



Keene in his study at home.

KEENE ON JAPANESE LITERATURE

IT WAS 1940. From a pile of discounted books in a bookshop on the corner of New York's Times Square a young man came across a tome that was to change his life forever. Its title was *A Tale of Genji*, translated into English by Arthur Waley. This young man by the name of Donald Keene was enthralled by this translation of the story that is said to be the world's oldest novel.

"As soon as I started reading it I was overwhelmed by the beauty and the exquisite world it depicted. Just as Britain has the works of Shakespeare and Italy has those of Dante as the pinnacles of their

respective literary worlds, I consider *A Tale of Genji* to be Japan's literary pinnacle," says Keene.

Captivated by the literature of Japan, he studied the Japanese language, going on to become one of the few people researching Japanese literature at the time. As a true pioneer in the field, Keene has since introduced many works of Japanese literature to the outside world, ranging from 7th-century poetry anthologies to modern novels. In recognition of his achievements, in November 2008 he was awarded the Order of Culture.

Keene is also known for being on friendly terms with such literary icons as Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, Yukio Mishima and Kobo Abe.

"Mishima and Abe were of my generation. They were good friends with whom I could discuss all kinds of things. I translated some of Mishima's full-length novels and short stories. He was probably the first Japanese writer who had foreign readers waiting to read his books when they came out. Considering that only 3,000 copies of the first English edition of *A Tale of Genji* were printed, I think that Japanese literature has today become much read overseas," says Keene.

More than sixty years since his first encounter with Japanese literature, Keene still spends his days teaching the subject and applying himself to his research. The flames of passion for Japanese literature sparked by *A Tale of Genji* still burn brightly in him.

Born in New York in 1922. After completing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at Columbia University and attending Cambridge University, in 1953 Keene entered the graduate school at Kyoto University. In 1986, he established the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture at Columbia University and is currently a professor emeritus at Columbia University. In 2008 Keene was awarded the Order of Culture.