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and Japanese Pearlming in the Arafura Sea,
1934–1938**

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Cover: The attempt to salvage the *Sanyo Maru*, November 1937. Photograph reproduced from Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*.

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ABSTRACT

This report reconstructs from English-language sources the activities and the sinking of the *Sanyo Maru*, one of several mother ships which serviced Japanese pearling luggers fishing in the Arafura Sea in the 1930s. To achieve this reconstruction, the report also examines the pearl shell industry of the day and its diminishing market, the increasingly vigorous extraction of pearl shell off northern Australia by Japanese pearling vessels, relations between Aborigines and Japanese crews, and the hostile reaction by many white Australians to what seemed to them an alien incursion.

KEYWORDS: Aboriginal protection; Darwin; Fukutaro, Tange; Haultain, Charles; luggers; Japanese-Australian relations; Mitsui; Nanyo; Nanyo Kohatsu; *Sanyo Maru*; Palau; pearl shell industry.

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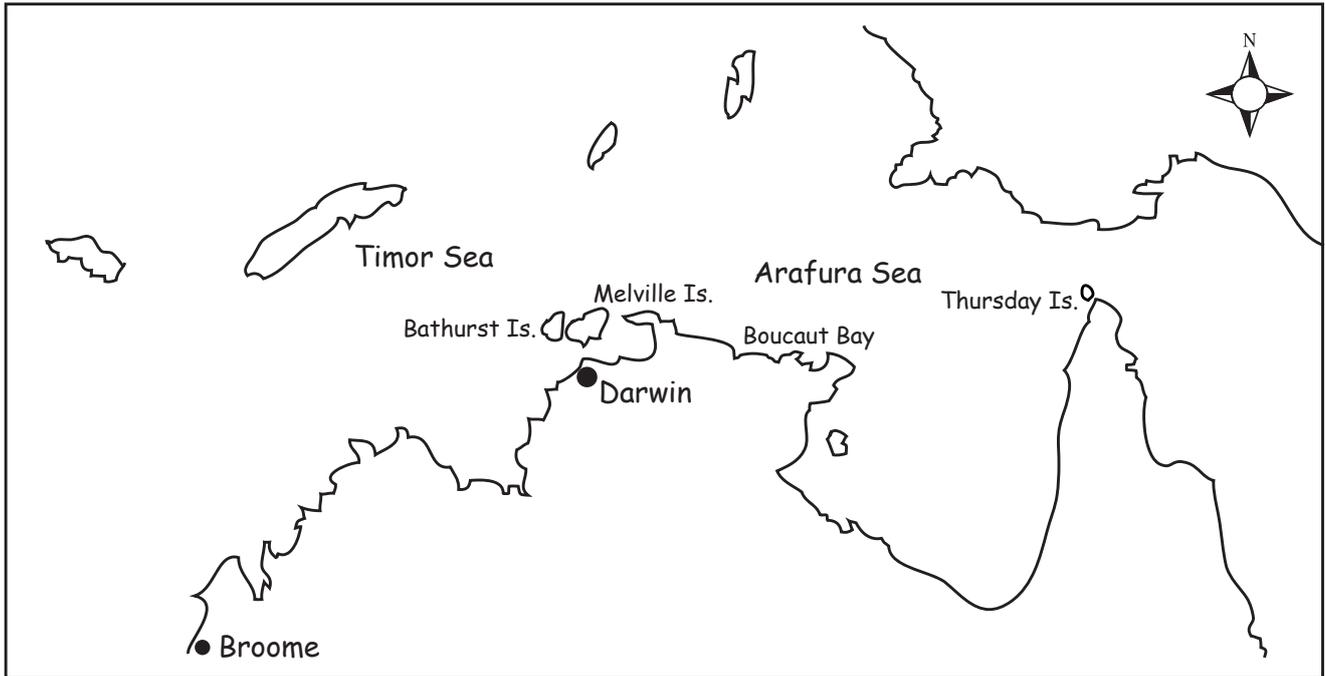


Fig. 1. Northern Australia and the Arafura and Timor Seas. Map drawn by Paul Clark.

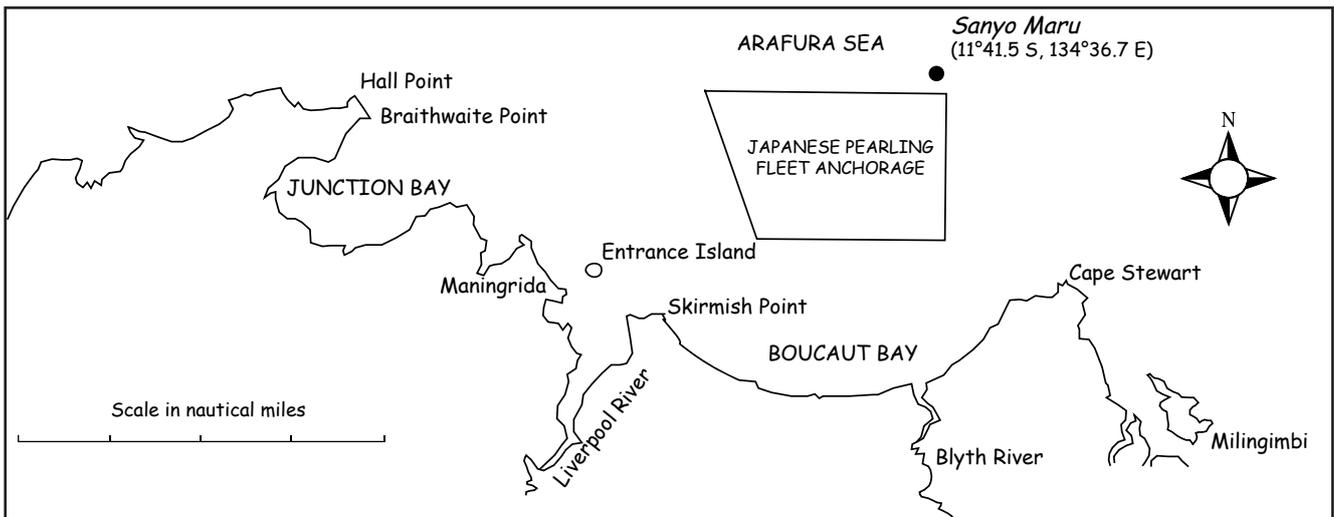


Fig. 2. Boucaut Bay and where the *Sanyo Maru* sank. Map drawn by Paul Clark.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2001, sonar from *HMAS Leeuwin*, a Royal Australian Navy hydrographic ship, located the remains of a boat on the floor of the Arafura Sea off Boucaut Bay, a huge but shallow inlet into Arnhem Land stretching from Skirmish Point near Maningrida to False Point approaching Milingimbi (Figs 1, 2).¹ Paul Clark and David Steinberg at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin believed the boat was the *Sanyo Maru*, a mother ship that had sunk in July 1937 while servicing a fleet of smaller Japanese luggers which extracted pearl shell from the Arafura Sea in the mid to late 1930s.² Clark led an expedition to the boat's remains in April 2002. Poor visibility and a heavy swell cut the expedition short, but Clark came away convinced the *Sanyo Maru* had been found.³

The *Northern Standard*, Darwin's newspaper in the 1930s, reported that the *Sanyo Maru* had sunk because it was overloaded with pearl shell and its captain had decided against heading for the shelter of Boucaut Bay when a storm rose.⁴ A file in the Darwin office of National Archives of Australia and the 1971 memoir of the captain of the Northern Territory patrol boat *Larrakia* both recorded that an armed Australian official had watched over an attempt to salvage the *Sanyo Maru*. Beyond this, almost nothing was known about the boat, how it serviced the fleet of luggers, and how it sank. Along with how the luggers themselves and the pearl shell industry operated, such things need to be investigated to assist future expeditions and, if necessary, to interpret the boat's remains to the public.

Documents relating to the construction, use and crew of the *Sanyo Maru* may be located in Japan and Palau, the home base for most Japanese pearling boats, if the documents survived the Second World War and found their way into archives. Documents relating to the pearl shell

industry in the 1930s are likely to be concentrated in the United States and United Kingdom, where most shell was processed into buttons and other items. I am unable to read Japanese, and my research was confined to libraries and archives in Darwin, Canberra and Sydney. The questions about the *Sanyo Maru* itself and how it sank remain open. But this report does explain how it serviced the luggers, offers a context for understanding the boat and its fate, and sketches a likely course of events from the boat's arrival in the Arafura Sea in June 1937 to a final salvage attempt in November that year. It also notes that the *Sanyo Maru*'s dinghy seems to have been appropriated by the Northern Territory police.

The first three sections of this report summarise the pearl shell industry in the 1930s, Japanese pearling operations in the Arafura Sea, and how Australians reacted to the Japanese presence along the north coast. Drawing on this background, and on press reports and documents relating to the sinking of the *Sanyo Maru*, the report then proposes, in a fourth section, a narrative of the *Sanyo Maru*'s service and sinking and of attempts to salvage the boat.

This report employs some maritime measurement units which may need explanation. A nautical mile is about 1.8 kilometres. The speed which a boat can reach is measured in knots, or how many nautical miles it can traverse in an hour. Gross tonnage is the shorthand for measuring a merchant ship like the *Sanyo Maru*. It refers not to weight, but to storage capacity – in fact to the number of cubic feet a merchant ship can enclose divided by 100.

Two terms are used in this report because of their brevity. Though the *Sanyo Maru* was engaged in the pearl shell industry, specifically the ocean shell industry, I refer to *pearlers* rather than pearl shellers and to *pearling* rather than pearl shell fishing.

¹ *Navy News*, 6 August 2001, 2. For a description of Boucaut Bay see D. Mildren ed., *Northern Territory judgments 1918-1950: being judgments of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory, the Supreme Court of North Australia, and the Supreme Court of Central Australia* (Darwin: Northern Territory University Press, 2001), 213.

² Steinberg to Bolger, 19 March 2001, and Clark to NBK Corporation president, 17 July 2001, maritime curator's *Sanyo Maru* file, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (hereafter MAGNT), Darwin.

³ Paul Clark, 'Sanyo Maru field work log Thursday 18 – Thursday 25 April 2002', maritime curator's *Sanyo Maru* file, MAGNT; *Northern Territory News*, 2 May 2002, 4.

⁴ *Northern Standard*, 9 July 1937, 'Japanese mother ship sunk'.

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THE PEARL SHELL INDUSTRY IN THE 1930S

Pearl shell. Any mollusc protected by a hard shell can produce pearls. The animal secretes these smooth, hard spheres, made of the same calcareous material as its shell, to seal off an invading irritant from its flesh. Humans have collected and worn pearls for more than three thousand years. We have also used their shell, especially that of the bivalve genus *Pinctada* and in particular its species *P. pinctada*, whose two large, thick, translucent, lustrous valves – its shell, in other words – gave it the popular name of mother-of-pearl oyster. Pearl shell has something of a pearl's beauty, and exceeds it in abundance and utility. It is attractive and impervious to changes in temperature and humidity, and can be carved (Fig. 3).¹

The pearl shell industry. Early use of pearl shell by humans can be guessed at by considering the pearl shell that some Australian Aborigines have carved and worn for aesthetic and religious reasons.² By the 1930s, such gentle adaptations of pearl shell had long been overshadowed by a global industry which gathered thousands of tonnes of shell from around the world and transformed nearly all of it into buttons of better quality than could be made from wood and cheap metal. The remaining pearl shell became furniture inlay, instrument dials, and decorative items such as buckles, combs, cuff links and knife and revolver handles.³

Most pearl shell used by the industry came from river clams. Better, though, was ocean shell, as importers and manufacturers called it, from *Pinctada maxima* pulled from the shallow floor of warm seas. Gathering the shell was a

difficult and dangerous business. Pearl oysters are hard to distinguish from rocks, being typically encrusted with marine growth. But they gape and close at regular intervals, and in daylight the animals' mantle at the edge of the gape catches the sun's rays and exposes them. In the 1930s divers sank to the sea bed from small boats called luggers, though these no longer had the lug sails which gave them their name. Air was pumped into a diver's heavy helmet through a rubber hose by a lugger-bound assistant called a tender. During stints on the bottom of an hour or so, the diver placed the pearl oysters he had found into canvas bags which were hauled to the lugger where the crew stripped off the flesh. The work was hard, monotonous and, for the divers, sometimes deadly. Their death rate was high.⁴

Some ocean shell went to Britain and Europe, including to Birmingham which in the second half of the nineteenth century had been the centre of pearl button manufacture. Three-quarters of the shell, though, was shipped to the warehouses of four New York importers, who in turn sold most of it to American button factories (Fig. 4). In 1937 these factories made 72 million buttons, including nearly eight million from ocean shell. Their workers soaked the shell in water to make it less brittle, then sawed 'blanks' – small circles – from it. The blanks were 'dressed' (their backs ground to make them even), 'faced' (concave dips carved into their front centres) and drilled (four small holes through which thread could be pulled) to make them into buttons. The buttons were polished, sorted into sizes and grades of quality, and packed in boxes. Some buttons

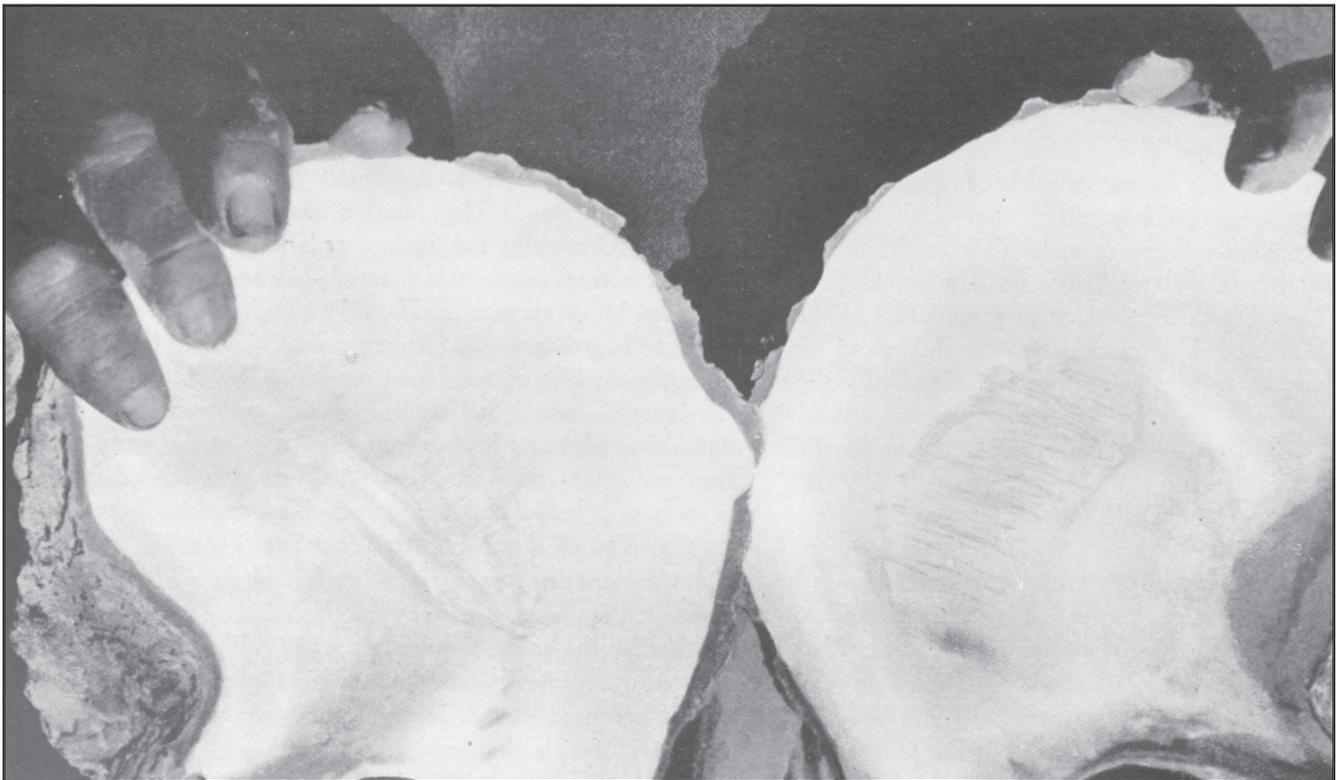


Fig. 3. *Pinctada maxima* shell.



Fig. 4. Pearl shell stacked and ready for export.

were exported, mostly to the Philippines and Japan. Most were sold to American department stores, to be bought by middle class customers, or sold to American garment factories, whose immigrant female workforce sewed them into shirts and pyjamas.⁵

Pearling as an Australian industry. Most ocean shell in the 1930s was gathered from the Arafura and Timor Seas. This shallow seaway links northern Australia, western and southern New Guinea, and the eastern islands of the Indonesia. The gathering occurred during what Australians called the trade winds season, roughly April to November, when the water was calm, the wind gentle and dependable, and the sunshine brilliant. Pearlers avoided the spring tides of the new moon and full moon, when the current muddied the sea bottom, and fished in the gentler, cleaner water of the week-long neap tides during the moon's first and third quarters.⁶

At the Arafura Sea's north-eastern corner are the Aru Islands, where pearls and pearl shell have long been gathered.⁷ In 1699 the English explorer William Dampier noticed similar pearl oysters further south, along north-western Australian shores. The Maccassans, vigorous traders from Sulawesi well to the west of Aru, had probably already begun casually fishing for pearl oysters during voyages to Arnhem Land to find trepang or sea cucumber, which they fished from coastal waters, boiled and dried on shore, then traded back home to Chinese buyers.⁸ The

Maccassans were about to be nudged aside by the white peoples who were claiming the region for themselves – principally the Dutch, who took what they called the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), and the British, who took what they called Australia. Not until the 1860s, though, did small fleets of pearling luggers begin to operate from the north of Australia. Owned by adventurous British colonists who would soon be thinking of themselves as Australians, the fleets nonetheless increasingly employed Asian crew members whose long experience of pearling and low expectations of what fate and white employers owed them made them cheaper to pay and feed than white workers – few of whom in any case were interested in working in a dangerous industry in the remote, hot north of the continent. By the 1890s three of the four main pearling ports of the region were Australian – Broome in Western Australia, Thursday Island north of Queensland, and Darwin in the Northern Territory. From 1905 some Australians set up at the fourth port, Dobo, on the Aru Islands, and there fished for shell under the Dutch flag. By 1900 three-fifths of the world's ocean shell was being gathered by divers working from Australian-owned luggers.⁹ By the early 1930s the proportion was said to exceed four-fifths.¹⁰

If the proportion was impressive, the amount was not. Pearl shell was not the luxury item it is sometimes said to have been, but it catered more to taste than to necessity – and taste was accommodating itself to the worldwide

economic depression that plagued the decade and to a new synthetic material, plastic, from which more colourful and cheaper buttons were being made. No more than five thousand tonnes of ocean shell reached New York during any year in the 1930s, no more than three thousand tonnes were pulled from waters off Australia, and the industry was never a significant source of export earnings for Australia.¹¹

The industry was marginal to the governments and people concentrated in the south of what was now the Commonwealth of Australia. Pearling was a colourful activity, perhaps, but it generated no employment for them – there was no significant pearl button-making in Australia. Pearling was also suspect for evading the popular policy of admitting only British immigrants to Australia and reserving jobs for white men.¹² Still, along with the activities of Australian traders and missionaries, pearling was part of the young nation's tentative economic and cultural reach into the southwest Pacific. And the operators of the pearling boats – master pearl-ers, or pearling masters as they were sometimes grandly called – were social fixtures of Broome, Thursday Island and Darwin. The presence of their luggers helped define these remote places.¹³ 'The pitter patter of their diesel engines was something that belonged to Darwin', a reporter recalled later.¹⁴ Some pearling masters liked to claim they were performing a useful strategic task. Few white people lived on Australia's northern coast, but to those who did, and

to many others further south, Asia seemed teeming with potentially hostile, land-hungry peoples who might at least be expected to take offence at the white Australia policy, at worst to want some of the vast lands white Australians were not using. A few master pearl-ers trumpeted themselves as lynchpins of white settlement, their luggers as an informal navy which despite its coloured crews was securing the northern coast for the white race.¹⁵

Pearling as a Japanese industry. The Japanese engaged in pearling vigorously from at least the mid nineteenth century, when predominantly female divers collected shell from shallow waters. By the end of the century the industry was exploring cultured pearling, in which beads were inserted into captive oysters to make them yield pearls,¹⁶ and had moved offshore and changed sex. So-called 'fishing emigrants' – prominent among male Japanese who from the 1860s left their land to work and, generally, remit their earnings – now provided the bulk of shell gatherers. Indeed Japanese divers became prominent in trepang and pearl fishing across south-east Asian waters.¹⁷ They were usually quick to learn, diligent, obliging, with a powerful sense of honour and duty – qualities that endeared them to many of the white businessmen and administrators who dominated the north. Most of the trickle of Japanese who came to Australia from the 1870s did so to gather trepang and pearl shell along the northern coast or, increasingly, to be employed to do so by white men (Fig. 5). Japanese ownership of boats and profits offended or disturbed many



Fig. 5. Japanese pearl fishers in Darwin in the second decade of the twentieth century.

white Australians, but it was agreed that industries based on low labour costs and, in the case of pearling, high labour mortality, could not survive legislation imposing a white workforce on them. Asians thus remained the usual gatherers of trepang and pearl shell, but on sufferance. Boat licences were to be granted only to British citizens. Asians in the industries were to be restricted to the status of low-paid contractors to those who held boat licences, with no right to settle in the land they were based in.¹⁸

By the 1930s untrained crew members on both pearling and trepang luggers were generally south-east Asian and occasionally Aboriginal, but nearly all divers, tenders, and engineers (who operated lugger engines) were Japanese. They were indentured for three years at a time and typically remitted most of their pay to their families. Apart from the master pearlery and a clerk or two, few white men worked with pearl shell. But one master pearler, Muramatsu Jiro, was a Japanese-born British citizen who had survived efforts to freeze him out.¹⁹

There was another, more important indicator that Japanese pearlery in Australia were more than mere helots. In a sense it was the senior Japanese divers, not the master pearlery, who drove the industry. A master pearler simply loaned a senior diver a lugger and paid him a fixed sum per tonne of shell gathered as well as a fixed sum per month. Otherwise the diver ran his own show. He chose his own tender and engineer. He decided where and when to fish. He had no captain on board to tell him what to do, since employing captains would have eaten into the master pearler's profits or obliged them to go to sea themselves.²⁰ Beginning to sense their power at last, in 1932 Japanese divers and tenders formed their own trades unions.²¹ But even such modest power alarmed many Australians. The pearling industry seemed 'two-thirds Japanese' to the Sydney-based *Pacific Islands Monthly*, which warned readers that it must soon pass into Japanese control.²² The warning seemed to be borne out on the arrival of Japanese-owned pearling luggers off north Australia.

By the 1930s Japan was growing commercially and militarily, striving to overcome a dearth of raw materials and land, extort submission from China, and win acceptance from the white colonial powers which held sway over much of east Asia and the western Pacific. Japanese companies showed astonishing energy and confidence. They were committed to mastering foreign technologies and outpricing foreign competitors. State intervention and vertical integration into massive corporations increased their initiative rather than sapped it.²³ Japan had one of the world's largest and most efficient merchant fleets,²⁴ and the world's largest fishing industry. Half the world's fishers were Japanese, and their 364 000 boats caught, in 1936, more than three million tonnes of fish – 125 times the Australian catch. Japanese fishers operated from Bering Sea to the Antarctic – open hunting grounds in an age when

territorial waters were generally confined to three nautical miles from a country's shore.²⁵ Their interest in the little-exploited south seas was increasing.²⁶ It was impossible that Japan would leave for long the pearl oysters off north Australia to the few dozen luggers operating out of Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island.

In the early 1930s some Japanese operated luggers from Dobo and Timor. The most successful among them was Tange Fukutaro, a former marine engineer who had been inspired by anger at white hegemony over the industry to set up his own company.²⁷ Other Japanese pearlery operated from the Palau Islands whose capital, Koror, contained a fine harbour. It was also the administrative centre of a sprawling Japanese colony encompassing the Mariana, Caroline and Marshall Islands, commonly called the Mandate by English-speaking commentators, which had been wrenched from German rule early in the First World War. Intensive migration was turning Palau into a bustling, rambunctious settler colony which busied itself growing sugar cane and trawling the oceans. Pearl fishing had been confined to its coastal waters and largely concerned with developing cultured pearls until the Mandate government began to subsidise fishing boat owners and established a marine produce research station.²⁸ Then came the discovery, around 1933, of rich beds of *Pinctada maxima* off Bathurst Island, north of Darwin.

The discoverer may have been a Japanese diver working from Broome, or it may have been Tange. His luggers were probably the first to work the beds, followed by others from Dobo and by experts from Palau who came to chart the beds and assess their riches. The shell proved more attractive than that found around Palau, the animals to produce better pearls if cultured.²⁹ An Australian master pearler predicted a fleet of Japanese luggers would converge on the new beds.³⁰

He was soon proved right. Near the end of 1934 sixteen Japanese luggers from Dobo and Timor were operating off Bathurst Island. There were five times as many by early 1936, most from Palau and outnumbering all the pearling luggers registered in Australia.³¹ Seven hundred tonnes of shell gathered by the end of the year by the Japanese went onto the New York market for the first time – nearly a third the amount of sold there by Australians. New York importers judged it generally softer and less iridescent than shell gathered from Australian luggers, but it was also more reliably sorted into grades offered to them at cheaper prices.³² Australia's dominance of ocean shell gathering was immediately broken, challenging the prosperity and dignity of Australia's master pearlery. The presence of Japanese pearling boats so close to Australia – and especially mother ships like the *Sanyo Maru* which arrived to service them – also unnerved many Australians.

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³⁰ *Northern Standard*, 10 January 1933, 'The pearling industry'.

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JAPANESE PEARLING IN THE ARAFURA SEA

Base and organisation. Most of the first Japanese luggers fishing the Arafura Sea pearl oyster beds were based in Dobo and Timor. Dobo was the larger and older centre, having been used by Japanese pearlmen before the First World War. It was well situated for buying supplies and fuel and for maintaining luggers off northern Australia. But the Dutch rulers of the Netherlands East Indies wanted to prevent Japanese fishers from entering local waters and by 1937 had banned them from registering their boats locally. The ban depressed Dobo's economy and hastened the Japanese shift in base to Koror on Palau.¹

Koror was little more than a village until, with government aid, Palau's fishing industries took off in the early 1930s. After the discovery of the Arafura Sea pearl oyster beds it became the booming base for more than a thousand Japanese pearl fishers. When these men were in town the restaurants and hotels were booked out, the bars and brothels crammed.² But these wild individualists, and others moving in from Dobo, were becoming domesticated. In 1935 or 1936 Mitsui Bussan, the trading arm of the giant Japanese firm Mitsui, arranged to buy all the ocean shell gathered by Japanese luggers in southern waters, and New York's largest shell importer, Otto Gerdau, arranged to buy the shell from Mitsui. These arrangements, and perhaps also intervention by a Japanese government, led to lugger owners being bought out by two or three companies early in 1937.³ Tange Fukutaro now worked for the Nanyo Kohatsu (South Seas Development) company, often called Nanko and Palau's biggest firm. His eleven luggers joined 48 others owned by Nanko's blandly named fishing arm, the Kaiyo Shokusan (Marine Produce) company. Its managing director, according to Darwin's *Northern Standard*, was the 'prominent Japanese businessman' Kichizo Jotami from Wakayama Prefecture, which encompassed Kobe.⁴

Crews. Japanese pearlmen in the Arafura Sea formed a floating township off northern Australia of about 2500 men by 1938—about the same population as Darwin's. The *Adelaide Advertiser's* reporter in Darwin, Southwell Keely, visited the township that year and described its inhabitants as 'small and wiry, amazingly powerful men who have been reared on the sea'. The captain of the Northern Territory patrol boat *Larrakia* thought them well disciplined and hard working. Another Australian official suspected them of possessing intense patriotism and the conviction that their country was always right. Most luggers had a crew of ten or more, including a captain who was a master mariner, two or three divers, a tender for each diver, an engineer and a cook. A few of the divers had worked on Australian-owned luggers.⁵

Operations. There may have been rivalry or even mistrust between crews from different companies.⁶ Still, they may have operated as a fleet. While a few boats made charts of the waters,⁷ searched for new beds of pearl oysters or found young oysters—'chicken shell' to

Australian pearlmen—to be taken live back to Palau for cultured pearling, most of the luggers fished the known beds. Another reporter in Darwin, Arthur Barclay, claimed to have seen them split 'into three armadas, some eighty luggers, each with mainsail up, drifting sideways within an area of between two and three miles'.⁸ The number was smaller at first. By the end of 1935 there were thirty or so Japanese luggers in the Arafura Sea, all fishing south-west of Bathurst Island. They may have pulled 250 tonnes of pearl shell from the ocean floor.⁹ Next year eighty or more luggers fished these beds again, fished them out, then moved east to new beds found off north Arnhem Land between the Goulburn Islands and Elcho Island. That year Mitsui sold 712 tonnes of shell to Gerdau.¹⁰ The luggers arrived early for the 1937 season, eager to exploit the new beds. More than a hundred were working them by the end of year, and Mitsui almost tripled its previous annual sale to 2002 tonnes.¹¹

Luggers. Most Japanese luggers were small, sleek, low-slung boats with timber decks and white-painted metal hulls. Averaging around thirty tons gross, they used sails slung from two masts to drift with the tide as the divers worked, and their stuttering diesel engine to take them any distance. Australian-owned luggers worked about five days at the middle of each neap tide. Japanese luggers were bigger, and they could work seven to nine days, making them more adventurous than their Australian competitors. The radio equipment they carried made them seem impressively modern to Australian observers, an impression undercut by the crackling fire on deck with which meals and coffee were prepared¹² and by what seemed 'the unmistakable smell of Japanese occupation. The scent of pinewood planking, the smell of fish, and the sweaty tang of pickled lily roots, rose from the wooden tubs containing this oriental delicacy, and mingled in one inextricable "pong"'.¹³ The smell would have been accentuated by cramping ten or more men into a small space for up to nine months a year.

A day's work. Before dawn a crew (Fig. 6) emerged from its cramped quarters to prepare for the day's work. Tenders made coffee while the divers struggled into clumsy canvas suits that encased layers of flannel and wool, then smoked and gulped down the coffee along with pieces of bread (Fig. 7). As the light grew stronger, the anchor was wound up and the mainsail raised, the divers' massive helmets were screwed on, then one, two or three divers began to sink gently into the water toward the sea floor carrying canvas bags and joined to the lugger by lifelines and air pipes. The lugger drifted with the current and, on the bottom, the divers walked in the same direction, pulling pearl oysters from the sea bed. The lugger's engineer watched the engine and the compressor which pumped the air to the divers, and each tender, lifeline in hand, waited for a tug that was a signal from the sea bed. Soon the first bag, filled with fifty or so pearl oysters, would be drawn



Fig. 6. A Japanese lugger crew.

to the surface and an empty bag lowered for the next haul. The crew now got to work stripping flesh and encrustations from the shells and feeling optimistically for any pearls, which were rarely found. The cleaned shells were stacked in the lugger's hold, along with the flesh which would later be sold to Chinese buyers.¹⁴

After an hour on the bottom a diver rose slowly and fitfully to the surface, staging his ascent to avoid the bends. Soon the divers were working alternately, one collecting while the other one or two were staging or resting. After a couple of hours the lugger was taken back to its starting point, ready to drift with the current again but this time alongside the paths already taken. Breakfast, usually fish and rice, was gulped down while the lugger relocated. A hasty lunch, probably fish and rice again, was eaten during another relocation; the usual alternatives to the standard menu were bread and jam and tinned food. By sunset each diver had been down six to eight times. After the deck and utensils were scrubbed clean, the long day ended at last with a leisurely dinner.¹⁵ As stated in the previous section of this report, it was hard, monotonous work, and for the divers fraught with danger. Fifteen or more died during the 1936 season.¹⁶

Spring tide landings. By the end of the neap tide a lugger crew needed to offload the shell gathered, replenish water, firewood and food, and perhaps remove the marine growth which quickly encrusts boat hulls in warm tropical waters. A return trip to Aru, let alone to Palau, to resupply and careen a lugger would have cut into the next neap. A return trip to Darwin might not, and some luggers made it. In mid 1936 the Australian government affirmed that Japanese pearling boats might use Darwin, and for the next two years there were usually several anchored in front of the Royal Australian Navy's fuel tanks where they bought oil.¹⁷ The word *Maru* seemed 'to linger in the air with a kind of wail' in Darwin in the later 1930s.¹⁸ Each lugger typically spent £600 during its brief stay. No wonder one shop assistant tried to learn some words of Japanese.¹⁹ But Darwin was too small, and its white population too uneasy about the Japanese, to accept an invasion by dozens of luggers every fortnight.²⁰ In any case, few lugger captains wanted to spend the spring tide at sea chugging to and from Darwin, especially when the quiet shores of the Tiwi Islands and Arnhem Land offered an abundance of landing places within a few hours' sail, with plenty of fresh water,



Fig. 7. Japanese divers prepare to take the plunge.

sheltered coves to careen hull and varnish decks, and opportunities for sex.²¹

Malay trepang fishers and, later, Japanese crew members of Australian-owned trepang and pearling luggers had long used the coast this way. In return for tobacco, rice, tinned food and flour, but rarely alcohol, young Aboriginal men would guide luggers through the shoals and young Aboriginal women would be offered to the crews. Occasionally the barter went awry. Eight Japanese trepang fishers were killed in the early 1930s, five of them at Caledon Bay in east Arnhem Land. Official proclamations by the Australian government made the Tiwi Islands and most of Arnhem Land into reserves for their black inhabitants and forbade entry to most outsiders in part because ‘alien fishermen’ had ‘exploited the ignorant coastal natives for many years’, prompting ‘numerous murderous attacks on some of these alien fishing crews’.²² Yet the landings and the barter continued, partly because Australian master pearlmen relied on them to reduce their operating costs.²³

For Japanese pearling luggers to follow this custom involved double illegality – illegal entry into Australian territorial waters, that invisible three-nautical mile band around the coast, as well as illegal entry into an Aboriginal

reserve. No Japanese lugger crew was ever found illegally ashore by Australian officials. But there was no reason, beyond the legal one, for Japanese pearlmen on Japanese boats not to behave as Japanese pearlmen on Australian boats had done and were doing. During spring tides in the 1937 and 1938 seasons both the Japanese pearling fleet and Australian pearling luggers usually gathered at Boucaut Bay, the huge inlet stretching almost from Maningrida to Milingimbi. Landings by pearlmen were certainly frequent and ‘the prostitution of women, including little girls, became the regular custom’, so Donald Thomson, an anthropologist working in Arnhem Land, complained.²⁴ Some Boucaut Bay Aborigines told a crew member of the *Larrakia* they took women out to the luggers whenever they were close by.²⁵ They were unlikely to have distinguished between luggers registered in Palau and in Australia. Misunderstandings and occasional hostility between Aborigines and lugger crews continued, more the product of predictable cultural clash than anything else. Thomson recorded that one Aboriginal man had complained that the Japanese ‘knew no shame, for not only did they openly solicit women, but they solicited a woman in the presence of her brother’.²⁶ Japanese views on their interaction with Aborigines are unrecorded, at any rate in English. But a Japanese study of Australia published



Fig. 8. Japanese pearling boats, photographed from the patrol boat *Larrakia* and reproduced in Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*. Both these boats are described in the book as mother ships. The one on the left may be an older mother ship, or possibly the fuel and live shell carrier *Seicho Maru No. 10*.

during the Second World War gives an insight into how lugger crews might have felt about the Aborigines. The study described them as an honest, guileless people, the most primitive and least civilised of all races, who had been killed like vermin by white Australians who continued to treat them inhumanely.²⁷

Mother ships. The Australian invitation to Japanese luggers to replenish at Darwin was extended partly to reduce these incursions.²⁸ A more practical but equally inadequate remedy existed in the Japanese use of mother ships to service their luggers (Fig. 8).

Australia's master pearlers may have pioneered the use of schooners to supply luggers at sea and allow them to stay for months on or near pearl oyster beds, though they gave them up once the depression of the 1930s ate into their profits.²⁹ Japanese mother ships were the next generation on from these schooners. Like the floating canneries being used by Japanese crab fishers and the floating factories of Japanese whalers, they allowed sustained, uninterrupted fishing by hundreds of boats perched thousands of kilometres from their base, and just off another country's territorial waters. Bringing supplies to the pearling fleet in 1937 and taking away the shell it gathered, they were heavy carriers of two to four hundred tons gross. Steel-hulled and painted white like the luggers, likewise equipped with sails as well as diesel engines, they were bigger, less graceful yet speedier boats, able to make the return journey between the fleet and Palau in just nine days. Their crews probably numbered around twenty men.³⁰ When among the fleet, their derricks passed drums of fuel, cases and cans of food and packets of mail to luggers from their company in return for bulging bags of shell. Floodlights allowed the job to carry on into the night if necessary. Knowledge and power were exchanged as well as goods. Mother ships lent skilled crew members like engineers and carpenters to luggers needing repair and, being senior men who represented the company back in Koror, mother ship captains inspected records kept by lugger captains and issued orders.³¹

Southwell Keely went aboard a mother ship, the *Asahi Maru*, during a spring tide transshipping in 1938 (Fig. 9) and described how it was done. The mother ship's deck, he wrote:

swarms with scurrying figures, and her packing case-covered decks seethe with noisy activity. Small lithe brown figures, stripped to the waist, with piratical-looking handkerchiefs swathed round their black hair, clamour for their mail. On the cluttered afterdeck, the bespectacled, harried purser, who, despite his multifarious duties maintains a smiling urbanity, directs the transshipment of

goods. Supercargoes have the unenviable task of checking the hundred and one transactions which are being carried out simultaneously.'

It was the start of a transaction that grew busier by the minute:

A lugger is hailed and quickly moves in alongside the overtowering mothership. Another and another pull in alongside until a pontoon of about eight luggers extends on either side of the *Asahi Maru*. Scores of dinghies have already been moored from her stern. Sailors swing from mast to mast like monkeys and alight on the decks of the mothership. To the European's eyes it is a scene of chattering hustle and confusion.

The scene grew even more lively, particularly on production of alcohol and mail:

Derricks swing cases of tinned goods from the hold, and dozens of willing hands guide them down on to the rolling deck of the lugger below. On the deck above hundreds of men are delving into packing cases and producing queerly marked preserved foods and wines and spirits of all the well-known brands, but stamped "Made in Japan". These tins and bottles are passed from hand to hand, their ultimate destination being lost in the swaying, gesticulating, clamouring crowd. A name is shouted, and a bundle of letters and papers disappears in the same way. More men swing in from the luggers until all the decks resemble antbeds of industry in orderly confusion.³²

The bustle might continue into the night under floodlights, merging into what became a recreational event. With fishing suspended and the fleet gathered together at Boucaut Bay, there was time to drink and play chess with friends or listen to wireless for news from home. 'Strains of weird piping music lilt across the waves', Southwell Keely observed, and dinghies plied:

between the numerous luggers lying at anchor. The oarsmen are chanting Japanese sea ditties which are caught up and passed from boat to boat. Approaching closer, the stranger hears the rollicking, happy laughter of Japanese fishermen, the echoing clicks of Japanese chessmen and the hoarse shouts of Japanese seamen as they transport freight between the luggers.³³

The reporter romanticised these men as 'simple fisherfolk'. But some may have been genuinely puzzled by a matter that any white Australian could have set them straight on. 'Why', they asked Southwell Keely, 'do Australians dislike us?'³⁴

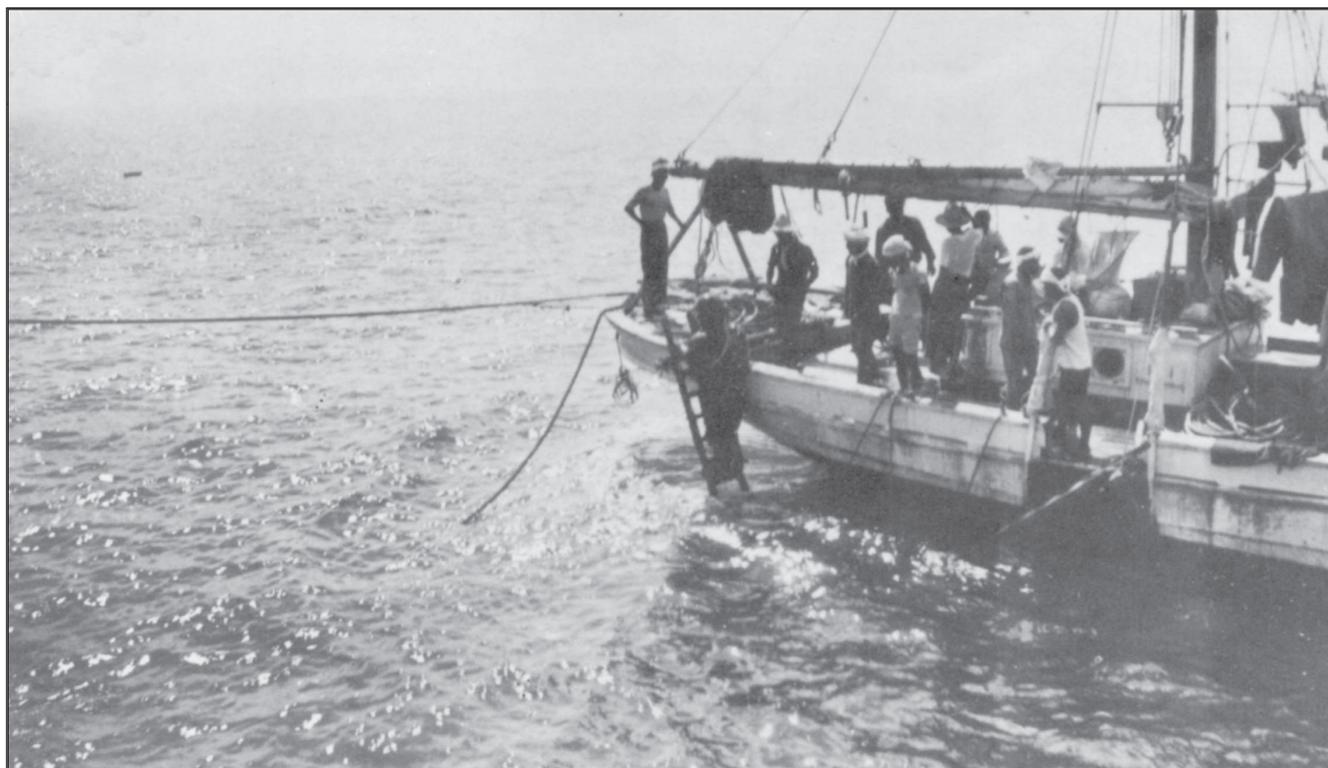


Fig. 9. The mother ship *Asahi Maru* servicing luggers in Boucaut Bay, 1938.

¹ Sheldon to British consul general in Batavia, 5 March 1937, file Jap158 part 3, series A981, and 4 January 1938, file 679/1/8, series A601, both National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Canberra; H. Dick, 'Japan's economic expansion in the Netherlands Indies between the first and second world wars', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (September 1989), 259.

² R. Peattie, *Nanyo: the rise and fall of the Japanese in micronesia 1885-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 174-6.

³ Sheldon to British consul general in Batavia, 5 March 1937, file Jap158 part 3, and British consul general in Batavia to secretary of state for foreign affairs, 15 January 1938, file Jap38 part 3, and clipping from *Toyo Keizai*, 30 October 1937, 'The Nanyo Kohatsu', Jap158 part 4, series A981, NAA, Canberra; [trade] commissioner Longfield Lloyd to Department of Commerce secretary, 10 April 1939, file 679/5/6 part 5, series A601, NAA, Canberra; Japanese consul general in Sydney to minister for Interior, 18 June 1937, file 1937/251A, and Sheldon to British consul general in Batavia, 7 April 1938, file 1938/584, both series F1, NAA, Darwin; T. Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township off Australian coast', *Advertiser*, 2 July 1938, 12.

⁴ Statement by Japanese consul general in Sydney, 2 July 1937, file 1937/251A, series F1, NAA, Darwin; *Northern Standard*, 6 August 1937, 'The arrested Japanese lugger', and 24 September 1937, 'Overproduction of MOP shell'; clipping from *Toyo Keizai*, 30 October 1937, 'The Nanyo Kohatsu', Jap158 part 4, series A981, NAA, Canberra; Dick, 'Japan's economic expansion', 262.

⁵ Typed lists of crews of Japanese luggers, file D3138, series E72, NAA, Darwin; court evidence of Kametake, 28 July 1938, file 22/1937, series E470, NAA, Darwin; Eckersley to External Affairs secretary, 'Case of Takachiho Maru No. 3', 13 July 1938, file Jap113, series A981, NAA, Canberra; A. Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers off north Australia', *Walkabout*, 1 February 1937, 39; Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'; C. T. G. Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land* (Canberra: Roebuck, 1971), 209; S. Shepherd, 'One hundred years of pearling in the Northern Territory 1869-1969' (Darwin: typescript, c. late 1990s), 25.

⁶ Haultain to Northern Territory administrator, 6 December 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, NAA, Darwin.

⁷ The extent of charting needs to be investigated. That it occurred, see Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers off north Australia', 41, and 'General remarks on Japanese encroachment in Australian waters (for use by Defence Department representative on inter-departmental committee)', 20 February 1939, file 3/10, series AWM124, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

⁸ Court evidence of Kametake, 22 September 1938, file 22/1937, series E470, NAA, Darwin; Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'; Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers', 38.

⁹ Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers', 41; J. P. S. Bach, 'The pearling industry of Australia: an account of its social and economic development' (Newcastle: Department of Commerce and Agriculture, 1955), 219, 253.

¹⁰ 'Report on the administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 30th June 1937', 15 October 1937, 39, copy on shelves in Northern Territory Archives Service; Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers', 38, 41; L. R. Macgregor, 'Report on

the market for ocean pearl shell in the United States of America' (Canberra: Department of Commerce, 1940), 22; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, pp. 82, 84; Bach, 'The pearling industry', 219, 253.

¹¹ Kamper's log, entry for 4 November 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, NAA, Darwin; Macgregor, 'Report on the market for ocean pearl shell', 22; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 109; Bach, 'The pearling industry', 219, 253.

¹² Inventory of *Dai Nippon Maru No. 5*, 8 November 1938, file 1937/251A, series F1, NAA, Darwin; Sheldon to British consul general in Batavia, 5 March 1937, file Jap158 part 3, series A981, NAA, Canberra; court evidence of Okishima, 28 July 1938, file 21/1937, and Kametake, 22 and 30 September 1938, file 22/1937, both series E470, NAA, Darwin; Northern Standard, 10 January 1933, 'The pearling industry', 5 February 1937, 'Japanese poachers', and 18 June 1937, 'Release of Japanese poacher'; *Times*, 29 October 1938, 13; Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'; Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers'; N. Bartlett, *The pearl seekers* (London: Melrose, 1954), 281; M. P. Parillo, *The Japanese merchant marine in World War II* (Annapolis Md: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 191-3.

¹³ Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 168.

¹⁴ Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers'.

¹⁵ Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers'.

¹⁶ Clipping, *Herald*, 9 November 1936, 'Diver dies at pearling grounds', file 1936/61, series A1, NAA, Canberra.

¹⁷ Department of Interior secretary to minister, 31 July 1936, file 1936/7994, series A1, NAA, Canberra; Northern Territory administrator to Department of Interior secretary, 11 August 1936, file 1937/600, series F1, NAA, Darwin; *Northern Standard*, 30 April 1937, 'Round about', and 23 July 1937, 'The New Guinea Maru'; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 134.

¹⁸ H. Hartt, 'Pearling luggers at Darwin', *Walkabout*, 1 May 1946, 8.

¹⁹ *Times*, 29 October 1938, 13; interview with Con Scott, November 1990, 11, transcript TS616, tape 1, series NTRS226, Northern Territory Archives Service (hereafter NTAS), Darwin.

²⁰ Peattie, *Nanyo*, 141.

²¹ Northern Territory acting administrator to Department of Interior secretary, 6 April 1937, file 1937/251, series F1, NAA, Darwin.

²² Hicks, 'Arnhem Land aboriginal reserve', 11 March 1931, unnumbered file 'Arnhem Land reserve', box 2, series F60, NTAS, Darwin.

²³ Acting Northern Territory administrator to Department of Interior secretary, 6 April 1937, file 1937/251, series A1, and notes of a 'Deputation from master pearlmen Darwin 19/8/1938', file 679/5/4, series A601, both NAA, Canberra; Thomson, 'Report of expedition to Arnhem Land 1936-37', 11-15, copy in Northern Territory Library and Information Service main library; G. H. Sunter *Adventures of a pearl fisher: a record without romance, being a true account of trepang fishing on the coast of northern Australia and adventures met in the course of the same* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1937), 178-82; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 40-3; C. C. Macknight, *The voyage to Marege: Macassan trepangers in northern Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976), 83-92; Bach, 'The pearling industry', p. 207; M. McKenzie, *Mission to Arnhem Land* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1976), 67-8; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 193; A. Chase, "'All kind of nation": Aborigines and Asians in Cape York peninsula', *Aboriginal History* 5, part 1 (June 1981), 10; M. Dewar, 'Strange bedfellows: Europeans and Aborigines in Arnhem Land before World War II', MA thesis, University of New England, 1989, 24-6, 127-35.

²⁴ Chief protector of Aborigines to Northern Territory administrator, 6 January 1938, file 1939/420, series F1, and court evidence of Kametake, 30 September 1938, file 22/1937, series E470, both NAA, Darwin; Thomson, 'Report of expedition to Arnhem Land 1936-37', no date, 15, copy in Northern Territory Library and Information Service main library.

²⁵ Kamper's log, entry for 24 November 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, NAA, Darwin.

²⁶ Thomson, 'Report of expedition to Arnhem Land 1936-37', no date, 12, copy in Northern Territory Library and Information Service main library.

²⁷ D. Askew, 'Australia through a Japanese lens', in P. Jones and P. Oliver eds, *Changing histories: Australia and Japan* (Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, 2001), 56-8.

²⁸ Department of Interior secretary to minister, 31 July 1936, file 1936/7994, series A1, NAA, Canberra.

²⁹ Goldie and Male, 'Report on the prospectus of the Ocean Shell Fishing Company Inc of New York', 17 November 1928, file 1929/9336, series A1, NAA, Canberra; Bach, 'The pearling industry', 219-20; S. Mullins, 'James Clark and the Celebes Trading Co: making an Australian maritime venture in the Netherlands East Indies', *Great Circle* 24 (2002), no. 2, 26, 29-31, 37; Shepherd, 'One hundred years of pearling', 25.

³⁰ Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'; court evidence of Kametake, 30 September 1938, file 22/1937, and Takahara, 11 October 1938, file 13/1938, both series E470, NAA, Darwin; C. L. A. Abbott, *Australia's frontier province* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1950), 134; *Northern Standard*, 27 September 1938, 'Lugger runs on reef'. For Japanese floating canneries and factories see *Japan Times*, 15 June 1937, 2; K. Kunishi, 'Japan's ocean fisheries', *Oriental Economist*, August 1936, 497-8; B. Wertheim, 'The Russo-Japanese fisheries controversy', *Pacific Affairs* 8, no. 2 (June 1935), 195.

³¹ Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'; court evidence of Kametake, 22 September 1938, file 22/1937, and Okishima, 11 October 1938, file 13/1938, both series E470, NAA, Darwin.

³² Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'.

³³ Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'.

³⁴ Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township'.

AUSTRALIAN REACTIONS TO THE JAPANESE PRESENCE

White Australian concern. White Australia had waged a long, low-level and largely successful campaign to keep Maccassan and other south-east Asian fishers from using Australia's northern coast and mingling with its Aboriginal inhabitants.¹ But a fleet of Japanese boats in the Arafura Sea could not so easily be rebuffed, and its presence was more troubling. At the very least, Japanese pearlers seemed to have broken free from their role as labourers for white pearling masters and to be running their own show, breaking Australia's near-monopoly over ocean shell, undercutting Australian sales in New York, driving a small Australian industry to the wall. White Australians observed, a little uneasily, the modernity of the fleet. They judged it guilty of various trespasses – overproduction, poaching, using Darwin unfairly, and exploiting the Aborigines – and, more seriously, of spying.²

Modernity. White Australians who observed the Japanese pearling fleet often remarked on how new most of its boats were, at any rate in contrast to the aged, unwieldy luggers owned by Australia's pearling masters. It was partly 'their superior vessels and equipment', reporter Arthur Barclay observed, that was allowing Japan to supersede Australia as the main gatherer of ocean shell.³ Darwin's *Northern Standard* noted typically that Tange Fukutaro's *Takachiho Maru No. 3* was 'one of the most up-to-date pearling luggers in the industry, being modern in every respect' (Fig. 10)⁴ Mother ships seemed even more impressive. When the *Kokoku Maru* came to Darwin in August 1937 its newness and size 'attracted much attention' from the locals.⁵ But it was the mother ships which allowed the luggers to operate so close to Australia and fish the beds so intensively. They may have symbolised the Japanese commercial victory for some Australians.⁶

Overproduction. Darwin's chief pearling inspector believed the Japanese pulled four to five thousand tonnes of pearl shell from the sea floor in 1937 – too much for the beds to survive, and too much for market to bear. 'Production on such a scale must have affected the world's market', he reported to Canberra.⁷

As noted in the previous section of this report, Mitsui sold at best half this amount in New York that year. Still, the inspector's charge of overproduction was fair. The movements of the Japanese fleet from Bathurst island to northern Arnhem Land, and later to Broome, suggest it was quickly exhausting at least the obvious pickings. Whether this was ruthless plunder of a natural resource or simply a rapid use of it depended on one's point of view. At any rate, quick exhaustion was the common result of the energy and organisation of Japanese fishing across the Pacific.⁸

Mitsui certainly put too much pearl shell on the market to keep prices up. After the Second World War someone calculated that any more than 4000 tonnes of shell would depress prices. The 2002 tonnes sold by Mitsui in 1937 pushed total sales in New York alone to 4600 tonnes. New

York's warehouses were soon crammed with up to a year's supply of ocean shell that could find no buyer at a profitable price.⁹ This result increased the vertical integration of Japanese pearling and delayed the start of operations in the 1938 season in an effort to reduce the catch.¹⁰

Poaching. Many white men across eastern Asia and the Pacific believed the Japanese did not play by the rules of commerce. Poaching in other countries' territorial waters was a clear breach of these rules as well as an affront to those countries' self-respect, and Japanese fishers seem to have been more inclined to poach, or come close to it, than their white competitors. There were armed clashes off Siberia when Japanese fishers entered Russian waters. Americans protested at the trial despatch of a Japanese ship to salmon grounds off their western coast.¹¹

White Australians who lived or worked on their northern coast and in the south-west Pacific constantly accused



Fig. 10. The *Takachiho Maru No. 3*.

Japanese luggers of poaching. One man living in Torres Strait warned that he and others would start shooting if the practice continued. Some master pearlers would have liked to reach for their rifles too. They were angry that Japanese pearlers had entered what they considered their waters to strip what they considered their beds, and without having to pay the boat licence fees and various taxes to Canberra they said were oppressing them, or heed the Northern Territory's pearling ordinance which prohibited them extracting 'chicken shell'.¹² 'We are subject to all the restrictions and penal clauses of the Fisheries Ordinance, and God knows what else', complained one master pearler; 'if we are found with chicken shell we're gone a million, yet these Jap bastards can fill their holds with young shell and the government can't, or won't, do a thing about it.'¹³

Japanese trepang luggers were indeed guilty of poaching, and the Australian government may have officially protested to Tokyo about it.¹⁴ But accusations of poaching by Japanese pearling luggers were unfounded. 'As a matter of fact', as the Minister for the Interior, who was responsible for Northern Territory, told parliament, poaching by Japanese pearlers was 'quite negligible.'¹⁵ Both the imperial government in London and the national government in Canberra upheld the doctrine of free use of the seas outside territorial waters. It was there, in what were sometimes called extra-territorial waters – close to Australia, popularly thought of as Australian, but beyond the three-mile limit – that Japanese divers operated.¹⁶ In doing so they were simply exercising their rights, one reporter explained. Their employers would have agreed. As a Japanese fishing association lectured the Americans, 'The open sea is the joint property of the whole world'.¹⁷ Nor could Japanese crews legally be punished for entering Australian territorial waters and perhaps even an Aboriginal reserve if bad weather or the need for water made it prudent to do so, provided they did not continue to fish.¹⁸ What Australians called poaching was perhaps better called penetration—the sudden appearance of a foreign commercial fishing fleet in a sea popularly felt by Australians to be Australian.

Exploiting Darwin. Darwin might have grown rich supplying the Japanese pearling fleet. But its reaction to Japanese visits was cold.¹⁹ The master pearlers were particularly hostile. To their minds, selling oil to Japanese boats without charging the same license fees and taxes the pearling masters paid was giving the Japanese an unfair advantage over them. The Northern Territory's administrator agreed that oil sales would encourage the fleet to stay in the Arafura Sea and compete with Darwin-based boats.²⁰ His concern was probably common. 'Every foreign boat operating in northern waters should be denied the use of Australian ports', argued Sydney's *Bulletin* magazine, 'unless it pays dues sufficient to give Australians who pioneered the industry a fair chance'.²¹ There was unease at news that the Japanese might have liked space at Darwin

harbour to pack and export pearl shell from the town rather than take it back to Koror.²²

The Japanese fleet's use of Darwin was as legal as its use of the Arafura Sea. 'There is nothing at the present time', the Minister for the Interior said, 'to prevent any ship belonging to a friendly power from entering any port in the Commonwealth and obtaining water, wood, fuel, and stores'.²³ And though they paid licence fees, the pearling masters were classified by government as primary producers and, therefore, excused some of the tax and import charges they thought the Japanese were evading.²⁴

Exploiting Aborigines. If Japanese pearlers were neither poaching nor unfairly using Darwin's facilities, they were – like the partly Japanese crews of Australian luggers – landing on Aboriginal land to draw water, stretch their legs, careen their luggers and have sexual relations with Aboriginal women. The incursions in themselves were troubling enough, but it was the barter for women – the lubra trade, many called it – that most outraged white Australians.

In the 1930s many Aborigines were effectively wards of a white Australia inclined to segregate those still living largely traditional lives – hence the declaration of the Tiwi Islands and most of Arnhem Land as Aboriginal reserves. The missionaries who effectively ruled those reserves, the 'protectors' officially responsible for them, and on-site anthropologists like Donald Thomson, disagreed how best to manage their black charges. They were united, though, in their outrage over the lubra trade. Better that Australia's pearling industry go under, thought Methodist missionary Theodore Webb, than the horrors being perpetrated on Aborigines continue.²⁵ Thomson, a zealot for 'absolute segregation', denounced 'the demoralizing and disintegrating effect' of the 'Japanese invaders'.²⁶ Many white Australians would have supported him, each for a different reason or mix of reasons – the violation of young women, the rise in sexually transmitted diseases, the birth of mixed-race children, the escape of Aborigines from the reserves on board pearling luggers, or even that the Japanese might somehow subvert white authority over the blacks.²⁷ In the end it all came down, though, to an anger that 'they are exploiting our blacks, and, worst of all, prostituting the black women with impunity'.²⁸

Japanese pearlers certainly won a priapic reputation among north coast Aborigines. Lockhart River Aborigines in north Queensland believed them to be sexually insatiable.²⁹ They were probably more vigorous, more blatant or more urgent bargainers than the south-east Asian trepang fishers who had long visited the coast. They probably spread sexually transmitted diseases.³⁰ The trade must have been grim for many Aboriginal women. Yet it was other women as well as men in their communities who pushed them forward, largely for the tobacco being offered in return. As missionary George Goldsmith conceded, the transactions between lugger crews and Aborigines was barter, and entered into willingly by Aboriginal communities, if not

all the members of those communities.³¹ Many Aboriginal men were notoriously enthusiastic to meet the luggers, too much at times – one reason why a Darwin master pearler exclaimed that ‘The niggers are a nuisance’. There was good reason for the enthusiasm. Trade with lugger crews secured food and tobacco more easily than hunting on traditional land or working for a mission could do. Lockhart River Aborigines still look back fondly on what they call ‘luggertime’ (Fig. 11).³²

White Australians who condemned the lubra trade usually forgot that they helped create it.³³ The white Australia policy had closed the Japanese brothels that once dotted northern Australian towns.³⁴ Canberra had disregarded the warning that to include small islands off Arnhem Land in the region’s Aboriginal reserve would give lugger crews no sparsely inhabited legal landing place to obtain water and firewood, and thus encourage them to go to larger islands or the mainland with their bigger Aboriginal communities.³⁵ And the disintegration of traditional Aboriginal society, an inevitable product of white rule that could not be stemmed by segregation, was proceeding relentlessly. It was unlikely to have been hastened by intermittent contact with a third party.

Spying. Even more troubling for white Australians than the apparent exploitation of Aborigines was the possibility that the Japanese pearling fleet was spying. On the face of it, spying was an odd charge to level at citizens of a nation that had been an ally in the First World War and was one of Australia’s most important trading partners. But Japan’s spectacular victory on land and sea over Russia

in 1905 had signalled to the world that it was prepared to carve out an empire in Asia just as European powers had done, and perhaps at the expense of those powers – one of whose products, and a largely undefended one, was the Commonwealth of Australia. Japan and Australia clashed at the 1919 Versailles peace conference following the First World War, and in 1936 waged a trade war against each other. Australian fears of Japanese aggression were revived by Japanese incursions into north-east Asia from the early 1930s which finally erupted into a full-scale war of conquest against China in July 1937.³⁶ Koror, the Japanese pearling fleet’s main base, was also becoming a military base.³⁷ So too was Darwin, as Australia’s government made ready to resist any Japanese attack.

In the 1930s Tokyo, its navy and some Japanese businessmen wanted to expand southward into what seemed to them the untapped riches of vast colonies held by white masters who lacked the energy to exploit them fully. Until 1940 this policy of *nanshin* (roughly translatable as ‘go south’) was economic rather than military. Still, in the later 1930s it brought aggressive Japanese commercial activity in the south-west Pacific, especially against the Dutch government of the Netherlands East Indies, which seemed more intended to increase Japanese power than prosperity.³⁸ It became a commonplace among white men living across south-east Asia that Japanese fishers were really spies for Tokyo.³⁹ Australians at Dobo were reporting on Japanese activities to Britain’s consul general in Batavia, indeed calling for Dutch strikes against Japanese poachers.⁴⁰ Nanko hardly possessed a reassuring profile



Fig. 11. Aborigines as they might have appeared to the crews of pearling boats. Photograph reproduced from Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*.

to such observers – closely identified with the Japanese government, links to the Japanese navy, aggressive seeker after concessions in the Netherlands East Indies and Timor, said by Britain’s consul general in Batavia to ‘run a sort of intelligence department’.⁴¹ British intelligence added that Mitsui was gathering intelligence for Tokyo and Japanese naval officers were undertaking intelligence missions.⁴² Soon an Australian naval officer would report he was ‘of the opinion that, in every Japanese lugger and mother ship examined, there is a person outside the jurisdiction of the master who is not a working member of the crew.’⁴³ The report seemed to be confirmed late in 1941, when the opening Japanese attacks came so suddenly, swiftly and effectively they were commonly explained as the result of surreptitious preparation.⁴⁴ In 1987 Ogawa Taira, a historian who had written on the Japanese pearling fleet in the Arafura Sea, assured Australian historian Regina Ganter that pearling boats:

were requisitioned by the Japanese navy as spy ships to Palau, the Philippines, New Guinea, Borneo, Java, etc. They carried cargo and personnel, and made charts of foreign ports, noting where water, bananas, potatoes, and so on could be obtained. They were instructed to do so three years before the outbreak of war. I spoke to one of the captains myself.⁴⁵

Ogawa’s comment, if supported by written sources from the time, applies to the Japanese pearling fleet from 1939 to 1941, when its size was small, but not to the fleet at its height from 1936 to 1938. And support from written sources seems unlikely, as records of Japanese intelligence activity in the years before the Second World War are said to be few.⁴⁶ Japanese pearlers probably kept up the long-standing custom of passing on apparently useful observations to the military – just as some Australians were doing when they visited Japanese ports or observed Japanese boats.⁴⁷ But the primary purpose of their activity, and probably of any charts they made, would have been commercial.⁴⁸ It would have been risky for the navy to have trusted most pearlers, notoriously wild men, with much in the way of secret tasks or even careful recording.⁴⁹ Anyway, any charts passed to the navy might have proved useless. The Northern Territory’s administrator reported to Canberra that ‘frequent statements that the Japanese had good charts of the Australian coast’ were ‘not at all in accordance with the facts’ as ‘their navigation is of the most sketchy and haphazard nature’.⁵⁰ One thing is clear. Australia was not on the Japanese general staff’s list of war objectives during the 1930s, when there was little in common between Japan’s military advance into China and its economic advance, however aggressive, into south-east Asia.⁵¹

The Australian response. The apprehension that a modern fleet of Japanese luggers and mother ships off the northern coast seemed at best to be stripping a natural resource and eroding an Australian industry, at worst to be exploiting Aborigines and spying, led to a response by Australia that was typical for a white administration in

south-east Asia and the western Pacific anxious to show its flag without sparking a diplomatic row. In May 1936 the *Larrakia*, a sleek, British-made launch built for speed and based in Darwin, began to patrol territorial waters which pearling luggers were likely to enter. It was a civil vessel, not a naval one. But it was armed with a machine gun, and its captain, Charles Haultain, was a former naval officer.⁵² Haultain was no japanophobe, though. Four years earlier he had applied for a commission with the Japanese navy.⁵³

Northern Territory pearling masters expected the *Larrakia* to chase the Japanese fleet out of the Arafura Sea.⁵⁴ Haultain was told to protect these privileged Australians from ‘unfair competition’, which presumably meant poaching,⁵⁵ and probably also to report anything that looked like spying by the Japanese. He had more precise orders to end the lubra trade by swooping on lugger crews entering Aboriginal reserves – regardless of whether those crews came from Japanese or Australian boats. This even-handedness, Canberra hoped, would save the patrol from antagonising Tokyo. At the same time, if Haultain encountered any Japanese lugger found in territorial waters without good reason he was to order it out to sea or—after radioing Darwin for permission to do so – arrest the crew and impound the boat.⁵⁶

The *Larrakia* made its first arrests in August – of the senior divers from two Darwin-based luggers caught with Aboriginal women. When the master pearler who employed the divers saw Haultain in the street he insisted the patrol ‘pull in a few bloody foreigners, instead of your own mob’.⁵⁷ Haultain’s chance came in March 1937, when he detained thirteen Japanese luggers found in territorial waters off Korewa Island north of Milingimbi. Some tried to escape the *Larrakia* and were halted by bursts of machine gun fire. The Japanese captains said they had sought shelter and also fresh water which their mother ships couldn’t supply. Haultain warned them they could be gaoled or fined and their boats confiscated, then told them to get out of territorial waters within an hour.⁵⁸ The Foreign Office in London had recently counselled that using machine guns on patrol boats might anger Tokyo, but Japan’s consul general in Sydney made no objection to Haultain’s action.⁵⁹ Still, an armed encounter was bound to make for sensational news in the Australian press.⁶⁰ Some Australians thought Haultain had not gone far enough. ‘His obvious duty’, lectured Darwin’s *Northern Standard*, ‘was to have arrested them [the luggers] and brought them into Darwin harbour as prizes.’⁶¹

The newspaper would soon be satisfied. Japanese luggers continued to enter territorial waters during spring tides. The *Larrakia* must ‘be prepared to follow up the warnings already given’, the Northern Territory administrator wrote, so future warnings to have any impact.⁶² That probably meant impounding the next Japanese luggers it encountered. But did the patrol have the legal power to impound without warning if Parliament was not sitting, so amending customs legislation to confer such power was

out of the question. Anyway, a quieter way was preferred. Donald Thomson and the north Australian missions were bombarding Canberra with reports of outrages by lugger crews. Even the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science was calling for action to end the lubra trade. All right, then: cabinet would amend the Northern Territory Aboriginals Ordinance. Haultain could immediately impound any foreign boat in territorial waters off an Aboriginal reserve unless it was short of water and needed to land to get it.⁶³ Concern for Arnhem Land Aborigines played a genuine part in the decision. But as the chief justice of Darwin's supreme court later grumbled, 'the poor old Aboriginal is being used as a stalking horse'.⁶⁴

Early in June 1937 Haultain's patrol used its new power to impound Tange's *Takachiho Maru No. 3* and a Kaiyo Shokusan mother ship, the *New Guinea Maru*, in Boucaut Bay, and arrest the crews. Both boats were to be brought back to Darwin. But the *New Guinea Maru* proved too large to negotiate the shallow waters by the coast that the *Larrakia* used, so Haultain let it go and instead seized

the smaller and older *Seicho Maru No. 10* which carried 'chicken shell' back to Palau. Haultain's troubles had just begun. The lugger crew refused to cooperate, tension rose, and the captain held a Japanese flag across his body and declared that to shoot him was to shoot Japan. Haultain shot anyway, nicking the captain's ear and ending the protest. Then on the return journey the *Larrakia's* engine failed, and it had to be towed for a time by one of the captive boats. In Darwin the Northern Territory administrator threatened to gaol the crews unless they left for Palau immediately, which they did, but kept the *Takachiho Maru* as a prize.⁶⁵ Japanese pearlers in the Arafura Sea were reported to be 'somewhat excited over the arrest'.⁶⁶ The Japanese consul general announced that international law was on Japan's side and asked for the boat's release.⁶⁷ Two weeks later the captain of another Kaiyo Shokusan mother ship, the *Sanyo Maru*, would have to decide whether or not to shelter in Boucaut Bay.

¹ J. P. S. Bach, 'The pearling industry of Australia: an account of its social and economic development' (Newcastle: Department of Commerce and Agriculture, 1955), 207–25, 247–8.

² I. Idriess, *Forty fathoms deep: pearl divers and sea rovers in Australian seas* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1938), 334–5; J. P. S. Bach, 'The pearlshelling industry and the white Australia policy', *Historical Studies of Australia and New Zealand* 10, no. 38 (May 1962), 212. Pam Oliver warns that white Australian concern about Japan might have been largely masculine; for many women, Japan may have seemed a place of culture and sophistication: P. Oliver, 'Espionage and paranoia: assessing responses to "Japanese" 1870-1947', *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 11 (March 2003), 53.

³ A. Barclay, 'With the Japanese luggers off north Australia', *Walkabout*, 1 February 1937, 41.

⁴ *Northern Standard*, 18 June 1937, 'Release of Japanese poacher'.

⁵ T. Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township off Australian coast', *Advertiser*, 2 July 1938, 12; *Northern Standard*, 24 August 1937, 'Round about'.

⁶ For a reference to mother ships with Japanese whaling boats see *Australian Parliamentary Debates* 153, 23 June 1937, MacDonald, 224.

⁷ Appendix to 'Report on the administration of the Northern Territory for the year 1937–38', 11 October 1938, 39, copy on shelves in Northern Territory Archives Service.

⁸ For Japanese exhaustion of fish stocks off Siberia see B. Wertheim, 'The Russo-Japanese fisheries controversy', *Pacific Affairs* 8, no. 2 (June 1935), 196.

⁹ Office of the Commonwealth acting official secretary to Department of Commerce secretary, 19 May 1938, Cross to McKenzie and Sons, 30 July 1938, and Broome Pearlers Committee chairman to Green, 20 October 1938, all file 679/5/4, series A601, NAA, Canberra; *Northern Standard*, 24 September 1937, 'Overproduction of MOP shell'; L. R. Macgregor, 'Report on the market for ocean pearl shell in the United States of America' (Canberra: Department of Commerce, 1940), 3, 22; Bach, 'The pearling industry', 219.

¹⁰ *Northern Standard*, 24 September 1937, 'Overproduction of MOP shell'; Sheldon to British consul general in Batavia, 7 April 1938, file 1938/584, series F1, NAA, Darwin.

¹¹ Clipping from *Herald*, 19 September 1936, 'Japan invades Canadian and US fisheries, file 679/1/8, series A601, NAA, Canberra; *Japan Times*, 15 June 1937, 1; Wertheim, 'The Russo-Japanese fisheries controversy', 192–4; B. Hopper, 'The perennial Kamchatka discord', *Foreign Affairs* 15, no. 3 (April 1937), 564–7; M. R. Peattie, 'Nanshin: the southward advance 1931–1941 as a prelude to Japanese occupation of southeast Asia' in P. Duus and others eds, *The Japanese wartime empire 1931–1945* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 203.

¹² Northern Territory administrator to Department of Interior secretary, 11 August 1936, file 1937/600, series F1, NAA, Darwin; *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 24 January 1936, 9, and 23 April 1936, 8; *Bulletin*, 11 November 1936, 8; *Northern Standard*, 5 February 1937, 'Japanese poachers'.

¹³ C. T. G. Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land* (Canberra: Roebuck, 1971), 81.

¹⁴ *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 21 February 1936, 5.

¹⁵ *Australian Parliamentary Debates* 153, 24 June 1937, Paterson, 350.

¹⁶ Latham, 'Poaching on pearling areas', 9 October 1934, file 715/24, series A1928, NAA, Canberra.

¹⁷ *Japan Times*, 15 June 1937, 2; H. Hartt, 'Pearling luggers at Darwin', *Walkabout*, 1 May 1946, 7.

¹⁸ Bach, 'Pearling industry', pp. 222, 223, 224.

- ¹⁹ Memorandum, 'Japanese sampans at Darwin', 23 July 1936, file 1936/7994, series A1, NAA, Canberra; Times (London), 29 October 1938, 13; M. R. Peattie, *Nanyo: the rise and fall of the Japanese in Micronesia 1885–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 141.
- ²⁰ Gregory to Northern Territory administrator, 28 October 1936, file 1937/600, series F1, NAA, Darwin; *Northern Standard*, 11 May 1937, 'Japanese request for Darwin base'.
- ²¹ *Bulletin*, 11 November 1936, 8.
- ²² Chief pearling inspector to Northern Territory administrator, 14 May 1937, file 1937/360, series F1, NAA, Darwin; *Northern Standard*, 20 April 1937, 'Darwin as base for Jap boats'; Australian *Parliamentary Debates* 153, 23 June 1937, Green, 300, and 24 June 1937, Paterson, 350; Bach, 'The pearling industry', 231; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 133–4.
- ²³ Australian *Parliamentary Debates* 153, 24 June 1937, Paterson, 350.
- ²⁴ Gregory to Northern Territory administrator, 28 October 1936, file 1937/600, and chief pearling inspector to Northern Territory administrator, 22 March 1938, file 1938/624, both series F1, NAA, Darwin; chief pearling inspector to Northern Territory administrator, 30 October 1936, file 1936/7994, and Commonwealth Railways acting secretary to Department of Interior secretary, 9 December 1936 and department of Interior secretary to Department of Trade and Customs comptroller general, 21 July 1937, file 1938/173, both series A1, NAA, Canberra; Department of Commerce secretary Department of Interior secretary, 1 March 1939, file 679/5/6, series A601, NAA, Canberra; A L Nutt, 'Pearl shell industry, Darwin', 26 January 1939, file Jap100, series A981, NAA, Canberra.
- ²⁵ *Missionary Review*, 5 March 1937, 5.
- ²⁶ Thomson, 'Report of expedition to Arnhem Land 1936–37', no date, 9, 12, copy in Northern Territory Library and Information Service main library
- ²⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 April 1937, 13; *Times*, 2 January 1937, 9; *Sun*, 8 February 1938, 3; *Missionary Review*, 5 March 1937, 5; Thomson, 'Interim report on work among native tribes of Arnhem Land, Arnhem Land', 20 June 1937, file 1936/382, series F1, NAA, Darwin; Thomson to Department of Interior secretary, 20 November 1937, file 1938/33269, series A1, NAA, Canberra; Australian *Parliamentary Debates* 153, 22 June 1937, Abbott, 128; 'Report on the administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 30th June 1937', 15 October 1937, 11, 23–4, 44, copy on shelves in Northern Territory Archives Service; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 2, 80–1; D. Lockwood, *The front door: Darwin 1869-1969* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1968), 129.
- ²⁸ *Northern Standard*, 8 January 1937, 'Darwin's pearling industry'.
- ²⁹ Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 185; A. Chase, "'All kind of nation": Aborigines and Asians in Cape York peninsula', *Aboriginal History* 5, part 1 (June 1981), 16.
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- ³¹ Missionary in charge Goulburn Island to Northern Territory administrator, 5 December 1936, file 1937/600, series F1, NAA, Darwin; *Northern Standard*, 4 June 1937, 'Darwin luggers blamed'.
- ³² Notes on a 'Deputation from master pearlery Darwin 19/8/1938', file 679/5/4, series A601, NAA, Canberra; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 2; Chase, "'All kind of nation'", 11–18.
- ³³ For a use of the phrase 'lubra trade' see for example Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 26.
- ³⁴ D. C. S. Sissons, 'Karayuki-san: Japanese prostitutes in Australia 1887–1916', *Historical Studies* 17, no. 69 (October 1977), 478, 488.
- ³⁵ Memorandum, 'Arnhem Land Aboriginal reserve', 24 February 1931, unnumbered file 'Arnhem Land reserve', box 2, series F60, NTAS.
- ³⁶ H. Frei, *Japan's southward advance and Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991), 99–110, 116–28; P. Jones, Paul, "'Racial character" and Australia and Japan in the 1930s', in P. Jones and P. Oliver eds, *Changing histories: Australia and Japan* (Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute, 2001), 25–48.
- ³⁷ Peattie, *Nanyo*, 247–9.
- ³⁸ Peattie, 'Nanshin'; H. Dick, 'Japan's economic expansion in the Netherlands Indies between the first and second world wars', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (September 1989), 268–71.
- ³⁹ Peattie, 'Nanshin', 224; Dick, 'Japan's economic expansion', 259.
- ⁴⁰ Sheldon to British consul general in Batavia, 5 March 1937, file Jap158 part 3, series A981, NAA, Canberra; Jessup, 'Drawn from memory: being reminiscences from early childhood to his capture by the Japanese at Singapore', no date, f. 19, item ML DOC 2982, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- ⁴¹ Peattie, 'Nanshin', 205–6; Dick, 'Japan's economic expansion', 262; Frei, *Japan's southward advance and Australia*, 151–2; K. Tsokhas, "'Trouble must follow": Australia's ban on iron ore exports to Japan in 1938', *Modern Asian Studies* 29 (1995), no. 4, 883; Oliver, 'Espionage and paranoia', 43.
- ⁴² Officer to Department of External Affairs secretary, 1 November 1934, file Jap98 part 1, series A981, NAA, Canberra.
- ⁴³ B. Winter, *The intrigue master: Commander Long and naval intelligence in Australia 1913–1945* (Moorooka Qld: Boolarong, 1995), 54.
- ⁴⁴ Barnwell, 'Japanese: report on associations and activities', c. 1942, file N40344, series SP1714/1, NAA, Sydney; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 1.
- ⁴⁵ R. Ganter, *The pearl-shellery of Torres Strait: resource use, development and decline 1860s-1960s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 143.

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⁴⁷ E. Feldt, *The coast watchers* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1946), 16–17; D. Ballendorf, 'Secrets without substance: US intelligence in the Japanese mandates 1915–1935', *Journal of Pacific History* 19 (1984), no. 2, 92; Winter, *The intrigue master*, 25–31, 41.

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⁴⁹ Peattie, 'Nanshin', p. 225.

⁵⁰ Haultain to Northern Territory administrator, 6 December 1937, and Northern Territory administrator to Department of Interior secretary, 7 December 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, NAA, Darwin. See also interview with J. Cassidy, June 1989, transcript TS564 tape 3, NTAS, Darwin.

⁵¹ Frei, *Japan's southward advance and Australia*, 149–50; Peattie, 'Nanshin', 220–35.

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⁵³ Haultain to Japanese consul general, 7 March 1932, file J223, series C443, NAA, Sydney.

⁵⁴ *Northern Standard*, 25 May 1937, 'A pearler's prayer'; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 13.

⁵⁵ Cabinet minute, 'Patrol of the coast of the Northern Territory', 8 February 1934, file 1934/1012, series A1, NAA, Canberra.

⁵⁶ Department of Interior secretary to Northern Territory administrator, 23 June 1936, and 'Darwin patrol vessel Larrakia: instructions to master in connection with his appointment as acting officer of customs', no date or signature, file 1936/319, series F1, NAA, Darwin; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 26; Haultain discussed his work with the assistant director of naval intelligence (Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 178–9), whose agents were reporting on, among other things, Japanese pearling activity (Winter, *Intrigue master*, 26–55). Those agents, Monash University historian dr Pam Oliver is establishing, did not include Australian missionaries working on the north coast, but did include John Iwamatsu Nakashiba of Darwin, who worked secretly as an intelligence officer in the Royal Australian Navy.

⁵⁷ Haultain, 'Report on the arrest of members of luggers D1 and D3, 13 August 1936, file 1936/503, series F1, NAA, Darwin; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 40–3, 49.

⁵⁸ *Northern Standard*, 6 April 1937, 'Alleged Japanese poachers'; 'Report on the administration of the Northern Territory for the year ended 30th June 1937', 15 October 1937, 12, copy on shelves in Northern Territory Archives Service; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 115–23.

⁵⁹ Order to Dominions Office, 10 February 1937, file 679/1/8, series A601, NAA, Canberra; *Bulletin*, 14 April 1937, 12.

⁶⁰ See for example *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 April 1937, 11.

⁶¹ *Northern Standard*, 9 April 1937, 'Britannia rules the waves'.

⁶² Northern Territory acting administrator to Department of Interior secretary, 6 April 1937, file 1937/251, series F1, NAA, Darwin.

⁶³ *Missionary Review*, 5 March 1937, p. 5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 April 1937, 11; *Northern Standard*, 6 April 1937, 'Japanese poaching activities', 13 April 1937, 'Northern patrol', 23 April 1937, 'New power for coastguards', and 27 April 1937, 'trespassing on native reserves'; Department of Interior telegram to Northern Territory administrator, 19 April 1937, file 1937/251, NAA, Darwin; Prime Minister's Department secretary to Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, 25 February 1937, file Jap98 part 3, series A981, NAA, Canberra; Department of Commerce assistant secretary marine to Department of Commerce secretary, 27 April 1937, and Garrett to Department of Commerce secretary, 8 July 1937, file 679/1/8, series A601, both NAA, Canberra; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 124–32.

⁶⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 1938, 10.

⁶⁵ 'Extract from diary: Captain Okamura of the *Takachiho Maru No. 3*', 9 June–6 July 1937, file D3138, series E72, NAA, Darwin; *Northern Standard*, 18 June 1937, 'Release of Japanese poacher'; *Northern Standard*, 21 June 1938, 'Seizure of Japanese luggers'; Abbott, *Australia's frontier province*, 133; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 143–60.

⁶⁶ Northern Territory government secretary to Northern Territory administrator, 'Arrest and confiscation of Japanese luggers', 23 August 1937, file D3138, series E72, NAA, Darwin.

⁶⁷ Japanese consul general to Interior minister, 18 June 1937, file 1937/251A, series F1, NAA, Darwin.

THE *SANYO MARU*'S SERVICE, SINKING AND SALVAGE ATTEMPT

The vessel. The members of the April 2002 expedition to the wreck of the *Sanyo Maru* were able to discern the boat's rough shape and surviving features. It had a narrow beam and a blunt stern. Most of the hull was given over to a large cargo hold which included water tanks. Above the hold rose a derrick, behind it a mast and a wheel house.¹

Press reports of the *Sanyo Maru*'s sinking filed from Darwin described the boat as 'one of the newest and largest all-steel Japanese ships', 'one of the most modern in Australian waters', with 300 tons gross capacity.² It was newer and larger than the 'quite new' *New Guinea Maru*, the mother ship said to hold 220 tons gross, two thirds of which could be given over to pearl shell.³ The *Sanyo Maru* was reported to have carried a small motor launch and also a dinghy.⁴ The crew may have numbered around twenty, including a captain and a purser.⁵ Life aboard the *Sanyo Maru* may have been as cramped and uncomfortable as on a pearling lugger.

These reports sketch a boat similar to the *Asahi Maru*, the mother ship visited in 1938 by Southwell Keely of the *Adelaide Advertiser*. He described the *Asahi Maru*, again impressionistically, as a floating miniature emporium of 200 tons gross. The indistinct photographs that illustrated the article suggest a narrow, blunt-sterned, bulky vessel sitting high in the water and with one or two tall masts.⁶ His words and photographs accord with an entry for an *Asahi Maru* that appears in an inventory of Japanese commercial shipping prepared by United States naval intelligence in the Second World War. The entry is for a steel boat built in 1934, 36.5 metres long and seven metres in the beam, 284 tons gross and powered by a diesel engine.⁷

The inventory also lists two boats called the *Sanyo Maru*. One is a steel 'fishing research vessel' built in 1937, 33.5 metres long and 185 tons gross. The other is a steel 'fish carrier' built two years earlier of exactly the same length and beam as the *Asahi Maru* and virtually the same capacity – 281 tons gross.⁸ The inventory was compiled late in the Second World War, and neither entry may refer to the mother ship that sank off Boucaut Bay. Then again, the compilers would have relied largely on documents describing the characteristics of boats. Most such documents would have predated a boat's demise and thus not always have recorded it. The second *Sanyo Maru* in the inventory certainly matches the press description of a boat larger than the *New Guinea Maru*, or at any rate of greater gross tonnage, and the *Asahi Maru* in the inventory matches Southwell Keely's description and photographs. It seems safe, then, to add the inventory details for the second *Sanyo Maru* to the findings of the April 2002 expedition and the details given in reports on the sinking.

The mother ship *Sanyo Maru* can be taken, therefore, to have been a narrow, blunt-sterned steel carrier built in 1935, 36.5 metres long and seven metres in the beam, powered by a diesel engine assisted by sail, and 281 tons gross

– some of which capacity was to be taken up with water or other liquid. The closeness of this description to the *Asahi Maru*'s suggests both boats might have been built by the same shipyard, or from the same blueprint, or both.

The name *Sanyo Maru* can be loosely translated as *Good Ship Seven Seas*. *Maru*, appended to the name of most Japanese boats of the period, is almost an incantation, and could be applied to children as well as boats. It expresses pride and hope and invokes protection. The closest equivalent in English is the now quaint epithet 'the good ship'.⁹ *Sanyo* has several meanings. The most likely, and the one that applies to the name of the Sanyo company today, is 'three oceans', the Japanese equivalent of the expression 'seven seas'.¹⁰

When reporting the boat's sinking the English language *Japan Times* named the *Sanyo Maru*'s owner as the South Seas Development Company – the usual translation for Nanyo Kohatsu or Nanko.¹¹ Japan's consul general in Sydney more correctly named Kaiyo Shokusan, Nanko's pearling arm, as the owner.¹² In September 1937 Kaiyo Shokusan had 59 luggers, including Tange Fukutaro's eleven, and three mother ships.¹³ One of the mother ships was the *New Guinea Maru* that the patrol boat *Larrakia* had seized briefly on 10 June 1937.¹⁴ Another was the boat that Haultain, the patrol captain, had swapped in its stead and taken back to Darwin – the *Seicho Maru No. 10*, a decrepit former lugger which brought fuel to the company's luggers and took 'chicken shell' back to Palau.¹⁵ The *Sanyo Maru* may, until July, have been Kaiyo Shokusan's third mother ship.

The *Sanyo Maru*'s arrival from Palau. The Japanese pearling fleet in the Arafura Sea probably counted a hundred or more luggers in June 1937.¹⁶ During spring tides they were hugging the shore off Boucaut Bay. The *New Guinea Maru* was running between there and Timor bringing vegetables and other provisions.¹⁷ The *Seicho Maru No. 10* returned to Boucaut Bay on 22 June from its brief confinement in Darwin carting both its own crew and that of Tange's still impounded lugger *Takachiho Maru No. 3*.¹⁸ The fleet's luggers ceased fishing on 26 June, which may be the day the *Sanyo Maru* arrived at Boucaut Bay from Palau.¹⁹ The men on the *Seicho Maru No. 10* would have passed round the anchored fleet their account of the recent arrests – how the captain of the *Takachiho Maru No. 3* had draped himself defiantly in the flag, how Haultain had fired anyway and nicked him in the ear, how in Darwin officials had forced him at gunpoint to sign a document he could not understand, how all them had been threatened with gaol unless they left Darwin immediately crammed onto the little *Seicho Maru No. 10*.²⁰ Perhaps the fleet also knew that Japan's semi-official press agency was predicting 'serious trouble' between Australia 'and the Japanese fishing interests'.²¹ No wonder the pearlery were reported as being 'somewhat excited'.²²

By 30 June or 1 July the *Sanyo Maru* had filled its hold with pearl shell, perhaps too eagerly. Kaiyo Shokusan's luggers had made good hauls, and in Palau Mitsui was offering good prices.²³ If the *New Guinea Maru* was engaged on the Timor run, it may not have been able to share the load. If the *Sanyo Maru* had taken on three hundred tonnes of shell, and if its capacity was apportioned as the *New Guinea Maru*'s was, then there were a hundred tonnes of shell in its hold that should not have been there. The boat was also carrying a typical human cargo for a mother ship – one or two sick lugger divers.²⁴ On 1 July it headed out into a famously calm sea.²⁵

The *Sanyo Maru* was only about 24 kilometres from shore when it sank in a storm that same day, 1 July 1937.²⁶ Known sources on the sinking are a letter by Japan's consul general and also the press reports mentioned earlier. Given how unusual a storm off Boucaut Bay in July would be, research needs to be done into weather reports from the time. Pending this research, it is worth noting that none of the known sources contradicts any other, while together they build a credible picture of an unexpected storm rising suddenly and of its consequences. At first the cargo on the *Sanyo Maru*'s deck was swept overboard. The captain might have returned to the shelter of Boucaut Bay; instead, he turned head on into the storm to reduce the target his boat presented to the wind and waves. The cargo in the hold seemed to move. Then the boat rolled heavily, rolled again, tipped over, and sank 27 metres to the sea floor. There had been no time for the crew to get to the launch and start its motor. But the little dinghy floated clear, and several of the crew scrambled into it. Others struggled in the rough water, clinging to jetsam. The dinghy had a Japanese flag in it, and the men waved it wildly. Fortunately a lugger was close by. At first the lugger crew took the men in the water to be adventurous Aborigines looking for barter. Then they saw the men were fellow Japanese. The lugger pulled twenty of them from the water. Two more were missing: the *Sanyo Maru*'s purser and a sick diver.²⁷ Any later legend that some crew members struggled ashore and lived for a while with an Aboriginal community is false.²⁸

Three hundred tonnes of pearl shell was more than a sixth of the total that Mitsui would sell in New York that year.²⁹ If that amount was now on the sea bed it was a blow to Kaiyo Shokusan.³⁰ As soon as the sea was calm again a dozen or more luggers, presumably all Kaiyo Shokusan ones, descended on the scene, dragging the bottom with grappling hooks and sending down divers in relays. Gradually, over two days, the shell was recovered along with one of the bodies. Valuable fittings were stripped from the boat. But any idea that a swarm of luggers without the right equipment might refloat the *Sanyo Maru* was found to be hopelessly optimistic.³¹ Kaiyo Shokusan decided to organise a formal salvage effort.³²

What became of the recovered body? Just a week earlier, after an official request from the Japanese consul general, the Australian government revoked its long-standing

opposition to burials in Darwin of Japanese pearling fleet divers who died at sea. Presumably the news had not yet reached the fleet. The body may have been buried at Dobo or Timor.³³ Presumably the survivors of the sinking and the retrieved shell made their way to Palau.

The loss of the boat was never officially reported, at any rate not to Darwin or Canberra.³⁴ News of the sinking took a week to reach Australia, and the medium was probably the crew of an Australian-owned lugger which seems to have reached Darwin on 8 July.³⁵ A report of that date and based on a telegram from Darwin appeared a few days later in the *Japan Times*, simply relating that the *Sanyo Maru* had sunk in a 'terrific squall', that all but two passengers had been saved, and that luggers were still trying to salvage the cargo.³⁶ On 9 July Darwin's *Northern Standard* gave two paragraphs to the wreck, describing it as the result of overloading and the captain's decision not to 'seek shelter in territorial waters'.³⁷ Next day even briefer reports, probably by the same journalist, appeared in the *London Times* and *New York Times*. They made clear what the *Northern Standard* had not – that the captain had wished to avoid his boat being confiscated by Australian authorities.³⁸ Fuller reports soon appeared in the Cairn's *Northern Herald*, the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Adelaide's *Advertiser*, probably other Australian newspapers too. They also blamed overloading and fear of confiscation for the sinking.³⁹ The cursory coverage of the sinking by international newspapers was reasonable, by the Australian press less so. It emphasises the alien nature of the Japanese pearling fleet to white Australians, and how any sympathy they might feel for the Japanese was plunging now full-scale war was breaking out in China. The Japanese army was clearly the aggressor there, and its aggression was marked by wild brutality against civilians.⁴⁰

Was fear of confiscation a later rationale for a bad decision at sea or a judgement that Boucaut Bay was too far away or too wide and open to offer much shelter? The press reports were consistent on the point, and the 'somewhat excited' state of the fleet about the recent arrests and impoundings was likely to have been shared by the *Sanyo Maru*'s captain. Pending further research, it seems reasonable to assume that fear of confiscation made up the captain's mind.

The salvage effort. Early in August a Japanese delegation arrived in Darwin to beg for the release of the *Takachiho Maru No. 3* and announce that more and bigger mother ships would prevent future incursions into territorial waters. No mention seems to have been made of the *Sanyo Maru*.⁴¹ Perhaps the loss seemed embarrassing, or the delegation wished to avoid increasing tension by blaming Australian policy for the deaths of two Japanese. At any rate, the delegation failed to move the Australian authorities. Indeed the visit coincided with the impounding of a second lugger, the *Dai Nippon Maru No. 5*, for trespass (Fig. 12). In September a third lugger was impounded, the *Tokio Maru No. 1*.⁴²



Fig. 12. The *Dai Nippon Maru No. 5*.

A week after the second impounding the Japanese consul general advised the Australian government that Kaiyo Shokusan intended to salvage the *Sanyo Maru*. He asked that the company be permitted to repair the boat on shore at the mouth of the Liverpool River west of Boucaut Bay.⁴³ Refusing the request would seem harsh; granting it would go against the policy of keeping Japanese pearlers out of Aboriginal reserves.⁴⁴ The Northern Territory's administrator agreed with the government that 'supervision can be arranged'.⁴⁵ On this basis the salvage effort was allowed, and without, apparently, the usual requirement that foreign visitors undergo medical examinations.⁴⁶ So the *Bishu Maru*, a large boat with 69 argumentative Japanese and Taiwanese crew members, headed for the Arafura Sea with the job of salvaging the *Sanyo Maru*.⁴⁷

Haultain nominated as salvage supervisor one of his crew, Nicholas Kamper, who had learnt some Japanese while growing up in China.⁴⁸ Kamper's appointment 'was an excellent arrangement for our purposes', Haultain later remembered, 'as there was still much obscure in Japanese fishing procedures, fleet dispositions, and organisation. To have our man in the middle of the scene was an opportunity not to be missed.' Kamper was also 'to find out why we had not heard of the loss of the vessel'.⁴⁹ The answers, if Kamper found them, were never recorded.

The salvage attempt failed. A buoy left to mark the *Sanyo Maru*'s position had floated away or been deliberately removed, which Haultain interpreted as suggesting 'unscrupulous rivalry' between crews of different pearling companies. It took two weeks simply to find the boat. Nine days of diving recovered some clothes, some more cargo, the motor launch, some deck gear, some

ship's papers, five hundred yen, and finally the derrick. By now the pearling season was over. The fleet was leaving the Arafura Sea for Palau and the monsoon was coming, bringing poor visibility and stronger currents. The salvage was suspended on 29 November and apparently never resumed.⁵⁰ Perhaps Japan was producing enough merchant shipping vessels that there was no need to salvage a lost one. More likely the number of mother ships needed by the fleet was dwindling with a rationalisation early in 1938 which followed further amalgamation of pearling companies into a single firm.

The dinghy. Not quite all of the *Sanyo Maru* lay at the bottom of the Arafura Sea. Around the time the salvage was abandoned Colin Bednall, a Darwin-based reporter for Melbourne's *Herald*, took to sea with the *Larrakia*. As the patrol approached the mouth of the King River near the Goulburn Islands a police constable rowed out to greet them in a wooden dinghy. His little vessel, he said, came from the *Sanyo Maru*. It had been left to float after the crew members in it were hauled aboard the lugger, and had drifted with the tide. Two Aborigines eventually spied it, hoisted a blanket to its short mast, and sailed it half way to Darwin before they were picked up by a seagoing trader who carried them, and the dinghy, the rest of the way. In Darwin the police bought the dinghy for use at King River – one of two new 'control stations' being established so that Australian pearling lugger crews could dump shell, refuel and obtain water, a privilege pointedly not to be extended to Japanese lugger crews (Fig. 13).⁵¹ A little bit of the *Sanyo Maru* thus played a part in the Australian resistance to the Japanese conquest of the pearl oyster beds of the Arafura Sea.



Fig. 13. Constable Riley of King River Station using the dinghy from the *Sanyo Maru*. Photograph reproduced from Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*.

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- ¹ Clark, 'Sanyo Maru field work log Thursday 18–Thursday 25 April 2002', and undated sketch of *Sanyo Maru* by Jung, maritime curator's *Sanyo Maru* file, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (hereafter MAGNT), Darwin.
- ² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1937, 17; *New York Times*, 14 July 1937, 13.
- ³ *Northern Standard*, 18 June 1937, 'Release of Japanese poacher', and 9 July 1937, 'Japanese mother ship sunk'.
- ⁴ *Northern Herald*, 10 July 1937, 4.
- ⁵ *Northern Standard*, 9 July 1937, 'Japanese mother ship sunk'.
- ⁶ T. Southwell Keely, 'Floating Japanese township off Australian coast', *Advertiser*, 2 July 1938, 12.
- ⁷ United States Navy division of naval intelligence, *ONI 208–J supplement No. 2: Far Eastern small craft* (Washington?: United States Government Printing Office, 1945), index, 14.
- ⁸ United States Navy division of naval intelligence, *ONI 208–J Supplement No. 2*, index, 29.
- ⁹ D. H. Kennedy, *Ship names: origins and usages during forty-five centuries* (Charlottesville VA: University Press of Virginia, 1974), 116–7; Nippon Yusen Kaisha Internal and Public Relations Chamber, *Voyage of a century: photo collection of NYK ships* (Tokyo: Nippon Yusen Kaisha, 1985), 205.
- ¹⁰ Conversation with Keiko Tamura of the Australia-Japan Research Project, Military History Section, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 28 August 2003.
- ¹¹ *Japan Times*, 11 July 1937, 1.
- ¹² Japanese consul general to Interior minister, 13 August 1937, file 1937/12060, series F1, NAA, Darwin.
- ¹³ *Northern Standard*, 24 September 1937, 'Overproduction of MOP shell'.
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- ¹⁵ *Northern Standard*, 11 June 1937, 'Japanese supply ship', 18 June 1937, 'Release of Japanese poacher', and 23 July 1937, 'The *New Guinea Maru*'; court evidence of Takahara, 11 October 1938, file 13/1938, series E470, NAA, Darwin.
- ¹⁶ *Northern Standard*, 20 April 1937, 'Life of the pearling beds', counted one hundred. 'The number of Japanese-manned craft in the waters of the reserve had been increasing steadily throughout the year' according to Thomson, 'Report of expedition to Arnhem Land 1936–37', no date, 9, copy in Northern Territory Library and Information Service main library.
- ¹⁷ *Northern Standard*, 23 July 1937, 'The *New Guinea Maru*'.
- ¹⁸ Court evidence of Okishima, 11 October 1938, file 13/1938, series E470, NAA, Darwin.
- ¹⁹ Court evidence of Okishima, 11 October 1938, file 13/1938, series E470, NAA, Darwin; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1937, 17.
- ²⁰ 'Extract from diary: Captain Okamura of the Takachiho Maru No. 3', 9 June–6 July 1937, file D3138, series E72, NAA, Darwin; C. T. G. Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land* (Canberra: Roebuck, 1971), 156; C. L. A. Abbott, *Australia's frontier province* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1950), 133.
- ²¹ *Japan Times*, 16 June 1937, 1.
- ²² Northern Territory government secretary to Northern Territory administrator, 'Arrest and confiscation of Japanese luggers', 23 August 1937, file D3138, series E72, NAA, Darwin.
- ²³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1937, 17.
- ²⁴ *Northern Herald*, 10 July 1937, 4.
- ²⁵ Court evidence of Cassidy, 30 September 1938, file 22/1937, series E470, NAA, Darwin.
- ²⁶ Japanese consul general to Interior minister, 13 August 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, Darwin.
- ²⁷ The fullest reports are *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1937, 17; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 July 1937, p. 7; *Northern Herald*, 10 July 1937, p. 4. The last two reports are identical.
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- ²⁹ L. R. Macgregor, 'Report on the market for ocean pearl shell in the United States of America' (Canberra: Department of Commerce, 1940), 22.
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- ³¹ *Japan Times*, 11 July 1937, 1; *New York Times*, 14 July 1937, 13; *Northern Herald*, 17 July 1937, 18.
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- ³⁴ Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 200.
- ³⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1937, 17.
- ³⁶ *Japan Times*, 11 July 1937, 1.
- ³⁷ *Northern Standard*, 9 July 1937, 'Japanese mother ship sunk'.
- ³⁸ *Times*, 10 July 1937, 11; *New York Times*, 10 July 1937, 31.
- ³⁹ *Northern Herald*, 10 July 1937, 4; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 10 July 1937, 7; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 July 1937, 17; *Advertiser*, 10 July 1937, 24.
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⁴² Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 179–80, 189–96.

⁴³ Japanese consul general to Interior minister, 13 August 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, Darwin.

⁴⁴ Interior minister to Department of Interior secretary, c. 17 August 1937, file 1937/12060, series A1, NAA, Canberra; Department of Interior secretary to Northern Territory administrator, 17 August 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, Darwin.

⁴⁵ Northern Territory administrator to Department of Interior, 20 August 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, Darwin.

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⁴⁷ Japanese Consul General to Minister for Interior, 11 October 1937, and Haultain to Administrator, 6 December 1937, NAA, F1, 1939/420; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, p. 209.

⁴⁸ Haultain to Northern Territory administrator, 25 October 1937, and Northern Territory chief protector Aboriginals to Northern Territory administrator, 27 October 1937, file 1939/420, series F1, NAA, Darwin; Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 169.

⁴⁹ Haultain, *Watch off Arnhem Land*, 200.

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CONCLUSION

The steel-hulled, diesel-driven *Sanyo Maru* was a modern mother ship serving part of a fleet of more than a hundred Japanese luggers that in 1937 was extracting pearl shell from the floor of the Arafura Sea off Arnhem Land. Mother ships like the *Sanyo Maru* brought supplies to the luggers and took their pearl shell to the fleet's base at Koror in Micronesia, then a Japanese colony. Most of the shell eventually reached the United States where the bulk was worked into buttons.

The close presence of the Japanese pearl shelling fleet disturbed many Australians. Landings by lugger crews – both Japanese-led crews of Australian boats as well Japanese boat crews – on the coast to get water and firewood, to careen their boats and trade tobacco and food for sexual relations with Aboriginal women, particularly offended Australians. The Australian government reacted by declaring such landings illegal and impounding Japanese luggers found in territorial waters.

The impounding may have contributed to the sinking of the *Sanyo Maru*. On 1 July 1937 a gale struck as the boat, probably overloaded with shell, had begun its return trip to Koror. The captain was reported to have decided against running for shore in case his boat too was impounded. The *Sanyo Maru* sank, and two men on board were drowned. The shell was extracted from the sea floor by a swarm of luggers, but attempts to salvage the boat failed. The boat's dinghy drifted ashore, eventually to be used by the Northern Territory police.

Epilogue. At the close of the 1937 season the Japanese luggers returned to Palau to be laid up while their crews caroused. One hundred and ninety luggers, most now owned by one company, returned to the Arafura Sea for the 1938 season, later than usual in order to limit the shell take and, perhaps, potential clashes with Australian authorities. Each lugger was to pull only 30 tonnes of pearl shell from the sea floor. Even with these impediments the beds were stripped before the season was over. By the year's end the fleet was looking to move to new beds off Broome. Mitsui sold slightly less ocean shell in New York – 1828 tonnes – in 1938 than it had the year before, and the price was poor. Still, it was more than twice the amount sold by Australia's master pearlmen.¹ The London *Times* awarded victory to the Japanese pearlmen. 'The visitors', the newspaper decreed, had 'outnumbered, outgrown, and outwitted the local fleets.'²

They outwitted them not only at sea. From June to October 1938 the Northern Territory supreme court heard Japanese appeals against the seizure of the three luggers. The judge accepted explanations offered by Japanese witnesses for being in territorial waters, and he pronounced that international law allowed foreign vessels to enter territorial waters unintentionally or when needing water or help, that not all the waters of the vast Boucaut Bay could be counted as territorial, and that Haultain had been careless

about establishing precisely where one of the luggers was when he seized it. All three luggers were returned, Canberra had to pay damages and legal costs, and Darwin's chief pearling inspector publicly toasted the winners.³ The victory suited the increasingly belligerent mood of Japan's opinion makers, like the reporter who wrote that Japan's south seas fishermen were bold entrepreneurs operating where their western counterparts were barely active, that Tokyo must no longer accept these men being dealt with in an inhuman manner by white colonial powers.⁴

Australian pearling fleets were shrinking to a few dozen boats kept in the water only by bank credit and government subsidies. In 1939 Canberra resolved on a state-supported marketing scheme for the industry and for negotiating an agreement with Tokyo to limit shell take.⁵ Both Japanese and Australian pearlmen were indeed facing common enemies – falling prices in New York, the coming of the second world war, the increasing use of plastic for buttons. Yet suspicion and hostility between Japan and Australia was too great for them to work together, as was the power imbalance between them. If they had formed a cartel to control shell take and shell price, as a New York importer was urging them to do, it would have been dominated by the Japanese, something Australians would never accept.⁶

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 began a war in the Pacific which ended Japanese pearling off north Australia for ten years and allowed the beds to replenish (Fig. 14). Australian pearlmen failed to take advantage of the Japanese absence, and the prospect of the return of Japanese luggers to the Arafura Sea in the early 1950s alarmed them. This time Canberra claimed the right to make Japanese pearlmen pay a license fee and observe its rules as Australian pearlmen had to do.⁷ The claim was unnecessary. Plastic killed the pearling industry by the late 1950s, at any rate the side of it concerned with shell. Cultured pearls boomed, and it was the ever-innovative and energetic Japan that led the way.

Suggestions for further research. Further research is needed to answer questions about the *Sanyo Maru* and Japanese pearling in the Arafura Sea which remain open, and to confirm or overturn how I have interpreted incomplete evidence.

All pearl shell sold by Mitsui was sold in New York, but where exactly was shell sold by Australian master pearlmen sold, and for what prices? What products apart from buttons was it made into? Was it really better quality than Mitsui shell? To what extent were Australia's master pearlmen ruined by Japanese competition, to what extent by their own inertia, greed, and reliance on government support?

Were intelligence concerns partly prompting the stream of communications from Donald Thomson and missionaries in Arnhem Land about Japanese encroachment? How much did intelligence concerns fuel the creation and deployment of the patrol boat *Larrakia*?



Fig. 14. Stores for an Australian infantry battalion being landed in 1944 beside the wreck of a Japanese lugger.

When was the *Sanyo Maru* built? Where, and by which company? Was it built to some standard blueprint for pearling mother ships? Did it serve elsewhere before becoming a pearling mother ship? Who formed its crew, and where did they come from? Had any served off Australia before, perhaps with Australian luggers? Was the captain new to the Arafura Sea? Was the boat overloaded, or at least incompetently loaded? Was overloading common for mother ships?

Was the storm that struck the *Sanyo Maru* as severe as reporters agreed- Or was the loading was so poorly done the boat foundered in a storm that should not have troubled it? Did the *Sanyo Maru*'s captain really fear confiscation by the *Larrakia*, or was this an excuse made later? Why did the Japanese pearling delegation to Australia fail to mention the loss of the *Sanyo Maru*? Why did neither the delegation nor the consul general claim publicly that Australian policy had cost the lives of Japanese seamen?

Why were there no further attempts to salvage the *Sanyo Maru*? Did the *Sanyo Maru*'s dinghy survive its use at the control station?

Questions about the severity of the squall, the attitude of master pearlers and the fate of the *Sanyo Maru*'s dinghy can probably be answered from records gathered in the Northern Territory. Questions about intelligence concerns might be answered from National Archives of Australia records in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.

Most other questions, though, need the attention of a scholar or scholars who can read Japanese. A researcher would need to consult Japanese company and consulate records seized in Sydney in 1941 and now housed in the Sydney office of National Archives; pearling company and shipbuilding records in Japan and Palau; and pearl button industry records in the United Kingdom and United States.

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Series A981 (Department of External Affairs) files:
Jap38 part 3 (Japanese activities in the Pacific part 3) 1934–41
Jap41 part 2 (Foreign Office on Japan) 1937–41
Jap98 part 1 (Japanese poaching) 1931–5
Jap98 part 2 (Japanese poaching) 1935–6
Jap98 part 3 (Japanese poaching) 1936–40
Jap100 (conference on poaching in Australian waters) 1938–54
Jap113 (interpreter for cases concerning Japanese luggers) 1936–40
Jap158 part 2 (Netherlands East Indies Japanese activities) 1933–5
Jap158 part 3 (Netherlands East Indies Japanese activities) 1937–8
Jap158 part 3 (Netherlands East Indies Japanese activities) 1938–40

Series A1196 (Air Services Branch) file:
22/501/9 (Japanese encroachment Australian waters) 1938–40

Series A1928 (Department of Health) file:
715/24 (Japanese encroachment Australian waters) 1934–41

Series A6006 (Cabinet papers) files:
1937/09/02 (arrest of *Dai Nippon Maru No. 5*) 1937
1938/09/01 (Japanese pearling activities) 1938

Series A8911 (Investigation Branch) file:
2 (Japanese intelligence in Australia) 1937–42

Series CP167/2 (Prime Minister Joseph Lyons) files:
12 (Interior representations) 1938–9
13 (Customs representations) 1937–9

Series CP450/7 (Attorney General Robert Menzies) file:
301 (Northern Territory) 1937

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Series E72 (Crown Law Office Northern Territory Branch) file:
D3138 (Haruo Kitaoka) 1938

Series E470 (Northern Territory Supreme Court) files:
21/1937 (Tange v. Commonwealth) 1938
22/1937 (Yamami v. Commonwealth) 1938
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Series F1 (Northern Territory Administrator) files:
1936/271 (purchase of patrol launches) 1932–7
1936/319 (patrol vessel *Larrakia*) 1936
1936/382 (Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land) 1935–44
1936/503 (*Larrakia* patrols) 1936
1937/251 (*Larrakia* patrols) 1937
1937/251A (arrest of Japanese sampans) 1937–8
1937/339 (burial of Asiatics in Darwin cemetery) 1937
1937/360 (base for Japanese sampans at Darwin) 1937
1937/600 (interference with lubras) 1936–7
1938/584 (interference with lubras) 1936–7
1938/624 (pearling, assistance to) 1935–40
1938/772 (court case arrest of Japanese luggers) 1937–1938
1938/885 (*Seicho Maru* wreckage and salvaging) 1938–9
1939/420 (*Sanyo Maru*) 1937–8

National Archives of Australia, Sydney

Series C443 (Investigation Branch NSW office) files:
J62 (Peter Nakashiba) 1939

J167 (letter from Kepert) 1933
J223 (letter from Haultain) 1932
J274 (letter about Yamami) 1937
J296 (telegram to Muramatsu) 1941
J337 (map of Darwin by Miyakawa) c. 1936
J426 (Japanese pearlers in Australia) 1941

Series C447 (Investigation Branch NSW office) files:
3 (Australia-Japan trade agreement) 1936–8
7 (translations) c.1936–40

Series SP1714/1 (Investigation Branch NSW office) file:
N40344 (Rupert Hornabrook) 1942–6

Northern Territory Archives Service, Darwin

Series E113 (Northern Territory Supreme Court) volume:
2 (supreme court cause book) 1935–47

Series F60 (Northern Territory Lands and Survey Branch) box:

2, 'Arnhem Land reserve' file 1931–41

Series NTRS226 (interviews conducted for the archive) transcripts:

TS084 (interviews with Dorothea Lyons) 1980–1
TS161 (interview with Don Bonson) 1981
TS325 (interview with Harold and Ella Shepherdson) 1980
TS337 (interview with Gordon Sweeney) 1980
TS394 (interview with Ray Tyrell) 1984
TS426 (interview with Derec Thompson) 1984
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