

A Yankee in Meiji Japan

The Crusading Journalist Edward W. House

BY JAMES L. HUFFMAN

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REVIEWED BY JOE GAWRYS

James L. Huffman adopts an unusual but highly effective technique in a new biography, *A Yankee in Meiji Japan: The Crusading Journalist Edward W. House*. Assuming, correctly, that most of us don't know much about Meiji Japan, Huffman devotes every odd chapter to an overview of several years of Japanese history during this critical period. In the even chapters, then, Huffman writes his biographical portrait of House, an important journalist who helped to shape Western and especially American attitudes towards Japan.

In the 1870s and 1880s, most American reporters in Japan wrote with condescension and ignorance about a Japan struggling to modernize and to make its way into the rather closed club of powerful nations. House was the exception. He was "Japan's friend," and indeed even spent years on the payroll of the Japanese government, though Huffman argues persuasively that House's causes were already well-established before he ever got government support. House wrote against British imperialism, against the unequal treaties that crippled Japan's progress, against biased reporting by various Western newspapers and journals, and against the laws of extraterritoriality and tariff limits. House wasn't blind, though, to the faults of his adopted country. For instance, he also crusaded for women's rights in Japan and even opened a school for Japanese girls.

The entire book is well written. American historians will be fascinated by House's reporting on the abolitionist John Brown, and literature buffs will enjoy the accounts of House's friendship, and later enmity, with Mark Twain. For Asian history teachers, though, the climax and best part of the book will be Chapter 8, which covers House's years with the *Tokio Times* from 1877 to 1880. During this period, the *Tokio Times* was the only English-language paper in Tokyo, and the interplay between what happens and how it is presented to the public holds critical insights for the historian.

The scope of *A Yankee in Meiji Japan* is too narrow for inclusion in high school classes and probably for introductory college classes. Teachers of Asian studies, though, will find their understanding of the Meiji Period enriched by reading this book and adding it to their libraries. ■

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