Matsuo Basho

Definition: Basho from Collins English Dictionary

1 full name Matsuo Basho, originally Matsuo Munefusa. 1644–94, Japanese poet and travel writer, noted esp for his haiku

Summary Article: Bashō 1644-1694
from Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms

Bashō lived in 17th-century Japan at time when the Tokugawa shoguns had instituted a policy of national isolationism. Rather than inhibiting cultural growth, this isolationism provided Japan with perhaps its greatest phase of cultural advancement, which included an increase in both literacy and the availability of printed books. Bashō was not only soon recognized as responsible for transforming the haiku from a light pastime to serious art form, he was one of the first professional Japanese poets to benefit from a large reading public. This made him something of a celebrity in his own lifetime.

After being born the son of a minor samurai, Bashō entered an apprenticeship as a cadet for a local shogun. He developed a friendship with the shogun's son, and they both devoted themselves to studying popular poetry under Kitamura Kirgin. When his friend died in 1666, Bashō was bereft of the political connections necessary for his advancement in the samurai. For that reason Bashō left for Edo (Tokyo), where he established himself as a professional poet. In less than ten years he was famous as a writer of renku or haikai no renga linked verses, a common form of poetry at the time that began with a haiku. His pen name (Bashō = banana) derives from a banana tree planted by his students in front of his hut, which he wrote about:

Banana tree in autumn winds, a night passed hearing raindrops in a basin.

In his travel memoirs, Bashō described nature in both poetry and prose. Thus, his variation on the tradition of linked poetry was to link his haiku with prose description and narration. In 1689, Bashō began a 15,000-mile journey that resulted in the last of his five travel memoirs, Oku no hosomichi (The Narrow Road to the Deep North), perhaps his most famous work. At the beginning he wrote in prose: “Transitory though I know this world to be, I shed tears when I came to parting of the ways, overwhelmed by the prospect of a long journey ahead.” This he followed immediately with the haiku:

Departing springtime: birds lament and fishes too have tears in their eyes.

When he visited the Buddhist shrine, Komoyji, Bashō wrote in prose: “We visited it by invitation and worshipped at the Ascetic's Hall.” Then he followed with the haiku:

Toward summer mountains we set off after prayers before the master's clogs.

Of travelling through rice fields, Bashō wrote in prose: “Thus we went on into Kaga Province.” He followed with the haiku:

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Scent of ripening ears: to the right as I push through, surf crashing onto rocks.

In this fashion, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* moves between its poetry and prose.

As a writer of nature poems, Bashō found in travelling through the natural world the proper inspiration for such poetry. For Bashō, life was a Buddhist spiritual quest, which, for the professional poet like himself, required movement through space either for spiritual enlightenment or for the spread of doctrine as a necessary religious exercise. Through journeying and writing about those journeys, Bashō practised his faith of Buddhism while simultaneously writing his life story. For Bashō in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, the spiritual quest of the Buddhist, the professional quest of the poet, and the physical movement of the traveller represented the perfect melding of vocation, avocation, and spiritual association. Thus, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* was not only the recounting of the physical route through Japan; it was also the spiritual path of the soul.

While the prose and the poetry in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* demonstrates the eight-fold path of Buddhism, Bashō devoted himself more to nature generally than he does to Buddhism specifically in his life writing. Nearly three centuries after Bashō died, by which time he had become deified by the Shinto Buddhists, the diary of his travelling companion Soro was published. Soro’s writing presented a much more human and less saintly portrait of the great Bashō than Bashō did of himself in his most famous travel journal.

**Biography**

Born Matsuo Munefusa in or near Ueno, in Iga Province, Japan, 1644. His father was a low-ranking samurai (member of the military class). Entered the service of a local samurai of higher rank. Became an attendant to his son, Yoshitada, and studied poetry with him. Led an unsettled life after Yoshitada’s death in 1666, roaming the Kyoto area. Moved to Edo (now Tokyo), 1671. Eventually established himself as a teacher of poetry and began to study Zen Buddhism. Withdrew to a recluse’s hut near Edo, 1680. Took his literary name from a banana (*Bashō*) tree growing there, which he admired for its lack of practical utility - in Japan it produces no fruit and its leaves give no shade.

Published an anthology of verse with his disciples, *Miradhigun* [Empty Chestnuts], 1683. Travelled around Japan, 1684-85. 1687, 1688, and 1689, and described his travels in verse and prose in journals and diaries. Collections of his works appeared from 1684, notably the famous *Oku no bosomichi* (1702; *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*). Died early autumn 1694.

**Selected Writings**

- Bashō Oku no hosomichi, 1702; as The Narrow Road to the Deep North, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa with Other Travel Sketches, 1966; also translated by Earl Miner in Japanese Poetic Diaries, 1969; translated by Dorothy Britton as The Narrow Road to the Deep North, 1974, and A Haiku Journey: Basho’s Narrow Road to a Far Province, 1980; as Narrow Road to the Interior, translated by Sam Hamill, 1991; as The Narrow Road to Oku, translated by Donald Keene, 1996; as Basho’s Narrow Road: Spring and Autumn Passages, translated by Hiroaki Sato, 1996; selections translated by Keene in Anthology of Japanese Literature, 1955; selections as Back Roads to Far Towns, translated by Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu, 1968.
- Bashō Bashō shokanshu (correspondence), edited by Shinpu Katsumine, 1934 “Basho’s Journey to

- Bashō Zenshū (complete works), edited by Komiya Toyotaka, 10 vols, 1959-69.
- Bashō The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa, 1966.
- Bashō Matsuo Bashō shu (diaries), edited by Noichi Imoto et al., 2 vols, 1995-97.

**Further Reading**


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