



Chronicles of My Life: An American in the Heart of Japan

Donald Keene

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Few memoirs have the concision, modesty, and charm that mark this late-life work by Donald Keene, America's most renowned scholar and interpreter of Japan. As a Columbia University humanities student in 1941, nineteen-year-old Donald Keene, an able linguist, began learning Chinese from a Chinese student—until an unexpected invitation from a Japanologist to study that language with his small group intrigued him. Keene, already enchanted by Arthur Waley's translation of *The Tale of the Genji*, accepted; a life-long commitment to Japan and its history, culture, and people followed. His Japanese-language skills led to war service in Hawaii, the Aleutians (the Japanese had made landings there), Okinawa, and China. Post-war, Keene spent a year at Harvard and then Cambridge, UK (engagingly and wittily recollected); he then joined Columbia University, and annual trips to Japan followed.

Keene's friendships with such varied and distinguished writers as Mishima, Kawabata, Oe, and Abe led to many translations and publication, and Keene became this nation's leading historian of Japanese literature and a pioneer in broadening its readership here. Keene exhibits a modesty and restraint in his writing (a reflection of the Japanese quality?) and in his travels and work approaches all he meets *vivement mais sans brutalité* (a phrase he appreciated). This book, with illustrations by Akira Yamaguchi, is a gem.

PETER SKINNER (January 9, 2009)

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