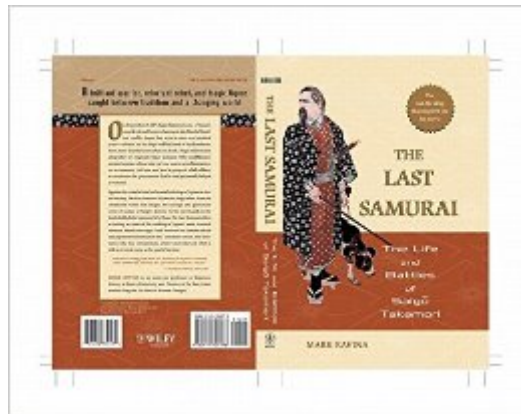


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The Last Samurai: The Life And Battles Of Saigo Takamori



Synopsis

The dramatic arc of Saigo Takamori's life, from his humble origins as a lowly samurai, to national leadership, to his death as a rebel leader, has captivated generations of Japanese readers and now Americans as well - his life is the inspiration for a major Hollywood film, *The Last Samurai*, starring Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe. In this vibrant new biography, Mark Ravina, professor of history and Director of East Asian Studies at Emory University, explores the facts behind Hollywood storytelling and Japanese legends, and explains the passion and poignancy of Saigo's life. Known both for his scholarly research and his appearances on The History Channel, Ravina recreates the world in which Saigo lived and died, the last days of the samurai. *The Last Samurai* traces Saigo's life from his early days as a tax clerk in far southwestern Japan, through his rise to national prominence as a fierce imperial loyalist. Saigo was twice exiled for his political activities -- sent to Japan's remote southwestern islands where he fully expected to die. But exile only increased his reputation for loyalty, and in 1864 he was brought back to the capital to help his lord fight for the restoration of the emperor. In 1868, Saigo commanded his lord's forces in the battles which toppled the shogunate and he became a leader in the emperor Meiji's new government. But Saigo found only anguish in national leadership. He understood the need for a modern conscript army but longed for the days of the traditional warrior. Saigo hoped to die in service to the emperor. In 1873, he sought appointment as envoy to Korea, where he planned to demand that the Korean king show deference to the Japanese emperor, drawing his sword, if necessary, to defend imperial honor. Denied this chance to show his courage and loyalty, he retreated to his homeland and spent his last years as a schoolteacher, training samurai boys in frugality, honesty, and courage. In 1876, when the government stripped samurai of their swords, Saigo's followers rose in rebellion and Saigo became their reluctant leader. His insurrection became the bloodiest war Japan had seen in centuries, killing over 12,000 men on both sides and nearly bankrupting the new imperial government. The imperial government denounced Saigo as a rebel and a traitor, but their propaganda could not overcome his fame and in 1889, twelve years after his death, the government relented, pardoned Saigo of all crimes, and posthumously restored him to imperial court rank. In *THE LAST SAMURAI*, Saigo is as compelling a character as Robert E. Lee was to Americans - a great and noble warrior who followed the dictates of honor and loyalty, even though it meant civil war in a country to which he'd devoted his life. Saigo's life is a fascinating look into Japanese feudal society and a history of a country as it struggled between its long traditions and the dictates of a modern future.

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Customer Reviews

Ravina's *The Last Samurai* is an excellent study high on specifics in an academic subject which is often superficial and generalized. It's not a book about generals, tactics, and weapons, but a look at an idealistic and passionate man who also happened to be a samurai. Casual readers should know right from the start that this book is an academic text with extensive annotations and a large bibliography. It is not a difficult book to read, but a fuller knowledge of Japanese history would give the book a richer historical context in which Saigo Takamori lived. With that said, I only wish Ravina had included a substantive biographical glossary of the people with whom Saigo lived and communicated. The importance of people like Okubo, Kido, and Itagaki are far understated in the text. A minor peeve are the date notations which can be confusing at times, but it reflects Ravina's conscious decision to put accuracy at the forefront of his research. Historical method is certainly the defining characteristic which makes *The Last Samurai* a definitive text in English (as well as in Japanese, when and if it ever gets translated). One would have wished for a more complete examination of the alleged assassination attempt on Saigo's life for it is offered as a critical pretext for his revolt against the Meiji government. If the conspiracy to take his life were conclusively true, then Saigo could be seen as reacting in self-defense to preserve not only the independence of the Satsuma fief, but also his personal honor. If untrue, Saigo could just as easily be accused of supporting an opportunistic rebellion.

"Where is Saigo Takamori's head?" Thus begins Mark Ravina's intriguing and amazingly detailed historical narrative of Japan's enduring hero of its traditional cultural ways, the way of the Samurai. As Ravina ponders, why did finding Takamori's head matter: because it represented one of the

oldest traditions of the warrior class. At the final battle between the rebel forces against the Meiji state on the morning of September 24, 1877, in which the rebel forces were defeated, by presenting the severed head of this legendary defeated warrior, it displayed honour, and offering the head to the lord as tribute, this showed great respect for the Samurai class as a whole. (This was a contradiction, as the Meiji state had been suppressing the Samurai tradition for some time) It was highly symbolic that Takamori's head could not be found, which the author examines with great erudition and depth. Saigo Takamori continues to be revered in Japan because he has come to represent the true Japan, medieval Japan, before the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the rise of the Meiji state, which ironically, Saigo Takamori played a major role that contributed to their rise and fall, respectively. Takamori was at once a great traditionalist and reformer. He practiced the old ways and believed passionately in the basic virtues of the Samurai, though at the same time realised the great need for his country to reform. In the end, he knew that Japan had to retain its cultural heritage, all that was good and positive, but he also realized the need to move with the west. He believed the west was advanced in many ways, politically, yet cultural anomalies such as ballroom dancing, he utterly appalled. In effect, he desired everything good from both cultures. In fact this entire story is a paradox.

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