

BLUE HEAVEN

The Pacific as Paradise

Michener: Man of the Pacific Man of Asia

by Horace Sutton

IT IS A popular assumption, not altogether without foundation, that James Michener is a man of the Pacific, in the fashion of Stevenson who lies buried on a hillock in Samoa, of Maugham who immortalized Pago Pago, and of Melville, from whose Pacific adventures blossomed *Typee* and *Omoo*. The circumstances that put Michener in the Pacific in the first place, and the success of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Tales of the South Pacific* that came out of that wartime experience—followed in course, by the musical made from it, which won its own Pulitzer, as well as the movie—established all that. It also sent him back there in pursuit of the magazine pieces that appeared mostly in the old and handsome *Holiday* and in a book, *Return to Paradise*. Then followed the opus, *Hawaii*, a saga so grand it took 189 minutes on the screen plus a film sequel to tell the full story.

Despite his Pacific identifications, Michener holds the conviction that he is much more a man of Asia. His affiliation with this vast continent began with his love story of postwar Japan, *Sayonara*, and *The Bridges at Toko-ri*, an adventure novel of the flyers who worked from carriers during the Korean War.

In *Sayonara* Michener plays a chord over and over, sounding the beauty of Japanese women and the sensitive love they express toward their men. That quality compares harshly with the scrubbed, sleek handsomeness of American women

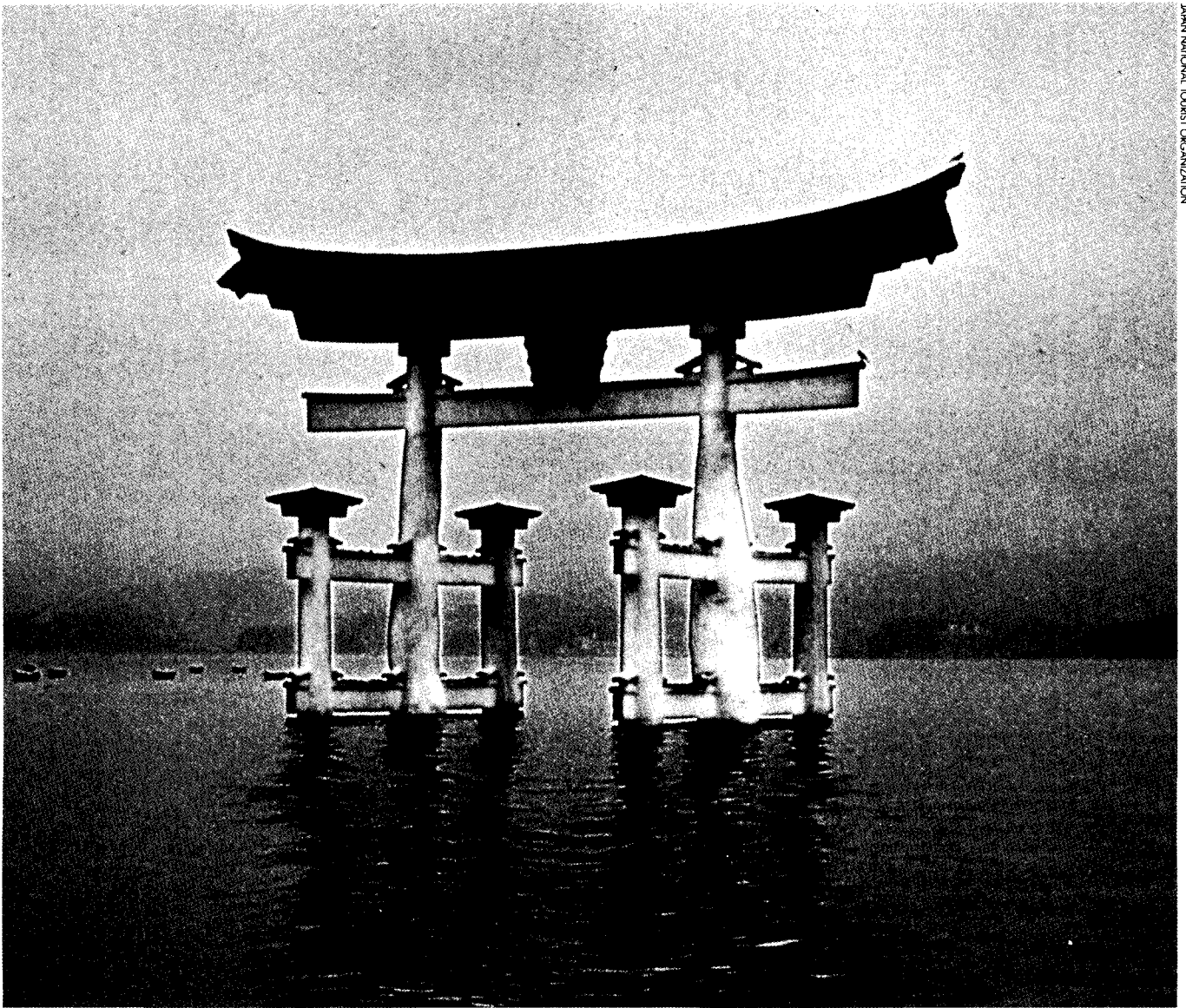
and their insensitivities, at that time, toward their sisters of the conquered nation. In the story the American major, engaged to the beautiful daughter of the general, falls in love with a star of the Japanese theater. The book ends with the major saying "*Sayonara*"—goodbye—to his Japanese love and returning to America. To get Marlon Brando to play the part it was necessary to change the ending. Brando, as Major Gruver, doesn't say sayonara. He stays with his Japanese love. "It was beautiful," says Michener, a Quaker of unknown parentage who is married to Mari Yoriko Sabusawa, a second generation Japanese-American.

But *Sayonara*, like most of his Asian books, is not without its vibrant, expressive landscapes:

Our entrance to Kyoto was memorable, for we saw in the distance the soaring towers of great Buddhist temples, their tiers built with the corners upswept in the Chinese style. And along one street we caught a glimpse of the famed Heian Shinto shrine, a glorious vermilion thing with enormous blood-red torii guarding it.

In *Toko-ri* there is time, amid the terror of war, to view the Korean landscape with a poetry of its own:

To the north sprawling reservoirs glistened like great brooches, holding the hills together. To the south snow hung upon the ridge lines and made the valleys shimmering wonderlands of beauty, while beyond the upcoming range of mountains lay the vast blue sea....



Nearly 30 years ago, armed with assignments from *Life* and the New York *Herald Tribune*, he journeyed through a dozen Far Eastern countries from Japan to India talking to the citizenry, a journey that became a book, *The Voice of Asia*. Taking quarters at the old Raffles in Singapore, he spent his evenings talking with visitors, later writing:

I have now forgotten the names of these casual visitors, but the glow of those lovely evenings, with the Raffles waiters bringing excellent food, the string orchestra playing in the distance, the hot night all about you, and the urgent talk is with me yet and colors any thoughts I may have about Asia.

"Guys like me," he says now, "used to keep a complete wardrobe and a typewriter in each place. I would travel to Asia two and three times a year. I guess I have flown into Singapore 50 times, been to Burma 20 times. Once I spent three weeks traveling with the foreign minister of Pakistan."

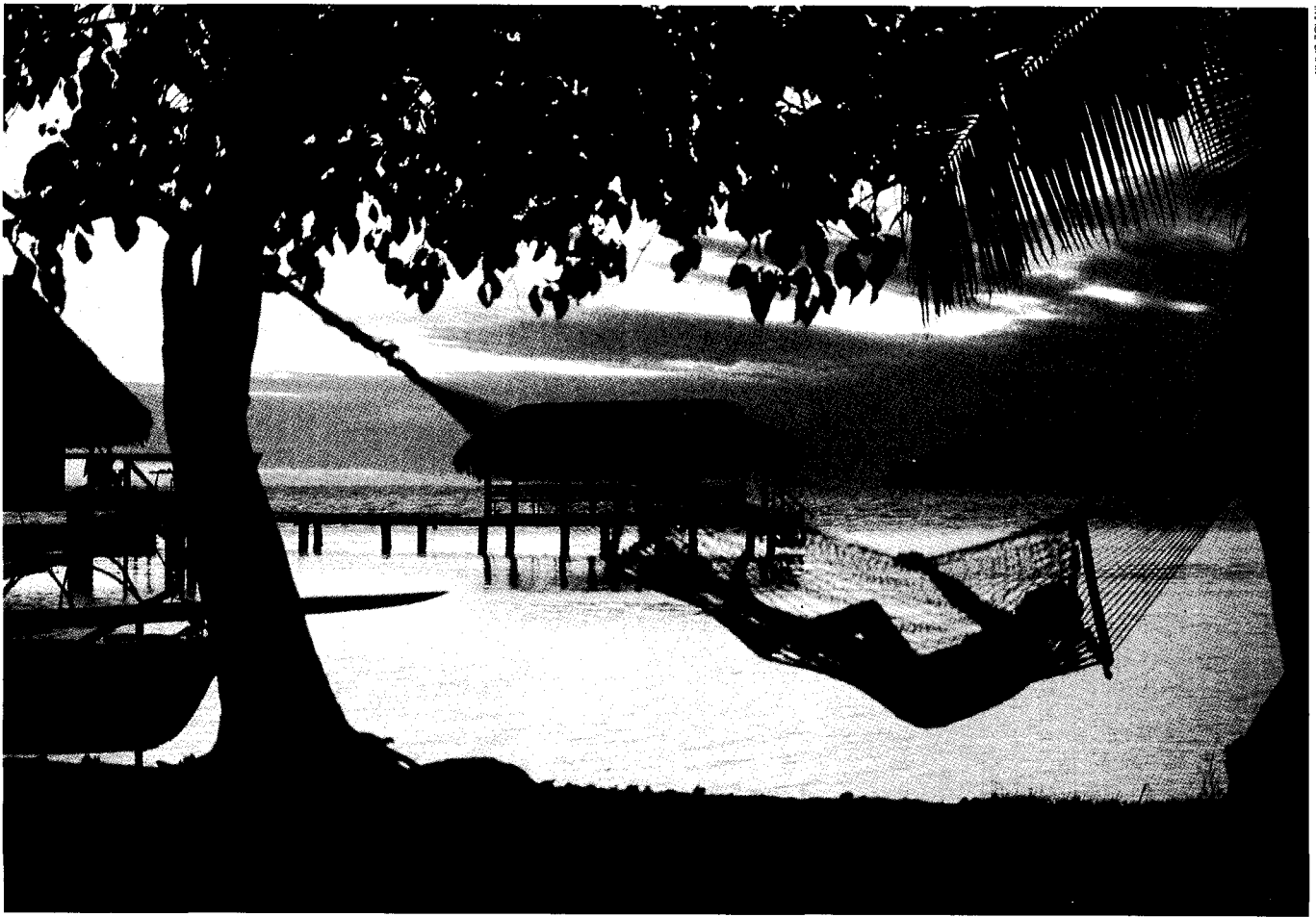
Caravans, which came out in 1963, was a consequence of those travels. Although it is about Afghanistan, Michener, reflecting on it today, says, "I could have done it on any of those Asian countries I was visiting, particularly Indonesia or Pakistan."

"The story cannot be said to dominate this novel," *News-week* wrote of it at the time. "What dominates it—indeed, frequently shoulders the action right off stage—is information, facts, explanation." In the light of today's events, it is

almost prescient. After a chilling description of an execution of a woman by stoning incited by *mullahs*, Michener has an Afghan character say:

Public executions supervised by mullahs were common in places like Samarkand. But the Communists from Moscow and Kiev said they had to stop. The chaderi was outlawed. Women were freed.... We have ten years to halt these terrible things. If we don't... Russia's going to come down and stop them for us.

Besides the books that come flowing in a seemingly endless stream, Michener, with Mari, has formed two major art collections. "We have collected on a high level and have some good art," he says. Their American paintings are going to the University of Texas. Additionally, they own 6,000 Oriental prints—many Hokusai works included—one of the world's great collections. No dilettante acquirer, he has published five books on Japanese art in Japan that were translated into German, French, and Japanese. The Japanese collection is being given to Honolulu's handsome Academy of Art where it will provide an immense addition to that museum's artistic assemblage of Pacific and Asian works. With 26 books on the shelves; a public television series on lands that include Hawaii and the South Pacific; with the great art of Asia that he collected with Mari hanging on public view in Hawaii, his onetime homeland, it will be a long time—if ever—before the world can say sayonara to James Michener.



The sun beds down on Bora-Bora—"This is the greatest coral island against which all others must be judged."

Memoirs of a Pacific Traveler

by James A. Michener

ONE OF THE finest things that can happen to any young man is to find himself in the South Pacific on some tropical island where the values of life are radically different from his own, and where nature is so omnipresent he simply must pay attention to it.

My good friend Lew Hirshorn of Long Island stopped off in Tahiti one day in the 1920s intending to stay six days. He stayed the rest of his life. Another friend, Nick Rutgers, scion of the family after whom the university is named and heir to a pharmaceutical fortune, drifted into Tahiti one day in the 1950s, met the beautiful daughter of James Norman Hall, and so far hasn't been able to drag himself away. I know of some 40 others with similar records, and all say that coming to the islands was the best thing they ever did.

During World War II I had the good luck to serve on 49 of these islands, all the way from Iwo Jima in the northwest to Pitcairn Island in the southeast, and how I had the will power to break away

from lands that I positively cherished I will never be able to explain. On the islands I met scores of interesting people. I heard endless great stories. And I came to know certain islands so beautiful that I gasp when I recall them. For the benefit of travelers who might want to try their luck in the remaining years of this century, I'd like to list a few high spots.

The most beautiful island. Incomparably, it must be Bora-Bora. I said this almost 40 years ago and have often been challenged, but in seven revisits I have found the island even better than I remembered. In shape, location, design, and impact this is the great coral island against which all others must be judged, and one of the perfect sights in the world. Moorea has better mountains, Tahiti more interesting people, Raiatea a more profound sense of history, but Bora-Bora is the nonpareil.

The most beautiful road. From the old military airport in British Samoa,

now legally Western Samoa, to Apia the road runs along the northern shore of Upolu Island, and as one rides he sees the lagoon, the bending palms, the wonderfully constructed grass huts, the tall and beautiful people of Samoa. At one spell of my life I rode this route twice a day and never tired of its charm. It seems to me now the finest road I have ever traveled, and whenever tied down in cities and driven to think of the best traveling I've done, I summon up remembrance of that Apia road.

The most stirring sight. Not many voyagers reach Milford Sound, on the southwest coast of New Zealand's South Island, but the difficult trip there is worth all the effort, for this is one of the world's fine fjords, made more acceptable by the fact that it is so relatively accessible from the tropics. There is a hiking trip into the head of the fjord and exciting vistas as the waterway opens up to the Pacific. I find this combination of peak-and-ocean so enchanting that I've