

**“One Hundred Mountains of Japan” By Fukada Kyūya; translated by Martin Hood
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“Well, are there any mountains in Japan?” I had asked Martin Hood more than a decade ago, as we travelled back to Zurich from a ski-tour in the Swiss Alps. Martin had recently joined our club, after a six-year sojourn working and mountaineering in Japan. It’s taken a while, but Martin has now answered my question in fine style – by translating the classic “One Hundred Mountains of Japan” from the original Japanese, in which it is known as Nihon Hyakumeizan.

What are these One Hundred Mountains? We learn in the book’s introduction that the list has no official standing. And, unlike most other mountain league tables – the Seven Summits, the Scottish Munros, the California Fourteeners – it has very little to do with the height of the mountains it embraces.

Instead it represents the personal choice of a failed novelist who, half a century ago, published a series of short magazine articles about his favourite peaks. After readers voted them the best in the magazine, the essays came out in book form in 1964 and immediately won a prestigious literary award.

In the epilogue to his book, the Hyakumeizan author Fukada Kyūya writes that mountains form the very bedrock of the Japanese soul. Mountains are part of the landscape for almost everyone born in Japan, he explains: “A mountain watches over the home village of most Japanese people. Tall or short, near or far, some mountain watches over our native village like a tutelary deity.”

Fukada was not the first to draw up a list of notable mountains. Another magazine, had previously polled its readers for a list of one hundred popular Japanese peaks. But Fukada’s approach was different; he consulted his own taste in selecting mountains with the most character, history and “extraordinary distinctiveness”. A mountain could only be considered for Fukada’s list if he had climbed it. Height was a secondary consideration; ideally, a “Meizan” should be more than 1,500 metres high, he stipulated, but two in the list fall below that level.

What counted more than altitude were a mountain’s appearance, history and cultural significance – and these are the aspects that Fukada picks out in each of his one hundred essays. There is more than enough material, as the Japanese have been climbing and writing about their mountains for more than a thousand years, first as pilgrims, monks and hunters, and, for the last century or so, as hikers and alpinists. Mountains feature prominently in Japan’s history, arts and literature too.

“Ultimately, the Hyakumeizan are a personal choice and I make no claims for them beyond that,” wrote Fukada in the epilogue to his best-selling book. And, he added, “if the book is reprinted, I may well change a mountain or two”. For good or ill, it is too late for that now. Fukada died of a brain haemorrhage on a mountain hike in 1971. Meanwhile, his list of mountains has been enshrined in all Japanese hiking maps, a raft of spin-off books, and even a TV mini-series by Japan’s national broadcaster.

Why has Fukada's book become a classic? One answer can be found in his essay on Ontake – the same sacred stratovolcano that erupted with tragic results last autumn. “The mountain’s inexhaustible treasury of riches is like some endless storybook with its pages uncut. As one follows the rambling plot along, one is always looking forward to reading more. Every page yields things never found in other books. Ontake is that kind of mountain.”

Nihon Hyakumeizan, one might say, is that kind of book. And now you can read it in perfect English. Yes, there are indeed mountains in Japan. (**Christian Frey**)



Mt. Fuji



Mt. Rishiri



Tsurugidake



Tateyama & Lake Mikurigaike



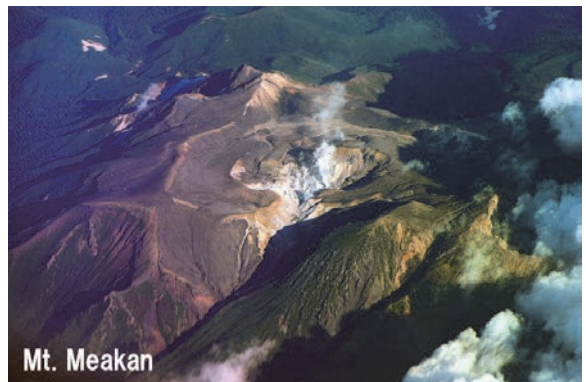
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