



Emperor of Japan

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 Publishers Weekly

Drawing extensively from the Meiji tenno ki, the official Japanese record of the emperor's life, noted Japan scholar and Columbia professor emeritus Keene fills this monumental work with a wealth of factual information from the emperor's childhood illnesses and tours across the country to his political role in the state apparatus. This work is also, as the title suggests, an examination of Meiji's world, and Keene uses diaries and letters of the emperor's contemporaries, as well as secondary sources, to describe important events and people in Japan's transition to a modern nation-state. Keene is seeking the personality behind the historical figure, but since Meiji kept no diary and wrote almost no letters, it is difficult to determine his personal feelings about the historical events of the time. Keene does examine Meiji's poems and anecdotes from acquaintances in order to provide a rounder sketch of the man, but often, in the attempt to personalize him, Keene must resort to speculation about how the emperor "must have felt" at particular moments. Keene is obviously attracted by the subject of his study and often points out qualities in the man that he finds lacking in European monarchs of the same period (Meiji was more frugal and less arrogant, Keene notes, than the tsar, his enemy in the Russo-Japanese War). But in the end, Keene admits that "Meiji seems almost to repel attempts by a biographer to come closer" than the officially prepared chronicles allow. Perhaps, as one contemporary politician noted, "The emperor had almost no private side to him." Keene's achievement, then, is the enormous wealth of information that he makes available to the English reader. This book will undoubtedly be the most complete picture possible of a sovereign who remains as distant as a proper Confucian ruler should.

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From Library Journal

During the Meiji era (1868-1912), Japan entered world politics as a modernizing and ambitious imperial power. Previous studies of this era largely slighted the emperor himself, but Keene (Shincho Professor of Japanese Literature and University Professor Emeritus, Columbia Univ.), a titan of Japanese studies, brings the emperor out of the wings and onto center stage in this vivid and richly detailed chronicle. Using a multitude of Japanese and other sources, Keene argues that Meiji was no mere figurehead but an increasingly active participant in the politics of modern Japan, particularly after he outgrew his youthful impatience with state affairs. Keene's admiration for Meiji, an unsympathetic figure who drank to excess, ignored his own children, and often slighted his duties, is somewhat baffling on the evidence presented. Ultimately, the Meiji era is much more interesting than the man himself. Keene, a literary scholar, is a master narrator with an eye for fascinating details, but his sprawling chronicle is weak on analysis of the historical significance of an era that he views almost exclusively from the vantage point of court politics. For academic and larger public libraries. Steven I. Levine, Univ. of Montana, Missoula

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From Booklist

Columbia University professor of Japanese Literature and author of a definitive multivolume history of Japanese literature, Keene now has written a comprehensive biography-cum-history of Emperor Meiji and his times. Despite a heavily documented life (even though Meiji himself kept no diaries and wrote hardly any letters--unlike his similarly long-reigned and near contemporary, Queen Victoria), previous biographers have failed to penetrate the depths of this first Japanese emperor ever to meet a European. Recent debunkers have left the impression of Meiji as a cipher, a mouthpiece for more intelligent staffers. Yet, as Keene demonstrates in this massive work, Meiji's reign saw Japan become fully industrialized under a brand new constitution, and with new economic and educational systems adopted. Despite the book's massive scale,

Keene's graceful writing holds the reader's interest throughout, describing a life of duty and responsibility, and one, despite several wars, dedicated to hopes of peace. This should become the Meiji biography against which all others are judged. *Allen Weakland*

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