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

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

**By Donald Keene**

(New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002. xiii+928 pp.)

Reviewed by *John Pinkston*

Donald Keene's massive and monumental *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and his World, 1852-1912*, focuses on the life and times of Emperor Meiji, who reigned as Japan's sovereign, imperial ruler from 1867 until his death in 1912. During his reign Japan was transformed from a backward, feudal society into a modern, industrialized nation. Utilizing the volumes of *Meiji Tenno Ki*, (Record of Emperor Meiji), the official, detailed history, along with numerous other Japanese and foreign sources allowed the author to weave a history of Meiji the person as numerous significant events unfolded during his lifetime.

Prince Sachi, later known as Emperor Meiji, was born in 1852—one year before U.S. Navy Commodore Matthew Perry and his “black ships” arrived. Several rituals surrounded the infant's care. For example, for the first seven days after his birth, a knot was tied in a cord every time he sneezed because it was believed that the more he sneezed the longer he would live. Yin Yang diviners were summoned who prescribed many of the ritual actions to be taken to ensure the health of the young prince. He was taught the traditional Confucian classics such as *The Analects* and *The Classic of Filial Piety*; calligraphy; and how to write poetry in the classic *tanka* verse form. He disliked studying and was not a diligent pupil. On one occasion he pushed an elderly male servant into a carp pond on the Imperial palace grounds in Kyoto to demonstrate he had “spirit” and as not a weakling. He was not taught about barbarians like Perry, nor taught practical subjects like science.

Emperor Komei, Meiji's father, was angry and frustrated as foreign warships insisted that Japan open its doors to trade. The Shogun's government—the Tokugawa shogunate-- was divided over how to respond, but realized it must grant some concessions or risk invasion by powerful Western nations such as Britain, Russia, and the rising power of the United States. Komei was resolutely opposed to foreign entry and infuriated that the Tokugawa shogunate granted treaties favorable to the foreigners. Komei's anti-foreign sentiment resulted in violence between forces supporting him and those favoring opening the country to trade and diplomatic relations. Assassinations by opposing factions were common, and Western powers demanded retribution for their assassinated nationals.

Komei died in 1867, and following his coronation, Meiji and his entourage traveled along the Tokaido from Kyoto to Tokyo (known as Edo until 1868). Keene relates that Meiji was the first Japanese emperor to glimpse the Pacific Ocean or to see Mount Fuji. Tens of thousands gathered to see the emperor enter Tokyo, and a large amount of sake and cuttlefish were distributed to the citizenry. Meiji received foreign ministers courteously, previously unheard of in Japan. Surprisingly, Meiji had none of his father's anti-foreign sentiment. Meanwhile, Tokugawa shogunate forces were defeated by warriors led by Satsuma and Choshu domains, and Yoshinobu, the last shogun, formally ceded governing authority to the emperor.

During his lengthy reign, Meiji received many foreign dignitaries. Perhaps the most memorable was the visit in 1879 of former U.S. President Ulysses Grant while on his around-the-world tour. When they met, Meiji advanced and shook hands with him. At dinner, Mrs. Grant commented to the empress that of all the places they had visited, Japan had shown the most kindness. Grant was well received by the common people of Japan, and his likeness is depicted on numerous woodblock prints from the period.

## Emperor of Japan—Pinkston

During the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-96, Meiji moved the imperial headquarters to Hiroshima, the disembarkation point for troops bound for the conflict, in order to be personally involved with the war. At his wish, his quarters were spartan. He was accompanied by the empress, who visited the wounded in hospitals. Foreign perceptions of Japan were marred by news reports of atrocities committed by Japanese troops at Port Arthur, China. There were numerous official Japanese denials and bribery of the foreign press to publish favorable reports. There is no evidence that Meiji learned of the atrocities or the attempts to cover up reports. Although he attended Cabinet meetings regularly, he relied on his ministers and rarely read newspapers.

Infant mortality was high and imperial succession was not assured. Although Meiji's marriage was happy, the empress was barren. He was served by imperial concubines, ladies of impeccable background. He would have fifteen children, yet only five survived into adulthood.

Meiji made several trips to various parts of Japan during his reign. He focused on improving education and military preparedness, and supporting industrial development. He visited schools, listened to student recitations, and gave out educational materials. He visited factories to inspire progress. He frequently visited military maneuvers, occasionally braving indolent weather or leading troops on horseback with drawn sword for inspiration. Early trips were made by palanquin, and although extremely uncomfortable, he was never known to complain. Later trips were made by train. Political pressure for a constitution increased, and there was considerable discussion as to what type of power sharing arrangement should emerge. The Meiji Constitution became effective in 1890 along with convening of Parliament. Although more liberal than some European constitutions, it provided that the person of the emperor was "sacred and inviolable" and that sovereignty resided in him rather than the people. Nevertheless, it marked the beginning of representative government in Japan.

Meiji died of heart failure in 1912, and although he is Japan's most revered emperor, Keene believes most Japanese are not very familiar with him. What kind of man was Meiji? Keene finds his subject frustratingly elusive. He wrote few letters and kept no diary. The *Meiji tenno ki* fails to leave much of an impression. He loved to compose *tanka*, and it is estimated that he wrote more than 100,000 during his lifetime. He liked horseback riding, and consumed a lot of sake, later wine. He usually dressed in a military uniform or frock coat, and was rarely seen in public wearing Japanese clothes. He rarely showed emotion. He was simple, frugal, dedicated to his duty, and seemed genuinely interested in other people. He relied heavily on his ministers, particularly Ito Hirobumi.

Emperor of Japan can be strongly recommended to students of Japanese history, and its easy readable style makes it readily accessible to the general reader. Its 63 chapters of text numbering over 700 pages portray events chronologically, with ample elaboration to provide context where desirable. In addition to the many important historical events of the period, such as the Russo-Japanese War and Japanese annexation of Korea, the numerous rituals and ceremonies surrounding the emperor and imperial court are richly described. It is extensively annotated with an impressive bibliography. Readers will find a treasure trove of information on the Meiji era in this delightful book.