1959 TOKYO VISIT

When Ian Fleming arrived in Japan in November 1959 dressed in his habitual lightweight dark blue suit, polka dot bow tie and moccasins, an ebony cigarette holder clamped between his teeth, he was only just coming into the first flush of his success as the creator of James Bond. Since Casino Royale (1953) he had published six Bond novels, with Goldfinger having been published a few months earlier. Film companies were sniffing around – Fleming himself favoured James Stewart or Richard Burton for Bond, with Hitchcock as director – but the worldwide Bond cult would not really take off until the first Bond movie in 1962. In any case, James Bond was far from Fleming’s mind. After churning out a book a year since 1952, he was growing weary of his hero, who seemed to be taking over his life. He was in Tokyo on an all-expenses-paid escape and escapade: the Sunday Times had dispatched him on a five-week tour of his personal canon of ‘the thrilling cities of the world’ – Hong Kong, Macao, Tokyo, Honolulu, Los Angeles,
Las Vegas, Chicago, New York. Unlike his friend Somerset Maugham, who had arrived by boat from Europe days earlier, Fleming was emphatically a post-war traveller, revelling in the speed of air travel, having arrived in the Far East on a BOAC Comet that took twenty-six hours from London to Hong Kong via Zurich, Beirut, Bahrain, New Delhi and Bangkok armed with a £803 19s. 2d. round-the-world ticket, one suitcase and his typewriter.

He had enjoyed Macao and loved Hong Kong (‘the most vivid and exciting city I have ever seen’), but he flew on to Tokyo ‘full of reservations about Japan. Before and during the war they had been bad enemies, and many of my friends had suffered at their hands.’ As a Naval Intelligence officer in 1941 he had been involved in a clandestine night-time mission to break into the Japanese Consul-General’s office in New York to microfilm codebooks. Fleming embroidered this experience in Casino Royale, where we learn that the first man Bond had killed was a Japanese cipher expert, and that this, plus the assassination of a Norwegian double agent in Stockholm, had earned him his 007 rank and ‘licence to kill’:

The first was in New York – a Japanese cipher expert cracking our codes on the thirty-sixth floor of the RCA building in the Rockefeller Center, where the Japs had their consulate. I took a room on the fortieth floor of the next-door skyscraper and I could look across street into his room and see him working. Then I got a colleague from our organization in New York and a couple of Remington thirty-thirtys with telescopic sights and silencers. We smuggled them up to my room and sat for days waiting for our chance. He shot at the man a second before me. His job was only to blast a hole through the window so that I could shoot the Jap through it. They have tough windows at the Rockefeller Center to keep the noise out. It worked very well. As I expected, his bullet got deflected by the glass and went God knows where. But I shot immediately after him, through the hole he had made. I got the Jap in the mouth as he turned to gape at the broken window.

Now here was Bond’s creator landing in a Japan that was no longer a wartime enemy but a valued ally. He was prepared for mixed feelings, culture shock and ‘a great deal of hissing and bowing’, but not for what actually happened: his being so enthralled by Japan that after this brief visit to Tokyo he would be back within three years and would not only send Bond to Japan in his last completed novel but have him father a half-Japanese child.

His guide and ‘comprador’ was the Australian Richard ‘Dikko’ Hughes, the Sunday Times’s tough, ebullient Far Eastern correspondent, who had first worked in Japan in 1940 and returned after the war.