



Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1852-1912

By Donald Keene

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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.

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Editorial Review

From [The New Yorker](#)

When Emperor Meiji ascended the throne, in 1867, Japan was a feudal, pre-industrial dictatorship, administered by sword-wielding samurai and closed off to foreigners. By the end of his reign, in 1912, the country had become a cosmopolitan constitutional monarchy and a military superpower, defeating Russia and China. Keene gracefully marshals evidence to illuminate this astonishing transformation by focussing on the earnest, dutiful Emperor, whose Confucian conscience obliged him to wear a patched uniform and to live in comfortless and shabby rooms. Unflinchingly describing such episodes as the Port Arthur massacre, Keene also shows how Meiji's exercises of martial strength did not preclude a sincere distaste for war. Copyright © 2005 *The New Yorker*

Review

Few scholars are as well qualified to undertake this tremendous project.... [Keene's] special gifts are on display in *Emperor of Japan...* [which] brings us as close to the inner life of the Meiji emperor as we are ever likely to get.

(New York Times Book Review)

Utterly brilliant... the best history in English of the emergence of modern Japan.

(Los Angeles Times)

Keene gracefully marshals evidence to illuminate [an] astonishing transformation.

(New Yorker)

Keene does a heroic job of painting a personal picture of the Meiji Empire, which is an impossible task.

(The New York Review of Books)

Distinguished and massively authoritative... This book probably comes as close as we shall ever get to the man himself.

(Times Literary Supplement (London))

Despite the book's massive scale, Keene's graceful writing holds the reader's interest throughout.... This should become the Meiji biography against which all others are judged.

(Booklist)

A fresh and fascinating portrait.

(*Choice*)

This is a monumental work, the result of years of painstaking research and meticulous scholarship, unlikely to be superseded by any book about the Emperor Meiji in this century and destined to be required reading for all foreign students of the Restoration and the growth of modern Japan.

(Hugh Cortazzi *The Japan Society*)

The first reliable and full biography of the Japanese monarch in any language.... Carefully crafted, judicious, balanced, authoritative, it is another remarkable gift from a distinguished American author.

(*Washington Post*)

One comes away from Keene's lively account with the feeling that one person made an extraordinary difference in Japan's history.

(*Foreign Affairs*)

Eminently readable... a staggering achievement.

(*Seattle Times/Post Intelligencer*)

The most complete picture possible of a sovereign who remains as distant as a proper Confucian ruler should.

(*Publishers Weekly*)

Keene... is a master narrator with an eye for fascinating details.

(*Library Journal*)

This book is as close to being a definitive biography of the Emperor Meiji as we are likely to see in Western languages. It is an important contribution to our understanding of Japan's modernizing experience.

(W. Dean Kinzley *The Historian*)

About the Author

Donald Keene is Shincho Professor of Japanese Literature and University Professor Emeritus at Columbia University. He is the author of more than thirty books, including the definitive multi-volume history of Japanese literature. He lives in Tokyo and New York City.

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