

# "America's Greatest Writer"

By JAMES A. MICHENER

*Every word of this story is literally true, to the best of my knowledge, as are all the names and places mentioned.—James A. Michener.*

WHEN I FINISHED my talk to the students from Waseda University in Tokyo the first question from the floor was, "How do you compare the literary accomplishments of Jean-Paul Sartre and Earnest Hoberecht?"

I had to confess that for several years I had been traveling and had been unable to keep up with the younger German writers. My audience laughed.

After the meeting a graduate student said, "I'm writing my thesis on *The Influence of Earnest Hoberecht on Modern Japanese Thought*. I'm really surprised you didn't know Hoberecht was an American."

I explained that since 1950 I had been away from home and hadn't been able to read all of our bright young men. I said, "I did get some books by Capote and Buechner flown out to me, but apparently I missed Hoberecht."

Replied the intense young man with obvious disdain, "But Earnest Hoberecht is America's greatest writer. He's been famous since 1945. In my thesis I prove he's America's most significant modern novelist."

This bowled me over, for wherever I am I studiously read *TIME*'s weekly book section and drop into big libraries around the world to catch up on the Sunday *New York Times* book section. But four days later my amazement was compounded when I attended a round table conducted by some of Japan's intellectual leaders . . . A professor asked me directly, and in a somewhat hushed voice, "Do you consider the short stories of Earnest Hoberecht superior to those of Ernest Hemingway?"

I believe I did a double take, then said, "Gentlemen, I simply don't understand this great interest in Earnest Hoberecht. I've never heard of the man."

I repeated that in America, so far as I knew, no one in literary circles had heard of him.

One of the critics sighed openly and said, "You mean—he's not America's most famous writer?"

I replied, "Frankly, gentlemen, I didn't even know he was a writer . . ."

"Everybody told us he was better than Hemingway."

In the days that followed I moved about Tokyo trying to unravel the mystery of Earnest Hoberecht's enormous literary reputation in Japan, but when I stuck Joe Fromm, the tough little president of the Tokyo Correspondents Club, he held his hand up. "Don't waste your time asking me. Earnie really is a major literary figure. But ask him. He'll tell all. One thing Earnie will always do is talk."

Through Fromm's kindness I found Hoberecht on the top floor of the *Mainichi* newspaper building. He was a tall, warm, good-looking, immaculately dressed young man in his early thirties. He was wearing a flashy tie, his trade mark, a pin-stripe suit with wide lapels, and highly polished tan shoes. His thick hair was sandy red and he sported a trim moustache, an infectious smile, a malacca cane and a ten gallon Texas hat.

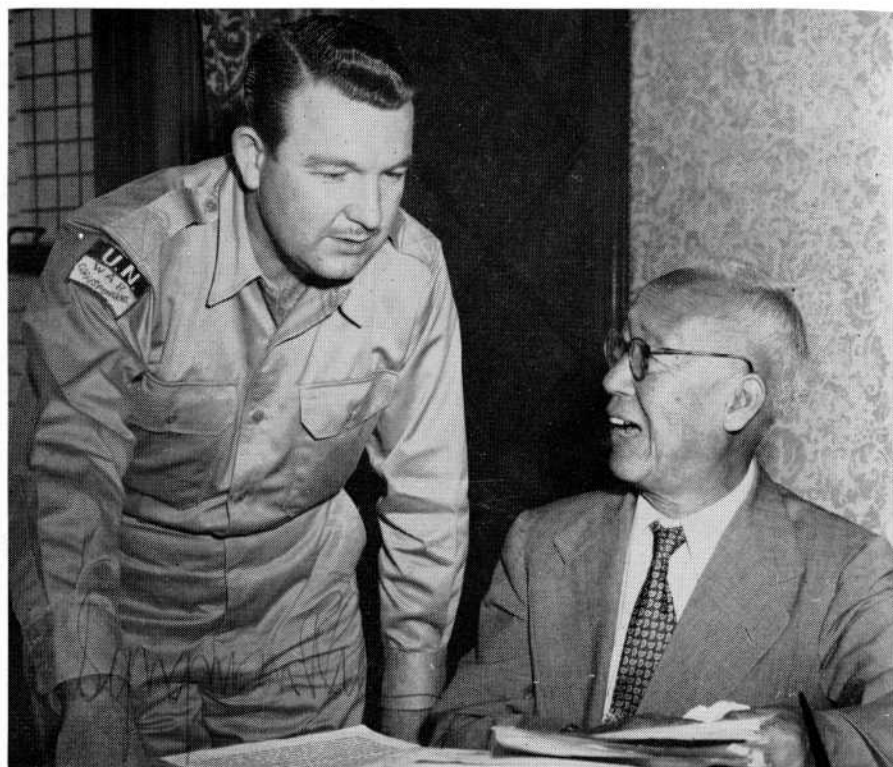
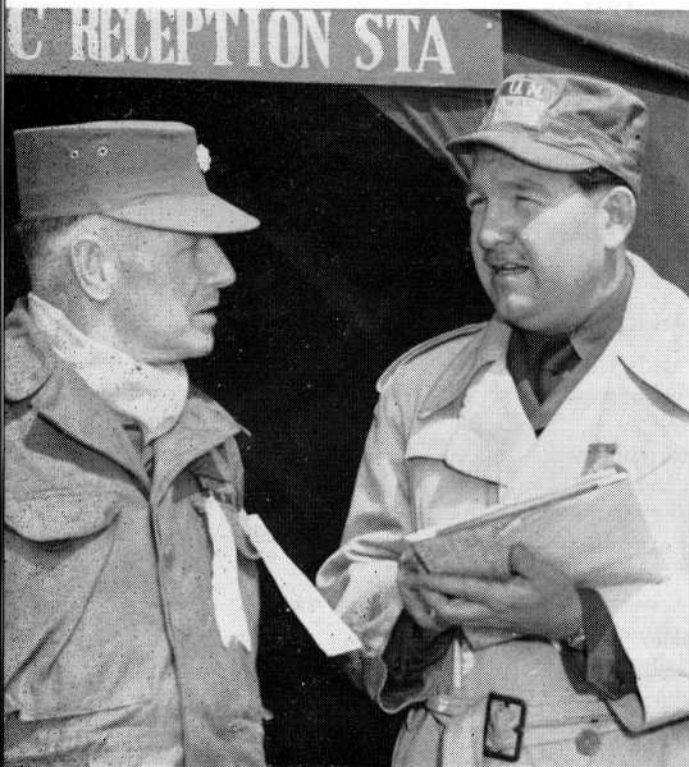
Indicating the latter he said, "Ignore it. It's just my latest affectation. A man in my position has to be talked about or he's forgotten."

"What is your position?" I asked.

He threw out his chest and pointed grandiloquently around a room where some two dozen Americans and Japanese were toiling at typewriters. Coughing modestly he said, "I'm General Manager of the greatest news-gathering agency in Asia. Also

Earnest Hoberecht, 41journ, was interviewed by the Pulitzer Prize winning author in Tokyo. Results indicate a colorful personality and a deep-seated affection between Hoberecht and people of Japan. Article is abridged slightly.

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Earnest Hoberecht, '41journ, interviews officer in South Korea      Hoberecht talks with President Rhee of South Korea during the Korean conflict.

## *"All over Japan you'll meet people who know only two*

he said, "I'm General Manager of the greatest news-gathering agency in Asia. Also I'm Bureau Chief for Tokyo."

"Associated Press?" I asked.

I might as well have machine-gunned him in the belly. "Associated Press!" he gasped. "That has-been outfit! In other parts of the world the A. P. may have a certain local standing but in my territory it's United Press all the way. I am known in these parts as the man who humiliated A. P. You might say that I am the incarnate spirit of the new U. P. on the march . . ."

**H**E REGAINED his composure, recovered his cane and flourished it again. "How d'you like the decor of this office?" he asked. Before I could reply he said, "I decorated it. Purchased everything myself and set the general tone of the place. Found the wallpaper in Osaka. I was down there trying to sell a Japanese newspaper our U. P. wire service. The publisher said, 'Never heard of U. P. What is it?' This made me mad and I asked, 'You mean to stand up there and say you've never heard of Earnest Hoberecht?' Immediately his face lit up like a Christmas tree. 'Hoberecht! Yes, my daughter is a member of Hoberecht Fan Club.' I let him get excited, then stood back and said quietly, 'I am Earnest Hoberecht.' The publisher gasped, then went to the door of his office and called in all the secretaries. 'This is Earnest Hoberecht,' he said, and after I had spent 20 minutes handing out autographs the publisher pumped my hand and said proudly, 'This is a wonderful experience. If you are with U. P. we'll buy the service.'"

I asked what the Hoberecht Fan Club was and he called in one of his secretaries, a pretty little Japanese girl with bowed legs who proudly took from her American-style purse a card bearing a handsome photograph of her boss, moustache and all, accom-

panied by much Japanese writing, a place for her signature, and on the back this solemn oath in Japanese and English: "I am a member of the Hoberecht Fan Clubs of Japan. I read all Hoberecht books and sing all Hoberecht songs. I tell my friends to read and sing them too."

The number of her card was in the 280,000's. "At one time," Hoberecht told me proudly, "we had more than 300,000 cards out. One of the biggest things that ever hit Japan. Practically all club members were girls. That was because of my world-famous series of lessons on how to kiss like an American."

Things were happening a little too fast for me to follow so I tried to slow them down with a question, "Excuse me, Mr. Hoberecht, but about this book—"

"Name's pronounced Ho-bright. First name's spelled E-A-R-N-E-S-T. All over Japan you'll meet people who know only two Americans. General MacArthur and Earnest Hoberecht."

"Now about this book you wrote—"

"Not one. Six."

"I haven't read them."

"How could you? They're all printed in Japanese."

"Do you write them in Japanese?"

"Nobody can write Japanese. I doubt if any American ever learned to write one sentence in Japanese. It's a very easy language to speak. About as easy as Spanish. But it's almost impossible to read and absolutely impossible to write."

"Then how are your books—"

"Wonderful stroke of luck for me. A friend introduced me to the young man in Tokyo who plagiarized *Gone With the Wind*. Very gifted boy. I employed him to work on my books and all the skill he had applied to his plagiarism he applied to his work.



Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and secretary talk with Hoberecht on Formosa.



John Foster Dulles talks with Hoberecht while on a Far East visit.

## Americans. General MacArthur and Ernest Hoberecht”

What was the result? Critics will tell you that my works contain some of the purest and most beautiful Japanese ever written. That accounts in part for their enormous popularity. First one sold over 300,000 copies in two months. You might say a cultural hurricane hit Japan with the advent of Hoberecht on the literary scene.”

It was apparent that only the most severe methods would elicit from this energetic and amazing young man an orderly account of his spectacular career. I produced a notebook and said, “I’ll ask the questions. What was the name of this first book?”

“Well, I was the first American correspondent to land in Japan in 1945.”

“And the first book?” I asked.

“Pure chance. I happened to be the correspondent who had seen most of Japan in those early days . . .”

AT THIS POINT one of Hoberecht’s secretaries brought in a report for the New York office of U. P. She had made a few obvious changes which to my eye were clear-cut improvements, but Hoberecht was enraged and rose to his full six feet, and staring balefully down at the 4-foot-10-inch girl demanded, “Keiko-san, are you General Manager of the greatest newsgathering agency in Asia—or am I?” Keiko-san, who had learned English in Japanese night schools, replied meekly, “You are, Hoberecht-san.” Immediately Earnie softened, sat down, took the papers and patiently explained, “Then if you are willing for me to be in command, will you please type the reports as I wrote them.” With a grandiloquent flourish he tore up the reports. I expected Keiko-san to burst into tears but she looked at me, laughed and said, “Hoberecht-san always showing off.”

“You’ve got to,” Hoberecht said firmly. “You take the time

I was in Seoul trying to sell the Korean press on the U. P. wire service. I took a Korean photographer along with me and a little boy to stand outside the window. If things had worked out right this might have been the greatest picture of free private enterprise in the history of Asia. I went into the office with a pocketful of 1,000 won bank notes, worth about 14¢ apiece. I asked the manager if he was going to buy the U. P. wire service and then while he considered it, I strode over to the window and started tossing 1,000 won notes out in the air, saying in a loud voice, ‘Every minute you hesitate you’re throwing money out the window.’ But, damn it all, before the photographer could get a picture of me throwing the notes the Seoul newspaper owner said, ‘All right. I buy.’ One of the most humiliating moments of my life. I looked like a fool, especially when he came to the window and saw the little boy.”

“What was the boy doing?” I asked.

“I brought him along to pick up the notes. No use wasting money.”

Ernest Hoberecht was born in Watonga, Oklahoma, in 1918 and his three great enthusiasms are the United Press, General MacArthur and Oklahoma in that order. In a famous interview in which he encouraged Japanese novelists to work hard he said of his own humble beginnings, “Even when a student at Watonga High School I liked to write. I frequently submitted, without success at that time, manuscripts to the leading American magazines. I too have known failure but I have also known work.”

In another interview with the Japanese press he confided, “I went to the University of Oklahoma and tricked them into giving me a bachelor of arts degree in journalism.” Actually he was a

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fine student and has become, as befits one of America’s leading writers, more or less enshrined in the University’s honor roll. That he has returned the compliment and held the fair name of Oklahoma ever higher than the names of some of the grubby states nearby will be seen later.

While in college Hoberecht was a prolific writer and made what he calls “a nice piece of change” turning out westerns for pulp magazines. Of this period he says modestly, “Little did I then know that I was already in the process of influencing the literature of one of the world’s major nations, Japan.” He found himself in a position to exert this influence through two accidents, one minor and the other of universal magnitude. He went to work for the United Press, of which he says reverently, “So long as we have one man where the A. P. has ten, God will continue to love the United Press.” The larger accident was World War II, in which he served as a red-hot correspondent. His graphic description of the first naval shelling of the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido was a shattering epic . . .

But in spite of three or four other epic reports Hoberecht, at the end of the war, was merely another bright young newspaper punk. What changed this was Japan. “You might say that no people ever got along better than Japan and me. From the first time I saw it at Atsugi airfield until the time I became General Manager for all this part of Asia I loved Japan. I believe when the history of this period is written it will be acknowledged that the two best friends Japan had were General MacArthur and Earnest Hoberecht.”

ONE OF THE THINGS he is proudest of is his historic fight to admit Japanese to the Tokyo Correspondents Club. This distinguished saloon and transient hotel is located at I Shimbun Alley, near the great Japanese newspaper headquarters. (Shimbun means press, and Hoberecht was partly responsible for naming the alley.) High in club history is the political brawl between Hoberecht and his supporters seeking the presidency against the Dwight Martin (*TIME*)-Joe Fromm (*U. S. News*) axis. Martin was the six-foot-five king-maker and Fromm the five-foot-two front man. Hoberecht calls Fromm “that midget Machiavelli,” but the Martin-Fromm entente usually kept control of the club so that Hoberecht says mournfully, “At age 30 I had to sit by and see myself become an elder statesman.” His one great victory, however, determined club policy and helped make this undistinguished building one of the most hilarious in the history of Asia.

“Let me be the first to give Fromm credit,” Hoberecht says. “He was one of the committee that wangled this building from the army and he helped us arrange a concordat which permitted us use of military telephones, military commissary and, I might add, military liquor supplies. But the social conscience of the regime that preceded the midget Machiavelli was deplorable. Simply because little Japanese girls moved in with many of the correspondents—to take care of laundry and things—the board took a very stuffy attitude. I do have to admit that most of the girls brought along charcoal braziers, bags of rice and fish so that the whole club smelled like Fulton Street. But we could have cleared the fish out. Anyway, the board passed a drastic rule that no Japanese would be permitted in the club. It was a show-down fight. All the Australians were against the Japanese. We debated the order for two nights and I was clearly losing, for the Aussies had lined up the Englishmen on their side, but at three o’clock on the second night I gave the sign and a Negro correspondent whom I had coached for two hours rose and said in a very low voice that

he understood the war in the Pacific had been fought in defense of human dignity, the brotherhood of man and freedom of the spirit. It was a short speech but we had worked in every good word in the English language and when he sat down there was a standing ovation in which the Australians led the cheering. Some of the members who were drunk burst into tears.

“So next day the club smelled like a dead fish once more. Everybody pointed at me and said, ‘You engineered this. Now you clean it up.’ So my faction held a caucus and we came up with a rule that there must be no fish cooked over open charcoal fires within the club and all girls had to be out of the upstairs rooms between the hours of three and five in the morning. For the next week the club was really something to see. At about five minutes to three each morning the stairs would be jammed with little Japanese girls and their correspondents coming down to sleep in the lobby till five. Sometimes you couldn’t find a place to step downstairs during those hours but at five sharp all the correspondents would waken the girls and everybody would trudge back upstairs. This was plainly ridiculous so I hit upon a sensible compromise: Correspondents were honor bound not to let the girls do any cooking at all and nobody was to sleep in the lobby. The club was getting to look like a flophouse.”

It was shortly after this demonstration of superior statesmanship that Hoberecht became friends with General Douglas MacArthur. As head of one of the two principal American wire services Hoberecht automatically became a member of the so-called palace guard. He had another qualification for the job in that he admired MacArthur enormously. “I had a small camera which never got in the General’s way and many times, on long flights to Korea, I would take those famous shots which appeared in all the newspapers of the world and which drove the Associated Press nuts. I was always thinking up ways to outsmart the enemy.”

It’s confusing to talk with Hoberecht about war because when he uses the word enemy he doesn’t mean the North Koreans, he means A. P. Numerous times he outsmarted the enemy with his small camera or with some off-the-cuff comment of General MacArthur, but without question the darkest day in the life of Earnest Hoberecht was April 12, 1951, the day when President Truman fired MacArthur. Here was one of the biggest stories of modern times and Hoberecht, the friend of the deposed general, was in Korea. A competitor who was with Earnie at the time says, “Four times Hoberecht asked for the news to be repeated. Then he sat absolutely dumb for 15 minutes. It was pitiful to see. We all knew that if Earnie had been in Tokyo he would have got next to someone close to MacArthur and sent off some world-shaking inside news. So he just sat there on a box in Korea and looked dead. Then suddenly it came to him. He rose like a prophet from the Old Testament, went to the phone and called his office in Tokyo. ‘Put it on the wire immediately,’ he bellowed. ‘Hoberecht has again scooped the world. I have just had the first exclusive interview with General Ridgway, the new Supreme Commander . . .’”

EVEN A. P. MEN bear testimony to his energy. Says one, “No man in the world wants peace with China more than Hoberecht. It would mean more than a thousand Chinese newspapers he could sell the U. P. service to.” The same A. P. man laughs and says, “I’ll never forget the look on Earnie’s face when he saw the famous photograph of MacArthur leaving Japan. There was Mac, shaking hands with Russell Brines, an A. P. man. Earnie turned purple and pointed to Brines’ crutches. ‘Take those crutches away and what have you? A cheap publicity hunter.’” The phrase is sometimes thrown at Earnie. During the height of the Korean war he returned to the United States to deliver a series of lectures on the horrors of war and appeared on leading plat-

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forms attired in a spanking new correspondent's military uniform, with an oversize patch and mud spots which he is said to have applied each night from Korean dust he carried with him in a milk bottle. Pictures of the intrepid hero were flown back to Shimbun Alley and when he returned to Tokyo he was nearly mobbed. His long association with MacArthur affected his prose style and recently when the Army arranged a routine inspection flight to Okinawa for two dozen correspondents Earnie sent a dazzling cable to New York explaining that "I will do this and write that, interview leaders and size up the situation and submit eight leading articles and make U. P. a name to conjure with in Okinawa." Replied New York: "We are so relieved. This is the Earnest Hoberecht we know and love . . ."

Looking back on the razzle-dazzle literary career of this amazing young man one is tempted to laugh it all off. But the sober fact remains that from 1946-48 Earnest Hoberecht, considering his enormous sales in Japan and the fact that he paid absolutely no income tax, was probably the highest paid writer in the world! It would be sacrilegious to have any one but Hoberecht himself describe his incredible book.

"My first book was like so many important events in world history, pure chance. There was the smart Japanese publisher Zenkichi Masunaga—that's his beer hall you see right outside my window. I always say it's providential you can see his beer hall from my desk because we sort of got one another our big breaks. Masunaga came to me in late 1945 and said he could make a lot of money if he could get rights to American books for publication in Japan. He said the Japanese people were mad to know about American life, seeing as how we had licked them. I said it was easy. Get books by Zane Grey and Hemingway and Mary Roberts Rinehart and some good mysteries and some of our first-class scientific books. But he said he couldn't do that and I asked why. He said, 'The army isn't going to allow any American books to be published in Japan.' I said he must be confused on the law . . ."

"But Masunaga gave me the name of the army man to see and I was literally bowled over. This officer said, 'Mr. Masunaga can publish Russian books or French books or Rumanian books or English books. But not one American book.' I asked why this was, and I was told, 'The army cannot presume to operate a board of literary criticism. Suppose we let in a book like *Main Street*, which makes fun of America! What an outcry there would be in Congress. Or if we let in Erle Stanley Gardner and not John Dos Passos. Some smart aleck in the *New York Times* would ridicule us. So we're going to keep out everything.'

"Right then I had my big idea, the one which you might say revolutionized Japanese thought. I went back to Masunaga and said, 'By golly, you were right. You can't publish any American books. But there's no law which says I can't write an American book here in Tokyo and give it to you to translate. You publish it as an original.' I must say for Masunaga that in one-millionth of a second he understood and the great idea was launched. That day he found me a dream secretary, Susie Miyashita, who could type a manuscript down exactly as I dictated it without using shorthand. Each night when I was through work for U. P. I would rush home and dictate to Susie. Next day she would deliver the copy to Masunaga who would hand it to his translators and by nightfall it would be set in Japanese type. In all my six famous books I never corrected one word or one comma. Just sat down and dictated. Two days after I dictated 'The End,' the printed book would appear. Masunaga once told me he wouldn't dare to work that way with anybody but me, but he knew I was a man

who could be relied upon to produce. It took me about 35 nights to do a book and the worst sales I ever had on any one of them was a quarter of a million copies. Without one word erased . . .

"And after a while I came to think of myself as a kind of Horatius at the Bridge, holding the line until Hemingway and Dos Passos and Zane Grey could break through with better books.

"MY FIRST BOOK was *Tokyo Diary*. Somewhere I had heard a title like that and it sounded good. I explained to the Japanese how an American correspondent landed in Japan, what he thought, what he saw, how he liked the Japanese people. The book sold like mad and we made a pile of money. There's a lot of misinformation about how much money I made. Some A. P. men claim I made more than two million dollars. It wasn't that much I can assure you. But to me, even more important than the money is the fact that all Japan has recognized me as a friend. I can go anywhere in Japan and people speak of me as Hoberecht the sincere friend of Japan. I think my atom-bomb kiss had something to do with that. MacArthur announced that he wanted the Japanese to stop making blood-and-thunder *samurai* movies of revenge and get more in the American tradition. But how can you have an American movie if the hero doesn't kiss the heroine? I happened to visit a Japanese movie company that was trying its best to make an American-style love story but the heroine, acted by a sweet little girl, had never been kissed. In fact, she had never seen a kiss. There was no word in the language for it. You might say that right then and there I seen me duty and I done it. I stepped forward, bowed and gave the movie star a big kiss. She fainted. Yep, she fainted dead away and there was a photographer there and the pictures were shown all around the world. People in Japan went crazy to hear more about this kissing racket. They demanded to see this correspondent who was so good at kissing that girls fainted. A. P. men have started the rumor that I actually set up kissing schools where I collected fees. That's a lie, an outright lie. I did permit a couple of other movie stars to take lessons but none of them fainted and gradually the craze died out. You can say, however, that Japan's first democratic movie would never have been made without my assistance.

"Looking back on that atom-bomb kiss I'd say it hurt me more than helped, because when my greatest novel was published everyone was certain that I was the hero and the movie star was the heroine. That isn't true. This second book was the result of much more careful planning than that. When Zenkichi Masunaga saw that he was cleaning up on *Tokyo Diary* he came to me with a proposition that I should write a powerful romantic novel about modern Japan. I went right to work and in four days was a quarter of the way through it. I called it *Love Me, Tomiko*. And right there Masunaga showed his genius. He said he had a much bigger idea than a book with such a name. He introduced me to a brilliant young newspaperman, Masaru Fujimoto, Ambassador Grew's personal interpreter. You can read about him in Grew's book. Masunaga said that the three of us would constitute a brain trust. So we sat down and planned this great novel as coldly as you would plan building a skyscraper or laying a railroad through the mountain.

"Masunaga said the title had to have the word Romance in it, so we started with that. Then Fujimoto said that Tokyo had always been the most romantic city in Japan and I cried, 'That's it. Because it ties in with my first book, *Tokyo Diary*.' I wanted the people of Japan to associate my name with a series of good books. So that was it. I wrote *Tokyo Romance* in 27 days but I would like to give some of the credit to the brilliant young man who translated it. He's the one who did such a splendid job plagiarizing *Gone With the Wind* into a Japanese setting. He could handle love scenes with unusual delicacy and before my novel appeared



his version of *Gone With the Wind* was the biggest seller Japan had ever had in the romantic field. Now of course *Tokyo Romance* holds the record . . .

"Some A. P. man started the rumor that Masunaga had printed over a million copies and had paid me for only 300,000 but that's a lie. I trusted Masunaga implicitly but one of my men just happened to find the printing plant that printed the little numbered pages that appear in the back of each book. They're called chops. So my man sneaked into the chop plant each night to check off how many had been printed. Masunaga was completely honest.

"*Tokyo Romance* was a real sensation. On some days people would stand in line for hours just to buy a copy . . . Sometimes I'd appear unexpectedly in a store and sign every copy sold in the next hour. If word got out that I was appearing there would be enormous crushes. People used to stop me on the street. Everybody recognized me because I had a special clause in the contract that a certain percentage of Masunaga's profits had to be plowed back into giant posters containing my picture and my name in both Japanese and English. You couldn't ride anywhere without seeing me. There were special meetings of literary societies to discuss my work and all over Japan young girls were taking a new interest in kissing.

"The book was published in America. Word got around New York that here was one of the greatest modern novels, a social force equal to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So an American publisher cabled for a copy of the manuscript and was astonished when I cabled right back that he could have it but it was in Japanese. He dug up a carbon of the original which I had sent to my father in Oklahoma and he printed it just the way Susie Miyashita had typed it, without a single correction. The American reviews were fifty-fifty. *Life* ran a picture story on it, five great big pages, and called it 'the worst novel of modern times.' I immediately cabled them, 'Gentlemen, your statement . . . is near libelous in view of the fact that I have written worse myself. Hoberecht.' They thought some drunk from A. P. had sent the cable and wired back to Carl Mydans of their staff to see if my cable really was legitimate. Mydans didn't even bother to ask me, just wired New York: 'No need to check. Of course Hoberecht sent it. Of course he wrote it. Of course he wants you to publish it.' I did want them to use it. I figure that any publicity is good so long as they spell my first name with an 'a.' The only American review that I thought got to the heart of the job was the *New Yorker's*. They said the book read as if it had fallen out of a typewriter without a single word having been corrected. How right they were.

"The Japanese reviews were terrific and I imagine the Japanese version is a lot more literary than the English because the translator had already gained considerable fame . . . and it's reasonable to suppose he improved my copy if he found an occasional weak spot. The unkindest thing said about my book was said by an A. P. man who announced, 'Well, Japan lost the war, didn't they? They should expect to suffer.' Somebody told me that a Harvard man in the Civil Information and Education Section had his secretary translate the first two chapters. When he read them he shouted 'Stop! Stop! The War Crimes Commission is trying the wrong man.' The thing I like about *Tokyo Romance* is that it's a simple story anyone can understand. One Japanese critic said that I had undertaken a serious burden in offering my lone American novel in competition with the best of Dostoevsky, Galsworthy, Andre Gide and Thomas Mann. He implied that Dostoevsky had won but that I was trying. A left-wing critic said in a bar that America had sent Japan the atom bomb and Earnest Hoberecht and that between the two he would take the bomb every time.

"But the fantastic success of *Tokyo Romance* made Masunaga insatiable for more of my work so I cabled my father in Oklahoma:

'Have struck oil. Ransack attic. Rush all my old manuscripts regardless of subject matter. Insure heavily.' He dug out my old college themes and some rejected westerns that I had written while trying to learn the pulp racket. I published the whole lot of them without a single correction as *The Hitherto Unpublished Short Stories of Earnest Hoberecht*. They were a big success and were later reprinted in all Japanese magazines. I'd say the collection was a little uneven because we didn't have enough westerns to make a complete book so I filled in with some philosophical essays I had done in my junior year in Oklahoma University about the nature of God . . .

"MY NEXT NOVEL is probably the finest thing I ever did and I'm deeply sorry it had to be published in Japanese because it's a book Americans ought to read. It clears up some very misleading matters. It's called *Shears of Destiny*. I wrote it long before the war and couldn't find an American publisher, being then just an unknown, and it turned up in the box of old papers my father shipped me. I had it translated by the plagiarizer right into Japanese without additional editing because it was a well constructed story just as I told it and I had already gone over it once when I sent it to the American publishers. The Japanese loved it and it made a lot of money . . . In it I prove that the Okies written about by John Steinbeck didn't come from Oklahoma at all. They were mostly from Georgia, a very poor sort of people, with some useless Texans and some no-goods from Mississippi thrown in. They just happened to be passing through Oklahoma . . . I'm not criticizing Steinbeck, you understand. Does no good for one literary man to knife another, but I did have to write this book to clear Oklahoma of the unfair stigma Steinbeck's book had cast upon my state. The harm done by one book like Steinbeck's outweighs all the good of a musical like *Oklahoma!*

"Well, I had now . . . to think up something new.

"So I sat down with Susie Miyashita and in four weeks of night work wrote my *Fifty Famous Americans* . . . The book was a huge success . . .

"I . . . dictated another masterpiece. In some ways I'm prouder of it than any of the others, even though the subject matter seems so strange. I called it *Democratic Etiquette* and in it I showed the ordinary Japanese reader how Americans live in a democracy. The thing I'm proud of is that I didn't preach a lot about elections and free speech. I explained how in a democracy the man should let the woman go through the door first. This was quite revolutionary. I gave the girls a lot of hints on makeup and how to set a table or dress becomingly. You might ask how I knew these things. It was simple. I got together eight or ten of the standard etiquette books and spread them out on the floor at night while Susie sat at her typewriter. I'd open all the books to one subject, say how to word a marriage invitation. I dictated, 'Authorities agree that in a democracy there are five acceptable ways to word a wedding invitation.' Then wrote whichever book said it best.

"I'll confess I had mixed feelings about the whole adventure. I was making a pile of money so I felt good. But I was really ashamed that one man had to carry the intellectual burden for 150,000,000 Americans. I wasn't getting any help from Hemingway or Thornton Wilder or Pearl Buck and it hurt when smart-aleck young Japanese said, 'Comparing Russia's modern novels with what we have seen of America's, the people of America must be intellectual midgets.' Well, my job was finally completed. I was promoted and had no more time for literature and the army let down the barriers and allowed American books to come in. For a little while there was a tremendous flood of fine books and young college students, when they had a chance to read our top

## "AMERICA'S GREATEST WRITER"

Continued

writers, stopped referring to Americans as mental mice. Hemingway was most popular. Then William Faulkner because of the Nobel Prize. Fitzgerald was high because he wrote of a lost generation and young Japanese felt themselves in harmony with him. Pearl Buck was popular too, and Sinclair Lewis. But I doubt if any of them will ever take the place of Earnest Hoberecht in the permanent affections of Japan. For example, could you imagine a man like William Faulkner electrifying the entire nation by giving the first authentic bobbysox jazz program in Asia? I did it."

The Earnest Hoberecht Jazz Concert for Public Charities took place in 1946 and represented both a milestone in Japanese cultural history and the apex of Hoberecht's fame. That the climax of the concert was a fiasco was not entirely Hoberecht's fault and by a typically magnanimous gesture he salvaged his reputation. The idea started modestly when in an interview Hoberecht said he couldn't understand how Japan could ever become a functioning democracy if its popular love songs didn't rhyme. "In America," he said, "June and moon, love and above are an essential part of the national spirit. Our highest and our warmest emotions are expressed in the exquisite songs for which we have become world famous. If Japan wants to do one thing which will help her to catch up with modern times let her musicians compose some songs that rhyme." There was discussion of this idea and a few days later Hoberecht announced, "By chance I have been working on a great Japanese love song whose words do rhyme. Humbly I shall offer this song to Japan as a token of my friendship for this admirable land."

It was Hoberecht's intention merely to publish the song out of some excess royalties from his books, but at this point the 300,000 members of the Earnest Hoberecht Fan Clubs intervened and said that they had been waiting for some time for their idol to appear in public so that the general population of Tokyo could see him. The president of the fan clubs was a brilliant and famous geisha O-Kiharu-san and it was largely her enthusiasm that snowballed a simple love song into the most spectacular concert ever given in Asia. O-Kiharu-san announced that a distinguished Japanese musician would write the music for Hoberecht's lyrics. Posters proclaimed that earnest Hoberecht would address the throng in Japanese. And to top it all, in an exclusive interview Hoberecht announced that at this concert Japan would have her first opportunity to witness beautiful bobbysoxers who would swoon as he sang. "There will be at least 50 lovely talented girls who will scream and throw flowers just as they do in America," he promised, "and as I finish they will fall upon the floor in a dead faint." The hall was sold out five days in advance and on the fatal night there was a crowd of standees reaching for three blocks.

**D**ETAILS OF THE CONCERT were handled by Ian Mutsu, the handsome son of a former Japanese ambassador to the Court of St. James. Mutsu, a movie magnate, succeeded in getting the co-operation of Japan's leading musicians. In addition he conscripted 54 lovely girls, trained them to swoon, showed them how to throw flowers so that the bouquets would fall at Hoberecht's feet, and then spent more than four hours demonstrating exactly how the girls were to scream, turn around twice and fall in a dead faint. For this they were to receive the equivalent of 40¢ each and Hoberecht would pay for the flowers. In addition Mutsu composed a flowery speech in phonetic syllables—the subject was "Charity"—which Hoberecht memorized with violent and heart-rending gestures.

The day before the concert everything seemed safe. Hoberecht issued a press release assuring the people of Tokyo that in his

song "every line rhymes with some other line . . ."

O-Kiharu-san collected 40 lovely geishas who composed a classical dance to accompany the song. They proclaimed it to be one of the easiest songs to fit a dance to they had ever heard. One of the dancing geishas told the newspaper, "This song springs right from the soul of Japan." Replied a cynical newsman, "Why not? Japanese wrote it." On the eventful day Ian Mutsu gathered his 54 bobbysoxers for one last rehearsal in Mainichi Hall. Explained Mutsu, "You will be seated in the first two rows, holding flowers in your lap. When Hoberecht-san appears to sing his song you are to give a loud gasp, wait a moment as if breathless, then start to squeal. Hoberecht-san will stop dead as if stunned by your reception, whereupon you must throw flowers all over him. He will press the back of his hand to his forehead as if deeply moved and unworthy of such gifts. Then he will throw you a kiss, at which you will spin around twice, utter loud cries and collapse in a dead faint."

For a faithful report on this epic concert we must go to Gene Zenier, one of two famous American newsreel cameramen whose careers in Japan have somewhat paralleled Hoberecht's. Gene can never forgive Earnie for the debacle at the Charity Concert.

"You could say the entire thing was one colossal bust. Hoberecht had taken pains to have all the newsreel people there to catch shots of the first honest-to-god swooners in Japan's history. I'd say we had a dozen cameras trained on the girls, waiting. When the music started every seat was jammed and there was a mob at the door trying to get in. Members of the Earnie Hoberecht Fan Clubs were all over the place. His speech of welcome in Japanese was a big hit and you could see members of the fan clubs saying, 'I told you so!' to the others. The love song he had written was very nice and the dancing geishas were attractive. You could hear people all over the theater gasping when all the lines rhymed, the way Earnie had promised they would. Never heard anything like it before. And Earnie's final entrance was something special. The 54 bobbysoxers rose and squealed and tossed flowers and everybody in the audience stood up and shouted Hoberecht-san."

I asked Zenier, "But if it all happened that way why was the concert a bust?"

"Fraud," Zenier snorted. "The girls didn't faint . . ."

"Nope. They turned around twice like Mutsu had said but then they got scared of the noise and refused to faint."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh, it was a mess. Mutsu was furious and shouted in Japanese, 'Faint! Faint!' On stage Earnie was beside himself with disappointment and made a sign with his hands that the girls were to fall down but instead they put their hands up to their mouths and giggled. The audience was disgusted and I understand some people demanded their money back because not even one girl fainted and Earnie had said there would be more than 50 stretched out on the floor. For us newsmen the affair was a bust. We shoulda stood in bed."

Hoberecht says, "One of the most humiliating moments of my life. Mutsu had trained the girls to perfection but when the big moment came they just wouldn't collapse. Mutsu refused pointblank to pay the girls a single yen. Told them it was a breach of contract if he had ever seen one. But when the girls started to cry he did pay them for the flowers."

Gene Zenier, disgusted as he still is with the mess, does admit, "But when it was all over and Earnie got the thing in better perspective he paid the little girls 40¢ apiece. He said he had demanded too much of them. They squealed and they turned around twice and they threw the flowers. If they failed him on the fainting he would forgive them.

"I've always found Earnie to be like that. Big-hearted."