



*Commemorating Meiji: History,  
Politics and the Politics of History*

**D. V. Botsman and  
Adam Clulow (eds.)**

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**Review by: Alison J. Miller**

*Commemorating Meiji: History, Politics and the Politics of History*. Edited by D. V. Botsman and Adam Clulow. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. ISBN 978-0-367-64268-6. vii + 116 pp. \$160 hardcover, \$58.95 e-book.

The edited volume *Commemorating Meiji: History, Politics and the Politics of History* is one of the many scholarly works produced to commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Meiji Restoration in 2018. In six chapters plus an introduction, the authors and editors focus on a variety of commemorative activities and sites related to the Meiji state, named for the reign of Emperor Meiji (1868-1912), and how these events and places changed in the public memory over time, primarily within the twentieth century. Originating in the 2017 conference “The Meiji Restoration and its Afterlives,” held at Yale University, the six content chapters of the volume were originally published in the journal *Japanese Studies*, albeit in different issues.

Chapter One, by D.V. Botsman and Adam Clulow, acts as a very short introduction. Linking the book’s aim of examining the history of commemorating Meiji in the twentieth century to an understanding of the Abe government’s decisions on marking the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, this three-page outline points out tensions in the methodologies of each chapter, arguing that these divergences prove the need for further scholarship on the topic of historical commemoration.

Botsman’s subsequent chapter analyzes the 2018 commemorations of the Meiji Sesquicentennial in comparison to the 1968 Centennial. Primarily focused on how historians in Japan and the English-speaking world critiqued these two commemorative events, the chapter notes the divide between government efforts to use historical commemoration to galvanize nationalist emotions amongst the populace and the general lack of interest or participation among Japanese citizens in both 1968 and 2018. Botsman covers significant ground in this chapter, noting the striking absence of any mention of war and militarization among the Japanese government’s promotion of the “spirit of Meiji,” summarizing divides in scholarly perspectives in the post-war period, and considering the acceptance and rejection of modernization theory among different groups.

In Chapter Three Nick Kapur also addresses the position of modernization theory in 1960s Japanese and US academic circles, and how it clashed with Marxist ideas that were dominant in the post-war Japanese scholarly realm. Kapur ties this conflict to the negative assessments of Centennial celebrations by Japanese historians, who were critical of Prime Minister Satō Eisaku’s use of the commemorations to provoke and encourage nationalist, and even militarist, thought. He then describes the Centennial Ceremony, comparing it to the 1940 ceremony to commemorate the 2600<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Imperial Rule. Kapur argues that the events were strikingly similar, using photographs and programs as evidence, and states that the song “A Dream Renewed,” the centennial hymn, extolled a modernization theory view (37–40). Yet readers might note that most imperial ceremonies throughout the modern era have similar aesthetics to the 1940 and 1968 events, and that commemorative hymns typically extoll positive values and exaggerated national success, not a nuanced view of history.

Takagi Hiroshi's chapter (translated by D.V. Botsman) explores how the 1917 and 1928 Meiji commemorative events addressed the 1868 Boshin War. Takagi primarily examines the divisions of the winning and losing sides in memorialization, arguing that while some of the war dead were venerated immediately, it took decades for those who were on the losing side to be integrated into sites of tribute. The chapter skillfully compares the 1917 and 1928 events, contending that the process of historical reconciliation resulted from the modern Japanese emperor system's unification of the citizenry with imperial mythology and concepts of racial superiority, the rise in mass media, and a change in official responsibility for historical sites moving from the Home Ministry to the Ministry of Education.

Chapter Five, by Robert Hellyer, presents the history of the Second Kiheitai, an 1860s militia which was formed in present day Yamaguchi prefecture (then Chōshū domain). Hellyer analyzes the Second Kiheitai's commemoration from the Meiji period, into the midtwentieth century, and onto the present day, primarily in stone monuments and through a sesquicentennial tourist campaign. This chapter looks at the Meiji Restoration through the lens of local history, and traces how the sites in the Chōshū domain, despite not having many physical traces of the events, were linked to larger narratives. In one example, the author discusses the militarism of 1930s Japan as linked to local Yamaguchi youth campaigns to fundraise for the construction of a stone memorial for a member of the Second Kiheitai (68). Hellyer successfully utilizes the Chōshū domain as a case study to argue that the Second Kiheitai commemorations show the importance of grounding Japan's imperialist age in the Meiji Restoration.

Anne Walthall takes a different approach in Chapter Six by tracing the varied scholarly approaches to the Meiji period, primarily in the United States. Her chapter returns to the modernization theories brought up in the early sections of the volume and the debates with Marxist approaches, mentioning the perennial problem of how to translate *Meiji ishin* into English (84); if Meiji Restoration is used, it implies a return to something, when in fact the change was fairly radical, but if Meiji Revolution is used, it indicates a different type of political event than was the reality. She also discusses movements towards people's history and women's history later in the twentieth century. Walthall states in her conclusion:

Studying a full range of responses to the West, from the importation of the latest in weaponry to calling on the gods to repel the barbarians, reminds us that people at the time did not know what we do; they did not know that progress would come to be defined in terms of modern imperialism (88).

With these comments, and the cohesive ties to other author's discussions of historical framing, this chapter provides an especially compelling case for focusing on the values of individual actors in larger historical narratives.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, D. Colin Jaundrill uses one specific battle to trace the way commemoration has changed over time. As the first major site of the Boshin War, the 1868 Battle of Toba-Fushimi was important to the eventual success of the Meiji Restoration, but

it was not a focus of the Meiji state's mythmaking. The chapter examines three stages of Toba-Fushimi commemoration, ranging from early Meiji to post-World War II, arguing that while other nations have institutions dedicated to preserving important battle sites, as with the United States National Park Service, Japan's battle fields are relatively ignored, thus meaning that few are conserved, with Toba-Fushimi's preservation acting as an exception.

*Commemorating Meiji* is a good complement to other recent scholarship on the Meiji period. In 2018, for example, the *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History*, edited by Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, attempted to cover a significant swath of history in over five hundred pages. *Commemorating Meiji* is far more specific, and contributes to the field of modern Japanese history in that it provides depth on one particular aspect of the Meiji state and its aftermath. The varied methodological approaches taken to the topic of commemoration make an interesting case study in how different scholars investigate similar topics, and as such this volume would be a conversation-provoking addition to a graduate seminar syllabus.

Despite these positives, *Commemorating Meiji* lacks a substantial theoretical introduction, which could have worked to broaden the reader's ideas about commemoration and memory as specifically related to the Meiji state. The book functions as a series of excellent case studies which resonate well, but the individual chapters could have been longer to provide more throughlines and an expansion of the theoretical premise. Furthermore, all seven chapters were previously published in the journal *Japanese Studies*, leaving this reader to wonder if re-publication was needed. The expansion of the topic with the inclusion of art history, religious studies, or media studies would have been an improvement. Finally, readers from Royal Studies will be disappointed to find that the Meiji emperor and the larger imperial family are nearly absent from the book's chapters.

However, *Commemorating Meiji* makes a significant contribution to the emerging field of Memory Studies. While studies of memorials and commemorative events are common in fields such as Holocaust Studies or the history of the United States Confederacy, within Japanese Studies there is a need for more of this type of thoughtful historiographical work. Typically, scholarship on war and memory in the Japanese context focuses on events and places related to World War II and the atomic bombings, but—as many of the *Commemorating Meiji* authors point out—there are significant and poignant links between the commemoration of both the Meiji Restoration and the Meiji period and the expansion of the Imperial Japanese State in the mid-twentieth century. As such, this book opens new avenues of research in Japanese Memory Studies which will hopefully be built upon in the coming years.

*Commemorating Meiji* will be of interest to historians and those considering monuments and memorials, as well as commemorative events and their impact on history. Overall, each chapter makes a significant, nuanced contribution to an emerging and growing field.

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