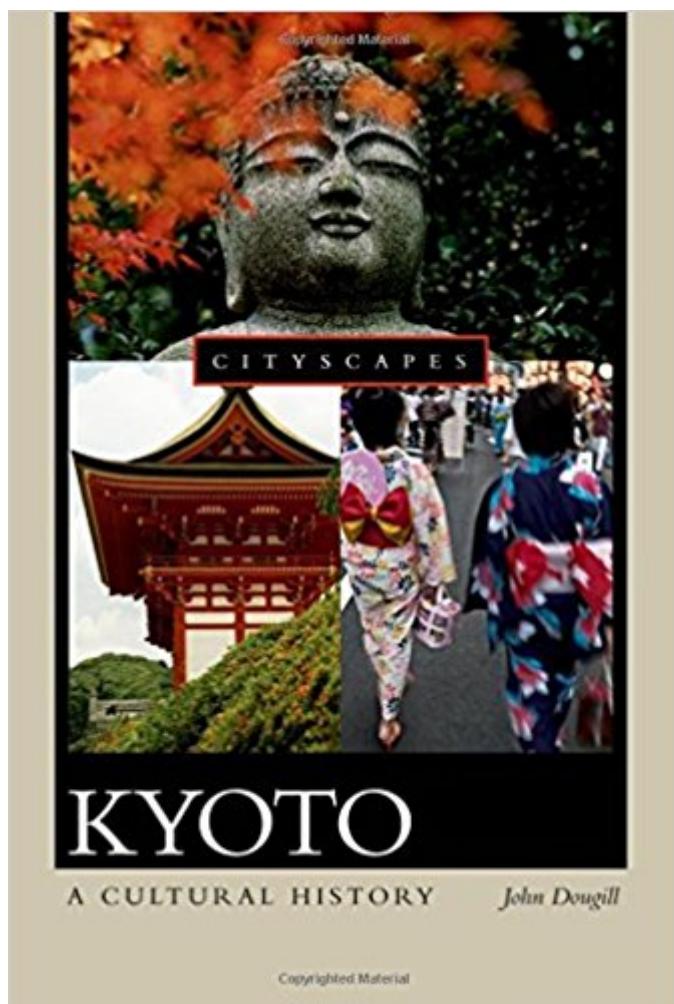


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Kyoto: A Cultural History (Cityscapes)



Synopsis

Kyoto, the ancient former capital of Japan, breathes history and mystery. Its temples, gardens and palaces are testimony to many centuries of aristocratic and religious grandeur. Under the veneer of modernity, the city remains filled with countless reminders of a proud past. John Dougill explores this most venerable of Japanese cities, revealing the spirit of place and the individuals that have shaped its often dramatic history. Courtiers and courtesans, poets and priests, samurai and geisha people the pages of his account. Covering twelve centuries in all, the book not only provides a historical overview but also brings to life the cultural magnificence of the city of "Purple Hills and Crystal Streams."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'an engaging work of cultural geography'; 'carefully crafted structure"'; 'a pensive work that is historical, literary, and a cultural profile' -- Japan Times, June 4, 2006 (Stephen Mansfield)

John Dougill is Associate Professor of English at Ryukoku University in Kyoto. He is the author of *Oxford in English Literature*.

As an academic who specializes in Kyoto's history, I can say without reserve that this is one of the best cultural histories of Kyoto written in modern times. It has a style immediately accessible to general readers and undergraduates, yet also a level of sophistication that will appeal to scholars

alike. Travellers interested in getting much more from Japan's ancient capital than a travel guide could ever provide should also check out this book. Highly recommended.

For a one-book introduction to a city whose history spans at least 1,200 years, this somewhat idiosyncratic historical and cultural jaunt is pretty good. I use it as an introductory text for students travelling to Kyoto for a study abroad experience. It provides just enough historical background to allow those not deeply steeped in Japanese history a few hooks upon which to hang their experiences. As a bonus, it offers a great number of recommendations (implicitly) of things to see and do over the course of one's study-abroad experience that will add significantly to the depth of that residence.

Go to Kyoto.. buy this book and go to Kyoto. What a wonderful place! This is a history of.. not a landmark walking book

Well-written overview of Japanese cultural concepts particular to Kyoto, such as the various Buddhist sects, Tea Ceremony, Noh, Geisha, etc. Each concept is woven into a relevant historical period, with many important personalities introduced. Before going to Japan, it helped me tremendously to understand both the "big picture" of Kyoto history, and to decide which of the many Kyoto temples and shrines to visit. The book is not a traditional guide, however - it's more of a narrative history, with some personal reflections and recommendations of the author.

When you write a book in praise of Kyoto, it's hard to go wrong by me. This fine and refined metropolis--formerly Japan's political capital and (sorry Tokyo) always and ever its cultural capital--is in all honesty one of my favorite places on earth, and back when I lived in Japan nary a month would go by that I wouldn't visit it at least once. Back here in the States that's not really possible, unfortunately, and so it's quite a delight to at least be able to revisit Kyoto through the pages of this brief but heartfelt cultural history. The author has lived and worked in Kyoto for a long time as a professor of British Studies at Ryukoku University, and so has a deft first-hand familiarity with the city along with an obvious deep affection and enthusiasm for the place, all of which he unselfishly shares with the reader. On the other hand, since this is not his primary scholarly field, he has taken a vast store of variously scattered expert studies and translated primary sources and weaved these together with his own anecdotal accounts, memories, and impressions; some might dismiss this as "unoriginal" but to read so widely and then handpick the relevant portions and craft

them into a coherent narrative that's personal, personable, entertaining, and informative all in one is no mean feat and is nothing to sneeze at. That said, the parts where he digressed to discuss his own experiences of Kyoto were often the parts that really shone for me as a reader, as these were often perceptive and thought-provoking as well as sometimes funny--and speaking of funny, the author has a wonderful penchant for lame puns and silly jokes that add a certain fatherly charm to the prose. As a whole the book is well-organized, moving along chronologically from the city's founding in 794 to modern times, discussing the characteristic cultural contributions of Kyoto distinctive to each era of Japanese history often with one as the primary focus ("The Tale of Genji", the schools of Buddhism, court verse, Zen, Noh drama, decorative art, the way of Tea, haiku, geisha, cinema, and the modern novel (those by Tanizaki, Mishima, and Kawabata)). The sociopolitical history of the city is also addressed properly, mostly as it is relevant to changes and shifts in cultural history, of course. He has a surefire respect for tradition but can also take the city's modern developments in stride--this is a living, breathing city after all and not a large sprawling museum. The only drawback is that there are a few inaccuracies in the chapter on Buddhism, some glaring (Dainichi is most certainly NOT the Buddha "who created all things"--there is no creator Buddha in Buddhism, nor any creation *per se*) and some merely nitpicky or just semantically misleading. Nothing a little further reading won't straighten up, though, and the ins and outs of Buddhism are not the main topic at hand, so these inaccuracies are not a mortal sin really, just a minor annoyance if you happen to know better. The book is written in a very accessible, straightforwardly casual prose style that is ideal for someone unfamiliar with Japan and its cultural capital and still enjoyable for a frequent visitor or resident--also perfect for reading during one's long commute by train or bus. A word of warning though to prospective buyers: the book's cover somehow makes it look like a guidebook, and this is misleading. It makes no attempt to outline key places, hours of operation, and transportation. It's not even organized by site as other similar titles are (such as Mosher's great contemplative guide: *Kyoto: A Contemplative Guide*) though reading it might give you a few hints of places you might want to check out. On the other hand, if you plan on visiting Kyoto as a tourist this book would be a great and user-friendly way to place all of the detailed data from your guidebook(s) into an overall context and framework and you'd doubtlessly get a whole lot more out of your trip thereby. And if you're stuck somewhere else wishing you were in Kyoto like me, this book is a reliable way to take a little trip there in spirit.

Dougill's 'Kyoto, a cultural history' is a general introduction to Japanese culture. As such, it employs the city of Kyoto as a starting point and a phocus to make a quick review through Japan's history

and main traditional arts. If you're looking for a general introduction, and don't know much about the subject matter, the book will come quite handy. Otherwise, it will just give you basic information (the author isn't a specialist in Japanese culture, and the book's size doesn't allow for much deepening either). Each chapter is centered in one of the main cultural manifestations we associate with Japan, and at the same times reflects the historical period (jidai) in which the said art was born. So we have a chapter on classic poetry, a chapter on Tea Ceremony, a chapter on Geishas, etc... The main exceptions are the first ('City of Kammu', which works as a general introduction to the geography and the foundation of the city), the sixth (about political unification and its leaders in the sixteenth century) and the last (a mélange of cinema, novels and history in the twentieth century). Being a 'cultural' guide, some chapters center too on religious developments (like Heian aristocratic Buddhism, in chapter three). If you're looking for a guide, this isn't for you. If you're looking for a 'cultural history of Kyoto', the book will come out to shallow and basic, and most of the time more about Japanese culture as opposed to specific Kyoto evolutions (for art and history of Kyoto alone, try if you can find it Ponsonby-Fane's 'Kyoto'). But as a general introduction of the subject-matter, well written and entertaining, this book will do the trick. I'm giving it only 3 stars because I was expecting a bit more to it (being an Oxford University Press book, and all that) than just a 'beginner's guide to Japan's culture'.

Reading a book like this is a good way to prepare for a visit to Kyoto, at least if you are interested in the cultural history of the place. The book is also a fairly good introduction to Japanese history in general, especially the pre-Meiji period.

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