



John's copy of Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Photo courtesy of the author.



RETRACING THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH

John McBride

My exploration of the old highways of Japan began in 1978 when I walked from Tokyo to Kyoto.

In 1981 I retraced the steps of a poet and his companion who walked the lonely roads of north-eastern Japan over 300 years ago. I was an undergraduate foreign student studying Japanese classics at a national university in Tokyo. The object that embodies my connection with Japan is a copy of Matsuo Basho's book about his own journey, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

My exploration of the old highways of Japan began in 1978 when I walked from Tokyo to Kyoto. My documentation of this journey was seen by Professor Kawarazaki Mikio and he took me aside and for the next few years we read Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The copy of Basho's book I used to study is full of pencil scribbles I made while Kawarazaki attempted to bash some understanding into me.

Meanwhile, I walked from Kyoto back to Tokyo on the Nakasendo, then on the Kumano Kodo Pilgrimage. In 1980 I walked the Eighty-eight Temples Pilgrimage of Shikoku, reliant on alms alone. I still keep in touch with a number of priests who helped me at that time.

Finally, in 1981, I was ready to embark on my journey in Basho's footsteps. I travelled north through the Shirakawa Barrier into the *oku* [interior] of Japan, enjoying Matsushima, Hiraizumi and finally entering Dewa, or Yamagata. Basho stayed here on Mount Haguro for nine days. He undertook ascetic practices, climbing the three sacred peaks of Dewa: Haguro, Gassan and Yudono.



Last year, after years of ascetic practice I was awarded a *Sendatsu* license—the first time a foreigner has received one. My *Yamabushi* name is Josen, meaning a mountain hermit who purifies.

Today Haguro is an active centre of *Yamabushi* training. *Yamabushi* are laymen from villages who are chosen to undertake strict ascetic practices in the mountains. They understand and harness the supernatural protective and healing powers of the mountains.

At Dewa the *Yamabushi* enter the mountains on 25 August each year for their training. The week begins with a ritual death and cleansing as they cross the ablution river at the bottom of Mount Haguro. Ascending the mountain they spend nine days restricting the amount of food, sleep, water and fresh air they consume. At the end of the practice they are reborn and return to their villages. Two are chosen to undertake a further 100 days of ascetic practice which is broken on New Year's Day.

In my desire to understand Basho's poetry I too started these ascetic practices. Each year I attend in late August. I do not eat for the week, I do not use water or sleep while we pray all night and climb difficult peaks and cliffs during the day. Twice each night we are locked in a room where burning chilli powder suffocates us for up to twenty minutes at a time. At the end of the practice I appreciate good food, a good night's sleep, clean water and fresh air.

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John outside a temple in Haguro, Japan. Photo courtesy of the author.





John participating in Yamabushi training in Haguro, Japan. Photo courtesy of the author.



in this one slip of paper, and I feel a little closer to Basho’s emotions on Mount Haguro. While on Haguro, Basho wrote:

*So holy a place—
the snow itself is scented
at Southern Valley*¹

My journey in Basho’s footsteps saw me travel down the coast of the Sea of Japan to Kanazawa and then on to Tsuruga. In Tsuruga I happened by an exhibition of one of three walking poles Basho used. All three still exist. The museum made a limited number of exact

copies of Basho’s original book and I now own one of them. It is a copy of the handwritten book known as the ‘Nishimura version’.

The Nishimura version was transcribed by Kashiwaki Soryu under direct instruction from Basho in the early summer of 1694. I discovered the original copy resided in a *soba* noodle shop on a lonely mountain pass in the hinterland of Tsuruga. I wondered how on earth Japan’s most important piece of literature came to reside in such a place.

Nishimura Hisao is the owner of this national treasure. He is the sixteenth generation of his family and works hard as the *soba* noodle chef at his restaurant on a lonely mountain road, the Mingei Chaya Magobei. Occasionally he agrees to bring the book out. He always dons a suit when he does so and becomes very serious. He first shows the national treasure certificate, then he describes how the book came to be in the attic of the Nishimura family home, where it was discovered by a researcher in 1934. In 1943 it was proven to be the original copy. My copy is based on a woodblock print of this book.

In 2011 after the triple disaster in Tohoku I approached Walk Japan to see if they would be interested in me designing a Basho walking tour to assist in the recovery of the Tohoku tourism industry. They agreed and today we take about 300 customers a year on this walking tour, on their own journeys into Japan.

1 Basho, Matsuo. *The Narrow Road to Oku*.
Translated by Donald Keene. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1996.



John McBride AM completed his undergraduate degree at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and graduate degrees at The Australian National University and University of Melbourne. He began his career at the Australia–Japan Research Centre, The Australian National University, before joining Ansett Australia to help establish flights into Osaka, Japan. Later he was Chief Executive of News Corporation Japan and helped build Sky PerfectTV! Returning to live in Sydney in 2003, McBride has continued his interest in matching texts about ancient, natural, and contemporary history with his walking, both in Australia and Japan. McBride was made a Member of the Order of Australia for his support of Australia–Japan cultural and business links, and for supporting young artists and arts institutions.