



Book Review

Haiku History: The American Saga Three Lines at a Time. By H.W. BRANDS. Austin: University of Texas Press. 2020. Pp. xiv + 134. \$21.95 (Hardback). ISBN 13: 978-1-4773-2032-7.

Despite the oft-invoked Shakespearean verse “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene ii), names seldom take center stage in poetry. So rare are they that in order to find a collection of poems reviewed in *Names*, readers need to go all the way back to 2014, when Daniel Friend provided an animated discussion of *Good Poems, American Places*, edited by Garrison Keillor. Fortunately, however, with the publication of *Haiku History: The American Saga Three Lines at a Time*, H. W. Brands offers a fresh opportunity to consider names in poetry.

Brands provides *Names* a chance not only to review poetry but also to hear from a best-selling author, familiar to popular as well as academic audiences. Henry William Brands Jr. has written over 30 books on US history, including two Pulitzer Prize finalists, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (2000) and *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (2008). In demand as a teacher and keynoter, he has recorded 60 videos in the C-SPAN Video Library, and his articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic*, and more. His most recent study, *The Last Campaign: Sherman, Geronimo and the War for America*, was published in 2022.

With an undergraduate degree in history from Stanford University and two Master’s, from Reed College and Portland State University (the latter in mathematics), he earned his Ph.D. in history at the University of Texas at Austin, where he now holds the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in History. Highly regarded in his field, he is a member of the Society of American Historians, which elects scholars recognized for “excellence in historical work marked, among other qualities, by clarity, empathy, narrative power, accuracy, and explanatory force” (Society of American Historians 2023).

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Brands reveals the genesis of *Haiku History* in its 8-page preface, where he reports that the book sprang from his fascination with the 140-character limit set by Twitter and an offhand remark in class, which prompted a student to ask if he had ever written history as haiku. With that, Brands took up his own challenge and set out to tweet a haiku every day or two to sketch the arc of US history from pre-colonization to the present. Several years into the project, his poems numbering over a thousand, he culled 334 to assemble the book.

Following the preface, *Haiku History* is divided into 8 chapters, from “Origins”, which deals with the earliest known humans on the North American continent, to “Vexed Victory”, which covers the 1970s through the election of 2016. In italics below each poem is something akin to a title, recording the topic and time period. Brands clearly hopes his readers will be as taken with his approach as they are with his content, where names can occur in the poems themselves and/or their titles. On just the first page, he includes a toponym (Asia), an ethnonym (Norsemen), and an anthroponym (Columbus). He begins:

Walking from Asia
A hunter, a tribe, a clan
Into a new world.
• *First arrivals, c. 15,000 BC* (3).

Names stipple Brands’s pages, suggesting the near impossibility of writing history without naming names. This history-in-haiku incorporates not just names of national figures—Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, John Brown, William Howard Taft, Richard Nixon, and more—but a cascade of places where US history was made, from Salem to Vicksburg, from the Panama Canal to Pearl Harbor. Names of events and historical periods appear in greater measure in *Haiku History* than they might in other onomastic studies. Poems recount the Great Awakening, the Constitutional Convention, the Raid on Harpers Ferry, Reconstruction, and the Panic of 1873, among dozens of examples. Wars abound: the War of 1812, the Civil War, both World Wars, the Vietnam War, and invasions of Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Peace too erupts:

A League of Nations
World government by the good
To awe wrongdoers.
• *Wilson and the Treaty of Versailles, 1919* (82)

Yet it remains true that whole eras can be summoned without a single proper noun:

Torn from their homeland
Transported in misery
To toil in chains.
• *Slave trade, 17th–19th centuries* (5)

Brands admits in his preface that he worked without an outline and freely expanded or contracted historical periods, as is evident across the selections. A sequence on the economic and political impact of J. P. Morgan stretches to 9 haiku, 11 if one includes McKinley’s defeat of William Jennings Bryan, who had opposed Morgan (65–68). Even longer is the sequence of haiku dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, whom Brands initializes as TR, with 14 haiku, 3 of which refer back to the seemingly ubiquitous J. P. Morgan (73–77).

In structure, Brands is meticulous in keeping to the well-known pattern of 5-7-5 syllables for a three-line haiku, no easy feat when multi-syllabic names are involved, and he omits most internal punctuation. He recognizes some incongruity in his choice of form; he notes that the Japanese haiku, which focuses on a stationary image, is “deliberately static”, whereas history is “full of action” (xi). And unlike traditional haiku that are marked by the seasons, history runs on its own chronology. However, like the best of the Japanese haiku writers, he presents images that call audiences to a contemplative pause, catching them by surprise to summon an emotive response:

A cold churning sea
A windswept peninsula
This is a refuge?
• *Plymouth, 1620* (5)

Lincoln, gratified
Relaxes for the first time
In four wearing years.
• *Ford’s Theater, April 1865* (49)

Even so, readers familiar with the Japanese form may question Brands's application of haiku to US history and its many names. The Haiku Society of America acknowledges that few writers of English haiku keep strictly to 17 syllables but still holds image and season at the center of its definition of the form as "a short poem that uses imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience of nature or the season intuitively linked to the human condition" (The Haiku Society of America 2023). However, Hiroaki Sato, a former president of the society, would seem to offer implicit approval of Brands' adaptive appropriation by observing that "[h]aiku has completely become a part of American life" (3). The form's immediacy and brevity make it appealing to English-speaking audiences of all ages. A scan for "haiku" in titles among library databases produces such ingenious varieties as *A History of Western Philosophy in 100 Haiku* (Vlavianos 2015); *Elemental Haiku: Poems to Honor the Periodic Table Three Lines at a Time* (Lee 2019); and *Coronavirus Haiku* (Nowak 2021). For children, there are *I Haiku You* (Snyder 2012) for Valentine's Day and *Boo! Haiku* (Caswell 2016) for Halloween. Meanwhile, the Haiku Foundation, which claims the largest online archive of haiku in English, with over 4,700 haiku-related pieces, offers a digital encyclopedia of the form, called *Haikupedia* (The Haiku Foundation).

In Sato's observation, "English writers are more venturesome, more willing to experiment than their Japanese counterparts" (17). He notes that the famed haiku composer Bashō was himself an innovator who adapted Japan's formal poetic language to haiku composed during games and competitions, poems about frogs, fish salad, and soup instead of elegant courtly topics. Haiku's concrete images draw the reader into the composition, Stephen Addiss argues in *The Art of Haiku*, explaining that "haiku suggest rather than define their meanings" (3), thus prompting an interactive experience that is central to art, whether visual or verbal.

As if appreciating Addiss's perspective, the University of Texas Press has taken care in presenting Brands's work. Lightweight for a hardback, the book measures 4½ by 7 inches (11.4 by 17.8 cm), its size and shape fitting readily into a reader's hand. The artwork of Lauren Nassef enriches the text with gray and black watercolors, evoking the monochrome subtlety of Japanese ink wash painting. One of her images appears on the obverse of each chapter's title page, where it sets the tone for the ensuing historical period. With just three haiku per page, ample open space invites readers to "read in small doses" (xiv), as Brands advises. His suggestion follows Addiss's reflection that haiku are enhanced by empty spaces and ellipses, forms of incompleteness that "allow meanings to emerge rather than being insisted upon" (3).

Haiku History would unapologetically divert *Names* readers, at least momentarily, from the academic studies often reviewed in these pages. In Brands' history, names become part of an aesthetic experience, their appearance something to be sought out and savored. Those who take up his compilation will find that naming persons, places, events, and historical periods can surprise and delight as well as educate and inform.

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