



The Last Samurai

At long last, I saw the huge old statue of the Great Saigō with his hunting dog and short sword in Tokyo's Ueno Park, which lies a goodly distance north of the Imperial Palace. When I lived in Tokyo in the 1950s and '60s, I never got around to it. Too busy, I guess. The recent Tom Cruise movie, "The Last Samurai," encouraged me to seek out this memorial to the 19th-century general who would have, if he could have, reversed the course of the Western-leaning Emperor Meiji, Hirohito's grandfather. Since Saigō was a counter-revolutionary and greatly admired by Japanese people, the American Occupation forces of the mid-1940s considered destroying the statue, but wiser heads prevailed, so the sculpture stands intact as a reminder of momentous times in Japan's long history.

Don't be fooled by Takamori Saigō's casual dress here. In the latter half of the 1800s, he was a *samurai* general of the first rank. His *samurai* warriors fought battles that overthrew the 2½-centuries-old Tokugawa military dictatorship and installed the teenaged Emperor Meiji in the Imperial Palace in Edo, which was quickly renamed Tokyo. In time, however, he became disillusioned with the way things were going. *Samurai* titles were abolished in 1873. Japanese men and women looked a bit ridiculous in Western clothes. Traditional Japanese culture was being lost. So Saigō raised an army of disgruntled *samurai* and went to war against a modern-equipped imperial army in 1877. His swords and arrows didn't stand a chance against rifles and cannon, but his reputation, enormous even during his lifetime, survived in defeat, much as did the reputation of Confederate General Robert E. Lee after the American Civil War. Like Americans, Japanese are suckers for true believers and lost causes sincerely waged.

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