

excerpt from “The Weller Dispatches”, the concluding essay by Anthony Weller in “FIRST INTO NAGASAKI: The Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on Post-Atomic Japan and Its Prisoners of War” by George Weller (1907-2002), pub. by Crown [New York, 2006, \$25]

As a subject, the atomic bomb searches out a writer’s weaknesses and has no mercy. My father’s attitude to what he experienced in Nagasaki was complicated, and did not grow less so over the years—*I lost my war in Nagasaki*, he used to say. It is necessary to keep in mind exactly when Weller was writing—what year, what month—to assess whether he was recording faithfully, with a critical eye, what he saw. It is no use reading a reporter’s words from the past and trying to frog-march them into the present. The goal, while remembering what you know that he did not, is also to ask yourself if he knew anything that you do not.

Weller was careful not to let himself be trapped in polemics on whether the atomic bomb was “wrong”. To say that he hoped it would never be used again is an understatement; by 1945 he had seen enough death for one lifetime, and he still had many wars left to run. When I was a boy he always refused to tell me about Nagasaki apart from the adventure of making his way in. Later, he described it as the most horrible human destruction he’d ever witnessed—but he was careful to point out that it had to be evaluated alongside, for example, the fire-bombings of Tokyo and Dresden. And each belonged within its much larger military and political context.

He was frustrated, as we have seen, that the issue of radiation was so deliberately silenced at the time. But he also felt strongly that, because the atomic bomb was so dramatic, it was not clear-mindedly assessed as a military

weapon compared to others, and that its newness inevitably led to a tendency in the public to misremember or ignore the destruction of which our other weapons were capable.

Not only were there no straightforward answers, there were no non-complex questions. In interviews, or casual conversation, he could wind along these paths for hours and you would never be sure where he stood. You would only realize how few of the problem's dimensions you had considered.

When pointing out that Nagasaki should be spoken of in the same terms as those two famously fire-bombed cities, he was not diminishing the nuclear deaths so much as trying to put them in perspective. He usually reminded an interviewer that one single night of the Tokyo incendiary-bomb air raids was more costly than Nagasaki in human lives as well as buildings destroyed. His point was not that people should not critically analyze Nagasaki, but that they had failed to analyze Tokyo. (The effectiveness of those raids—the colossal number of dead Japanese—was poorly understood in the USA at the time of the atomic bombs.)

He was careful, in public and in private, not to take a position on the decision to drop the atomic bomb—to the degree that I'm not sure he ever made up his mind. He felt the reporter's task was not to follow the blind trails of *what-might-have-happened* (referred to by him as “condition contrary to fact”) but to unearth the hidden, important truths of what actually *did* happen. The American instinct to simplify all politics, to look for an unpolitical, emotional right or wrong no matter what, stymied him. He believed profoundly that it was the reporter's duty not to simplify.

He was dismissive of Japanese propaganda putting the atomic bomb in its own separate shrine, turning an apparent plea for world peace and nuclear disarmament into a moral condemnation for the USA using the bomb in

the first place. He felt there were, to be sure, arguments to be made against either bomb—but most did not suffice. If the victims of Nagasaki were civilians, who had placed the arms factories in its heart? Were the majority of dead American servicemen not likewise civilians yanked out of civilian lives to defend themselves in a war not of their own making? Was the USA uniquely reprehensible for using a weapon that Japan would have been morally quite content to use first, had they invented it first?

Because he was so critical of Japanese conduct both during the war and afterward, it has been easy to conclude that he “endorsed the bomb”. But to criticize the Japanese for being eager propagandists with a bad case of amnesia is not an endorsement of the bomb, only a characterization of how they managed to curve the discussion.

He was not looking for a national apology; but he was looking for signs of self-understanding from the Japanese, an acknowledgment of their militaristic role across Asia and in waging war against a longtime ally. He was perpetually annoyed (though never surprised) at the pressure he would get, whenever Japanese journalists came to interview him, to apologize on behalf of the USA for having won the war, said apology to be delivered in the guise of guilt for having used such a terrible weapon, or in the guise of vows never to loose such a barbaric evil on the world again. He spoke with admiration of how astute the Japanese were as propagandists, and with dismay at how ready Americans were to feel sorry, even guilty, for not losing.

That said, he was never reluctant to connect his censorship to the fact that Americans—who as a people were generous both by conviction, and whenever they could think of nothing else to be—would not have forgiven either MacArthur or the U.S. government had they known we were doing nothing to offer people in Nagasaki all medical assistance. The weeks dragged on, and people perished, he felt, who might not have had to.

A key phrase in his thinking crops up in “First Into Nagasaki”, when he states, having seen those dying of radiation in the hospital: “I felt pity, but no remorse. The Japanese military had cured me of that.” Another came up in a 1990 radio interview conducted by the Swedish journalist Bertil Wedin— “the worst crime of any war is to begin it.”

Weller:

MacArthur didn't want anybody to go there because this would lead to a lot of compassionate stories about what had happened to the people. I wanted to get these stories. Most of the deaths had already occurred.

Even though MacArthur tried to stop the story by not having anyone see Nagasaki, I wanted to be completely straightforward toward him once I got there. The war was over for a month; he had no military right at all to stop the story, in my judgment. But I was going to treat him as a gentleman, and have him see the dispatches first. If he were an intelligent officer, now in a peacemaking situation, he would allow them to pass, because they were extremely valuable.

Why were they valuable? The excellent Japanese doctors had examined the cadavers, and found out fascinating things about the effect of the ray on all the organs of the body. That was the scientific preciousness, in my mind, of my whole mission. Everybody in the outside world thought that all the people were fried to death immediately by the bomb, cooked like a piece of meat. That wasn't the case at all. For some it was a slow death.

One of the first places I went was to the hospitals. . . I made the point of being not a conquering visitor but an inquiring visitor. People were still dying. They were sitting in pathetic circles, with families trying to comfort them in their last hours.

I had a strong sense that everything written about this bomb had been wrong. These people were dying with an intact machine of life, and the first thing to do to fight the effects of the bomb was to find a way to pump platelets into them. I didn't know whether one could, and the Japanese doctors didn't know yet whether they could. It was like a leak in a boat, there was no way to stop it.

Wedin:

Was it difficult not to become too emotionally involved?

Weller:

I became involved in every way. I reached instantly the level of compassion that still obtains throughout the world. But I also had a checking machine working on me, so that I could have a different story than simply a compassionate story—so I could analyze the atomic bomb as a new weapon of war that would be used throughout the world unless it was outlawed. People thought it was a super-bomb, that more people had died than ever before at any one time. In fact this was not true. More people had died earlier in the heavy incendiary bombardment of Tokyo itself. Here, as a result of the bomb, Nagasaki's wooden houses caught fire from each other; streets were

blocked; people were trapped in their homes. There was a medical story in these exotic platelets, but most of the dead had burned. It was a Dresden.

Wedin:

It sounds as if you do not feel the atomic bombs were justifiable.

Weller:

This is an immense problem, in which the victims have their right to be heard and the West has to decide what its position is. The Japanese—a very alert people politically, and quick to exploit a moral position—did not hesitate to remind me of this instantly.

The worst crime of any war is to begin it, to start the conflict. That is the problem here. The Japanese, after years of friendship with the USA, sent with great adroitness under the leadership of Admiral Yamamoto a force that completely and successfully deceived us and on a Sunday morning struck at Pearl Harbor. A very successful military operation. But was it successful morally, to strike them on their holy day of worship? America had taken the steps to make an advantageous peace in the Russo-Japanese War; they were the referees, and helped Japan to win that war. Was this, then, an ethical act? It destroyed a friendship that had gone on for many years.

And what to make of all that George Weller saw and heard and wrote down? Beyond any human impulse to take sides, beyond an overwhelming sense of regret, lies—I hope—a healthy outrage that in a free society it can still take sixty years for some of the missing pieces to come together. At least this book adds another sliver to the mosaic of what happened, what was witnessed. For me it is a small triumph that these words, the deaths and lives that were written about, and the deep determination behind them to get at the truth, were not lost forever.

In 1984, for *GEO* magazine, I asked several foreign correspondents to each recount their most important story that was silenced. My father wrote about Nagasaki, and called the piece, which never appeared, *Confessions of a Temporary Colonel*. His final sentences, for me, hold great poignance:

I was once an illicit colonel, assuming that rank when I was actually only a rather troublesome war correspondent. A month after the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both south Japanese cities were still off limits. But their hospitals were full of civilians dying under the inner glow of radiation. What was happening to them? There was a story waiting to be told, and I was determined to get it.

I expected that MacArthur would by now have let doctors and nurses reach Nagasaki. Or were they being detained for one super publicity shot of the general bringing mercy in victory? Yet the Japanese doctors who crowded to shake my hand, and show me their reports, were not resentful. MacArthur was only doing what one of their generals would have done: *punish*.

In the hospitals I met a strange sight. The patients, all doomed, had left their beds and were sitting on their haunches in the matless halls, surrounded by their kneeling relatives. They were pale, tearless, formal, withdrawn, dignified. Death was a matter of days.

These people squatting before me had run around, salvaging, unworried, believing they were safe because they were unburned. Then, carelessly, they scratched a finger on broken glass, or bit off a hangnail. And they bled. And bled.

I thought that perhaps there was still some way that MacArthur could save some of these lives, if he was told what was going on. So, instead of smuggling out my news myself, I began writing the story of the anatomy of radiated man. I wrote it all—besides the sight of blistered Nagasaki—with no false compassion, but with full details of every organ: heart, kidneys, stomach, pancreas, lung, genitals, everything. I mixed it with single stories, the lives of people who now lived in urns.

There was something else MacArthur didn't want known: right in the heart of Nagasaki, where a last black hulk still smoldered in the harbor, a hundred skinny American prisoners, now free, had actually been under the terrible light in the sky. When the bomb-bearing B-29 came over, they leaped in the slit trench surrounding the plant where they worked, and cowered flat. "Deep enough to put us in shadow," they said. "That's all you need." Four failed to lie flat enough, and died. For MacArthur they had a message: "Tell Uncle Doug food drops aren't enough."

In four days I sent 25,000 words by the hands of the obliging *kempeitai*, the secret police, directly to MacArthur. I figured that, since his officer had not followed the *kempeitai* back and arrested me, he would be interested enough—I had won a Pulitzer Prize, the first in his command—to let them pass.

I was wrong. MacArthur could not halt history or science, but he did his best to take the bloom off death by atomic radiation. All my dispatches were suppressed. Every one of my 25,000 words was killed by MacArthur's censorship, which went on afterward, month after month.

I relinquished my colonelcy, and began another enlistment in a war that is still unfinished.

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