

Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. xxix, 593 pp. Cloth. \$45.00

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Conrad Totman's *Early Modern Japan* is a survey history of the three centuries from the rise of Oda Nobunaga in the 1560s to the waning years of the Tokugawa regime in the early 1850s. Although Totman never explicitly says so, the book is surely intended as a college textbook, so I will begin by considering its merits as such. But *Early Modern Japan* is also aimed at a general audience, and thus serves as a more explicit statement of the author's vision of Tokugawa Japan than it might have had it been conceived solely as a college text. The nature of that vision will be the topic of the bulk of my discussion.

Early Modern Japan is without question the most thorough survey of the period available in English. It is clearly written and logically organized, and the footnotes and bibliographical essay will direct students to further readings for term papers and other assignments. Although it is sparsely illustrated for a textbook, the visual materials—particularly the selection of nineteenth-century photographs—add to the book's appeal. Moreover, unlike so many blandly "objective" textbooks, Totman's account has an explicit structure and argument around which one can easily build an entire course (minus the critical period from 1853 to 1868, which is treated only very briefly). Students will leave at term's end with a clear sense of the structure and problems of Japanese politics, society, culture, and environment during the early modern centuries.

So should you assign *Early Modern Japan* to your class? Well, that depends. Do you want your undergraduates to read a survey text of almost 600 pages? Are you comfortable with Totman's schema of a century and a half of rapid growth followed by another 150 years of stasis, all set against a background of increasing environmental stress? If you can answer yes to these questions—particularly the latter—by all means use it, as you will find it far superior to anything else now available. Otherwise you will probably not want to adopt it, for you will discover yourself spending your lectures arguing against the textbook, a most hazardous enterprise with any undergraduate audience.

Any EMJ Network stalwart would immediately recognize *Early Modern Japan* as Conrad Totman's work, for it reflects the interests and concerns he has pursued during three decades of careful research and prolific writing, most notably a desire to situate historical developments in an ecological context and an intimate knowledge of bakufu politics. Totman's sympathy for the losers in the struggles that so often divided the peasantry is evident as well in his emphasis on the costs of economic change. By the same token, he is obviously less comfortable with intellectual history and high culture, both of which he dutifully covers at some length in chapters that competently synthesize other scholars' work but add little original interpretation. Most striking is the near absence of social history, a point to which I shall return below.

The work revolves around Totman's reading of the environmental history of Tokugawa Japan. He sees the first half of the early-modern period (roughly 1560 to 1710) as one of rapid and dynamic growth and the second half as a period of "stasis," which he defines not as an absence of growth or change, but rather as a reallocation of resources from one sector of the economy to another, one stratum of society to another, one region to another, and so on. The shift came about because by the early eighteenth century the Japanese people had exhausted the readily available resources of the land and were thus forced to exploit the environment (and each other) more intensively. To this environmental story Totman links every significant development in politics, diplomacy, economics, social relations, discourse, religion, and culture.

At the outset Totman notes that the "ceaseless interplay of people and their environmental context . . . fundamentally determined the scope and nature of early modern Japan's growth and the necessity and shape of its stasis" (p. xxvi). The deterministic quality of this approach is especially evident in the discussion of stasis (which altogether accounts for perhaps two-thirds of the book), as major political and economic developments from the Kyōhō Reforms to the rise of tenancy are presented as attempts to cope with a diminishing resource base, while intellectual and cultural developments are in turn discussed as by-products of political and economic change.

One example of this viewpoint is Totman's re-reading of the evidence presented in Thomas C. Smith's classic work, *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan*. The outcome of Totman's story is much the same as Smith's: large holdings broke up into smaller and more productive (but more laboriously run) units; peasants studied agronomy, used commercial fertilizers, and turned to wage labor and by-employments to supplement their incomes; and intravillage social tensions escalated even as living standards rose by some measures. But for Totman "the key factor" in accounting for the origins of this process "is that as villages ran out of additional land to till, they strove to maximize the output of existing fields" (p. 248); the macroeconomic context is relegated firmly to the background: "As the role of markets and money grew, the economic differentiation that accompanied the rise of micro-farming became ever more decisive in the allocation of goods and services" (p. 249). Commercialization, in other words, reinforced a process of social change set into motion by environmental stress but was not a significant agent of fundamental change itself.

This ecological big-bang theory of rural social change is intriguing, but Totman does not fully explore it. The social and economic implications of the rise of landlordism, the commercialization of agriculture, the emergence of rural manufacturing, and other developments are not systematically explored in light of environmental constraints. To be sure, the discussion of Smith's work is in a chapter on ecology rather than economy, and as such properly focuses on the importance of the environmental context for subsequent economic developments. But the assumptions behind this approach inform the book's entire argument. Thus Totman contends that "in the eighteenth century, as Japan lost an environmental context favorable to laissez-faire economics, entrepreneurialism was incorporated into a state-sanctioned, oligopolistic or 'fascist' order (in which government farmed control of the commercial economy to major mercantile interests in return for fiscal and political collaboration)" (p. 102).

Throughout the book economic development is consistently treated as the ephemeral flip side of environmental degradation and as such warrants little attention; thus the question of structural change in the late-Tokugawa economy is not taken up at all, and

in general nineteenth-century developments get little independent treatment (none of the eleven chapters on the period of "stasis" is devoted to the economy). Finally, in the bibliographical essay Totman dismisses analyses of the significance of Tokugawa economic development for Japan's later history as relics of a "pre-environmentalist 'modernization' model" (p. 573).

Here Totman misses an opportunity to show economic historians—not all of whom celebrate the ruthless rationality of the marketplace—a way to integrate the environment more fully into their work. But then his concern for environmental history is a partisan's concern: he is disturbed by the things we do to the planet in the name of progress and so writes history as cautionary tale. Such passion is incompatible with a treatment of ecology as one of so many variables to factor into a coolly detached analysis. Totman's passion makes his work emotionally gratifying—and adds to *Early Modern Japan's* appeal as a textbook—but it colors his narrative in numerous ways beyond the realm of economic history, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

His description of politics generally benefits from the ecological perspective. Totman does a good job of conveying how the political economy of environmental exploitation worked, as in his description of getting building materials to Edo during the construction of the shogun's castle (pp. 67-68). Fires, famines, volcanic eruptions, and other emergencies demanded prompt action from leaders; by treating them prominently Totman lends an immediacy to his political history that is lacking in accounts that focus more exclusively on ideological battles. A corollary of this perspective, however, is that nearly the entire period from the mid-seventeenth century to the collapse of the regime is discussed in terms of crisis, leaving one to wonder how the bakufu held on for so long. Totman describes the eighteenth century, for example, as "a grim time devoted to conscious 'systems maintenance,' with most political, economic, cultural, and intellectual efforts directed at the preservation, repair, and elaboration of established arrangements" (p. 33). This characterization makes it hard to explain the vitality of so much of late Tokugawa culture and misrepresents ordinary people's view of their own time—after all, moments of conscious revolutionary reordering are quite rare.

While political history benefits from the environmental perspective of *Early Modern Japan*, social history suffers badly. Totman admits that among the “aspects of the human story inadequately covered” in the book, the minimal treatment of women is “perhaps the most disturbing lacuna” (p. xxviii). It certainly is disturbing (the absence of gender beyond the confines of “women’s history” is another issue). What’s going on? Part of the answer is that the book reflects the state of Western scholarship, and there simply is not much available on Tokugawa women in English (particularly since Totman seems to have written the manuscript before the appearance of Gail Lee Bernstein’s *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991]). But it also reveals an implicit assumption that social relations (including gender relations) beyond the struggle for resources are simply not all that important. I come to this conclusion because, on the one hand, Totman takes pains to discuss women painters, poets, and other artists active in the world of high culture, while on the other hand, rural society and culture in general—topics in which women would figure prominently—are hardly touched upon. The family is barely mentioned and even infanticide gets only a couple of paragraphs. Youth associations (*wakamonogumi*) and other village organizations are overlooked completely despite their importance in the everyday lives of peasants. Especially puzzling is the absence of any discussion of popular religion except as a barometer of political and environmental instability (as in the rise of several “new religions” around the time of the Tenpō crisis in the 1830s); few students reading the book would ever realize that Buddhism was Japan’s principal institutionalized religion during the Tokugawa period.

Some of the other lacunae noted in the introduction (pp. xxviii-xxix) are less surprising but worth mentioning for what they say about the state of Western scholarship on Tokugawa Japan. The biggest omission is the outcaste community and, more broadly, the status system (*mibunsei*) as an organizing principle of the early-modern polity. Japanese scholars during the past decade or so have been calling for a conceptualization of status beyond the confines of Buraku history, but this work has yet to be reflected in the literature in English. (For a good introduction, see Asao Naohiro, ed., *Mibun to kakushiki* [*Nihon*

no kinsei, vol. 7] [Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1992].) Totman mentions the handicapped as another overlooked group. Here the literature in Japanese is sparse, but recent work (such as Katō Yasuaki’s article on the blind in the Asao volume cited above, and a brief discussion of a hospice for victims of Hansen’s disease in Kyōto burakushi kenkyūjo, ed., *Kinsei no minshū to geinō* [Kyoto: Aunsha, 1989], pp. 205-207) suggests that the handicapped occupied an ambivalent buffer zone between outcastes and commoners. Eventually we will realize that talking about commoners in Tokugawa society without reference to outcastes is like talking about contemporary American society without reference to race, but until then marginal peoples will remain invisible and our synthesis of early-modern history incomplete.

Also missing from the book are the people of the Ryukyu Islands and the Ainu, which again is understandable given both the paucity of scholarship in English and the prevailing academic convention that Okinawa and Hokkaido are beyond the pale of “Japanese” history (aside from foreign relations) for studies of the pre-Meiji period. (Totman does cover Russo-Japanese territorial rivalry in the pan-Okhotsk Sea region thoroughly.) This is an issue I feel strongly about, but suffice it to say here that a number of scholars in Japan and abroad are working to problematize the boundaries of both the early-modern polity and Japanese ethnicity (Kikuchi Isao’s work is particularly good on this topic), so that in the future the peripheries will be less peripheral to our understanding of Tokugawa Japan.

As my discussion has shown, the problems with *Early Modern Japan* are mostly of the sort that pit Conrad Totman’s Big Picture of Tokugawa Japan against someone else’s—mine, of course, in this case, but I suspect colleagues in intellectual history and cultural studies would have their own catalogue of complaints. The growth-stasis framework fits well with the book’s focus on high politics and environmental degradation, perhaps, but it denudes the social, economic, and intellectual history of the period of the dynamism that makes it so interesting and important. Totman’s narrative strategy is surprising considering how his earlier work of environmental history (*The Green Archipelago* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989]) argued that a creative political response to diminishing resources helped to