

TEA as a Spiritual Luxury

Bruce Richardson brings to light the life story of the author of *The Book of Tea* in his new Benjamin Press edition.

by James Norwood Pratt

“Meanwhile, let us have a sip of tea. . . . let us dream of evanescence and linger in the beautiful foolishness of things.”

The music of such language transports us just the way tea does sometimes—we understand: Tea can be spiritual refreshment.

Those beautiful words I quoted were composed by one born in Japan, the son of a samurai. How he became such a master of late Victorian prose has remained a mystery. Now Bruce Richardson has lovingly investigated—and really for the first time brought to light—the life of this remarkable author. Previously, almost all that was known of him in the tea world was his name: Okakura Kakuzo.

Okakura was such a charismatic genius, the Japanese call him *tenshin*, meaning “teacher,” which he certainly was. But they have no word for “bridge person” anymore than we do in English, yet this describes the essence of Okakura’s life work. He bridged cultures that seemed worlds apart, interpreting Japan and Asian ways to the West and in Japan itself finally achieving the honored status of *tenshin*. *The Book of Tea* is only the best known of his monuments. It has never gone out of print since it appeared in 1906 in Boston, and it has reached millions of readers over successive generations and editions. Now comes Bruce with the definitive edition of *The Book of Tea* for our own time: He has produced a book so beautiful that it compels us to look again at that beloved text. What a life story is now revealed to us!

Books become more alive and more personal when we know the forces and circumstances that shaped the life and the spirit of an author. Through his new prologue, Bruce introduces us to a young Okakura who was born in a Yokohama warehouse, was taught by both Christian missionaries and Buddhist monks, and became recognized as a peer of Harvard professors and the cultural

elite in the West. Using the common metaphor of tea, he introduced Bostonians of the Gilded Age to the Asian concepts of beauty and simplicity. In sharing Okakura’s incredible journey, his new editor makes us eager to read *The Book of Tea* again with renewed awareness.

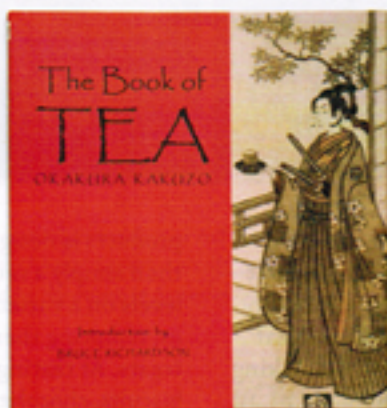
Bruce further resurrects Okakura’s life and times by means of expertly chosen and reproduced illustrations. It is rare for writing as exquisite as Okakura’s to be illustrated just as exquisitely, and this Benjamin Press edition of *The Book of Tea* is in its own right a landmark in the art of bookmaking. We look through Bruce’s educated eye at period photos and portraits from the time Okakura, at 24 in 1886, sailed from Yokohama for San Francisco. Already an *enfant*

terrible in the Japanese art world, he was eager to discover new worlds—America and Europe—where his impact was to prove scarcely less epochal than it had been on his native soil. Bruce also shows us how Okakura inspired and influenced several generations of American genius—very much including Frank Lloyd Wright and Georgia O’Keefe—through *The Book of Tea*. Why has all this been kept secret up until now?

This new edition represents a work of generosity and love on the part of Bruce and his wife, Shelley, as well as all their colleagues at Benjamin Press. It is a beautiful work of art in tribute to a beautiful work of art.

In the company of the Richardsons, I once heard Dr. Anne Morse, Asian Arts director at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (and Okakura’s successor there) say, “*The Book of Tea* is not about tea.” True, but it is perhaps the most important inspirational book in any tea library. Let us be grateful and get several copies for our friends.

For more information about *The Book of Tea* or to order it, go to elmwoodinn.com, or call 800-765-2139.



Having served the cause of tea around the world for three decades, James Norwood Pratt is a highly regarded teacher and speaker and a recognized authority on tea and tea lore. His eponymous *Tea Dictionary* was published in 2010. He and his wife, Valerie, live in San Francisco.