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James Babb. *Tanaka: The Making of Postwar Japan*. Profiles in Power Series. Harlow, England: Longman, 2000. xii + 126 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-38215-2.

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## The Tanaka Legacy

### “The Tanaka Legacy”

Who can deny that Tanaka Kakuei was one of the most—if not the most—colorful and influential politicians of postwar Japan? James Babb presents a detailed yet concise account of this controversial and enigmatic figure from Japan’s recent history. Comprised of seven chapters, this biography follows the trajectory of Tanaka’s life from “Humble Beginnings” to his “Prolonged Fall,” and finally his “Legacy.”

Tanaka was born in 1918 in Futada village, Niigata prefecture, to a farming family of modest means. His mother was “a hard working woman” and the backbone of the family, while his father was “an operator who dabbled in ill-fated ventures” (pp. 7-9). Tanaka’s grandfather owned a construction company that landed several public works contracts, including the building of local government offices and schools. As a result, Tanaka was introduced to the business of construction and local politics at an early age.

Despite having been “an able student with a remarkable memory and an enthusiasm for learning,” after graduating higher elementary school in 1933, Tanaka took a job as a common laborer (pp. 12-13). Disgruntled with the measly pay “he had earned only fifty sen (half a yen) per hour, which was the same rate of pay for a woman at the time” he quit the job and managed to get hired as a foreman in the neighboring city of Kashiwazaki. His aptitude soon brought Tanaka to the attention of a village council office elder who recommended him to Viscount Okochi Masatoshi, who subsequently invited Tanaka to

join his firm in Tokyo.

Tanaka studied architecture and his career was only just beginning as Japan’s occupation of China escalated into war in the late 1930s. Drafted into the army (Mokioka Cavalry) in 1938, Tanaka served in the border region of Manchuria and the Soviet Union. His stint in the military was cut short by tuberculosis, and he was sent back to Japan for rehabilitation in late 1940. He spent months in hospital and was discharged in October 1941, just two months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Tanaka sat out the rest of the war on a medical discharge. He returned to his home in Niigata and tried to establish himself as an independent architect.

In March 1942, Tanaka married Sakamoto Hana. She was eight years his senior and a divorced mother of one, an unusual match for the time, but her appeal to Tanaka may have been heightened by the fact that her father owned Sakamoto Construction, a profitable building materials and construction firm. (Babb only hints at Tanaka’s opportunistic bent here.) After the death of his father-in-law, Tanaka took control of the company. Within a year it absorbed another small firm, and the number of employees grew to one hundred, whereupon he renamed the company Tanaka Construction. By the end of the war, Tanaka’s firm employed nearly four hundred workers.

After the war, the purges conducted by the Allied occupation officials opened new windows of opportunity for ambitious individuals such as Tanaka. Like his grandfather, Tanaka cultivated relations with local politicians to gain construction contracts, by which, he gained some

familiarity and experience with local politics. He was eager to join the political elite and began by making large financial contributions to the Progressive Party representative in Niigata. In April 1946, Tanaka himself ran as a Progressive Party candidate in Niigata's third district. He lost, but ran a second time on the Japan Democratic Party ticket and won. As a member of the Lower House of Parliament, Tanaka quickly rose to the position of chair of the Commerce Committee. He made his mark early as a staunch opponent of the bill to nationalize the coal industry. According to Babb, it was largely due to Tanaka's opposition that the nationalization legislation was defeated.

In December 1948, Tanaka was indicted on charges of accepting bribes in exchange for mobilizing his party's opposition to the nationalization bill. He jumped parties and ran as a Democratic Liberal Party candidate in the 1949 election. Tanaka won, despite having started the campaign while in jail. He was convicted of bribery in 1950, but was pronounced innocent on appeal in the following year. Thus began Tanaka's scandalous political career.

Babb follows the development of Tanaka's checkered political life from being a protégé of Yoshida Shigeru to becoming a nationally known champion of public works projects. Tanaka's rise to power was marked by questionable patronage and a unique style of right-wing populism. By the late 1950s, Tanaka was not only a national political figure, but he was also something of a fixture in popular culture. He had been the youngest member of parliament to serve as a cabinet minister (Minister of Posts and Telecommunications), and he also appeared on garden variety television shows singing Japanese folk ballads. He even released a vinyl recording of his gruff, whiskey-voiced crooning and was heard on radios throughout all of Japan.

Babb situates Tanaka at the center of Japan's "economic miracle" in the 1960s. Tanaka served as Minister of Finance for four terms from July 1962 to June 1965, and he averted a national crisis by bailing out the securities industry in May 1965. But, characteristically, his term in office was tainted by scandal. As an informal paid advisor to numerous corporations, Tanaka was alleged to have used insider information to profit his own personal business ventures. As Babb states, "Tanaka was not alone in his dubious dealings, but his activities added to a general atmosphere of corruption in the mid-1960s..." (p. 59).

Tanaka reached the height of power and scandal in the 1970s. He served as secretary for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from 1968 to 1971, was appointed Min-

ister of International Trade and Industry in July 1971, and became president of the LDP in 1972. In July 1972 he became Prime Minister. He played a central role in managing the Nixon and oil "shocks" of the early 1970s, and he normalized diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Babb credits Tanaka with having transformed Japan's political economy at this critical juncture in history.

But it was Tanaka's "dubious dealings in the past" that caused his own party to turn against him and led to his downfall (p. 93). Facing allegations of influence peddling and bribery, and in the midst of a severe downturn in the economy, various factions converged to force Tanaka out of office. In December 1974, Tanaka resigned as Prime Minister. He was arrested in July 1976 on charges of violating the Foreign Exchange Control Law. He was subsequently indicted for bribery, and stood accused of having used the office of Prime Minister to influence All Nippon Airways to purchase Lockheed L-1001 Tristar airbuses, for which Lockheed allegedly paid him over two million dollars. In 1983, Tanaka was sentenced to serve four years in prison, but he remained free while the case remained on appeal. In February 1985, he suffered a severe stroke, but he remained active and influential in politics throughout the 1980s. Tanaka died in December 1993.

In Babb's words, Tanaka was "no ordinary man," and his story "is crucial to understanding the rise of the common people in postwar Japan" (p. 1). Indeed, according to Babb, "Tanaka made postwar Japan what it is today" (p. 17). The "Profiles in Power" series, of which this book is a part, presents biographies of prominent political leaders in world history, ranging from Catherine De Medici to Alexander to Churchill and Nehru, to name a few. As such, the objective of this book would appear to have been to illustrate Tanaka as a comparable historical figure. But in this context, Tanaka's significance might be somewhat overstated.

No one can deny that Tanaka was an important political figure in postwar Japan. But Babb's account here often reads more like hagiography than standard biography. In a government system ruled mainly by one political party comprised of several factions, wherein the bureaucracy dominates, and almost nothing is accomplished without wide-ranging consensus, it is difficult to imagine a single individual possessing as much agency as Babb attributes to Tanaka in this book. But Babb may be forgiven for his more than occasional use of hyperbole, for how else is one to make the case that Tanaka belongs in a publication series that includes the likes of Napoleon, Lenin,

Mao, and Hitler? Tanaka was arguably not the best or most appropriate selection to represent Japan in this series, but that is perhaps a criticism to be leveled at the series editor and not the author himself.

On its own, this book is a solid treatment of Tanakâs political career. It does not dwell on Tanakâs personal life. Although some mention is made of his two mistresses and his illegitimate children, as well as a few other personal foibles, the focus remains on Tanakâs political life. Babb has drawn from numerous Japanese sources, including the published memoirs of Tanakâs secretary, his other mistress (a geisha), and Tanaka's colleagues, as well as several other biographies of Tanaka published in Japanese. These Babb has synthesized with first-rate secondary sources in English to produce a useful and readable political biography. There is not quite the depth of research that one should expect of a more serious academic treatment of the subject, where one might find more interviews with contemporaries, references to unpublished diaries and manuscripts, government records, and other such primary sources. But as stated above, such a study does not appear to have been Babb's objec-

tive as a contributor to this series.

One can debate whether Tanakâs life story really merits inclusion in this particular publication series, but one can not deny that he was one of the most colorful and influential politicians in postwar Japan. With so little written about Tanaka in English, Babb's biography is a most welcome addition to the scant literature on this compelling subject. Some may find this book a useful supplementary text for courses in modern Japanese history and political science. Others may simply enjoy it for the scandal and intrigue that tainted Tanakâs career in public office, but which made him something of an underworld folk hero. In any case, this is a valuable introduction to Tanaka Kakuei and his legacy.

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