

ESSAYS

Editor's Note:

We asked EAA Associate Editor, Peter Frost, to write a short review of Japan Focus. Frost, a historian of Japan, has extensive undergraduate teaching experience, and has conducted a large number of Japan institutes for pre-collegiate teachers.

THE JAPAN FOCUS WEB SITE A Commentary

By Peter Frost

The *Japan Focus* Web site is a collection of quite scholarly essays on largely current political and social questions. Selden and his fellow coordinators aim to make “the most innovative, creative and progressive voices in Japanese society” available to the general reader.¹ The essays—145 in number when I last looked—can be indexed as a whole, but are also listed by categories such as “War and Terror,” “Japan and the World,” “People’s Movements” (including gender issues), and the like.

All of this is easily accessible, prints nicely, and certainly is a source that we all should know. I personally found it handy, for example, when I wanted to know how my colleague (and Occupation scholar) John Dower responded to President Bush’s statement early on in the Iraq war that things were going better than “similar efforts in Germany and Japan after World War II.” Others may find this interesting since Dower’s concerns about incomplete US reform efforts in the Occupation period (1945–52) pale in comparison to his stinging critique of the Bush administration’s false analogies and controversial policies in Iraq. In addition, all of us will surely appreciate the coordinators’ desire to have more Japanese scholarship available in English.

What needs to be stressed, on the other hand, is the coordinators’ desire to bring “progressive” scholarship to our attention. The

essays I have looked at were highly critical of US policy (particularly towards North Korea, for example), a new conservative Japanese history text, the problems Japanese women face, and the discrimination that various marginal groups suffer in Japan. These concerns are surely real, but I find highly critical readings to be not enormously helpful in many survey level classes. Generally, students both at the elite private college where I spent most of my career, and in the state university with which I am currently affiliated, need to be encouraged instead of discouraged from investigating other cultures. Although we need to be aware of Japan’s flaws, in my opinion our first duty in introductory courses is to show students that other ways of organizing society can at least be as successful as ours.

My reaction to this site is thus somewhat mixed. I admire the ease with which my students and I can use the site to get some of the top “progressive” scholarship being published by both American and Japanese scholars, and yet I feel the need to provide wider perspectives and more K–12-oriented materials about the ongoing social and political issues we all face. Put another way, *Japan Focus* provides one piece—a piece that Selden and his colleagues rightly claim is often missing—in a complex puzzle, but more is needed to complete the picture. ■

NOTE

1. Mark Selden, “Japan’s Contributions to Contemporary Thought: Introducing *Japan Focus*.” (*Asian Studies Newsletter* 49, no. 1, February 2004), 10.

PETER FROST is the Frederick L. Schuman Professor of International Relations Emeritus, Williams College, and Visiting Professor of International Studies, Croft Institute for International Relations at The University of Mississippi.

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