

The “Savage” and “Gentle” Race: Isabella Bird on the Ainu

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With the forced “opening” of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1854 and the subsequent move by the government away from its policies of enforced isolation, jet-setting Westerners from various nations poured into the Mikado’s isles, coming to see for themselves this hidden Asian nation whose culture was supposed to be so different from the other Asian nations with which the West had already had long intercourse, be it missionary, colonialist, or merchant. The Japanese were different, it was widely proclaimed, and Japanese manners, cleanliness, and craftsmanship were held to be inferior to none in the world.¹

It seems that every visitor to the country had quite a lot to say about it, and books came out one after another detailing the traveler’s adventures, which usually included stops along the most beaten of tracks: Nagasaki, the Inland Sea, Kyoto, the Tokyo area, and Nikko. It wasn’t long before serious travelers, and travel writers, were craning their necks to find the “unbeaten tracks,” undiscovered areas which they might be the first to introduce to an eager and waiting readership and thereby earn their travel fame.

The northern Island of Yezo² was one such place, and traveling there became the goal of Isabella Bird, who struck out from Tokyo with her Japanese interpreter in 1878, determined to make it all the way to Yezo in order to visit with and write about the Ainu. Bird’s letters to her sister from Japan were collected and published as *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* in 1880. The importance to the author of the visit to Yezo can be gathered from the subtitle of the work: *An Account of Travels in the Interior Including*

Visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrine of Nikko. This book, still one of the best-known travelogues of Meiji-era Japan, was also one of the first to give a relatively comprehensive account of the life and culture of the Ainu people. Bird, writing very much in what has been termed the "Manners and Customs" style of amateur Ethnographic travel writing, is driven to understand and tell about this "savage" race, and is quick to draw comparisons between the Ainu and the Japanese, whose civilization was already quickly swallowing up their culture and society.

European and American visitors to Japan in the late 19th century revealed complicated racial opinions in their writings. While the Japanese were almost universally held to be superior to Chinese or Indians, they were just as universally held to be less developed than Caucasians. But the Japanese and their "national characteristics" were by this time already getting to be quite well known in Europe. Many visitors to the islands, Bird included, thus began turning their attention northwards, to Japan's first people, still living close to nature in what was described as an uncivilized, savage way of life. It wasn't long after the opening of Japan that westerners began writing accounts of the Ainu. As opposed to the Japanese, with their ages-old, refined, oriental civilization, the Ainu were seen as a race almost wholly lacking in culture, and described as everything from paradigmatic noble savages to creatures little differing from monkeys or dogs. They were also, however, not entirely Asiatic in appearance, which fact, coupled to the proximity of their lands to Russia, led many Westerners to theorize that they might actually be Caucasian in origin. This of course led to complicated feeling: a vague sense of brotherhood, especially over and against the "Mongolian" Japanese, and yet an unwillingness to embrace such a relationship, on account of the savage primitiveness of Ainu culture. English travelers like Bird surely did not want Japanese to link Englishness with the Ainu.

In this short essay, I wish to summarize and systematize Isabella Bird's description of the Ainu people. I will include a short section on Bird's imaginative geography of Yezo, but thereafter I will limit myself to discussions of the Ainu physique, face, and personality. I am interested in Bird's view of the Ainu as an uncivilized, disappearing race of people pushed to the northern corner of Japan and slowly being done in by the encroachment of civilization. Bird also has a lot to say about Ainu culture and society, but I will not touch upon that at this time. This essay will form just a small portion of a larger project that traces literary and artistic representations of the Ainu and their land in the works of travelers, Japanese and Western, to the land of Yezo in the 18th and 19th centuries. Isabella Bird, being the most well-known of the Western travel writers to deal with these people, seemed to me to be a good author from whom to start my analysis. In fact we can even say that her *Unbeaten Tracks* is the only such Yezo travelogue that still continues to be widely published and to enjoy wide readership.

The Imaginative Geography of Yezo

Bird arrives in Yezo with a full set of ideas about the wild, northerly nature of the place. These ideas were no doubt transmitted at least partially by the Japanese she spoke to along the way, who then as now viewed the island as wild, wide-open, and frigid in the extreme. The vocabulary she uses to describe her first perceptions of the island, the area around Hakodate, is vivid, and, to one who has seen the place and knows the extent to which it was already "civilized" when she arrived, seems slightly overblown:

(T)he Yezo mountains loomed darkly and loftily through rain and mist, and wind and thunder, and "noises of the northern sea," gave me a wild welcome to these northern shores. A rocky head like Gibraltar, a cold-blooded-looking grey town, straggling up a steep hillside...seen in

flashes between gusts of rain and spin-drift, were all I saw, but somehow it all pleased me from its breezy, northern look. (Letter 32)³

Bird's vocabulary here certainly sets the tone: "dark," "wild," "rocky," "cold-blooded." Such adjectives set the mood for a savage, cold, wild adventure, and also make her own travels there seem that much more heroic.⁴ While arriving in any port in the weather she encountered certainly would afford a wild, chilly feeling to a traveler, what she encountered in Hakodate upon arrival was neither geographically, meteorologically, nor culturally very different to what she left behind on the other side of the Tsugaru Straights. But in her imaginative geography, Yezo was worlds apart.

Even after the storm subsides, Hakodate seems slightly different. The climate is "invigorating," the mountains "naked," "recently burned out" volcanoes as opposed to those in Japan, which were "smothered in greenery" (Letter 33). Most of all, though, in Yezo she feels "freedom," the freedom of being away from the restrictions of civilized life, the freedom of the "rough, little-known, and thinly-peopled," and "adventures with bears, wolves, and salmon" waiting (Letter 35).

Bird also images Yezo as a lonely place, linked, it would seem, to the sorrowful plight of the Ainu, whose culture and way of life are slowly being stamped out by the Japanese. She refers to Yezo as "the lonely Aino"⁵ land," and further goes on:

There is something very gloomy in the solitude of this silent land, with its beast-haunted forests, its great patches of pasture, the resort of wild animals which haunt the lower regions in search of food when the snow drives them down from the mountains, and its narrow track, indicating the single file in which the savages of the interior walk with their bare, noiseless feet. (Letter 36)

She concludes that "(a) lonelier place could scarcely be found" (ibid).

More than the landscape, though, her attention and expectation are directed towards the Ainu, about whom she states clearly the contradiction that will frame her representation of the people throughout her writings. They are "complete savages in everything but their disposition, which is said to be so gentle and harmless that I may go among them with perfect safety" (ibid). We have here already evidence that her views of them are clearly influenced by the romantic notion of the noble savage, so prevalent in European thought for over a century before that time, though we might say its influence was already waning in the late 19th century. Savage they are, completely so, but gentle and harmless. Today, the combination of these two notions might strike us as a contradiction, a mistaken use of the English language, so we must pay attention to what exactly she means by "savage" in the way she uses the term hereafter. We will return to this point at the end of the essay.

Bird's Travels on Yezo

Bird's travels on Hokkaido were in fact quite limited to areas that could not really be called "beaten tracks" except by a foreign visitor. In fact, all the areas she visited were quite Japanized at that time.⁶ She arrived in Hakodate on August 12, 1878 and departed from the same port on September 15. Bird's travels, though extensive compared to earlier short-term visitors, took her through only the south-eastern portion of the island, from Hakodate, around "Volcano Bay" past Mororan, and up north past Tomakomai, climaxing in her sojourn at the village of Biratori, where she spends 3 days and 2 nights. It is her observations and conversations here that form the bulk of what she has to say about the Ainu.

Her discussions of the indigenous group take several different forms. She discusses their "manners and customs," as well as describing their

houses, foods, work habits, marital relations, and religious feelings. We also see traces of physiognomy, as she goes into detail about their physical characteristics and facial features. In the present essay, I will confine myself to Bird's comments on the Ainu's physical features, facial expressions, and personalities.

Description of the Ainu

Bird began the preface to her 1897 work, *Korea and Her Neighbors*, with the statement that her four visits to the peninsula between 1894 and 1897 "formed part of a plan of study of the leading characteristics of the Mongolian races" (Bird 1897, p.5). This is a plan which, though unstated in, and possibly not even conscious at the time of writing *Unbeaten Tracks*, certainly harmonizes with her close inspection and comparison of the Japanese and Ainu whom she encountered on that earlier journey. She is certainly using "races" here in a manner that is more akin to our use of "ethnic groups" or "ethnicities" today, as in her discussion of plural races, she compares the Koreans mainly to Chinese and Japanese. As for the types of "characteristics" she is interested in, while in her books she pays attention to all kinds of cultural traits, it is interesting to note here that the first comparison she embarks upon, which seems to have been foremost in her mind, is one related to racial physiognomy. Early in her "Introductory Chapter" she tells us that while "conquests and immigrations from Manchuria have left some traces on the Koreans" (ibid., p.12) — genetic traces, that is, they are quite different in physiognomy from either the Chinese or the Japanese. In fact, there is so much variety among their faces that, unlike these other groups, it is quite easy to tell one from the other. While Koreans have the same "oblique" eyes, their skin complexion, while still tending to bronze, ranges from a "swarthy olive to a very light brunette." Likewise hair color and the amount of facial hair in men also show more variety than in neighboring

groups.

Following racial theories popular at the time, she reads various kinds of psychological traits in the face: a lofty and intellectual brow, expressions “cheerful, with a dash of puzzlement,” an indication, on the whole, of “quick intelligence, rather than force or strength of will.” On the whole she finds the Koreans “a handsome race,” much more so than either the Chinese or Japanese (*ibid.*, p. 26). They also have a much better physique than the latter (*ibid.*), although on the whole the men average only 5 feet 4 1/2 inches in height. We might here recollect, for comparison’s sake, just how little she thought of the physique of the Japanese she first encountered in Yokohama, even if she admired their ethics in a slightly patronizing way:

The first thing that impressed me upon landing was that there were no loafers, and that the small, ugly, kindly-looking, shriveled, bandy-legged, round-shouldered, concave-chested, poor-looking beings in the streets had some affairs of their own to mind. (Letter 1)

We see from the prefatory remarks in this later work on Korea that underlying Bird’s writing is an ethnology closely tied to the notion of biological race. “Racial characteristics” as first and foremost physiognomic, and these are pointed out in relation to the psychical traits which they were supposed at the time to indicate. This approach is used on the Ainu as well. She gives general measurements on their height, head size, etc., remarking that their brain is indeed quite large for such a stupid race of people! (Letter 37).

In dealing with Bird’s descriptions of the Ainu, I would like to focus on comments related to 1. Body and Physique, 2. Face and Facial Expressions, and 3. Mental Traits.

Body and Physique

One rather interesting point about Bird's discussion of the physical characteristics of the Ainu is that she pays relatively little attention to their oft-mentioned hairiness. She certainly describes their long, curly hair and beards:

The 'ferocious savagery' of the appearance of the men is produced by a profusion of thick, soft, black hair, divided in the middle, and falling in heavy masses nearly to the shoulders...The beards are equally profuse, quite magnificent, and generally wavy... (Letter 37)

While Bird does indeed comment about body hair, she seems to intentionally try to de-emphasize the point. Most men have fine hair on their limbs and back (Letter 37), while some Ainu actually have no body hair at all: "They wore no clothing, but only one was hairy" (Letter 35, cont.). This will stand in stark contrast the general trend, beginning in early Japanese description of their northern neighbors, which sees hair as one of the overarching signifiers of the Ainu people. She concludes on the subject:

The Volcano Bay Ainos are far more hairy than the mountain Ainos, but even among them it is quite common to see men not more so than vigorous Europeans, and I think that the hairiness of the race as a distinctive feature has been much exaggerated, partly by the smooth-skinned Japanese. (Letter 40, cont.)

As a whole she finds the Ainu physique "superb," (Letter 35, cont.) in that they are large, strong, and agile. She summarizes: "The men are about the middle height, broad-chested, broad-shouldered, 'thick set,' very strongly built, the arms and legs short, thick, and muscular, the hands and feet large"

(Letter 37). The women, too, are endowed with fine physical features:

The Aino women seldom exceed five feet and half an inch in height, but they are beautifully formed, straight, lithe, and well-developed, with small feet and hands, well-arched insteps, rounded limbs, well-developed busts, and a firm, elastic gait. (Letter 37)

In the final analysis, the physical features of the Ainu, both male and female, are to be preferred to those of the Japanese, who she describes in no kind terms:

After the yellow skins, the stiff horse hair, the feeble eyelids, the elongated eyes, the sloping eyebrows, the flat noses, the sunken chests, the Mongolian features, the puny physique, the shaky walk of the men, the restricted totter of the women, and the general impression of degeneracy conveyed by the appearance of the Japanese, the Ainos make a very singular impression. (Letter 37)

Furthermore, there is an interesting passage strengthening this point that was included in the 1st edition of the work but that has been omitted from later ones. On returning to civilization and seeing some Japanese again after a bit of time spent in the company of the Ainu, Bird comments:

I was much impressed with their ugliness, the lack of force in their faces, and the feeble physique of both men and women, as compared with that of the aborigines. (Bird 1880, Vol. 2 pp.129-30)

It seems clear which group she prefers.

It is this imposing physical appearance, along with the long hair

and beards of the men which, more than anything else, makes for the "savageness" of the Ainu's appearance. They are a strong, robust people, particularly in comparison with the civilized Japanese, and they seem to possess all kinds of potential for physical violence. In short, it seems to be their physical bodily presence, coupled with the obvious lack of civilization, which Bird classifies as savage. In their faces, though, their expressions and eyes, and also their behavior, she sees nothing of the like.

Facial Expressions

Generally speaking, Bird finds the Ainu handsome and gentle looking, with soft, kind eyes that are much lighter than the black eyes of the Japanese, faces often smiling, and, most interestingly, a very European look. It is this kindness in their faces, and voices, that drives away any fear of these awesome savages:

I hope I shall never forget the music of their low, sweet voices, the soft light of their mild, brown eyes, and the wonderful sweetness of their smile. (Letter 37)

But we should pay attention to stress she puts upon the fact that they appear to have many European qualities, and was should ask what exactly it is that she sees. While admitting that the intellectual life of these uncivilized beings could not possibly be more different than her own, she obviously feels some kind of physically kindred spirit with them. In stressing their European qualities, we get the feeling that Bird is welcoming them, albeit tentatively, into her own tribe, lining up with them over and against the Japanese and other "Mongolian" races. For one, they have fair skin, which she often compares to that of Europeans. "Two of the youngest women are very pretty — as fair as ourselves, and their comeliness is of the rosy, peasant

kind" (Letter 36). In color, their skin is roughly as dark as that of southern Spaniards (Letter 40).

Over and over, she repeats that there is something European about these people. Speaking of an old woman:

Though her expression is so severe and forbidding, she is certainly very handsome, and it is a European, not an Asiatic, beauty. (Letter 36)

It is their faces, and not only the physical appearance of these, but the expressions on them, which link them to Europe not only physically, but also emotionally as well, for the expressions are moving in the feelings that they reveal. The point is made repeatedly: "I am more and more convinced that the expression of their faces is European" (Letter 37 continued), "their faces had a touching sweetness which was quite beautiful, and European, not Asiatic" (Letter 40), "(t)he features, expression, and aspect, are European rather than Asiatic (Letter 37).

Her strongest description of Ainu male beauty is also tied to a European image. Early on in her travels in Yezo, Bird meets a Ainu-Japanese mixed-breed man, whom she finds perfectly beautiful. The man ends up carrying her across a flooded river on his back, and there is no little amount of romance in her words as she discusses the ridiculousness of the scene. Is Bird falling in love with this savage?

She describes him in glowing terms, going as far as to liken him to a portrait of Christ himself:

The adult man was not a pure Aino. His dark hair was not very thick, and both it and his beard had an occasional auburn gleam. I think I never saw a face more completely beautiful in features and expression, with a lofty, sad, far-off, gentle, intellectual look, rather that of Sir Noel

Paton's "Christ" than of a savage. (Letter 35)

As we see here again, the facial beauty that Bird finds in the Ainu is not simply physical, but linked to emotional and intellectual characteristics that she reads into them, and these are often found to be similar to the expressions of Europeans. In these facial expressions, and in the low, soft tones of their speech, Bird reads a kind of melancholy, a wistful sadness stemming from their savage condition and their fateful conflict with civilization.

Mental Traits

Though Bird finds a European beauty in the facial expressions of the Ainu she meets, she finds no mental or intellectual similarities between her own race and these wild savages. While pondering their fate when standing before her God in judgment, she seems to plead for mercy on their behalf, for "Surely these simple savages are children, as children to be judged" (Letter 36). It is in the end the image of the Ainu as powerful, lovely, and melancholic children that she leaves us. Magnificent in body, kind in face, and childish in mind. The Ainu are ignorant and satisfied to stay that way. They have no notion of progress, and no greater ambition than to drink sake.

The log-fire lights up as magnificent a set of venerable heads as painter or sculptor would desire to see, — heads, full of — what? They have no history, their traditions are scarcely worthy the name, they claim descent from a dog, their houses and persons swarm with vermin, they are sunk in the grossest ignorance, they have no letters or any numbers above a thousand, they are clothed in the bark of trees and the untanned skins of beasts, they worship the bear, the sun, moon, fire, water, and I know not what... (Letter 37)

She is amazed and repulsed at the idea that a people could have no history and no interest in one, that they could have no urge to better themselves or their lots, and could want nothing more than drink.

The Savage

“Savage” is the most important key word used by Bird in her discussions of Yezo and its inhabitants. In conclusion, I would like to look more closely at her use of the term in an attempt to get a more precise understanding of what exactly she means by it. The word is used so often in the text that it becomes almost comical, and then it almost seems to lose any meaning whatsoever. Though it may become repetitive, a brief list here will make the point clear. The Ainu are “complete savages in everything but their disposition” (Letter 35). At one point they are so courteous that she “quite forgot that I was alone among savages” (ibid). In a fire-lit hut she describes them again rather pointedly:

I never saw such a strangely picturesque sight as that group of magnificent savages with the fitful firelight on their faces...and the row of savage women in the background — eastern savagery and western civilisation met in this hut, savagery giving and civilisation receiving...
(Letter 36)

The honor paid to her as a guest is a “savage virtue” that she judges unlikely to survive contact with Japanese civilization (Letter 36, cont.). Later, a fine young Ainu man entered the hut, and “saluting me, he threw himself down in the place of honour by the fire, with the easy grace of a staghound, a savage all over” (ibid.). In conclusion, she judges that the Ainu “are uncivilisable and altogether irreclaimable savages” (Letter 37) who are yet “attractive, and in some ways fascinating” (ibid).

In her use of the term in these places, it seems quite clear that she has in mind the notion of the noble savage, the uncivilized, uneducated being living in the state of nature as described by Rousseau in the opening lines of *Emile, or Concerning Education* (1762): "Everything is good in leaving the hands of the Creator of Things; everything degenerates in the hands of man." It is clear that even though their physical presence is imposing and somewhat wild, what is most savage about these people is their lifestyle, their lack of civilizing influence.

Her ideas on the subject become clear when she compares them with a civilized group of Christian people: the lower classes of her own England. While these Ainu are mired in ignorance and vermin, she at least finds them better at heart than those at home who, though Christian, have been made low by civilization:

The glamour which at first disguises the inherent barrenness of savage life has had time to pass away, and I see it in all its nakedness as a life not much raised above the necessities of animal existence, timid, monotonous, barren of good, dark, dull, 'without hope, and without God in the world;' though at its lowest and worst considerably higher and better than that of many other aboriginal races, and — must I say it? — considerably higher and better than that of thousands of the lapsed masses of our own great cities who are baptized into Christ's name, and are laid at last in holy ground, inasmuch as the Ainos are truthful, and, on the whole, chaste, hospitable, honest, reverent, and kind to the aged.
(Letter 37)

Bird reveals no small amount of antipathy towards the "lower classes" of Britain, ruined by civilization and urban life, though somehow one feels that she thinks it is all their own fault.

In her notion of the Ainu as noble savages, living in the state of nature exactly as god created them, however, Bird is actually quite mistaken. As Savage Landor and others will point out later, the Ainu in the areas that Bird visited were anything but complete (uncivilized) savages. They are a conquered people living on the fringes of Japanese civilization, and thus according to the romantic ideology of the noble savage, already corrupted. Bird gives examples of this: their heavy drinking and all-out greed for sake, their fear of the Japanese authorities and hesitance to speak to her for being found out by them, the wretched condition of the Japanese fishing villages where Ainu are employed, and the generally poor and filthy appearance of Ainu villages that are in close proximity to Japanese settlements.

We will need to look at other accounts of this interesting ethnic group, accounts both previous and subsequent to Bird's, for us to be able to make any sound conclusions on the matter.

Works Cited

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——— (1897), *Korea and Her Neighbors*, London: Murray.
A.H. Savage Landor (1894), *Alone with the Hairy Ainu*, London: Murray.

- 1 Research on this essay was conducted with the support of a Scholarly Assistance grant (*Gakujutsu kenkyu*) from Kansai University.
- 2 The Meiji government, when establishing the development commission (*kaitakushi*), changed the name of the Island to Hokkaido.
- 3 As there are numerous editions of this work, and I shall be quoting from more than one, instead of giving a page number from a specific edition, I shall give the number of the letter in which it is included. Many of the letters are listed as continuations of previous letter. In that case, I shall give "cont." after the number.
- 4 Throughout the work, in typical Victorian immodesty, Bird continually refers to

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herself as the first foreign woman to travel the unbeaten tracks of Japan alone. Her translator and guide Ito does not seem to count as an eligible companion.

- 5 Throughout the work, Bird calls them Aino, a corruption of the transliteration of Ainu that was common until the 1880s.
- 6 A.H. Savage Landor, writing in *Alone with the Hairy Ainu*, some 10 years later, makes this point repeatedly, without referring to Bird by name. All the previous Western visitors to Yezo, he claimed, had failed to get beyond the beaten tracks where Ainu were already tainted by Japanese civilization. He himself succeeded in circumnavigating the island.