

Still blue-eyed, but not a 'salaryman' anymore

By ANGELA JEFFS

Niall Murtagh begins "The Blue-Eyed Salaryman" with good humor and a wry, self-deprecating smile:

" 'So you're gonna become an ant,' said straight-talking Thomas (an Austrian colleague) that day, many years ago, when I told him about the job.

'Me? An ant? Course not. I'm just gonna see what it's like, then move on.' "

Except Niall did not move on. He stayed with Mitsubishi for 14 years.



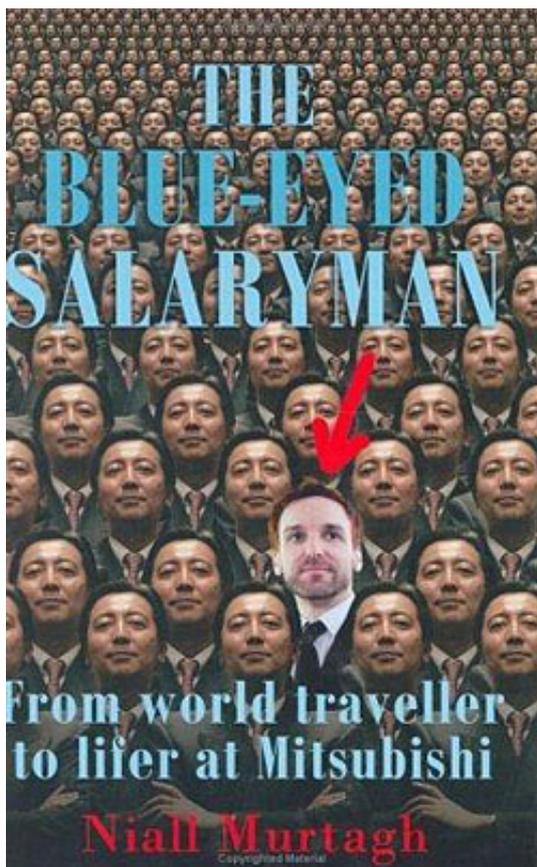
Niall Murtagh, who achieved the Japanese dream at Mitsubishi but left when he hit a glass ceiling, made his own company, OM-Consulting, offering business support such as translation and technical consulting.

"I remember at the job interview back in 1990, when I was asked if I was ready to come up with brilliant new ideas for the hundreds of things Mitsubishi made, I agreed to work for a year or maybe two. But to be honest, the longer I stayed, the harder it was to give up the very nice salary, thank you, and all the perks."

He remembers his first day at the company plant near Yokohama: "Getting off the train. Waiting at the traffic lights even though there are no cars coming, because there was a crowd of people around me, watching what I did, approving or disapproving without saying anything or doing anything," and then passing through the gate with everyone wearing the same "salaryman" white shirt and gray suit, carrying the same salaryman briefcase.

Then came booklets about company history, rules, words of the company song, benefits and employee obligations. Plus a company jacket, an ID badge and a cloth cap with the three-diamond company logo. "What was the cap for? To stop me bumping my head, I was told, in all seriousness. Also at no time was I to walk

around with my hands in my pockets -- but there seemed no rational explanation for that one." And this was only the start.



Asked where this start first began, and he laughs: "Dublin. Although I knew I wanted to live and work overseas somewhere beyond Europe, by the time I got to 20 I'd only ventured out of Ireland twice, and both times to England."

So after university (he studied engineering, geared toward computing and artificial intelligence) he set out to hitchhike from Paris to Istanbul -- and found himself working in Australia. By 1983, and three years on the road, he had covered the East also. Time to go home? Well, yes

and no.

He came to Japan as a student, "because I'd always been interested in things beyond technology." He spent four years at the Tokyo Institute of Technology in a Ph.D. program "mainly for something better to do than working." Soon employment options began to present themselves, with Japanese companies like Hitachi, Toshiba and Mitsubishi lining up.

"I joined Mitsubishi Electric because they were so accommodating. When I told them I was not ready to start quite yet, they said no problem, take your time. So instead of starting April 1st like everyone else, they gave me until September. That's when I traveled overland through Latin America, from Los Angeles to Patagonia, using a few trains but mostly by bus, riverboat and truck."

Hired officially as a research engineer, developing elevator design software, it took Niall six months to settle in. He had trouble with his bicycle. Company life was a bit like military service. And then there was his medical check. When irregularities showed up in his eye test, it turned out that the machines had been confused by the color of his eyes. "Real salaryman didn't have blue eyes -- at that time, anyway."

Having achieved the Japanese dream of a wife and two kids, a job with a major corporation and a small company apartment in the concrete suburbs, Niall began to pedal to work feeling as if he was a lifer. Which is when the idea of a book was born, to explain to the world how Mitsubishi life was at the same time weird, tough and almost fun.

He put his story together over six years, writing when he wanted to write, which was more often than not. "I wanted to explain both sides, to help foreigners better understand Japanese companies and they to better understand us. I don't exaggerate, but rather poke gentle fun."

The hardback edition was published in the U.K. in 2005; the paperback came out this year. A Japanese-language edition appeared on bookshelves three weeks ago. "After it was featured in the Japanese edition of Newsweek magazine, former colleagues called to say a book like this might encourage the company to become less monocultured."

But Niall is not sure. "Mitsubishi have been employing foreigners in Japan since the late 1980s but never with the idea of encouraging them to stay and aim at senior management. This is where I hit a glass ceiling. Also, a Westerner who speaks and reads fluently is sometimes treated as an oddity -- like a talking robot: amazing, but does it really understand what it is saying?"

When Niall asked to be released in early 2005, Mitsubishi tried hard to dissuade him. But he thinks this had more to do with losing face than valuing him personally. Now he works under his own company name, OM-Consulting, offering business support such as translation and interpretation (mainly in intellectual property) and technical consulting. "I went from student to company man and now I have to readjust again."

He found it surprisingly easy to place his book with first a U.K. agent and then a publisher. "I guess it was the pitch: a guy who having traveled 60 countries and crossed the Atlantic in a homemade boat, put on a suit to join a conservative Japanese company and stayed."

You can hear more from Niall Murtagh in person at Good Day Books in Ebisu tomorrow evening -- about Niall's unique corporate experience, the bicycle saga, and that homemade boat!

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