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Herbert P. Bix. *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan.* New York: HarperCollins, 2000. xi + 800 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-019314-0.

Reviewed by Tom Mayock (Retired Military Historian)
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Recycling Hirohito

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Hirohito was born a hundred years ago. He entered a world that Queen Victoria had barely exited, where Hapsburgs, Hohenzollerns, and Romanoffs disported themselves, and Americans, insofar as they thought about the Japanese at all, saw them as a quaint but go-ahead people who promised to act as a check on the Russian colossus. He was thought a rather unprepossessing heir to the throne. Almost ninety years later, that same unprepossessing Hirohito was still on his throne, having survived intervening wars and convulsions – long outlasting the great European royal houses – while the Americans had realized that Japan really could be a stabilising force in the Far East.

A book that tells, and tells convincingly, and largely from primary sources, how Hirohito and his nation came through such events can only be a tour de force. Such a book is Herbert Bix's *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan.*

The protean Hirohito operated originally under the Meiji Constitution, bequeathed by his grandfather, which defined the Emperor as a living god descended in an unbroken line from Ameratsu, the Sun Goddess. It gave him extraordinary powers, but as a practical matter he mainly operated to harmonize and legitimize the policies of the cabinet and of the unruly armed services who had direct access to him. He reigned, rather than ruled, but exercised real influence behind the scenes. During the late 1920s and early 1930s he often skated on thin ice, endangered by the fanatics in the Japanese armed services. He acquiesced in the Japanese state becoming increasingly militarized and prone to solve its problems by grabbing parts of China, and other foreign territory.

When this course eventually led to a disastrous defeat at the hands of the United States, Hirohito desperately needed to fashion a legend to show that he had been blameless in the matter, impotent to influence the actions of the state. No war criminal! And he got away with it, with the connivance of one of the master legend-makers among the victorious Americans, Douglas MacArthur, who wanted to simplify the problems of occupying Japan. Anxious for a moderate Japanese regime, Washington approved preserving the monarchy. This, of course, is pretty rich stuff, even involving on some level the cynical observation that on most days a comfortable lie is at least as good as an uncomfortable truth.

The legend depended on the role Hirohito played in the seizure of Manchuria and the China Incident; in the decision for war against the United States, Britain and Holland; and in the eventual surender in August 1945. Bix lays out impressive evidence of the Emperor's involvement in events in Manchuria and China. He shows that any disagreement by Hirohito with the policies of expansion was strictly tactical. Although the initial Manchurian aggression was an unauthorized action by the local army, Hirohito specifically authorized subsequent moves. He volunteered advice on military aspects, for he had been given an intensive grounding in military science and took a lively interest in the campaigns. He was extremely well-briefed and no doubt would have learned of the excesses committed during the capture of Nanking. He was probably knowledgeable of the scorching of the Chinese countryside and of biological and chemical warfare initiatives. Unless explained away, this record would have been enough to qualify him, in American eyes, as a war criminal.

Bix is not so surefooted when he describes American reactions. He places FDR in his third term in 1936, and accepts the standard version of the attack on the Panay as deliberate, without amplifying.[1] Official secrecy obscured the Japanese court's relations with the cabinet and the armed forces. This enabled Joseph Grew, the American ambassador from 1932 onward, and an ardent admirer of Japanese culture, to paint Hirohito to Washington as a peace-lover who was vainly endeavoring to re-

claim power from the militarists. When FDR dispatched his demands for damages for the sinking of the Panay, for example, he asked that the Emperor be informed, as if the whole matter was being kept from him. As Bix demonstrates, Hirohito functioned to achieve the compromises that made the system work. He approved the campaigns in Manchuria, and the war against Chiang Kai-shek. He eventually established a large headquarters and a war room on the palace grounds.

Likewise, the author has little difficulty in showing that in 1941 the Emperor participated intimately in the deliberations leading to the decision to go to war against the United States, Britain and Holland. He went over the plans and knew in advance about the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, making no objection. In fact the successful strike put him in a mood to don his navy uniform.

He went on to be a war leader, who, after fortune deserted the imperial forces, didn't hesitate to criticize them, favor them with suggestions, and nag them to do something to reverse the tide. He thought, mistakenly, that in the Philippines Leyte would be a better place to fight than Luzon.

Most histories gave Hirohito high marks for overruling his military chiefs and ordering acceptance of the Allied surrender terms. Bix observes that had he acted earlier, he would have avoided the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the expenditure of thousands of lives. Instead he waited until the bombs went off, until the Soviets dashed his hopes of using them for intermediaries, and until the Americans hinted that they might preserve the monarchy. His failure to act gave the American victors the options of abolishing the monarchy, declaring Hirohito a war criminal, or forcing his abdication.

The Allied governments and American popular opinion favored trying the Emperor. The alternatives chosen were to sanitize him by portraying him as having been powerless to oppose the militarists; to pursue democratic reforms in Japanese society by working through existing authorities, and thereby simplify the occupation. MacArthur hoped that a slick performance by him in Japan could be parlayed into a successful run at the American presidency. So the Emperor survived under a new constitution as the constitutional monarch he pretended to be under the old. But he was never comfortable with his diminished role.

In the postwar world the myth of the pacifist, powerless Emperor enshrined in official American accounts inevitably came under scrutiny. Leftist groups in Japan perceived the monarchy, even in its denatured form, as still a prop of the conservatives. Others believed that declaring the Emperor blameless encouraged the Japanese in general to conclude they too had nothing to atone for from the war years. Therefore, Japan hadn't really fully come to terms with its past transgressions. Something was still owed to the victims beyond what had been granted under the Peace Treaty. The factual basis for the Emperor myth had always been thin since Japanese officials had made a bonfire of important records before the Americans had got established in Tokyo, and the testimony of his loyal associates in the war crimes trials exonerated the sovereign of any wrongdoing.

Dr. Bix, an American who teaches at Tokyo's Hitosubashi University, published his conclusions about the myth of the powerless Emperor in professional journals a half dozen years ago,[2] and in the seventies the myth had already begun to fray at the hands of Japanese historians. More wartime documents and diaries had become available. In the United States David Bergamini brought out Japan's Imperial Conspiracy in 1971. In 1997 Iris Chang followed with The Rape of Nanking, both popular books critical of Hirohito. In 2000, John Dower won a Pulitzer for Embracing Defeat, recounting how Japan adapted to the victors. Hirohito's son, Emperor Akihito, among other Japanese officials, has gone some distance to express regret for Tokyo's wartime aggressions. But Dr. Bix believes that more public discussion is needed, and seems at times to trail his coat.

The 800-page book is not an easy read, partly because the Emperor left little by way of recollections, and his associates were loath to criticize a deity. The scholar is forced to painfully reconstruct episodes that might be straightforwardly told if they simply involved Americans. There are more than ninety pages of notes, and no bibliographical essay, but the author acknowledges his principal debts in his Introduction. Ninety percent of the sources are in Japanese and the titles of Japanese documents are not translated. Dr. Bix explains that this may make people in Japan more comfortable with the work, and a Japanese version is apparently planned. The book and its message are frankly targeted at the Japanese public.

Impressive and persuasive as he is, Bix is not likely to have the legendary last word. The Japanese authorities still hold back full access to the archives. For instance, there is said to be a Hirohito diary, but like the Emperor's clothes, no one has ever seen it.

Notes:

[1]. See reviewer's *Pacific Warlord* (http://www.erols.com/tomtud). Incidentally, he bit on the powerless Emperor myth.

[2]. Herbert Bix ,"Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," Diplomatic History, (1995) and "Inventing the Symbol Monarchy in Japan," Journal of Japanese Studies, 1995.

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