reveal Murdoch's challenges in depicting Japan. William K. Burton (1856-1899), who prepared the pictures, made the acknowledgement statement in the novel. He insisted, 'So far as I am aware this is the first book that has been illustrated with true half-tone photomechanical reproductions printed with the letter-press'. Since the book contains traditional Japanese style photographs inside, created with the latest technology of the West, it has a strong impression. Unlike the drawings in Murdoch's other novel *From Australia and Japan* (1892), the pictures in *Ayame-san* do not illustrate the story directly. For instance, although the story is a romance between two Western men and Ayame, a Japanese girl, there are only a few pictures that depict a foreigner, and none of them corresponds with the characters. In fact, another work by Murdoch, *Sights and Scenes on the Tokaido* (1892), includes exactly the same pictures in this work. However, by approaching the photos from a different angle, it is possible to consider that the scenery in the pictures can be seen from the eyes of the characters in the story. Readers enjoy the plot, and they also enjoy what the characters visualise in the Far East. Although the pictures do not embellish the story emotionally like paintings, they provide readers with information that is not written and give depth to their imagination about Japan

**Keywords:** James Murdoch; *Ayame-san*; *From Australia and Japan*; photography; Kelly & Walsh

## Introduction

James Murdoch (1856-1921) taught English and European history in Japan during the Meiji period. He also authored various works about Japan, satirical verses, romances, descriptions of photo albums, and an autobiographical novel. His best-known work, *A History of Japan* (1903-1926), influenced many scholars of Japan.

This paper mainly focuses on Murdoch's romance novel, *Ayame-san: A Japanese Romance of the 23rd Year of Meiji (1890)* (1892). The characters in this novel have been discussed previously: D. C. S. Sissons, who wrote the entry on Murdoch for the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, compared Ayame in this novel to Murdoch's other characters to reveal the writer's views about justice or women or his political beliefs (1). However, the book's illustrations, which are, in fact, all photographs, seem not to have been adequately discussed before. A review in the *London Daily News* in 1892 mainly referred to the pictures rather than the content, noting that 'It is evident that the book has been printed in Japan, and an extremely favourable specimen it is of Japanese typography' (2). This suggests that it was the book's photographs that made it unique, and that the fact that the book

had been printed in Japan was notable for readers at the time. This paper discusses how photography was used to reflect relationships within the work and outside it and examines the effect of the photographs on the book's readers.

## 1. Murdoch's Photographic Relationships

Murdoch published two novels, *Ayame-san* and *From Australia and Japan* (1892), with different publishers in the same year. In Murdoch's biography, Longford mentions that 'he wrote an autobiographic novel, but on failing to find a publisher at the first attempt, he put it away and took no further interest in it,' which suggests that Murdoch had not been commissioned to write novels but was instead promoting his literary projects to publishers. Therefore, taking a closer look at his publishers can yield information regarding Murdoch's intentions in printing his books.

*From Australia and Japan* was published by Walter Scott Ltd. (1826-1910), London. This publisher was considered a worldwide business, and it had a branch in Australia (3). Because Murdoch had been a journalist in Australia, it is possible that he may have come into contact with this publisher there. Walter Scott assigned Charles Edmund Brock (1870-1938) to be the illustrator of the book. Brock contributed illustrations to the magazine *Punch*, novels by Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and *Gulliver's Travels* that are familiar to Western readers (4).

In appearance, *Ayame-san* is a Japanese-style book, with a cover showing Japanese drawings of irises (the flower called *ayame* in Japanese) and waterwheels with circulator fans for blades. However, as the acknowledgments note, 'this is the first book that has been illustrated with true half-tone photomechanical reproductions printed with the letter-press' (5). It introduced the latest photographic technology, which at the time originated in the West. In other words, in outward appearance, it seemed to follow an old, traditional style, but there was evidence of modernization inside. This unique form came from Kelly & Walsh, a company originally from Shanghai that printed and sold books about China from 1876 (6). This firm established a branch in Yokohama, Japan. Kelly & Co., a predecessor of the company, had already settled there; the *Yokohama City Directory* (1881) explained that the company sold books, stationery, newspapers, and tobacco and that it was an agent for *The London and China Express* (7). It was, evidently, one of the Asian front companies for the Western world and left a legacy of various works in English, from storybooks to academic essays about Japan.

There was a network of collaborators behind the decision to use this publisher. The acknowledgments, the first words in the book after the title, were written not by Murdoch but by William Kinninmond Burton (1856-99). Burton was a professor at Imperial University who taught sanitary engineering in the late 1880s. He was also a photographer whose *Modern Photography* has gone through seven editions (8). Burton took most of the photos for *Ayame-san* and also supplied the photographs for another of Murdoch's works, *Scenes from Open Air Life in Japan* (1913). Because many of the students who graduated from the First Higher School where Murdoch taught went on to Tokyo Imperial University (9), it is possible that Murdoch and Burton came to know each other through the University. Moreover, they were both born in Scotland in the same year, which presumably would have made it easier for them to get to know each other.

In the acknowledgments, Burton thanked three people for providing photographs: Kazumasa Ogawa (小川一真, 1860-1929), Charles Dickinson West (1847-1908), and George Brinkworth (year of birth and death unknown). Ogawa was in charge of the photomechanical aspects of the work, as listed on the title page. He was a good friend of Burton and printed albums of photos taken by Burton (10). West was also a professor at Tokyo Imperial University, making him one of Burton's co-workers. This implies that Murdoch's connection with Burton helped him find collaborators for the book.

The three who provided photographs and Burton were members of the same association, the

Photographic Society of Japan, which had been established in 1889. West founded the society to promote photography in Japan, both professional and amateur (11). Burton was secretary of the society and had lectured for the association. Ogawa was a committee member of the association. George Brinkworth's name appeared on the member list from 1891 (12). He had displayed a series of photographs using gelatino-citro-chloride paper in 1892 (13). This suggests that although he was not a board member of the society, he was engaged in taking photographs and played an active role in the association. In fact, he was not a professional photographer. His brother Benjamin J. S. Brinkworth was appointed manager of Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., and he succeeded him as manager after his death. It is evident that the Photographic Society network enabled Murdoch to form a connection with the firm that published his work. After this, Murdoch published some of his works with Kelly & Walsh Ltd., including the first volume of *A History of Japan*.

Consequently, *From Australia and Japan* was published by the British company Walter Scott, Ltd., and the work was made more story-like by the illustrations by Charles Edmund Brock, whose drawings for storybooks would have been familiar to readers at the time. In contrast, *Ayame-san* was published via the Photographic Society of Japan network. It can, thus, be seen that the collaborators for the book were selected on the basis of their photographic ability. The acknowledgments were composed not by the writer but by the leading photographer for the book, suggesting that part of the book's value comes from its photographs and that the photographs are what make it unique.

## 2. The Beauty Contest in Ryounkaku

The previous chapter discussed how relationships influenced the publication of the book. As for *Ayame-san*, they influenced not only the conditions of its publication but also its contents. As suggested by its title, *A Japanese Romance of the 23rd Year of Meiji*, the book is a love story involving an Irish man (O'Rafferty), a Scottish American (Gifford), and a Japanese lady (Ayame). In the story, Ayame disappeared from them. A photograph is the clue that enables Gifford to find Ayame, and photography is the key to the story's dramatic climax. The picture that leads to Ayame is displayed at the beauty contest in Ryounkaku (凌雲閣) to which Mr. Tokiyeda, a student at Imperial University, takes Gifford. The story refers to the photographer as follows:

"Anyhow, those photos have been finished by a real workman," remarked Gifford, the artist coming uppermost in him. "Who is he?"

"Oh! that's Ogawa. That's his name there; those characters that you see below all the photographs."

He pointed to the 川小 which Gifford noticed to be the only constant factor in the welter of characters that explained the purport of each individual picture.

"He's easily the king of his craft in Tokyo," the student added. The rest of the writing tells you about the girls. [...] "For example, there's Kotsuma of the Masudaya of Shimbashi, Tokumatsu of the Shinakamura of Shimbashi, Wakazakura of the Yanagidaya of Yoshicho, Kaneko of the Owariya of the Yoshiwara, and so forth." (14)

The photographer is clearly intended to be Ogawa Kazumasa, who photoengraved *Ayame-san*. There are photos of Kotsuma of Shimbashi (新橋小つま) (15) and Tokumatsu of Shimbashi (新橋徳松) (16) in Ogawa's *Celebrated Geisha of Tokyo* (1895). By putting words in the student's mouth, Murdoch gives Ogawa high praise. This implies a close relationship between Murdoch and Ogawa. It also has the effect of promoting to the readers the idea that the pictures in the book they are reading have been printed by 'the king of his craft in Tokyo'. As Murdoch wrote the Kanji, Chinese characters for Ogawa, readers can find his works when they have a chance to go to Japan without needing to know Japanese.

The pictures in *Celebrated Geisha of Tokyo* were taken for the beauty contest held in the Ryoukaku tower in 1891. The twelve-story tower, which was designed by Burton, opened in 1890 and became one of Asakusa's popular landmarks. The elevator in the tower was one of its main attractions; however, it was condemned following a safety inspection by Japanese police, which struck a heavy blow to the business. To entice customers to go up without the elevator, Ogawa held the show upstairs, and the event is considered the first beauty contest in Japan (17). That is, the event was a collaboration between Burton and Ogawa. Mr. Tokiyeda recommended the event to Gifford as below:

...the beauties are not there in person. But one hundred of the most famous of the geisha of all parts of Tokyo have been photo-graphed and their pictures have been placed in two of the flats, and every man who ascends the tower gets a voting-card with his admission-ticket, and he is supposed to vote for his favourite. It is really worth seeing. (18)

Although his account emphasizes the charm of the contest, he also explains its system in detail. The voting cards are not particularly connected to the storyline. In fact, Gifford voted for Kaneko before he found the picture of O-sōyō, who is actually Ayame. These parts are reports of the beauty show rather than of the mental scenery of the main characters. This suggests that Murdoch adopted the beauty contest as a stage setting not only because the tower and the event full of geisha are picturesque but also because he wanted to introduce the event and its construction, because they had been created by his close friends and, furthermore, collaborators in the publication of *Ayame-san*. The readers are allowed to experience this part of the world through the book not only by reading but also by looking at the photographs the collaborators created.

### 3. The Effects of Photography in *Ayame-san*

As has already been discussed, using photography influenced publication and the contents of *Ayame-san*. It is, therefore, worth discussing the effect of the use of photography in the book. The relationships between the photographs and the story are not like those in his other novels or any other storybooks. For instance, many illustrations in other books simply describe what is happening in the story. However, in *Ayame-san*, the specific character is not directly illustrated in the pictures. Many of them are landscape photographs, and even though there are some people in the photos, they do not reflect the personages' characteristics, and thus it is difficult to decide which character they are. If one of the geishas in a picture is Ayame, she should be in many other pictures, but most of the girls do not appear repeatedly in the photographs. There is one exception in that the book has six photos featuring the same three geisha, but it is still difficult to tell which one is Ayame.

One of the pictures in *Ayame-san* can be seen in another of Murdoch's works, *Sights and Scenes on The Tokaido* (1892), a photo album that was published by Tokyo Tsukiji Kappan Seizo-jo, a publishing company established by Ogawa in a bid to dominate the national market for photographic plates (20). As one would expect from the title, Murdoch describes photographs of the historical Tokaido road, drawing on his knowledge and experience there. The photo in the album Plate XX, which is the same picture in *Ayame-san* is of three geisha dancing in the teahouse. Murdoch describes the plate as follows:

Also store of pretty girls to amuse 'ye weary wayfarer,' for in not a few of the more fashionable tea-houses of the country, there are geisha (singing-girls) every ready at the beck and call of the 'honourable guests'. We order up two singers with their *shamisen*, and three *ōshaku* (dancing-girls). These latter treat us to dance and pantomime to the music of their elders, till it is time for us to think of 'doing an honourable leave-taking' (21).

Murdoch plays the role of guide to Tokaido in the book. In the comment, they order three dancing girls to treat the travelers with dance and pantomime which corresponding to the situation in the photo. This way, Murdoch's comment completely captures the spirit of Burton's photograph.

In contrast, one of the photographs in *Ayame-san* is placed just above the beginning of Part II, Chapter II, which begins with the following lines (Fig.1):

In the middle of the summer of '90, there was an unusual stir in political circles throughout the Empire of Japan. Tailor Ito and his assistants, after a visit to Berlin to make personal note of the latest fashions in Clothes Constitutional had come back and set to work to contrive and cut out and stitch together a brand new suit for the Land of the Rising Sun. (23)



Figure 1: Part II Chapter II (P.122) in *Ayame-san*. Photo by William K. Burton

The sentences are about the modernization of Japan. It is obvious that it is unrelated to the three geisha in the picture above. In fact, this photo is one in a continuous series. Six photos feature the same three geisha dancing in the same teahouse, but none of them are related to the story's content. All of them are placed above the starting line of a chapter: Chapters VI, VIII, IX in Part 1, Chapter II in Part 2, and Chapters V, IX in Part 3 (Fig. 2). Although the pictures in Part 1 appear continuously, those in the latter half are scattered across the work. As for the actions shown in the pictures, the pictures showing bowing, which should be placed at the beginning or in the end, are in the middle. This suggests that the photographs in *Ayame-san* were not shot to express the storyline but were instead gathered and chosen. Some of the pictures show the situation of the story. However, many other photographs are not connected to the story.



Figure 2: Six pictures in *Ayame-san* that shows the same geishas; Part 1 Chapters VI (P.52), VIII (P.68), IX(P74), Part 2 Chapter II (P.122) in Part 2, Part3 Chapters V (P.247), IX (P.279)

Although many of the pictures do not express the story, they have other effects. They give information about the world in which the character lives, which provides a sense of reality against which the story can be staged. The book's subtitle, 'A Japanese Romance of the 23rd Year of Meiji (1890)', sets a specific background. It is important to note that it refers not only to 'A Japanese

Romance’ but also to Japan in ‘the 23rd Year of Meiji’. In fact, the citation above explains the transition in clothing for the common people during the Meiji period. He continues to discuss the topic, extending it to political issues, and devotes almost half of the chapter to the subject without returning to his fictional characters. This information, running alongside the storyline, is not just a supporter of the story but the essence of the work. Photographs that capture the atmosphere of the time broaden the reader’s perspective from one in which they are just following the storyline to one in which they recognize the world beyond the story. The objects in the photographs can be seen by the characters in the story, and thus readers partly relive the characters’ perceptions of the events. The story is a route to explore the world, and while following the story, the readers can also enjoy the world—that is, Japan in 1890.

## Conclusion

The photographs in *Ayame-san* are more than just a part of the book. Murdoch’s relationship with the photographer Burton led him to find collaborators and publishers for the work. In addition, a photograph is the key that leads to the romantic climax, and therefore photography is also an icon for the story. Murdoch set a scene at the beauty contest in Ryouunkaku, the event related to Burton and Ogawa. Because these two are Murdoch’s collaborators in publishing the book, the readers can experience this part of his work not only by reading but also by looking at the photographs within. The fictional characters and the real world exist at the same time in *Ayame-san*. By treating things as real in fiction, the border between the fictional and the real fades, and the depth of the romance’s world is enhanced. The pictures in *Ayame-san* do not always depict the storyline. However, they provide visual information about the world in addition to the storyline and make the readers relive the characters’ perceptions. Photography influences both the inside and the outside of the work, making it a unique piece of work that captures the atmosphere of Japan in 1890.

## Notes

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## Author Biography

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