

Book Review

Thomas, Roger K. *Counting Dreams: The Life and Writings of the Loyalist Nun Nomura Bōtō*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2021. ISBN13: 9781501759994.

The closing days of the Tokugawa shogunate (the *bakumatsu* period), usually seen as extending from the arrival of US Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, is arguably one of the more consequential periods in Japanese history. The shogunate's response to the demands of Perry and subsequent Western envoys helped to ignite a loyalist movement, which advocated that the emperor exercise a more dominant role in political affairs. Leaders of some feudal domains, notably Chōshū in western Honshu (present-day Yamaguchi prefecture), came to support that cause, as well as calls for the expulsion of foreigners from the Japanese realm. In pursuit of those goals, Chōshū increasingly challenged the rule of the Tokugawa regime, which twice mounted large military expeditions to punish the recalcitrant domain. Among the loyalists from other parts of Japan who made their way to Chōshū was Nomura Bōtō (1806-1867), a Buddhist nun, writer, and poet who hailed from the Fukuoka domain (present-day Fukuoka prefecture) in northern Kyushu.

Counting Dreams, Roger K. Thomas' impressive study of Nomura, adds to a burgeoning list of publications in English that profile the lives of individual women in *bakumatsu* Japan, a trend initiated by Anne Walthall with her seminal, 1998 book.¹ Different from those works, Thomas explores not only Nomura's life but also analyzes in depth, and provides extensive translations of, parts of her written corpus, which includes poems—many composed as “patriot verse” (*shishigin*), a subgenre of *waka*—as well as diaries, letters, and accounts of her dreams. Thomas concludes that previous studies of Nomura have focused too much on her political activities and have thus come to “misunderstand her worldview.” He argues that instead a key link “between her [Nomura's] political activity and her interior life was her poetry. Through its lens she made sense of and reconciled both worlds.” (p. 17)

Thomas explores Nomura's life beginning with her childhood as the third daughter of a middling samurai retainer of the Kuroda, the ruling clan of the Fukuoka domain. He also touches on her initial studies of poetry, some of her literary influences, as well as aspects of her two marriages. The latter bond proved a happy one which Nomura expressed in her poems. She also traveled to Kyoto, describing it as less sophisticated than Hakata, a city whose denizens, in Nomura's opinion, wore more fashionable garb. (Thomas includes a translation of the diary Nomura kept during her journey to the capital.) In addition, Thomas carefully charts Nomura's path to becoming a devoted loyalist. Readers learn of her assistance to key loyalist figures, underscoring the importance of personal networks during the *bakumatsu* period. Notably, she allowed the Chōshū samurai, Takasugi Shinsaku, to take refuge at her hermitage. In 1864, Takasugi had fled to Kyushu after conservative groups gained control of the Chōshū leadership

¹ Anne Walthall, *The Weak Body of a Useless Woman: Matsuo Taseko and the Meiji Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Other recent works on women in the *bakumatsu* period include Laura Nenzi, *The Chaos and Cosmos of Kurosawa Tokiko: One Woman's Transit from Tokugawa to Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015) and Simon Partner, *Koume's World: The Life and Work of a Samurai Woman Before and After the Meiji Restoration* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

and acceding to Tokugawa demands, charted on a more conciliatory course (that would prove only temporary) with the shogunate and other domains.

In 1865 the lord of Fukuoka, Kuroda Nagahiro, also adopted a more pro-Tokugawa shogunate stance and ordered the arrest of Nomura and other loyalists in his domain. During her imprisonment on a small island off the domain coast, Nomura penned a diary, *Counting Dreams* (*yume kazoe*), a translation of which Thomas includes in the book. In the late summer of 1866, Takasugi and his compatriots arranged for her rescue. After spending time in the home of a wealthy Shimonoseki merchant, Nomura lived in exile in the Chōshū port of Mitajiri (present-day Hōfu City) on the Inland Sea, enjoying a position as “the old woman of high status” thanks to literary talent and ardent devotion to the loyalist cause. Until her death from illness in 1867, she received many visitors, including the sister of the Chōshū intellectual, Yoshida Shōin.

As he explains the key events of her life, Thomas provides a rich analysis of Nomura’s poems and other writings. He sees her poetic style as evolving in three stages, the first being in writings that “idealized the spirit of the ancients while striving to produce verses worthy of the age in which they were written.” Thomas describes the second stage as a “bifurcation into two trends: a vision that appears superficially to be political but is better described as visionary and, especially following her imprisonment, a renewed emphasis on Buddhist resignation (*teikan*) and devotionism in general.” (p. 104). He sees a third stage as emerging during her time in exile in Chōshū when her prose came to include a decidedly more political slant, as illustrated in her diary from the period. Thomas notes that over time, much of Nomura’s poetry also assumed a millenarian tone, reflecting a general uneasiness that permeated *bakumatsu* society. As one example he cites the following poem: “Like mosquito incense that neither bursts into flame nor dies out— the condition of the world, choking in dreary smoke” (p. 106).

At several points in his study, Thomas challenges previous scholarly and popular interpretations of Nomura and her place in *bakumatsu* history. For example, he finds little evidence to support an often-repeated claim that Nomura met the famous Satsuma samurai, Saigō Takamori. In addition, he dismisses portrayals from the Meiji and Taishō periods that described Nomura as merely a “mother” to loyalist groups dominated by young men. He laments “the unfortunate tendency to reduce Bōtō’s legacy to her work as a loyalist while dismissing her contributions as a poet and diarist,” an approach that “diminishes her significance” (p. 165).

Backed by thorough research, Thomas effectively challenges such previous interpretations. However, if this volume has one failing, it is that Thomas misses chances to more explicitly present, both in the introduction and the conclusion, his primary “take-aways” about Nomura’s place within nineteenth-century Japanese political and literary history. Nonetheless that minor critique aside, Thomas has produced a book that provides well-supported and revealing insights on Nomura’s life and significant literary accomplishments during a tumultuous period in Japanese history. Although its limited discussion of background events makes it less accessible to undergraduates, the book is a valuable and recommended read for graduate students and others interested in the final days of the shogunate and Japan’s path to the Meiji Restoration.

Reviewed by:

Robert Hellyer
Wake Forest University