

GOVERNING JAPAN

J.A.A. Stockwin

BLACKWELL, LONDON ; PP. 270

ISBN 0-631-21213-2; UNPRICED

In *Governing Japan*, Oxford don J.A.A. Stockwin analyzes six specific crises now faced by Japan. These include weak political power, an unaccountable bureaucracy, political apathy on the part of ordinary Japanese, lack of competent economic management, a growing pessimism on the part of the general public about the future, and worries over Japan's role on the world stage.

In this era of "we told you so," where it seems everyone who ever spent a fortnight in Tokyo returns home to write about how Japan is mucking things up, Stockwin's book is refreshing for two reasons. First, unlike too many Japan scholars, especially in the U.S., Stockwin is not afraid of the declarative sentence or the personal vignette to illustrate a point. Second, the analysis is academically rigorous and clinical, free of attempts at cultural relativism that poison similar works.

In addition, Stockwin provides a good introduction to issues that have, until recently, been off of the radar or slightly taboo for many Japan watchers. These include a tough, realistic appraisal of the U.S. Occupation of Japan and its legacy, both good and bad, an issue that remains touchy among certain academics and policymakers at Harvard University and in Washington D.C. In addition, his descriptions of local government politics and policies, which often get ignored by the professional chattering classes in Tokyo, is a refreshing look at the way the system really works.

Readers familiar with the so-called revisionist school of Japan writing, which purports that Japan has its own way doing things, will no doubt recognize some of Stockwin's ideas from earlier works like Dutch writer Karl Van Wolfren's 1989 classic *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, or, more recently, Patrick Smith's *Japan: A Reinterpretation*.

Yet Stockwin has his own doubts about some of their claims, and cites Van Wolfren's work as alarmist. He disdains much of the work by the revisionist school as incomplete and complains, like the good professor he is, that writers of this school are often too pat and simple in their conclusions.

Governing Japan has been written as a basic text for a general readership, rather than as a specialized text for Japan watchers. At times, however, the editors followed the very annoying academic style of putting the names of other academics in quotes after certain passages rather than footnoting. These breaks in the flow of the text are infrequent enough as to not be too noticeable. Still, if this is supposed to be a general introductory text, better editing would have been appreciated.

In the end, these are minor quibbles. Stockwin's superb writing style, clear, uncluttered thinking, and extremely detailed knowledge of Japanese politics make *Governing Japan* an important

work, one that current and future Japan scholars are likely to keep close at hand for a long time to come.

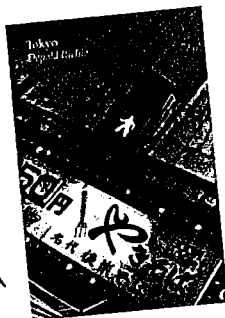
ERIC JOHNSTON

TOKYO: A VIEW OF THE CITY

Donald Richie (with photographs by Joel Sackett)

REAKTION BOOKS; LONDON; PP. 139

ISBN 1-86189-034-6; £14.95



Donald Richie has been writing about Japan since he arrived in the country with the occupying forces in 1947. His first novel *Where are the Victors?* dealt with his experiences after the war. He has subsequently produced volumes on film, cookery and his best-selling travelogue, *The Inland Sea*, which was filmed by Lucille Carra in 1991. Resident in Tokyo for the greater part of five decades, he has recently produced his second book on the city in a new series of travel writing called *Topographics*.

By Richie's own admission Tokyo is "unusually ugly." By this he means not only Tokyo is exceptional in its ugliness, but also each aspect of ugliness is itself exceptional. As he puts it, "an absence of style... is the style of Tokyo." In a city that has been ravaged by fires, earthquakes and bombing there is precious little history. There is almost nothing to connect the Tokyo of today with the Edo or Musashi of the past. There is no Schönbrunn, no Versailles, no marvels. Richie himself makes a comparison with the Ise Shrine which is rebuilt every 20 years; Tokyo does not attempt to deny the mortality of its residents with its architecture. Modern in every aspect, Tokyo has more in common with Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* than with the capitals of Europe. Richie relates how Tokyo inspired the futuristic cityscapes of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.

Accordingly Richie looks at the lifeblood of the city - its people. He writes about the kitsch fads and fashions that seem to fascinate the outsider such as *purikura*, loose socks and *tamagotchi*, while also pointing out that the concept of kitsch has no relevance in Japan. He quotes the old Japanese proverb "Fish have no word for water." There is also a long discussion about the eponymous sex industry as if a visit to Tokyo's Kabukicho is as requisite as a trip to the Louvre in Paris.

Some of the narrative is made up of extracts from Richie's diaries from 1947 to the present, making much of his portrait of the city as personal an account as his earlier work, *The Inland Sea*. In spite of his long-term connection with the city, Richie writes primarily from the outsider's point of view and supplements his opinions with the experiences of foreign writers such as Isabella Bird and Victor Hugo.

Like Tokyo the city, Tokyo the book is a rambling affair. Richie saunters from diary entry

to anecdote to historical fact without really establishing an objective for his thoughts and observations. Joel Sackett's black and white photographs are equally ambiguous in their outlook. Unlike the city on which it focuses, the volume doesn't sprawl, and at a slim 139 pages the reader may be left with the impression of a coffee table book for a very small coffee table.

MATTHEW GREEN

JAPAN - WHY IT WORKS, WHY IT DOESN'T: ECONOMICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Edited by James Mak, Shyam Sunder, Shigeyuki Abe, and Kazuhiro Igawa

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, HONOLULU; PP. 227

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James Mak, an economist from the University of Hawaii, is aided by 22 erudite associates in the task of explaining baffling aspects of life in Japan to a broad general audience. Actually, these savants may have tried a little too hard; when academic specialists condescend to address a wider readership than usual they often write as though addressing none-too-bright adolescents in a British teacher training college or the earnest dullards thronging a JALT conference. This book is no exception, alas. Still, there is not a single word of incomprehensible economic jargon within these covers; what a work of heroic teeth-gritted self-denial the editing must have been!

Postwar Japan was an impoverished wreck; malnutrition, infantile polio, rickets and tuberculosis were rife and the future seemed so bleak that many energetic Japanese emigrated to Brazil and elsewhere.

As readers resident in Japan are well aware, some things in Japan work very very well indeed and other things don't seem to work at all. The railways run on time, which would have delighted Il Duce, but social welfare provision is threadbare. Rice is ludicrously expensive but Japanese consumers accept existing price structures as the normal state of affairs. Much has been squeezed into these pages. In twenty-six articles grouped under the headings Living, Work and System (which eerily echo the Travail, Famille, Patrie mantra on the coins of Vichy France). Sample chapters, selected at page-flicking random, deal with juku hell, the birthrate, cramped and ruinously expensive housing, the grotesque cult of luxury goods, social welfare, family finances, the health system, personal taxation, academic leisureland and retailing.

Some of the essays are well-written and all are thoughtful and informative. The timelag inevitably involved in serious publishing means some chapters, such as that dealing with lifetime employment, must be read with caution. White-collar jobs are disappearing fast in the downsizing economy of contemporary Japan; among the 10,000 or so hapless souls sleeping rough in Osaka in 1999 are men who were very recently white-collar salaried men with every foreseeable prospect of a secure job for life. Not any more, sad to say.

WILLIAM CORR