The final years of the samurai were an age of unprecedented turmoil and bloodletting in Japan. They heralded the end of two and a half centuries of rule under the powerful Tokugawa Shogun. The rule of law was deteriorating, assassination and murder were rampant, and inner-fighting among the warrior class embroiled the nation. After the United States forced an end of over two hundred years of Japanese isolation, two contrasting philosophies were embraced by the samurai. On one side were those who would overthrow the Shogun and restore the Emperor to his ancient seat of power. Opposing the revolutionaries were the allies of the House of Tokugawa, the ruling samurai dynasty which was headed by the Shogun. While these samurai clashed violently with one another, they shared allegiance to an unwritten code of honor which governed the ways they lived and died. Theirs was a stoic system of morals which condoned suicide, vengeance and, in some cases, cold-blooded murder. Prevalent among the samurai was an apparent lack of concern for human life which might offend modern values. But taken in their unique historical and social context, the two-sworded adherents of the Way of the Warrior demand the respect of even the most enlightened denizens of the 21st century. Samurai Sketches are, to quote the author, “accurate portrayals of the heart and soul of the samurai, the social and political systems of whom have, like the Japanese sword, become relics of a distant age, but the likes of whose nobility shall never again be seen in this world.” In recounting what he terms “the great epic which was the dawn of modern Japan,” American author Romulus Hillsborough applies his long years of research and keen perception of things Japanese to delve deeply into the psyche of the men of the samurai class. Brought to life are not merely warriors of a distant age and culture, but also human beings, both good and bad, who suffer the same pangs of body and mind as all of us. Depicted are: The unruly swordsman with a propensity for cold-blooded murder, who is also the poet of a profoundly delicate quatrain in the face of his own imminent death. The executioner who prays at the scaffold for the souls of the condemned, and who performs sword “cutting tests” on their bodies. The assassin who dies by his own sword rather than
violate his self-imposed code of honor. The brilliant commissioner of the Shogun's navy who, refusing to draw his blade, dominates his adversaries by sheer strength of mind. The notorious commander of the Shogun's most dreaded police corps who is captured for execution by the new Imperial government. The expert swordsman, charismatic revolutionary leader, meticulous planner of cold-blooded murder, and weaver of terror in the hearts of men. Japan's most revered samurai who was assassinated shortly after accomplishing his vow to overthrow the Shogunate. The quintessential samurai, magnanimous revolutionary leader, and commander-in-chief of the forces of the new Imperial government. In each of these thirty historical sketches and vignettes, Hillsborough once again wields his vivid literary style to bring his readers gripping accounts of real events and people from the bloody final years of the samurai, never before depicted in the English language.

My Personal Review:
Samurai Sketches -- From the Final Bloody Years of the Shogun is an accurate and realistic study-in-brief of the fifteen years of bloody revolution which culminated with the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868. In this collection of historical sketches written in short-story form, Romulus Hillsborough depicts scenes of human strife, courage, fidelity, self-sacrifice, heroism, good and evil, in prose which are always concise, often intensely vivid, at times poetic. He throws light upon a period in Japanese history which has either been sadly neglected or grossly misinterpreted by Western writers. Sketches is Hillsborough's sequel to RYOMA -- Life of a Renaissance Samurai, which chronicles this historical era through the life of one of its most important heroes, Sakamoto Ryoma. As a Japanese man, and as a life-long student of Japanese history, I am at once proud and happy to recommend both Samurai Sketches and Ryoma to people interested in Japanese culture and history, or, more broadly speaking, the human condition.

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