

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Japan

## *A Modern History*

BY JAMES L. MCCLAIN

NEW YORK: W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, 2002

632 PAGES

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PAPER, ISBN 0-393-97720-X



mostly English language footnotes and bibliography provide solid support. The longest sections are on events from 1868 to 1931, but both World War II and post 1945 Japan—the periods most interesting to my students—are covered more fully (both in pages and percentage terms) than in the Beasley and Schirokauer texts. Literary and artistic events are not emphasized, but there is an attempt to include the lives of commoners, women, and minorities (what my earlier review called “low history”) in the broad sweep of events from 1603 to the present.


These are flush times for good Japan textbooks. In the Winter 2001 issue of *Education About Asia* (Volume 6 Number 3), I reviewed paperback editions of William G. Beasley’s *The Japanese Experience* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999) and Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Japanese Civilization* (Fort Worth, Harcourt, Brace College Publishers, 1993), and found both comprehensive and authoritative. Half-read on my desk lie two very promising works: Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan from Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York, Oxford University, 2003), and Elise K. Tipton, *Modern Japan: A Social and Political History* (London, Routledge). While the competition is thus keen, James McClain’s book is sure to be a winner.

While commenting briefly on earlier times, McClain’s work begins with the Tokugawa and proceeds on through the “bursting bubbles” of the 1990s. A helpful chronology starts each of five major sections (Traditional Japan, Japan in Revolutionary Times, Japan in the New Century, Japan at War, and Contemporary Japan), while fifteen maps, a few charts and photos, a glossary, and

As should be clear from the accompanying interview, McClain’s work captivated me. Though far longer than the four works cited above, it neatly uses the chronological charts and maps to provide a careful backdrop to a fluid, totally absorbing narrative. The judgments seem nicely balanced, hardly apologetic, yet sympathetic to Japan’s plight as it modernized, went through war and occupation, and then encountered both the promise and peril of rapid industrialization. The key feature for me—and, indeed, the reason I am using it as my main work in an undergraduate course that attracts a wide range of students—is that the chapters normally start with an interesting anecdote or event and then proceed to provide a fast-paced and coherent story that mixes just the right amount of immediate detail and broad generalization. James McClain is a wonderful writer. What greater praise can one give than to say that his work is enormously informative without being “textbooky”? Buy it! ■

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