EAA INTERVIEW

Photo courtesy of James McClain.

James McClain, Author of *Japan: A Modern History*

As explained in the accompanying review (see page 62), James McClain's *Japan: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002) is a monumental new text that covers Japan from the 1600s to the present. To highlight some of the characteristics of the book, *EAA* Associate Editor Peter Frost asked Professor McClain the following questions:

Peter: *I'm wondering—or perhaps I should say marveling—about what makes your textbook so interesting. I noted that you pay homage to Clifford Geertz's "thick description." Can you tell us what this term means and how it influences your book?*

James McClain: As I suggest in the Preface to *Japan: A Modern History*, Peter, I want to take students back into the past and encourage them to explore the beliefs and values of the people who participated in the making of events. For me, the most gratifying way to understand history—to comprehend, that is, why things happened as they did when they did—is to learn about people, to uncover their dreams and ambitions, hopes and fears, and then to discover how they crafted particular plans and agendas for action to overcome what, for them, were the major problems of their times and give life to their views of the future. All of this takes a lot of intellectual energy, of course, and demands that we make what Geertz at one point calls an extended acquaintance with the people we are studying. The reward is that such thick description provides a solid foundation for making sweeping analyses and broad interpretations.

Peter: *How do you get all this in and also provide the more conventional "high history" of prime ministers, parliamentary debates, and wars? Your handy time lines and occasional use of charts are surely one way. Do you have any others? And did you have to leave out some aspects of Japan's history that you would like to have included?*

James McClain: First, I don't have a separate category for "high history." That is, the policies advocated by various prime ministers, the ideas that infused parliamentary debates, and the decisions to commit the country to war emerged from the values and perceptions of certain individuals or the social groups they represented, and hence, in that sense, the political and diplomatic concerns of an era can be understood and analyzed as an integral part of the broader unfolding of events of that particular time. Accordingly, most chapters in the book have a defined chronological framework and bunch together political, economic, social, and cultural developments. To my way of thinking, that approach can move the story along in an expeditious manner, and it also serves to reveal the important linkages between supposedly "different" kinds of history. Second, inevitably, things get left out. In retrospect, I wish I had been able to devote even more space than I do to minorities and to certain social and cultural matters, such as the changing family system and the experiences of children. At some point down the road, I suspect I will be able to expand on those issues in a revised edition.

Peter: *I notice that, in marked contrast to your other, more "scholarly" work, your footnotes are in English. Is this simply a matter of convenience or a commentary on Japanese scholarship?*

James McClain: It certainly is not intended as a slight of Japanese scholarship. As you know, Peter, I have published two volumes jointly with Japanese colleagues, and their scholarship has enriched my thinking about that country's history. But *Japan: A Modern History* is intended for an audience that reads English, and I wanted it to celebrate the growing and increasingly innovative scholarship written in that language. Just the other day I was reminiscing with a fellow American historian of Japan, and we were somewhat startled to discover that we had shared a common experience: In the early 1970s, when we were entering the profession, we thought we could read every significant book that came out in English, regardless of its disciplinary orientation; today, we are hard-pressed to keep up with the publications coming out in history alone. Not only has English-language scholarship on Japan grown enormously, we are now at a point where Japanese historians must pay heed to the findings and ideas of their foreign colleagues. This is a sea change, and I hoped to draw attention to that fact.

Peter: *I am also interested in your political slant. When you say (on page 480 of the paper edition) that Secretary of State Cordell Hull's November 1941 note contained "tired and unworkable*

demands," for example, are you suggesting that the United States should share a lot of the blame for the war?

James McClain: Yes. In the summer of 1931, Japan and the United States were on friendly terms; in the summer of 1941 they were prepared to wage war with one another. The road to Pearl Harbor ran a very complicated course and involved a lot of discrete steps and decisions over a decade. But by 1940, Japan and the United States had come to hold utterly opposing views about what the future ought to hold for East Asia. Most Japanese leaders wanted Asia to be free from Western imperialism, and they were laboring to create a semi-united economic zone that, in the rhetoric of the day, would be secure and prosperous under Japanese mentorship. China, to their way of thinking, would be folded into the Japanese-controlled region after it came under the domination of a pro-Japanese regime. Hull and President Roosevelt, to the contrary, were determined to preserve the colonial holdings of the United States in Asia, as well as the empires of its allies; foresaw a China that was united under Chiang Kai-shek and free from Japanese influence; and insisted that Japan respect the status quo in Southeast Asia so that the United States and other capitalist countries could go about their business of making profits in their colonies. Unfortunately, by 1940 there probably was no way to reconcile those different visions of East Asia and its future, and each side has to accept a share of responsibility for reaching that impasse.

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Peter: *Since a recent* EAA *issue spent a lot of time on Herbert Bix's book,* Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan *(New York: Harper Collins, 2000, 800 pages, ISBN: 0-060931-302) I think that I had better also note that you do not discuss the Emperor much in your work. As you know, Bix argues that the Showa Emperor was heavily involved in war planning. Do you think he overstates his case?*

James McClain: I admire the scholarship so richly on display in Bix's monumental study, and, as evident in my footnotes, I draw on its findings for my book. That said, in my own estimation, to concentrate exclusively on the role of the emperor denies the more comprehensive, shared responsibility for Japan's belligerence in the 1930s and 1940s. Bix's monograph, of course, is about the emperor, so he rightly focuses on that individual. *Japan: A Modern History*, on the other hand, is a broader, more general study, and I wanted to make space for other persons who, intentionally or not, abetted aggressive behavior. Such individuals could be found in a lot of different places and included military planners (Ishiwara Kanji), politicians (Konoe Fumimaro), bureaucrats (Kishi Nobusuke), corporate leaders, (Aikawa Yoshisuke), media pundits (Ryu Shintaro), academics (Arisawa Hiromi), and even poets (Yosano Akiko), suffragettes (Ichikawa Fusai), and ordinary Japanese citizens who looked the other way or didn't speak up when they should have. In that regard, Peter, perhaps I should add that I have never endorsed the view that the emperor ought to

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apologize to the world for the acts of his nation between 1931 and 1945, if that act of repentance were to place the entire weight for those events on the imperial shoulders. Japanese aggression, and the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers across Asia, did not spring from the ideas, words, or actions of any single person; they were the product of millions of individual decisions.

Peter: *Indeed, while you claim that "My experiences in Japan also conditioned me not to view that society or its history as a success story" (p. xvi), your view of Japan—like mine, I might add—seems pretty positive. Am I wrong?*

James McClain: When Howard W. French reviewed *Japan: A Modern History* in the *New York Times* recently, he wrote that while I debunked a lot of common myths, "readers will come away from [McClain's book] with a renewed appreciation that Japan, if not so mysterious or even unique, boasts one of the world's great civilizations, one whose story is extraordinarily rich in both achievement and moment." French's comment struck a chord in me. When we recall Japanese achievements in the cultural realm—from classical poetry to Kabuki theater to modern literature and film—and reflect on the transformation of Japanese political culture from shogunal authoritarianism to constitutional parliamentarianism to mass democracy, the growth of commerce and industry, Japan's changing relations with its Asian neighbors, and various ways Japanese over time have conceived of gender roles, the family system, and the rearing of children, then there is room to see both successes and failures, from our perspective as well as that of the people who lived through those times. Regardless of our judgments about the past, however, French is correct: Japanese history is extraordinarily rich and it merits our attention.

Peter: *Finally, how would you like to see your text used? I'm thinking particularly of my attempts to construct discussion (as opposed to lecture) classes. Is that up to each of us who adopts the book, or do you have special thoughts on the subject?*

James McClain: I'm sure that people will discover a variety of ways to use the volume. I hope that my effort to show how different Japanese held contrasting views on almost every subject under the sun, and on how those contending points of view provided the dynamic that moved events forward, would be helpful in constructing discussion classes. Needless to say, I assign *Japan: A Modern History* in my own survey of modern Japan, where I use certain incidents or developments as points of departure for lectures. For example, I have put together a set of slides that illustrate the evolution of middle-class behaviors and tastes in the interwar years and the emergence of its critics, such as the *mobo* and *moga*, radicals and lovers like Otsugi Sakai and Ito Noe, and flamboyant stars of stage and screen such as Matsui Sumako. In the postwar coverage, I then compare those slides with illustrations of the New Middle Class, youth, and social dissidents as a way of understanding change and continuity across the divide created by the war years.

Peter: *Thanks a lot, Jim. I look forward to using your book!*

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