



Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai

Kokichi Katsu , Hiroshige Utagawa (Illustrator) , Teruko Craig (Translator)

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A series of picaresque adventures set against the backdrop of a Japan still closed off from the rest of the world, *Musui's Story* recounts the escapades of samurai Katsu Kokichi. As it depicts Katsu stealing, brawling, indulging in the pleasure quarters, and getting the better of authorities, it also provides a refreshing perspective on Japanese society, customs, economy, and human relationships. From childhood Katsu was given to mischief. He ran away from home, once at thirteen, making his way as a beggar on the great trunk road between Edo and Kyoto, and again at twenty, posing as the emissary of a feudal lord. He eventually married and had children but never obtained official preferment and was forced to supplement a meager stipend by dealing in swords, selling protection to shopkeepers, and generally using his muscle and wits. Katsu's descriptions of loyalty and kindness, greed and deception, vanity and superstition offer an intimate view of daily life in nineteenth-century Japan unavailable in standard history books. *Musui's Story* will delight not only students of Japan's past but also general readers who will be entranced by Katsu's candor and boundless zest for life.

Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai Details

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From Reader Review Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai for online ebook

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

This fine paperback did not seem readable to me when I leafed through it a few months ago but I decided to read it because I've never read such an autobiography written by a Tokugawa samurai before. Written in 1843 during his retirement, this nine-topic account would help its readers know more or better understand how the author lived or worked as well as what the people/places looked like in Edo (Now Tokyo) 170 years ago. Interestingly, there is an anonymous 4-line poem facing the Prologue page:

Be patient, large of heart, and chaste,
Ever conscientious in fulfilling your duties.
Follow the path of learning,
Even though life is as fleeting as the dew on the roadside.

This reminds me of the Japanese character itself that has long shaped Japanese to be unique in their country called Japan, in other words, each line looks simple but Japan has since taken each as her way of life and become one of the great countries in the world, that is, culturally, economically, technologically, etc.

Marcus says

A rather interesting read and not quite what I expected; Musui's story doesn't relate recollections of grand military campaigns or platitudes of honor and martial prowess. Instead the Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai gives us a candid view into the life of a roguish anti-hero. The ever scheming protagonist gleefully recollects adventures in Edo (modern Tokyo) unbecoming the traditional conceptions most of us have of regarding the samurai. The code of bushido states something to the effect of "a samurai must keep death in mind at all times", whereas our hero, Katsu Kokichi, seems to have a somewhat different philosophy, something along the lines of "a samurai must keep money in mind at all times." This is understandable to some degree as, according to the Introduction, "in Tokugawa Japan there were more samurai than official and military posts" (xii). Therefore there were a lot of bored and unemployed young males running around with swords—in such a context, shenanigans are sure to ensue. Kokichi begins his narrative by expressing regret that implies a cautionary tale. "There can't be many in the world as foolish as I am," the narrator begins when writing on childhood, "listen to what I have to say, and may the scoundrels and fools, especially, take my story as a lesson" (9). I find this interesting because throughout the autobiography, Kokichi portrays himself as a scoundrel, indeed, but he is no fool. Despite affirmations to the contrary, Kokichi takes pride in his past antics and adventures. This is evident in the tone he takes throughout the narrative. Kokichi seems to have spent much of his life in debt but never for long, "If I ran short of money, I could always sell swords for people or come up with one scheme or another" (142), yet he would spend money as fast as he could make it. I found the contradictions between the historical, or romantic, conceptions of the samurai that permeates pop culture and the reality of Kokichi's world in 19th century Edo, to be fascinating. It humanizes Kokichi, who did what he had to do to make a living, while having fun doing it. Throughout the text, Kokichi often repents his misdeeds to his superiors, expressing regret for his actions (usually after being caught), therefore I have to wonder if this auto-biography is another non-apology of sorts. The book begins with, "Confined to my house by the order of my superiors," so at the time of writing

this, our hero was once again under house arrest. Therefore I have a feeling that Kokichi was simply repenting to appease the powers that be. I believe that despite becoming a lay priest and taking the religious name Musui (meaning dream-besotted), that old rogue, Kokichi, probably spent the last few years of his life up to his old money making schemes.

Peter Hutt Sierra says

A fun little romp through Tokugawa Japan on the eve of the Meji Restoration. The self aggrandizing autobiography of a clearly unrepentant Kokichi Katsu remains amusing throughout and never overstays its welcome. This isn't a literary masterwork or even a complete narrative, but it makes for an easy historical read and provides a window into the mentality of an era long past.

Our protagonist is a complete bastard, if a charming one. He's a Japanese wise guy, like the characters you find in *Goodfellas* or *The Sopranos*. I'm sure everyone around Katsu hates him. If that sort of protagonist isn't your cup of tea then I can't recommend this book. However if you're in the mood for a light read about the antics of an unemployed samurai then I think you'll like this.

It's been too long since I've read a complete book. Ironically, now that I'm an English major I finish very few books. Hopefully I'll have more reviews in the future.

Kendra Strand says

A lucid translation that reads easily and enjoyably, despite showing its age in the interpretation of certain terms and concepts, including “feudalism” and related structure and terminology, as well as discussions of the Yoshiwara district and its inhabitants. Regardless, Craig captures the easygoing, almost flippant, pleasure and resilience with which Katsu goes about his life and his makeshift business endeavors, even when they deal him one harsh blow after another.

Taylor Lee says

“Follow the path of learning,
Even though life is as fleeting as the dew on the roadside.”
—imprint preceding the Prologue

Portrait of life as an infringed samurai at the dusk of the Tokugawa era. Most interesting is Katsu Kokichi's prologue, which features abstract and philosophical reflections twined with a simple, practical morality aimed at sons, grandsons and future readers. Do not make these mistakes as I have lived them— instead, take heed this wisdom, live these rules, and you will do well. The narrative is picaresque, wild, heroic and oft times, on the surface, dubious, though ceaseless round each corner entertaining.

An interesting document.

Sam Wilkinson says

Very interesting firsthand account life in Japan during the Tokugawa era. Written by a samurai in the 19th century, this book contains wise words from a man who learned a lot in his exciting life. Kokichi makes many mistakes during his life. He embarrasses and wrongs his family. But he understands his mistakes and urges his descendants who read it to "read this record carefully and savor its meaning." (157)

Anyone that wants a primary source's account on Tokugawa Japan and samurai life should read this. It contains many footnotes that will give the reader deeper context and explanations of Japanese culture from this time.

Stanley Watt says

Less interesting than I had hoped. Seemed like Samurai life was mostly trouble making and dealing with relatively inconsequential problems.

Steve says

This book was an assignment as part of a world history class I'm taking. It is a memoir/autobiography of Katsu Kokichi (aka Musui), a low-ranking samurai during the Tokugawa period of early modern Japan. The author recounts his childhood, adolescence and adulthood in a plain no holds barred style. As an unemployed, uneducated samurai Katsu's prospects were dim. Nevertheless he figured out how to use his wits, brawn and compassion to survive and lead an interesting and innovative life. This book is a good window into early 1800's Japanese society.

Neko Neha (BiblioNyan) says

Musui's Story is an autobiography about a samurai during the Tokugawa era in Japan. To be perfectly honest, I found the re-telling of Katsu Kokichi's life to be rather bland and unnecessary for a publication. He glorifies his lack of worth ethic and also his lack of family honor all the while making himself sound like a saint at times.

The novel is a good representation of what life was like during the era, however. It shows the period for the simplicity and normalcy that it was. Media has made the life of a samurai as something grand and elegant when it really was the complete opposite. So, I did enjoy that real-life aspect to the book.

The novel was a quick read, at least for me. There isn't anything vastly special about it that makes it a must read. However, if you are interested in learning a bit about samurai life during the Tokugawa period as it truly was, then I recommend it.

Jeff says

Musui's Story is an interesting read. Other Japanese writings (and the American romanticized view of samurai) give us a perception of the good, honest, benevolent samurai. This book does quite a bit to show what life was really like during the Tokugawa period. The samurai were much as they were during the warring states period; opportunistic, dectieful and selfish. This may be a slightly unfair generalization, but nearly all samurai that the author mentions in relation with himself seem to be similar to him.

In all, this book is well worth reading if you enjoy Samurai culture. Even if you don't necessarily like the culture, but are just a history buff, this is a good book to read for the simple fact that it is a firsthand experience from somebody that comes from a highly romanticized time period.

That being said, even though I read this as a textbook, it is certainly one that I feel that I could pick up again and read if I have some down time. It is able to teach us quite a bit about the samurai culture of the Tokugawa period while being very readable.

Kavya says

Really confusing -- not the best read

Caseyfast says

The book provides a humorous, insightful tale of a low-level Samurai's life. I enjoy this sort of narrative.

Glen says

I enjoyed this book immensely, not only because of the personal insights it gives one of the everyday life of an Edo samurai during the closing years of the Edo Period, but because dispels the myth of the "honorable" samurai so often sold to the West through book and film.

Most samurai living in Edo, and most other castle towns of the period (although probably not as dishonest as Katsu Kokichi on the whole), had very little to do but march to the capital, spend money and fight off debt, and this book does a good job of presenting a rare firsthand account of one such "urban samurai."

Zachary says

During the 1840s in Japan, Katsu Kokichi wrote his own life story in this book, which was translated into English by Teruko Craig. During the late period of the Tokugawa era, Katsu Kokichi came from a lower-class samurai family with a stipend of 100 koku of rice. Katsu became a rebel child during his earlier life and he has run into trouble numerous times throughout his lifetime. There are nine chapters in this book with the addition of Craig's introduction in which he gives the historical background of Katsu.

I had noticed three notable evidences through Katsu's experiences within this book which may have led the samurai class to decline in the mid-19th century. These evidences included the wealth of the samurai, the tax money, and the corruption between the samurai and the peasants. When one analyzed these evidences in this book, one would noticed why this is so.

The experiences of Katsu Kokcihi were an interesting perspective of the lifestyle and the "feudal" culture in the Tokugawa Japan before the decline of samurai. Such an insightful book, and it is to be recommended.

Marie says

A wonderful and funny book, written in the "readers, don't do things like I did" vein. Very revealing about what life was like for lower ranking samurai in the Tokugawa era.
