

REREADING E.H. NORMAN

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For many years Canadian historian-diplomat E.H. Norman's first major academic work occupied an unusually important place for Western students of Japan. Written in 1938 as his Harvard doctoral thesis, *Japan's Emergence as a Modern State* examines the problems and accomplishments of the Meiji era. The transition from a divided and decayed feudal system had occurred painfully and with astonishing speed. In less than five decades, Japan had leapfrogged a developmental distance that in Europe had required far longer and had moved by slow stages, which in Japan were abbreviated or skipped.

Focusing on this rapid transformation, Norman points out that the last two decades of the Tokugawa military government and the early decades of Meiji had been stormy and that though there was rapid progress, it was uneven. Many features of late Tokugawa feudalism had persisted—for example, landlord-tenant relations in agriculture, minute-scale farming, a “land-hungry peasantry,” and a domestic market distinguished by low purchasing power. The great changes were driven politically, financially, and technologically from above and from outside, with the consequence that huge distortions developed in Japanese society and economy.

At the time Norman presented his dissertation, Japan was mobilizing for more “total” war on the Asian continent, where its situation had bogged down into a stalemate. Its militant leaders, feeling their traditional ties with the United States and Britain had become more like economic fetters than supportive bonds, were considering a closer alignment with Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. The convictions that fired the imagination of Japanese militarists are nowhere to be found in Norman's text, and *Emergence* is in no way a military analysis. Nevertheless, Japanese militarism in the 1930s was rooted precisely in the time Norman studies.

There are other lacunas. Norman speaks of the Japanese bureaucracy but ignores the bureaucratized monarchy. As a result of the lack of materials at the time, and the Japanese taboo on discussion of the throne, he does not assess the military power, economic wealth, and ideas that underpinned the throne, let alone its role, but simply refers to the monarchy by the word “absolutism.” There are certain exaggerations: Japan’s great leap forward was more sluggish than Norman understood, and he exaggerates the extent of the foreign threat to Japan’s political independence.

Emergence is the work of a political historian intent on explaining the accomplishments of the statesmen and people of the late Tokugawa and Meiji periods. It asks two main questions: How did Japan establish a modern nation-state with an industrialized economy nurtured by state patronage and control? What were the costs of this achievement?

Today, we view the Japanese past in a way Norman could not. Several decades of “new” history—from the new social history of the 1970s and early 1980s to the postmodernist wave that succeeded it and has since waned—have overtaken large parts of his analysis, which, after all, derived from now outdated historical works on the Meiji era. *Emergence* is still important. We need frameworks for thinking about how Japan made the transition from late feudalism to a modern capitalist state. Norman’s concept of the Meiji “settlement,” and how it shaped the parameters of later political development, remains useful and relevant.

Norman’s style is always graceful. One finds many of his best passages still fresh. A wealth of useful, reliable information fills his book. Some of his evaluations are also relevant: for example, how foreign pressure (*gaiatsu*) forced changes on Japan. Norman consistently writes with a high degree of objectivity and balance. He is also open to both Marxist and non-Marxist sources, but because he draws heavily on the “lectures school of Marxism” (*Kōza-ha*) of the interwar decades, his account is largely in the mould of structural analysis. Japanese scholars during the Occupation period (1945-52) appreciated this feature, not to mention Norman’s skill in recasting what he had read into clear, stylish prose. He was the first Western historian translated into Japanese after the Second World War who did what they had wanted to do but could not during the wartime repression of thought.

Emergence ends with Norman's reflections on "The Position of a Liberal Opposition and the Question of 'Military versus Civil' in the Japanese Government." A famous passage defines the bureaucracy "as a shock-absorber in Japanese political life . . . As it shuttles back and forth from the military to the financial camp, or from the court circles to political parties, this almost anonymous but experienced bureaucracy has gradually snuffed out all signs of genuine democratic activity, but on the other hand it has blocked the victory of outright fascist forces . . . It might not be an exaggeration to say that the key to understanding Japanese political life is given to whoever appreciates fully the historical role and actual position of the bureaucracy" (206).