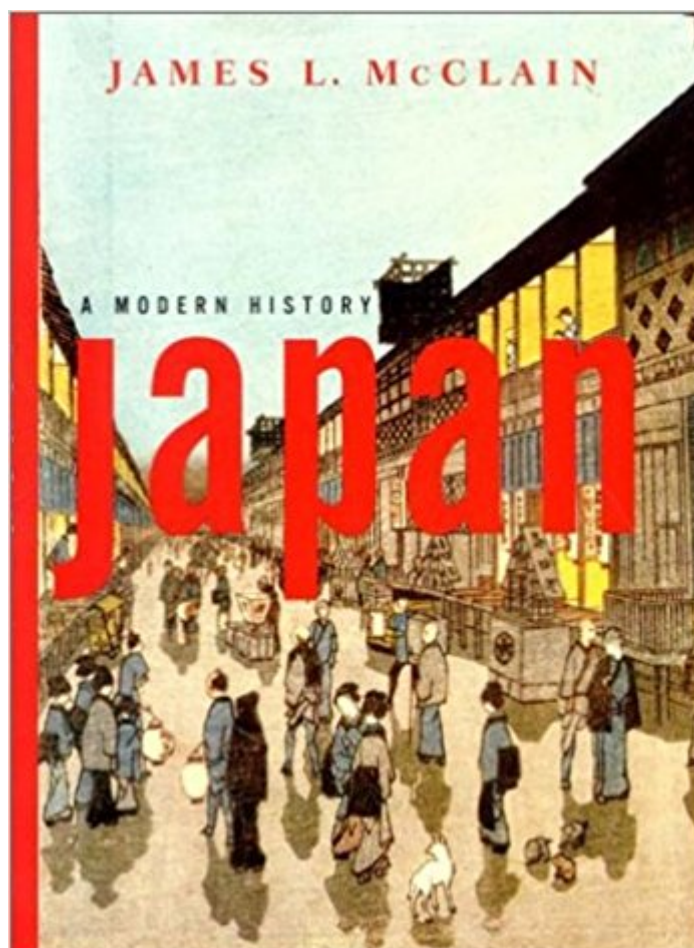


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Japan: A Modern History



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

Paperback: 752 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company (January 4, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 039397720X

ISBN-13: 978-0393977202

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.4 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (12 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

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.

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.

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