



John Newman (1925-1993): Judoka, Broadcaster and Academic

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IAN RUXTON (WITH INPUT FROM OTHERS)



INTRODUCTION

JOHN EDWARD BRIAN Newman was born in Kingsbury in the London suburb of Brenton on 13 December 1935. He attended a primary school, St. Andrews Junior School run by the Church of England from 1941 to 1945, and Dudden Hill Secondary County School in West London (North Willesden) from 1946 to 1952 where he became school captain. During his national service in the Royal Marines in Malta, Italy and Turkey from 1953 to 1956 he served in the elite Special Boat Squadron (SBS). From 1956 to 1958 he was a trainee in the printing house of E.S. & A. Robinson in London. From 1958 to 1962 (i.e. in his mid-twenties) he was an External Lecturer in English and a Japanese language student at Tenri University, the centre of *jūdō*, in Nara prefecture, Japan.

During this time he obtained a Diploma in Japanese Studies from Tenri University (1961) and in 1964 a London University GCE A-level in Japanese after a two-year period studying Japanese at

SOAS (1962–64). On his curriculum vitae submitted later to Nihon University medical school he wrote: ‘In 1964 I received an attractive offer from the BBC to join their newly-expanding Japanese Service. This offered a good prospect of ultimately succeeding Mr Trevor Leggett as Head of the Service. I interrupted my studies and accepted it.’

From 1967 to 1969 Newman was seconded by the BBC to NHK’s Radio Japan in Tokyo as an English announcer and news editor. His duties, as stipulated by NHK, included translation, rewriting and announcement of English news and language programmes, and training of NHK staff. He contributed to programmes such as ‘Hello from Tokyo’ into which he introduced for foreign listeners information about the way of life of Japanese people. On trips with his Japanese producer he covered such Japanese traditional events as cormorant fishing on the river Nagara in Gifu prefecture, Central Japan. On other broadcasts he described the famous whirlpools created by rapid tidal currents in the Naruto Strait by Shikoku Island as well as other scenic spots and places of historic interest in Japan. He established a good rapport with his Japanese colleagues who appreciated his gentle and polite demeanour.

In 1969 he was the BBC representative for British Week in Tokyo,¹ and in 1970 BBC representative to Expo ‘70 in Osaka.² In 1970 he was appointed in his mid-thirties to head the Japanese service and in 1988 was awarded the MBE for services to broadcasting. He continued as head of the Japanese service until the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) decided to close down the service in 1991. At that point he declined promotion within the BBC and chose early retirement, whereupon he was offered a position as professor of English and international studies at the Nihon University’s medical school.

There were three main strands to Newman’s life in and involvement with Japan: like his predecessor as the BBC’s correspondent and ‘man in Japan’ Trevor Pryce Leggett (1914–2000) who was portrayed in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, Volume IV³ (Ch. 28, pp. 323–333) and with whom he co-authored some books, he was a highly competent *jūdōka*, and also a first-class teacher of *jūdō* and English.

JŪDŌKA (JŪDŌ PRACTITIONER) AND AT TENRI UNIVERSITY

In a self-introduction written for Nihon University medical school’s *Igakubu News* John Newman wrote that his relationship with Japan began with *jūdō*. It was an ‘obscure sport’ introduced to Britain by Tani Yukio in 1904. Reference to the martial art appears in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Major Barbara* (1905); Sherlock Holmes uses

‘Japanese wrestling’ to escape from Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls in Conan Doyle’s *Return of Sherlock Holmes*. It was these stories, probably introduced by the highly literate Leggett, which encouraged Newman to learn jūdō.

Newman began jūdō at the Central YMCA in London under John Barnes⁴ of the Budokwai. He was identified as talented, and referred to the Budokwai in the 1950s. At the Budokwai Trevor Leggett was the most influential teacher. He encouraged his pupils to go to Japan to learn jūdō, where he had been interned during the war. Leggett was a concert pianist, a Japanese chess player, author and a great linguist. He demanded high standards, and according to his reputation he did not suffer fools gladly.

Newman was a stylist, with good technique in jūdō.⁵ He had an upright posture, and mastered the major throws such as *uchimata*, a big overt movement, which Westerners usually find hard. He was also good at *ashiwaza* (foot sweeping).

During his national service in the Royal Marines he was kept fit, but there were no opportunities to practise the sport. He made a great impression at Tenri University with his effective and stylish technique, his personable, polite and gentlemanly manners. Already with two European championships under his belt, he proved his efficiency by winning the groundwork (*newaza*) competition, a remarkable achievement. Tenri is a hard and serious jūdō school, whose trainer at the time was the Japanese Olympic team manager. Training included early morning runs with his small dog in pursuit, yapping at the heels of stragglers.

On his first day at Tenri in April 1959 Newman met Kobayashi Takano, who like Newman was freshman at Tenri. When Kobayashi, a country-born boy from Hiroshima, tried his limited English with Newman he received a friendly reply and the two became firm friends. After Trevor Leggett, the former president of the World Jūdō Association, introduced him to Nakayama Shōzen, the founder of Tenri University and the second head (*Shimbashira*) of the Tenri religion, Nakayama arranged for Newman to perfect his skills at Tenri.

Newman practised from 5 to 7 p.m. on weekdays with the jūdō-major students. He struggled to communicate. One day, he wanted bananas and hamburger buns. He drew pictures, and asked his caretaker to go shopping for them. She brought back *takuan* (yellow pickled radish) and *anpan* (bean-paste buns). He missed London, and read J.B. Priestley’s novels and Noel Coward’s plays. He recalled that during the blitz when his family sheltered in the tube he had stumbled and broken his chin, but he had not cried; the scar remained.

While at Tenri he enrolled on the Japanese language course for foreign students. One summer, he hitch-hiked with a Hawaiian

friend for ten days along the Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō. He came back sunburned and exhausted, but was able to tell many funny stories of his adventures like Yajirobei and Kitahachi of Jippensha Ikku's *Hizakurige*.

He was blessed with the necessary intelligence, strength, perseverance and fortitude to be a great athlete. He was proficient in sports and physical exercise, and he mastered new sports very quickly. On a skiing training camp he was able to ski down a hill on his first day, much to the surprise of all. He was always well dressed in a tie, even in the heat of summer, and he was never carried away by radical emotions. Kobayashi thought he held his passions in check like a disciplined Japanese samurai.

Yet he was also agreeable and sociable, joining picnics, speech contests and other outings with Japanese students. He and Kobayashi wandered round the hills and historic sites of the Kansai region (Osaka, Kyoto and Nara). They played table tennis and listened to scratchy phonograph records of musicals, which Newman had brought from London. His farewell present to Kobayashi in March 1962 was a phonograph record of 'Oklahoma'.

Newman was awarded a scholarship by Tenri University, and he taught four classes to English majors. He was paid 20,000 yen a month for this. He lived simply, toasting loaves of plain bread when hungry. He cheerfully called charred toast 'golden brown'. When he had money he went with Kobayashi to a cinema in Nara, and they ate heartily at a cheap restaurant.

In 1961 Newman had an operation for sciatic neuralgia at a hospital in Kyoto. Although confined in a stuffy and crowded hospital for several months, he recovered. The doctor, however, told him that he had to give up his jūdō career. This must have been a great shock to him. Kobayashi remarked: 'I did not know how to console him. He courageously challenged his trial, and did as much rehabilitation exercise as he could. I thought he was a real samurai with discipline, stoicism and perseverance. For rehabilitation, we walked together even in the snow-covered mountains and hills in Nara. He was always hopeful and optimistic.'

Another Japanese who remembered Newman at Tenri University was Imamura Haruo who had been studying in Fresno, California and returned to Japan in April 1961 for four months to renew his visa and taught as a part-time jūdō instructor at Tenri. As they both spoke English, he and Newman often went drinking together, and he remembered that John associated for a while with the American 'talent' (TV personality) Edith Hanson (born 1939). Yoshida Shintarō, who remembered Newman's strong British accent in Japanese; was surprised when John refused to remove his jacket in a poorly air-conditioned train heading from Tenri to Osaka in the height of

summer when everyone else was in shirt sleeves. John never took it off and just said ‘Oh I am fine.’ John told him he was a Green Beret, a headdress worn by all Royal Marines who have passed the Commando Course.⁶

A tall man at 6 feet 4.5 inches, and with very large feet (UK size 13) which ‘probably helped root him to the ground’,⁷ he won the British jūdō championship four times and the European championship twice, all before going to Tenri. He became a fifth Dan, and was manager-cum-coach of the British jūdō team at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964.⁸ Before the Olympics he had retired from active jūdō due to back pain.⁹

As the team manager in 1964 he met the British team, which travelled part of the way to Japan on the Trans-Siberian railway. He organized railway tickets for them to go to Tenri University for their training camp. His time at Tenri was a loss for the British team, and if he had not been injured he could have been a team member at the Tokyo Olympics.

John Newman followed his own path in jūdō and Japanese culture. He was an excellent example of what Leggett set out to achieve. Jūdō was not to be practiced merely for a sporting outcome but for self-improvement. Training hard in jūdō, he believed, led to excellence in other areas of life as well. It was a means of gaining the wisdom to achieve excellence in other fields. For Newman who had no career pathway, jūdō not only introduced him to Japan, but helped him to rise to become head of the Japanese service of the BBC. Of course, the fact that his jūdō teacher was also employed at the BBC helped him.

Newman taught jūdō at the Budokwai in the Chelsea area of London, and at Harlesden. The Budokwai had been founded in 1918 by Koizumi Gunji,¹ a Japanese immigrant. He sought to repay the kindness he had received in Britain, by introducing the martial arts of kendō and jūdō. It is the oldest martial arts club in Europe.

BROADCASTER WITH THE BBC AND NHK (1964–91)

Newman had assisted the BBC Japanese service on a part-time basis before he joined as a full-time staff member (producer) in November 1964. In his first year he was responsible for the morning transmission (evening in the UK, due to the eight-nine hours time difference). This was his first experience of live broadcasting. It was nerve-racking, and he began to smoke more heavily. From 1967 to 1969 he was seconded to Radio Japan, the external service of NHK, and worked in Tokyo.

John Newman succeeded Trevor Leggett in October 1969 as programme organizer, and worked at Bush House in London. Leggett

had stayed in this position for twenty-three years, refusing any promotion. When Newman started the job he discussed with the Japanese staff how to make the content of programmes more varied. The success of this policy was reflected in the increase in the number of letters from listeners: from an annual number of about 3,500 in 1969 it increased year on year until in 1975 it reached a peak of 140,000 letters.¹¹

Although Japanese businessmen overseas frequently listened to the BBC Japanese service the majority of listeners were in Japan. Teenage boys who had a fascination for listening to shortwave radio from abroad formed the core of the most enthusiastic listeners. When they listened to the BBC and sent letters to London they were able to receive 'verification cards' which they enjoyed collecting.

When in 1970 Newman attended EXPO '70 in Osaka his fluent Japanese was a great help in promoting the British Pavilion. He also frequently appeared on Japanese television, where, since few Japanese grew beards, his trademark black beard was a distinguishing asset. (On one occasion he appeared in a Nescafé instant coffee advert in a Japanese newspaper, without the beard.)

The Japanese service under Newman included as producer (later senior producer) Anthony Lightley who joined in 1971 after a career, which included involvement with the *Doctor Who* series, and who had studied Japanese at Durham University.

There were also nine programme assistants (Japanese broadcasters). Most of them were seconded, for periods of up to three years, from Japanese radio and television stations. In all some hundred Japanese were seconded to the BBC Japanese service. In addition, there were a number of audience researchers who worked in a different building and dealt with letters from listeners.

Some of the Japanese producers after returning to Japan wrote articles and books about various aspects of life in Britain. Simul Press in Tokyo with whom John had established close contacts published these in a BBC series.

Lightley was a well-organized and precise man, whereas Newman was easy-going and did not pay much attention to details, although he was generous and broad-minded. They formed an excellent combination creating a pleasant working environment for their staff.

One BBC Japanese programme had a segment called 'Letter Box' once every two weeks, in which Newman and Lightley spoke Japanese. They discussed letters from the audience and answered questions from them. Newman's deep, soft voice was very popular, and he was voted 'Foreign Broadcaster of the Year' several times. Lightley spoke Japanese with a typical 'English' accent, but Newman's Japanese sounded natural. Lightley was shy and never spoke Japanese with the Japanese staff, but Newman sometimes spoke Japanese with

them. They were impressed by the colloquial expressions he used, presumably picked up while at Tenri University.

Newman also gave short English conversation lessons in a segment called '*Eigo de Dōzō*' (In English, Please). Secondees from NHK Radio Japan wrote the script, and Newman modelled the English phrases.

After Newman established a close relationship with the British Tourist Authority (BTA) a series of mini travel guides to the British countryside were broadcast. The BTA arranged tours to various parts of Britain, and every summer Newman sent his programme assistants to the countryside. These short guides proved quite popular.

The Japanese Service programme sometimes broadcast radio dramas such as Sherlock Holmes and Robin Hood. While major roles were played by Japanese programme assistants, Newman sometimes joined in minor roles and acted in Japanese. He appeared to enjoy these chances for amateur dramatics.

One of the most successful transmissions in which John Newman was involved was the coverage of the Sapporo Snow Festival in 1977. Sapporo Snow Festival, one of Japan's largest winter events, every year attracts about two million people from Japan and abroad. Its main attraction is a large number of huge, splendid snow and ice sculptures lining the main street of the city for a week in the beginning of February. When the Sapporo Branch of the Japan BCL (Broadcasting Listeners¹²) League started in 1976, they planned to build a snow sculpture of the Palace of Westminster¹³ with 4.5 metre-high clock tower, and sought from BBC Japanese service details of the design of the building. John Newman saw this as a great opportunity for publicity for the BBC Japanese service and featured a simultaneous transmission from London and Sapporo in February 1977. John travelled to Sapporo and broadcast live in Japanese on the spot in front of the snow Big Ben. After the event he and his Japanese producer went to Jōzankei Spa in the suburbs of Sapporo to recuperate and absorb some warmth.

While working with Radio Japan John like many other foreigners who lived in Japan climbed Mt Fuji. He did so together with his Japanese producer, Hosokawa Yukimasa, who had a hard time keeping up because of John's long legs. They stayed at the lodge on the eighth station and started before dawn the next morning for the summit toiling up the zig-zag path and through volcanic ash together with a crowd of other climbers. Unfortunately, as so many others have found, the panorama was hidden by fog. John quoted to his Japanese producer the saying 'Mt Fuji is best seen from a distance.'

On 1 April 1980, the Japanese service announced that the clock on the tower of Big Ben (officially known since 2012 as ‘Elizabeth Tower’) was going digital, and that therefore the hands would be removed; the first person to write to the Japanese service would get one of the 6.5 metre long ‘big hands’ which were no longer required. They embellished this tall story by saying that a flood warning alarm would be installed as well as a stopwatch to time the London Marathon. It was normal practice to make clear that the April Fools Day transmissions were jokes, but on this occasion Newman told his staff not to mention this, saying he would take responsibility for the consequences.

Within an hour of the transmission the Japanese service received a telegram from a seaman on board a tanker asking for the hand; soon they had received about 300 letters from all over Japan applying for the Big Ben hand. John Newman revealed the joke about three days later. Major Japanese newspapers reported this as an example of the failure of Japanese to understand British humour, but no serious complaints were received by the Japanese service. The listeners seemed to have understood the humour and joined in the fun.

When the FCO under budgetary pressure decided in 1991 to close down BBC services to Malaysia and Japan, the BBC was not given the option to continue the services by making savings elsewhere. The savings (a mere £300–400,000) were miniscule, especially compared to the investment by Japanese firms in Britain, and many Japanese received it as a snub, but ‘...John Newman accepted what was a bitter blow with dignity. He managed the dispersal of his talented Japanese staff without losing their respect.’¹⁴

In the *Japan Digest* of January 1991 in an article headed ‘Sayonara Japan’ Newman gave an overview of the forty-seven years of broadcasting to Japan. The service began on 4 July 1943 when the mere possession of a shortwave radio was dangerous. Many listeners were in the Japanese armed forces in Southeast Asia, and later the 50,000-strong Japanese community in Brazil also joined in. Trevor Leggett organized a game of *shōgi* over the air to prove that the service could be heard in Japan, and it lasted a year! Moves from London were broadcast once a week and the Japanese player would send his moves in reply two days later by airmail. Leggett persuaded a noted blind koto player, Miyagi Michio, to compose ‘*Rondon no Yoru no Ame*’ (A Rainy London Evening) for the Japan service. Newman also recalled the April fool episode, and the more than a hundred Japanese seconded to the BBC from Japan who had used their experience at Bush House to further their careers.

ACADEMIC

In 1991 Anesaki Masahira was a professor of sociology at Nihon University School of Medicine, which was looking for a professor of English and International Studies. He saw a news item on television about the abolition of the Japan service of the BBC in which John Newman appeared. This inspired him to write to John Newman suggesting that he apply for the post. Newman, being at the time at a loose end, replied expressing great interest. At the interview Anesaki recalls that ‘...[H]e made a very good impression on us, not only with his height, handsome looks and articulate speech but also his gentlemanly demeanour.’¹⁵ He got the job quite easily, with few reservations expressed. Anesaki told him he would be accepted as easily as William Adams was by Tokugawa Ieyasu. He continues:

He brought big ideas about teaching English to future physicians as well as various audio-visual materials with him from Britain. His serious attitude to his teaching and his good sense of humour motivated his students to try hard...

Newman was popular, not only with the students but also with the teaching and administrative staff. Anesaki became a close colleague and friend, and they often watched sumo together and spoke about martial arts. They also discussed the state of Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Anesaki tried to learn BBC English pronunciation and ‘courtliness’ from Newman.

CONCLUSION

John Newman did not drink alcohol because he had cirrhosis of the liver. Despite having to go into hospital repeatedly, he completed the academic year 1992–3 including all his freshman classes and exams. At the start of the spring vacation he returned to London and decided to have a liver transplant on 10 April 1993 at King’s College Hospital. Unfortunately, one week later, his body began to reject the new liver. On 18 May 1993, he passed away in the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital, aged fifty-seven.

The funeral at the West London Crematorium on 27 May was well attended, with all 200 seats filled and the rest of the mourners standing. Pauline Webb conducted the ceremony. A Japanese version of the 23rd Psalm was read, and Trevor Leggett gave a tribute. There was a reading by his friend Gill Wilkie, of the BBC Malaysian service, from Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’ and in conclusion a version of ‘Stand By Me’, somehow fitting for its emphasis on how love can conquer all adversity and hardship. It was a modern pop song, which John Newman liked. Professor Anesaki attended the

funeral and wake, and later reported on it to the university. In the evening he and Watanabe Kisaburo (a former Asian jūdō champion and instructor at the Budokan jūdō club in London) dined with Newman's daughters, Martha and Sophie. Donations were to the Liver Failure Unit, King's College Hospital, and Cancer Research.

John Newman was a deeply patriotic Briton from a working-class West London family background who was proud of his country and London, and eager to show them off to Japanese visitors. He was a man with a great sense of adventure and fun, personal warmth, self-discipline and physical toughness. He is fondly remembered not only by his family, but also by his many friends in Japan and Britain. His love affair with Japan began through jūdō at a time in the post-war period when memories of the war were still very fresh, and when many people in Britain viewed Japan with suspicion and hostility. In the Newman family, his daughter Sophie recalls that 'can't' was a taboo word, and he was always keen to let his children experience adventures: he once had them camping overnight near St. Paul's Cathedral before the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana to get a good view of the procession. On another occasion he had Sophie travel alone in her early teens from Tokyo to Kyoto, although she knew no Japanese. It was on this occasion that Kobayashi met her, while her father was still working for the BBC. Later whenever Kobayashi went to London he would meet Newman at the BBC or at his flat in Russell Road, West Kensington. In the summer of 1992 he stayed one month there, and Newman took him to the golf course, swimming pool and Richmond where his family lived.

John Newman's secretary at the BBC in London for fourteen and a half years was Afsaneh Dekan. She considered him as family, and a gentle giant, and felt very lucky to be working for him. He did not work on Mondays but would occasionally pay surprise visits on that day, opening the office door quickly and saying with characteristic English humour learned in the Marines and, one imagines, a wry grin: 'What do you think this place is, a holiday camp?' He sometimes called his daughters and announced that 'the Monsters' were coming to the office for lunch. Observing Japanese custom, Newman would always start a letter to Japan with a comment on the season or weather. His nickname in the office was 'Big Bad John'.¹⁶

In the county of Dorset there is an oak tree planted by the parish in the cemetery of St. Mary's church in the village of Blandford St. Mary in commemoration of the man they called 'The Oak'. This very English tree testifies to the high regard in which he was held for his friendliness and community spirit. The Newman family used to go there for holidays for many years, and sometimes John stayed in the cottage (which belonged to a BBC colleague) for weekend breaks.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an account of British Week in Tokyo see essay by Ben Thorne in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, volume IX, ed. Hugh Cortazzi. Renaissance Books, 2015.
- ² For an account of Expo '70 see report by Sir John Pilcher, HM ambassador to Japan, in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, volume IX, ed. Hugh Cortazzi, Renaissance Books, 2015.
- ³ Ch. 28, pp. 323–333. This volume was edited by Hugh Cortazzi and published in 2002 by Japan Library.
- ⁴ John Barnes (1911–1998), educated at Bradfield College, Berkshire. Later a wing commander in the RAF, he became interested in jūdō in 1936 and studied intensively at the Budokwai for two-and-a-half years. After the war he helped Koizumi Gunji found the British Jūdō Association and the European Jūdō Union. In August 1937 he got jūdō onto television for the first time when the Budokwai gave a demonstration for the BBC. He was honorary president of the British Universities Jūdō Association for forty years until his death. (Tony Sweeney, *EJU News*, November 1998).
- ⁵ With thanks to Tony Sweeney for comments on John Newman as a jūdōka to the author at the Budokwai on 2 September 2014.
- ⁶ From a fax of two letters to him sent by Professor Anesaki on 26 December 2014.
- ⁷ Email to author from Sophie Newman, daughter of John, 8 August 2014.
- ⁸ For an account of the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo see pp.160–166 of *The Japan Society Proceedings* number 150, 2013.
- ⁹ Notes from Tsujikawa Kazunori entitled 'John Newman and the BBC Japanese Section', received 21 June 2014, based partly on Okura Yūnosuke, *This is the BBC London – Forty Years of Japanese Language Broadcasts* こちらロンドンBBC BBC日本語部の歩み, (Tokyo: Simul 1983), and John Newman's own comments in 'Sayonara Japan', *Japan Digest*, Vol. 1, No. 3, January 1991. The photograph of Newman is from the Simul publication, facing p. 196.
- ¹⁰ See biographical portrait of Koizumi Gunji in *Britain and Japan: Biographical Portraits*, volume IV ed. Hugh Cortazzi, Japan Library, 2002.
- ¹¹ The full table from 1959 is given in Okura Yūnosuke, *This is the BBC London: 40 Years of Broadcasting to Japan, 1943–83* (Simul Press, 1983) p.189, but the part relating to Newman's tenure is as follows:
 1969, 3,539 1970, 4,452 1971, 5,002 1972, 7,240 1973, 19,811
 1974 57,811 1975 140,621 1976, 101,634 1977, 70,030 1978, 40,693
 1979, 28,388 1980, 20,741 1981, 16,866 1982. 7,954
 (Data not available for 1983–91.)

- ¹² Broadcasting Listeners were groups of people who enjoy listening to radio – mostly short wave radio – from abroad.
- ¹³ In 1984 the snow festival at Sapporo included a copy in snow of Buckingham Palace.
- ¹⁴ Leonard Miall, Obituary of John Newman, *The Independent*, 21 May 1993.
- ¹⁵ Masahira Anesaki, *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan (TASJ)*, Series IV, Volume 20, 2006, Supplement, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ From an email sent by Nina Afsaneh Denkan to Sophie Newman, 22 September 2014.