Hugh Fulton Byas (1875–1945): ‘The fairest and most temperate of foreign writers on Japan’s political development’ Between the Wars

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INTRODUCTION

In 1975, thirty years after Hugh Byas’s death, the late Nicholas Tomalin offered ‘ratlike cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability’ as ‘the only three qualities essential for real success in journalism’. The journalist Tomalin cited as the originator of ‘ratlike cunning’ was Murray Sayle, like Byas, a long-serving Japan correspondent, who in 2005 returned to his native Sydney after thirty years’ incisive correspondence from Tokyo.¹

Hugh Byas seems at different times in his twenty-seven years reporting from Tokyo to have exercised most of the qualities on Tomalin’s list. The depths of his cunning are hard to plumb, but his manner must have been more than a little plausible for he inspired trust and enjoyed lasting friendships with a wide circle of people, most of whom had little else in common. Byas also enjoyed more than his fair share of
literary ability. He was quite as scrupulous and elegant a stylist as his fellow Scot, Robert Young of *The Japan Chronicle* of Kobe, but he was innately less inclined to polemics than Young or his feisty successor, Arthur Morgan Young (1922–36).²

As one who was always employed by others, Byas had to negotiate the limitations and prejudices both of his proprietors and the editorial staff under him, and had to operate under the closer scrutiny that was the price of editing East Asia’s foremost American newspaper, *The Japan Advertiser* in the periods 1914–16, 1918–22, and 1926–30. Although he became strongly identified with the *Advertiser*, Byas’s real flowering as a journalist may have come with his appointment, in 1926, as *The Times* correspondent in Tokyo. For a while he combined this task with the editorship of the *Advertiser* but in 1929, he was appointed Tokyo correspondent for *The New York Times* and in 1930 he resigned from the *Advertiser* to concentrate on his work for what were arguably the two premier national dailies in Britain and the US.

In ‘the devil’s decade’ of the 1930s, a flood of local news and a considerable tightening of official screws on Western correspondents seem to have brought out the best in Byas. In June 1940, a *Time* magazine correspondent wrote that ‘He is besides generally considered the most reliable foreign correspondent in Japan.’¹³ Between leaving the *Advertiser* in 1930 and, with considerable regret, leaving Japan in 1941, Hugh Byas became the best known and longest-serving journalist in Tokyo and earned the ‘Dean of the Tokyo press corps’ tag that is still used in discussions of his role in pre-war journalism in East Asia.

Over twenty-seven years, 1914–41, Byas managed the difficult task of retaining both his professional integrity and the trust of many in official Japan. In the few years left to him after his departure for the US, he remained one of only a handful of wartime commentators to employ tact and urge respect for Japan’s national integrity and exercise restraint at a time when drum-beating and officially-sponsored racism were the order of the day. Thus even today his journalism and his books on Japan, especially *Government by Assassination* (1943) remain a fresher read, at the same time more focused and more detached, than the work of most of his contemporaries.

Hugh Fulton Byas was born in 1875, either on a farm in Scotland, according to *The New York Times*, or in Glasgow, according to *The Times* of London, to Thomas and Jane Fulton Byas.⁴ His speech retained a ‘Scottish burr . . . thick as haggis’ that did not lessen with time.⁵ Byas did not attend university but went straight into reporting on the Scottish provincial press until, aged twenty-three, he was taken on by a Glasgow newspaper, where he remained for two years.

In 1902, Byas moved to Johannesburg to write for *The Rand Daily Mail*, an interesting choice of employer, for the *Mail* advocated an