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Steven J. Ericson. *The Sound of the Whistle: Railroads and the State in Meiji Japan.* Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996. xix + 506 pp. $42.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-82167-5.

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Railroads as a Window on the Meiji State

Ericson says: "the railroad offers us a window with stunning perspectives not only on government and business but also on society at large during the Meiji period" (p. 25), and the vista that he gives us is stunning indeed. *The Sound of the Whistle* contains nearly 500 pages of detailed research to support his theses about the politics of development and the relationship between state and private enterprise during the first four decades of the Japanese railroad industry. Anyone interested in railways, in party politics, in Meiji society, in the history of Japanese politics, finance, communications or industry, in Japanese banks, silk industry, coal mining, or army, will find something in this book. For some scholars it will be a must.

For a non-specialist in these areas who would like to know more about Meiji Japan (1868-1912), the first ninety pages read like an engaging novel. Here, on "The Transformative Power of Meiji Railroads", we are given a concrete picture of changes to the country that text-book references to "constitutional change" or to "opening to the West" usually fail to convey. For one graphic example, take clock time. 1889 saw the first train time-table in book form. Travel times had not been an issue in the Tokugawa era, and would-be train passengers had to be re-educated. The minimum unit by which people ordered their lives was dramatically changed from hours or half hours to minutes. The twice daily ring of temple bells was replaced by clocks in public places, and personal use of clocks and watches. Even so, the exemplary efficiency of Japanese railway schedules with which we are now so familiar was never achieved during the Meiji period. The dizzying suddenness with which Japanese conceptions of distance and speed were overturned, and with it the lifestyle changes in travel and recreation, also capture the reader's imagination.

Attitudes of railway officials to the general public were initially arrogant, station workers were overbearing. Citing Noguchi, the author tells us that "the prestigious stationmaster with his glittering uniform and lofty social status" was one of the true "role models" of the Meiji era (p. 78). The customer-first attitude was not promoted until 1899 when the chief of the progressive San'yo Railway Company returned from overseas impressed with the fact that British agents said "thank you". Because fares were initially high, it was not until the 1900s that recreational travel became truly available to everyone.

In general, the effect of the railway operations on Meiji economy was restrained by geography, and there was already a well-developed system of water transport. "Tokugawa Japan had resembled an animal whose circulatory system rests on the outside of its skin" (p. 42). Japanese railroads have from the beginning been geared to passengers rather than freight. Nevertheless, certain industries, especially those in land-locked areas, benefited directly, the coal and silk industries in particular. The rivalry between the people of Kiso and Ina in Yamanashi prefecture for the routing of the Chuo line through their silk and rice producing valleys makes lively reading, Kiso even produced a "fight song". Who won? For this, and much more, read Part I. Ericson provides adequate maps, but a good relief atlas will help the reader.

By Part II the author is launched into the detailed accounts which support his theses and his criticisms of other historical analyses. He argues that there is need for substantial revision of current views of the roles of the state and the banks in Meiji economic development. Misleading generalizations stem from overemphasis on industries such as cotton-spinning which did not require participation of banks or state, and from lack of attention to the important field of railroads. In the case of Japanese scholarship he criticizes the tendency to oversimplify by assuming a much more consistent drive for nationalization on the part of the state than was in fact the case. From the beginning state authorities were generally ea-

ger to promote private railroads, and not merely as stopgaps. Railway decision making was not a monopoly of government bureaucracy. Ericson's research gives overwhelming evidence of lack of a coherent policy, largely because of the number of groups with input. The Diet was critically important, juggling the political balls representing the various interests of ministries, investors, merchants, banks, the military, landowners, and so on. The influence of particular individuals is also well documented.

For many reasons, including the reluctance of private investors to step into the unknown, the Meiji leaders had begun with a policy of state construction and managements of railroads. The expense was daunting, and it was not until the budgeting efforts of Maejima Hisoka resulted in his "Railway Estimates" of 1870 that the need was officially recognized. Soon, however, a peers' group, financed from their stipends as former daimyo, were given permission to establish private railroads. In actual fact it was not until 1881 that the Nippon Railway Company was established as the first successful private railroad in Japan. This was not such a departure from State policy as it might seem, as it was heavily dependent on the State until 1892.The head of the Railway Bureau, Inoue Masaru, was an outspoken advocate of unified state control. I found Ericson's portrait of this "Viscount" to be an interesting foil to Inoue's own account of Japanese railroads in Okuma's *Fifty Years of New Japan* which was published in 1910. Oozing modesty, Inoue begins by saying that he and three other young men left Japan before foreign travel was permitted, to make investigations in Europe "incognito", though in what sense four young Japanese could be incognito in Europe in the 1860s is a matter for conjecture. Inoue's otherwise dry summary does not even mention rolling stock, and as for the human and social interest, we are given little but a chronicle of the acceptance and rejection of his various proposals. Ericson, on the other hand, tells it as it surely was: "an account of trial and error, of policy changes and reversals, of consensus reached only after extended conflict and debate" (p. 6). Contrary to the impression given by Inoue Masaru, by the time of the 1890 financial panic private railroads had made solid progress.

In the early 1890s the owners of railway companies were firstly banks, etc, but future zaibatsu such as Mitsubishi and Mitsui emerged also as stockholders. A third group were the former daimyo and aristocrats, and then there were other industrial capitalists, together with more traditional capitalists who used income derived from land ownership, trade, and money-lending. Nakagama Hikojiro, first president of the San'yo Railway, was an outstanding and innovative manager. He became the target of a retrenchment drive which led to his resignation, but contrary to his biographies, he was probably not alone in the push for a raising of standards. Expansion of railways required dealing with landowners, sometimes as many as 130 per mile, and the Compulsory Land Purchase Law of 1889 removed provision for the expropriation of land by private railways. Even Inoue Masaru sympathized with San'yo's complaints about that, and central and local government continued to cooperate to some extent in the acquisition of land for private railways. Many of these companies survived the panic and recession, nationalization was shelved and the construction of new government lines took priority instead.

Part III begins with the lively years, 1890-92, and all that went into the making of the comprehensive Railway Construction Law. By the time the Bill was passed in June 1892, it contained something for everyone. For instance, it affirmed the Railway Bureau's principle of state railroad construction, it complied with the demands of the Jiyuto and its local supporters by scheduling thirty-three more regional lines, it accorded with cabinet measures in a program of "first-stage" construction, and also met the opposition parties' demand for checks on bureaucratic power. It allowed for private building in some cases, and provided for the establishment of a Railway Council that realized both military and party demands for a say in railroad planning.

In the late 1880s the boom in private railways was countered by the state railway bureaucrats, led by Inoue Masaru. The author argues that overemphasis on the Bureau has distorted the historical picture, simply by ignoring the political context of the Law, especially the opposition of the cabinet and the Diet in the early 1890s. The Law was a compromise, a merger of the administration and lower-house bills, not a mutilated version of Inoue's proposal. A cabinet decision showed a sudden shift from the government policy of strong support for private development when it asked the Diet to legislate for state construction and nationalization. Among the several factors contributing to this change of heart was the realistic appreciation of the fact that with the Tokaido line complete, railway development had reached a stage where orderly extensions of the system required central control. Military expediency was another line of debate engaged in by military chiefs, Diet members, local leaders, and notably between Inoue as head of the Railway Bureau and the former army chief Ozawa Takeo, then in the House of Peers.

We are given a vivid account of the legislative process of the Diet, showing in detail the impact on public railroad policy of the parties, and of local and special interests, naming the personalities involved, and citing even howls of protest from the floor of the House. The reader marvels that the Law was ever passed at all. In September 1891 when news leaked that the cabinet had decided to buy out private railroads, "the two major popular parties announced their unanimous opposition" (p. 208). As still is the case with party politics anywhere, long-range policy was difficult to implement in a wide field of conflicting interests, fuelled often by opposition for opposition's sake. Ericson takes us through the steps that led from opposition to flexibility and conciliation.

Part III deals with the passage of the Railway Nationalization Bill, passed "in the evening of March 27, 1906, under tumultuous conditions in the House of Representatives" (p. 245). There are two themes, the first concerns the respective roles of the Communications Ministry, the army, the Finance Ministry and the oligarchs, and the Diet, in forging a consensus; the second is the response from the business world, from railway companies to the business community at large. Nationalization of railroads was finally enacted during the postwar boom, when private railroads had excellent business prospects. Just before the Bill was passed, Prime Minister Saionji Kinmochi rewrote history by claiming for the principle of the state ownership of railways that "our nation's railway policy has remained consistent from beginning to end" (p. 248). We readers of Ericson's book know better.

Den Kenjiro, Vice-Minister of Communications and former head of the Railway Bureau, is portrayed as a fascinating case of a top Meiji bureaucrat "who descended into the rough-and-tumble of private business and party politics, only to re-ascend into the state bureaucracy, creating in the process a broad network of contacts that could then be pressed into the service of government policy" (p. 250). The lead of the Communications Ministry was seconded by the role of the army. Experience of moving troops during the Russo-Japanese war had thrown into relief the lack of equipment standardization. Locomotives, for example, came from a variety of manufacturers in Britain, the United States and Germany. The author says, however, that the extent of the actual problems this caused during the war is another item that is sometimes overstated. They found a stronger argument for nationalization in the desire to prevent direct investment and intervention by foreign nationals. A coalition of the Communications Ministry and the army still had to confront the resistance of the Finance Ministry, and purchase of private railroads was to take place in the face of a huge war debt. The Ministry resisted the bill almost to the end, and was responsible for several modifications to it, extending the periods for buying and for the issuing of bonds, and slashing the number of companies to be bought. The lower house finally passed the bill by a large margin, but it was another story when it reached the House of Peers where the objections of the finance authorities were vociferously repeated.

The situation of most small railroad companies was such that purchase by the government would have been welcome to them. It was quite a different matter for large railroads such as the Kansai, San'yo Kyushu and Nippon companies. Kansai, for example, had Mitsubishi among its top shareholders. Because of the wider benefits of railroads Mitsubishi had a strong vested interest in private ownership and management, in contrast to Mitsui which had focused on trade and finance. The Kyushu railway had as its president the formidable Sengoku Mitsugu, and Mitsubishi backed his relentless pursuit of business expansion. But in the end most of the owners and financiers of private rail companies welcomed nationalization, and with good reason, compensation was generous. The purchase prices of the Kobu, Hokkaido Colliery and Nippon companies amounted to more than double their construction costs. This resulted in a huge debt that plagued the national railway system for years to come, but on the other hand it led to the expansion and diversification of private industry. Some of this was invested in light railways and electric rail, and most notably it was used to develop heavy industries centred in electric power. Mitsubishi, for example, not only branched out into new fields, but also expanded its colonial interest in Korea and Taiwan. "… the real legacy of railway nationalization for Japanese business" was "the release of private capital for productive employment in other sectors of the economy" (p. 385).

By the 1970s the proliferation of non-paying local lines led to a crisis in the Japanese National Railways. In 1985, under Prime Minister Nakasone, privatization became the official objective. With the break up of the national system into several private companies in 1987 the privatization–nationalization tides had come full circle back to privatization. It is clear that policies and programs along the way were largely based on expedience and on pragmatic compromises among rival groups, rather than on any hard and fast principles.

Readers will take from this long book those themes and facts that accord with their interests. The above review has been written from the point of view of a lay-

man in Meiji history. A specialist who takes issue with any of Ericson's views must face the challenge of matching the wealth of evidence that he provides. His sources, Japanese and English, are impressively varied. As well as the more obvious histories, records and personal papers, references include songs, novels, telegrams and unpublished manuscripts, cited in 66 pages of notes and thirty-two pages of bibliography. Tables are generously provided, and some entertaining photographs. A Japanese character glossary would have been a bonus, as it always is, but the lack matters little here where the author has adopted a policy of maximum translation of institutional names and such-like. Why is the ball by ball detail in Parts II and III, the serious body of the book, not dry and boring to the non-specialist? The answer seems to lie in Ericson's gift for narrative, the skill with which he interweaves quotations to give the effect of different voices, and the portrayal of individuals encountered along the way as real people. Real people is what history is about.

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