

# Donald Keene, Famed Translator of Japanese Literature, Dies at 96

Donald Keene in 2015 in his home in Tokyo. He was a translator during World War II, and said that reading the diaries of enemy soldiers gave him an initial insight into the emotional lives of the Japanese people.

Shizuo Kambayashi/Associated Press

By Ben Dooley

Feb. 24, 2019



Donald Keene, whose translations of Japanese literature into English and prodigious academic output helped define the study of the subject and made him a celebrity in Japan, died on Sunday in Tokyo. He was 96.

The Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture at Columbia University confirmed his death. He had spent much of his career at Columbia.

Dr. Keene devoted his life to Japan, and his efforts to communicate the country's rich literary tradition to the world — and elucidate it to its own people — made him a superstar there. More than a dozen Japanese television crews gathered to film the last session of his graduate course on traditional Japanese theater at Columbia.

Despite having already received the kind of fame rarely achieved by academics in his home country, Dr. Keene transcended the boundary between celebrity and legend when he decided to become a Japanese citizen in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster that followed a deadly earthquake and tsunami — a gesture of solidarity with the nation that had already become his home in every sense except the official one.

Born on June 18, 1922, in Brooklyn, Dr. Keene was a child prodigy. Entering Columbia on scholarship in 1938 at 16, he studied the classics of Western literature and honed his talent for languages on French and Greek. It was the beginning of a lifelong relationship with the university.

Two years later, at a midtown bookshop, he first encountered the literature that would define his life, purchasing a 49-cent translation of Murasaki Shikibu's "The Tale of Genji," an 11th-century story of courtly love affairs and other intrigues, often described as the world's first novel.

The translation "was magical, evoking a beautiful and distant world," he wrote of the encounter in a 2008 memoir of his relationship with Japan.

The year was 1940, and the opening battles of what would become World War II raged across Europe. For Dr. Keene, a man who described himself as an "intense pacifist," Murasaki's romance was "a refuge from all I hated in the world around me."

But his dreams of ancient Japan quickly met the reality of the country's modern military ambitions. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, Dr. Keene enlisted in the Navy, where he volunteered to study Japanese and began his formal education in the language at the University of California at Berkeley.

His first experience as a translator came in Hawaii, where he worked on routine military reports captured from Japanese units in the Pacific theater. A box of bloodstained diaries from enemy soldiers gave him an initial insight into the emotional lives of the country's people, he wrote in his memoir, musing that they were "the first Japanese I ever really knew."

His first visit to the country began on a beach in Okinawa on April 1, 1945. But instead of a genteel world of aristocratic amusements, he found himself plunged into one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific campaign.

His time as a wartime interrogator helped build a deep empathy for Japan and its people, a trait that served him well as he returned to Columbia to study the country's literature, receiving a doctorate.

Among Dr. Keene's many books was his memoir about his life in Japan.

Over his career, he translated many of the most important works of Japanese literature into lively and eminently readable English.

His scholarship quickly became the foundation of the study of Japanese literature and culture in the English-speaking world.

"It would be virtually impossible to teach an undergraduate course on Japanese literature of any period without assigning books by him," Jay Rubin, an accomplished translator and scholar of Japan in his own right, wrote in a [1984 New York Times Book Review appraisal](#) of "Dawn to the West," Dr. Keene's two-volume examination of modern Japanese literature, a work that "alone could stand as a respectable life's work for any scholar."

But Dr. Keene wrote much more. All told, he published around 25 books in English and many more in Japanese and other languages — ranging from academic studies to personal reminiscences. Taken together they display a level of erudition and scholarship that made him a giant in his field not just abroad but also in Japan. In 1985, he became the first non-Japanese to receive the Yomiuri Prize for Literature for literary criticism for his historical survey of Japanese diaries, later published in English as "[Travelers of the Ages](#)," a book inspired by the bloody wartime journals he encountered while serving in the Navy.

The idea that a foreigner could make such an important contribution to a largely unexplored area of Japanese literature caught many in Japan off guard, Dr. Keene told The Times after receiving the award.

"People have said they expected a Japanese to have dealt with every aspect of Japanese literature," he said, "and to have a foreigner doing it was surprising, and to some, annoying."

But for most in Japan, including some of the country's most famous living writers, he was a source of lively interest. He befriended prominent literary

figures from the Nobel Prize winner [Yasunari Kawabata](#) to the troubled nationalist [Yukio Mishima](#), who maintained a lively exchange of letters with Dr. Keene until Mishima's suicide after an abortive attempt to spark a military coup.

"I was a freak who spoke Japanese and could talk about literature," he told The Times in 2012 after deciding to live out the rest of his life in Japan.

It was a choice he had long pondered, his adopted son, Seiki Keene, said in a statement to The Mainichi Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper. He is Dr. Keene's only immediate survivor.

"He devoted his life to Japanese literature and to become part of Japan's soil, as a Japanese person, was my father's longstanding dream," the son said.

To the end, however, Dr. Keene could never completely leave behind his American identity, he told The Times in 2016, after the election of President Trump.

"If I were really Japanese I wouldn't have felt so excited or so terribly stricken by the recent American presidential election," he said at the time. "There are things like that which make me feel I'm an American really, and I can never be anything else."

"But," he added, "it's so much nicer to live here."

A version of this article appears in print on, on Page D6 of the New York edition with the headline: Donald Keene, 96, Translator of Japanese Literature. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe



ADVERTISEMENT

---

**The New York Times** [Go to Home Page »](#)

---

NEWS

Open in the app

OPINION

---

ARTS

---

LIVING

---

LISTINGS & MORE

---

© 2019 The New York Times Company

[Contact Us](#) [Work with us](#) [Advertise](#) [Your Ad Choices](#) [Privacy](#) [Terms of Service](#) [Terms of Sale](#) [Site Map](#) [Help](#) [Subscriptions](#)

