

OBITUARY

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**In Memoriam :**  
**Fanny Hagin Mayer : 1899–1990**

ON 6 November 1990 the researcher and translator of Japanese folktales, Fanny Hagin Mayer, passed away in Whittier, California. The extraordinary adventure story of her life brought her to Japan when she was barely one year old. Her father, Fred E. Hagin, worked as a missionary for the Disciples of Christ at churches in Hongō, Koishikawa, Chiba, and Katsuura. He initiated evangelization on the island of Hachijōjima and also in Asakusa, famous for its amusements and Kannon temple, whence he set up social activities for the impoverished Tōhoku area.

Fanny and her sisters received their education in English from their mother and in a small school set up by daughters of the Swiss professor of Law at the University of Tokyo, Louis Briddell, so that she had no difficulty continuing her studies from high school to university in the U.S.A. From 1928 to 1947 she taught on different levels in California, but she always remembered the sights, smells, and sounds of Meiji Japan and the stories she had heard since childhood from her nurse, who hailed from Karuizawa. She found these tales so much more fascinating than those told in her home country. Her desire to return to Japan was fulfilled when in 1947 she received a call from the Occupation authorities to serve as Assistant Education and Women's Affairs Officer to the Civil Affairs Team at Niigata. Her professional competence as a teacher blended well with her deep feeling for the country of her youth.

The success of the Supreme Command of the Allied Powers in setting the defeated nation on a course of democratic reform owes a great deal to the devoted and well-qualified people they placed in the right jobs and whom they allowed to pursue their subsequent careers in Japan.

Mrs. Mayer quickly regained the spoken Japanese of her youth and at 54 started the more arduous task of mastering the script as well. Inspiration for this hard effort came from the memory of the folktales she had heard in childhood, and the dream of collecting and translating such tales. The execution of this dream was to bring her international

fame. When her assignment in Niigata came to an end, she felt that her mastery of the language had reached a satisfactory level of scholarly competence. The Tsuda College in 1950 offered her the Chair of English Literature, and this secured her the necessary passport from the Occupation authorities, who thought she was economically liable as "just a grandmother on the loose, pursuing a dream." For the next fifteen years she taught English literature at different universities; at the same time she delved into the cultural history of Japan, and from 1953 to 1959 she joined the graduate course in Japanese literature of Tokyo University.

From 1952 the publication of translations and of commentaries on folktales began in learned periodicals in Japan and abroad, including *Monumenta Nipponica*, *K.B.S. Bulletin*, *Japan Quarterly*, *Asian Folklore Studies*, *Anthropos*, etc. She worked in close association with the doyen of folktale studies, Yanagita Kunio. He invited her to read in his library and gave her counsel and guidance. She also undertook field-work, especially in Niigata. There she was introduced to the technicalities of tale collecting by Mizusawa Ken'ichi, the foremost collector of that area. Work with Mizusawa taught her not only the stories but also the atmosphere in which the stories were told. Most of her publications on folktales, translations as well as reviews, are directly or indirectly related to her days with Mizusawa.

The year 1910 marks the beginning of folktale research in Japan with the publication of Yanagita's *Tōno monogatari* 遠野物語, based on a collection of Sasaki Kizen, son of a landowner in the area, who studied at Waseda University. The old castletown of Tōno was the trading post where the farmers of the inland area of Iwate exchanged their products with those of the fishermen of the coast. In the numerous inns traders from a wide area exchanged their tales, so that Tōno became a receptacle of folklore.

In her first publication, *Japanese Folk Tales* (1954, revised 1966), Fanny Hagin Mayer offers a survey of the studies of tales by Japanese scholars. Another important work was her translation of Yanagita's *About Our Ancestors* (1970) at the request of the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science. A collection of several of her shorter works was published in 1973 as *Introducing the Japanese Folk Tale*. Her most extensive collection of tales was published by Indiana University Press as *Ancient Tales in Modern Japan: An Anthology of Japanese Folk Tales* (1985). More than half of this work is made up of tales published for the first time in English.

A crowning achievement and the fruit of long-lasting efforts on her part was the publication of Yanagita's classification of folktales, *The*

*Yanagita Kunio Guide to the Japanese Folk Tale* (1986), by the same Indiana University Press.

A long life of great devotion to her dream brought forth rich fruit in the scholarly field. It was accompanied by an even greater love for her many students and friends.

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(compiled by Peter Knecht)

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