

John S. BROWNLEE, *Japanese Historians and the National Myths, 1600-1945: The Age of the Gods and Emperor Jimmu*. viii + 256 pp. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press; Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1997. Cloth 8,000 yen. ISBN 0-7748-0644-3 (UBC Press); ISBN 4-13-027031-1 (University of Tokyo Press).

PROFESSOR BROWNLEE'S book is a comprehensive survey of Japanese historical works written between 1600 and 1945. This long period begins with the introduction of Neo-Confucian "rational philosophy" during the Tokugawa era (1600-1868), reaches a high point of rationality with the spread of Ranke's historical thought during the "Modern Century" (1868-1945), and ends with the "death of the imperial state" in 1945. The breadth and depth of the author's research in Japanese materials are truly impressive. This study is sure to be consulted frequently and for many years by Western students and scholars of Japanese history.

The selection of historians surveyed and the issues discussed emerge from Brownlee's expressed need to evaluate each historian's "fall from scientific history to nationalistic history" (p. 10). Readers who share his view of "scientific history" as rational, objective, and secular treatments of the past, and his view of "nationalistic history" as inseparable from imperialism, militarism,

and authoritarianism, will not object to the harsh things he has to say about Japanese historians yielding to the demands and restraints of nationalism. But I venture to guess that many historians, including this reviewer, will be unable to accept his underlying assumption that Japanese historical writing can be best evaluated by discovering whether a consistent stand is taken for either scientific history or national history. Many of us now embrace an organic worldview that opens our eyes to complex interactive relationships between all fields of energy, not just those that can be seen and measured (armies, treasures, and material possessions) but also those that cannot be seen or measured (beliefs, ideas, and historical thought).

In this day of rampant religious nationalism no reader is likely to criticize the author for harboring strong feelings about the destructive power of nationalism. The Allied Powers were surely justified in moving to reduce the aggressive thrust of ultranationalism. Many Japanese scholars, too, have come to understand that nationalism—whipped up by state officials for the benefit of the state—has led to objectionable and disgraceful action. For example, Matsumae Takeshi, an eminent scholar of Japanese myth, makes this harsh statement in his autobiography: “I hate Japan’s prewar Imperial-Country thought” (MATSUMAE 1992, p. 115).

But those of us influenced by what sociologists and anthropologists have to say about myth and ritual will surely conclude that the national myths of Japan—however absurd they may be to an outsider—cannot be brushed off as old stories that a rational historian could not possibly swallow. They are rather more like explosive ideological fields of energy that emerge, swirl, and grow whenever a state comes into existence. And such ideologies, as history shows, can and do become quite virulent whenever a state’s rulers feel threatened by enemies (foreign and/or domestic) and move to use the state’s religious, educational, and communication systems to step up the power of nationalism, insisting always that this is required for unifying the people in a do-or-die defense of the nation. Wide-ranging and intensive endeavors to promote nationalism tend, as recent history makes clear, to move the hearts and minds of people beyond unified national service to fanatical hatred of the nation’s enemies, even causing some to willingly give their lives in rash attempts to destroy just one more enemy.

Such extreme manifestations of nationalism (commonly referred to as ultranationalism or fanatical religious nationalism) have placed national ideology (or nationalism) in ill repute, leading many scholars to shy away from even thinking about the way this phenomenon affects the thoughts and actions of people all over the world. Some brush off nationalism as “just rhetoric.” Others, such as Professor Brownlee, condemn historians whose writings have become contaminated by belief in outrageous national myths. All such reactions suggest a rather common blindness to: (1) the extraordinary power of nationalism, especially when it has been stirred up in time of war; (2) its presence and power in countries all around the globe; and (3) the fact that its unifying potential can at certain times and places be quite beneficial.

Although concerned with the way Japanese historians have responded to their national myths, this book does not help us to understand the nature

and power of national ideologies: how this power is generated; how it affects almost every area of life, not just the way a historian deals with history; and how it is made benign. And at this particular time and place in world affairs, we are in dire need of such help.

In probing for the roots and energy of nationalism in Japan, I have come to see that it was not first generated by Meiji officials after the representatives of four Western powers (backed by warships) demanded that Japan open its ports to foreign trade (BROWN 1955). Instead, it has been a powerful, highly institutionalized ideological movement that got started more than 1,300 years ago. That was when leaders of the centralized state of Japan felt threatened by the advancing armies and navies of T'ang China. That was when emperor-centered national myths were compiled in Japan's oldest extant chronicles, when the Ise Grand Shrine appeared as the main shrine of a nationwide system for an emperor's worship of his ancestral kami, the Great Goddess Amaterasu (Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神). It was also when rituals were firmly established for emperor-centered Shinto worship, and when Imperial-Country Shinto (*kōkoku Shintō* 皇国神道) was set up and administered by the Council of Kami Affairs (Jingi-kan 神祇官), a high-level organ of state placed directly under the emperor and alongside his powerful and Sinified Council of State (Daijō-kan 太政官) (BROWN 2000).

Although the book under review does little to help us to see how national ideologies intensify hatred and conflict all over the world, I consider it an important contribution to our understanding of what historians were thinking and writing during the four centuries that began shortly after Japan was first faced with the military and economic might of expanding Western states. It reveals, to begin with, that historical thought was made more rational during the Tokugawa period (Part I) when Neo-Confucianism was imported from China. It also shows us just how Japanese historical thought became more rational and objective during the later "Modern Century" (Part II), at a time when the "scientific" methods of Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) were being introduced to Japan through Ludwig Riess (1861–1928), who arrived in 1887 and stayed for 15 years.

Chapter 11 is particularly interesting. Dealing with eminent historians of the 1930s, it carries this punchy subtitle: "The Betrayal of Scientific History." The chapter contains detailed sections on such distinguished historians as Kuroita Katsumi (1874–1946) and Tsuji Zennosuke (1877–1955), and closes with fascinating paragraphs on Hiraizumi Kiyoshi (1895–1984), the "Passionate Nationalist." Appropriately enough, the whole of the following Chapter 12 is devoted to the writings of the intelligent and courageous historian Tsuda Sōkichi (1873–1961). Tsuda stands high among historians who abhor the excesses of nationalism because, at the beginning of World War II, he was judged to be guilty of destroying myths of the "Age of Gods" on which the "legitimacy of the imperial house" rested. A prominent journalist of the day, Minoda Muneki, even wrote that Tsuda had "massacred the Japanese national essence and Oriental culture." But Brownlee, apparently convinced that feelings of nationalism can never be squared with rational and scientific historical thought, brackets Tsuda with historians who had betrayed the cause of

scientific history. Why? Because he had gone along with nationalists until 1939.

By concluding that postwar Japanese historians (following the retirements of Ienaga Saburo and Inoue Kiyoshi) “have not been diligent about the myths,” *Japanese Historians and the National Myths* calls our attention once again to the power of national ideologies to turn men’s minds away from reason. It does little, however, to deepen our comprehension of the conditions and circumstances under which that power can be increased and manipulated to make us irrational and mean human beings.

#### REFERENCES

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