

# **This Perfect Rose: The Lasting Legacy of William J. Higginson**

by Michael Dylan Welch

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[http://www.graceguts.com/\\_/rsrc/1435435984802/essays/this-perfect-rose-the-lasting-legacy-of-william-j-higginson/William%20J.%20Higginson.gif](http://www.graceguts.com/_/rsrc/1435435984802/essays/this-perfect-rose-the-lasting-legacy-of-william-j-higginson/William%20J.%20Higginson.gif)

When William J. Higginson died on 11 October 2008, at the age of 69, he left behind a legacy of love for haiku poetry—his perfect rose. This legacy, chiefly in the form of poems, criticism, and books, particularly *The Haiku Handbook*, has influenced and directed generations of haiku poets for nearly half a century. His combination of being a poet, translator, teacher, editor, publisher, and scholar—or "haiku coach," as he sometimes called himself—gave his legacy accessible appeal and lasting authority. For the length and breadth of his legacy, William J. Higginson takes his place with R. H. Blyth and Harold G. Henderson as one of the three most influential English-language commentators to have written about haiku poetry.

## Poetic Influences and Haiku Growth

William J. Higginson was born on 17 December 1938 in New York City, and grew up in the Bronx and Bergenfield, New Jersey. After attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he joined the United States Air Force, which sent him to Yale to learn Japanese. He then served in Japan for two years at Misawa Air Base, in Aomori prefecture, near the northernmost tip of Honshu. It was at Yale and Misawa that his love of the Japanese language and its literature began to flower. In his introduction to *Ten Years' Collected Haiku*, Volume 1 (Fanwood, New Jersey: From Here Press, 1987), Higginson wrote that "The haiku was my starting verse . . . my initiation began with an instructor at Yale reciting Bashō's *furuike-ya* to my class in Japanese military terminology . . . Bashō's poem struck me like the stick of a Zen master" (1). Higginson wrote again of this pivotal influence in his haibun, titled "Well-Bucket Nightfall, or New Day?" published in the *Haiku Society of America* journal *Frogpond* 32:1, Winter 2009, the issue dedicated to him shortly after his death. This was to be "Bill's last personal writing, a haibun, written Friday, October 3rd, 2008, eight days before he died" (5):

Is this, then, to be the journal of my own well-bucket nightfall, when my own life will be snuffed out in a few weeks' time? Or the journal of a dark night to a bright

new day? I have lived a long and productive life, to my own understanding, lived much of it on my own terms, much on the pure dumb luck of some accidental word or event no one could have predicted. Who could know that a single verse spoken in an endless year of USAF Japanese vocabulary drills relating to parts of weapons and flying airplanes would lead to a life-long interest in Japanese poetry that has sustained me through all the rest.

smell of bile . . .  
I waken to October  
afterglow

Higginson's passion for haiku led him to a life of poetry, criticism, and translation that embraced his knowledge of the language and culture, beginning with the publication of *Twenty-Five Pieces of Now*, translations of classical Japanese haiku, in 1968. This was the same year that Higginson became a charter member of the Haiku Society of America, which held its inaugural meeting in New York City in October of 1968 (he also served as president of the organization in 1976, and in 2007 he received the HSA's Sora Award for service to the society). In 1969, Higginson completed a BA in English (with honors) from Southern Connecticut State College. In 1971, prompted by a desire to know more about William Carlos Williams, he moved to Paterson, New Jersey. He edited *Haiku Magazine* from 1971 to 1976, and in 1975 he started *From Here Press*, which published mostly haiku-related chapbooks, including collections by Allen Ginsberg and Ruth Stone. The press's website, listing selected books published over the years, is active at <http://fhp.2hweb.net/contents.html>. Higginson stayed in New Jersey until 1991, when he and his wife, Penny Harter, relocated to Santa Fe, New Mexico, a move chronicled in *Met on the Road*, his Bashō-influenced haibun book that my press, *Press Here*, published in 1993—a book that focuses on various haiku friends and their poems, all “met on the road.” He and Penny moved back to Summit, New Jersey in 2002, where he died in 2008 after a three-month illness.

William Higginson was sometimes imperial, but not imperious. He knew when to dress in a suit and tie when giving an important speech, but wore a blazer with leather-patched elbows rather than a three-piece suit. He was a dedicated and passionate scholar, but although he did not have a PhD, he had educated himself more than enough to reach an equivalent knowledge. In print he went by William J. Higginson. In person he went by Bill. He was a tall-looking man, but not quite as tall as his slender frame usually suggested. He wore glasses and a beard that gave him a grandfatherly demeanor. He could be stern, yet he laughed readily. He expected something of every poet who approached him, whether encouraging a beginner to write a better haiku by learning more of its traditional propensity for season words, or by demanding that a peer rise to his level of scholarship and clear thinking. He could be impatient, but this was because he expected much of everyone around him. Yet he could also be patient, always taking time to respond to every question when he could, especially from

those who were new to haiku. In a long letter to me, dated 6 July 1990, more than a year before we would meet at the first Haiku North America conference, Higginson wrote "I have enjoyed your work . . . and look forward to seeing what sort of things you will do as an editor and publisher." Words such as these, surely shared with many others first making his acquaintance, were tremendously encouraging. Above all, his goal was to be helpful to modern poets. As he wrote in *Ten Years' Collected Haiku*, Volume 1, "The game was to take haiku out of the hands of those poetasters who would keep all poetry in antiquity, and bring haiku and its devotees full-bore into the heat of our own time and place" (4).

In a private email message to me on 19 April 2015, haiku scholar Richard Gilbert noted the following about Higginson—observations that catch something of who Higginson was, and how supportive he was to so many people, in all spectra of experience (Gilbert was the first person to deliver the biennial William J. Higginson Memorial Lecture, first established by the Haiku North America conference in 2011):

Haiku North America 2007 [in Winston-Salem, North Carolina] was the first and last time I would meet and talk with Bill, though I've continued a warm collegial friendship with his wife, Penny Harter. In print, Bill sometimes crossed the line between objective criticism and personal attack. At the same time, as anyone familiar with criticism knows, strong critics hold strong opinions—strongly negative critique is part of the game . . . Bill was at times a savage gatekeeper, with strong opinions. At HNA, I gave a talk on Hasegawa Kai, as a way of establishing new possibilities for English-language haiku. After the lecture and in the following days Bill and I had a chance to talk. I found Bill to be expansive, intellectually deep, and open-minded—also he was quite excited about my work. It was my impression he appreciated the rigor and research involved in my arguments, as well as the grounding in haiku history and contact with notables in Japan. I'd also mention that, to date, there is really nothing to compete with Bill's *Haiku Handbook* for expansiveness, for scope—where else would you find haiku (or haikuesque) poems discussed, which were penned by Paz, Seferis, Éluard, etc.? Bill taught me not just about haiku, but about haiku in cultural and historical settings. He helped make me aware of new avenues of literature, and alerted me to possibilities of critical approach, for haiku.

Similarly, in an appreciation that appeared in *Simply Haiku* 6:4, Winter 2009,<sup>1</sup> George Swede wrote about Higginson's connection with poets and scholars of all levels of experience:

Bill was a different person to different people . . . In all that he did for haiku, Bill was diligent, independent and non-elitist . . . Bill was also always ready to help anyone—from novice to master—in solving any problem to do with Japanese poetic forms: definitions, the proper season word, the appropriate next line in a *renku*, the right reference text, a translation from Japanese into English and vice-versa, the best place to publish one's work, and so on. No wonder the descriptor, "He was generous with his time," is frequently included in discussions about Bill

after his death. . . . Undoubtedly, in the future William J. Higginson will be remembered as an icon in the history of English-language haiku. But in the present, we cannot help thinking mainly of Bill's generosity and his outreach to other poets.

In his early years as a poet, the 1960s and 70s, Higginson balanced his haiku studies with longer poetry, publishing small anthologies, such as *Between Two Rivers: Ten North Jersey Poets* (Fanwood, New Jersey: From Here Press, 1981). He also published numerous volumes of his own poetry, such as *Paterson Pieces: Poems 1969–1979* (Fanwood, New Jersey: Old Plate Press, 1981), continuing the practice with such later books as *The Healing* (Fanwood, New Jersey: From Here Press, 1986), and *Surfing on Magma* (Summit, New Jersey: From Here Press, 2006). In 1973, he started teaching poetry in the Poets-in-the-Schools program, which deepened his practical experience of converting scholarly explorations into accessible knowledge for his students. He continued to be not just a teacher but a teaching poet, and in 1989 was inducted into the New Jersey Literary Hall of Fame. In the 60s and 70s, he also started publishing translations and essays on haiku that appeared in leading haiku journals of the time, at first in Jean Calkins' *Haiku Highlights* and Eric Amann's *Haiku*, the latter of which Higginson took over in 1971 and renamed *Haiku Magazine*. His early criticism in *Haiku Highlights*, published serially under the pen name of Hian (until someone correctly guessed that William J. Higginson was the author), promoted significant change in the poems published in this early haiku journal. This series of essays culminated in the book *Itadakimasu: Essays on Haiku and Senryu in English* (Kanona, New York: J & C Transcripts, 1971), which won an award for critical writing in the inaugural Haiku Society of America Merit Book Awards in 1974. *Itadakimasu* was also a forerunner to Higginson's most influential book, *The Haiku Handbook*, which also won the HSA's Merit Book Award for textbook/scholarly work, in 1986.

As a publisher, too, with From Here Press, started in 1975, he demonstrated a penchant for service, to help others rather than focusing just on publishing his own work. In the 70s, he also began to write and study renku and related linked poetry, at first under the influence of Tadashi Kondō. Renku became an intense and lifelong passion, and he led many renku sessions at conferences and other gatherings, with statues of Bashō and Sora often placed near him as he offered instruction and guidance (these statues are now mine, a gift of Penny Harter). Renku and related collaborative genres would give further social awareness to his writing, adding another dimension to his drive to promote seasonal reference in haiku. In the past, as today, haiku served to connect poets to each other as a social art, but also served to connect each poet and his or her poem to time—both the specific time of year and to the metaphorical time of life, in all their unfolding seasons. Higginson was not merely studying the haikai of old Japan, but actively bringing it into the twentieth century through the writing and appreciation of new work.

Higginson's promotion of current Japanese haiku included the publication of a compendium of translations and work on at least three additional books by

prominent Japanese haiku poets. These collections, with Higginson's translations, some translated with Tadashi Kondō, include *The Big Waves: Meisetsu, Shiki, Hekigotō, Kyoshi, Hakyō* (Fanwood, New Jersey: From Here Press, 1989), *A Simple Universe* by Sonō Uchida (Foster City, California: Press Here, 1995), *Red Fuji: Selected Haiku of Yatsuka Ishihara* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: From Here Press, 1997), and *Over the Wave: Selected Haiku of Ritsuo Okada* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: From Here Press, 2001). With these books Higginson helped to bring attention, at least amid the Western haiku community, to leading haiku poets in Japan, emphasizing that haiku was a contemporary living art, and not just plucked from the pages of Japanese antiquity.

As an editor, Higginson could be relentless, but only because he insisted on high standards, not just for himself but also for those with whom he worked. In 2001, he provided a back-cover blurb for *The Nick of Time*, a collection of essays on haiku aesthetics by Paul O. Williams that I published with my press, Press Here. He also reviewed the introduction that I wrote with Lee Gurga for the book. His edits were forceful and detailed, decrying the paragraphs that didn't flow, or lacked clear logic, taking us to task for sloppy writing. My first reaction was to resist nearly everything he said, but when I looked past his stridency, I saw that he was right. He had invested himself in the essay, being generous with his time as he had done in previous interactions. Through this investment he found a better way to say what needed to be said, and offered it to us. It wasn't just that he wanted what we'd written to be better. Rather, his intensity demonstrated that he cared, that discussions of haiku mattered to him. Ultimately, these interactions showed him to be accepting me as a peer. I reciprocated as best I could by reviewing some of his essays, such as his detailed and impatient review of Jane Reichhold's *Writing and Enjoying Haiku*,<sup>2</sup> providing numerous examples of problems pointed out in the review. We also worked closely together, long before this, on *A Haiku Path*, the monumental 1994 anthology that documented the first twenty years of the Haiku Society of America from 1968, and also debated, at length, each Haiku North America conference, and all the papers and discussions that arose from this gathering of the haiku tribes every two years. He was at odds with me about Garry Gay's invention of the rengay form, which I had promoted heavily as an alternative—or complement—to renku, but we both saw past that disagreement to value the fact that each of us in our own way was on the haiku path.

In later years, Higginson started a blog about haiku books, an extensive website, *Renku Home*,<sup>3</sup> devoted to renku and other writing about haiku, and also edited (yet more service on his part) the "Haiku and Related Forms" portal site<sup>4</sup> of the Open Directory Project. This website, in its long day, was the single best and most egalitarian online assemblage for worldwide haiku-related resources, one that brandished Higginson's democratic approach to haiku by acknowledging even pseudo-haiku. The site has been neglected since Higginson's death. Perhaps no one could do it justice the way he could.

Haiku and Senryu

It is worth sharing the following poems from a span of five decades to give a sense of William Higginson as a poet as well as a translator and scholar. As much as he valued his recognition as a commentator on haiku, as a teacher and haiku coach, he wanted to balance that work with poetry too.

More intricate  
than all winter's designs,  
this spring flake

The preceding poem won the Haiku Society of America's first contest, in 1968.

Holding the water  
held by it—  
the dark mud.

Higginson told me that he wanted to retain the capitalization and punctuation of this 1970 poem because that was the way it was originally published, even if he no longer wrote that way. This poem shows, too, that he was not needlessly rigid in employing season words in his haiku, omitting them when it was best for the poem.

grey dawn  
ice on the seats  
of the rowboat  
  
the tick, tick  
of snow on the reeds . . .  
sparrow tracks

The preceding two winter poems, from 1982 and 1989, show Higginson's continuing emphasis on seasonal reference. Listen to the T, K, and S sounds of the latter poem. Higginson once reminded me that in Japan they talk of "composing" haiku, not "writing" them, a point that underscores the lyrical and musical feeling in Japanese haiku that poets writing in English should also remember.

New Year's Eve . . .  
thieves have left my car open  
in the falling snow  
  
going over a bump  
the car ahead  
going over a bump

These two car poems, from 1994 and 1999, are examples of both haiku and senryu. While Higginson wrote extensively about haiku, he also embraced senryu.

He was very encouraging to me in a review in *Modern Haiku* of my anthology, *Fig Newtons: Senryu to Go* (Foster City, California: Press Here, 1993), and was passionate about distinguishing between haiku and senryu, even while his primary focus was on haiku.

summer storm . . .  
a shopping cart rolls past  
the end of the lot

crescent moon  
would I look at the clouds  
without it?

These 2001 and 2004 poems illustrate Higginson's ability to notice details, including close observations of himself and his emotional state, and to write about the ordinary and everyday. He encouraged others to write about such topics, to keep haiku accessible.

I look up  
from writing  
to daylight.

writing again  
the tea water  
boiled dry

spring rain  
rereading my own book  
I fall asleep

These three poems, from 1970, 1986, and 2005, cover a span of thirty-five years. They show a dedicated author at work, yet one who is not afraid to poke fun at himself, not taking himself too seriously.

Here are two more poems, from 2004 and 2005, that seem to look ahead to his final illness and perhaps his own passing:

fireworks crashing  
and fireflies so silent . . .  
tomorrow the biopsy

one maple leaf . . .  
end over end on the sand  
without a trace

In the very first paragraph of *The Haiku Handbook*, Higginson wrote that "The primary purpose of reading and writing haiku is sharing moments of our lives that

have moved us, pieces of experience and perception that we offer or receive as gifts. At the deepest level, this is the one great purpose of all art, and especially of literature" (v). In his haiku and senryu, William J. Higginson participated in this social act of sharing, of giving the reciprocal gift of haiku, and hoped not only that others could see what he saw, but that he could see and feel what others saw and felt.

## Seven Successes of The Haiku Handbook

Where Higginson cemented his legacy was with the publication of *The Haiku Handbook*, published by McGraw-Hill in 1985, reprinted by Kodansha International in 1989, and reissued in a twenty-fifth anniversary edition in 2010, also from Kodansha International. In inscribing my copy of the McGraw-Hill edition in 1991, Higginson referred to the book as "these rambles through brambles—watch for the thorns, but see the dewdrops." He knew from decades of experience, before and after the book was published, that understandings of haiku were a contentious business. He knew that what he offered was one perspective, but I believe he also knew, with confidence, that he offered a balanced and informed perspective that would enable his readers to see the dewdrops despite any thorns.

Booklist referred to *The Haiku Handbook* as "the standard work in the field," and that observation is still true today, even decades later. I believe the book has succeeded, and continues to succeed, for at least seven reasons. The first is that it covers the genre's history, yet not exhaustively. Higginson provides overviews of the Japanese masters as well as the development of haiku in English, with just the right amount of information to be informative but not taxing. His chapters on "Haiku Old and New" hint at greater depths of exploration, but not with so much information that he would tire readers who did not already have a specialized or academic interest in haiku poetry. For someone with so much knowledge that he could have unloaded with a blast, then or later, he chose a path of restraint—a characteristic not unlike haiku poetry itself. He was, in a sense, an idling Ferrari of haiku knowledge, but knew that some of his readers needed just a bus ride. Nevertheless, he wanted to make sure they got somewhere.

A second reason for the book's success is its carefully refined and wide-ranging translations. The translations of Harold Henderson and Kenneth Yasuda in the middle of the twentieth century had been gilded with titles, rhymes, and sometimes contorted syntax (although I believe Henderson, to his credit, later disowned the rhymes and titles). Unlike these stilted, Victorian versions, Higginson's were modern, accessible, and disarmingly simple, a balance of the academic and poetic. He also presented them in historical and cultural contexts that brought them alive, making them seem as if they'd just been written. Higginson told me (and surely others) that he was particularly proud of his translation of Bashō's *furuike ya*, which he said he worked and reworked in countless ways over many years:

old pond . . .

a frog leaps in  
water's sound

It is so simple, yet the details were very important, such as the ellipsis rather than a dash to indicate the *ya* cutting word, to suggest a moment of passing time when we encounter the pond, and to help emphasize the temporal contrast between the pond's oldness and the newness of the frog and its splash. He also knew that, before Bashō's haiku, Japanese poems about frogs celebrated their croak rather than their jump. Here the poet was celebrating a different kind of sound, a radical departure from centuries of previous poems. This was an overtone to the meaning of "old" that readers miss too easily today. It was also important to Higginson to say "in" rather than "into," because he said the poem was not metaphysical in the way it would need to be for the frog to somehow leap "into" the sound rather than into the pond—a translation that he considered to be in error. Bashō's poem was much more direct and unpretentious than that, even while it had layers of depth. And he found "water's sound" to be better than "the sound of water," another possible translation of *mizu no oto*, because it was more concise. This version of Bashō's most famous poem is so unassuming, and so widely known, that we forget that it began with Higginson, and distills multiple considerations, not all of which are addressed here. Higginson cared deeply about every nuance in his translations. On occasion he has been taken to task for some of his choices, as any translator will be, but his versions all reflect his deep caring for the haiku genre, his love for these perfect roses.

A third influence on the success of *The Haiku Handbook* is its succinct writing guidance. Where R. H. Blyth excelled at translating a great volume of haiku, describing what he saw as the aesthetics or techniques used in Japanese haiku and what to look for when reading them, Higginson extended well-considered advice to embrace the writing of haiku in English, in the context of Imagism, modernism, and postmodernism. He moved from the descriptive to the prescriptive, but was gentle if he was ever didactic. His guidance was as direct and immediate as the following, something I've adapted into my own workshops on haiku when I say, "Don't write about your feelings; instead, write about what caused your feelings":

This is the main lesson of haiku. When we compose a haiku we are saying, "It is hard to tell you how I am feeling. Perhaps if I share with you the event that made me aware of these feelings, you will have similar feelings of your own." Is this not one of the best ways to share feelings? (5)

A fourth reason for the book's success is its wide appeal to poets, teachers, and general readers at the nexus of scholarly and popular writing. He did not dumb anything down, but respected the reader's intelligence as well as patience by concisely offering informed substance and practical guidance, not just for poets but for those who would teach poetry. Penny Harter's haiku lesson plan adds to the practicality of the book, and many teachers of haiku, myself included, have adopted the seminal guidance offered here. Contributing to this wide appeal

is the fact that the material is not overly specialized. Perhaps haiku itself is a specialized interest in the context of all poetry or other literature, but for those interested in haiku, the book was not excessively detailed, perhaps wisely for an introductory work. Higginson's later books, *Haiku Seasons* and *Haiku World*, were much more specialized in their focus on seasonal references, and their exploration in a worldwide context, something that had never been done in English before, at least not to the same extent.

A fifth contribution to the success of *The Haiku Handbook* lies in its liberal use of examples by various poets, complete with contextual references to other poets, such as the poetic ideograms of E. E. Cummings. Where others writing about haiku have used their own poems, sometimes exclusively, to illustrate their points, Higginson uses poems by poets from around the world, the sung and unsung. He was celebrating his subject, not himself, and not even other poets. His selections recognize the value of particular poems, without regard to whether the poet is well known. Consequently, someone like Marion J. Richardson (have you heard of her?) could be treated the same as a Nobel Prize winner. He did not shy away from quoting haiku by famous writers—such as Dag Hammarskjöld, Richard Wright, Tablada, Rilke, Machado, Snyder, Ginsberg, Borges, Seferis, Paz, and others—but his emphasis was more on the poem. By this emphasis, he demonstrated the democracy of haiku, that haiku was a poetry of the people, accessible to anyone, even while it also attracted well-known writers. By quoting so widely, too, Higginson builds confidence in his readers, who see that he knows his material, providing a passion that becomes infectious.

A sixth reason for the book's success is its simple title. The alliteration goes a long way in making the book memorable and marketable, while the choice of words also promotes the book's practicality. Need help with haiku? Then you need a handbook, and William J. Higginson has written one. It's an unpretentious yet informative title, with just a touch of catchiness. Would it have sold so well if it had been blandly named *How to Write Haiku*?

A seventh reason for the success of Higginson's best-known book may simply be that its author was the right person at the right time. He was a poet, unlike Blyth and Henderson, and a much better poet than Yasuda, and he was a translator and a student of Japanese culture. He was not as fluent in Japanese as Blyth, Henderson, or Yasuda, but perhaps that was a strength, in that it forced him to study carefully, and to empathize with his readers who were also not fluent in Japanese. Translations of Japanese haiku had been appearing from Blyth and Henderson, and through the widely popular Peter Pauper Press editions into the 1970s, and now that interest could be developed into English-language haiku by a wide swath of readers. At this point, too, there had been only one major collection of English-language haiku, Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), but although it was a major accomplishment, it was in some ways still formative. More guidance was needed, and *The Haiku Handbook* was just the book to help. Higginson was also a teacher, used to sharing ideas and fielding questions in a classroom, juggling learning styles and reader resistances to make his subject clear. And he lived close enough to the publishing powerhouses in New York City so that he could more readily approach

them. By the time the book appeared, Higginson had been building a name for himself with poems, translations, and criticism for almost twenty years. Even if that was only within a small community, it gave him a voice that the haiku community wanted to hear more from, yet he extended his reliability on the subject to a broader poetry community as well, and to teachers and those with a general interest in Japanese arts. These factors all came together at the right time, when there hadn't yet been a book published about haiku that could bring this poetry into the modern age.

In contrast, for example, Joan Giroux's *The Haiku Form* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 1974) seemed too narrow in its focus, dwelling more on Japanese haiku than on writing them in English, and lacked the range and context of Higginson's awareness, poetics, and scholarship. Giroux's book also reused Blyth's translations as well as Blyth's perspective on Zen and Yasuda's idea of the "haiku moment." It wasn't breaking much new ground, and asserted such misguided notions as believing that "punctuation . . . should also be included in the syllable count" (80) and that, despite language differences, haiku should still lean to the 5-7-5 arrangement. The book included only a few examples of haiku in English, mostly 5-7-5, almost all from just two sources, James W. Hackett and Helen Stiles Chenoweth's now largely dismissed regional anthology, *Borrowed Water* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 1966). Higginson's book was more informed. It helped, of course, that it also came out from a major publisher, thus receiving healthy distribution and at least basic publicity. *The Haiku Handbook* found its audience, and its audience promoted the book to others because it found it helpful.

Indeed, Higginson wanted his book to make a difference, to help poets, no matter what their experience level. He lamented, as so many haiku advocates still do, that haiku continued to be mistaught in schools merely as a syllable-counting exercise, but *The Haiku Handbook* began to shift public understandings, providing a literary underpinning to haiku that was invariably absent in the misinformation passed off so quickly in grade schools and curriculum guides. Writing in "The American Haiku Movement, Part I: Haiku in English" (in *Modern Haiku* 36:3, Autumn 2005), Charles Trumbull wrote that Higginson's *Haiku Handbook* "made accessible for the first time in English a concise, eminently readable compendium of haiku history, modern developments, and information on both writing and teaching haiku and related forms. Now twenty years old, it is still essential reading for the American haiku poet" (55). The same is still true today, ten years further on, and may well be true for many years to come.

Although *The Haiku Handbook* remains essential reading for anyone interested in haiku poetry, Higginson wanted to update the book to accommodate haiku's tremendous advances in the Internet age, but was never given the opportunity, despite asking. But with the book still selling consistently, so he once told me, the publisher was reluctant to invest in any manuscript revision and redesign. He wanted to include many poets who had furthered the art and craft of haiku since 1985, and to document the rise of many national and regional haiku groups, such as the British Haiku Society and the Haiku Poets of Northern California. He also wanted to promote new presses that specialized in haiku, including my own, Press Here, Charles Trumbull's Deep North Press, Jim Kacian's

Red Moon Press, and John Barlow's Snapshot Press, among others.

The original *Haiku Handbook* was groundbreaking in its exploration of world haiku, and its reminder that English was not the only language in North America, but Higginson wanted to document worldwide developments much more extensively, especially when so much had been happening. Many haiku organizations had started around the world since 1985, and they and many individual poets had increasing communication with each other thanks to the Internet, online discussion lists, and social media sites.

Higginson wanted to acknowledge new poets and translations and journals, and to say more about changes in Japanese haiku that were just beginning to influence Western haiku, including *gendai haiku*. He wanted to talk about the inevitable fragmentation of haiku, and how that was both a beneficial and challenging development. He also wanted to refine some of his opinions about haiku, fill in historical gaps, provide easily updatable companion resources online, and revise his reference to "onji," which he acknowledged was an incorrect or at least outdated term for the sounds counted in Japanese haiku.

A year and a half after Higginson died in 2008, Kodansha International republished the book in a 25th anniversary edition, with a new cover and brief foreword, but none of Higginson's text was changed. Because Higginson was not able to update *The Haiku Handbook*, it has become a milepost for how haiku was at its time of publication, and perhaps the passing of time calls for new mileposts to be marked. As such, the book cannot help but eventually become dated, especially when most of the contemporary poets it quotes have died, and new books and organizations have come to the fore, but until then the book will continue to instruct and inspire.

### Other Books and Publications

If *The Haiku Handbook* was Higginson's most influential book, it was not his magnum opus. That was to be the twin publications of *Haiku Seasons* and *Haiku World*, which both appeared in 1996 from Kodansha International. They were originally intended as a single book, but the publisher suggested splitting them in two. Of the two books, that decision made *Haiku Seasons* a much more accessible overview than a combined single book would have been. This also made it easier for Stone Bridge Press to republish this volume in 2008—however, the publisher, Peter Goodman, chose not to republish *Haiku World*, suggesting to me it was perhaps too specialized a book for his press to invest in, much more so than *Haiku Seasons*. In both its original printing and slightly revised reprint, *Haiku Seasons* provides a thoughtful and finely researched exploration of the role of season words in English-language haiku, expanding the Japanese model to address worldwide concerns, including latitude and longitude, the oppositeness of seasons in different hemispheres, and other challenges. It also addresses the difficulty of defining seasons in the first place, complicated by the early Japanese tradition of basing seasons on the lunar calendar, which has been replaced by our current solar calendar. He educates his readers on how the new year (counted as a fifth season in Japanese haiku), was originally celebrated according to the lunar calendar in February and so was immediately followed by spring. Knowing details

like this can help one better understand seasonal references in traditional Japanese haiku. *Haiku World*, in contrast, takes the ideas of *Haiku Seasons* and manifests them in what was the first worldwide English-language *saijiki*, or almanac of seasonal topics and poems—a monumental production that incorporated knowledge of botany, zoology, climatology, and other natural phenomena, linguistics, geography, and more. Higginson set himself a limit of including no more than three poems per person, to avoid favouritism or imbalance, a restriction that no doubt made it daunting to find example haiku for particular season words. As a reference book, it is unequalled in demonstrating the role of season words in haiku, and helps to underscore the fact that haiku is a seasonal poem, not strictly a nature poem (a common, if slightly misleading, perception). As Charles Trumbull wrote of *Haiku World* in his “American Haiku Movement” essay, cited previously, “For the first time English-speaking haiku poets had adequate tools for studying the Japanese *kigo* system and could debate the adequacy of these conventions for non-Japanese haiku” (55).

To give a fuller sense of what *Haiku World* is like, the following is an example entry, on the early summer season word “rose” (*bara* in Japanese), with the first of its five example poems. This sort of detail goes on for hundreds of pages. Imagine confirming all those Latin names,

researching related plants, and creating accurate descriptions, as well as finding and getting permission for suitable poems.

ROSE, *bara* (early). In Japanese *saijiki* this refers to cultivated roses, which would also be understood in English if the word “rose” were used by itself. A number of well-known varieties could be named; I imagine that most Americans will picture a red rose unless the poem indicates otherwise. But in Europe and North America there are several kinds of summer-blooming native wild roses. These include the multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) with clusters of small white flowers, common from southern New England south; Virginia rose (*R. virginiana*) with pink flowers, Newfoundland south to North Carolina and west to Missouri; and wrinkled rose, also called beach rose (*R. rugosa*) with rose-lavender or white flowers, especially noted along roadsides, in seashore thickets, and on sand dunes, and cultivate both for show and to prevent erosion, ranging from eastern Canada south to New Jersey, west to Wisconsin. Despite its name, the white Cherokee rose (*R. laevigata*) was introduced from China, but has gone wild, especially in much of the south-central U.S. England has the pink-flowering sweet briar (*R. rubiginosa* or *eglanteria*)—also known as *eglantine*—and dog rose (*R. canina*). The wild rose of Japan is the yellow-flowered MOUNTAIN ROSE (*yamabuki*) of late spring. Also: white roses. (160)

reading a mystery—  
a cool breeze comes through  
the beach roses

Cor van den Heuvel

Before *Haiku Seasons* was republished, when there was still a possibility to reprint *Haiku World* as well, I provided Higginson with dozens of pages of notes, at his invitation, for improving both books. This sort of engagement with his readers made his books better by embracing various points of view, and might well have been an accidental marketing technique, in that it gave so many readers (not just those whose poems were quoted) a vested interest in his books. This engagement is represented by the extensive list of names collected in the acknowledgments of the Stone Bridge Press edition of *Haiku Seasons*, and in Higginson's other books.

Not to be forgotten amid the fanfare of Higginson's handbook and his two books that explored international season words is his 1991 hardback book for children, *Wind in the Long Grass*, published by Simon & Schuster, with sumptuous illustrations by Sandra Speidel. This book also took a worldwide view of haiku, with poems arranged by season representing poets from seventeen countries, as diverse as Ecuador, Cuba, Senegal, Greece, and Brazil. In his introduction, Higginson writes that "The haiku and pictures in this book will all make you imagine that you are seeing hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching something in a special way" (5), emphasizing that haiku's central focus is on things we can experience through our five senses. Although intended for children, the book is equally appealing for adults.

Three other publications by William Higginson, among many, are worth at least a brief mention. The first is *Haiku Compass: Directions in the Poetical Map of the United States of America*, a very short book, more of an essay, published in Tokyo in 1994 by the Haiku International Association. It summarized American haiku activities for a Japanese audience, and appeared in both English and Japanese. As with so many of his other books, *Haiku Compass* showcased poems by numerous poets from around the country, seeking to be as wide-reaching and representative as possible. This was one way that Higginson demonstrated that haiku was a poetry of the people, and not just an academic pursuit. He valued and harnessed its democratic and social aspects in writing about it, quoting others widely as a way to give back to poets—and a poetry genre—that had given him so much. Another publication is *The Seasons in Haikai*, published in Portland, Oregon in 1996 by Ce Rosenow's Irvington Press, a book that was a precursor to *Haiku Seasons*, in a greatly condensed form. And a third notable book was *Kiyose: Season Word Guide*, which Higginson published (Summit, New Jersey: From Here Press) in 2005. This small booklet was a basic listing of essential season words, a much handier reference than the weighty *Haiku World* book. It enabled English-language poets to do what Japanese haiku poets have been able to do for decades—carry a handy guidebook in their pockets to check their use of season words, or to find inspiration while out on haiku walks.

Higginson's last major contribution to haiku was a return to translation, in *Butterfly Dreams: The Seasons Through Haiku and Photographs*, a privately published collection of about 200 poems arranged by season, with photographs by Michael Lustbader. These poems appeared not as a conventional book but as an electronic book, on CD-ROM, as a multimedia presentation with vibrant nature

photographs and poems. After the aesthetic presentation of each poem and photograph, the book also includes commentary and cultural information on each poem, as well as photographic data. Higginson's first book was *Twenty-Five Pieces of Now*, a short collection of translations released in 1968. With the translations in *Butterfly Dreams*, in 2006, almost forty years later, it seems he returns full circle. The value of this publication is not just the translations themselves, but the beautiful and aesthetic way they are presented with photography and fine typography, embracing new technology. This way of not sitting still, of keeping up with trends and technology, was a key part of how Higginson developed and maintained his considerable influence in haiku poetry.

### This Perfect Rose

Around 1991 or 1993, I remember Higginson vociferously questioning me about the authenticity of a haiku I'd written about "soft hail" that had streaked down the front of my sweater. He was at first adamant that such a thing wasn't possible, that hail couldn't be soft. I assured him that I'd recently experienced exactly that, in Southern California—and it arrested me enough to want to write a haiku about it. Later, I shared more information with him about soft hail, more properly known as graupel, and he was genuinely pleased to enlarge his understanding of a new natural phenomenon. Higginson at first encouraged me to use the more accurate and colourful word graupel, but he came to agree with me to use "soft hail" instead because some readers might not know the word "graupel," and could feel alienated by it. Soft hail was more intuitive to me at the time, but now I wonder if I might use "graupel" after all. As with so many topics we discussed over more than two decades, Higginson was fascinated by the detail and subtlety of language, all of it part of his search for excellence in haiku expression. That caring was what led him to be on the Haiku Society of America's original definitions committee in 1973, and again thirty years later, in 2003, when he and new committee members revisited the society's oft-quoted definitions. Such was Higginson's longevity with haiku, and his passion for this poetry. He cared for haiku, as if they were prized roses.

William J. Higginson was never more in his element than at Haiku North America conferences, and he was the keynote speaker at the very first one, in August of 1991, talking about "North America and the Democracy of Haiku," an egalitarian approach to this poetry that he advocated for as long as I knew him. He was the only person to have attended all nine of the first nine biennial HNA conferences. At that first Haiku North America conference, which I helped to organize in Livermore, California, I asked Bill to sign my haiku autograph book, the first of what is now five volumes, filled with poems and signatures from many hundreds of haiku poets from around the world. From the beginning, I asked all poets<sup>4</sup> who signed to include one or more of their favourite or best haiku, and to autograph and date it. Here's the poem Bill wrote:

after the shower  
finally able to see

this perfect rose

For William J. Higginson, haiku was a perfect rose, glistening with dew—and, in the latter half of the twentieth century, he was its foremost gardener.

<http://www.simplyhaiku.com/SHv6n4/features/Higginson.html>

<http://www.modernhaiku.org/bookreviews/reichhold2003.html>

<http://www.2hweb.net/haikai/renku/>

[http://www.dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Poetry/Forms/Haiku\\_and\\_Related\\_Forms/](http://www.dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Poetry/Forms/Haiku_and_Related_Forms/)

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