PART ONE

WANDERINGS THROUGH THE WORLD OF BOOKS
CHAPTER ONE

GIVEN UP TO NATURE AND TO BOOKS

They were happy years, and still stand out as memorable. Ignorant of the world, of the pitfalls that await any who try to walk a straight path through life, of the price of progress for both individual and community; childish disciples of a youthful master, we moved confidently forward, as we thought, towards the kingdom of our ideals. Our hearts leapt at the word ‘freedom’, our eyes flashed at the tales of the heroes of history. An unsullied hope surged within us as we watched the world outside, yet with one eye on our books, like young recruits listening eagerly to reports from the battlefield.

Tokutomi Roka (Kenjirō) Footprints in the Snow

The latter part of my time at junior high school was a chaotic period of voracious reading [...] in which we behaved like entrepreneurs and adventurers. [...] That words could also be dangerous did not at that time occur to me. I read books and in reading books I read about myself as well as about other people.

Miki Kiyoshi Wanderings through the World of Books

In the 1870s and early 1880s the overwhelming majority of students filling the new higher education institutions were from the old samurai class. This class was considered by the Meiji oligarch Iwakura Tomomi, the leader of Japan’s mission abroad in the early 1870s, to represent the most important and the best among the people. They were highly literate and placed great value on education and new technology.¹ Miki, however, was born a commoner, the eldest son of twenty-four year old Eikichi and his wife Shin, aged just eighteen. The family soon expanded with the birth of another five boys and four girls, although one boy and one girl died in infancy. This large family was sustained primarily by farming but Miki’s grandfather Kiyosuke, who died in 1910, had apparently made a considerable fortune as a dealer in grains, mainly rice, and the family were known locally as the komeya or ‘rice merchants’.²

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² MKZ, I, 369.