



The English Essays of Minakata Kumagusu – Centering on his Contributions to *Nature*

TAMURA Yoshiya, Academic Trustee of Minakata Kumagusu Archives

Prologue: Minakata Before Contributing to Intellectual Periodicals



Minakata Kumagusu (Photographed in Jacksonville, Florida)

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Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941) left Japan for the United States in 1886, at the age of nineteen. After living in Michigan and Florida for four years (including a short stay in Cuba), he moved to London in 1892, when he was twenty-five. He remained in the English capital for eight years until September 1900, when he ended his fifteen years abroad, mostly for financial reasons.

Minakata's life overseas appears to have been of a diffuse nature, a feature ultimately characterizing his whole life. His main aims changed several times.

Initially he entered a school of finance and accounting in San Francisco, in January 1887. In August that year, however, he left and headed east. After a day's stay in Lincoln, Nebraska, to visit the University of Nebraska, he traveled on through Chicago to Lansing, Michigan, and enrolled in the State College of Agriculture on August 22. According to Minakata's diary, however, he spent many days as a fieldworker in Ann Arbor rather than following the school curriculum in Lansing, where the State University of Michigan is located to this day.

In his earlier days in the United States, Minakata apparently intended to enlarge his intellectual capacity by reading various authors, following contemporary academic advancements in

general, rather than hastily determining his own track.

One of his earliest purchases of printed matter known to us was *Popular Science Monthly*, a magazine encouraging the spread of scientific knowledge. Minakata also purchased more than fifty paperback titles in various academic fields from Humboldt Library, including works by Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, Alfred Wallace, Ernst Haeckel (in translation), John Stuart Mill, William Stanley Jevons' *Money and the Mechanism of Exchange*, and many others. Besides purchasing cheap books, Minakata began transcribing extracts



of books which presumably he had read in libraries, an activity which was to become one of his life-long occupations. In addition, he began to collect a complete set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (American ninth edition), purchasing individual volumes separately. He completed one set in the United States and another in the United Kingdom, and later collected a set of the eleventh edition, which was published after his return to Japan.

At the same time, he maintained the interest he had held since his boyhood in the realms of botany and natural history. Specimens of both higher and cryptogamic plants such as fungi, bryophyta and lichens from these days remain in the Minakata Kumagusu Archives today, alongside several titles of worn and torn books on the flora and fauna of his location at a given time (*The Agrariceae of Michigan*, *Catalogue of the Phaenogamous and Vascular Cryptogamous Plants of Michigan*, and *Musci Appalachianii*; or *Specimens of Mosses collected Mostly in the Eastern Part of North America*, for example). These monotonously practical lists of species were doubtless used for collecting specimens. Together these remaining items tell us how Minakata addressed himself to collecting in the field. From his diary, he seems to have moved gradually toward habitual collecting from May 1889 onwards.



TAMURA Yoshiya, Academic
Trustee of Minakata Kumagusu
Archives

After four years spent familiarizing himself with the local eco-system of the area, Minakata eventually quit Ann Arbor and moved to Jacksonville, Florida, on the suggestion of an amateur lichenologist named William Wirt Calkins (1842–1914). At that moment, Minakata probably decided to devote himself entirely to the collection and research of cryptogamic plants, delving deeper into the natural field of North America, while putting his interests in other intellectual realms to one side. From April 1891 to August 1892, he lived mostly in Florida state, temporarily wandering via Key West to Cuba.

Presumably through his experiences at this time, botanical collecting in the field became another life-long occupation of Minakata.

As to his interest in *Nature*, Minakata is known to have begun reading the magazine when he was a young student in Tokyo. The oldest remaining copies of *Nature* in his former residence include twelve numbers dating from August 1888 to September 1889, and twenty numbers from January 1890 to January 1891, as far as his American years are concerned. The termination of these two intermittent sequences by and large corresponds to his move to the South, and to the beginning of his collecting and drifting life, as mentioned above (though a possible loss of some other numbers might have occurred afterwards).

Minakata Moves to London

In August 1892, however, Minakata left Florida and moved to London via New York. No particular reasons have so far been specified for his decision. Although he continued working with his American specimens while also trying to go out to collect during his first few years in England, the change of place gradually came to mean that Minakata would return to the world of letters and intellectual groping through books, leaving the natural world behind. In London, he eventually began to seek his own world of imagination through writing, which was to



become yet one more life-long occupation. His first steps in this direction were the publication of his articles in *Nature*.

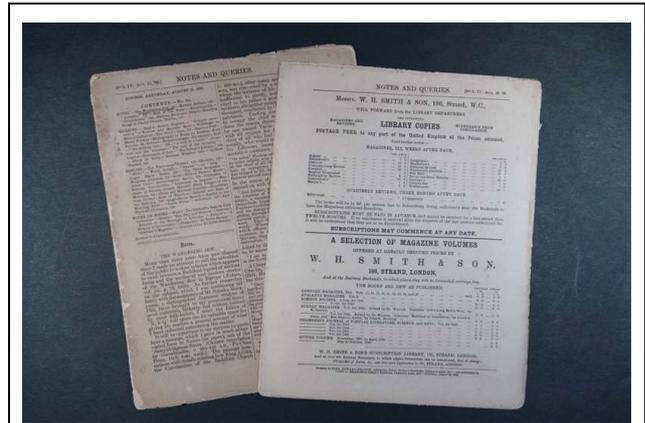
First Contribution to *Nature*

In his life, Minakata succeeded in publishing fifty-one essays, notes and comments in *Nature* – thirty-eight before he left the United Kingdom for Japan in September 1900, and thirteen more while in Japan, until 1914. Minakata’s first article to be published in *Nature* was “The Constellations of the Far East” (number of October 5, 1893).

In this first essay, Minakata attempted to outline the similarities and differences between the constellational systems of old Chinese and Indian civilizations, in response to the query of an anonymous reader signed M.A.B. which had appeared in the same section of a previous volume (17 August, 1893). This essay appeared, like all other articles of his in *Nature*, in the “Letters to the Editor” section (except for one letter in 1902, which was quoted in an Editor’s note). This section had provided readers with a place for feedback as well as further discussions regarding the contents of preceding numbers since the day it started. The section was removed from the print edition in 2006, while it remains in the online edition to this day. An entry in this section is regarded today as being of considerably high academic worth, even if it is not considered an independent thesis, on the grounds of the globally accepted excellence of the magazine. To the eye of later readers, Minakata’s achievement of publishing more than fifty articles in this section is considered in retrospect as of being a testament to his work’s high academic value by international standards.

However, even a glance over Minakata’s first contribution as well as the original query to which he tried to respond suggests that the section “Letters to the Editor” was sometimes a place for exchanging information, open to general readers, without the institutional exclusiveness seen in the *Nature* of later years. M.A.B.’s original query consisted of five serial questions, namely:

- 1) Whether the old civilizations of Assyria, Egypt, Greece and Persia had the same system of constellations or not.
- 2) If one system was shared, whether each of the constellation names was the same or not.
- 3) How the old Assyrians or Egyptians named their constellations, noting Westerners named theirs after Greek mythology.



Minakata succeeded in publishing fifty-one essays, notes and comments in *Nature* from 1893 to 1914

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- 4) Whether old non-Western civilizations like the Chinese, Indian, African or Native American civilizations had their own systems of constellations or not.
- 5) And if they had, whether the closeness or remoteness of the systems of constellations reflects the closeness or remoteness between the nationalities.

In response to such far-sighted questions, Minakata only allowed himself to “venture to answer the last two.” He first showed the general structure of the Chinese celestial system as being independent from the Western one, and explained the traits of several particular names from the historical viewpoint of the Chinese social system, suggesting the quite early establishment of the system in ancient Chinese history. He then remarked on a particular lack of maritime elements (such as *Delphinus*, *Cancer* or *Cetus* in the Western system) in the Chinese celestial system, and went on to suggest the possible inland origin of Chinese civilization itself.

The last of his observations was later quoted by Joseph Needham in his *Science and Civilisation in China*, with the comment that “Minakata made a good point,” followed by Needham’s expansion that “the overwhelmingly agrarian-bureaucratic nature of ancient Chinese civilisation led to a multitude of star names in which the hierarchy of earthly officials found their counterparts.” [Needham, 1959]

Minakata then mentioned briefly the celestial system of ancient India. He noted the general similarity of the Chinese and Indian systems — the division of the celestial sphere into the same number of twenty-eight, and several constellations consisting of the same stars — by presenting a balance table of constellations (not inclusive but selecting only the comparable ones). He then remarked on several indigenous features in the Indian names which he interpreted as “Brahmanical” rather than Buddhistic, and, in conclusion, posited them as evidence of the independent origins of the Chinese and Indian constellational systems in periods earlier than the transmission of Buddhism from India to China.

Several weak points in Minakata’s discussion might easily be remarked on from today’s point of view. He supposed, for example, with no substantial basis, the transmission of Buddhism into China (commonly viewed as having occurred in the era of the latter Han dynasty) as the earliest of cultural transactions between these civilizations, and inferred his dating on that ground. As to his treatment of literary sources, the only documents he referred to are thought to have been a Japanese encyclopedia of the eighteenth century, *Wakan sansai zue* (和漢三才図会) for the Chinese system, and a Chinese encyclopedia of the ninth century, *You-yang-za-zu* (酉陽雜俎), for information regarding the Indian system. It must be admitted that Minakata, in his first attempt at English academic writing, presented only fragmented information on the celestial systems of two old civilizations by referring to a popular source of knowledge in pre-modern Japan, with no further documental work beyond that.

In fact, Minakata must soon have come to understand his fragile standpoint: The Indian system described in *You-yang-za-zu* is known today to be derived from an older Chinese translation of Buddhist literature, the *Mahasammipata-sutra* (大集經), which includes the astronomical and calendric knowledge. Minakata came to be informed of this religious text by Dogi Horyu (土宜法龍), a priest of Tantric Buddhism whom he met in London, and had to post a note in order to follow up his earlier submission, in May 1894.



Nature of Minakata's Day

As for the institutional exclusiveness of *Nature*, it is worth focusing on the fact that the questions of the anonymous reader M.A.B. themselves were obviously of historical and ethnographical interest and did not belong to the realm of pure natural sciences: what is concerned was the intercultural diversity of the astronomical knowledge of several old civilizations. In addition, it is evident that both M.A.B. and Minakata shared an interest in the history of civilizations with special attention to their origins as well as the interactions through their growth.

What is more, M.A.B.'s printed query was not a contribution of new or original knowledge but was rather a set of personal questions from an anonymous reader, though doubtless the topic's possible interest to other readers would have been approved by the editorial staff. Minakata, who responded to the query, had no institutional qualifications (he had neither completed a higher educational degree nor did he belong to any academic organization, either then or afterwards).

This being the case, was the encounter of an Oriental of multiplicate curiosity with inter-civilizational questions in this medium a fortunate exception? Was it an irregular acceptance which enabled Minakata to burst into the English intellectual circle? There are reasons to suggest the contrary: it is most probable that the information which Minakata could provide happily corresponded to the intellectual desires of the contemporary English audience.

Nature, the most renowned and respected of the academic periodicals in the field of natural sciences of today, was founded in 1869 by Joseph Norman Lockyer (1836–1920) as a weekly magazine of broad scientific interests. *Nature* is commonly said to have been founded for the purpose of facilitating the transmission of ideas between scientific disciplines. And it is worth emphasizing that *Nature* had a much wider set of contributors as well as audience when it started than it does today, having had an orientation in accordance with the personality of its founder, who remained the editor for more than half a century until shortly before his death in 1920.

While he eventually came to take important positions in British academic circles (including the directorship of the Solar Physics Observatory in South Kensington, London, and the presidency of the British Association, among many others, as well as establishing the Norman Lockyer Observatory), Norman Lockyer had a background as an amateur researcher in his earlier life. His eminent achievements in astronomical physics—he is credited with having jointly detected the element helium, in sunlight, by way of electromagnetic spectroscopy—stemmed back to his keen attempts at spectral analysis of the Sun as a young civil servant in the British War office, spectral analysis being at the time a hot point of intersection of the advancing sciences of physical chemistry and astronomy as well as the technology of optical instruments.

Lockyer's publications include a number of introductory textbooks of astronomy, or applications of astronomical knowledge to the realm of archaeology and ancient history (*The Dawn of Astronomy: A Study of Temple Worship and Mythology of the Ancient Egyptians*, 1894, and *Stonehenge and Other British Stone Monuments Astronomically Considered*, 1906), in addition to the many contributions he proposed to astronomical experts. This suggests that he was — as is quite likely for an intellectual of the latter half of the nineteenth century — a man of cross-disciplinary interest rather than a specialist in a narrow branch of a particular discipline, and that he was



interested both in the advancement of sciences as well as in their historical paths from their origins, hence his expected audience was one inclusive of academics with limited interests and general readers of rather diverging curiosity. A wide range of subjects (including reports on ethnographical information or matters of historical interest, as some of Minakata's articles were) and a readiness to accept contributions from unqualified amateur contributors — both tendencies helping to enable Minakata's involvement — were in fact characteristic of the pages of *Nature* in the 1890s.

As far as the incentives for Minakata are concerned, it may be worth noting that contemporary authors with whom he was familiar from his earlier days including Herbert Spencer, Alfred Wallace and Edward Morse (an invited professor of Zoology at Tokyo Imperial University) also occasionally contributed to the "Letters to the Editor" section. Minakata once posted a comment regarding Morse's letter "Acquired Immunity from Insect Stings" of October 21, 1897.

A "Spine" of Minakata's Writings: Through the Eye of Sun Yat-sen

Minakata was once described, by the editor of an anthology of articles on *Nature* in its first century (for which one article of Minakata's was selected), as "[writing] frequently in *Nature* on Japanese topics, usually historical" (Gratzer, 1996), though Minakata's topics were in fact not confined to Japanese information. Minakata himself once said of the basic nature of his writings in London, "At that time, I frequently contributed to *Nature* and strived to appeal to Westerners about the existence of Eastern scientific traditions, which, however immature from today's point of view, did not fall so far behind those of the West until the beginning of modern times, in spite of the common Western view" (Minakata, 1925). In fact, most of Minakata's contributions were of historical and ethnographical information in the "alternative" sciences in contrast to the Western understanding, or else provided evidence of scientific, if fragmental, knowledge in pre-modern Asian cultures, through his documenting of Eastern classical texts (mostly Chinese and occasionally Japanese besides the Western travelogues). It is quite likely that Minakata's writing activity for the English audience had a deep spine of "nationalism" in a broad sense of the word, while arousing historical interest in the Western audience at the same time, by showing the alternative or deviate paths of intellectual evolution of mankind. The acceptance of his sum fifty-one essays in *Nature* over twenty years should be enough to substantiate the view that Minakata's contributions matched up, at least partly, with the orientation of Lockyer's magazine. As for his personal, or trans-civilizational ambitions, however, a curious testimony of his exertions might be traced to his exchange with the Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925).

Sun Wen, alias Sun Yat-sen, is the founder-president of the Republic of China which he proclaimed following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. Minakata and Sun met for the first time at an office in the British Museum in 1897 in London, where Sun had escaped as a refugee after the failure of the first of his repeated revolts, at the age of thirty and twenty-nine. During Sun's stay in London, his movements were monitored by the detectives of the consulate office of the Qing government. These records are housed today in the British Public Record Office and have been disseminated by historians of Sun (Wong, 1987). From these sources,



as well as Minakata's diary, we learn how frequently they met during the four months between their first encounter and Sun's departure for Asia in July 1897, attesting to their intimacy at that time. This tight friendship between the Chinese revolutionary and the rootless Japanese wanderer of almost the same age, both temporarily sheltered in London, was not of a passing nature, for when Minakata returned to Japan in 1901, Sun traveled all the way to Minakata's native town of Wakayama to see him again (Sun was living in Japan at that time for revolutionary purposes). After this reunion, Sun sent Minakata a specimen of lichen which he had collected in Hawaii (where Sun had his hideaway). It was evidently Sun who kept paying respect to his emigrant friend back in London, and who tried to step closer again.

For most researchers of Minakata or of the modern Japanese history of ideas, as for most historians interested in the modern history of Chinese politics, the cordial ties between these two men would seem more or less out of place, for they may be considered to have belonged to completely different worlds, one of real politics and brutal revolution, the other of unworldly knowledge and researches. It may be worth remembering, however, that Sun had been a medical doctor following a Western medical education before getting involved in politics. And if there were any tangible deeds on the part of Minakata which might have won such respectful sympathy from Sun, they could hardly be anything other than his English writings (for they were almost his only accomplishments at that time).

When they first became acquainted in March 1897, Minakata had already posted twenty-one essays in *Nature* (and one more during Sun's stay in London). In most of them Minakata had shed light on aspects of Asian cultures ("On Chinese Beliefs about the North," "Chinese Beliefs about Caves," "The Antiquity of the "Finger-Print" Method," "Chinese Theory of the Origin of Amber," "Mandrake," "[The folklore of] Marriage of the Dead," and so on) in broadly (sometimes alternatively) scientific contexts for Western readers, offering a penetrating insight into the details of a wide range of literature, quoting trivial lines from more than sixty titles of Chinese and Japanese texts besides Western literature on the East. His sources include such encyclopedic works as *Yuan-jian-lei-han* (淵鑑類函), *Wu-za-zu* (五雜俎), and *Gu-jin-tu-shu-ji-cheng* (古今圖書集成) in addition to the above-mentioned *You-yang-za-zu* (酉陽雜俎), corpuses of natural history like *Ben-cao-gang-mu* (本草綱目), erudite essays like *Bai-hu-tong* (白虎通) and *Bo-wu-zhi* (博物志), and travelogues like *Da-tang-xi-yu-ji* (大唐西域記) and that of Marco Polo. When Sun met Minakata, the latter was regarded as a helpful informant of Eastern literature and culture in the British Museum, and through his presentation of such a vast range of literature on the East was evaluated as a generous informant of Eastern knowledge, sufficiently proficient in English, by *Nature*.

As to Minakata's nationalism, I would like to refer to a view of Takeuchi Yoshinobu: "It has become the chief aim of Minakata to show the quality of Eastern civilization toward ethno-centric Westerners as well as Japanese who have uncritically accepted the predominance of Western civilization.... Moreover, Minakata always took the merits of Japanese cultural attainments as part of Eastern civilization and never got caught in self-suprematism. That was the reason he could hold an impartial standpoint toward other Eastern countries as well other civilizations, hence the basically neutral attitude of his research method" (Takeuchi, 2005). In the context of cultural confrontation with the Western audience, this view should be admitted to be in line with the contents of his earlier contributions to *Nature* as shown above, while his "neutral" quality or immunity from



“self-suprematism” may possibly require further examination.

It may be worth mentioning that Minakata’s serial reports on the similarity between the Chinese medical herb “shang-lu” (商陸), or *Phytolacca acinosa*, and Western mandrake or mandragora in folkloric contexts under the title ‘Mandrake’ (April 25, 1895, August 13, 1896, and March 3, 1898) were later referred to by Mircea Eliade in his treatise on this mythical plant (Eliade, 1940), as the earliest authentic report on its Eastern counterparts in the Western language. Certainly the recovery of Minakata’s small contributions by Eliade, or by Needham as mentioned above, was possible chiefly due to the eminent status of *Nature* in later years. At the same time, however, it may duly be admitted that Minakata’s involvement in writing for *Nature* had not only a significance for his personal or nationalistic ambitions but also a certain merit of its own, at least during the days when the magazine held historically or ethnographically oriented interests.

Minakata’s Gradual Retirement: From *Nature* to *Notes and Queries*

Minakata kept contributing to *Nature* until he left London in September 1900, and resumed writing from Japan in 1902, though less frequently, up to his last posting on January 15, 1914 (“Trepanning among Ancient Peoples”). Minakata’s later contributions show an apparent inclination toward biological taxonomy of cryptogamic plants (including fungi, algae, and myxomycetes): his first letter from Japan was a report on the discovery of a known species of fresh water alga (*Pithophora oedogonia*) in Japan, which until then had been known only on the American continent (his letter, originally an attached note to the specimens he had collected both in Florida and Wakayama, Japan, was quoted as a correspondence by the editor in the column “Notes” on July 17, 1902 followed by a supporting comment from an authority researcher). In 1910 and 1912, he posted two serial reports on the colors of a few numbers of myxomycetes which he had observed to be different from the description in Arthur and Gulielma Listers’ *A Monograph of Mycetozoa*, a standard work in this realm (Minakata had kept in contact with the authors — father and daughter — from 1907 through the British Museum). He had resumed his once habitual fieldwork of botanical collection after his return to Japan, and began writing in the realm of pure natural sciences on those grounds and those of his own collections from his American days.

At the same time, he continued writing on subjects of historical, ethnographical, or folkloric interest as well. Some of them successfully appeared in *Nature*, others did not: as far as he recorded in his diary, Minakata suffered



Minakata sketched himself (wearing silk hat) at a pub in his London days on a postcard for an acquaintance (1903).

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MINAKATA KUMAGUSU ARCHIVES (MINAKATA KUMAGUSU KENSHO KAI)



a total of five rejections from *Nature*. While two of them were in his London days (he recorded having sent “A Peculiar Fruit of the Cat” on February 8, 1897, and “Early Chinese Knowledge of the Olive” on February 14, 1899, neither of which are known to have been printed), three were written to *Nature* from Japan from 1912 to 1913, and sent back with official rejection slips (these being “Japanese Castaways Stranded on the Peruvian Coast,” “Alleged Reproductions of Stones, Pearls and Bones,” and “Some Bats and Birds as Agents of Pollination,” all of which Minakata later published in Japanese). One of the rejection slips he received, one with an exceptionally explanatory comment from the editorial staff, may suggest how Minakata’s contributions of historical interest had come to be seen by the 1910s.

[Rejection slip from *Nature* for: “Some Bats and Birds as Agents of Pollination”]
May 5th. 1913.

The Editor of “Nature” presents his compliments to Mr. K. Minakata, and writes to say that the accompanying letter entitled “Some Bats and Birds as Agents to Pollination” is longer than he can find space for, but if Mr. Minakata will make it less diffuse, and return it to this office, the Editor will be pleased to further consider its publication in his columns.

(Tamura, 2004; words in italics printed as a form on the original letter.)

This letter might be considered sympathetic to Minakata, suggesting *bona fide* the reasons of rejection being its length and diffusiveness. Comparison with another rejection slip to Minakata, a rather practical though diplomatic one, may fortify this impression:

[Rejection slip from *Nature* for “Alleged Reproductions of Stones, Pearls and Bones”]
April 22nd. 1913.

The Editor of “Nature” presents his compliments to Mr. K. Minakata, and regrets his inability, through want of space, to make use of the accompanying communication entitled “Alleged Reproductions of Stones, Pearls and Bones” which Mr. Minakata was so good as to submit for his consideration, and which is therefore, returned, with thanks.

(Tamura, 2004; words in italics printed as a form on the original letter.)

It may be admitted that Minakata was trying for both of the two aspects of *Nature*, that is, involvement in contemporary advancement of natural sciences and inquisitiveness to trace the global tracks of scientific evolution from historical as well as intercultural viewpoints, after his return to Japan: both orientations were part of the versatile character of the magazine from its foundation. While Minakata already has been keenly contributing to the latter aspect through his London days, his writings in the direction of botanical taxonomy were his new commitment to the former, though each of them was a report of only restricted facts or observations. However,



Minakata eventually ceased to write in either of these two directions for *Nature*. Although he continued observing and collecting fungi and myxomycetes in the field, he scarcely tried to publish his observations. While having found a number of new species of myxomycetes as well as bryophytes, Minakata queerly held off from writing description papers, only confining himself to the position of an informant and sending his specimens to the authorities (Minakata once explained himself this was due to his being an amateur researcher, without belonging to any institute nor having facilities and references, basic requirements for determining new species). As to the latter aspect of *Nature*, it is highly likely that the recurrent rejections in 1912 and 1913 were taken by Minakata as signs of his feeling increasingly out of place in the pages of *Nature*, which in fact came to shake up its coverage of subjects of historical interest to concentrate instead on engagement in the inventiveness of the natural sciences, as the accelerated advancement of natural sciences inevitably urged it to do. In fact, this orientation has gradually become less distinct as *Nature* established its excellent academic status in the course of the twentieth century, though the subjects of historical interest do occasionally appear in *Nature* long after Minakata's retirement from it.

Anyway, Minakata came to confine himself to writing his trans-civilizational observations only for *Notes and Queries*, a periodical of folkloric and antiquarian interests founded by William Thoms (1803–1885, the originator of the word “folklore”), to which he eventually contributed more than 320 essays on folkloric or ethnological concerns as well as notes on both Western and alternative sciences from 1899 to 1933, following the style he established through his contributions to *Nature*.

TAMURA Yoshiya

Born in 1966. Graduated from the University of Tokyo. He is now Academic Trustee of Minakata Kumagusu Archives (Minakata Kumagusu Kensho kai)

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All of Minakata’s English writings are collected in: 10th volume of *Works of Minakata Kumagusu* (『南方熊楠全集』10 卷)