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Series 2, Episode 26: Infrastructure for the Blind with Maud Rowell

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INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE BLIND  
WITH MAUD ROWELL



**OM:** Oliver Moxham

**MR:** Maud Rowell

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**OM:** Hello and welcome to *Beyond Japan*, an interdisciplinary podcast that looks at the broad reach of Japanese Studies from within and beyond Japan. This podcast is brought to you by the Centre for Japanese Studies at the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures in collaboration with the University of East Anglia. I'm your host, Oliver Moxham, Research Project Coordinator at the Sainsbury Institute and researcher of language and Japanese war heritage.

Today we are joined by [Maud Rowell](#), blind freelance journalist and author of [Blind Spot: Exploring and Educating on Blindness](#), to discuss Infrastructure for the Blind.

Maud's upcoming James Holman prize-winning project, '[Where Birds Won't Go](#)', will see her independently travel to the most remote regions of Japan and write a book on her experiences, all the while demonstrating that accessible public infrastructure can benefit us all.

We hope you enjoy the show.

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**OM:** Good morning, Maud, thank you for joining me on the podcast today.

**MR:** Hi, Ollie, thank you so much for having me. It's a real pleasure to be here.

**OM:** So first off, we'd like to know a bit more about you. Can you tell us about your area of expertise and how your interests brought you there?

**MR:** Great, yeah, so my name is Maud, I'm a freelance writer based in London. I have a background in Japanese Studies, and that was the bachelor's degree I did at the University of Cambridge, graduating in 2019. I did my dissertation on the forefather of  
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*ukiyo-e* and the floating world prints of the 17th, 18th, [and] 19th centuries. After that, I trained to be a journalist at City University of London. Halfway through that course the pandemic hit, and I spent a lot of it reading travel literature and trying to escape in my mind when my body physically couldn't. For a long time, I've wanted to mesh those two passions of my writing and Japan and Japanese culture and language. So, I'm really excited to be here on the show talking about what's coming up where I get to go back there and write about it.

I should also mention that I'm blind. I went blind in 2015 just before starting my degree from a rare degenerative disease that has kind of progressed over time, and that has been a big part of what I write about as a journalist. In my book that came out last year in November, *Blind spot: exploring and educating on blindness*, there also is a central theme reason for my upcoming trip to Japan, which we're going to talk more about.

**OM:** Excellent. So, where most episodes of Beyond Japan see academics discussing case studies, typically from an objective researcher's perspective, this episode will be taking a different approach through looking at your personal lived experience of blindness and learning to navigate the world in a whole new way. To begin with, can you tell us how you define blindness?

**MR:** Yeah, of course. There is a technical specification for what qualifies you as blind. I think it's a certain level of visual acuity. I can't totally remember what it is or how the scale works, but essentially it's atypical vision that can't be corrected by things like glasses or contact lenses. Blindness is a really massive spectrum. There's a really popular misconception that people who are blind to see nothing at all or they just see blackness, but that's very rarely the case. In fact, people who have had their eyes removed see whiteness, actually, which is very different to the popular imagination.

So, for me, blindness is characterized by central vision loss, so I still have peripheral vision – I can see colour and shape – but I can't focus on anything. So, that means I can't really read text or see people's faces and read expressions, things like that, anything with detail. My eyes can no longer perceive that, but for some people, it's flashing lights and moving dots. For others, it's kind of blackness coming in from the edges, but you still have the middle of your vision. There's essentially just a million

different ways that people can be blind, and everyone's vision will be different. Just a huge spectrum, basically. Just a really big spectrum.

**OM:** Can you tell us about your transition into blindness? Can you explain that a bit?

**MR:** Yeah, of course. So, I've always been blind in my left eye, but it was a bit of a medical anomaly, and no one really understood why. I was just born that way. It didn't seem to be doing anything. It was very static. So, I just got on with my life, really, and then when I was 19, I was taking a gap year before starting my bachelor's degree, and I worked for six months in South Korea. I then travelled around Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea again. At the end of that year, a few months before starting university, I realized that people's faces had become invisible. When I looked directly at a person, I couldn't see their face. It was like something was sort of in between me and their face and was blocking it. So, I went to a hospital very late at night after a panicky Google of those symptoms and was originally diagnosed with a different eye disease. The one I have is very, very rare. It's called familial exudative vitreoretinopathy, and I think it's very rarely detected because it doesn't always do anything. You can have a gene, it's hereditary, but it won't always manifest itself in any physical way. You'll just have it and never know, but for me, it meant that my other eye that wasn't blind originally started deteriorating, and it's been degenerative over time. So, when I was first diagnosed, essentially I just needed things magnified and then I could sort of get on with my life quite a lot like how it was before I went blind, and over time, that's progressed.

So, now kind of five-six years on, I use a long cane, which is the most advanced type of white cane, as in there's a simple cane, which is small, and a guide cane, which is about a metre, I guess, and then a long cane is the longest one, which you use all the time and touches the ground all the time. I use text to speech to convert visual things into audio and things like that. It will presumably continue to degenerate. It's all a bit uncertain because the condition is so rare, and the treatment is all kind of "we don't know what would happen if you weren't having the treatment." So, I have injections every month to try and slow it down, but there's sort of no way to test if that's working.

So, yeah, it's a very dynamic disability in that it can change any time, and I have to basically keep an eye on it for the rest of my life, [so it won't] fluctuate and do things. It won't get better, but it might stay the same as it is now.

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**OM:** I see. Thank you for explaining that to us. In your 2021 book, *Blind spots: exploring and educating on blindness*, you do a fantastic job of not only deconstructing the harmful stereotypes around blindness, but also emphasizing how little the blind are considered in public infrastructure, that is, public transport, pavements, crossings, and so on. Given your transition from blindness in one eye to both eyes, what changes in your capacity to get from A to B particularly stood out for you?

**MR:** I think for me in particular, as someone who's grown up in England, [where] a lot of the infrastructure here is very old – so, for example, our cities are very kind of ramshackle and sprawling and there isn't a grid system or anything that makes it formulaic – it really shows how accessibility measures have been sort of tacked on much, much later in the history of the places that I live in and visit in this country. So, like how there are lots of old roads and they won't have any crossings at all, and then when there are crossings, there's sometimes a rotating cone underneath a pedestrian crossing. I don't know if anyone out there who's sighted has ever just felt that just for fun, but it spins when there's a green man. Those are built on after the pedestrian crossing has been installed. They're a whole separate thing, so not all of them have them.

Sometimes there's just no crossing at all. It just really highlights how much navigating relies on being able to see things, too. Crossing roads is something that I think about quite a lot because literally I live on a road that has no crossing. It's on a block with no crossings on any of the roads around it, so I physically cannot independently and safely cross the road that I live on and use every day. So, yeah, I think in London, it really strikes me how the city is really old and has a lot of history and all these areas are kind of overlapping in the way that the city looks today.

Accessibility is quite a late addition to all those various historical incarnations of the city that still exist. It feels very much tacked on and so there are lots of gaps where we haven't totally sorted out how to implement it on something that's so hybrid in the way that it exists. I think for me, [I don't feel] being blind in one eye affected me very much when I was growing up. There were very few things that that meant had to be different in my life. I had to wear an eye-guard for some sports, and that was about it. Going blind in both eyes really showcased for me how much – especially in the UK, which is

obviously where I've grown up and where I have the most experience – visual is just the norm for how we navigate the places we live in and the places we visit.

So, everything we do when we navigate is visual. The audio always comes second, and when there are problems with the audio, it doesn't really affect the majority of people and we don't really notice. So, if you imagine navigating the London underground, I have frequently been on trains where the audio is either really quiet so you can't hear it or it's been out of sync and it's been saying the wrong station. I don't know if anyone else has had that or it will just not play at all. The Piccadilly line is really bad at this. Sometimes they just don't play any audio or they play it at some stations and not others, things like this. For the vast majority of people, when things like that happen, it doesn't really matter because they still can rely on reading the little ticker tape orange text, the visual announcement of what the station is going to be, or they can look out the window and read the name of the station on the platform. So, it doesn't really matter when the audio fails, and it fails a lot because it doesn't matter to so many people, but then when you're blind, the audio is what you're relying on. So, when it fails and the fact that this happens so often, that makes a massive difference in your ability to travel around independently. That was very frustrating when I was first going blind and just discovering how little emphasis is placed on other ways of navigating when there are plenty of other ways.

I write about this in the book, but Japanese tube stations do this really well, where they have loads of audio cues that are made for everyone, so everyone benefits from them being there, and they're just really pleasant, helpful jingles or birdsong to indicate exits or the sound of water that you hear near toilets. So, blind people can navigate by those noises, but everyone benefits from being able to streamline their journeys through kind of busy stations. It's helpful for you to not have to look around for a sign. You just know by what you're hearing, where you're going, things like that.

One of the things I really try and challenge in the book is the idea that accessibility is just for a small group of people because it really isn't. When we do accessibility well, it makes environments nicer for everyone, and it has loads of amazing ripple effects in other things as well. Just a really basic example is if you think about curb cuts, which is where the curb slopes down to meet the level of the road. They were designed for

wheelchair users, but of course, those are also useful for people with luggage or people with push chairs and small children. Far more people than the original group for whom that feature is critical will use these things and find them useful. I really think the essential issue with accessibility is that we just have a bit of an image problem with it. We really need to understand why it's good for everyone. Once we understand that, we'll start implementing it and doing it better, and I think that will be a really amazing thing to see.

**OM:** Yeah. So, it's a need to normalize accessibility. It's not just for other people, it's to help everyone.

**MR:** Absolutely.

**OM:** So, let's turn to your upcoming project, 'Where Birds Won't Go', where you'll be travelling across twelve regions of Japan over the course of a year, starting this month. Could you tell us where you will be going and what the goals of this project are?

**MR:** Yeah, of course. So, over lockdown, I was reading a lot of travel writing, which was a great way to escape the realities of the pandemic. I was reading DH Lawrence and Patrick Leigh Fermor and just some amazing books that took me to places that were incredible. It became a bit of a dream to be able to do some travel writing myself and get back out there into the world, and of course, it made complete sense for me to mesh that with my knowledge of and love for Japan as something that I have an academic background in.

At the same time, I was also writing my own book, *Blind Spot*, which you mentioned before, and as part of that research, I was learning about a blind Georgian/early Victorian Explorer called James Holman, who was just an amazing figure from history. Honestly, my dream dinner party guest from history. Just an incredible person. He circumnavigated the globe in the 1830s. He was completely blind. He wrote books. He was just an amazing person. I really recommend his biography, *A sense of the world*, to anyone listening who thinks that sounds cool, but yeah, just an amazing figure. I was learning about him and was really sad to see that he wasn't really remembered in the present day at all, really. No one has really heard of him. We don't learn about him in school. He doesn't really crop up anywhere. I'd certainly never heard of him until a blind

person who had some connection to him mentioned him to me. The person I was interviewing was talking about something called the Holman Prize, which was set up by a San Francisco-based charity called [Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#). The Holman Prize runs every year. It awards \$25,000 to three blind people annually to do something that champions blind ambition, which sounds pretty vague because it is in a good way, in that you can apply with sort of any idea that is creative and ambitious and challenges popular ideas about what blindness is and what it limits you with and just shows that it doesn't. Blind people can do amazing things. It's an amazing project.

It was such an honour to win last year, and the project I applied with as my proposal was to go to Japan for a year, travel around some really ambitious regions, I just mean places with little infrastructure or just very, very remote. I really wanted to try and do the kind of itinerary I think Holman would have approved of. It was a real honour to win, and so, backed by Lighthouse, I will be going to Japan. I'm actually leaving on the 1 June. It's all been a bit with Omicron and Japan's borders being shut for so long, everything kept getting pushed back, but now I finally have a departure date and I'll be leaving on the 1<sup>st</sup> June for a year, as you say. Some of the regions I'll be visiting include Aogashima, which is a volcano inside another volcano hundreds of miles out to sea. I want to do the Shikoku 88, which is a pilgrimage dating back to the 13th century. [It's a] very old pilgrimage route around one of the islands of Japan, Shikoku. I'll be going to Okinawa, which are the islands further south, and Hokkaido, the island in the north, with loads of places I've never been to before in Japan. I'm really excited to just see so much more of the country that I've studied, but actually seen a very small amount of in reality. I really just wanted to challenge myself to go to places I hadn't been before completely by myself and just explore for the love of exploration, so it's amazing to be funded so that I can do that. It really is kind of a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The point of the year was to show that blindness doesn't stop you following your passions and doing anything you want to do. I mean, Holman did just the most incredible things, and he had less sight than I do. I also want to write a book over the course of the year, try my hand at travel writing, so I really felt that it was important to contribute to representation of blindness in literature. I think especially in the realm of travel writing, there are so many great writers that have contributed to that field, but quite often they're men, they're white, there's a very set repertoire, I think, that could

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really do with being diversified. I think it will really help other people to see people who are more different and unique contributing to travel writing and to just general exploration as an art form.

**OM:** Can I just ask - and please correct me if this is an insensitive question - but tourism is so often linked with seeing things like sightseeing and taking in landscapes and looking at old buildings that you can't touch or go inside, but just looking at them, taking photographs of them - what is sightseeing for you without actually seeing things?

**MR:** Yeah, that's actually a really good question, and it's a very interesting point that you use the word "sightseeing", which of course literally references the sense of sight. It's actually something Holman had to deal with when he was traveling and writing about his travels as well. People accusing him - sorry, I'm not saying that you're accusing - but people were saying, "what's the point of him traveling and experiencing all these things if you can't see them? What's to say that his versions of what he's describing are accurate? How can it be legitimate tourism and travel when he's not able to see anything?" I feel like this is a kind of classic human reliance on sight that is one part of a whole.

When I say, "what's the difference between you looking at a photograph of Japan and actually being there?", it's all the other senses, really, isn't it? I mean, looking at a postcard and being in Japan and experiencing something is completely different, but that's because it's so multisensory. You're not just seeing the view that's in front of you that can be preserved in a postcard. You're feeling the wind and smelling certain plants and things like that. I do think we tend to sort of forget how important the other senses are.

Also, I think it's important to remember that, as I said before, blindness is a spectrum. I can see some things, and it's unfair to say that what I'm seeing is not as good as what you're seeing when you'll never know what I can see, and if I'm enjoying it, then that makes it legitimate and worthy. I think we have to remember that everyone's ways of seeing are unique and that's something we should respect and celebrate. I think it's really cool that everyone sees something slightly differently.

Colour is a really nice example of this. The fact that so many people perceive colour in different ways. Colour blindness is really prevalent, especially among men which I don't really understand, but it's very interesting. So, I think it's amazing to think that quite often [when] we're looking at something, we think of something like colour as being really objective, but no, people are going to see that in all different ways. So, the way I'm seeing a view, a panorama in front of me is going to be different how you see it, but that doesn't mean that it's not legitimate, and that doesn't mean that I'm not going to look at it and see something beautiful, because I absolutely am. In some cases, I find that I see things that are much more beautiful than people with great vision. [There have been] times when I've looked up and thought that I could see a kind of great milky splash of stars when it was actually just a cloud that was lit a bit weirdly, but what I was seeing was really beautiful, so I'm quite glad that I had that experience.

I think it's sort of just accepting that just because someone sees something differently, it doesn't mean that their way of seeing is not as good or not as worthy as what someone with "perfect" vision – and I say that with air quotes – is seeing. I really think people being able to see things in different ways is really special and amazing, and it's something we should celebrate instead of try and devalue and interrogate to death.

**OM:** Yeah, definitely. So, on that topic, by chance, it turns out we were both at Doshisha University in Kyoto at the same time in 2017. How do you expect this experience to vary from your last trip to Japan?

**MR:** Yeah, discovering that was a really lovely coincidence! Yes, so just like you, I spent the year at Doshisha, 2017 to 2018. That year was very structured, I would say. I mean, we were both studying at a university, so we had classes every day, had to follow kind of term time, and I was based for the whole time in the city of Kyoto. I mean, I did make trips to other parts of Japan over the year, but I was essentially tied to one location, so I think it's going to be really exciting to have a whole year where I don't have anything like that kind of structure to the year. It's very free flowing.

I have lots of different activities planned, but nothing kind of locked into certain dates. I mean, I have contacts in places, but ultimately, there are parts of Japan where I'm just going to sort of rock up and wing it a bit. I have always found as a traveller that the spontaneity is one of the most beautiful things about travel. Some of the best

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experiences I've had in different places have been because I haven't had a plan at all, and I've spoken to someone and they've recommended something, or something like that. So, a whole year of doing that is going to be really, really amazing.

I've also really challenged myself off to pick places to go to that have very little infrastructure, unlike cities like Kyoto, where there's a tube, there's good public transport, things like that. So, I'm going to literally uninhabited islands off the coast of Nagasaki, things like that. Aogashima, the island I mentioned, that's a volcano inside a volcano out to sea, to get there, you have to get a ferry to a different island and then a helicopter to Aogashima. Some of these places are really remote, and I just think the challenge of navigating those, which is already a fairly big challenge for people with sight, and then to show that blindness isn't going to stop me doing those things, it's just going to make the way I do it maybe a little different, a little more creative. I think that's a really exciting thing to be able to showcase.

I'm sure I will run into many obstacles. I'm sure I will have bad days and things will go wrong, but again, that's sort of part and parcel of the travelling experience that definitely happened to me when I was travelling before I was blind, so I see no reason for that not to continue. I'm sure there will also be amazing things. I'm so grateful to Lighthouse for supporting me on this project. Otherwise I definitely wouldn't have been able to do it for a year. It's an amazing and exciting and terrifying thing to look forward to.

I really think I have designed an itinerary that will challenge me to expand my comfort zone, especially after so many years now where my comfort zone has sort of shrunk quite a lot, as I think for many people it will have. Nowadays, social interactions that would have felt quite normal before the pandemic sometimes made me feel a bit anxious. So, I am both simultaneously really excited and really, really nervous to begin on a trip that I think is quite ambitious, but I ultimately think will be a really incredible life changing experience.

I know that I can handle any obstacles that come my way. I think blindness has given me really good resilience emotionally, and that's a really amazing thing to have in your arsenal to come at the world with. Yeah, I know things can go wrong. I went blind while travelling, so yeah!

**OM:** Not to exacerbate the nerves, but I'm just remembering when I was first travelling in Japan with absolutely zero knowledge of Japanese and anything about Japan, to be honest, and not being able to communicate, to talk with people, was probably the scariest part. I had to work out schedules myself, looking for literature or anything that could help me work out when the next bus is coming, where it's going. I had to really use a lot of written material to get by. Now that you speak Japanese, do you feel that skill is going to be even more valuable now that you're blind, that you can actually talk to people and ask them, "excuse me, do you know this bus is going there and what time" and all that sort of thing?

**MR:** Absolutely. Being able to communicate with people is going to be a really amazing thing, especially because I definitely think that being blind has actually given me an amazing gift that I just have so much more random social interaction than I feel many sighted people do. So, when I first went blind, it felt quite humiliating to have to always ask for help, but then I reached a point where I felt that, "you know what? I can do this task by myself. I can get out my phone or a magnifier or use technology to solve this problem, but ultimately, I would rather make the choice to ask a human being and have a nice social moment." So nowadays, if I'm in a shop and I could get a device out and read all the labels, I would rather ask a person to just help me find something, and now I don't find that humiliating at all. I'm making a choice to talk to a person, and I've had some amazing, lovely interactions that way. I've had job offers, just meeting people in the street, honestly, just like really lovely moments where I've met other humans.

I especially think that even for sighted people nowadays, technology is just sort of everywhere. Your phone is in your pocket all the time, and it can do everything, and that's amazing, but it does mean that quite often we are just in our own little bubbles with our phones, and we don't necessarily need to leave them to do anything, to talk to someone else. So, it's actually been really nice that blindness has sort of meant that I have more excuses to leave that bubble. I think Japan is going to be no exception to that. I think it's going to be really amazing the kind of things that happen when I talk to someone to ask them when the bus is coming, as you say, things like that.

It is also definitely worth mentioning that technology is going to be a massive aid. The leaps and bounds that have happened literally, I think, since I was last in Japan, the fact

that the new iPhones can recognize text and pictures and can translate it instantly, things like that will be really useful. So, I really do think my iPhone is basically going to be the most helpful piece of assistive technology I bring to Japan. I think that's really amazing. Holman didn't have access to any of those things, so it's going to be really interesting travelling in a manner that I have planned as tribute to him. I'm going to places that I really think he would have gone to, really remote, hard to reach places, but at the same time, I'm going with technology he couldn't have even dreamt of in my pocket, so it's an interesting thought.

**OM:** Yeah. So, kind of going on from that, I found the 2019 project you mentioned in *Blind Spot* by Dr. Mona Minkara fascinating in how differently the experience of traveling as an independent blind person was not just in terms of infrastructure, but also in how people engaged with her. Given her favourable review of Japan, is a more understanding and helpful public a fundamental part of decent infrastructure for the blind?

**MR:** Yeah, so for the listener, the project that you're talking about is Dr. Mona Minkara, who is the person who first mentioned Holman and the Holman Prize to me when I interviewed her for my book. When she won the Holman Prize, it was to fund a project where she went to five different cities around the world, including Tokyo and London, and compared their takes on accessibility in terms of her arriving in the country, navigating public transport, going for dinner, going to a hotel, fairly normal activities, but just how they were different for her as a blind person and how people treated her and how the systems were built to support her. It was a really interesting project, and anyone who wants to learn more about that, it's all on YouTube. It's called "[Planes, Trains and Canes](#)."

So, it was especially interesting, I think, for me, not just that she went to Tokyo and looked at that through the lens of being blind – I wasn't as blind as I am now when I was last in Tokyo, so I'm intrigued to go back and see how it compares now – but the fact that she came to London, which is obviously my home, I think I'm very used to it. I don't always notice things about it that I think if you were a first-time visitor would stand out. Seeing London through her eyes was quite harrowing, actually. It really highlighted how flawed accessibility systems are here.

Some of her footage is quite harrowing to watch. She has an experience in a London tube station where someone literally tells her that she has to have assistance on the tube because she's a liability. To be told that as a disabled person, that's really upsetting and unfair and not at all true and just upsetting to watch.

**OM:** A very othering experience.

**MR:** Yeah, whereas Tokyo was the opposite end of the spectrum. As I mentioned before, Japanese tube stations tend to have just a lot of audio information going on that's just absolutely critical for blind people, but also useful and nice for everyone else. Escalators tell you whether they're going up or down audibly with a voice, things like that. Each train has a different jingle, so you can tell by the jingle what train you want. These are all things that blind people can use that are just amazing tools in terms of navigating independently.

Visibility is a massive thing here. I think when I was in Japan, I definitely remember noticing far more blind people walking out and about, using the systems that are there, tactile paving that's everywhere, and just seeing blind people out and about is an amazing tool to help people understand that blind people exist. We're out there, we live in cities, we go to work, we go to school, we lead our lives the same as you do. We're not hidden away in some dark, dusty corner and I think that really does boost understanding, literally just being able to see blind people out and about doing daily activities. So, when cities have good infrastructure for the blind, that naturally encourages blind people to go out and use the city and move around and things like that. It's a kind of nice virtuous cycle of "good accessibility means higher visibility" which helps people be more understanding and kinder.

So, I definitely think that the fact that accessibility measures are.. I hesitate to say better, only because I feel like I am more familiar with English systems because I've lived here for so long, but Japan I haven't really visited since going much more blind than I was last time I was there, but from what I can see, it seems generally much better on lots of physical things tactile paving, sounds in stations, things like that. I think that enacting good in other ways is really important but then again, when you look at some social aspects of it, I would say that Japan still has quite a long way to go. So, I don't know, there's the physical side of things where accessibility is something you can

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physically implement in a place, on an object, things like that, but then there's also how people think about disability and how people conceptualize it.

I don't want to say too much about it at this point. I think it will be a really interesting thing to experience myself over the year and have a more informed understanding of by the end of the year and then be able to write about it. So, at this point I'll say that I'm looking forward to learning more about that, and I'll get back to you on it.

**OM:** Great. So, for my last question, I'd like to raise your experience of coming to terms with blindness. I was struck by your descriptions of the painful medical procedures, but also feelings of isolation from a lack of cultural awareness of blind role models. For anyone dealing with blindness or wanting to support someone with blindness, do you have any words of comfort or advice you would like to share with them?

**MR:** I think the most important thing I've learned is that knowledge really is power here. There's so much information out there that can inspire and empower you as a blind person and as a sighted person to just be a better citizen in the diverse communities that we all live in. Researching 'Blind Spot' and writing that book really was for me, the difference between me feeling like blindness was something I had to come to terms with and just accept and get on with my life to something that I feel really celebratory about.

It's a part of my identity that I don't think I'd change, and I love being blind. There are so many amazing things that it's given me. Honestly, researching the book was what empowered me to feel like that. So, I would say information, finding role models. As you said, I think role models are a really important thing to discover. For me, James Holman has just been the ultimate antidote to all the negative, toxic ideas and narratives we have about disability in societies all around the world. So, for me, that was a really powerful discovery, finding someone that resonated so strongly with me from history.

Also, just connection in the present day, I think it also really helped me to find, you know, that now I'm blind, I'm part of a really amazing community that I'm not sure I would have crossed paths with otherwise. Meeting the team at Lighthouse has just been amazing. [They're] just incredible people and all these other connections that have come about just through being blind. It's an amazing community, and I really think for anyone who's struggling with sight loss in the transition, because I really do remember

how traumatic that was. It felt really tragic, and it was really hard, but for anyone struggling with that, there are people out there like you, and we're all here for each other, and it's an amazing community that you can be really proud to be a part of. I really hope that for anyone struggling that you will reach that place because it definitely exists. I can tell you that for sure.

For sighted people, again, knowledge is power, and it gives you the power to just be a better, nicer person, and that's an amazing power. Sorry for the self promotion, but please read my book! It's a very short book. It will fit in your pocket, but I worked really hard to make it helpful for sighted people to be more understanding and to just educate themselves in a way that helps everyone. The afterword in particular includes a list of things you can do, just physical things you can actually do to help support blind people and just be better. I worked really hard on it, so please go read it and enjoy. Thank you so much, Ollie, for taking the time to read it before this interview, I really appreciate that.

**OM:** It's my pleasure. I strongly recommend people go and read it. As a sighted person, for me, it really helped me to understand how blind people are just not considered really in many public services and how little things can improve it so much more. So yeah, I definitely second that!

Well, thank you for answering my questions today, Maud. Before we finish the episode, can you share with us any of the projects that you're currently working on?

**MR:** I can say that I'm working on a long form piece about James Holman which I'm really excited about and has involved a lot of exciting visits to archives and the Royal Observatory to touch things and it's been amazing to be able to connect with someone who's been dead for so long through physical objects that were around at the time he was alive. I can also say that there's a short film that's in post-production which I'm very excited about, will have to wait till it's out, but yeah, stay tuned.

**OM:** Brilliant. Great! Let's look forward to then. Thank you for joining me today, Maud, it's been a real pleasure.

Thank you so much, Ollie. It's been really lovely chatting with you.

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**OM:** You can find a link to Maud's website in the description below. Don't forget to subscribe on JapanInNorwich.org or on your preferred podcast provider for updates on new episodes. Join us for our next episode with Dr Sonia Favi, researcher at the University of Turin, to discuss the history of imagined travel. Sonia's digital exhibition, 'Travels in Tokugawa Japan', explores how late-Edo period maps indulged the imagination of those unable to journey across the country, something all too familiar in the wake of COVID-19 travel restrictions.

We hope you will join us then. Thank you for listening.