Long Live Unpopular Schools.

Introduction: A cry for sympathy.

Earlier this year I celebrated one of those "significant birthdays". As someone who grew up in the 60s and 70s I confess I had little expectation of getting to the really old age of 50 and much less thought what I would do if I did. So now here I am and this great unplanned expanse of ongoing existence stretches before me and I don't know what I'm going to do with it.

Well to start with I'm going to sink rapidly back to being the rebellious animal I was in the 70s believing my rapidly Greying hair (ok so it's all grey!) allows me the freedom to ask questions and not to accept things at face value. Grumpy old men beware there's a new kid on the block.

The first stage to this was to bring together a disparate (and on occasion desperate) group people to celebrate my half century. So in the middle of winter I dragged them all up to within a few yards of Hadrian's Wall for dinner. The guest list included Members of a Dutch IT company, academic theologians from Durham University, a sword collecting Anglican priest and a budding (or possible blooming) entrepreneur whose only real failing was a morbid obsession for Bizen swords. At the eleventh hour I was worried that they would all sit looking at each other with little common ground and it would be a long and painful evening. They didn't and it wasn't. Why? Because they asked each other questions, and if they didn't understand or agree with what was said they asked again or challenged. It was friendly instructive and very enjoyable (at least for me) and we all learned a lot about things I knew little about before.

The point behind this extensive rambling introduction, apart from courting sympathy for my loss of youth, is to return to my pet soap box issue about being prepared to challenge and question what we are told. If we accept everything teachers or scholars tell us without question we can never progress.

This Train of thought was further stimulated when I read a recent translation of an NTHK magazine article by Icho Inushijin about Miyoshi Nagamichi. He was praising the work of what he regarded as an underrated smith. He illustrated a point by comparing a Nagamichi blade with one by the very famous and much sought after smith Nagasone Kotetsu. He made the point that poorly made swords by Kotetsu exist, but because they were made by him the faults are somehow transformed into important features. In particular he draws our attention to the shape of blades. Many Kotetsu blades exhibit very little sori; in fact they are almost straight. This is not regarded as a fault; it is described as "Kotetsu's characteristic shape like a rod". However, a Miyoshi Nagamichi exhibiting an identical sugata is described as "low class and unsophisticated".

Other examples exist. Generally core metal showing in the hada is regarded as a fault in either manufacture or after care. In some schools, however, (Rai and Hizen) its suddenly no longer ugly featureless core steel showing through, it is a feature of their fine workmanship. Even with Masamune you see descriptions like "The uncontrolled nature of his hamon would be regarded as a fault in a lesser smith but for him is a point of supreme artistry"--?????

The subject of the following is to ask why certain schools are so undervalued and others overrated. What is the basis in fact that makes one blade worth 10 or even 100 times more than another almost identical work.

Three Unpopular Schools

I intend to focus on three schools all of which I have had some direct experience (albeit fairly limited). These are Echizen-Seki, Bungo Takada and Kongo-byoe. I will try and summarise the traditional view point which relegates them to the lower divisions of the sword makers' art, to show examples as to why the reality may not be so black or white and then finish off with a detailed description of a blade to compare against the definition of what is a good blade.
Why are these schools regarded as of lesser quality?
Some of the published reasons are as follows:

- They produced functional weapons that lacked artistic merit
- They were provincial or country schools
- They did not conform to any of the 5 traditions
- They didn't produce any top level smiths.
- Their Nie was not attractive.

If we look at each of these points in turn:

1. They produced weapons etc: No argument there. BUT if you read most of the introductory works by the highest level scholars from Japan and the West they all say without exception "The primary purpose of the sword is to cut" It is a weapon, a very beautiful and severely efficient one but first and foremost a sword should cut. If it is a poor weapon, unfit for its prime purpose it is a poor sword.
To go further, the artistic characteristics of a Japanese sword blade only exist as a result of smiths developing structure and shape to improve the swords efficiency as a weapon. They are, if you like, a by-product of striving to achieve a level of functional perfection. The fact that works from these rural schools were highly rated as fighting weapons suggests that they also included those features which contribute to the aesthetic qualities that are appreciated by the art loving elite.

2. They are from provincial or country schools. So what? Are we really saying that Art and excellence are only capable of being achieved in Cities or Political centres? Of course much innovation is the result of demand, competition and learning from neighbours. This can be much more easily achieved in areas where there are thriving communities of artisans supplying a demanding clientele. However demand can also work against you. Taking Seki and Osafune as examples, when demand outstripped supply in the 16th century quality fell away and to quote Sato from his book the Japanese Sword "No swords of merit were produced".
It is also demonstrably true that great art can also be produced in small isolated communities. It is more difficult, but not impossible, look at the quality of painting coming from the impressionists, the Glasgow School or many others. But the schools mentioned above were not truly isolated. There was considerable movement of Smiths

between various provinces. In particular Mino smiths travelled far and wide and had a great influence on those working in Echizen (hence Echizen Seki). Kongo-Byoe origins go back to the early Yamato schools and Bungo Takada has both Mino and Bizen influence.

3. They did not conform. At the risk of being cynical this is perhaps the core of the problem. It is difficult to neatly box any of these schools in a particular tradition. This creates a major problem for a nation that values order, conformity and the ability to put something clearly in order. If it doesn't fit in to the five recognised traditions it can't be assessed properly and therefore must be of lower aesthetic value. Non conformity to a given standard also makes it difficult to judge whether something is authentic or not. The combination of these factors is very unsettling, especially for those with responsibility for appraising and valuing precious objects and for those trying to teach
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So why didn't these schools conform? Well as mentioned above they were continually influenced by a number of visiting smiths from different traditions and so many of their works exhibit bits of one school alongside others from a different tradition. In addition much of their work (particularly Bungo Takada) was producing copies of the 5 traditions. Thus you could have a Bungo Takada sword that looked Bizen, another showing Hizen or Mino traits. An interesting side line here is that to be effective copyists they had to master a wide range of different skills. Very few smiths in history have been able to do that successfully. Even fewer schools have consistently produced good quality work of such complexity and variation.

3. They didn't produce any top level smiths. Possibly true, depending on your criteria for top level. Yasatsugu, one of Tokugawa Ieyasus favourite smiths originated in Echizen and has many highly regarded works. A Juyo Kongo-Byoe blade appears in Comptons' 100 great masterpieces (not a bad achievement for a country smith when you consider the quality of the collection Compton was drawing from). I am not familiar enough with Bungo Takada smiths to name particularly famous ones, but I have seen some beautiful swords originally attributed to Osafune School, Ichimonji and more by very learned people only to have them papered to Bungo Takada.
No, they didn't produce top level names in abundance. But all of these schools produced work of sufficient quality to be regularly mistaken for the work of other top quality smiths.

4. Their Nie was not attractive. Now we are getting in to the realms of ultra subjectivity. What is good or bad Nie? Let's go back one stage, what is Nie? Nie crystals are formed when the blade is quenched in water. To appear the blade needs to be hot (if memory serves me correctly between 700 and 800 centigrade) the ability to form Nie is dependent on the purity of the steel and the size of the individual Nie crystals on the time taken for the blade to cool. So the fact there is any Nie at all tells us the quality of the steel was good.
What is really being reviewed here is the size shape and evenness of the Nie in both hamon and Ji-hada.

If you look at descriptions of different schools work there is huge variation in what is described as beautiful Nie. In Hizen blades Ko-Nie cascading through the hamon and in the Ji-hada is thought of as magnificent. The brightness of the abundant nie forming Kinsuji and inazuma in Soshu work is stunning, clusters of Ara-Nie in other schools work regarded as magnificent.
The governing criterion is control. The Nie should look the way it does by design not accident. The Smith controls his material and process to achieve exactly the result he wants. The problem with our three reference schools is because they did not conform to a given standard one cannot tell whether the Nie formed in their work was deliberate or accidental. Therefore you cannot judge whether they were supremely skilled or just plain lucky.

I am fortunate enough to own a blade papered to Kongo-Byoe and one to Echizen-Seki. The Echizen-Seki I have used on several occasions to illustrate points at presentations given to the society in the past. I will also use it for the second part of this paper. I have never owned a Bungo-Takada, but I remember lusting after a wakazashi in Deryck Ingham's collection. It was stunning the hada beautiful the hamon as active as you could hope for and the shape great. When Derycks collection went to the Armouries it was one of the original pieces on display. That may now have changed, but if you have the chance, look at it. It was originally bought as a Bizen blade. The NBTHK papered it to Bungo-Takada. Kajihara (who had polished it) disagreed and papered it to the Osafune School.
Whoever made it is worth a trip to see. You will not be disappointed.
The Kongo-Byoe I have also shown before, It is a large (although Suriage) Muromachi period Daito. It is very powerful, austere and conservative. Its Yamato heritage is there for all to see. It is also between 550 and 650 years old and looks like it was made yesterday. I think that also says something for the quality of country made pieces.

Description of a poor quality blade.

Before going in to detail on the sword in question and at risk of sounding patronising I would like to remind us of what to look for in a good blade:

1. Shape- A good shape is not a guarantee of a good sword, but it's a good start. However, no good sword has a bad shape. If a blade has a bad shape it is a bad sword.

2. Hada- Look for pattern, colour, the presence of Nie and activity. A beautiful hada is an essential component of a good sword. It can only be achieved through the use of good material and working that material with skill.
3. Hamon- Look for activity, shape and continuity. Is it Nioi or Nie based?

4. Boshi- as with the hamon how is it formed is it healthy and complete.

5. Nakago- Is it original (ubu) or shortened, if shortened has it been done with skill or has the end just been hacked off. Is the shortening sympathetic to the overall appearance of the blade

The sword I am describing in the following notes has been in my collection since 1998. It was bought in the USA by a well known UK collector when it was in a poor state of repair. Based on what little he could see (and perhaps with a little optimism) he thought he might just have found an O-suriage Ichimonji blade. Without delay it went to Japan where it was polished by Kajihara, at a time when he was at the height of his skill and career. It was submitted for papers to the NBTHK and------- was papered to Echizen-Seki. There was much disappointment and gnashing of teeth and a great desire by the owner to be rid of the source of his disappointment. It then came in to the possession of Deryck Ingham. Over the next few years it was passed back forth between several collectors, before returning to Deryck at the beginning of 1998. It came to me as part of a trade I can't remember for what but knowing Deryck I am sure he was over generous. It became my first papered sword. It is now the longest serving member of my collection. All earlier pieces having been traded at various stages as I tried to focus the collection (a bit). As I keep saying I am not a Mino or great Bizen fan and this blade has signs of both. So why is it still here? Well the truth is because I think it is absolutely beautiful. I derive as much pleasure still from this blade as I do from later, more famous and certainly more expensive pieces.

<u>An O-Suriage Echizen-Seki Wakazashi (Chisa-Katana)</u>

Nagasa 58.8cm Sori 1.3cm
Motohaba 2.7cm sakihaba 2cm
Kasane 0.5cm
Hada Ko-itame with masame in the shinogi-ji abundant bright nie in the Ji-hada
Hamon Midare-choji with Ashi Sunagashi and Kinsuji. Nioi deki with abundant Ko-Nie.
Kissaki small chu (bordering on Ko) Kissaki with Ko-Maru midare boshi with nie.

Despite being shortened this sword retains an absolutely beautiful sugata. At just over 23 inches I have no doubt it was used as a Daito. When it was papered as now, the NBTHK have only 3 types of blade Daito, Wakazashi or Tanto (apologies they do of course have categories for pole-arms as well). This is less than 24 inches long so it's a wakazashi. The most telling thing about this sword is its proportion. Despite loosing between 4 and 6 inches in length the overall shape looks fabulous. The slightly high shinogi the small chu-kissaki the even tori-sori all combine to create an impression of elegant, subdued functionality. It is like looking at a finely proportioned sculpture. In its original form it was probably koshi-sori and I wonder whether that would have enhanced or detracted from the overall impression of the blade. We will never know.

The hada is bright and clear. I always find defining colour in steel difficult but there is a blackish hue to the clarity. It is a little like looking into a frozen pool on a winters' day. The hada is full of bright nie. The crystals cluster together on the border of the hamon and shine out in even individual splendour. A slight tilt of the wrist and they turn to a fathomless black. Nie is distributed throughout the Ji-Hada from the shinogi it cascades

down through the nioi based hamon. The shinogi-ji shows a combination of masame and running itame hada.
The Hamon is an almost casual combination of midare, choji and gunome, nioi guchi with ashi dropping almost to the edge. The ashi and the junctions of the choji are formed almost entirely of ko-nie. In the troughs of the choji the masame structure of the steel creates a vehicle for long lines of Sunagashi and Kinsuji comprised almost entirely of ko-nie which is extremely even and bright. The activity in the hamon is sufficient to keep the observer occupied for ever. 6 years on I continue to find detail that I've not seen before.

The Boshi although subdued is a complex combination of midare in nioi with a considerable amount of ko-nie falling through it. It looks crisp, in proportion and clear.

The Nakago is O-Suriage. The end is Kiri. The details of the yasurimei are obscured by aging. I think blade was shortened in the early Shinto period. The patina of the new Nakago would certainly support this view. The end is cut square (kiri) and there are two mekugi-ana.

Conclusion.

I hope the description above indicates my enthusiasm for this blade. If not let me remove all doubt. **I think this is a stunningly beautiful blade made by an extremely skilful swordsmith.** It fulfils all the criteria identified above in defining what makes a good sword. Its only failing is that it is Echizen-Seki not Ichimonji. How did they decide that? The presence of Masame hada in the shinogi-ji. Financially, if this were Ichimonji, I would not be able to afford it. As it is, I have within my collection a sword that speaks to me and displays all the characteristics we are told to look for in high quality blades.

While we should and must be guided by those who have studied longer, had access to more examples and understand Nihonto far better than we are able to; it is very dangerous to accept everything at face value. We can sit and be continually frustrated that the truly great blades are either unaffordable or never leave Japan, OR, we can stop looking at the labels and look more closely at the swords. By doing so you might be pleasantly surprised.

Oshigata of Echizen Seki Blade.