

Courage and Change: The Life of Kiichiro Toyoda. By Kazuo Wada and Tsunehiko Yui, translated by Edmund R. Skrzypczak. Tokyo: Toyota Motor Corporation, 2002. xiii + 330 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendix, notes. Cloth. ISBN: 4-990-10301-7.

Reviewed by David Farber

The Toyota Motor Corporation authorized this thoroughly researched and well-written biography of its founder, Kiichiro Toyoda (1894–1952). The authors are both eminent Japanese business historians. Tsunehiko Yui wrote the first two chapters, which focus on the inventive genius Sakichi Toyoda (1867–1930), the father of both Kiichiro Toyoda and Japan’s power-loom industry. The next six chapters and the epilogue, written by Kazuo Wada, explore Kiichiro Toyoda’s long and difficult struggle to advance the power-loom business and then, in the 1930s and 1940s, to create and develop the Toyota automobile industry. The work’s title, *Courage and Change*, captures the authors’ overarching thesis: Toyoda recognized that the nascent automobile industry represented an extraordinary domestic business opportunity, and though he was aware of the immense challenges inherent in starting up an automobile company in Japan in the 1930s, he threw himself into the enterprise. While Yui and Wada write in measured tones throughout, they demonstrate that Kiichiro Toyoda’s success, like that of American founding auto giants Henry Ford, Alfred Sloan, and Walter Chrysler, is the stuff of legends.

Kiichiro Toyoda was, perhaps, more like an Alfred Sloan than a Henry Ford or a Walter Chrysler. While Sakichi Toyoda was a self-taught inventor who made the extraordinary leap from rural village life to industrial leadership (shades of Henry Ford), his son, after some family debate, was raised to take a place in a rapidly modernizing and industrializing Japan. Kiichiro’s path was by no means an easy one. His mother left his father less than a month after Kiichiro’s birth; as a result, Kiichiro was at first raised by his paternal grandparents and then by Sakichi Toyoda’s second wife. Young Kiichiro’s father did not immediately embrace Japan’s emergent culture of professionalization, and in the first years of the twentieth century he wanted Kiichiro to begin working in the family business after graduating from middle school. Kiichiro’s stepmother, however, insisted that her son be allowed to continue his education. A happy Kiichiro, as a result, went on to high school and then to the prestigious Tokyo Imperial University, where he matriculated in the Department of Mechanical Engineering in the Faculty of Engineering. Kiichiro, then, belonged to the earliest cohort of technologically well-educated men in Japan’s booming industrial sector.

The comparison between General Motor's Alfred Sloan and Kiichiro Toyoda should not, however, be overdrawn. While Sloan's years at MIT in the early 1890s ingrained in him a tightly focused—if quite useful—engineering perspective on corporate problem solving and profit maximizing, Toyoda gained more than technical knowledge and methods during his years at Tokyo Imperial University. Toyoda also became a dedicated student of Zen meditation, a practice he maintained throughout his life. Kiichiro Toyoda, in turn, taught his eldest son, Shoichiro, that the “strivings of man are like Sisyphus rolling the stone up the hill: there is no such thing as an ultimate goal that can be achieved” (p. 47). Such a perspective would provide Kiichiro Toyoda with strength of will and tenacity, traits that were most useful during the multiple setbacks he, his company, and, indeed, his nation suffered during the 1930s and 1940s.

The authors of this biography have not written this monograph in order to argue a new interpretation of business history. Their account is, instead, a nonromanticized, compelling story of a gifted industrialist's struggle against the odds to begin a world-shaking business enterprise. In a fascinating preface to the book, Hiroshi Okuda, chairman of the board of Toyota, writes: “Today the world, in search of a new framework, is in a state of great instability. Within such conditions the world's markets and Japan's industries are placing a great deal of hope in Toyota. . . . I feel certain that, once we come into contact with the fervor and tenacity in pursuit of a dream of those who, with our founder, took on the challenge of starting a new business, we too will be inspired to face with courage the challenge of major change that we face today” (p. vi). This didactic hope clearly helped to inspire the Toyota Motor Corporation to fund the book project. Still, the book's didacticism is only implicit.

Wada's chapters on Kiichiro Toyoda's technical and managerial development are models of careful research and reveal Toyoda's disciplined approach to industrial research and decision-making. This disciplined process took him to England, where he worked at the Platt Brothers, a leading textile machine manufacturer, and to the United States, where he studied American manufacturing techniques, negotiated with American companies over patent rights and, perhaps most important, Wada argues, pondered the possibility of the Toyoda company's entrance into a new industry. In the spring of 1930, shortly after returning from the United States, Toyoda began to prepare his company for entry into the automobile industry. Wada details the step-by-step process through which Toyoda tested his capacity and his company's ability to undertake the complex and difficult transition into the technologically sophisticated business of manufacturing automobiles. While a kind of folklore has emerged around Toyoda's entrance into the auto business that suggests the choice was a lighthearted one, perpetuated perhaps by Toyoda's own remark that he threw himself into the task “without regard for the consequences” (p. 274), Wada

makes it clear that Kiichiro took many measured steps, based on “meticulous scrutiny of his calculations” (p. 274) as he moved the company in a new direction.

While Wada gives us much useful information on the technical problem-solving undertaken by Toyoda and his team, the emphasis throughout the text is “on Kiichiro as a thinking and feeling human being” (p. 259). We learn that Kiichiro Toyoda was a man unafraid of challenges: he risked his father’s displeasure by seeking higher education; he traveled broadly in search of technical knowledge; and he was willing to risk his company and his own reputation and status on a grand entrance into the new field of automobile manufacturing. He was also, it is worth noting for an English-speaking readership, a man of principle, whose disapproval of the militarist turn in Japan in the late 1930s caused him to step back cautiously but deliberately from the war effort. Fulfilling the hopes of the leaders of the Toyota Motor Corporation when they supported this biography of their founder, the story of Kiichiro Toyoda is a fascinating account of industrial leadership.

David Farber is professor of history at Temple University. His books include Sloan Rules: Alfred P. Sloan and the Triumph of General Motors (2002). At present he is working on two book projects: a short history of modern political conservatism and a biography of John Raskob.