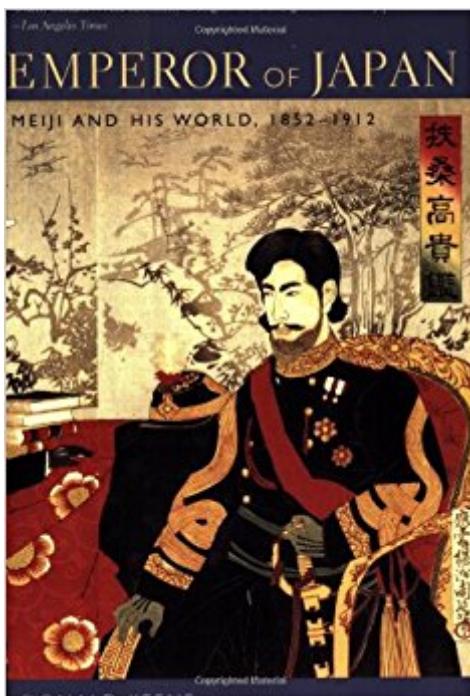


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Emperor Of Japan: Meiji And His World, 1852-1912



Synopsis

When Emperor Meiji began his rule, in 1867, Japan was a splintered empire, dominated by the shogun and the daimyos, who ruled over the country's more than 250 decentralized domains and who were, in the main, cut off from the outside world, staunchly antiforeign, and committed to the traditions of the past. Before long, the shogun surrendered to the emperor, a new constitution was adopted, and Japan emerged as a modern, industrialized state. Despite the length of his reign, little has been written about the strangely obscured figure of Meiji himself, the first emperor ever to meet a European. Most historians discuss the period that takes his name while barely mentioning the man, assuming that he had no real involvement in affairs of state. Even Japanese who believe Meiji to have been their nation's greatest ruler may have trouble recalling a single personal accomplishment that might account for such a glorious reputation. Renowned Japan scholar Donald Keene sifts the available evidence to present a rich portrait not only of Meiji but also of rapid and sometimes violent change during this pivotal period in Japan's history. In this vivid and engrossing biography, we move with the emperor through his early, traditional education; join in the formal processions that acquainted the young emperor with his country and its people; observe his behavior in court, his marriage, and his relationships with various consorts; and follow his maturation into a "Confucian" sovereign dedicated to simplicity, frugality, and hard work. Later, during Japan's wars with China and Russia, we witness Meiji's struggle to reconcile his personal commitment to peace and his nation's increasingly militarized experience of modernization. Emperor of Japan conveys in sparkling prose the complexity of the man and offers an unrivaled portrait of Japan in a period of unique interest.

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Customer Reviews

When Emperor Meiji ascended the throne, in 1867, Japan was a feudal, pre-industrial dictatorship, administered by sword-wielding samurai and closed off to foreigners. By the end of his reign, in 1912, the country had become a cosmopolitan constitutional monarchy and a military superpower, defeating Russia and China. Keene gracefully marshals evidence to illuminate this astonishing transformation by focussing on the earnest, dutiful Emperor, whose Confucian conscience obliged him to wear a patched uniform and to live in comfortless and shabby rooms. Unflinchingly describing such episodes as the Port Arthur massacre, Keene also shows how Meiji's exercises of martial strength did not preclude a sincere distaste for war. Copyright Â© 2005 The New Yorker

Few scholars are as well qualified to undertake this tremendous project.... [Keene's] special gifts are on display in Emperor of Japan... [which] brings us as close to the inner life of the Meiji emperor as we are ever likely to get. (New York Times Book Review)Utterly brilliant... the best history in English of the emergence of modern Japan. (Los Angeles Times)Keene gracefully marshals evidence to illuminate [an] astonishing transformation. (New Yorker)Keene does a heroic job of painting a personal picture of the Meiji Empire, which is an impossible task. (The New York Review of Books)Distinguished and massively authoritative... This book probably comes as close as we shall ever get to the man himself. (Times Literary Supplement (London))Despite the book's massive scale, Keene's graceful writing holds the reader's interest throughout.... This should become the Meiji biography against which all others are judged. (Booklist)A fresh and fascinating portrait. (Choice)This is a monumental work, the result of years of painstaking research and meticulous scholarship, unlikely to be superseded by any book about the Emperor Meiji in this century and destined to be required reading for all foreign students of the Restoration and the growth of modern Japan. (Hugh Cortazzi The Japan Society)The first reliable and full biography of the Japanese monarch in any language.... Carefully crafted, judicious, balanced, authoritative, it is another remarkable gift from a distinguished American author. (Washington Post)One comes away from Keene's lively account with the feeling that one person made an extraordinary difference in Japan's history. (Foreign Affairs)Eminently readable... a staggering achievement. (Seattle Times/Post Intelligencer)The most complete picture possible of a sovereign who remains as distant as a proper Confucian ruler should. (Publishers Weekly)Keene... is a master narrator with an eye for fascinating details. (Library Journal)This book is as close to being a definitive biography of the Emperor Meiji as

we are likely to see in Western languages. It is an important contribution to our understanding of Japan's modernizing experience. (W. Dean Kinzley The Historian)

A fascinating account of the life, times, and deeds of a transformational Japanese emperor. I was particularly pleased by several things:- The background given of the reign and character of his father, Emperor Komei, early in the book;- The inclusion of the backgrounds of his key advisors, which helped provide context to their advice and actions;- The interspersing of tanka poems and other short writings, both in the original Japanese (using romaji) and as English translations, written by Emperor Meiji at key points in his reign; and- The presentation of the material in the form of a scholarly narrative rather than as a dry chronicle of deeds and major event. That said, if I could, I would rate this 4.75 stars rather than 5 for two reasons. First, in describing the Russo-Japanese War, in chapter 54 the author states that "[t]he ensuing Japanese victories at sea and on land are too well known to be recounted in detail again here." The book was published in 2002, 98 years after the outbreak of the war in 1904. While in the scholarly community the author's statement is undoubtedly accurate, as a casual reader I only knew some basic facts about that war. In fairness, the author does discuss the key battles of the war, but I still felt like there should have been a bit more coverage given how accessible the book as a whole is to casual readers. The second reason is that in discussing Emperor Meiji's death, excerpts of obituaries from around the world are provided and some of them are in French without any translation included. Having a rudimentary knowledge of that language I was able to understand the broad strokes of most of them, but I think English translations should have been provided. Regardless, the book is well-written and well worth reading for anyone interested in the history of modern Japan.

I became interested in the Meiji era when I visited Tojo Castle in Kyoto. It was obvious that the castle had belonged to the Shogun but power was later transferred to the Emperor. The guide implied that this was a peaceful hand over of power because no one wanted to hurt the Emperor. That sounded suspicious. Then I read Daughters of the Samurai that described battles between the supporters of the Shogun and the Emperor. I wanted to learn more. This was great in describing a very eventful era in Japan.

The author has managed to bring the Meiji era to life with this very detailed look at both the Emperor Meiji and the time period. The book starts with his father, the Emperor Komei, with emphasis on the political situation between Imperial and Shogunal factions. The birth of his son (the future Meiji) in

1852 is welcomed as now there is an Imperial heir. The young prince's education and general upbringing are detailed. At the age of fifteen he is thrust into the position of Emperor by the death of his father. The forced opening of Japan in 1854 quickly brought many changes to the nation as well as the Imperial Restoration in 1868. Meiji oversaw his country emerge from a feudal state into the modern world. Japan managed to leap a few hundred years in a fifty year period. Both China and Russia were defeated by the new Japan in military conflicts. Railways and telegraphs were used to unify the country and the people were introduced to new ideas. A hefty read at 725 pages but essential for the historian's library.

Much is written about the Meiji Era, yet very little about the Emperor himself, and the role he played in the transformation of Japan that bears his name. This book fills the gap. The author has painstakingly trawled through many sources, first and foremost the official record of the Reign to piece together this biography of the Emperor. At the same time, the book gives good insight in the various political forces and factions active during this period.

More than a portrait of one man this engrossing book condenses into 700 pages the history of Japan from the forced opening of Commodore Perry to the death of Meiji and the beginning of the militarism that corrupted Japan's great democratic beginnings. However Keene does show how the Meiji emperor's steadfast support for modernization allowed it to go forward with much less trouble than in Korea and China.

For anyone looking to expand their knowledge of Early modern Japan and how she embarked on the road to join modern countries, this is the book to read.

It's difficult to take an entire man's life and fit it into over 700 pages, but that's what Donald Keene attempts in this book. I think overall the book is very well written, thought provoking and thoroughly researched. It focuses on Meiji's life while attempting to understand Meiji through others' views and poems Meiji has written through his life. It's guesswork, but educated guesswork. I think it is a valuable book to have and looks into probably one of the more jarring transitions in Japanese History. Though it is cautious as to not award Meiji with full credit for the modernization of Japan, it does make a very nice attempt to view the man, his life and his actions during this time. Don't look for much in the realm of action in the Sino-Japanese War or the Russo-Japanese War as they are discussed in the chapters, but not to any great detail. I think it is a necessary addition to any

respectable Japanese History Library.

A topic most of the American readers have missed. Very interesting man in an important period of history.

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