Saitō Takeshi (1887–1982)

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INTRODUCTION

Saitō Takeshi (1887–1982) was the first Japanese scholar to hold a full-time post (Assistant Professor 1923–31; Professor 1931–47) to teach English literature in the English Department of the Imperial University of Tokyo. He followed Dr Ichikawa Sanki (1886–1970: Assistant Professor 1916–20; Professor 1920–46), a distinguished philologist, who deserves a separate portrait in this series of Biographical Portraits. Together, covering literature and philology, they made a significant contribution to English Studies at the university and more widely in Japan.

Natsume Sōseki1 (1867–1916) had been Lecturer in the English Department from 1903 to 1907 after his agonizing two years in London, but resigned from his post in 1907 to devote himself to creative writing, eventually coming to be regarded as one of the greatest modern Japanese novelists. Ueda Bin (1874–1916) had been lecturer at the same time as Sōseki, but after studying abroad in 1907 he took up a post at the Imperial University of Kyoto.
Before Ichikawa and Saitō held full-time posts, teaching in English Studies at the Imperial University had generally been undertaken by English-speaking lecturers: William Houghton (1852–1917) who taught Tsubouchi Shōyō's (1859–1935: the first translator of the complete works of Shakespeare); James Main Dixon (1856–1933) and Augustus Wood (1855–1912) who taught Sōseki; the renowned Lafcadio Hearn's (1850–1904); and Dr John Lawrence (1850–1916) who taught Saitō. They were followed by Robert Nichols¹ (1893–1944), Edmund Blunden (1896–1974), Ralph Hodgson² (1871–1962), William Empson³ (1906–84) and others who all made invaluable contributions.

Saitō through his scholarship and teaching of English literature made a significant contribution to Japanese understanding of Britain and to Anglo-Japanese cultural exchanges. He read widely about Britain and wrote copiously about cultural aspects of Britain.

THE EARLY YEARS

Saitō's family was what would in Britain be described as 'landed gentry'. They came from an agricultural area in Fukushima Prefecture. As the eldest son he might well have inherited the family estate and have become a local dignitary like his grandfather and father who were, respectively, the chairman and a member of the prefectural assembly. It is surprising that Saitō coming from such a background became interested in English literature and became the leading figure in this field in Japan. According to his reminiscences while he was in the fourth or fifth year at Fukushima Prefectural Middle School he began to feel inclined to specialize in English literature. By the time he entered the Second Higher College in Sendai he had made up his mind to choose it for his lifetime profession.

He attributes his decision to the influence of his masters at school and the professors at college. At Fukushima Prefectural Middle School he had two inspiring teachers. One was Tsunoda Ryūsaku (1877–1964), a graduate of Waseda University, who lent him copies of selected writings of Blaise Pascal and of Henryk Sienkiewicz's Quo Vadis (1896), both in English translation. The other was Yoshii Shōichi, a philosophy graduate of the Imperial University of Tokyo, who lent him copies of Henry Longfellow's Poems and Thomas Carlyle's Hero and Hero Worship. Tsunoda was later to teach Japanese literature and culture at Columbia University where he taught students who would become eminent scholars of Japanese culture including Donald Keene (1921– ). He advised Saitō to read some of the writings in classical Chinese of Kōbō Daishi or Kūkai (774–835). Hence from his early years Saitō was inspired to develop a broad and scholarly approach to his studies.