Introduction

The idea for this book hatched nearly a decade ago, during an aimless afternoon spent browsing in Tokyo's bookselling district. I stumbled across a poster showing a flock of huge birds wheeling above a lush tropical island (Figure 0.1). An advertisement for guano fertiliser mined on a mysterious isle called 'Rasa' a century ago, it would once have hung on the wall of a village wholesaler or agricultural co-op. Buy our product, it seemed to promise, and channel the energy of the ocean, routed through the bowels of these birds, into your own crops.

At the time I had never heard of Rasa, but a quick google search brought up a satellite image of a barren, foam-ringed chunk of rock in the middle of the North Pacific. Devoid of vegetation, scarred by years of open-face mining, the island's present state is a far cry from the tropical idyll shown in the advertisement (Figure 0.2). Though technically administered as part of the Japanese prefecture of Okinawa, it is today uninhabited. The birds are long gone, too. In fact, the species depicted in the poster, Steller's albatross, was likely wiped out on the island even before the first guano miners arrived – its long wing-feathers plucked and sold to adorn the hats of women in Paris, London and New York.

Digging further, I discovered that Rasa was only one of a number of uninhabited islands that ring the outer perimeter of the Japanese body politic. The significance of these islands is entirely disproportionate to their tiny size. During Japan's colonial period they unfurled vast riches into the laps of the prospectors who harvested their resources for a quick profit, and much more modest incomes for their employees: the men and women who did the actual work of butchering seabirds and shovelling their faeces onto ships. The islands also generated reams of public discourse that fetishised them as symbols of colonial expansion, testimony to the pioneer spirit of the Japanese nation. Many went on to become key nodes in Japan's defence perimeter. One, Iwo Jima,

Figure 0.1 Advertisement for Rasa Island guano (n.d.)

became the site of one of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific War. Later still, even after their resources were depleted and strategic value spent, bird islands became symbols of nationalist pride and anchors of pelagic sovereignty under new regimes of international maritime law. They remain so to this day.

Intriguingly, some of these islands have also become sites for nature conservation. It was once thought that the activities of Japanese hunters drove Steller's albatross to extinction, but in the post-war era the bird has been resurrected by conservationists as a 'natural monument of the nation', symbolising Japan's commitment to peace, democracy and enlightened stewardship of the environment. It was, for example, one of the earliest species added to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's global database

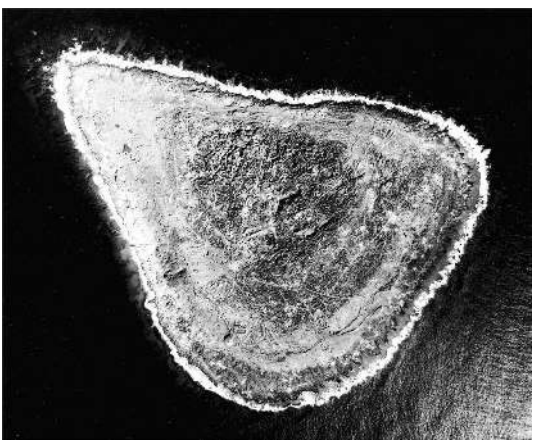

Figure 0.2 Aerial photograph of Rasa Island (1978)
© National Land Image Information, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

of threatened species. To this end, many of Japan's remote islands have been incorporated into national parks and United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (UNESCO) world heritage sites. At the time of writing numerous projects are under way to repopulate them with rare seabirds, wipe out invasive species such as rats and goats, and restore them to something approximating their prior ecological state.

Yet these conservation efforts have a contentious history. The first albatross conservation campaigns were mounted at the turn of the twentieth century by American ornithologists, who sought to evict Japanese bird-hunters from recently annexed Hawaiian atolls at a time of heightened anxiety about trans-Pacific Asian migration. Japanese conservation campaigns, for their part, have become entangled with the politics of the US military presence in East Asia and with festering territorial disputes with Japan's neighbours. As recently as 2013, during a bitter confrontation with China over the sovereign status of the Senkaku (Ch. Diaoyu) Islands, a conservation charity linked to the Japanese royal family suggested the government send a landing party to search for a potential new subspecies of Steller's albatross. The suggestion triggered a fiery response from Chinese state media, which denounced a Japanese plot to 'snatch our islands using the pretext of environmental protection'.

This book sets out to answer the flood of questions the Rasa Island guano poster raised for me. What chain of events led people to set foot on such remote spots in the first place? How did they go about claiming the birds and the land on which they nested? What kind of human settlements once existed on the islands, and what happened after they were abandoned? What does the history of bird islands say about Japanese imperial and post-imperial power, and about the web of political, economic and ecological connections between insular and oceanic space? What changed between the age of bird butchery and the age of bird protection – and what has stayed the same? And what does all this say about the relationship between sovereignty, territory and environment in the modern world? Did China's accusation of a conservationist conspiracy to 'snatch' bird islands not, perhaps, have a grain of truth to it?

In addressing these questions, this study sits at the intersection of three overlapping fields of historical enquiry: Japanese colonialism, Pacific Ocean studies and environmental history. Because of this, I have aimed to write it in such a way that readers can grasp the narrative and core arguments without deep background knowledge of any of these fields. In the pages that follow I will set out how the study contributes to each field in turn, beginning with the relatively narrow field of Japanese history and moving outwards to encompass the Pacific world more generally, before finally addressing the broader subdiscipline of environmental history. It is always a challenge to write a book that speaks to multiple subfields in this manner, but I hope that the pages herein contain something for everyone.

Shards of Empire?

Bird islands occupy a peculiar space within the Japanese body politic. They were first colonised during a century of expansion that began in the 1850s and ended abruptly in 1945: in this sense they are what Alexis Dudden has called 'shard-like remnants of the nation's once massive empire'.[1] It is now well known that Japan once had an overseas empire of colonies and puppet states. Key possessions included Taiwan (annexed in 1895), Southern Sakhalin (1905), Korea (1910), Micronesia (1914), Manchukuo (1931–1932), plus the brief Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (1940–1945), which at its zenith

[1] Alexis Dudden, 'Japan's Island Problem', *Dissent* (Fall 2014): 12.

stretched from Mongolia to Burma to Indonesia to the Aleutian Islands. The history of Japan's bird islands cannot be grasped without reference to this broader territorial empire. It is hardly a coincidence, for example, that Japan chose to annex the Senkaku Islands in the middle of a war with neighbouring Qing China. And many of the same people who helped to colonise bird islands such as Torishima and Marcus Island were also active elsewhere in the Japanese Empire, particularly in Micronesia.

More recent scholarship, however, has sought to move beyond empire studies in the traditional sense in a number of ways. Some historians have chipped away at the conventional distinction between colony and metropole by drawing attention to 'internal colonies' such as Hokkaidō and Okinawa, which remain part of the Japanese body politic to this day.[2] Others have drawn attention to what I here call 'extraterritorial empire', showing how gunboat diplomacy secured consular protection for Japanese imperialists even when they strayed well beyond the limits of Japanese-administered territory.[3] At the same time, other scholars have drawn connections between Japanese colonial expansion and the migration of Japanese subjects across the Pacific, suturing together the once divided fields of East Asian history and Asian-American studies.[4] The most ambitious work has followed this line of thinking to its logical conclusion by

[2] For a discussion of Japan's internal colonies see Takaesu Masaya, *Kindai Nihon to shokuminchi to 'tōsho'* (Yumani Shobō, 2009), viii; Michele Mason and Helen Lee, *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 18–20. The contested identity politics of Okinawa are discussed in Chapter 7.

[3] Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, Mark Peattie (eds), *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895–1937* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Erik Esselstrom, *Crossing Empire's Edge: Foreign Ministry Police and Japanese Expansionism in Northeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Seiji Shirane, *Imperial Gateway: Colonial Taiwan and Japan's Expansion in South China and Southeast Asia, 1895–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

[4] Shiode Hiroyuki, *Ekkyosha no Seijishi: Ajia Taiheiyō ni okeru Nihonjin no imin to shokumin* (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2015); Eiichiro Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Sidney Xu Lu, *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism: Malthusianism and Trans-Pacific Migration, 1868–1961* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Martin Dusinberre & Mariko Iijima, 'Transplantation and Imperial Practice in Japan's Pacific', *in Historische Anthropologie* 27 no. 3 (December 2019): 325–32.

historicising the production of territorial space itself.[5] The result has been to destabilise conventional distinctions between nations and empires and instead highlight the emergence of centrally administered, territorially demarcated states as a profound historic rupture in its own right.[6]

Pacific Frontier or Ocean Borderland?

Given all these recent innovations, it becomes apparent that describing Japanese activities on bird islands as 'colonial' only gets us so far. How then should we locate bird islands within the sprawling expanse of the Japanese Empire? What should we make, for instance, of the fact that many were governed not as colonial appendages but as part of the Japanese metropole itself? Despite lying twelve hundred kilometres out to sea, for instance, the island of Iwo Jima is technically part of the city of Tokyo. From the outset I knew that explaining the peculiarity of bird islands within the Japanese body politic would require a particular spatial analytic.

One option that presented itself was the concept of the frontier. In some ways the term is an attractive one. For one thing, it has long been used to describe the expansion of human settlements into wild and/or uninhabited space. And while this framing has often served to erase or marginalise the existence of Indigenous people, in fact bird islands were unique within Japan's territorial empire in that they mostly *did* lack a history of human habitation. One exception to this rule, the Bonin Islands (J: Ogasawara Shotō), is discussed in Chapter 1, but in general the colonisation of bird islands was quite distinct from imperial rule over populated territories such as Taiwan, Micronesia and Hawai'i. If the latter cases fit recent understandings of colonialism as the 'occupation of an already inhabited island or locale by another population seeking to displace or dominate the

[5] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Borderline Japan: Frontier Controls, Foreigners and the Nation in the Post-War Era*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Pär Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); David Ambaras, *Japan's Imperial Underworlds: Intimate Encounters at the Borders of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6] Charles Maier, 'Leviathan 2.0', in *A World Connecting, 1870–1945*, ed. Emily S. Rosenberg (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). On the pre-territorial Japanese 'geography of civilization' see David Howell, *Geographies of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Japan* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005): Ch. 6.

original inhabitants', then bird islands were closer to the older, Latin-derived sense of the word: *colere,* meaning simply 'to cultivate, or inhabit'.[7]

Other scholars have deployed the term 'frontier' in a more narrowly economic sense, for instance to describe the interplay between capitalist and non-capitalist space. Indeed, in some ways this book charts the emergence and collapse of a 'commodity frontier zone' predicated on extractive economic activity.[8] But I am at pains to emphasise that this was not a unidirectional process. Capitalist expansion was frequently undermined by ecological 'frictions': resource exhaustion due to unsustainable extraction, but also fluctuations in weather and climate, tidal erosion and volcanic activity. The economic viability of oceanic frontier zones was also hostage to 'social frictions'. Working conditions onshore bird islands were often grim, and guano mining operations in particular plagued by frequent labour disputes. The profitability of bird island settlements was also hostage to whiplashing commodity prices that were in turn driven by a host of other factors: boom and bust cycles in the global economy, the availability of substitute goods (kerosene for whale oil, chemical fertiliser for guano) and the sheer vagaries of consumer fashion in the case of plumage.

Finally, as scholars such as Eichiro Azuma and Sidney Xu Lu have shown, many self-styled colonial pioneers did indeed employ frontier-inflected terms like *hatten* ('development'), *shokuminchi* ('colony'), *bōchō* ('expansion') and *kaitaku* ('colonise/develop') – both to fashion their own sense of identity and to whip up support for their efforts.[9] The bird-hunters and guano miners who led the effort to colonise bird islands were equally fond of such language. In this sense the frontier as an imagined construct, conjured into being as part of an ambient 'culture of imperialism', was a very real thing.[10]

[7] Glen Petersen, 'Indigenous Island Empires: Yap and Tonga Considered', *The Journal of Pacific History* 35 no.1 (June 2000): 6.

[8] Sven Beckert, Ulbe Bosma, Mindi Schneider and Eric Vanhaute, 'Commodity Frontiers and the Transformation of the Global Countryside: A Research Agenda', *Journal of Global History* 16 no. 3 (November 2021): 435–50.

[9] Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontier,* 14–15; Lu, *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism,* 31–4.

[10] Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999); Aaron Skabelund, *Empire of Dogs: Canines, Japan, and the Making of the Modern Imperial World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

But the very fact that empire-builders (and wannabe empire-builders) were so fond of frontier-style rhetoric should caution us against applying it uncritically ourselves. A particular hazard of the term 'frontier' is that it risks treating pre-existing civilisations (or nations or empires if you prefer) as a priori units of analysis.[11] This tendency is pervasive throughout much historical writing: many studies that do not explicitly use the term 'frontier' nevertheless echo its premise by referring simply to Japanese 'expansion' without specifying exactly what they mean by 'Japan'. One influential study of US–Japan relations was entitled simply 'The Clash', giving the impression of two ontologically stable geopolitical entities facing off against each other from the moment of their first encounter until the trade war of the 1980s.[12]

Yet colonial, imperial, economic and territorial boundaries did not move in lockstep, so in this study I prefer to use the term 'borderland'. If frontiers are bilateral, unidirectional and teleological, borderlands are 'ambiguous and often unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road'.[13] A borderland perspective permits what Tessa Morris-Suzuki has called an 'anti-area studies' approach: 'by placing oneself not within the boundaries of traditionally defined world regions … but precisely *on* the boundaries … the focus of research then becomes the shifting and fluid nature of these boundaries themselves'.[14] The sociologist Ishihara Shun likewise argues that the oceanic Northwest Pacific is an ideal site from which to conduct a 'fixed point observation of modernity' – by which he means the interlinked processes of globalisation, state-making and colonialism.[15] It allows us, in other words, to examine processes of

[11] Richard White, Patricia Nelson Limerick and James R. Grossman, *The Frontier in American Culture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994).
[12] Walter Lafeber, *The Clash: A History of US–Japan Relations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997).
[13] Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, 'On Borderlands', *The Journal of American History* 98 no. 2 (2011): 338; Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, 'From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History', *American Historical Review* 104 no. 3 (June 1999): 816.
[14] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *On the Frontiers of History: Rethinking East Asian Borders* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020), 22.
[15] Ishihara Shun, *'Guntō' no rekishi shakaigaku: Ogasawara Shotō, Iōtō, Nihon, America, soshite Taiheiyō sekai* (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 2013), 21–2.

modern state formation without treating the state itself as a pre-existing unit of analysis.

Imagining the Pacific as an oceanic borderland is fruitful for other reasons. For one thing it places the traditional bilateral story of US–Japan relations within a broader international context, highlighting not only the importance of Britain as a global hegemon in the nineteenth century but also the role of smaller regional players such as the Kingdom of Hawai'i, not to mention the cast of beachcombers and Pacific Islanders who drifted around the region during the period.[16] Conversely it shows the role of the United States in shaping post-war territorial disputes between ostensibly independent East Asian governments. Throughout, it helps highlight the crucial role of exterritoriality in shaping contests over terrain, people and resources. To put it another way, it reminds us that the territorialisation of sovereignty is a recent and still incomplete phenomenon, and that for much of its history the Pacific has been what Ziad Fahmy has called a 'jurisdictional borderland'.[17]

A borderland approach also reveals the dialectical processes that helped to propel Pacific state-making. Not only was Japan far from alone in practising a form of 'mimetic imperialism' but Japanese activity in the Pacific also spurred rival actors to develop new techniques of asserting sovereignty over bird islands.[18] In fact, although the islands discussed in this book arc loosely around the periphery of the contemporary Japanese state, the perspective is by no means uniquely Japan-centric. Some islands, such as the Bonin Islands, are today Japanese territory but were originally settled by Pacific Islanders and white 'beachcombers'. Others, such as the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, have never been Japanese territory in any formal diplomatic sense but were once sites of economic activity by Japanese nationals. Some, such as the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, were annexed by Japan but relinquished after World War II. And others still, such as the

[16] Lorenz Gonschor, *A Power in the World: The Hawaiian Kingdom in Oceania* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019); Petersen, 'Indigenous Island Empires'.

[17] Ziad Fahmy, 'Jurisdictional Borderlands: Extraterritoriality and "Legal Chameleons" in Precolonial Alexandria, 1840–1870', *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 55 no. 2 (2013): 305–29.

[18] Robert Eskildsen, 'Of Civilization and Savages: The Mimetic Imperialism of Japan's 1874 Expedition to Taiwan', *The American Historical Review* 107 no. 2 (2002): 388–418.

Senkaku Islands and Takeshima (Korean: Dokdo), remain fiercely contested by neighbouring states to this day. The view from bird islands, in other words, offers a fresh perspective not only on Japan but also on East Asia, the Pacific and still more distant shores.

Environment and Empire

A borderland approach to the Pacific offers another advantage, in that it helps to highlight the agency of the oceanic environment itself. Bird islands are the products of long-term environmental processes such as seabed volcanic activity, circulatory currents, tidal erosion and sedimentation, migration by plants and animals, trophic cascades and coral growth. Oceanic ecologies sustained the webs of life that fuelled extractive industries such as whaling, bird-hunting and guano mining, and the ocean's liquid 'low friction' terrain enabled a degree of maritime 'borderless mobility' that is impossible on land.[19]

Yet at the same time, the oceanic environment frequently frustrated attempts at permanent human settlement. The sheer inaccessibility of bird islands – which made them ideal nesting sites in the first place – acted as a barrier to humans much as it did to other land-borne predators. Their scarcity of potable water meant they could support only limited human populations without recourse to expensive desalination infrastructure. (Seabirds are not troubled by the lack of freshwater, for their bills are connected to salt glands that allow them to drink seawater.)[20] Moreover, bird islands' tiny surface areas generally contained negligible amounts of arable land. Bird hunters and guano miners in particular suffered from the scourge of beri-beri, a diseased cause by a vitamin-deficient diet.[21] Seasonality posed another challenge to human settlement. The seabirds on whom plumage hunters depended nested on the islands only at certain times of the year, and

[19] For 'low friction terrain' see James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 330 n8. For 'borderless mobility' see Ishihara Shun, *Kindai Nihon to Ogasawara-tō: idōmin no shimajima to teikoku* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2007), Ch.3.

[20] William A. Buttemer, J. Eduardo P. W.Bicudo, Mark A. Chappell, James T. Pearson and Claus Bech, *Ecological and Environmental Physiology of Birds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 171.

[21] Noritaka Tsunetō, *Discovery and Exploitation of Rasa Island* (Tokyo: Rasa Rinkō Kabushiki Gaisha, 1920) 35; MOFA 3.5.2.8: Rear Admiral Evans to Ambassador, Tokyo (6 January 1903).