



The Lone Samurai: The Life of Miyamoto Musashi

By William Scott Wilson

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The Lone Samurai is a landmark biography of Miyamoto Musashi, the legendary Japanese figure known throughout the world as a master swordsman, spiritual seeker, and author of *The Book of Five Rings*. With a compassionate yet critical eye, William Scott Wilson delves into the workings of Musashi's mind as the iconoclastic samurai wrestled with philosophical and spiritual ideas that are as relevant today as they were in his times. Musashi found peace and spiritual reward in seeking to perfect his chosen Way, and came to realize that perfecting a single Way, no matter the path, could lead to fulfillment. *The Lone Samurai* is far more than a vivid account of a fascinating slice of feudal Japan. It is the story of one man's quest for answers, perfection, and access to the Way.

By age thirteen, Miyamoto Musashi had killed his opponent in what would become the first of many celebrated swordfights. By thirty, he had fought more than sixty matches, losing none. He would live another thirty years but kill no one else. He continued to engage in swordfights but now began to show his skill simply by thwarting his opponents' every attack until they acknowledged Musashi's all-encompassing ability. At the same time, the master swordsman began to expand his horizons, exploring Zen Buddhism and its related arts, particularly ink painting, in a search for a truer Way.

Musashi was a legend in his own time. As a swordsman, he preferred the wooden sword and in later years almost never fought with a real weapon. He outfoxed his opponents or turned their own strength against them. At the height of his powers, he began to evolve artistically and spiritually, becoming one of the country's most highly regarded ink painters and calligraphers, while deepening his practice of Zen Buddhism. He funneled his hard-earned insights about the warrior arts into his spiritual goals. Ever the solitary wanderer, Musashi shunned power, riches, and the comforts of a home or fixed position with a feudal lord in favor of a constant search for truth, perfection, and a better Way. Eventually, he came to the realization that perfection in one art, whether peaceful or robust, could offer entry to a deeper, spiritual understanding. His philosophy, along with his warrior strategies, is distilled in his renowned work, *The Book of Five Rings*, written near the end of his life.

Musashi remains a source of fascination for the Japanese, as well as for those of us in the West who have more recently discovered the ideals of the samurai and Zen Buddhism. *The Lone Samurai* is the first biography ever to appear in English of this richly layered, complex seventeenth-century swordsman and seeker, whose legacy has lived far beyond his own time and place.

----- INTERVIEW WITH
WILLIAM SCOTT WILSON ABOUT BUSHIDO

Q.: What is Bushido?

A.: Bushido might be explained in part by the etymology of the Chinese characters used for the word. Bu comes from two radicals meanings "stop" and "spear." So even though the word now means "martial" or "military affair," it has the sense of stopping aggression. Shi can mean "samurai," but also means "gentleman" or "scholar." Looking at the character, you can see a man with broad shoulders but with his feet squarely on the ground. Do, with the radicals of head and motion, originally depicted a thoughtful way of action. It now means a path, street or way. With this in mind, we can understand Bushido as a Way of life, both ethical and martial, with self-discipline as a fundamental tenet. Self-discipline requires the warrior at once to consider his place in society and the ethics involved, and to forge himself in the martial arts. Both should eventually lead him to understand that his fundamental opponents are his own ignorance and passions.

Q.: How did the code develop and how did it influence Japanese society?

A.: The warrior class began to develop as a recognizable entity around the 11th and 12th centuries. The leaders of this class were often descended from the nobility, and so were men of education and breeding. I would say that the code developed when the leaders of the warrior class began to reflect on their position in society and what it meant to be a warrior. They first began to write these thoughts down as *yuigon*, last words to their descendents, or as *kabegaki*, literally "wall writings," maxims posted to all their samurai. Samurai itself is an interesting word, coming from the classical *saburau*, "to serve." So when we understand that a samurai is "one who serves," we see that the implications go much farther than simply being a soldier or fighter.

Also, it is important to understand that Confucian scholars had always reflected on what it meant to be true gentleman, and they concluded that such a man would be capable of both the martial and literary. The Japanese inherited this system of thought early on, so certain ideals were already implicitly accepted.

The warrior class ruled the country for about 650 years, and their influence-political, philosophical and even artistic-had a long time to percolate throughout Japanese society.

Q.: The Samurai were very much renaissance men - they were interested in the

arts, tea ceremony, religion, as well as the martial arts. What role did these interests play in the development of Bushido? How did the martial arts fit in?

A.: This question goes back to the Confucian ideal of balance that Japanese inherited, probably from the 7th century or so. The word used by both to express this concept, for the "gentleman" by the Chinese and the warrior by Japanese, is (hin), pronounced uruwashii in Japanese, meaning both "balanced" and "beautiful." The character itself is a combination of "literature" (bun) and "martial" (bu). The study of arts like Tea ceremony, calligraphy, the study of poetry or literature, and of course the martial arts of swordsmanship or archery, broadened a man's perspective and understanding of the world and, as mentioned above, provided him with a vehicle for self-discipline. The martial arts naturally were included in the duties of a samurai, but this did not make them any less instructive in becoming a full human being.

Q.: What was sword fighting like? Was the swordplay different for different samurai?

A.: There were literally hundreds of schools of samurai swordsmanship by the 1800's and, as previously mentioned, each school emphasized differing styles and approaches. Some would have the student to jump and leap, others to keep his feet solidly on the ground; some would emphasize different ways of holding the sword, others one method only. One school stated that technical swordsmanship took second place to sitting meditation. Historically speaking, there were periods when much of the swordfighting was done on horseback, and others when it was done mostly on foot. Also, as the shape and length of the sword varied through different epochs, so did styles of fighting. Then I suppose that a fight between men who were resolved to die would be quite different from a fight between men who were not interested in getting hurt.

Q.: How is the code reflected in Japanese society today?

A.: When I first came to live in Japan in the 60's, I was impressed how totally dedicated and loyal people were to the companies where they were employed. When I eventually understood the words samurai and saburau, it started to make sense. While these men (women would usually not stay long with a company, giving up work for marriage) did not carry swords of course, they seemed to embody that old samurai sense of service, duty, loyalty and even pride. This may sound strange in our own "me first" culture, but it impressed me that the company had sort of taken the place of a feudal lord, and that the stipend of the samurai had become the salary of the white-collar worker.M

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Musashi is primarily known in the West as the author of *The Book of Five Rings*, a guide to swordsmanship strategies that became an essential business-strategy manual in the 1980s. Wilson, having translated Musashi's book into English, turns for the first time to biography, with as complete a life of the man behind the sword as possible, given his legendary stature and peripatetic, largely undocumented story. Musashi lived in the 17th century and had his first match at 13 with a *shugyosha* (an older, professional swordsman); only Musashi walked away alive. For three decades, he wandered feudal Japan, moving from patron to patron, taking on opponents in formal and informal matches, teaching others his art and sometimes taking part in clan and regional rivalries. He eventually settled in southern Japan, where his martial art skills led organically to visual art: simple-looking, highly disciplined ink-and-brush painting and calligraphy. Toward the end of his life, Musashi synthesized everything he'd learned into the literary work he is now best known for. Wilson integrates a considerable amount of Japanese history and culture into a short, dense book with lots of specialized information. Although Musashi doesn't become fully dimensional—and given the scarcity of primary source material, he probably can't—Wilson provides an extensive appendix of other materials that have depicted the legendary swordsman over the centuries.

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Review

"A fascinating glimpse of a central figure in traditional Japanese culture." -- *Kirkus Reviews*, *starred review*

From the Publisher

THE TRUE STORY OF JAPAN'S GREATEST SAMURAI SWORDSMAN AND THE AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF FIVE RINGS

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