Japanese History through a Dog’s Eyes

Aaron H. Skabelund

Empire of Dogs: Canines, Japan, and the Making of the Modern Imperial World.

Aaron H. Skabelund’s volume breaks fertile ground. Taking the dog as his muse, he documents key sociopolitical developments under which this most ubiquitous companion animal has at once bolstered, and suffered in the name of, human progress. Skabelund upholds dogs for scrutiny as viable subjects of Japanese history and maps the topographies of their inclusion. His main stage is Japan of the interwar period (1918-1939), his spotlight a concept he calls “canine imperialism.” The term titles his introduction (pp. 1-17) and refers to the ways in which dogs’ presence reinforced colonial attitudes. With canine imperialism came an influx of breeds, with breeds the possibility of political traction, and with both an opportunity for elites to exploit their dogs as signifiers of power.

Skabelund begins where one must on the topic of Japanese canines: Hachikō (1923-1935), the loyal dog who waited for his dead master at a Tokyo railway station for nearly a decade. Despite the poignancy of the Hachikō narrative, such stories, Skabelund reminds us, are not uncommon among dog guardians. More surprising are the ways in which Hachikō became a figurehead of Japanese imperialism in the 1930s, even if in retrospect the changing landscape forged an ideal training ground in which to test “indigenous” dogs like Hachikō as symbols of purity and steadfastness. “In a word,” writes Skabelund, “Hachikō both shaped and reflected Imperial Japan” (p. 2).

Breed, like race, is a cultural phenomenon linked to the rise of the nation-state. Under its umbrella, the double leash of language and culture kept canines close at hand even as it pushed them away. Loyalty, civilization,
race all hinged on an allegiance to the efficacy of domestication, which sought to quell the bane of savagery and open the future to the wonders of civil expansion. And so, Skabelund’s eponymous empire is not only of human design, but also (if only in part) of canine intentionality insofar as dogs had taken it upon themselves to gain immediate advantage over their canid ancestors by siding with humans. It is a provocative twist on the nonhuman animal-as-moral-patient trope, one that views dogs as unwitting pawns in human colonial games while acknowledging their behavioral contributions—reflective as they were of human goals—to regimes of civil morality.

Hence the distinctions between The Native Dog and the Colonial Dog of the book’s opening chapter. Here Skabelund focuses on the nineteenth century, a crucial period of global interaction during which Europeans and Americans emerged armed not only with presumptions toward supposedly exotic lands and peoples, but also toward their own indigenous fauna. Only as objects of fascination did breeds like the Pekingese and the Japanese spaniel (or chin)—both lap dogs representative of a feminized Orient—become highly prized in Western kennel clubs. The fascination was mutual. The Japanese leveled their own visions of Western dogs as relatively compliant creatures, even as Westerners viewed the Japanese dog as an abomination more akin to the jackal or wolf than to the companionable specimens of the empire.

Colonial authorities chose to deal with such ambiguities by vanquishing them, a phenomenon that Skabelund details in his second chapter, Civilizing Canines; or, Domesticating and Destroying Dogs. As nature and civilization awoke from the dream of the Enlightenment in separate beds, the exigencies of the new pragmatics dictated removals of impurity in increasingly eugenic ways. In spite of mass eradications, canines retained their linguistic currency, which had dogs in Japanese as kame (from the English, “come here”) as early as the 1860s, at which time Western breeds came to be fashionable accessories for the well off. Imperial fascism provided an attractive alternative to the daunting feats of universalism fundamental to modernist thought, and it was in this intellectual climate that the character of “national dogs” became synonymous with that of foreign breeds. All of which connects full circle to Hachikō and to Skabelund’s third chapter, Fascism’s Furry Friends: The ‘Loyal Dog’ Hachikō and the Creation of the ‘Japanese’ Dog.

Hachikō’s loyalty was, and remains, inspiring. Any one of us might hope to be so selfless in a world of competing interests. Yet the loyalty script was a front to a pervasive national character, which saw its proto-citizen as being “pure in blood, loyal to a single master, and a fearless fighter” (p. 89). The dramatic cultural performance that was the Hachikō archetype strengthened these three