

The Japan Journals

1947-2004

DONALD RICHIE

Edited by LEZA LOWITZ

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The Inland Sea

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Donald Richie arrived in Japan in 1947 as a U.S. Civil Service typist, part of the reconstruction team after World War II. He found a better job with *The Pacific Stars and Stripes* newspaper, made friends, and stayed in Japan. Fifty-seven years and counting. Interested in music, architecture, culture, literature, film, and an array of other human pursuits, Richie focused his attention on reporting about the emerging nation. Among his many novels, anthologies, and works of criticism, the fictional travel account *The Inland Sea* (reissued by Stone Bridge Press in 2002 with a new introduction by Pico Iyer) is considered Richie's favorite work and a classic.

The Japan Journals offer an unusual window onto postwar Japan. Not least, the journals and memoir fragments provide insight on the expat/occupation experience in a country recently decimated by the occupiers. The journals were written in fits and starts, chunks flew into his novels, and other notebooks or pages simply vanished as the years passed. Yet the diary segments that remain cover memorable events and interactions and tell the story of an American living in Japan for a half century. There are years when Richie was occupied with writing fiction and the journals tapered off. When he was working at the New York Museum of Modern Art as curator of film from 1969 to 1972, one can imagine he had little time for recording the passing scene.

Richie knew lots of people and formed lasting friendships. But the journals are more than a Pepysian report of what happened last night, with whom, or who was at tea this afternoon. Richie is a thinking man with fine-tuned perceptions. As the years evolve through the journal, readers follow a man through life's turning points: marriage, various liaisons, a film criticism career, literary recognition, and a deepening understanding of his adopted country. At one point, he muses on how he's still an outsider after all these years living there, how he still barely knows the language and wouldn't presume to describe himself as an expert on the culture. Humility like that intrigues me; he must have learned a great deal to be aware of what he doesn't know.

Now nearly 80 and no longer picking up comely young folk, but still speculating on erotic possibility or struck by his own captivating memories, Richie reflects on a life of being an outsider, expat, the watcher. He wrote in December 2002:

Being old is like being convalescent. People tell you how good you look, as though they are pleasantly surprised, had not expected you to look good at all.

Despite his literary successes, he's as glum as any skittish young freelancer after losing two editing-writing contracts—reliable sources of income that every writer needs, even at age

79. Books don't pay, he grouses. "Many make livings as I do, various jobs here and there, retainers, editing this or that. This is where my money comes from, certainly not from the books I write." ■

REVIEWER: **L. Peat O'Neil**, author of *Travel Writing* (Writer's Digest Books), lives in Mexico City. She is finishing a book about her walk from ocean to sea through the Pyrenees.