

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Review

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

*H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.*  
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

### H-Diplo Book Review of:

Jonathan Clements, *Prince Saionji: Japan (Makers of the Modern World: The peace conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath)*. London: Haus Publishing Ltd., 2008. vii + 208 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-905791-68-2.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Barnart-Clements.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by Michael A. Barnhart, SUNY-Stony Brook

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It is somewhat ironic to review this book for H-Diplo, as its stunningly well-appointed cover, artwork, and photographs remind how much a physical pleasure books used to be. Only the goldleaf is missing. The contents are a puzzle. Jonathan Clements' book belongs to a series of biographical studies, most of which are devoted to secondary but important international policymakers in the early twentieth century, and focused on their impact on the peacemaking efforts following the First World War. Wilson, Lloyd-George and Clemenceau are there, but so are Hughes of Australia, Smuts of South Africa, Masaryk of Czechoslovakia, and Koo of China.

For many of these subjects, waging the First World War and making the peace that followed were the central episodes of their careers. For Saionji Kinmochi, it manifestly was not, and that fact presents the first difficulty in approaching Clements' study. His account says little about Saionji at the Paris talks because there is not very much to say. Clements wisely does not attempt radical new interpretations based on any newly-discovered importance of Saionji. The vaunted racial equality clause was valuable to the Japanese delegation. It was to be achieved if possible. But, if not, and if Japan could not weaken, delay or, hopefully, forestall the creation of the League of Nations, the clause could be (and was) traded away to obtain general recognition of Japanese rights in Shandong and the north

Pacific islands. Clements' treatment of Paris runs barely forty pages, under a quarter of his book, and properly so.

That is not to say that there is nothing interesting in examining Japan's approach to what became the Versailles treaty. Clements himself notes how both Chinese and Korean issues might have become major, but did not. He largely ignores the intersection -- one might better say collision -- between the new political order inside Japan in the aftermath of the Taishō Crisis of 1912-3 and new diplomatic order forged in part by Wilson's vision and elements of that treaty six years later. But it seems unfair to criticize Clements for this omission, as Saionji simply was not a central figure in the latter.

Even so, such a critique does bring up a fairer question. Where exactly was Saionji central? Clements correctly notes that earlier biographies are primarily exercises in praise, apology or both. Yet his account is not much of a correction to them. Perhaps, as he argues, Saionji was influenced by his early foreign exposure (he arrived in Paris in the summer of 1871), which did incline him to more liberal views than his aristocratic background would have predicted. But the stark fact is that Saionji simply was not in Japan when the key early battles over popular rights were fought. He was out of country for seventeen years of the next twenty. Upon his return, he became protégé to Itō Hirobumi--not really a figure most Japanese historians would associate with liberalism. His role in the Taishō Crisis is covered, but not in a way that gives much background to the deep civil-military, bureaucratic-party, and above all army-navy rivalries that produced that crisis.

In the end, one is left with the impression that Clements either was assigned a difficult mission or took one upon himself. Is this study one of Saionji? of the Japan of Saionji's lifetime? of Japan at Paris? It attempts to be all three, in a study limited to well under two hundred pages. The result is something that very few experts will find valuable. General readers or undergraduates can benefit from its able if sometimes breathless summary of key events of Japan in the world from the 1860s to Saionji's death in 1940. But overall this study represents a missed opportunity. An examination of Hara Kei, Katō Tomasaburō, or Tanaka Gi'ichi might have made the triune task of this volume's assignment more manageable for the author and, perhaps, more satisfying for most readers.

**Michael A. Barnhart** is Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Department of History at SUNY-Stony Brook. His works include *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919-1941* (Cornell, 1987) and *Japan and the World since 1868* (E. Arnold, 1995).

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