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Hiroshima: The Last Witnesses – An Interview with M.G. Sheftall

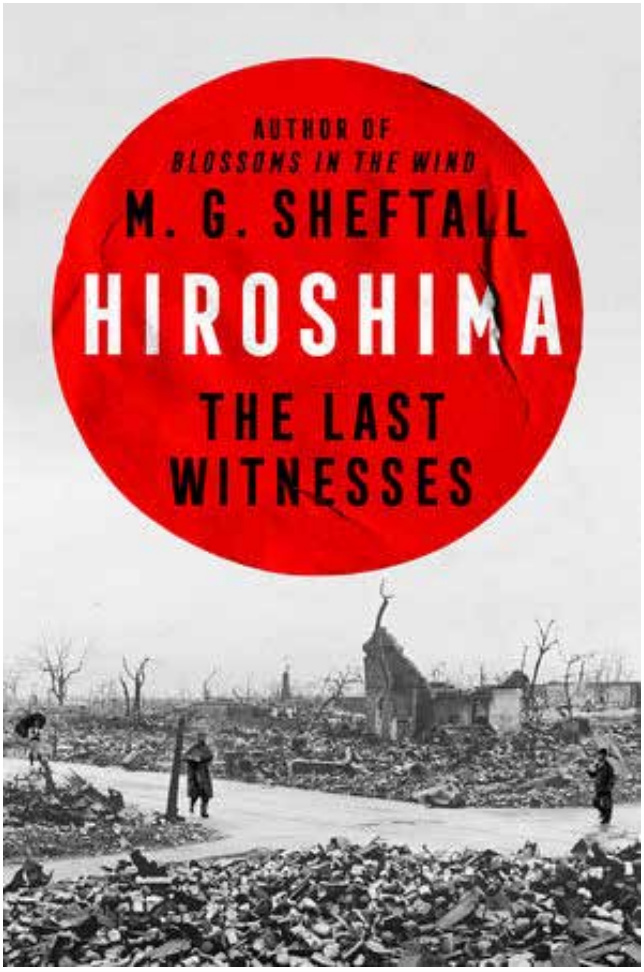
Interview by David McNeill

Abstract: *IM.G. Sheftall's oral history of the dawn of the nuclear age,* Hiroshima: The Last Witnesses*, is published this month. The book is based on interviews Sheftall, a historian and professor at Shizuoka History, conducted over eight years with dozens of hibakusha survivors and others in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Sheftall, who previously wrote an acclaimed oral history of wartime kamikaze pilots, said he was prompted to take on his latest project after an epiphany during U.S. President Barack Obama's historic visit to Hiroshima in 2016. Over 545 pages, the book plunges into the horrors of the bomb, its victims and its occasional ironies, among them that a Japanese scientist, Hideki Yukawa, had indirectly helped the development of the bomb by being the first to mathematically show the existence of strong nuclear forces in the universe.*

Sheftall notes that while Hiroshima was considered a military target, most of its residents were too young or too old to evacuate; the population had fallen from 420,000 in 1942 to 245,000 in 1945, leaving mostly children, caregivers, adults in war work, government employees and 40,000 soldiers. The book makes no pretense at being 'objective' on the subject of nuclear weapons, describing bodies carbonized and blown apart by their impact. "If you are going to defend these weapons' use, it is morally imperative that you own that image," Sheftall says, after dismissing antiseptic alternatives such as 'vaporized.' "Turn it around in your head a bit. Imagine it happening to ten thousand children or even a single child. Imagine it happening to your child."

The following contains edited extracts from an interview with David McNeill.

Keywords*: Hiroshima, Nuclear weapons, Barack Obama, Manhattan Project*



Q: Why did you write the book?

In early May 2016, my wife was reading *The Asahi Shimbun* over breakfast and said Obama was coming to Hiroshima, the first sitting U.S. president to ever visit the city. I had a daydream fantasy of Obama walking past children as white doves flew, and walking to the cenotaph doing a full Willy Brandt, and I thought we would be waking up to a different world

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the next morning. Until my wife scattered that reverie when she said that [then prime minister Shinzo] Abe was going to be there with him, sleepwalking through the whole thing.

Still, I thought it would be a pretty interesting fieldtrip, so I went. I wanted to see what sort of protests there would be, if the vibe would be negative or confrontational. The protesters were mostly old people and I remember saying how moribund the left is—50 years ago, they'd have had kids fighting in the streets! I felt depressed seeing that—I wanted it to be a bit more vigorous. I was also interested in whether Obama was going to use the active or passive voice in describing what the bomb did. I really didn't expect Obama to get such a welcoming, which turned out to be the case.

I was walking around the northern part of the park, near Aioi Bridge (the aiming point for the bomb) and went to the Children's Memorial. I was a bit emotional at that point, as a father. There was a line waiting to ring a bell over the prayer stone. I rang it and I imagined being the parent of a dead kid on the day of the monument unveiling and I just lost it, with a whole line of people behind me. I was frozen in a state of emotional chaos: a visceral, volcanic sob came up. I don't believe in God or ghosts or anything, but I felt like I was tapped on the shoulder by something outside of me: you've been assigned something and you don't really have a choice.

Q: You open the book with a description of Taiwanese and Korean victims and remind the reader that there were 80,000 ethnic Koreans living in Hiroshima Prefecture when the Little Boy was dropped. Why?

I didn't want Americans to think this was something that only happened to Japanese people. The Japanese tend to not like to mention those other people who were victimized by the bomb. Their narrative is more pristine when it is an exclusively Japanese Via Dolorosa. The presence of those colonials muddies up the waters of those clean narratives. In my work on collective memory, I've trained myself to never take the forced narrative or the official narrative at face value. I've learned that there are a lot more interesting stories around the periphery of that narrative.

Each person has only one part of the picture, it's the Rashomon thing—the multiple perspectives. Each one is like a flashlight beam and if you're lucky they pick something out of the dark forest of ignorance that you're stepping into when you begin something like this. And the more people you interview you start to see, for want of a better word, a narrative presenting itself. And that's what I was able to do, but if I'd been writing against a deadline, or had less time, I don't think I could have done it.

Q: It took a toll on you?

All of my career up till then I'd stayed away from the A-bomb because I was afraid to touch it: it was too horrible, too political. But the revelation [I experienced in Hiroshima] gave me the determination to write. I had to learn nuclear physics: where that power comes from, in atoms; all of creation always being in a state of a rubber-band that's about to snap. And the scientists who figured out how to make that rubber band start snapping—releasing energy that we have no business toying with. We were messing with the fundamental power of the universe.

There's a word used often in relation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki—'vaporize,' which is an antiseptic word. But if you look at it as something human flesh experienced in such a painful way, it becomes something very different. The bombings happened and can't be undone. But we can't think of it as something on the table that can be used again. We should think of this as giving penance to those people who were destroyed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by vowing to never use such weapons again.

If I had known what a deep dive it was, I wouldn't have started it. You reach a point where there is so much horror that you almost shut off and you don't

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feel anything anymore. The horror I started feeling evolved into a long-term depression that I experienced over the last eight years. And everyone I know says it has changed me and I don't know if I'll ever go back to the real me again.

Q: Could the U.S. have ended the war without incinerating Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

I often hear the question "would" it have ended, but you used the right word: "could." The question involves the political goings-on inside the Imperial Palace. The bombs didn't *force* the Japanese to surrender, they gave Hirohito the *opportunity* to surrender. They gave him the excuse. I always think of Admiral (Mitsumasa) Yonai, minister of the navy at the time, who had wanted a negotiated surrender since Saipan at least. News of the Nagasaki bomb came as they were having a meeting of the imperial war council about what to do about the Soviets coming into the war. It should be known that there was never any special imperial war council meeting after the Hiroshima bomb. That wasn't considered weighty enough to make everyone drop what they were doing and head to the Imperial Palace. Then Nagasaki happened and someone heard Yonai say, "This is a gift from the heavens."

What he meant by that is that this is the face-saving out for the emperor. He couldn't get in front of his people, who had been suffering and sacrificing themselves for eight years, and he certainly couldn't get in front of six million men in uniform, and say 'well, now that the Soviets have come in, I think we'd better surrender.' But when the bombs became known, Japan was able to make the monstrous implement of the sneaky enemy the reason to end the war, and the narrative they crafted was that Japan has to make that sacrifice to save humanity. So, I don't think the bombs worked in the way General [Curtis) LeMay expected—'bang them hard enough and they'll give up.' But the desired result was accomplished through different means, in which the bombs played a part. If they hadn't been budged by what happened to Tokyo in March 1945, it didn't become a problem that was going to be solved by killing more Japanese people, unless you're talking about genocide and extermination.

The Americans had contingency plans if the Japanese didn't surrender. They assumed after Hiroshima that the Japanese leadership would be in shock, but as I said, they didn't even call the imperial war council. So, the Pentagon and LeMay said, well, if the second bomb doesn't do the trick, let's hold onto the next one; the third bomb would have been ready by the third or fourth week of August. They had used up all the feasible uranium they had on Hiroshima (the Little Boy's nuclear core contained 64 kgs of U-235) but the plutonium works in Washington state were going full speed by then. [Leslie] Groves [director of the Manhattan Project) told the Pentagon that we'll have a dozen fat man bombs by November, the start of Operation Olympic, the invasion of Kyushu. They were going to use them to prep the beachhead and send the Marines in an hour after they were dropped. That's how little they knew about what radiation does to human bodies.

Q: Do you think opinion on the bomb has shifted in the U.S. since the bombs were dropped to the point where it would be impossible to use the bombs again?

Oh, absolutely opinion has shifted. Could it be used again as a first-strike option? No, unless a madman gets in, as he could. Then all bets are off. A sane and rational U.S. president who is genuinely representing the wishes of the American people would never order a first strike on anything except a planet-killing asteroid. I think there should be a small stockpile of H-bombs kept under the bailiwick of the United Nations for that specific scenario. Everyone else should give them up. They can never be used as a solution to human problems ever again. The nightmare scenario now, where we have nuclear-armed adversaries, is that the side that is starting to lose busts one out in desperation. Or there's an accident.

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Q: But Obama, for all his rhetoric, will go down as the man who modernized the U.S. nuclear arsenal and who, despite his Nobel peace prize, did nothing to advance nuclear disarmament.

Right, all he did was give that speech in Hiroshima. It's hard to do unilaterally because no one wants to go down in history, assuming there's someone left to write the history, as the guy who let us get caught with our pants down in a nuclear situation. We're into fantasy fiction now, but there would have to be a big summit, everyone would have to make a public statement that 'we swear we're going to dismantle them all.' Who is going to make that happen? I'm pretty pessimistic about this stuff. I don't think there will be a nuclear war, but I'm not optimistic about real disarmament, not in our lifetime, unless there is some kind of horrible accident and we all have to learn the lessons again. If that were to happen, the sacrifices of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be rendered meaningless.

Q: In your final chapter, one of your interviewees, Sayoko Tado, says she viewed the war and its climax as akin to a natural disaster rather than the product of human agency. Is there a danger that because of how the war is taught (or not taught) that children today also see the war in that way?

That's the danger of using the passive voice: 'the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima,' instead of the U.S. dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, and I was disappointed to see Obama fall back on that rhetorical out. It shouldn't be seen as a natural disaster, because natural disasters can't be prevented. People should know that these weapons exist and as long as they do, someone will be tempted to use them again. I have a feeling that Trump, Putin, or even Obama never really imagined what these weapons would do to someone on the receiving end. I wrote the book as deliberately and horrifically as possible so people would be traumatized by it. Because when you dive that deep into the abyss and come face to face with this monster, it just becomes unthinkable to ever use these things again.

Q: U.S., Russia, UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea. The nuclear club is growing. We've had Abe and other Japanese politicians say Japan should overcome its taboo of hosting nuclear weapons. There were even reports that Abe lobbied Obama in Hiroshima not to abandon its first use policy of nuclear weapons. How do you feel when you hear stuff like this?

I feel that it's high time for them to get to Hiroshima and spend a couple of hours there, read some hibakusha books. It's all too easy to see the dominoes fall and Japan getting nukes someday. If my book has made even a tiny contribution toward making that not happen, it will be worth the eight years of nightmares and lost sleep.

About the Interviewer

David McNeill *is a professor at the Department of English Language, Communication and Cultures at Sacred Heart University in Tokyo. He was previously a correspondent for* The Independent *and* The Economist *newspapers and for* The Chronicle of Higher Education. *He is co-author of the book* Strong in the Rain *(with Lucy Birmingham) about the 2011 Tohoku disaster. He is an* Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus *editor. Follow David on Twitter @DavidMcneill3. E-mail: davidamcneill@gmail.com.*

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