



*Matsushima*

Photo by Ken Asano

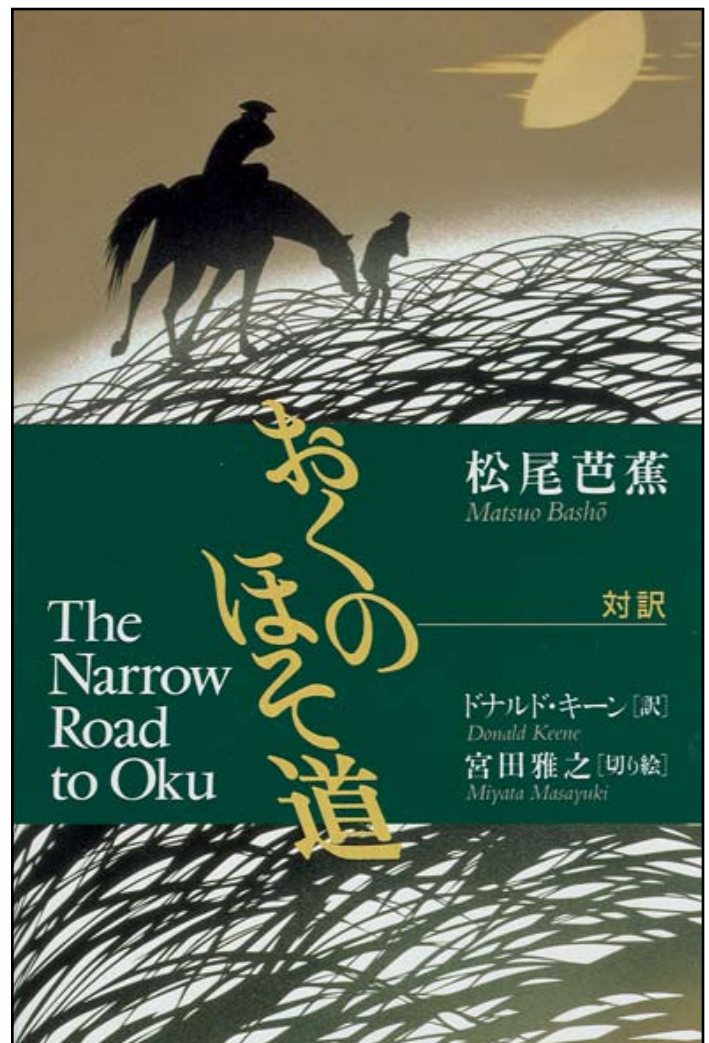
## *Lost in Translation*

by JACKSON SELLERS

THREE days were spent at Matsushima on Japan's northeastern Pacific coast. The huge bay is dotted with 250 pine-topped islets. Japanese have a penchant for making lists, here as elsewhere. Matsushima ranks among the three most beautiful seaside spots in the nation. Famed *haiku* poet Matsuo Bashō wrote in the 17th century:

*Matsushima ya!  
Ō, Matsushima ya!  
Matsushima ya!*

A nice story is told. Matsushima was so strikingly beautiful that the revered poet could only throw up his hands and exclaim the name in three lines of standard 5-7-5-syllable poetry. Today's Japanese recite this *haiku* but they know, most of them, that Bashō never wrote it. They just find it intolerable that he didn't. In *The Narrow Road to Oku*, which I read as I toured the Tohoku region that embraces Matsushima, Bashō tells of his one and only trip to the bay in the late 1680s. Matsushima scenery was "the finest in Japan," he wrote, then added: "What man could capture in a painting or a poem the wonder of this masterpiece of nature? ... I lay down without composing a poem." *Damn*, somebody





must have said as he rushed to compose the Matsushima *haiku* attributed ever since to the great poet, sometimes with a wink, often not. My friend Yutaka Kamayama, now 98 years old, sent me Bashō's book from Tokyo before I even started my Tohoku journey, which took me to four of the region's six prefectures. *The Narrow Road to Oku* is considered classical Japanese literature, prose interspersed with poetry, a bestseller in its time and even today. The "Oku" in the title means "the Deep North" on Japan's main island of Honshu. Or maybe, since the book was written by a poet, "Oku" refers metaphorically to "the Inner Mind." No matter. The book is mandatory reading for virtually all Japanese schoolchildren. A Japanese-American friend, Ken Asano, who was with me in Matsushima, grew up to the west in a small Miyagi Prefecture town. The Odae River ran by his high school. Bashō mentioned, just in passing, an Odae bridge in *The Narrow Road to Oku*, and Ken's teachers made a big deal over it. In general, I don't like translations of prose or poetry. The talent of the translator seldom approaches that of the original writer or poet. For example, a famous Bashō poem goes like this: *An ancient pond, a frog jumps in, the sound of water*. On my Tohoku trip, I toted a companion Bashō volume, a translated biography. In it, Bashō's pond/frog/water *haiku* was cited, and the third line was rendered as *splash!* Splash? Come on. Even I can see that *mizu no oto*, literally "the sound of water," means more, poetically speaking, than a mere splash. Still another book accompanied me, also a translation but not, in any instance, irksome. It was a historical novel about Rokuemon Hasekura, a low-ranking *samurai* from Miyagi's Sendai, who traveled to Mexico and Europe in the early 17th century. My friend Shozo Usami, a Tokyo professor, had suggested that Hasekura might interest me. He did. Hasekura was virtually the first Japanese to make such a trip. His mission was to solicit Spanish trade for Japan. He met Pope Paul V and had his portrait painted in Rome, as shown at upper right. But Hasekura made a politically incorrect mistake on his trip. He allowed himself to be baptized as a Christian. When he got home to Sendai, he was burned at the stake. After I left Tohoku and reached Shibukawa, Yoshi's hometown in the heart of Japan, sister-in-law Misao Hatori coincidentally gave me a set of Matsuo Bashō postal souvenir sheets. That's one of them at middle right. In the bottom photo, Misao shows me some black garden stones that her late husband, a man I was much fond of, obtained from Gunma Prefecture's Onioshidashi, a not-too-distant lava field created by an old Mount Asama eruption.

