

The Value of Iconic Place Names in Western Haiku

by David Cobb

Because of the general tendency in the West to try to replicate the Japanese use of kigo (season words) our haiku are easily misinterpreted as 'a poetry of nature'.

This is to overlook the double significance of the season word: to spotlight a moment in the writer's existence on Earth, yes, but also to remind the reader that it happens during the eternal cycle of life, to be repeated each time that particular season comes around, albeit never in the same identical way.

So, as Thomas Hemstege argued in a useful article in *Modern Haiku* (Vol 35 No 1), it would be just as reasonable to refer to haiku as 'a poetry of time'.

But now I want to go a little further down that road. For us humans, time and place may sometimes seem inextricable. Partly because many places we see, and particularly like to see, have a history attached to them: a history that may well arouse emotions, such as sorrow, pride, regret, triumph, or a variety of other feelings. Just as cherry blossom is present in nature to evoke emotion, and Christmas is there in time to evoke emotion, the Pyramids are there for ever as a source of emotion in space/ place. Place names give off a poetry of their own.

Let's look now at Japanese practice. The power of place names to release feeling is well known to Japanese poets. Some names of places and festivals are even included in the traditional saijiki (almanac of season words.) Even more so in the almanac used by haijin of the modern or avant-garde school.

We can divide them into different types:

- uta-makura - places that almost any educated person is likely to know something about and that are definitely iconic
- hai-makura - places that are lifted into that aura by their mention in a well-known poem.

In English poetry we have an example in *Adlestrop*, where the poet Edward Thomas wrote:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop -
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly.

Read the full poem [here](#).

Place name haiku can be subdivided again into:

- Places famous for their beauty
- Places possibly not very beautiful to look at, but remembered because of

some historical event, or legend or myth, attached to them, or because of a famous or heroic person who once lived there.

When Bashō started out on his celebrated journey along 'the Narrow Road to the Deep North', memorialised in the haibun (more accurately, *nikki*, or travelogue) known as *Oku-no-hosomichi*, he had a sort of cultural map in his head, with dozens of 'pillow places' where he intended to rest his head. So in that travelogue we can find examples of both *uta-makura* and *hai-makura*, though it has to be said his normal practice is to mention the place names in the prose, thus setting the context for a haiku that doesn't include a place name.

Matsushima is a place celebrated for a bay containing many beautiful islands. The sight of it rocked Bashō into writing

The cuckoo would need
the wings of a crane to span
the isles of Matsushima

An example of literary and historical reference is

Across the rough seas
stretching to Sado Island
the Milky Way

because the Japanese reader will be familiar with *The Tale of Genji*. Sado Island is where exiles were sent, including Prince Genji, 'the Shining One', as punishment for an illicit affair with a lady of the Imperial Court. (Incidentally, this haiku is an example that reminds us, if our aim is to create literature, the 'unvarnished truth', meticulous veracity, is far from a requirement of haibun. Researchers have calculated that, looking out from the vantage point where Bashō actually stood, and at the time when he stood there, it would have been impossible for him to observe the phenomenon he records. We can nevertheless accept the poetic 'truthlikeness'.)

I am tempted to think Bashō's mind was infused with feelings similar to those of spectators at a Japanese Noh play. Typically, in dramas of this genre the main character is a man or woman who suffered some unkind fate long ago. He or she appears in the first act, in a way that might remind us Westerners rather of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. His/her sorry tale is told to a wanderer, this time reminding us perhaps of the man in *The Ancient Mariner*, who 'stoppeth one in three', constantly telling and retelling his story to anyone who will listen to him.

The wanderer is invited to say a prayer for the unhappy spirit, so that it may have rest; and a Japanese audience finds itself drawn into this prayer by the actors, so that they experience a sort of 'communal catharsis'. They have a feeling of

inheriting some of the guilt of their ancestors which it is their responsibility to expiate.

The interest in place names continues to this day, so we find the 'grand old man', of contemporary Japanese haiku, Kaneko Tohta, referring to Hiroshima:

Round the A-bomb Dome
buckling in the heat
a marathon

Now let us turn to the situation in the West with regard to the mention of place names in haiku.

I trawled through three major anthologies of British haiku and found almost none.

One explanation for this may be the idea that you sometimes hear, that it should be possible for as wide a readership as possible to make sense of the experience the poet describes. So a common noun like 'river' or 'mountain' might be preferred to a proper noun like 'Thames' or 'Rockies'.

There may be occasions when that is true. But I want to suggest that there are other times when something important, something truly poetic, is lost if we avoid the proper noun. Some place names actually are poetry. Let me try to give you an example.

I was on holiday once in Scotland and my little daughter, perhaps 8 or 9 years old, was with me. We visited a battlefield where the traditional life of the Highland clans was more or less snuffed out. I could have written:

my daughter searches
for four-leaf clovers
on the battlefield

But what I actually wrote was:

my daughter searches
for four-leaf clovers
on Culloden Moor

Not only because the history of 'Culloden Moor' penetrates the British heart deeper than many another battlefield, but also because of the gloomy, falling sound produced by those two words: Culloden Moor has a dying cadence.

Here is another example. This time I'll give you only the first two lines and then pause while you try to think of a place name that, coming in the final line, might

turn a rather inauspicious beginning into something far more poetically powerful:

a man with a torch
goes looking for a name -

No, it isn't a tourist who has put up for the night at a guest house, been out to the local pub, and now has a problem finding his way back to his bed.

a man with a torch
goes looking for a name -
the Menin Gate

I hope you will agree with me, the name 'Menin Gate' has iconic power and poetic force for which there's no substitute. (My Australasian readers might well think of Gallipoli.)

Now, I don't wish editors of haiku magazines to be swamped with 'place name haiku' for the next six months, until another fad takes over. But you might just ponder whether 'river' is always the best word to use.

On the other hand, remember - there will be occasions when the generic term, e.g. river, is more effective than the place name, e.g. Rhine. As with so many other things, it is ultimately a matter for 'poetic discretion'.

This article has recently appeared in *Fropgpond*, although there has been one minor change, and appears here with the kind permission of the author.