Ronald P. Loftus  

In Changing Lives, Ronald P. Loftus presents extended translations with analysis and commentary of the autobiographies of three Japanese women activists: Yoshitake Teruko, Kishino Junko and Kanamori Toshie, as well as short excerpts by Okabe Itsuko, Shinya Eiko and Sawachi Hisae. The background and analysis interspersed with the translations helps make the book accessible for non-specialist readers, including undergraduate students. It should be a useful addition to courses related to history, feminism and gender studies, and is an excellent companion to Bluestockings of Japan, translations of essays by feminists in the early 20th century, as well as to recent scholarship, such as The Other Women's Lib.

The autobiographies translated in Changing Lives present an overview of women’s experiences from the war years into the 21st century. Although the main focus is on the Women’s movement of the 1970s, the authors discuss in various ways how overcoming the militarism of the war years and involvement in protest movements in the 1950s and 1960s also led them to the struggle for gender equality. For this reason, the first chapter covers women’s memoirs of their childhood and teen years during and immediately after World War II. Okabe Itsuko, in an excerpt from Yuigon no tsumori de (Intended as My Last Will and Testament, 2006), describes discovering after his death that her soldier boyfriend objected to the war, and how her guilt at not understanding his political courage has continued to haunt her. An excerpt from Joryū Shinya Eiko: Watakushi no rirekisho (The Actress Shinya Eiko: An Account of My Life, 2005) shows how the experience of defeat led her to a free-thinking, anti-authoritarian mind-set, and ultimately to avant-garde theatre, where she depicted the plight of Korean and burakumin A-bomb victims. A brief section from Watashi ga ikita “Shōwa” (The Shōwa I Lived, 2000) by Sawachi Hisae provides a harrowing glimpse of life in Manchuria in the wake of defeat. She ends with a stern warning to the present-day reader: “A Japan that cannot confront its own history honestly and without deceit will never be able to graduate from its own past” (p. 38).

Yoshitake Teruko’s Onnatachi no undōshi: Watashi no ikita sengo (A History of Women’s Movements: My Experience of the Postwar Years, 2006) is given the longest translation—one excerpt in the introduction, and two full chapters. In the first section, she talks about how the experience of being gang-raped by American soldiers revealed to her the connection between war and
sexual violence, and how even in her involvement with the US-Japan Security Treaty protests, she felt oppressed by the sexism of male-dominated groups. Her experience of “encounters” with others in the women’s movement and discussions typical of second-wave feminism led her not only to broader social consciousness and activism, but also to speak out for the first time about her rape.

Kishino Junko, in Onna no chihei kara miete-kita mono: Josei kasha no jibunshi (Things Visible from a Woman’s Perspective: Autobiography of a Female Reporter, 1980) describes similar struggles. Like Yoshitake, Kishino had embraced the post-war ideals of democracy and gender equality and was dismayed when those around her at university and in her career as a newspaper reporter did not live up to those ideals. She writes movingly of the death of Kamba Michiko at the 1960 Ampo protest and of her sense of betrayal when the newspapers changed their editorial stance to support the government against the protesters, providing an important view of an oft-discussed event.

In the final chapter, Kanamori Toshie in Waratte, naite, aruite, kaita: Josei jyaanarisuto no gojūnen (I Laughed, Cried, Walked and Wrote: My Fifty Years as a Female Journalist, 2006) brings the discussion of gender issues to the present day. While Yoshitake and Kishino write extensively about their experiences with sexism in the workplace, for Kanamori the bigger shock seemed to come later in life—she had expected to live with her daughter and husband, but instead, her daughter moved away and her husband died of cancer, leaving her alone to care for her elderly mother. Kishino writes forcefully about the growing problem of elder care in Japan and how that burden falls more harshly on women, who tend to live longer. Men must shoulder more of this burden and from a younger age, she argues. However, equally moving is her descriptions of caring for her husband at the end of his life. Rather than family life providing an escape from work, Kishino found it was her job that sustained her. Kishino’s message is clear: Both men and women need rewarding jobs, as well as to contribute to household work.

By providing much-needed translations of these important but often overlooked texts, Loftus makes them accessible to a wider range of scholars in gender studies. The varied autobiographies skilfully translated here present a vivid picture of post-war Japan and changing gender roles. Sawachi Hisae writes, “History is like the air; it is like the ocean. Rare is the person who lives in a specific era and can ascertain exactly where she is. Even when something is nearby, or right in front of one’s eyes, one cannot always observe the nature of its direction and progress” (p. 34). These narratives of both personal lives and well-known events make this history relevant and compelling.