

My A-Bomb Biography

James Kirkup

James Kirkup died in Andorra in May 2009, aged 91, writing poems to the end. He wrote these prefatory remarks to No More Hiroshimas, his volume of poems published by Spokesman in 2004. This little volume has circulated widely, particularly in Japan.

These poems all have their roots in one late afternoon at the ‘War Ag’ land workers’ hostel outside Ponteland, Northumberland. The gang of workers had just returned from another sweltering day of ‘labour on the land’—draining and ditching. As we entered the hostel we got the news that the first American Atom Bomb had been dropped on Japan, on the city of Hiroshima. It was the first time we had heard of that place that was to become a universal symbol of man’s inhumanity towards his fellow-men.

We had become accustomed to air raids and ‘buzz-bombs’ and to our own casualty lists at home and abroad. But this new weapon left us nonplussed and incredulous. The date was August 6th, 1945. Its worldwide significance was at that time beyond our comprehension, and we did not realise that the date was to become an international anniversary for peace.

Three days later, on August 9th, we received the news of an even larger and more powerful plutonium bomb that had been dropped on the city of Nagasaki and had almost completely devastated it. The name was known to me only as the home of Madame Butterfly. But we began to realise the enormity of these acts of war that had annihilated hundreds of thousands of civilians.

At that time, all I knew about Japan was from my wartime readings of Arthur Waley’s translation of *The Tale of Genji*. When peace was declared, I was liberated and started reading English or French or German translations of Japanese literature, ancient and modern. I also studied the history of Japanese art.

It was this passion for oriental painting

that led me to visit, in London, the first exhibition of paintings devoted to the themes of atomic bomb horrors. They were by Iri Maruki and Toshiko Akamatsu, and were shown in Europe for the first time in 1955. These vividly realistic paintings made such a profound impression upon me that I went straight back to my room and wrote in longhand, at a single draft, the poem, 'Ghosts, Fire, Water' which I took straight back to the gallery, and laid it in the book of visitors' comments (see below). Then I returned home and typed it out without any alterations and sent it to Kingsley Martin at *The New Statesman*, which had already published some of my work. It was rejected, without comment.

By that time, I had received a response from the woman who had organised the exhibition, expressing her admiration and gratitude, and urging me to send it to British newspapers and periodicals. I sent out many copies but they were all either ignored or politely rejected. However, I managed to include it in my next volume of poems, *The Descent into the Cave* (Oxford University Press), two years later, in 1957. There were no reviews mentioning the poem.

In 1959, I took up my first post in Japan, teaching English literature in Tohoku University in Sendai. As I later described in my volume of autobiography, *I, of All People* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), the British Council did everything they could to prevent my appointment and departure, after interrogating me in their London offices.

In Japan, I visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki as soon as possible, and wrote my impressions of Hiroshima in 1960, 'No More Hiroshimas', which appeared in my new collection, *Refusal to Conform* (OUP, 1963). On various other visits to those cities I wrote 'The Lantern-Floating Festival', 'White Shadows', 'Hiroshima Revisited (1982)', 'Friends of the Neutron Bomb', 'The Carol of the Four Wise Men', 'Our New Baby' and various other poems that were widely published and commented on in Japan – but not in Britain.

I collected my A-Bomb poems in a volume entitled *No More Hiroshimas* in 1983 and sent it to all the British publishers who still published poetry. It was rejected by all of them. So I decided to publish it myself, at my own expense, and as I was then in the early 1980s teaching in Kyoto, I called my press 'Kyoto Editions'. I had discovered, in the enormous Kinokuniya bookstore in Osaka's Umeda Station, a department that renewed and bound student theses, pamphlets and poetry collections. I designed the cover, with my name translated into Japanese by Makoto Tamaki.

When the book was ready, I sent out copies to all the British press, where it was ignored. No magazine mentioned it. So I just kept sending out copies

to friends and anyone I thought might be interested in it, until the first printing was exhausted. I had it reprinted by the bookshop, and by 1984 it had gone through four editions. I stamped the Peace Symbol in red on each cover.

Twenty years later, I was inspired to send a copy to Professor Ken Coates at the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. He at once offered to print it as a real book. So here it is, at long last.

* * *

Ghosts, fire, water

On the Hiroshima panels by Iri Maruki and Toshiko Akamatsu

These are the ghosts of the unwilling dead,
Grey ghosts of that imprinted flash of memory
Whose flaming and eternal instant haunts
The speechless dark with dread and anger.

Grey, out of pale nothingness their agony appears.
Like ash they are blown and blasted on the wind's
Vermilion breathlessness, like shapeless smoke
Their shapes are torn across the paper sky.

These scarred and ashen ghosts are quick
With pain's unutterable speech, their flame-cracked flesh
Writhes and is heavy as the worms, the bitter dirt;
Lonely as in death they bleed, naked as in birth.

They greet each other in a ghastly paradise,
These ghosts who cannot come with gifts and flowers.
Here they receive each other with disaster's common love,
Covering one another's pain with shrivelled hands.

They are not beautiful, yet beauty is in their truth.
There is no easy music in their silent screams,
No ordered dancing in their grief's distracted limbs.
Their shame is ours. We, too, are haunted by their fate.

In the shock of flame, their tears brand our flesh,
We twist in their furnace, and our scorching throats
Parch for the waters where the cool dead float.
We press our lips upon the river where they drink, and drown.

Their voices call to us, in pain and indignation:
 'This is what you have done to us!'
 Their accusation is our final hope. Be comforted.
 Yes, we have heard you, ghosts of our indifference,

We hear your cry, we understand your warnings.
 We, too, shall refuse to accept our fate!
 Haunt us with the truth of our betrayal
 Until the earth's united voices shout refusal, sing your peace!

Forgive us, that we had to see your passion to remember
 What we must never again deny: *Love one another.*

London, 1955

*No More Hiroshimas by James Kirkup is available from
www.spokesmanbooks.com, price £6.99*



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