

**Ian Jared Miller, Julia Adeney Thomas, Brett L. Walker, eds..** *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. xiv + 322 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8248-3876-8.

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Japan conjures up many images in the popular imagination, many of which seem contradictory. The same country known for delicate tea ceremonies, origami, and ikebana flower arrangements has also produced talking toilets, bullet trains, and cartoons featuring giant robots. Many Westerners, as the saying once went, “remember” Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima. Others enjoy anime, manga, and Hello Kitty. There is even an “emoji” movie. Animal rights activists are horrified by the images of slaughtered orcas and dolphins in the documentary *The Cove* (2009). Environmentalists worry about the “fallout” from the Fukushima nuclear disaster (often referred to as 3/11) and the tsunami that caused it. The film and the (natural and human) disaster appear in the introduction and in many of the essays in this collection, a useful guide to understanding Japan’s past, present, and future from the viewpoint of environmental history.

These images present a mixture of the modern and the premodern, especially in terms of Japan’s relationship to nature. The beauty of a simple Shinto shrine or garden is juxtaposed with the crowded, polluted urban landscape of one of the world’s largest cities, Tokyo. *Japan at Nature’s Edge* sees Japan as a global power that is not as in harmony with nature as generally thought. In

fact, Japan, like many other powerful nations, has tried to overcome nature at every turn, especially since modernizing after the Meiji Restoration. Rather than standing firmly beside nature, Japan “teeters on nature’s edge,” hence the title of the collection (p. xiii). Japan’s culture and history have determined this position, and the authors in this collection present examples of this. The editors emphasize the “human” half of the human/nature relationship, arguing that we must understand this better.

The editors have larger goals in mind. They want to expand the scope of Japan studies by bringing in environmental issues and move scholarship on Japan to the current focus on global history. Just as Japan opened to the West in the nineteenth century, they argue, Japan studies must embrace the global context to survive. In a lot of ways, this book is making an argument not only for a broader type of Japan studies but also for the relevance of environmental history itself. By considering nature in their work, historians can avoid preset boundaries and create more comprehensive and relevant academic writing. For the most part, the essays in this collection achieve these goals, although there is still much material to cover.

The collection is split into five parts, each containing essays that address a common theme. These include the often-overlooked role of maritime issues in history (“Oceans and Empires”), impacts of technology and efforts to control nature (“Changing Landscapes”), Japan’s relationship to nature examined through bodies and bodily functions (“Between Bodies”), the roles of humans and nature in Japan (“Vistas and Viewpoints”), and the impacts of the Fukushima disaster (“The Triple Disaster of 3/11”). The authors cover many subjects in environmental history, including environmental justice, policy, pollution, fisheries, waste, technology, land use, mining, eco-criticism, animals, nuclear power, natural disasters, activism and protests, and environmental movements. There are elements of military history, but most are related to the atomic bombs and their aftermath.

In addition to outlining the book, Brett L. Walker’s introductory preface analyzes *The Cove* and Admiral Matthew C. Perry’s “opening” of Japan in the nineteenth century. Walker also explains some key terms used in the book, such as “environmental orientalism,” reflected in the Western reaction to *The Cove*. The so-called eco-thriller was well received and honored in the rest of the world (Oscar nomination) while unpopular in Japan (met with protests, threats, and potential lawsuits). Western critics failed to see the economic importance of whale and dolphin meat, and were imposing their own values on the Japanese. The chapter concludes with a plea to include environmental issues in humanistic and social science studies of Japan.

Part 1 begins in a logical place: the oceans. William M. Tsutsui’s piece on Japan’s “pelagic” empire is also a good way to begin this collection, as it calls for a broader perspective in historical research. For many historians, Tsutsui explains, the action takes place on land: they tend to overlook oceans and maritime activities in their accounts of nation-states. This is one of the deficien-

cies the essays in part 1 try to redress, especially given that Japan is an island heavily dependent on the seas for resources. Not surprisingly, control of the oceans was, like for Great Britain (and later the United States), key to imperialism for Japan.

The influence of Americans and American technology were also key to Japan’s growth, as Jakobina Arch explains in “From Meat to Machine Oil: The Nineteenth-Century Development of Whaling in Wakayama.” Japanese whaling was limited to coastal waters before Americans, using more sophisticated technology, forced the Japanese to venture beyond their own coastlines as whale populations diminished. American ideas (civilization, colonization) encouraged expansion and imperialism. Arch effectively uses one village as a case study that reveals the impacts of these ideas and practices, many driven by changes in environmental conditions (like the loss of whale populations).

Just as Germany created and exported forestry schools, so too did Japan with fishery schools, as revealed in Micah Muscalino’s “Fisheries Build Up the Nation: Maritime Environmental Encounters between Japan and China.” As China learned Japanese fishery practices, they used this information to try and hold back Japanese maritime expansion. The oceans, like the land, had become an arena of imperialist competition and source of national pride.

The drivers of Japan’s modernization, especially technology, are the subject of part 2. Surprisingly, even though the popular imagination associates Japan with technology, Japan studies often overlook this subject. The three essays in this section reveal that technologies are not just machines, but part of society and culture. Like humans and nature, humans and technology are not separate, but parts of the same whole.

In “Talking Sulfur Dioxide: Air Pollution and the Politics of Science in Late Meiji Japan,” Takehiro Watanabe explains how residents tried to win damages from a mining company (Sumitomo) and

how science played an important role in the outcome. The pollutant, sulphur dioxide, emerges as much more than a chemical compound; it emerges as something with historical agency. Scientists could identify pollutants, but not convince locals, or provide adequate explanations for how the damage was done. The author concludes that protests and negotiations were not part of a “green” movement but a conflict over natural resources. Pollution was seen as a necessary evil for economic growth and progress. This is not your typical tale of the greedy corporate polluter versus tree-hugging villagers.

Philip C. Brown’s “Constructing Nature,” an analysis of riparian management in the Echigo plain, also questions accepted beliefs about Japan’s relationship to nature. He contrasts the “orientalist” view of Asian societies (living in harmony with nature) with Japan’s “constructionist” impulses and desire to control nature, which started long before industrialization. Like other authors, he links efforts to control nature to imperialism. This continuity between premodern and modern Japan is an important insight, pointing out that modernization may not have changed Japan as much as previously thought.

Timothy S. George’s “Toroku: Mountain Dreams, Chemical Nightmares” analyzes the impacts of arsenic mining in a small mountain village. He shows how the presence of arsenic determined the area’s fate as demand grew with wars and the nascent chemical industry in the industrial age. George also includes cultural elements, such as songs about the damage done by the mine. The essay makes a larger point about environmental history: everything is connected, and even a small case study teaches us a lot.

In part 3, the authors focus on bodies, manifestations of nature that are hard to ignore. David L. Howell, in “Fecal Matters: Prolegomenon to a History of Shit in Japan,” analyzes one of the more unique Japanese practices, the use of human waste (“nightsoil”) as fertilizer. The author re-

veals the blurring of boundaries between humans and products of their bodies. In Japan, human feces are not just waste but a valuable commodity. It is something we often avoid and yet is a key part of the natural environment. The essay is well placed in that it provides a bit of humor after George’s grim account of arsenic poisoning. It would have been interesting to hear how American occupiers viewed the use of nightsoil. We see again the theme that Japan is not as “close to nature” as we like to believe. Choosing to use human waste as fertilizer, Howell argues, was driven more by economics and practicality than any desire for recycling or environmental preservation. Utility conquers all.

Andrew Bernstein’s “Weathering Fuji: Marriage, Meteorology, and the Meiji Bodyscape” introduces the concept of “bodyscape” (defined as a group of bodies, human and nonhuman) with Mount Fuji as an example. The human part is the married couple that endured conditions at the top of the mountain to record not only weather conditions but also the condition of their own bodies, thus becoming part of the bodyscape. The goal, Bernstein argues, was to conquer the mountain; meteorology was just a side project. While Bernstein cleverly uses photographs and artwork to support his arguments, the scope of the essay, which contrasts science and poetry, male and female, nature and humans, seems a bit overly ambitious for such a short piece. Seeing natural features, such as Mount Fuji, as bodies (or parts of a bodyscape) could bridge divides between histories of the environment and the body.

Christine L. Marran’s “Animal Histories: Stranger in a Tokyo Canal” explores the larger meanings of the appearance of a seal in Tokyo Bay, which became a national sensation. As humans become more detached from nature, animals are a rarity, and those that are present (rats, pigeons) are seen as vermin. Animals are commodified, collected in zoos and circuses, or symbolized by cute cartoon-like figures, such as Hello

Kitty. To Marran this represents our desire for a fictitious “wild world” that, like the “untamed” wilderness, does not really exist. The animal in effect becomes a human surrogate, allowing us to forget how trapped we are in our lives, ignoring the reality of animals. This is a very interesting contribution, but I am not sure what the general point about Japan is. Perhaps it is the uniqueness of Japanese “cute” (*kawaii*) culture in its portrayal of animals.

Part 4 takes a closer look at the role of science and culture in Japan’s environmental history, providing tools to better understand the human/nature relationship. It begins with Federico Marcon’s “Inventorying Nature: Tokugawa Yoshimune and the Sponsorship of *Honzogaku* in Eighteenth-Century Japan.” Marcon covers the premodern Tokugawa period, as early naturalists set out to catalogue Japan’s flora and fauna from 1734 to 1736. The enormous amount of data they collected represented human control over nature and was similar to German “scientific forestry.” Just as the Germans changed the meaning of their forests, the practitioners of *honzogaku* (defined as “pharmacology” but more similar to natural history), organized and catalogued Japan’s nature, making it more accessible and less sacred.

Popular culture, in the form of literature, still maintains its relevance to studying Japan’s relationship to nature, as Karen Thornber argues in “Japanese Literature and Environmental Crises.” In her study of fiction writing (specifically a novel and poetry written after the atomic bomb attacks) on the natural world, she explains how literature disregards science’s focus on logic and order, allowing multiple interpretations that science overlooks. Her essay reminds us of the value of studying culture in environmental history. There are many other Japanese cultural forms (anime and manga, for example) ripe for study.

Switching to more prosaic writing, Ken’ichi Miyamoto’s “Japanese Environmental Policy: Lessons from Experience and Remaining Prob-

lems” analyzes past Japanese environmental policies and comes up with some surprising findings. Many Western readers may not think of environmental protests and grassroots (“bottom-up”) organizing for environmental protection as an Asian characteristic, and yet that is how many of Japan’s environmental laws were created. Miyamoto contrasts this approach to the German “top-down” method to environmental laws to provide a very good summary of lessons from prewar and postwar Japan that is useful for students of environmental policy and law.

Part 5 brings us into the present with interpretations of the “triple disaster” (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown) that occurred on March 11, 2011 (3/11), starting with Sara Pritchard’s “envirotech” approach in “An Envirotechnical Disaster: Negotiating Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima.” “Envirotech” involves seeing human and natural systems as closely linked, and recognizing that the environment has always been a part of technology. She also reminds us not to overlook human decisions (political, economic) that affected the disaster, to not see humans solely as victims. This speaks also to the Japanese faith in technology; Japan now must consider its natural environment (tsunamis, earthquakes, etc.) when using technology.

Daniel P. Aldrich’s “Postcrisis Japanese Nuclear Policy: From Top-down Directives to Bottom-up Activism” analyzes policies undertaken *after* disasters (A-bomb, Fukushima) and the rise of grassroots activism. He shows how Japanese attitudes toward nuclear power have changed from the “nuclear allergy” of the immediate postwar years to support, back to criticism and even the possibility of denuclearization. This piece provides a useful analysis of Japanese civil society that complements the other essays on protests and public pressure. It would be interesting to see how the more nationalistic sentiments of the Shinzo Abe regime, which took power after the book’s publication date, have affected these issues.

Julia Adeney Thomas finishes the collection by returning to more theoretical concerns by considering the nature of history itself. In “Using Japan to Think Globally: The Natural Subject of History and Its Hopes,” she highlights the need for interaction between science and the humanities and the value of national studies in an era of globalization. History, she argues, must do more than simply list events in order, particularly in the Anthropocene, where unprecedented human environmental impacts may make studying the past obsolete. Japan’s position on the “edge of nature” represents this dilemma. Will it tilt toward nature or science? Will it maintain any consideration for the natural world, and can studying Japan’s past provide any answers? This collection is a good start toward answering these questions.

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