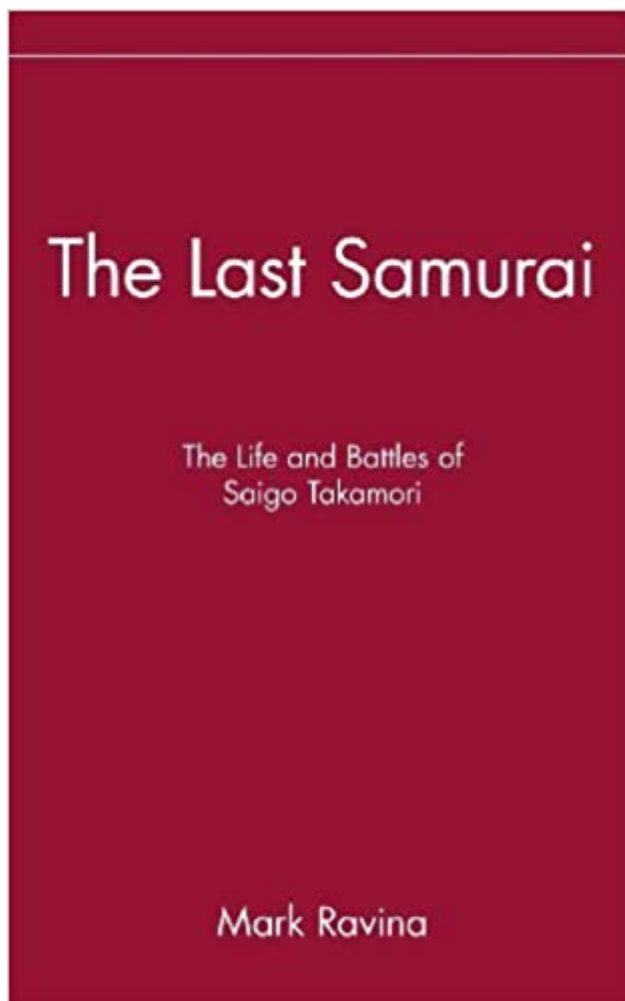


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# The Last Samurai: The Life And Battles Of Saigo Takamori



## Synopsis

The dramatic arc of Saigo Takamori's life, from his humble origins as a lowly samurai, to national leadership, to his death as a rebel leader, has captivated generations of Japanese readers and now Americans as well - his life is the inspiration for a major Hollywood film, *The Last Samurai*, starring Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe. In this vibrant new biography, Mark Ravina, professor of history and Director of East Asian Studies at Emory University, explores the facts behind Hollywood storytelling and Japanese legends, and explains the passion and poignancy of Saigo's life. Known both for his scholarly research and his appearances on The History Channel, Ravina recreates the world in which Saigo lived and died, the last days of the samurai. *The Last Samurai* traces Saigo's life from his early days as a tax clerk in far southwestern Japan, through his rise to national prominence as a fierce imperial loyalist. Saigo was twice exiled for his political activities -- sent to Japan's remote southwestern islands where he fully expected to die. But exile only increased his reputation for loyalty, and in 1864 he was brought back to the capital to help his lord fight for the restoration of the emperor. In 1868, Saigo commanded his lord's forces in the battles which toppled the shogunate and he became a leader in the emperor Meiji's new government. But Saigo found only anguish in national leadership. He understood the need for a modern conscript army but longed for the days of the traditional warrior. Saigo hoped to die in service to the emperor. In 1873, he sought appointment as envoy to Korea, where he planned to demand that the Korean king show deference to the Japanese emperor, drawing his sword, if necessary, to defend imperial honor. Denied this chance to show his courage and loyalty, he retreated to his homeland and spent his last years as a schoolteacher, training samurai boys in frugality, honesty, and courage. In 1876, when the government stripped samurai of their swords, Saigo's followers rose in rebellion and Saigo became their reluctant leader. His insurrection became the bloodiest war Japan had seen in centuries, killing over 12,000 men on both sides and nearly bankrupting the new imperial government. The imperial government denounced Saigo as a rebel and a traitor, but their propaganda could not overcome his fame and in 1889, twelve years after his death, the government relented, pardoned Saigo of all crimes, and posthumously restored him to imperial court rank. In *THE LAST SAMURAI*, Saigo is as compelling a character as Robert E. Lee was to Americans - a great and noble warrior who followed the dictates of honor and loyalty, even though it meant civil war in a country to which he'd devoted his life. Saigo's life is a fascinating look into Japanese feudal society and a history of a country as it struggled between its long traditions and the dictates of a modern future.

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## Customer Reviews

This book is a quick but fairly thorough retelling of the life of Saigo Takamori, often called the last samurai of Japan. The book does a great job of explaining Saigo's character while also explaining larger events going on in Japan during his life. The author shows Saigo as a complex mix of old and new in Japan, encourage reform while also being very traditional. The book clearly explains Saigo's thoughts and philosophical influences to help you really understand the man and the world he was part of. The only serious fault is the end of the book, or lack of one. There is little discussion about the lasting impact of Saigo or what happened next after his final battle. The "conclusion" of the book is wrapped up in 2 pages, a pretty sad finale. The editor should have recommended that the author add some depth to the end of the book. Readers will need to look elsewhere to have answers to these questions, leaving the book somewhat incomplete.

In the Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigo Takamori, author Mark Ravina's purpose of the literature is to expose the life of Saigo Takamori, and his influence to Japan. Furthermore, Ravina argues that despite the Imperial Government's attempts to quell Saigo's rebellion, a symbol of the samurai traditions against the modern and westernized, their choice to search for Saigo's head, an

old samurai tradition, only supported Saigo's cause. Before looking at the roots of the Satsuma rebellion, one must understand how the failed rebellion came to represent "Japan's rabid transformation after the imperial transformation" (Ravina 3). Mark Ravine explains that "the imperial army was a modern, national force" while "Saigo's rebel forces were, by contrast, samurai, fighting with swords" (Ravina 3). The loss to the imperial army revealed how modernized, Japan had become. Saigo's rebels came to represent the ways of traditional samurai, due to how Saigo himself was a representation of A Samurai. Proof of this, was Saigo's loyalty to his master. In Hagakure, Yamamoto Tsunetomo explains the role of loyalty in bushido; "If one were to say in a word what the condition of being a samurai is, its basis lies first in seriously devoting one's body and soul to his master" (Tsunetomo 72). Ravine explains in the year of 1856, Saigo's loyalty was put to a test (Ravina 65). During this year, Saigo agreed to lobby his lord, Nariakira, on behalf of his Mito mentors, as he "wanted to repay their intellectual guidance by advancing their cause" (Ravina 65). Saigo did this, but Ravine explains that Saigo's "anxiety and his trembling voice reflected a deep inner conflict. How could Saigo serve both his lord and Mito?" (Ravina 65). The anxiety mentioned, is the anxiety Saigo felt when discussing Mito's agenda with his master (Ravina 65). The fact that Saigo reflects on this, and hesitates with speaking to his lord on behalf of his friends, reveals how important he views loyalty. After Nariakira passes away due to illness (Ravina 73), Saigo's loyalty is truly shown, as Nariakira's previous political opponent, Hisamitsu becomes "ruler of the domain" (Ravina 74). Even after being put into exile in Okinoerabujima by Hisamitsu, Saigo's life was still "in service to his lord" (Ravina 108). This reveals Saigo's loyalty to Nariakira, as Saigo decided to follow his successor even after being cast away into exile, by him. Another key element pointing to Saigo regarding bushido highly is his willingness to throw away his life in battle or for a cause. In 1873, after Korea had broken of trade with Japan, and called it a "lawless nation" (Ravina 183), Saigo insisted on being sent to Korea "to determine Korea's true intentions" (Ravina 184). Despite this, Ravine explains how Saigo "wrote repeatedly to Itagaki of wanting to die in Korea and of wanting to provoke a war" (Ravina 184). Saigo's willingness to die is also displayed in his final days. "By March 12th...he doubted that anyone could turn the tide of battle...but, Saigo claimed this did not really matter. He was not fighting for victory but for the chance to die for principle" (Ravina 208). Knowing full well that his rebellion would fail, Saigo spent his last night celebrating with his followers (Ravina 4). A final example of Saigo's status as a samurai can be seen when analyzing his rebellion, and the reasons behind it. Among the reasons Saigo raised an army to attack the Imperial Government, was the fact that the Government has decided to attack samurai privileges by barring "anyone except officers at state ceremonies, soldiers, and police from carrying swords" (Ravina 198). Furthermore,

the Imperial Government "ordered the conversion of samurai stipends into thirty-year bonds...this meant a drop in annual income by at least 30 percent" (Ravina 198). Samurai being forbidden to wield their blade was the ultimate insult to the warrior class, as the sword was the ultimate symbol of the class. In Hagakure, Tsunetomo retells a story of how Takeda Shingen makes the comment that "A man who forgets the Way of the Samurai and does not use his sword will be forsaken by the gods and Buddhas" (Tsunetomo 145). However, despite these immoral actions by the Imperial Government, "for Saigo the central issue was maintaining a government based on virtue" (Ravina 199). Saigo was also concerned about the effects of "the land tax and the institution of private property" (Ravina 200), as they would "undermine the moral integrity of commoners" (Ravina 199). A separate example of Saigo's criticism of the Imperial Government's lack of virtue in its decision making can be seen when he refers to the tactics used by Japanese fleet as a "violation of heavens principals" (Ravina 187). In this event, a Japanese ship manage to provoke Korean shore batteries to attack, then justifying the dispatch of "warships to Korea...to force treaty negotiations" (Ravina 187). These were similar to the gunboat diplomacy tactics used by Commodore Perry, when "he lead a squadron of four warships into Edo Bay" (Ravina 55) and had successfully outgunned Japan's supreme warlord" (Ravina 55) forcing shogunal forces to receive "President Millard Fillmore's request for a treaty with the United States" (Ravina 55). Saigo argued that "there was nothing wrong with Japan and Korea going to war...but fighting should be based on a real explicit conflict of principles" (Ravina 187). This said, Saigo also "had little interest in Japan's empire" (Ravina 190) as he argued that "the West was not civilized...because it conquered weaker nations and profited from their misery" (Ravina 190). Saigo believed that "truly civilized nations would rule through the superior force of virtue" (Ravina 190). This belief can be linked to the samurai when Tsunetomo quotes Tzu Ch'an and says that "there is nothing that surpasses ruling with benevolence" (Tsunetomo 146). There is no doubt that Saigo's rebellion was a symbol of a traditional uprising against the more modernized Imperial forces. The failure of Saigo's rebellion utterly meant the end of the samurai way, but despite knowing that "they had failed to restore the samurai estate...they were determined to glorify samurai tradition in death" (Ravina 3). Furthermore, the fact that the Imperial forces would "honor a medieval Japanese tradition" (Ravina 3) by searching for Saigo's head, this ultimately contributed to a hollow victory. An example of this old tradition of head collecting can be seen in the Hagakure, where Tsunetomo explains that "while ornamentation on armor is unnecessary, one should be very careful about the appearance of his helmet. It is something that accompanies his head to the enemy's camp"(Tsunetomo 167). After the end of the rebellion, Saigo Takamori's fame elevated to a whole new level. "No one seemed to

believe Saigo was dead" (Ravina 7), and stories spread about how he fled to India or Russia (Ravina 7). Some even believed that Saigo had ascended, becoming a star, "looking down at Japan from the heavens" (Ravina 8). Saigo had successfully become a legend, and "rather than fight Saigo's legend, the government ultimately embraced it" (Ravina 11) pardoning him of all crimes in 1889 (Ravina 11). No other quote describes Saigo's fate better than how Tsunetomo explains that "Even if one's head were to be suddenly cut off, he should be able to do one more action with certainty...With martial valor, if one becomes like a revengeful ghost and shows great determination, though his head is cut off, he should not die (Tsunetomo 80)." After Saigo lost his head, he essentially became a legend, a vengeful ghost that became so powerful that it would force the government to pardon Saigo of all crimes, and ultimately, despite his death, Saigo's legend still lives, in some ways immortalizing Saigo himself. Author Mark Ravina does a great job of telling the tale of Saigo Takamori, and also pointing out that in Saigo's death, he had triumphed over the Imperial government. Despite this, the fourth and fifth chapters seemed the hardest to get through, as they mostly included the governmental reform that seemed to take an endless amount of time. The final chapter seemed short in comparison. My favorite moment in the novel has to be the moment Saigo hurls a watermelon, and accidentally splashes the Emperor of Japan (Ravina 177). Tsunetomo, Yamamoto. *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* Translated by William Scott Wilson Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1979. Ravina, Mark. *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigo Takamori* New Jersey. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2004.

A fantastic and very intriguing read. I highly recommend it to those interested in Japanese history. Very well documented history of a remarkable man as he takes part in transforming Japan from a feudal society into a united and modern nation. Great care and feeling is taken into consideration regarding telling the story of Japan's last true samurai. Powerfully told with much conviction. The book provides an interesting back drop of Japanese society. Beware of overlapping events in time and a lot of Japanese names to memorize and their ranks as this may cause some confusion. Some headaches may occur but it is worth it to learn of the dying world of the Samurai and the emergence of an empire.

interested in Japanese lore and history of the Samurai, then this is a great book for your library. It details with the final conflict in the last Civil War in Japan that solidified the Emperor Meiji's reign at a time when he had decided to reform his nation into one of advanced power and prestige in his attempt to bring Japan into the modern world. As with Cruise's movie, "The Last Samurai" this is a

conflict between two sides fighting for essentially the same thing - the soul of Japan. The cost of this conflict was a loss of military experts with centuries of experience that could really have made the difference with the construction of a national military force., had not the Samurai been intransigent in their opposition to technical and personnel changes to the art of war in Japan. That said, it is a fantastic historical example of the Samurai living and dying to the expectations of Bushido. I imagine, Emperor Meiji mourned the loss of such a fantastic part of his history and power, not to mention the loss of so many who could have aided his reformation. I recommend this book for lovers of Japan and its martial history.

Saw The Last Samurai as a film first. Tom Cruise and director Edward Zwick, they did a tremendous research and poured any amount of enthusiasm into the making of this film. Anything as good as this is not just entertainment. As for Mark Ravina he has my deepest respect. His book is a tour de force. It is a study of Saigo Takamori, the inner man and him as a public figure. A book like this also has quite a different scope. For anybody sufficiently interested in Japan, it tells of the touch-and-go maneuvering kind of politics at the time. The way the country was run without a central government. Even today it is possible to relate these tidings. The school and training of boys from a Samurai family is another interesting aspect of the book.

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