

FIREFLIES / Stephen D'Arcy

Mr Henry Mackie
Ormond College
The University
Parkville

Charles Morice
12 Raglan St
Creswick

1 December 1908

Dear Mackie

I am glad to hear through Carey Chisholm that you have returned to live in Melbourne and would like to renew our acquaintance from college days.

While my brother Lawrence and I manage my family's grain and feed business in Creswick, my own interest is the culture and history of old Japan.

When consulting the *Catalogue of the Public Lending Library* in Melbourne to order Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* (and so live again in imagination the classical discussions of our youth), I noticed a book by an A. H. S. Landor - *Alone with the Hairy Ainu*. I borrowed the book to see who the Ainu are (a native people), where they live (Northern Japan), and how hairy they are (luxuriantly).

More borrowings from the Japan entries in the Catalogue led me to Lafcadio Hearn's enticing *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* and J.L.L. Thomas's *Journeys among the gentle Japs in the summer of 1895*. I now read all that I can borrow or buy on Japan to prepare for a voyage there and so move from the cold slab of print to the enjoyment and visual delights of the Fair Far East and, who knows, a modest attempt at authorship myself ?

I would welcome your news. Chisholm hinted that there would soon be developments both academic and matrimonial for you. May the gods favour each enterprise. You are always welcome to visit me in Creswick, risk the cooking of a bachelor establishment, and, with the aid of the *Scottish Students' Songbook*, consume much whisky and vocal energy around my piano.

Yours truly
Charles Morice

Mr Henry Mackie
Ormond College
The University
Parkville

Rev. Carey Chisholm
Malvern Presbyterian Church
163 Wattletree Rd
East Melbourne

4 December 1908

Dear Mackie

I recently spent a few days in Creswick with Charles Morice and learned the welcome news that you have returned from your studies in England. Charles told me that he had written to you and mentioned his current interest in Japan. Obsession would be the better term as you know the strength of his interests.

When I arrived at his house, the maid said “He’s been on the poetry again”. Charles was sitting next to the pool in the blazing sun reading aloud above the noise of the cicadas:

“These trembling dewes on the grass – are they tears for the death of autumn ? –
Tears of the insect-singers that now so sadly cry ?”

After listening to my news, Charles explained that his garden was in transition from neatly arranged flower beds with wooden scalloped edging and privet hedges to a Japanese model with a small redgum bridge over a pool, stone lanterns made to order (to a Japanese design) by a Ballarat stonemason, a long bluestone bench for moon viewing, rocks as stepping stones throughout the garden, and a lattice-work summerhouse transformed into a hut for the tea ceremony. He has had trouble getting the correct accessories for the ceremony so we made do with Lipton’s China tea in a Britannia ware teapot.

The house is full of all the “japonerie” he has been able to find in the second-hand shops of Melbourne or on order from London. He showed me an extensive collection of guidebooks and memoirs on Japan, Japanese phrasebooks, steamship and railway timetables for Japan, reproduced photograph albums of Japanese sights, and maps of the towns and coasts of Japan. The number and the detail of the maps would be highly useful if he were planning a naval invasion of the country; the sword and lances less so.

Charles is preparing to travel to Japan but is vague on when this will actually take place. He is still the kind and good-natured Charles of old and worth keeping in touch with as are you. I am telling you all this so that you will not be surprised when you meet a semi-Japonified Charles.

Yours truly
Carey Chisholm

Mrs Mabel Williams
35 Hughes St
Sydney
New South Wales

Lawrence Morice
19 Cushing Ave
Creswick
Victoria

19 December 1908

My dear Mabel

We are all well here.

I went to a photographic magic lantern show on Japan that Charles gave in the Mechanic's Institute here. As Charles appears to be so well prepared to travel to Japan, some people have assumed that he is going soon and ask him in the street when he is leaving. An article in the Advertiser even stated that Charles is preparing to leave early next year.

I recently met in the street your old classmate Miss Alma Hughes. She recently returned to her family's old home at 37 Albert St and has taken on the Children's Bible Class. After her father's death, she spent the last ten years living in Ballarat looking after her ailing stepmother who passed away recently; the Ballarat house was then sold by the executor. Miss Hughes looked drawn and tired; I had heard from others that the late stepmother was of a difficult and exacting character.

Your affectionate brother
Lawrence

[From the private diary of Charles Morice under 19 December 1908]

What should I do ?

Charles the Adventurous: You now must go to Japan. After your talk in the Mechanic's Institute, people appear to have moved from "He is ready to go to Japan" to "He should go to Japan" to "He is going to Japan" to "He is going to Japan soon". It is embarrassing for you to keep putting them off. Act, take risks, and live your life through sharing that of the Japanese. Become known here and abroad through writing a book on your travels.

Charles the Prudent: I am well placed here with my house, my library, and my collection, regular meals cooked to my taste, and an undemanding routine at the firm. A voyage by boat would be long and uncomfortable. Travelling in Japan would be unpredictable and difficult. Anyway, I cannot leave until I have completed my holdings on the older gardens in Tokio, on the various ways to get from the mainland to Hokkaido, and on how to travel among the Ainu.

Charles the Adventurous: Charles the Bold was a 15th century Duke of Burgundy – be Charles Morice the Bold.

Charles the Prudent: Some translate his name not as "Charles the Bold" but as "Charles the Rash". This may be more accurate given that, after the battle of Nancy, his body was found naked, stuck in ice, and with his head split to the chin by a Swiss halberd – the body was half eaten by wolves.

Charles the Adventurous: After the halberd, whether he was devoured by wolves or nibbled by squirrels was irrelevant; at least he lived intensely. He didn't just hide in his palace, read Marco Polo, and collect manuscripts on Cathay.

Charles the Prudent: I'll need to think about this more. Anyway, there is the dinner gong.

Mr Charles Morice
12 Raglan St
Creswick

Miss Alma Hughes
37 Albert St
Creswick

21 December 1908

Dear Mr Morice

I have already read with great interest the books on Japan that you generously lent me at the end of your magic lantern talk at the Mechanic's Institute. I would like to arrange to return these books and to take advantage of your offer to lend me other works on Japan. I particularly liked the courtliness of the literal translations of Japanese phrases such as the Japanese for "Goodnight": "To receive sleep condescend".

My sister Elizabeth Hughes, my brother William, his wife Catherine, and I will go to Wendouree Lake for a picnic on Saturday morning. We hope that you will be able to accompany us. Thank you again for your kindness. I hope to see you on Saturday.

Yours sincerely
Alma Hughes

Miss Alma Hughes
c/- Mr and Mrs John Tilly
37 South St
Ballarat

Charles Morice
12 Raglan St
Creswick

15 February 1909

Dear Alma

I am taking advantage of your being temporarily away from Creswick to write to you so that you will have time to reflect on my letter before your return.

Since I met you at the Mechanic's Institute, I think constantly of you and I live for the next time that I see you, at church, at a social gathering, or for a walk. You have even displaced Japan in my mind and heart, a thing I (and some others) would have thought impossible.

I love you – do you love me ? Would you marry me ? While we have not known each other for long, I think that we are so suited to each other that we would live happy ever after together. Although the morning of our lives has passed, “we've years and years of afternoon” (you see, I do know *The Mikado*) - afternoon that I dearly wish to spend with you. What I can offer is a great love of, and respect for, you, mild eccentricity, a willingness to be laughed at and, therefore, to change, and an extensive and eclectic library – surely the last-mentioned is a strong inducement for a well-read lady.

With all my heart

Charles

Mr Charles Morice
12 Raglan St
Creswick

Miss Alma Hughes
c/- Mr and Mrs John Tilly
37 South St
Ballarat

16 February 1909

My dear Charles

Your wonderful letter made me so happy. I accept your proposal on one condition – that, to “inaugurate our new career”, we have our honeymoon in Japan. It is time for us both to cross the bridge to doing things instead of hesitating on the brink. When I found my stepmother dead in her chair, I opened the window to the wind and the rain and decided that I was now free and would act after 10 years of waiting to live.

I am returning early to Creswick on Wednesday to receive your answer and enjoy your charming company. I note that, while “the laws against flirting are excessively severe”, they do not apply outside the realm of *The Mikado*.

Mild eccentricity does not bother me. For the years that I looked after my stepmother, I had to wait until she finally went to sleep in the evenings before I could go to my bedroom at the other end of the

house and read aloud a novel or old play holding the book in my left hand and an invisible sword or glass of Gascon wine in my right. I got through much of Scott, Dumas, and Shakespeare this way.

Quiet bookish people can enjoy and share their eccentricity – such is likely to be our fate together. My other eccentricities you are yet to discover – some, no doubt, I do not even notice, “in my artless Japanese way”.

Yours - soon to be forever ?

Alma

[Telegram]

17 February 1909

TO: Miss Alma Hughes, c/- Mr and Mrs John Tilly, 37 South St, Ballarat

To note condition accepted condescend. Eagerly awaiting your return. Charles

Tokio 10 April 1909

Mrs John Tilly
37 South St
Ballarat, Victoria
Australia

Dear Vera

I hope that you, John, Ethel, and Arthur are all well – please give them my love. All has gone well with our voyage to Japan.

We set off for the countryside tomorrow to see the cherry blossom, shrines, braziers, low tables, paper screens, and shadows of old Japan and to avoid the trams, telephone wires, and European furniture of Tokio where the electric light is brilliant but unpicturesque.

Yesterday Charles and I went to the night fair and bought a stallholder's entire stock of about 100 "Princess Splendour" fireflies in cages. Last night, when everyone else at the inn was asleep, we crept into the central garden, opened all the cages, and let the fireflies out. Some clung to Charles' and my hair and hands before flying off like shooting stars returning home.

Affectionately yours

Alma