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**Review of *Samurai: A Very Short Introduction* by Michael Wert,
New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 120 pp., index.**

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Introduction

Not too long ago I reviewed (Hyde 2022) Michael Wert's *Samurai: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). I know that there is at least one other review of it (Neminemus 2022). Mine was more descriptive of its contents; the other was shorter and more critical. Really a very accurate review of Mr. Wert's new book on samurai, *Samurai: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), would be to simply direct you to these two reviews, the reason being that his new book is word-for-word *identical* with his book two years prior. Perhaps I have emphasized the wrong part of that statement: the two books are *word-for-word* identical. There is, literally, no difference between the two. If you want to be particularly pedantic about it, there have been linguistic adjustments to a few clauses within the book, but no more than a dozen in total. It is, in truth, quite disappointing to see both Mr. Wert and Oxford University Press republishing the same material under a different heading.

The only reason I can conceive of as to why they have done this is for the sake of profiteering – selling two books instead of one. Certainly, there is an argument that it was for the sake of reaching a broader audience, and that those who purchase Oxford University Press' *very short introductions* series would not necessarily have purchased Mr. Wert's other book. This is not very convincing, however: there is, fundamentally, very little difference between a book advertised as a very short introduction and one advertised as a concise history; this is patent from the fact they thought it suitable to

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republish the same book under the other heading without any requirement for an alteration in content. This is not to say that a concise history and a very short introduction are essentially the same. On the contrary, an introduction need not be either historical or arranged chronologically, but may choose to be topical instead. Likewise, a history need not cover certain topics and is free to give a broader or narrower account of events as appropriate. There is of course space in which the two meet where texts arranged in a certain manner could be called either a very short introduction or a concise history, but this is quite different from licensing the publication of such a text twice under each of its possible titles.

When I first drafted this review, I intended to accuse Mr. Wert of self-plagiarism. Fortunately, prior to its publication, it has been pointed out to me that the frontmatter of the book confesses that “this book was published in hardcover as *Samurai: A Concise History*”, and thus I have been saved that embarrassment. That hardly exculpates them, though, from the charge of questionable or unethical publishing practices for the sake of profiteering. And there is no question that the republication of the book was intended to be misleading: there is no mention in the book’s description, front cover, or any marketing material. The fact that, in reviewing this book, it had to be pointed out to me that there is a short line in the frontmatter declaring what I had spotted – which I was only able to because I had reviewed his other book – demonstrates that readers interested in samurai are being misled into buying the same book twice, and I am certain that there will be others who have read *Samurai: A Concise History* and will feel equally deceived upon opening *Samurai: A Very Short Introduction*.

Seeing as the books are almost identical, it will suffice to summarize some of the main comments that reviews of the first book made. Perhaps the most significant point made was that Mr. Wert “cannot seem to decide whether he is a storyteller or a historian”. This is because he flipped between objective narrative and opinionated criticism without distinguishing between the two, skewed the image of Japanese history by devoting more space to certain topics than others, and asserted as historical fact positions which are very divergent from what mainstream historians believe. The populist style of writing that he adopted disguised any form of contention, never indicating that, when Mr. Wert was rewriting history, that what was presented was not accepted historical fact. An example of this latter point is Mr. Wert’s revisionist account of the Mongol Invasion in which he denies that the kamikaze typhoons happened, ignoring the wealth of scientific and historical evidence for their occurrence. At least in this circumstance, he announces that his account is revisionist, even if he pretends that this

revisionist account is orthodox amongst contemporary historians. In his description of the rebellion of Taira no Masakado, however, he asserts that the insurrection was precipitated by a conflict over land by the Taira, failing to so much as mention that there is a historiographical debate regarding the cause of the rebellion, which may have been an act of revenge for his failure to secure a government post, caused by a dispute between Taira no Yoshikane and Masakado over a woman, perhaps Yoshikane's daughter, or that Masakado and Yoshikane quarrelled over a daughter of Minamoto no Mamoru.

Another issue raised was Mr. Wert's selection of topics. Anybody picking up a book on samurai is almost certainly expecting to read at least something about figures such as Miyamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojirō, battles such as at Sekigahara, tragic yet poetic rebellions such as the Akō Incident, and samurai "codes of honour" or ethics such as *bushidō*. However, Mr. Wert did not really speak about any of these; the book was a cultural history of a socioeconomic class that at times tries to reveal a thrilling militaristic narrative but failed to include what would constitute the most thrilling parts of it. Likewise, there was no discussion at all about weapons, armour, martial arts, and military tactics, nor was there much explanation of the variety of different sword schools that existed or the modern martial arts that came from them. This will certainly disappoint non-academics, for whom both books are intended, and who will not necessarily expect a cultural history of the samurai class.

Now there is something to be said for the book – or books – and that is that a cultural history of the samurai, although unexpected and, in some respects, disappointing, is in many ways something the general public needs to be introduced to. There are so many misconceptions about samurai and, like western knights in shining armour, it is easy to romanticize and idealize them. However, it is a shame that Mr. Wert became so fixated on dispelling myths that he could not engage with some of the most interesting material about samurai, and it is even more unfortunate that, in trying to correct some public misconceptions, Mr. Wert incidentally introduced new ones in the process, failing to justify himself or make any real reference to the historiographical research that has taken place on various aspects of Japanese history. What is the greatest shame of all, however, is that he decided to do exactly the same thing for a second time in "writing" (republishing) *Samurai: A Very Short Introduction*.

References

B.V.E. HYDE

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