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Book Review

100 Masters of Okinawan Karate

By Hokama Tetsuhiro

Translated by Charles (Joe) Swift

Review by Mark Tankosich*

Okinawa: Okinawa Gojuryu Kenshi-kai Karate-do Kobudo Association & Karate Museum, 2005, 92 pages, Paperback, \$20.00 / ¥2,000 + tax.

Readers of English language karate history resources will most likely first notice the name of the translator of this slim volume: Surely, they will have previously come across Joe Swift's work. He is, in this writer's opinion, among the top three or four Western researchers of karate history in the world. The book's author, Mr. Hokama, will probably also be familiar to more serious students of karate's history, especially those that read Japanese. He has, in the last twenty years, authored several publications dealing with the Okinawan martial art, including his *History and Traditions of Okinawan Karate* in English. Hokama Sensei is also the owner / curator of a karate museum located in Okinawa. Interestingly, he is apparently a great-nephew of Shitoryu karate's founder, Mabuni Kenwa.

As for the publication itself, *100 Masters of Okinawan Karate* has some weaknesses, but it will surely be an invaluable resource to anyone with a real interest in the history of karate. As the title indicates, this book is essentially an encyclopedia of sorts, consisting primarily of entries for (more than) one-hundred karate (and *kobudo*) greats. Some of these masters (e.g., Matsumura Sokon, Miyagi Chojun and Soken Hohon) are well-known figures in karate's history, while others (e.g., Bushi Higa, Ura Soki and Kaneshima Shinei) have

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likely never been heard of by most. The entries are arranged in order of birth year, and usually also note the year of death. This compilation of names and years of birth / death alone makes the book well worth having.

The actual content of each master's entry varies, and may include such things as birthplace, teacher(s) and/or students, significant accomplishments, and anecdotes and other interesting "tidbits." While all of such information is of historical importance, it is, of course, the anecdotes and tidbits which are the most interesting to read. For instance, in the entry for the famed Itosu Anko, we find the following: "According to Chibana Choshin, at age 69, (Itosu) stood about 4 feet 6 inches, had very wide shoulders, weighed about 108 pounds and liked to eat a lot."

Prior to the main section containing the entries for the various karate greats, *100 Masters* presents a series of glossy photos of the book's author and his calligraphy, family, students, etc., as well as a six-page forward. Also included in the book, following the main section, are: an abridged bibliography; a listing of historical karate sites; and a summary of the author's martial arts career, achievements and contributions.

As valuable a resource as this book is, as noted above, it is not without its flaws. Most notable are what might be called issues of editing and layout: Numerous spelling errors, grammar and punctuation mistakes, missing words, a sometimes questionable choice of pictures to be included, and poor placement of some headings all detract from the quality of the publication. The book's forward is also constructed in a less-than-skillful way. Finally, more frequent and complete citing of specific information sources would certainly have been preferable, although this admittedly may not have been very feasible or possible.

In sum, *100 Masters of Okinawan Karate* is, in this reviewer's opinion, a kind of "diamond in the rough." While it could benefit from a fair amount of polishing, its inherent value is clear. Those with a genuine interest in the history of Okinawan karate will want to be sure to obtain a copy of this publication.