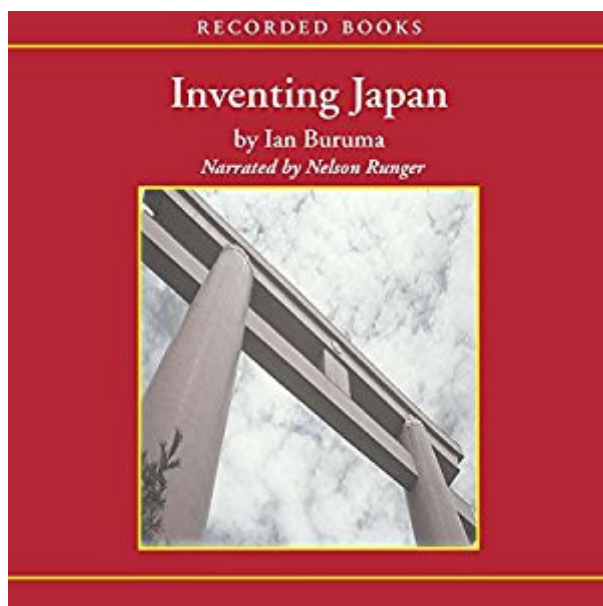


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Inventing Japan [Modern Library Chronicles]



Synopsis

In a single short book as elegant as it is wise, Ian Buruma makes sense of the most fateful span of Japan's history, the period that saw as dramatic a transformation as any country has ever known. In the course of little more than a hundred years from the day Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in his black ships, this insular, preindustrial realm mutated into an expansive military dictatorship that essentially supplanted the British, French, Dutch, and American empires in Asia before plunging to utter ruin, eventually emerging under American tutelage as a pseudo-Western-style democracy and economic dynamo. What explains the seismic changes that thrust this small island nation so violently onto the world stage? In part, Ian Buruma argues, the story is one of a newly united nation that felt it must play catch-up to the established Western powers, just as Germany and Italy did, a process that involved, in addition to outward colonial expansion, internal cultural consolidation and the manufacturing of a shared heritage. But Japan has always been both particularly open to the importation of good ideas and particularly prickly about keeping their influence quarantined, a bipolar disorder that would have dramatic consequences and that continues to this day. If one book is to be read in order to understand why the Japanese seem so impossibly strange to many Americans, *Inventing Japan* is surely it.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When a book's primary redeeming quality is that it is short, that says something. With "Inventing Japan", Buruma has written a terse, somewhat informative account of one of the most incredible periods of political and economic transformation in any nation and has done so with a nagging tone

of moral superiority. Japan's failures are construed as products of their "mumbo jumbo" and "irritating habits" where their triumphs are seen as moments where they properly looked to European models (and, from Buruma's lilt, one can't help but believe he means European betters). It is the kind of writing on non-Western nations that one finds in a handful of embittered post-colonial British writers and that shows no real development in thought or nuance of understanding from the days of Ruth Benedict's "Chrysanthemum and the Sword". The brevity is not reason enough to turn to this book instead of works on modern Japanese history by writers like Marius Jansen, Conrad Totman, or Andrew Gordon.

Since Mathew Perry's Black Ships reached Japan and broke its self imposed exclusion from the world, the Japanese Experience has been extraordinary. Alone among the non Western nations it has mastered Western science, technology, and economic prowess, and had earned a place among the major world powers in the pre WW2 world. Then it has joined in with Hitler and Mussolini as part of the Axis power, unleashing a gruesome campaign against its weaker Asian neighbors and a suicidal one against the United States. Following its defeat, Japan reemerged as a pacifist democracy and an economic and cultural world leader. Ian Buruma's fascinating little book about the century between Perry's arrival and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, has to cover a lot of ground in 160 pages (he has about 1.5 pages per year). His book is necessarily frustrating in its gloss of important aspects, but he nonetheless supplies a useful account of Japan's political history throughout the period (and, surprisingly, quite a lot about Japanese culture as well, particularly the Cinema). It seems redundant to summarize the political developments in Japan; Suffice to say that, rather than a confrontation between traditionalists and modernists; Buruma sees a conflict between modernists of the Liberal and illiberal kind. The latter, drawing upon the German model, transformed Shinto into a state religion celebrating a divine emperor, created a highly militaristic state, and led Japan into a series of Military adventures, from the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, through the war with Russia in 1905, the 'Manchurian incident' in 1931, and finally to Pearl Harbor. Following Japan's inevitable defeat, The American occupation force purged the hardliner military leaders, but maintained Emperor Hirohito (Buruma is inconclusive as to the level of his culpability in Japan's militarism). It created a new Constitution (dedicated to Pacifism), and partially, but not entirely, reshaped Japan's political culture. After some turbulence, the conservative Liberal-Democratic Party settled to rule Japan fairly effectively, partially betraying and partially fulfilling the Liberal hopes from the Post War era. As interesting as Japan's political history has been, the extraordinary question of Japanese history is economic: How did Japan manage to twice rise from great disadvantages to a position as

a world leader? How did Japan, alone among all non Western nations, manage to Industrialize as early as the 19th century, and how come it is today a leading member in the still almost exclusively Western club of developed countries?Buruma hardly addressed these questions, and as such his ability to explain the history of Japan suffers greatly. As interesting as the political and ideological history is, that's not where the story of Modern Japan truly is; Japan's triumph, and current difficulties are hardly addressed, and Buruma mostly sees the enrichment of post war Japan as a distraction, "Opium to the Masses", so to speak, allowing the conservatives to shrink from fuller Liberalization of Japan (pp. 166-167).The best insight Buruma offers to Japan's extraordinary success is in the Prologue, describing the Judo contest in the 1964 Olympics. The Japanese expected their smallish Judo champion, Kaminaga Akio to defeat his six foot six Dutch opponent, Anton Geesink. Such a victory would have signaled the "superiority of Japanese culture, of the Japanese spirit". (p.6)But in the end, Geesink won. The Dutchman defeated the Japanese: "Once again, Japanese manhood had put to the test against superior Western manhood, and once again it was found wanting". But the humiliation subsided when Geesink showed the proper respect by bowing the traditional bow. "Geesink... would be treated as a hero in Japan forever after... One quality has stood out to serve Japan better than any other: the grace to make the best of defeat".I think Buruma has hit upon a major element in Japan's success. Unlike many other traditional societies, Japanese were able to accept the victories of the West and to profit from them; I think people around the world have much to benefit by reflecting upon the Japanese capacity of Embracing Defeat.

A good introduction of Japanese political system and what's the problem inside. Combined with a economic history of Japan, you can get a better sense of why things going that way by then.

This book was recommended by a travel guide book and I strongly recommend it for people traveling to Japan to put the history you are seeing into a political context. Well-written and admirably short.

It was perfect! Thank you

Very interesting

The book is as described by the condition Used - Good. There are a few minor physical scratched

on the book covers but again, you have to hold the book up to the light at a certain angle to see it. There are no markings inside the book and the pages seem to be in good condition. Good price for the quality.

I was moderately familiar with the post-Meiji history of Japan before I read this book; what I didn't know was the binary hero/villain status of every public figure of the era. Thankfully, Buruma wrote a handy guide and now I know exactly in which camp everyone belongs.

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