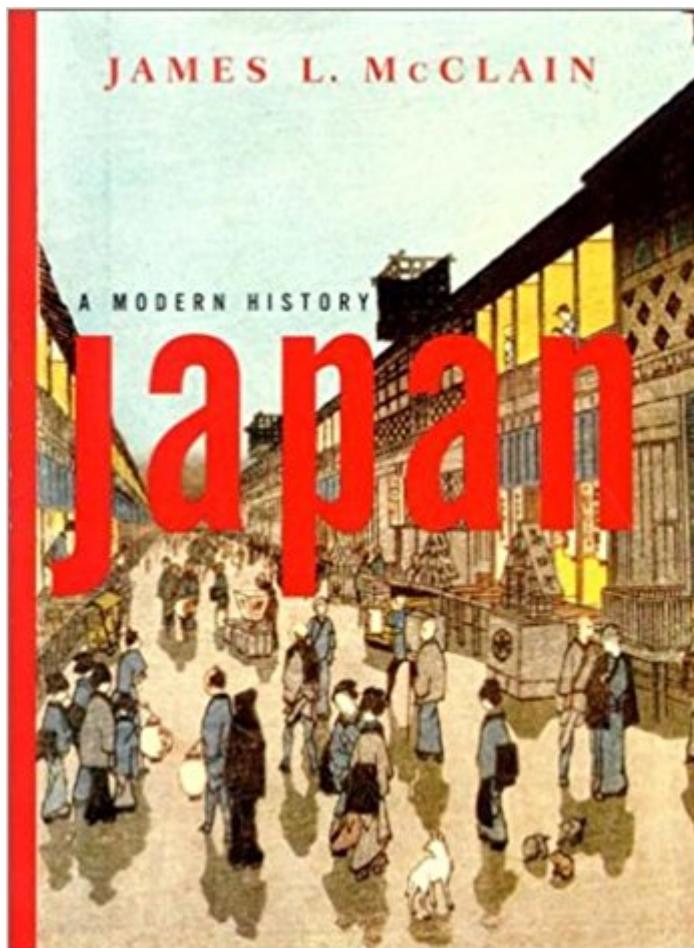


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Japan: A Modern History



Synopsis

Japan: A Modern History provides a comprehensive narrative that integrates the political, social, cultural, and economic history of modern Japan from the investiture of Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603 to the present.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

McClain takes a multifaceted, nuanced look at Japan's last four centuries. A professor of history at Brown University, McClain begins with the investiture of Tokugawa Ieyasu as shogun in 1603, then leads the reader from daimyo castles of the 17th and 18th centuries to the filthy barracks of mine workers in the 19th century, to the refined, "cultured houses" of the emerging urban middle class in the 20th century. Equally adept at describing religious and intellectual currents, economic development, political maneuverings and the special problems faced by women and marginalized groups like Koreans and the Ainu, McClain draws on the most current studies of Japanese history. Throughout, he is evenhanded in his choice of subject matter and source. He acknowledges the contributions of the industrial giants, but gives voice to the rural poor, factory workers and victims of industrial pollution. He describes the geopolitical realities that drove Japan to empire but also unflinchingly details the horrors of war. More than a mere description of how Japan became a leading nation of the 20th century, this is a story with room for the pronouncements of emperors, the poetry of Basho and the demands of labor leaders. A newcomer to the subject may be daunted at first by the sheer volume of information, but McClain soon puts the reader at ease with his mastery of the subject and his clear, precise prose. Some readers may wonder at his decision to overlook

events such as the Ako incident in the chapters on the Tokugawa era or Aum Shinrikyo's gassing of the Tokyo subway in his discussion of contemporary Japan, but overall this is a remarkable achievement. 70 illus. not seen by PW. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This panoramic study is a magnificent achievement that addresses virtually every dimension of Japan's modern history from the 17th century to the present, towering above all other works of its kind. In lucid and lively prose, McClain (history, Brown Univ.) analyzes major trends in politics, the economy, society, culture and the arts, foreign affairs, and almost every other conceivable aspect of Japanese society. He is both landscape painter and miniaturist, illuminating core trends with the telling anecdote and the personal stories and travails of ordinary people as well as the high and mighty. His pages devoted to social history, which cover workers, women, minorities, and outcastes, are particularly fine. McClain is no mere chronicler of events. He provides a finely shaded, deeply intelligent, and eminently fair assessment of a country whose historical legacy has shadowed it throughout its often tortuous transformation from a semifeudal polity to a modern state. A sympathetic but detached observer, McClain makes the history come alive for students and general readers alike. For all libraries. Steven I. Levine, Univ. of Montana, Missoula Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

McClain definitely has full command of his subject, although his writing style is somewhat informal. This book works as a textbook for undergrad college courses and also as an introduction for non-academic readers. The extensive bibliography of books for further reading at the end provides an excellent starting point for graduate studies. My only complaint is that the publisher (Norton) should have provided a better proofreader.

McClain has fashioned a highly detailed, sophisticated, and complex history of Japan from 1603 to the present. The historiography is superb (he obviously is totally bilingual and is fluent in Japanese sources). The history is both descriptive (chronological, social, political, economic, family/personal) as well as analytic (how social structure affected the rise of industrial society, for example). The overall effect is to make Japanese history clear and comprehensible. The people of Japan stand out in distinct relief. I was puzzled that the Boston Globe reviewer was much cooler toward this book than I think most readers are or will be. McClain's history will stand the test of time.

great value

Excellent, balanced, complete and comprehensive History of Japan. I bought it as a general introduction, but feel I got much more.

The book cover is a little bent, but inside is good

This book is an absolutely stellar treatment for its genre: the generalized universal history of a country over a long period. Such topics are extremely difficult to do well, but McClain's book is pretty much the way such books should be. The book is excellent for the following reasons: 1. All countries have stereotypes and clichéd account of the past; even if an historian makes an effort to avoid the ones about the subject of the book, other countries or historical periods will intrude with theirs. McClain never seems to do this. He successfully escapes the heavy hand of stereotypes about Japan, and also those of countries that played a prominent role in Japanese history (e.g., the USA, China, Russia, the UK). He also avoids the proverbial versions of famous events. 2. McClain's treatment of the characters shows analytical fairness. When he has the time to discuss the motives of historical actors, he does so with sympathy for each one's peculiar circumstances. In contrast, lesser histories tend to paint the characters with a few adjectives, and make them out to be slaves of an immutable nature. 3. He addresses very important social movements that are nearly always overlooked by historians. During each of the periods, including the Tokugawa epoch, he describes the evolving role and concerns of Japanese women; of "out groups" such as the Burakumin; and ethnic minorities such as resident Koreans and Ainu. 4. He clearly respects his subject and has compassion for the people he writes about. On many of the events he describes, I've read other works that are quite excellent: Herbert Bix, Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan (2000) and John G. Roberts' Mitsui: Three Centuries of Japanese Business (1989); clearly, McClain had done his research assiduously and avoided many common mistakes.

If you are looking for an excellent resource on the history of Japan in the past 4 centuries, I recommend this book highly. It does an excellent job in tracing the tortuous path that wove from Japan's feudal fiefdom society to the current modern parliamentary democracy. In addition to the governmental and military matters that are generally covered, there is notable space dedicated to the arts and the contributions of women, peasants and others not normally found in history books. The maps and illustrations are adequate, and do help to support the text. Highly Recommended.

The last few years have seen a spate of new histories covering the last three hundred years of Japanese history. From Herbert Bix's and John Dower's Pulitzer Prize-winning looks at Japan in the Twentieth Century to Marius Jansen and now James McClain's examinations of post-Sengoku ('Warring States') societal evolution, Japanese history is again attracting the attention of mainstream American readers. McClain's new book takes us from Tokugawa Ieyasu's country-uniting victory at Sekigahara in 1600 (with a brief stop to quickly explain the millennium of history leading up to the battle) to Yoshiro Mori's cabinet of 2000-2001. It covers political history, governmental development, economic evolution, societal change, educational systems and intellectual debates through this entire span of time giving a very synthetic view of Japanese history. If anything, McClain's book weighs in a bit more heavily on the economic and governmental development side of the equation, leaving political history to books that have covered it many times before. He shows all of modern Japanese history (defined as 1600 AD to the present) as dynamic, evolving and never quite fully under the control of any one person or group. A view that has gained a great deal of credence in modern years, it makes this history of Japan very timely. Unsurprisingly, the past century of Japanese history takes up the lion's share of the book and he shows the tragic mistakes of the century in much the same way he showcases the triumphs. If any one thesis appears in his book, it is that Japan continues to evolve, hangs on to the past and appears to be at the cusp of a new societal evolution as the century ticks over. The first two are hardly news, and while the third may be a little controversial in some circles, these views merit reiteration in a historical retelling. On the whole, McClain's book makes for a very necessary addition to the available reference works on Japanese history, especially given the economic and societal bent to his writing. His sources are impeccable and his work is conservative enough to stand as a good history while being just radical enough to push a few boundaries of intellectual thought about Japan. It doesn't hurt that the work is quite readable as well. If I ever teach a course on Japanese history, this book will serve as the core historical text.

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