



Inventing Japan: 1853-1964 (Modern Library Chronicles)

Ian Buruma

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In a single short book as elegant as it is wise, Ian Buruma makes sense of the most fateful span of Japan's history, the period that saw as dramatic a transformation as any country has ever known. In the course of little more than a hundred years from the day Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in his black ships, this insular, preindustrial realm mutated into an expansive military dictatorship that essentially supplanted the British, French, Dutch, and American empires in Asia before plunging to utter ruin, eventually emerging under American tutelage as a pseudo-Western-style democracy and economic dynamo.

What explains the seismic changes that thrust this small island nation so violently onto the world stage? In part, Ian Buruma argues, the story is one of a newly united nation that felt it must play catch-up to the established Western powers, just as Germany and Italy did, a process that involved, in addition to outward colonial expansion, internal cultural consolidation and the manufacturing of a shared heritage. But Japan has always been both particularly open to the importation of good ideas and particularly prickly about keeping their influence quarantined, a bipolar disorder that would have dramatic consequences and that continues to this day. If one book is to be read in order to understand why the Japanese seem so impossibly strange to many Americans, *Inventing Japan* is surely it.

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