

Afterword

Three Views of Oceanic Japan

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Oceanic historians have treated Japan about as often as historians of Japan have engaged with the ocean: that is, remarkably rarely. As Alexis Dudden explains in this volume, Japan studies are still “bound by territorial perspectives on the past. This is ironic at best and problematic at worst when analyzing Japan’s history with the sea.” It is ironic indeed because Japan can readily be described (as Paul Kreitman does here, channeling Epeli Hau’ofa) as a sea of islands, a diverse assemblage of lands linked and formed by their surrounding waters. In the wake of UNCLOS in 1982, that oceanic expanse comprises the world’s eighth largest EEZ, most of it spanning the ocean. The ocean bulks correspondingly large in the global imagination of Japan: Hokusai’s *Great Wave* is an icon of Japanese art; popular images place seafood at the heart of Japanese culture; and Japan’s major contribution to mythology is a monster from the deep, Godzilla. Moreover, Japan is unique in having had two heads of state, Emperor Hirohito and Emperor Naruhito, trained respectively in marine biology and maritime history.¹

The View from 1929 (i): Where is Japan?

Why, then, has the great wave of scholarship on oceanic history taken so long to reach Japan? This conundrum has deep roots that are both historical and historiographical. One way to suggest the historical origins of the absence is to go back for a moment—not for the last time in this afterword—to the pivotal year of 1929. Only twenty-five years before, Japan had claimed naval preeminence and amazed the world by defeating Russia’s

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Japan's long estrangement from the ocean was genuine, though not as absolute as conventional accounts of a country wholly "closed" before Commodore Perry found the key—or broke down the doors—might suggest.⁴ As Kären Wigen and Marcia Yonemoto argue, in the centuries before the Meiji Restoration, the shogunal state stood aloof from the greater Pacific and from the Indian Ocean even as its encircling waters aided the integration of the archipelago. Japan's reluctance to join the long-distance boat race with other Eurasian polities hardly scuppered maritime innovation: as Jakobina Arch shows, the technological demands of inshore sailing led to the invention of the shallow-drafted *bezaisen*. Nor was the ocean wholly absent from the Tokugawa imagination: as David Howell notes, reactions to mysterious tales of drifting craft and exotic castaways signified that "Japanese views of the sea were evolving long before Perry first showed up in Edo Bay in 1853." Yet, as that much later surrealist map indicated, broader mental cartographies, beyond Japan as well as within it, only haltingly assimilated Japan to the wider Pacific. That ocean did not appear on Japanese maps until the late eighteenth century and only became widely domesticated in the mid-nineteenth century. Until then, Yonemoto remarks, echoing the late Australian historian Greg Denning, Japan was firmly "*in* but not *of* the Pacific."⁵

The lack of oceanic histories of Japan was not a product of Japanese history alone: it was a side-effect of modern historiography itself. History-writing in and about Japan could not escape the fundamental commitments of the historical profession that had crystallized since the late nineteenth century. From that point almost until our own time, most historians in much of the world have been both anthropocentric and terracentric. They have studied mostly humans rather than nonhuman creatures and thereby cordoned our species off from nature as a whole. Moreover, they largely confined humans within national contexts defined by borders and rooted in territory. History as a discipline accordingly dealt with pasts that were human and terrestrial, fixed rather than fluid, and in effect horizontal rather than vertical.

It has taken half a century to blur the binary oppositions that bedevil the historian's craft: nature versus culture, nonhuman versus human, sea versus land. Environmental historians were the first to break the boundary, though they began by tracking changes in the land rather than currents in the ocean.⁶ Even the founding fathers of oceanic history—and they were overwhelmingly men—from S. D. Gotein and Fernand Braudel to

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K. N. Chaudhuri and Bernard Bailyn had little interest in the sea qua sea.⁷ They skimmed its surfaces instead of plumbing its depths and, in common with other anthropocentric historians, treated its nonhuman denizens more as objects of capture and commerce than as historical subjects in their own right. While historians confronted other “centrisms” such as Eurocentrism or ethnocentrism, terracentrism persisted unremarked and uncontested. It has been left to more recent scholars to put the ocean back into oceanic history and to endow the cod and the whale, the salmon and the sea cow, with a measure of historical agency.⁸ Salt water has proved to be a powerful solvent for enduring analytical binaries.⁹ In this regard, Japanese history is now joining the mainstream of historical innovation.

Apart from marginal differences in national styles and methodological tastes, “terrestrial bias” distorted history along with most of the other human sciences across the twentieth century.¹⁰ The great French historian Marc Bloch neatly encapsulated that prejudice in his *Apologie pour l'histoire* (1949), better known in the English-speaking world as *The Historian's Craft*. There, Bloch firmly defined history against the natural sciences on grounds of subject matter. The history of the solar system, he wrote, was “the province of astronomy” while that of volcanoes was the preserve of geology: both lacked the all-important “human element.” To sharpen his point, Bloch offered an oceanic instance. In 1134, a violent storm opened up a channel on the Flemish coast known as the Zwin, which began to silt up in the following century.¹¹ As long as any blockage of the channel arose from “alluvial deposit, the operation of ocean currents, or, perhaps changes in sea level,” Bloch argued, the Zwin was of no concern to historians. However, when diking sped up the silting, “the act of society remodelling the soil on which it lives” marked “an eminently ‘historical’ event.” What Bloch termed “the intervention of history” arrived only with human agency.¹² That attitude, elegantly expressed by Bloch, has ruled the historical profession for most of its life span. As a result, deep-sea creatures were rendered invisible like the water, winds, and waves. They dropped beneath historians’ notice and out of history itself, in Japan as elsewhere, to become one symptom of a more widespread human thalassophobia.¹³

Terracentric historians may see a world in a grain of sand, taking patches of our species’ grounded, bounded past to make claims about a larger history. Oceanic historians find the world in bodies of water. Holism is the name of the oceanic game, as the historian’s craft extends to ever more species and over other dimensions. Chapters in this volume by Toshihiro Higuchi,

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Takahiro Watanabe, Nadin Heé, and Kjell Ericson exemplify this trend by taking scallops and salmon, tuna and oysters, seriously as subjects with the capacity to intervene in history through their interactions with humans and as agents in their own right. If an oyster could speak, we might not understand it but, as Ericson reveals, Kai-Lingual software can translate bivalve motion into signals that we can comprehend and ultimately weave into history. Similarly, scallops might once have seemed silent but their spawning can also signify and thus be significant for historians.¹⁴ Moreover, the movements of marine biota shape human mobility and are in turn shaped by it to create a history that is dynamic, energetic, and always shifting but where the “human element” alone no longer defines what is, or is not, truly historical.¹⁵

Oceanic historians attuned to these motions are increasingly constructing a history from below—from below the waves, that is.¹⁶ Although this movement has been most conspicuous in animal history, it also contributes to what has been called the “volumetric turn” in the social sciences.¹⁷ Terrestrial histories are implicitly planar, scanning horizontal expanses but seldom looking up or down from the land to supramundane or subterranean realms. Oceanic history cannot afford to be so superficial. “Ocean and land are connected by the air,” Bathsheba Demuth remarks, and the air column above matters as much to its circulation as the water column below. Both are populated by creatures and, increasingly, by structures that claim historians’ attention. Stefan Huebner and Gerald Figal argue in their essays that platforms and tetrapods matter as much to the oceanic history of Japan as the animate subjects treated in other chapters. Huebner’s “platform archipelago” exemplifies a vertical history that rises from the seabed through the water column and into the air while Figal’s “econtology” of tetrapods extends the three-dimensional space of the Japanese littoral into the water as the effort to defend Japan’s coastline creates novel habitats for sea animals.¹⁸ Horizontalist historians tend to talk about their “field,” a bounded space that can be tilled or tended. Vertically integrated oceanic history suggests a better metaphor: the wave. This an encouragement to surf dynamic trends and write history both from above and from below that is at once transoceanic and submarine.¹⁹ In this regard, *Oceanic Japan* provides an inspiring model for other historians, oceanic and terrestrial, to combine field and wave, surf and turf, into a history that is immersive, amphibious, or what Alison Bashford has helpfully termed *terraqueous*.²⁰

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The View from 1929 (ii): Behold, the Sea!

Even if Japanese historiography has only recently turned terraqueous, Japanese history has long been so. That, at least, is the overwhelming impression *Oceanic Japan* leaves. From Arch's Tokugawa shipbuilders through Howell's and Kären Wigen's teeming imaginative space of the Pacific via the world shaped by steam portrayed by Martin Dusinberre to the turbulent, teeming modern sea of islands of so many other chapters, it should now be impossible—or require some justification—to treat Japan's history with a solely terracentric bias. The Japanese past was the product of the interpenetration of land and sea, of what Stefan Huebner calls “the coevolution between the dry and marine habitats,” that could even have political consequences, as Katherine Matsuura shows in her account of the 1868 Kosaka uprising. Japan's intensive “aquapelagic” environment also led to the overlap of old and new technologies as well as the coproduction of new ones.²¹ For example, the arrival of steamshipping in Japan—beginning with a single gunboat in 1862—did not abruptly signal the end of the age of sail: the two maritime technologies coexisted for decades, as the chapters by Martin Dusinberre and Manako Ogawa remind us. And if the transition from sail to steam was uneven, so was that from biofuel to fossil fuel: one result of “shifting our focus from black ships to black smoke”, as Dusinberre puts it, is to join the intimately local to the expansively global. As Dusinberre continues, “the ‘oceanic’ is partly a call for historians of Japan to think globally.” To paraphrase the late C. A. Bayly's aphorism on global history, all (Japanese) historians are oceanic historians now, though many have not yet realized it.²²

Terraqueous relationships appeared especially starkly in another compelling surrealist image from 1929, the Japanese painter Koga Harue's *Umi* (*The Sea*) (see fig. A2). Within a single collage-like picture, Koga compacted images of land, sea, and air; of the human and the nonhuman; of steam and sail; and of the submarine and the subconscious.²³ The painting defies any linear reading but rotates around multiple axes: the poised, notably Western, “Modern Girl” in her swimsuit on the right echoes the upright stance of the German factory, taken from a contemporary trade magazine, on the left; the archaic sailing ship on the surface of the sea resonates with the cutaway of a submarine in its depths; supersized shrimp swim past shoals of tuna and other fish; birds in flight seem to pursue the Zeppelin aloft. Throughout, the viewer's eye makes patterns and connections that

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FIG. A.2 Koga Harue, *Umi (The Sea)*, 1929. Courtesy of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

blur the lines between *terra* and *aqua*. Koga encouraged such sliding between states in a poem accompanying a reproduction of the piece:

Translucent and sharp color of water. Indigo. Purple.
 Reality is clarified. Land is in the middle of the sea.
 Sliding objects. Seawater. Submarine. A sailing ship.
 North latitude 50 degrees.
 Swimsuited woman. All things are tied to fish of the sea
 The fresh scent of germinating seaweed.²⁴

(North latitude 50 degrees does not cross the Japanese archipelago but might refer to the division of Sakhalin Island along that parallel after the Russo-Japanese War: it is presumably the line that traverses *Umi's* picture plane.) The terraqueous is just such a realm of sliding and slippage, connection and reconfiguration, in which terracentric “reality is clarified” as fluid, land

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and sea merge, nature is refreshed, and the human remains integral while the water is unignorably central.

“All things are tied to the fish of the sea,” as Koga intuited. Without the ocean’s refractive lens, Toshihiro Higuchi might not have discovered the collision between two models of industrialization, nuclear above and agricultural below the waves, in the struggle between proponents of nuclear energy and cultivators of crustaceans in Mutsu Bay. Likewise, history might have overlooked Takahiro Watanabe’s “fish-bearing forests” where salmon and trees grew together symbiotically or the forces of urbanization across the Tsushima Strait traced by Hannah Shepherd. “Oceans connect” was the founding slogan of the new thalassology in the late 1990s, as David Howell recalls.²⁵ In retrospect, it is clear that the original motto reflected the globalizing teleology of its time: the world was apparently becoming one, barriers and borders were melting into air, and the fluidity of “liquid modernity” began with, and on, the ocean as a matrix of integrative processes.²⁶ Yet as globalization itself has looked more halting and even reversible of late, the promise of that first boosterish phase of oceanic history has ebbed.

Oceans *disconnect*. Global historians, among whom many oceanic practitioners count themselves, are becoming more interested in friction, interruption, resistance, and blockage in world history. In this vein, Yonemoto shows that, until the middle of the nineteenth century, ship-free Japanese maps “cast the ocean . . . as a buffer zone or even a metaphorical moat protecting Japan.” The oceans are not simple barriers. They have more precise choke points: closed seas and maritime limits; bays and gulfs, narrows and straits; and pirates’ nests and controversial territories such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands or the Kuril Islands contested between Japan and its neighbors. For Japan, moreover, the ocean has frequently brought natural disaster, hence the evolving science of tsunami research and the aftermaths of Fukushima that Mariko Jacoby and Satsuki Takahashi cover here. Alongside all these disruptive oceanic factors, there is the brute materiality of maritime traffic itself: it was a container ship registered in Japan, the *Ever Given*, that halted world trade for six days when it wedged in the Suez Canal in March 2021. The dialogue between connection and disconnection may be unusually prominent in the history of Japan because of its situation: as Jonas Rüegg rightly insists, “Japan has never been an island limited to a confined terrestrial world but rather an archipelago awash in abundant currents,” subject both to its nutrifying effects and its catastrophic

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consequences.²⁷ *Oceanic Japan* should alert future historians to the sea's more general capacity to disunite as much as its power to conjoin.

The View from 1929 (iii): Sea Changes

The central question *Oceanic Japan* tackles is “how, and when, Japan became oceanic,” as Dusiñberre puts it. There was no environmental necessity it would become what William Tsutsui has fruitfully called a “pelagic empire” but it did so slowly across the early modern centuries and then more rapidly in the Meiji period and beyond.²⁸ In light of the new chronology established by this volume, the turn of the 1930s now appears crucial in the redirection of Japan's energies outward into the ocean, with the burst of shipbuilding, fleet expansion, and industrialization of the sea that rendered Japan world leading in maritime fishery. One last cultural product might indicate this inflection point. The year 1929 saw the appearance not just of Koga's *Umi* but also of Kobayashi Takiji's *Kani kōsen* (“The Crab Cannery Ship”). As an emblem of how transformative an oceanic approach to Japanese history can be, “The Crab Cannery Ship” would have to be invented if it did not already exist. *Kani kōsen* is at once a gripping tale and a compelling fable, a richly peopled story and a potent allegory. Its propulsive narrative energy derives from the gradually emerging solidarity among a motley crew of workers brutalized by a capitalist manager. These oppressed proletarians labor for insufferable hours in unbearable conditions confined to a “shit hole.” They witness appalling cruelty, negligence, and inhumanity that force them to revolt. At just the moment they think they have overthrown their oppressor, the organs of the imperial state step in to crush their rebellion and punish its leaders. In case his readers might somehow have missed the argument, Kobayashi pointed the moral in a supplementary note: “This narrative is a page from the history of capitalist penetration into colonial territories.”²⁹ What could better suggest the vast forces reshaping Japan in an age of rapid economic change and energetic imperial expansion between two great world—and Pacific-wide—wars?

Oceanic Japan allows, even compels, a rather different reading of Kobayashi's fable. “The Crab Cannery Ship” is usually understood as a classic of Japanese proletarian literature and as a text of early socialist consciousness.³⁰ Kobayashi's note further encourages reading his novella as an allegory of Japanese empire, and of a specifically territorial empire at that.

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And yet, as any reader of this volume will immediately notice, both strands of interpretation overlook the obvious. The setting of his story is a ship, the *Hakkōmaru*. Its main characters are classic foot soldiers of the army of labor—among them some of the “fishermen farmers” Watanabe introduced us to—but their factory is afloat. They do not produce textiles or other manufactures but process fish. And their place of production is not some huge building, firmly planted on land, but a still bigger vessel, plying the seas between the home islands and Kamchatka, following the contours of the expansion of the pelagic empire after the Russo-Japanese War.³¹ *Kani kōsen* is certainly proletarian in focus and socialist in intent, and the geography of the work maps the expansive vision of interwar Japanese imperialism. Yet it is fundamentally, definitively, revealingly, and essentially an oceanic work. The only mystery is why that aspect—visible in plain sight and woven into the fabric of the work at almost every point—is often overlooked, and why even Kobayashi downplayed it in favor of allegory and of territoriality.

No doubt the sea was so all-encompassing in Japanese history that, like the water in which a fish swims, it was at once indispensable and invisible. Anything so vast and omnipresent raises equivalent challenges, not least that of how historians might get their arms around something as large and unstable as the ocean. Kobayashi foreshadowed one solution: the ship history, a mode of inquiry into moving vehicles that, so far, has no equivalent in terracentric studies. (Coach, train, or automobile history, anybody?) Individual ships can be sensitive seismographs for broad historical shifts, by mapping their movements and reconstructing their connectedness, as Martin Dusenberre and Brett Walker demonstrate in their compelling accounts of the *Yamashira-maru* and the *Yukikaze*, respectively.³² *Oceanic Japan* provides many similar models for bottling worldwide waters into the pint pots of articles, dissertations, and monographs, from these ship biographies to Alexis Dudden and Jonas Rüegg’s contextualizations of the Ogasawara/Bonin Islands to the telling case studies of mammals and sea creatures and of *terra* and *aqua* that so richly populate its pages.

Historians, like fish, are constrained by scales. Terraqueous history facilitates the play of scales, between micro- and macrohistory, with plenty of “meso-” in between. As this book’s dazzling array of essays amply proves, the oceanic turn in Japanese history is a turn for the better. It would be conventional to judge *Oceanic Japan* “groundbreaking” if that did not imply exactly the methodological terrestrialism this collection decisively confronts: better, then, to call it “wave making” to fit its topic better and to

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predict more accurately what Japan can bring to oceanic history and what oceanic history might yet offer to Japan.

Notes

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