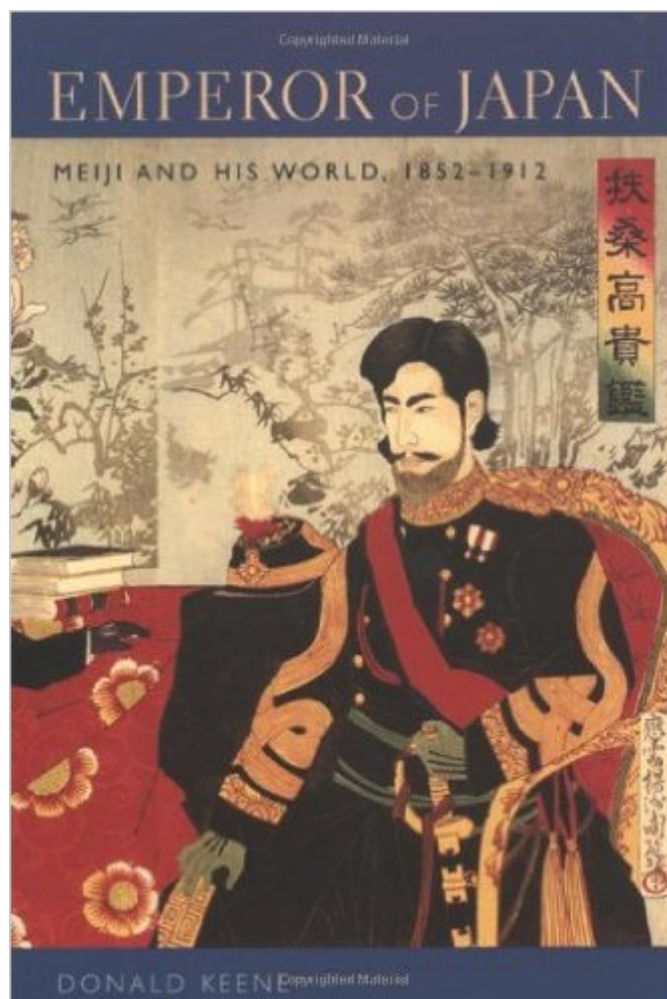


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Emperor Of Japan



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Author Donald Keene begins "Emperor of Japan" by introducing an interesting paradox: How is it that the Meiji emperor is one of the most revered figures in Japanese history, yet so little is known about the emperor as an individual? The aim of "Emperor of Japan" is to shed some light on the life of the Meiji emperor while placing him in the context of his times. Keene, however, only partially succeeds in this regard due to several problems he himself highlighted. The Meiji emperor kept no diary but wrote thousands of poems, although few revealed his true thoughts; official court chronicles kept a detailed record on the emperor's activities but all were concerned with events (i.e. the emperor did this and that); and eyewitness accounts by relatives and advisors-although extremely valuable-were sometimes contradictory or inaccurate. Despite such formidable obstacles, Keene nevertheless does an incredible job of bringing Meiji to life by pulling as much sources together and making educated speculations on the implications of Meiji's day-to-day activities. Meiji was a diligent emperor who understood the gravity of his position and the responsibilities it entailed by taking a more active role than his predecessors in discussing and examining state matters with his officials. He had toured Japan a number of times during his reign, out of the conviction that an emperor should be closer to his people. He was open to adopting western ways but remained a traditionalist, as exemplified by his distrust of western medicine and his preference for hearing lectures on Confucian philosophy. He placed great value on education, as shown by his propensity to tour schools and offer dictionaries as gifts to pupils and his obsession with his son's (and the future Taisho emperor) education and curriculum.

If you are looking for a definitive account of Emperor Meiji and his reign, look no further. Although probably not the first such account written for Western audiences, "Emperor of Japan" may very well be the last. I can't imagine a more exhaustive analysis of this monumental figure in Japanese history. I came to this book knowing next to nothing about Japanese history, but after several weeks I came away with a very firm grasp of what happened during the Komei and Meiji periods. (Emperor Komei, Meiji's father, was instrumental in setting the stage for his son's reign so is given ample space in this book.) I don't feel like my lack of prior knowledge kept me from enjoying this book. Donald Keene writes very well and explains things clearly. The events unfold at a deliberate pace and in painstaking detail. Either you will soak it up like a sponge, or you will tire of the book quickly. In fact, if you don't have a lot of time to invest (several weeks) you may want to pass on this book. If

you're looking for an account of the emperor alone, without the surrounding detail, you're out of luck. This book may have more information about Emperor Meiji than any other, but he only features prominently in about 25% or less of the more than 700 pages of text. It's difficult if not impossible to separate the emperor from the men and events that surrounded him. For much of his reign Meiji was more of a figurehead than a decision-maker, which makes it difficult for a biographer to center on the man alone. Also, as previous reviewers have pointed out, he did not keep a diary. Working with court records, personal anecdotes and thousands of tanka (Japanese poems) that Meiji wrote, Keene pieces together the most accurate picture we'll probably ever have of the emperor.

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