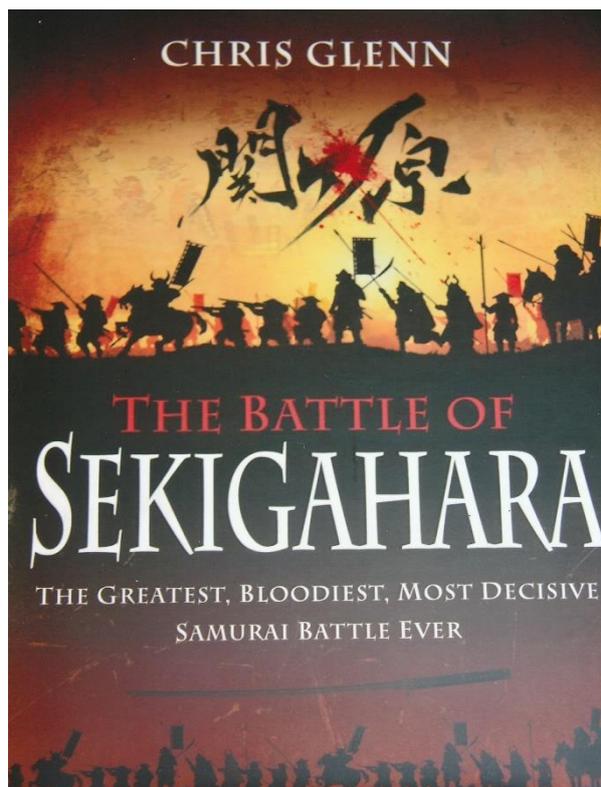


BOOK REVIEW**THE BATTLE OF SEKIGAHARA****THE GREATEST BLOODIEST MOST DECISIVE SAMURAI BATTLE EVER****BY CHRIS GLENN****PUBLISHED BY FRONTLINE BOOKS AN IMPRINT OF PEN & SWORD BOOKS****ISBN 978 1 399014 13 7**

This most notable and absorbing book reveals the turbulent history of Japan in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It focuses is on the Battle of Sekigahara which was fought by the Western and Eastern armies of Ishida Mitsunari and Tokugawa Ieyasu, respectively on the 21st October 1600. In the preface the author describes the battlefield site, approximately 1-kilometre in length and 500-metres wide, during a visit he made in the mid-1990's.

In the years before the 16th century Japan was riven by a series of wars between rival feudal warlords – Daimyo's – who were large landowners and ruled numerous regions of Japan. They were fiercely protective of their clans and allegiances. None however were able to establish prime authority over the country. Oda Nobunaga, who was born in the 1530's rose to prominence and established a fragile stability over the daimyos. After his death in 1582, one of his loyal supporters, Toyotomi Hideyoshi became Taiko or Great Chancellor and ruler of Japan. His authority gradually declined and when he died sixteen years later his five-year-old son became ruler. Prior to and after discord grew between discontented warlords from which two groups emerged led by Ishida Mitsunari and Tokugawa Ieyasu.

There were five main arterial routes which linked western and eastern Japan to the old capital Kyoto and Edo (now modern-day Tokyo). Two of these highways were of military significance. One the central mountain western route (542-kilometres long) followed the Kiso River, the other eastern sea route (514-kilometres long) ran along the Pacific Ocean side of Japan. Although the highways did not merge who ever had control over them controlled Japan's destiny.



These fascinating and intriguing aspects about Japan are fully explained in great detail by the author. Ishida Mitsunari and Tokugawa Ieyasu were prepared to go to great lengths to gain their ultimate prize of becoming Shogun – Grand General or Hereditary Military Dictator. To enjoy and reap a full appreciation of this historical event it is essential to come to terms with Japanese names, pronunciation to which many readers will be unfamiliar with. The authors narrative and careful descriptions is most helpful in understanding Japanese culture and traditions of the period, which he splendidly conveys to build up a comprehensive picture of 16th and 17th century Japan.

Inevitably, the machinations of Ishida Matsunari and Tokugawa Ieyasu culminated in a confrontation between them which was resolved at Sekigahara. A concise account is related to the reader about the arms, types of armour and weapons used the samurai. The term samurai means ‘to serve’. Samurai could serve as warriors or as administrators and clerks. A surprising fact is that the famous samurai sword was not the pre-dominant weapon in the Battle of Sekigahra and caused the least number of deaths. Matchlocks, spears, the bow and arrow and cannons were of more significance.

As dawn broke and the fog lifted on the 21st October 1600, a most spectacular panorama of the two vast opposing armies facing each other would have been revealed. The colourful scene of the armoured and mounted samurai with battle flags and standards displayed by each army belied the forthcoming slaughter. Ishida Matsunari’s Western army was composed of 83,000 plus another 13,000 nearby and confronted Tokugawa Ieyasu’s Eastern army of 80,000. Prior to the commencement of battle a prodigious ceremony was carried out by the warlords pledging their allegiance and loyalty in person and writing to their respective commanding general.

Just after 0800 hours the opening movements of the battle began, and the author communicates to the reader all the beauty and horror of feudal warfare. As the tide of battle fluctuated on the blood soaked plain, strewn with corpses it is compellingly brought forth by the author. He guides the reader around the battlefield where each component of the overall battle is fought. A few minutes after 1400 hours, the Western army effectively collapsed and with 30,000 dead lying on the battlefield Tokugawa Ieyasu claimed victory.

A traditional ceremony held shortly after by Tokugawa Ieyasu was the head-viewing of selected heads of hundreds of high-ranking samurai who had been killed. This perhaps macabre spectacle was part of the rich Japanese cultural traditions not widely known about in the west. Special note was taken of the facial expressions on the severed heads as it was believed that they could foretell the outcome for victory. At the conclusion of the ceremony the heads were buried with

respect and without discrimination in head mounds. Tokugawa Ieyasu later summoned his generals and high-ranking samurai of his army to thank them for their loyalty and distribute rewards. Seppuku – a form of ritual suicide – and other cultural ceremonies are included in the author's story. Isihda Matsunari, whose head was not taken on the day of the battle was later captured and ignominiously beheaded. There were, further conflicts Tokugawa Ieyasu had to subdue before he became Shogun on the 26th March 1603, laying the foundations of a robust and stable governance of Japan which lasted until the mid-19th century.

The author, Chris Glenn summaries his careful considered opinion about the Battle of Sekigahara and its legacy. Within the book are footnotes, colour photographs, battlefield layouts, brief biographies of the key participants of the Western and Eastern armies, a glossy of Japanese words into English, a timeline of events, select biographies and index. Chris Glenn, an Australian, whose thorough research of Japanese old manuscripts, documents, and letters about the Battle of Sekigahara is first class. He is member of the Japan Armour and Weapons Research and Preservation Society, Japan Castle Research Society and was also apprenticed to a traditional samurai armour artisan, has produced a magnificent and eminently readable book. Residing in Japan his revelations give a helpful explanation of Japanese traditions for readers who have little or no knowledge of the subject. This memorable volume is a good springboard for readers to pursue and learn about the culture and history of Japan.

Roger Coleman