



# Eastern isles, western isles: Geographical imaginaries and trans-island identities in British conceptions of Japan, 1800–1868

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## ABSTRACT

Ideas of islands shaped Britain's self-identity and its relationship with the wider world in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Existing interpretations of Anglo-Japanese relations have emphasized the development of the idea of Japan as the 'Britain of the East' in the late nineteenth century with the significance of Japan adopting a western model of development. This article argues for a critical re-evaluation that directly engages with the crucial developments within early nineteenth-century ideas of Japan as Britain's eastern reflection. It argues that the idea of Japan as Britain's eastern reflection did not arise out of Japanese reforms during the mid-nineteenth century but significantly predated these developments, grounded in ideas of geographical and cartographical connections between the two island nations and reinforced by firsthand travel accounts from the late 1850s onwards. Crucially, it argues that these ideas of twin isles of East and West exerted a powerful, at times eclipsing, influence over British conceptions of Japan in the early and mid-nineteenth century, employing geographical imaginaries in the face of geographical and cartographical difference.

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Japan in the early nineteenth century captured the British imagination both for its apparent similarities as well as its potential to provide a glimpse into Britain's own island nature. Characterized as two islands each narrowly divided from a continental mainland by a thin strip of water, British cartographic and textual sources both constructed and reflected expectations of similar latitudes, geography and climate. Underpinned by theories of environmental determinism and the relationship between climate and civilization, parallels drawn between Britain and Japan in the early nineteenth century emphasized a shared culture and historical uniqueness. These expectations of similarities could manifest through a selective reading of sources or even the construction of arguments that directly contradicted the sources being cited. At the heart of this was the use of 'climatic imaginaries' whereby the physical geography of a place was purposely distorted in both textual and visual

sources.<sup>1</sup> These distortions were not neutral but rather utilized to serve a specific purpose.

Despite its position at a lower latitude, Japan was frequently represented in written sources as sharing roughly the same latitude, as well as overall geographic features, as Britain and by extension the same cultural attributes associated with Britain's own climate. Consequently, this constructed a dissonance between the coherent conception of Japan in British written sources with their far more varied cartographical counterparts. As this article reveals, British writers frequently chose to consciously promote a narrative of a shared island nature between Britain and Japan in the face of knowledge of the physical differences between the two countries. These distortions not only constructed an image of Japan that reinforced rather than challenged earlier preconceptions of the country but also served to allow British writers to use Japan's apparent exceptionalism within East Asia to reinforce British claims to their own continental exceptionalism.

Without the ability to travel to Japan, cartographical depictions, and the texts in which they were published, became a vital source of information shaping the idea of Japan in the British imagination in the early nineteenth century. Allusions to a shared relationship between the two island nations appeared throughout numerous British texts during the first half of the nineteenth century including geographical and compilation texts, journals, magazines,

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of how these 'climatic imaginaries' were applied outside of Japan see: Sandip Hazareesingh, 'Cotton, Climate and Colonialism in Dharwar, Western India, 1840–1880', *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 1–17; Claire Fenby, Don Garden, and Joëlle Gergis, "'The Usual Weather in New South Wales is Uncommonly Bright and Clear ... Equal to the Finest Summer Day in England': Flood and Drought in New South Wales, 1788–1815', in *Climate, Science, and Colonization: Histories from Australia and New Zealand*, ed. by James Beattie, Emily O'Gorman, and Matthew Henry (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 43–59.

and newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, examples of the use of the phrase 'Britain of the East' can be found in pre-Meiji period works including British newspapers and journals as well as S.B. Kemish's 1860 *The Japanese Empire* in which he wrote that: 'It has been called "the Great Britain of the East," for Japan is to Asia what Great Britain is to Europe. It has about the same area, population, climate, insular position between a great continent and a great ocean'.<sup>3</sup> References to these ideas also appeared in fictionalized works such as Henry Morley's 'Phantom Voyage' to Japan published in 1851 in *Household Words*, a weekly journal edited by Charles Dickens. Describing Japan, Morley stated that: 'The main island, Nippon, is larger than Ireland, and is important enough to have been justly called the England of the Pacific Ocean'.<sup>4</sup> Mirroring the compilation texts published at the time, the article described a fictional voyage, including references to the experiences of earlier travellers.

These associations formed a distinct idea of a shared island identity that went beyond the fleeting references of similarity found in travel accounts, or the broader use of a familiar, British known to introduce an unknown to the author's readership. Rather, these ideas constructed a conceptual framework in which Japan not only shared certain similarities with Britain but was seen to share the same geographical, climatic, and even developmental, features as Britain. The idea of Japan as the eastern isle to Britain's western one both underpinned, and was used to explain, the presence of similarities between the two island nations. Developed initially through early nineteenth-century geographical and compilatory texts based on climatic and geographic features, the idea of a shared island identity between Britain and Japan constructed a pre-conceptual lens through which mid-nineteenth-century British travellers conceptualized Japan. In their travel accounts these writers weaved together pre-existing ideas of shared geographical and climatic features to construct a narrative of a shared island identity that placed Japan within broader conceptual frameworks of historical development and environmental determinism.

British ideas of civilization during the first half of the nineteenth century consisted of a broad conceptual framework encompassing culture, political and institutional frameworks, characteristics of the population, and the historical development of the society in question as well as the leading factors acting on these including climate, historical relationships between different societies and geographic location. These conceptions of civilization were far from static. While ideas of a shared geography and climate between Britain and Japan persisted throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century, the interpretation of these similarities evolved significantly across the period. This was compounded by the onset of firsthand travel to Japan by British people from the late 1850s onwards, with civilizational comparisons between Japan and the rest of East Asia becoming increasingly tied to personal observations. Prior to this, civilizational comparisons between Britain

and Japan had been reliant upon existing texts. The geographical writer Richard Phillips began his section on Japan in his 1820 *Geography* with the statement: 'Japan, "that celebrated and imperial island," bears a pre-eminence among eastern kingdoms, analogous [to] that of Britain among the nations of the West'.<sup>5</sup> Phillips's remarks were an almost direct reduplication of the earlier writings of William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, from his 1791 article celebrating the society's eighth anniversary.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Mark Prager Lindo, writing in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1855, asserted that Japan was 'the most civilized of Eastern nations'.<sup>7</sup> Japan to these writers therefore not only resembled Britain geographically but also shared the same geopolitical exceptionalism that distinguished Britain within its own continental context.

While both islands and comparative geographies have formed the subject of research in various fields, such as postcolonial studies of the Caribbean and Southeast Asia, the intersection of these in the context of inter-regional island-to-island relations has received considerably less focus.<sup>8</sup> This article brings together these two key perspectives to explore the critical role self-identity played in how British writers conceptualized, understood, and engaged with Japan's island nature. During the early nineteenth century the identity of Britain as not just an island but one defined by its proximity to a continental mainland and the resulting climatic differentiation produced by this formed a key marker of British self-identity.<sup>9</sup> The value placed by British people during the early nineteenth century on these specific characteristics as being crucial to Britain's success

<sup>5</sup> Richard Phillips, *Geography, Illustrated on a Popular Plan: For the Use of Schools and Young Persons* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1820), p. 553.

<sup>6</sup> Jones's address was recirculated in the early nineteenth century in: William Jones, 'The Eighth Anniversary Discourse, Borderers, Mountaineers, and Islanders of Asia, Delivered 24th February 1791', in *The Works of Sir William Jones, with the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth. Volume III*, ed. by John Shore (London: John Stockdale; John Walker, 1807), pp. 162–184.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Prager Lindo, 'Japan and its Intercourse with Foreign Nations', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 51 (1855) 145–156 (p. 150). For some of the many more examples of descriptions of Japanese prominence in Asia in British publications see: Alexander Andrew Knox, 'Kaempfer's Histoire de l'Empire du Japon. French Translation. By Scheuzer. The Hague: 1729, etc.', *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 96 (1852) 348–383 (p. 351); Alexander Keith Johnston, *Dictionary of Geography, Descriptive, Physical, Statistical, and Historical, Forming a Complete General Gazetteer of the World* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), p. 614; Andrew Steinmetz, *Japan and Her People* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1859), p. 289; Kemish, *The Japanese Empire*, p. 60; Francis Maurice Drummond-Davies, 'Japan', *Westminster Review* 17 new series (1860) 508–540 (p. 509).

<sup>8</sup> For examples of these two bodies of literature see: Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); John Connell, 'Island Dreaming: The Contemplation of Polynesian Paradise', *Journal of Historical Geography* 29 (2003) 554–581; Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986); Alexander Hugo Schulenburg, "'Island of the Blessed": Eden, Arcadia and the Picturesque in the Textualizing of St Helena', *Journal of Historical Geography* 29 (2003) 535–553; Tariq Jazeel, 'Singularity. A Manifesto for Incomparable Geographies', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 40 (2019) 5–21; Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774–1880* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980); Tariq Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity: Nature, Environment and the Postcolonial Geographies of Sri Lankan Nationhood* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); James D. Sidaway, Chih Yuan Woon, and Jane M. Jacobs, 'Planetary Postcolonialism', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35 (2014) 4–21.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 5. For more on British island self-identity see: Robert Shannan Peckham, 'The Uncertain State of Islands: National Identity and the Discourse of Islands in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Greece', *Journal of Historical Geography* 29 (2003) 499–515; Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Rebecca Langlands, 'Britishness or Englishness? The Historical Problem of National Identity in Britain', *Nations and Nationalism* 5 (1999) 53–72.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: John Pinkerton, *Modern Geography, a Description of the Empires, Kingdoms, States, and Colonies, with the Oceans, Seas, and Isles, in All Parts of the World: Including the Most Recent Discoveries, and Political Alterations* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806), p. 360. Pinkerton's text, like many geographical texts during the first half of the nineteenth century, combined together information on physical geography, astronomy, culture and society (often referred to as 'manners and customs'), and history.

<sup>3</sup> S.B. Kemish, *The Japanese Empire: Its Physical, Political, and Social Condition and History: With Details of the Late American and British Expeditions* (London: Partridge, 1860), p. 61. For uses of this term in newspapers and journals see for example: 'Lecture on Japan and the Japanese at Alnwick', *Newcastle Chronicle*, 31 December 1863; 'London, Tuesday, Sept. 29, 1863', *Morning Post*, 29 September 1863; 'Japan', *Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature and Art for Family Reading* 6 (1867) 222–223.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Morley, 'Our Phantom Ship: Japan', *Household Words* 3 (1851) 160–167 (p. 160).

and civilization elevated these features of geography and climate beyond their surface similarities. These similarities between Japan and Britain identified by these writers not only determined what they thought Japan was but also how it should be.<sup>10</sup> Crucial to this was the idea that Japan had the potential, if not the actualized reality, to become like Britain. As the final section of this article explores, these ideas of Japan as the 'Britain of the East' reflected not just an understanding of the present but also an expectation of Japan's future.

Existing literature on Japan as the 'Britain of the (Far) East' has focused almost exclusively on Meiji (1868–1912) and post-Meiji era (1913–present) Japan.<sup>11</sup> Fisher, for instance, argued that the idea of Japan as the 'Britain of the East' was first popularized in English-language debates by George N. Curzon in his 1894 *Problems of the Far East*.<sup>12</sup> Within the 1890s, however, these ideas were already part of public British discourse on Japan prior to Curzon's text. Published a year prior, John Miller Dow Meiklejohn's 1893 *A New Geography* began its section on Japan, which it labelled the 'Great Britain of the Pacific', with a list of ten comparisons between Britain and Japan. Seven of these referenced their shared status as islands off a continental mainland and the resulting climate arising from their island nature such as: '5. Both have a higher temperature and fewer extremes in climate than the countries in the same latitude on the respective mainlands off which they lie.'<sup>13</sup> More than thirty years prior, similar statements can be found in British texts such as the 1861 *Japanese Fragments* authored by one of the earliest mid-nineteenth-century British travellers to Japan Captain Sherard Osborn. In a section headed 'Geographical Resemblance to the British Isles' he listed similarities between Britain and Japan including 'a likeness to be traced in their geographical contour, in their relative position to adjacent continents and seas, in their climates'.<sup>14</sup> Yet as this article explores, these ideas significantly preceded not only the late-nineteenth century of Curzon's text but also the mid-nineteenth century in which Osborn was writing.

This article begins with an exploration of how geographical and cartographical comparisons between Japan and Britain influenced British ideas of Japan in the first half of the nineteenth century and the crucial significance of their shared nature as islands. It then turns to the critical impact of firsthand travel in reinforcing these ideas of a shared island identity in the context of changing ideas of climate and environmental determinism. In the final section, this article explores how travellers attempted to navigate the tension

between Japan as both a place of similarity and of difference from Britain through a projection of ideas of Japan as a Britain less far along the developmental path. As such, these writers imagined Japan's future, and by extension future equality, with Britain through the context of civilizational hierarchies in which Japan's present inequality could be rationalized through assertions of a future equality between the two island nations. In doing so, this article utilizes a *trans-island* approach, centring not the nation but the island as a geographical and conceptual category to argue that Britain's relations with Japan were significantly shaped by the idea of a shared island identity that distinguished them both from other nations on the globe.

### Cartographical representations and imaginative geographies

Islands in the first half of the nineteenth century were not neutral entities but instead embodied with meanings and interpretations that elevated their significance as markers of cultural identity and drivers of historical development.<sup>15</sup> In focusing predominantly on the period following the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the critical significance of islands and their embodied meanings in the early and mid-nineteenth century have been obscured by later ideas such as developmental models.<sup>16</sup> How British people saw them themselves and their own island nation profoundly influenced how they conceptualized the rest of the globe. This self-identity provided a framework of reference, a temporal and spatial norm to which everything else could be compared. In drawing distinct cartographical connections between Britain and Japan, British writers in the early nineteenth century integrated Japan into wider discourses on the significance of Britain's status as an island nation. The significance of geographical and climatic theories of civilization in British claims to uniqueness and superiority elevated the importance of geographical and climatic comparisons made between Japan and Britain in the early nineteenth century.

From the late 1850s, within the context of changes in Anglo-Japanese relations, travel to Japan became theoretically possible, though in practice the number of British travellers to Japan remained relatively small throughout the mid-nineteenth century. Prior to this, geographical and compilatory texts formed the majority of British texts about Japan in the nineteenth century, alongside newspapers, journals, and magazines, which published extracts from these longer works as well as commentary pieces and book reviews.<sup>17</sup> Constructed in an absence of firsthand experience, these texts formed a key bridge between the small number of travel accounts published about Japan prior to 1858 and those in Britain

<sup>10</sup> For the Japanese view of Britain during this period see for example: Andrew Cobbing, *The Japanese Discovery of Victorian Britain: Early Travel Encounters in the Far West* (London: Routledge, 1998); Ronald P. Toby, 'Imagining and Imaging "Anthropos" in Early-Modern Japan', *Visual Anthropology Review* 14 (1998) 19–44.

<sup>11</sup> For examples see: Cees Heere, *Empire Ascendant: The British World, Race, and the Rise of Japan, 1894–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Young-Hwan Shin, 'Is Japan the "Britain" of East Asia? A Geopolitical Analysis of Japan's Long-Term Strategy on the Korean Peninsula', *Revista UNISCI* 18 (2020) 87–98; Charles A. Fisher, 'The Britain of the East? A Study in the Geography of Imitation', *Modern Asian Studies* 2 (1968) 343–376; David Asher, 'Could Japan Become the "Great Britain of the Far East"?', *Asia-Pacific Review* 8 (2001) 112–128; Christopher W. Hughes, 'Not Quite the "Great Britain of the Far East": Japan's Security, the US–Japan Alliance and the "War on Terror" in East Asia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20 (2007) 325–338. Where these ideas of Anglo-Japanese similarities have been addressed prior to the Meiji period these have focused on the mid-nineteenth century, such as Toshio Yokoyama's analysis of Anglo-Japanese comparisons in the 1850s: Toshio Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind: A Study of Stereotyped Images of a Nation 1850–80* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, 'The Britain of the East?', p. 344. Fisher noted that the term may have originated in 1860 but did not develop this further, devoting the rest of his article to the post-Tokugawa period (1868 onwards). George Nathaniel Curzon, *Problems of the Far East: Japan, Korea, China* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894).

<sup>13</sup> John Miller Dow Meiklejohn, *A New Geography on the Comparative Method, with Maps and Diagrams* (London: Alfred M. Holden, 1893), pp. 280–281.

<sup>14</sup> Sherard Osborn, *Japanese Fragments* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1861), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the physical and conceptual interpretations of islands see: Klaus Dodds and Stephen A. Royle, 'The Historical Geography of Islands. Introduction: Rethinking Islands', *Journal of Historical Geography* 29 (2003) 487–498; Stephen A. Royle, 'A Human Geography of Islands', *Geography* 74 (1989) 106–116; *Islands and the British Empire in the Age of Sail*, ed. by Douglas Hamilton and John McAleer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Fisher, for instance, while acknowledging the shared status of both Britain and Japan as islands, focused predominantly on the significance of this in terms of developmental models, arguing that internal geographical differences precluded post-1868 Japan from successfully adopting a British model of development: Fisher, 'The Britain of the East?', pp. 368–372.

<sup>17</sup> Extracts of existing texts about Japan were also incorporated into publications such as the *Lady's Monthly Museum*, which included a story of three Japanese sons seeking to raise money for their mother as an educational example: 'Remarkable Instances of Filial Affection', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1 August 1807.



interested in Japan.<sup>18</sup> Compilation texts and geography books relied often on only a handful of sources, which were recycled across multiple texts by multiple authors. John Pinkerton's influential *Modern Geography*, for instance, based its section on Japan on the writings of only two individuals (the German physician Engelbert Kaempfer and the Swedish student of Linnaeus Carl Peter Thunberg who had both visited the Dutch factory at Deshima, Nagasaki).<sup>19</sup> Many of the sources these writers drew on were contradictory, written over the space of centuries by individuals with a variety of levels of experience of Japan and translated and retranslated by others.<sup>20</sup>

The influence of individual texts was further reinforced by the frequent reduplication, referenced and unreferenced, of passages from earlier texts by later writers. Christopher Kelly's 1819 *A New and Complete System of Universal Geography*, for instance, included lines reduplicated almost exactly from Pinkerton's earlier *Modern Geography*, such as his description of Yedo:

To the north of Nipon is another large isle, that of Jesso, which, having received some Japanese colonies, is generally regarded as subject to Japan; but, being inhabited by a savage people, it is rather considered as a foreign conquest than as a part of this civilized empire.<sup>21</sup>

The original version in Pinkerton's text read:

To the N. of Nipon is another large isle, that of Jesso, or Chicha, which having received some Japanese colonies, is generally regarded as subject to Japan; but being inhabited by a savage people, is rather considered as a foreign conquest than as a part of this civilized empire.<sup>22</sup>

There existed therefore a tension between coherence, magnified by practices of textual reduplication, and contradiction in which evidence to support these ideas of Japan was selectively constructed from a small body of existing sources and subject to the frequent imaginary touches of individual authors in an absence of their own firsthand experience.

Prior to the onset of firsthand travel in the mid-nineteenth century, geographical and cartographical depictions formed a key

method through which British people attempted to both conceptualize Japan and the relationship between Japan and their own island nation. Many texts written either solely about Japan, or which included specific sections related to the country such as geographical texts, began with assertions of similarities between the two countries. These geographic imaginaries distorted not only Japan's physical geography into an imagined paradigm of twin isles of East and West but also that of Britain. The earliest description of Japan in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1784, for instance, which was reduplicated across its later editions throughout the early nineteenth century, reshaped Britain's geographical realities to construct the geographies of Japan. The text stated that: 'Were South and North Britain divided by an arm of the sea, Japan might be most aptly compared to England, Scotland, and Ireland, with their respective smaller islands, peninsulas, bays, channels, &c., all under the same monarch.'<sup>23</sup> Crucial to this statement was the assertion that the comparison between Britain and Japan would be the 'most' apt. It was not therefore that Japan did not, or could not, resemble other places but that it was *most* like Britain.

Across the early nineteenth century the idea of Japan's geographical resemblance to Britain was repeatedly asserted and reduplicated across a range of different texts by different authors. Yet the cartographical representations that featured in many of these texts directly contradicted this coherence in their irregular, contradictory depictions of Japan. Japan was depicted in a variety of different shapes and sizes from a large mass resembling in size and general shape the neighbouring Korean peninsula (Fig. 1) to a thin, elongated and highly curved arc (Fig. 2). The size and overall shape of the Korean Sea/Sea of Japan also varied between these different maps.<sup>24</sup>

Cartographical representations of Japan could also vary widely within a single text. Smith's *System of Modern Geography* included multiple cartographical depictions of Japan in its various maps (Figs. 2 and 3). In each image the positioning of Japan relative to the mainland varied as did the angle of the curve of Japan's main island from the almost semi-circular shape in Fig. 2 to the much shallower curve in Fig. 3. In all three maps examined here the composition of Japan varied significantly, with Jesso (Hokkaido) also varying considerably in its shape, composition, and proximity to the surrounding islands and continental mainland.

The uniformity of the idea of Japan's geographical similarities with Britain, therefore, occurred partly in spite, rather than because, of the cartographical depictions of Japan available at the time. British writers selectively interpreted these inconsistent cartographical representations, applying their own imagination to these maps to transform a range of contradictory cartographical depictions into a unified image of Japan as Britain's eastern reflection. This practice continued into the mid-nineteenth century in the accounts of British travellers to Japan and the emerging body

<sup>18</sup> For more on the significance of geographical texts in Britain's imagining of Asia see: Paul Stock, 'The Idea of Asia in British Geographical Thought, 1652–1832', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 1 (2023) 121–144; Robert Mayhew, *Enlightenment Geography: The Political Languages of British Geography, 1650–1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). There were a very small number of exceptions to this absence of firsthand British experience resulting from brief, limited contact with Japan. See for example: Edward Belcher, *Narrative of the Voyage of H. M. S. Samarang, During the Years 1843–46; Employed Surveying the Islands of the Eastern Archipelago*. 2 vol (London: Reeve, Benham, and Reeve, 1848). Reflecting the highly restricted nature of British travel to Japan prior to the 1850s, Belcher's visit to Japan consisted of only approximately fifty pages (5.62%) of his narrative.

<sup>19</sup> The Dutch factory marked the only place where Europeans were permitted to trade with Japan for much of the period between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries.

<sup>20</sup> Kaempfer's highly influential *History of Japan*, for instance, was compiled and edited by John Gaspar Scheuchzer after Kaempfer's death, translated from his original notes in German: Engelbert Kaempfer, *The History of Japan, Giving an Account of the Ancient and Present State and Government of that Empire; of Its Temples, Palaces, Castles and other Buildings; of Its Metals, Minerals, Trees, Plants, Animals, Birds and Fishes; of The Chronology and Succession of the Emperors, Ecclesiastical and Secular; of The Original Descent, Religions, Customs, and Manufactures of the Natives, and of their Trade and Commerce with the Dutch and Chinese. Together with a Description of the Kingdom of Siam* (London: J.G. Scheuchzer, 1727).

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Kelly, *A New and Complete System of Universal Geography: or an Authentic History of the Whole World. Volume I* (London: Thomas Kelly, 1819), p. 163.

<sup>22</sup> Pinkerton, *Modern Geography*, p. 361.

<sup>23</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature. Volume 5. Second Edition* (Edinburgh: J. Balfour & Co., W. Gordon, J. Bell, J. Dickson, C. Elliot, W. Creech, J. McCliesh, A. Bell, J. Hutton, and C. Macfarquhar, 1871), p. 3816. This section was reduplicated in the third through sixth editions: *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature. Volume 9. Third Edition* (Edinburgh: A. Bell and C. Macfarquhar, 1797), p. 65; *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature. Volume 11, Part 1. Fourth Edition* (Edinburgh: A. Bell and C. Macfarquhar, 1810), p. 33; *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature. Volume 11. Fifth Edition* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company, and Thomas Bonar; London: Gale, Curtis, and Fenner; York: Thomas Wilson and Sons, 1815), p. 33; *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature. Volume 11. Sixth Edition* (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Company; London: Hurst, Robinson, and Company, 1823), p. 33. The first edition included only a single line on Japan's latitude and longitude as its entry.

<sup>24</sup> The names assigned to this body of water varied between texts in this period.



Fig. 1. Cropped close-up of Japan. Source: William Guthrie, *A New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson and J. Mawman, 1801), frontmatter. Reproduced with permission from: Queen Mary University of London Archives and Special Collections, Rare Books collection, ref. D18 GUT.



Fig. 2. Cropped close-up of Japan from 'Pacific Ocean on Mercator's Projection'. Source: John Smith, *A System of Modern Geography, Volume II* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1811), p. 930 inset. Reproduced with permission from: Archives and Special Collections, Bangor University, Bangor G115.S63 1810.



Fig. 3. Cropped close-up of Japan from untitled map of the world. Source: John Smith, *A System of Modern Geography, Volume I* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1810), frontmatter. Reproduced with permission from: Archives and Special Collections, Bangor University, Bangor G115.S63 1810.

of longer-term residents.<sup>25</sup> Early nineteenth-century cartographical and geographical comparisons influenced the preconceptions of these travellers prior to their arrival in Japan and thus how they understood and interpreted their experiences once they had arrived in the country. Mirroring texts from earlier in the nineteenth century, many travellers such as Christopher Pemberton Hodgson, the British consul of the treaty ports of Nagasaki and later Hakodate, opened their accounts with the analogy of Japan as the eastern reflection of the British Isles. Using the analogy of a map, he drew comparisons between the positioning of Britain relative to Europe and Japan relative to China asserting that: 'The Atlantic and North Seas wash the one, the Pacific and Japan Seas bound the other. The latitudes of Great Britain are higher, but yet occupy nearly the same amount of degrees.'<sup>26</sup> In beginning his text with a comment on these geographical comparisons between Britain and Japan, Pemberton Hodgson thus premised for his readers the wider context within which to interpret his text.

Like their earlier nineteenth-century counterparts, these geographical imaginaries exerted a powerful, at times eclipsing, influence over the cartographical depictions published in the texts themselves. Despite firsthand experience, and the updated maps available including those created by the US and British treaty negotiation parties in the 1850s, travellers such as Pemberton Hodgson continued to reshape geographical and cartographical

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of the significance of personal travel narratives on nineteenth-century public opinion see: László Máthé-Shires, 'Imperial Nightmares: The British Image of "the Deadly Climate" of West Africa, c. 1840–74', *European Review of History* 8 (2001) 486–500; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Pemberton Hodgson, *A Residence at Nagasaki and Hakodate in 1859–1860: With an Account of Japan Generally* (London: Richard Bentley, 1861), p. xi. For another example of this practice in mid-nineteenth-century British travel accounts see: Rutherford Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Japan, Volume I* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1863), p. 62.



reality to construct the narrative of shared similarities between Britain and Japan.<sup>27</sup> Maps also appeared more directly in these travel accounts, such as a reference to Mercator's maps (such as the one featured in Fig. 2), which was the subject of a discussion between Captain Bernard Whittingham and a Japanese secretary he met while briefly visiting Japan in the mid-1850s. Discussing his conversation with the secretary, Whittingham remarked that:

He seemed to take a pleasurable interest in the comparison of the relative positions and extent of the Britannic and Japanese Isles, and listened with attentive pride to some remarks on the configuration of his country, bounded by great lines of sea coast, indented by numerous and capacious bays and harbours, and inhabited by a race of hardy fishermen.<sup>28</sup>

To Whittingham, what mattered more was not the apparent accuracy of these cartographical representations of both Britain and Japan but rather the ability of these maps to illustrate similarities between these two isles of East and West.

Greater knowledge of Japan's geography was used to further reinforce, rather than challenge, the geographical imaginaries underpinning this idea. An example of this can be found in Osborn's account of his journey around the coasts of Japan in the late 1850s in which he remarked that:

There was a threatening twinkle about the stars, which would have betokened a hard north-easter upon our own shores; and as, in spite of a difference of twenty degrees of latitude between England and Japan, there was reason to believe the climates were much alike, we made preparations to face the heavy gale and sea.<sup>29</sup>

Critically, Osborn acknowledged that the two countries were separated in latitude by twenty degrees, yet this was overruled by the belief that their climates were highly similar. Through the writings of these British travellers the geographical imaginaries of early nineteenth-century geographical and compilatory texts were therefore transformed into an experienced reality.<sup>30</sup>

### Changing ideas of climate in mid-nineteenth-century British thought

Climate in the first half of the nineteenth century consisted not merely of cartographical comparisons drawn on a map but also spanned across conceptions of culture. Connections were also drawn between climate and morality in what Livingstone has termed 'a moral discourse of climate' associating ethnic and racial characteristics with particular climates.<sup>31</sup> The significance of climate in Britain's relations with other regions of the world during

the nineteenth century, especially in areas under British rule, has been the focus of a growing body of literature.<sup>32</sup> This article applies these analytical critiques of climate outside of explicit colonial relations, taking the island and its associated climatic consequences as the central point of analysis. In contrast to regions such as India, Japan had no explicit colonial relationship with Britain, though it was, as this article explores, a relationship heavily shaped by Britain's imperial actions in East Asia.

Islands did not exist in isolation but formed part of the vast array of networks that shaped the nineteenth-century world. *Trans*-island relations in the first half of the nineteenth century were deeply intertwined with the imperial and colonial developments occurring during the period. The changing demographics of Britain's expanding empire from the late eighteenth century played an important role in attempts during the first half of the nineteenth century to establish the features of a specifically British identity that emphasized cultural and topographical uniqueness.<sup>33</sup> Geographical texts frequently discussed in their entries on Britain the superiority of Britain's climate, such as Alexander Johnston in his *Dictionary of Geography* in which he declared that 'the climate of Britain is found, from tables of longevity, to be one of the most salubrious in the world'.<sup>34</sup> These ideas were inherently comparative and thus frequently structured around a narrative of similarity or difference. Johnston's assertion, for instance, relied upon a comparative 'world' against which to compare Britain's own climate.

Influenced by debates around monogenesis and the origins of humanity, the idea of climate as a source that acted on and led to human differentiation exerted a powerful influence over early and mid-nineteenth-century British conceptions of both Japan and their own island identity. In a review of James Clark's *The Sanative Influence of Climate* in the *Edinburgh Review*, John Forbes summarized this perspective, arguing that 'each region will present the physical and moral condition of the inhabitants under a different aspect, according to the character of the climate, and other circumstances amid which they are placed'.<sup>35</sup> The uncertain geopolitical situation in Europe during the early nineteenth century, including the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), further contributed to an increased interest in, and anxiety about, the security and self-sufficiency of island nations. These security discourses were closely intertwined with climatic conceptions of the British Isles through the lens of self-sufficiency in the face of isolation. Referring to concerns of Britain's international trade being cut off, William Spence in his 1807 *Britain Independent of Commerce* argued that 'this favoured isle has the means within herself, not merely of retaining the high rank which she possesses, but of progressively going on in her career of prosperity and of power'.<sup>36</sup> Key to Spence's argument was the agricultural productivity and potential of Britain,

<sup>27</sup> For an overview of the 1853–1854 US treaty expedition under the command of Commodore Perry see: Sheila Hones and Yasuo Endo, 'History, Distance and Text: Narratives of the 1853–1854 Perry Expedition to Japan', *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006) 563–578.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Whittingham, *Notes on the Late Expedition Against the Russian Settlements in Eastern Siberia: And of a Visit to Japan and to the Shores of Tartary, and of the Sea of Okhotsk* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1856), p. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Sherard Osborn, *A Cruise in Japanese Waters* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859), p. 67.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the 'real-and-imagined' within travel writing see: Paul Stock, 'The Real-and-Imagined Spaces of Philhellenic Travel', *European Review of History — Revue européenne d'histoire* 20 (2013) 523–537.

<sup>31</sup> David N. Livingstone, 'The Moral Discourse of Climate: Historical Considerations on Race, Place and Virtue', *Journal of Historical Geography* 17 (1991) 413–434 (p. 426).

<sup>32</sup> See for example: Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); George C.D. Adamson, "'The Languor of the Hot Weather': Everyday Perspectives on Weather and Climate in Colonial Bombay, 1819–1828", *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 143–154; James S. Duncan, 'The Struggle to be Temperate: Climate and "Moral Masculinity" in Mid-Nineteenth Century Ceylon', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 21 (2000) 34–47; Vladimir Jankovic, 'The Last Resort: A British Perspective on the Medical South, 1815–1870', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27 (2006) 271–298; Michael A. Osborne, 'Acclimatizing the World: A History of the Paradigmatic Colonial Science', *Osiris* 15 (2000) 135–151.

<sup>33</sup> Wilson, *The Island Race*, p. 5. See also: Daniel Wright Clayton, *Islands of Truth: The Imperial Fashioning of Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Johnston, *Dictionary of Geography*, p. 195.

<sup>35</sup> John Forbes, 'The Sanative Influence of Climate', *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 76 (1843) 420–442 (p. 421).

<sup>36</sup> William Spence, *Britain Independent of Commerce: Or, Proofs, Deduced from an Investigation into the True Causes of the Wealth of Nations, that Our Riches, Prosperity, and Power, are Derived from Sources Inherent in Ourselves, and Would Not be Affected, Even Though Our Commerce Were Annihilated* (London: W. Savage, 1807), p. 8.

in essence, Britain's favourable climate. These ideas of island self-sufficiency also intersected with early nineteenth-century debates on population demographics by writers such as Thomas Robert Malthus and Henry Brougham, who had authored the review of Spence's work in the influential review publication the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808.<sup>37</sup> Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* would go on to serve as an important influence on Darwin's later theories of natural selection.<sup>38</sup>

This interest in the self-sufficiency of island nations can also be seen in contemporaneous discussions about Japan such as Johnston's *Dictionary of Geography*, which argued that: 'The law, which separates them from intercourse with other countries, has forced them to draw on their own resources, hence the empire is nearly independent of external aid, it is a world in itself.'<sup>39</sup> The idea of Japan as an isolated, self-sufficient island nation that was both known, yet through its isolation inherently unknowable, formed a key element of early nineteenth-century British writings about Japan. For many British writers geography, and by extension climate, formed a key bridge between the known and unknown. While the exact political, social, or moral customs of Japan might remain in question, climatic and geographical comparisons formed a key method of conceptualizing Japan. In an article on Japan in the *Westminster Review*, Francis Maurice Drummond-Davies asserted that:

In examining the history of the past or present condition of nations, it is important to take into consideration those various external agents of soil, climate, and the general aspect of nature, which, together with the peculiarities of race, are now acknowledged to exert a powerful influence on the destiny of a people, and to afford a clue for unravelling the intricacies of any form of civilization which may exist among them.<sup>40</sup>

Foreshadowing the practices of later travellers, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* drew on theories of climate and its relationship to latitude to argue that: 'As these islands lie in the fifth and sixth climates, they would be much hotter in summer than England, were not the heat refreshed by the winds which continually blow from the sea around them'.<sup>41</sup> By the eighth edition in 1856 this statement had been further qualified with the assertion that: 'In the southern part of the empire, it [the climate] is said in many respects

to resemble that of England'.<sup>42</sup> Similar climatic comparisons appeared throughout early nineteenth-century British texts.<sup>43</sup>

These early nineteenth-century debates around climate and latitude, like the cartographical and geographical comparisons explored in the previous section, exerted a key influence on the conceptions of Japan by mid-nineteenth-century British travellers. Like his earlier nineteenth-century counterparts, Alcock writing at the turn of the 1860s utilized existing ideas around the relationship between geography and climate as a way of bridging the known and unknown. Climatic influences to Alcock served to differentiate between humans whom he argued were 'essentially the same under all skies and governments'.<sup>44</sup> Writing shortly after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which was published in 1859, Alcock continued to favour ideas of climatic adaptability as a driving influence on human civilizations rather than evolution.<sup>45</sup> These ideas of climate as the chief influence on the development of civilization continued throughout the late nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Alcock was far from the only British traveller to argue for the importance of climate. The Bishop of Victoria (Hong Kong) George Smith, who visited Japan in the early 1860s, also drew on these theories of climatic influences, remarking that:

The prevalence of fogs and mists, with alternate sunshine and rain, has probably contributed its share with other influences in imparting to the people of Japan some of the solid, stable and energetic qualities of natural disposition, which are the characteristic marks of the population of the humid climate of Great Britain.<sup>47</sup>

To explain these apparent similarities Smith once again returned to cartographical and geographical comparisons between Britain and Japan. Mirroring the geographical and compilatory texts of the first half of the nineteenth century just as his fellow traveller Pemberton Hodgson had done, he asserted that:

Not unlike in her geographical configuration and position at the extremity and border-edge of a continent, Japan seems adapted to assume that relative place among surrounding nations in the East which Great Britain has long filled in the countries of the West.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or, A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Miscellaneous Literature. Volume 12. Eighth Edition* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1856), p. 688. An almost identical statement was also published in Charles MacFarlane's 1856 *Japan: Charles MacFarlane, Japan: An Account, Geographical and Historical, from the Earliest Period at which the Islands Composing this Empire Were Known to Europeans, Down to the Present Time, and the Expedition Fitted Out in the United States, Etc.* (Hartford: Silas Andrus & Son, 1856), p. 124.

<sup>43</sup> See for example: John Bigland, *A Geographical and Historical View of the World, Volume IV* (Boston: Thomas B. Wait, 1811), p. 384; *The English Cyclopaedia: A New Dictionary of Universal Knowledge. Geography — Volumes III & IV*, ed. by Charles Knight (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1856), p. 324; James Bell, *A System of Geography, Popular and Scientific: Or A Physical, Political, and Statistical Account of the World and Its Various Divisions, Volume IV* (Glasgow: Archibald Fullarton; Edinburgh: W. Tait; Dublin: W. Curry, Jun.; London: Simpkin & Marshall, and W.S. Orr, 1832), p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon, Volume I*, p. 113. Alcock's two-volume text drew heavily from his official diplomatic Correspondence, which had already been published as a blue book and reviewed by Alcock himself in the *Edinburgh Review*: Rutherford Alcock, 'Correspondence with Her Majesty's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Japan. Presented to both Houses of Parliament, by Command of Her Majesty. 1860., etc.', *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 113 (1861) 37–74.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859).

<sup>46</sup> See for example: Goldwin Smith, 'The Greatness of England', *Contemporary Review* 34 (December 1878–March 1879) 1–18.

<sup>47</sup> George Smith, *Ten Weeks in Japan* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Ten Weeks in Japan*, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus and Henry Brougham, 'Britain Independent of Commerce: Or, Proofs, Deduced from an Investigation into the True Causes of the Wealth of Nations, that Our Riches, Prosperity, and Power, are Derived from Sources Inherent in Ourselves, and Would Not be Affected, Even Though Our Commerce Were Annihilated. By William Spence', *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 11 (1808) 429–448. Authors identified by the Wellesley Index. For further context on Spence's text in early nineteenth-century narratives of self-sufficiency and the popular reception of his text see: David Buchanan, 'Agriculture the Source of the Wealth of Britain: A Reply to the Objections Urged by Mr Mill, the Edinburgh Reviewers and Others, Against the Doctrines of the Pamphlet, Entitled, "Britain Independent of Commerce;" with Remarks on the Criticism of Monthly Reviewers Upon that Work. By W. Spence', *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 14 (1809) 50–60.

<sup>38</sup> This text was initially published in 1798, with Darwin having read the 1826 sixth edition: Dominic Klyve, 'Darwin, Malthus, Süßmilch, and Euler: The Ultimate Origin of the Motivation for the Theory of Natural Selection', *Journal of the History of Biology* 14 (2014) 189–214 (pp. 191–193); Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population. Sixth Edition. 2 vol* (London: John Murray, 1826).

<sup>39</sup> Johnston, *Dictionary of Geography*, p. 614.

<sup>40</sup> Drummond-Davies, 'Japan', p. 509.

<sup>41</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Volume 5. Second Edition*, p. 3816. This section was reduplicated in the third through sixth editions: *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Volume 9. Third Edition*, p. 65; *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Volume 11, Part 1. Fourth Edition*, p. 33; *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Volume 11. Fifth Edition*, p. 33; *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Volume 11. Sixth Edition*, p. 33.

Throughout early and mid-nineteenth-century British writings both Britain and Japan were depicted as having a civilization distinct from their continental neighbours. Assertions of Japan's similar place in Asia to that of Britain in Europe were underpinned by ideas of a shared exceptionalism compared with their continental neighbours that equated geography and climate with culture. Remarks on the high level of Japanese civilization, and its exceptionalism in East Asia, formed a key feature of British writings about Japan during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> These ideas of a shared exceptionalism were also drawn on by British writers during the changes occurring in 1850s with the onset of the treaties between Japan and other nations to speculate on Japan's future. Kemish, for instance, concluded his 1860 *The Japanese Empire* with the assertion that:

We may without fear predict that, after the ordeal of the first period of intercourse with Western nations, the people of Japan will advance rapidly in the scale of nations, and probably, favoured by their insular position and peculiar characteristics, become the leaders of Eastern civilization.<sup>50</sup>

Like Britain, Japan's specific island identity presented to these British writers the justification for Japan to occupy, or have the potential to occupy, the same geopolitical position in Asia as Britain did in Europe.

### Civilizational development and Japan as a mirror into the British past

British discourses on Japan's civilization intersected with a growing emphasis within British thought on environmental determinism, influenced by the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and the emerging field that would later become known as Social Darwinism.<sup>51</sup> Whereas acclimatization was favoured by writers such as Alcock and Smith who presented a theory of adaptation outside original climates, increasingly the view shifted towards a more fixed idea of climatic adaptation that argued against the ability to acclimatize to a different climate.<sup>52</sup> One of the most influential figures in these developments was the British anthropologist Herbert Spencer, whose theories were already being formulated in the 1840s prior to the publication of *Origin of Species*.<sup>53</sup> Along with other progressivist theories, Spencer integrated theories of progress with social and racial hierarchies, drawing on ideas of evolutionary biology.<sup>54</sup> Social evolutionists argued that theories of biological evolution could also be applied to social evolution, dividing humans into hierarchical categories from savage to civilized.<sup>55</sup> Within this narrative of stages of progress was the

implication that in order to 'catch up' with the West countries would have to go through the same stages of progress that the West had already passed through.<sup>56</sup> These ideas of stages of progress intersected with the increasingly asymmetrical power relationship between Britain and Japan precipitated by the unequal treaties of the 1850s and Britain's growing colonial power in East Asia.

British travellers to Japan during the mid-nineteenth century were both individuals from an island nation conceptualized as sharing many similarities with Japan as well as subjects and agents of an imperial and colonial power. Many of the most significant British travel accounts in this period came from diplomats or military officers. In drawing on ideas of stages of progress, these writers sought to engage with the tension between this shared island identity between Japan and Britain and the asymmetries of Britain's relationship with Japan during this period. The inequality present within Britain's relations with Japan in the mid-nineteenth century remained a conscious part of these travel accounts and of the identity of the traveller as an imperial subject, or even agent, in a country with whom Britain had an asymmetric relationship. Despite his own assertions of Japanese prominence compared with the rest of East Asia, Alcock ultimately concluded that when comparing Britain and Japan 'there can be no question that we are the stronger race — stronger in all the means and appliances of science and war'.<sup>57</sup> This was not simply rhetoric, with Alcock during his tenure as British Minister in Japan having authorized military attacks against Japanese forces during the 1863–1864 Shimonoseki Straits conflict.

Similarly, writing at the turn of the 1860s, Osborn depicted Japan as both an equal power to Britain but also a site of potential future British imperial expansion. He described the 1858 Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Amity and Commerce, for instance, as 'the renewal of the old alliance between these two powerful island empires of the East and West'.<sup>58</sup> Yet this apparent equality of two empires of East and West coexisted alongside a tension between emphasizing Japan's similarities with Britain and at the same time asserting its inferior position in the relationship between the two countries. Discussing an area he had viewed in Yedo, for instance, Osborn stated that:

We passed a nobleman's grounds which would have done credit for their neatness and good keeping to any park in Britain; it was just at the junction of the detached suburbs with those directly connected with the city. Here was the position for a European colony.<sup>59</sup>

To Osborn, the comparison with Britain did not preclude the area in question from being framed as a potential site for colonial expansion. Japan could co-exist in the British imagination as both a place similar to Britain and yet differentiated by the imperial dimensions that underpinned the contemporary relationship between the two island nations. The question then existed, if Japan shared similarities with Britain, how could this inequality between the two island nations be explained without questioning Britain's own claims to superiority. The answer for many of these writers lay in Britain's own past.

Mid-nineteenth-century British travel accounts are replete with references to the idea of Japan as a mirror into the British past. These references reflected not only their ideas of Japan but also British ideas of their own past and place within these ideas of civilizational development and hierarchies. Conceptualizing Japan's

<sup>49</sup> For an analysis of the 'civil' aspect of these discussions of Japanese civilization see: Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*, pp. 59–66.

<sup>50</sup> Kemish, *The Japanese Empire*, p. 303.

<sup>51</sup> For an overview of the origins and development of Social Darwinism see: Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 3–20.

<sup>52</sup> Adamson, 'The Languor of the Hot Weather'.

<sup>53</sup> Xiaoxing Jin, 'The Evolution of Social Darwinism in China, 1895–1930', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64 (2022) 690–721 (p. 693). For an example of Spencer's earlier works see: Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics, or The Conditions essential to Happiness specified, and the First of them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1851).

<sup>54</sup> Jin, 'The Evolution of Social Darwinism', p. 693.

<sup>55</sup> Henna-Rikka Pennanen, '"A Mighty Change Must Pass Over": W.A.P. Martin's Crusade in China', in *The Chinese Chameleon Revisited: From the Jesuits to Zhang Yimou*, ed. by Yangwen Zheng (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 108–142 (p. 115).

<sup>56</sup> Pennanen, 'A Mighty Change Must Pass Over', p. 116.

<sup>57</sup> Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon, Volume I*, p. xix.

<sup>58</sup> Osborn, *A Cruise in Japanese Waters*, p. 189.

<sup>59</sup> Osborn, *A Cruise in Japanese Waters*, p. 163.



relationship with Britain in the early 1860s, Alcock argued that Japan was ‘the living embodiment of a state of society which existed many centuries ago in the West, but has long passed utterly away’.<sup>60</sup> This was not an exact replica, he argued, stating that Japan provided ‘reproduction in all the details and distinctive characters (only with much greater knowledge of the arts of life, and a more advanced material civilisation in the body of the nation)’.<sup>61</sup> Key to this was the notion of historicism, which as Chakrabarty has noted ‘posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West’.<sup>62</sup> Crucially, the idea of Japan as a mirror into the British past formed a key method through which mid-nineteenth-century travellers attempted to navigate the tension between the implications of equality within the idea of Japan as the ‘Britain of the East’ and the inequality both expressed through their writings and the context of the unequal treaties. In framing Japan’s present as analogous to the British past, these writers drew on universalist ideas of Britain as a model whose developmental path Japan could thus ‘catch up’ to.

These developments built upon existing early nineteenth-century ideas of the synonymizing of progress with the progression of time in which stages of development were underpinned by a linear conception of time. Hugh Murray in his 1834 *An Encyclopaedia of Geography* asserted in his preface that: ‘Geography, in its present extended range, not only shows man as he actually exists, but delineates, as it were, the progressive history of the species’.<sup>63</sup> This idea of stages of progress was frequently expressed within these British texts through attempts to tie Japan of the early and mid-nineteenth century to a specific point in the British past. Like many of his contemporaries, Henry Reeve in his review of Alcock’s *Capital of the Tycoon*, explicitly tied these comparisons to Britain’s feudal past, remarking that: ‘Every privilege which was once conferred on a dominant class of nobles and landowners by the stern exactions and exclusive laws of the feudal system is there armed with a sanguinary power’.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, a report in the *Newcastle Chronicle* on a lecture in 1863 given by John M. Hunter who had visited Japan as assistant-surgeon on board the *Odin*, stated that the speaker drew ‘a parallel between the present state of Japanese society and the feudalism of our country during the middle ages’.<sup>65</sup> Japan as Britain’s eastern

reflection therefore reflected across not only spatial dimensions but also temporal ones. This temporal differentiation thus served to provide an explanation for the differences between these two eastern and western reflections in the face of asserted geographical and climatic similarities. The article concluded with the assertion that:

We now see an enlightened nation without a middle class — that backbone of a country — and a people looking forward to the time when their own land shall take its place among nations, and Japan — the Britain of the East — be as free as Britain itself.<sup>66</sup>

It was not therefore that Japan was different from Britain but rather that Japan had not become Britain yet.

## Conclusion

Throughout the nineteenth century the idea of geographic, climatic, and civilizational similarities between Britain and Japan exerted a powerful influence on both British views of Japan and on British self-identity. These ideas evolved across the nineteenth century, from geographical and cartographical comparisons in the early nineteenth century through to an increasing emphasis on environmental determinism and civilizational development from the mid-nineteenth century. Alongside these developments existed an emphasis on the asymmetries and inequalities of this relationship between the two island nations that became increasingly significant following the advent of firsthand British experience of Japan from the late 1850s onwards. Throughout the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century questions of equality between these two isles of East and West continued to shape Anglo-Japanese relations from the Meiji-era renegotiations of the unequal treaties to the establishment of the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance. Late Meiji period texts such as Curzon’s 1894 *Problems of the Far East*, first introduced in the introduction of this article, were therefore a reflection of a much older idea of a shared island identity between Britain and Japan.

In tracing back the much older heritage of these ideas and the crucial role geographic and climatic comparisons played, this prompts a re-evaluation of existing scholarship on the idea of Japan as the ‘Britain of the East’. As this article has shown, these ideas had a longer and more complex history than previously addressed. Similarly, the critical importance of geography, climate, and cartography in these early ideas of a *trans-island* identity between Britain and Japan provides new insights into post-war critiques of retrospective projections onto the past.<sup>67</sup> It also encourages reflection on the continued legacies of these ideas, which retain a powerful, if less overt, influence on contemporary British conceptions of Japan.<sup>68</sup> Despite the transformations both Britain and Japan

<sup>60</sup> Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon*, Volume I, p. 109. An almost exact match to this statement can be found in Alcock’s earlier article from 1861: Alcock, ‘Correspondence with Her Majesty’s Envoy Extraordinary’, p. 46.

<sup>61</sup> Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon*, Volume I, p. 109. Alcock was particularly influenced by the work of Frederick Temple, who argued that humanity at the time when the Gospel first emerged was split into four streams whereby ‘the Hebrews may be said to have disciplined the human conscience, Rome the human will, Greece the reason and taste, Asia the spiritual imagination’: Frederick Temple, ‘The Education of the World’, in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. by John William Parker (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1860), pp. 1–49 (p. 19).

<sup>62</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 7. For more on historicism as a concept see: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>63</sup> Hugh Murray, *An Encyclopaedia of Geography* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1834), p. iv.

<sup>64</sup> Henry Reeve, ‘The Capital of the Tycoon’, *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 117 (1863) 517–540 (p. 517). The question of whether this idea of Japan as feudal was accurate forms the subject of a large body of literature. See for example: Peter Duus, *Feudalism in Japan* (New York: NY McGraw-Hill, 1993 [1969]); Archibald R. Lewis, *Knights and Samurai: Feudalism in Northern France and Japan* (London: Temple Smith, 1974); Karl Friday, ‘The Futile Paradigm: In Quest of Feudalism in Early Medieval Japan’, *History Compass* 8 (2010) 179–196; John Whitney Hall, ‘Feudalism in Japan — A Reassessment’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1962) 15–51.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Lecture on Japan and the Japanese at Alnwick’, *Newcastle Chronicle*, 31 December 1863.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Lecture on Japan and the Japanese at Alnwick’.

<sup>67</sup> See for example the discourse around Tadao Umehao’s drawing of parallels between Britain and Japan in the context of Japan’s historical development: Tadao Umehao, *An Ecological View of History: Japanese Civilization in the World Context*, trans by Beth Cary, ed. by Harumi Befu (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2003 [originally published in Japanese in 1967]); Kenichi Ohno, ‘Meiji Japan: Progressive Learning of Western Technology’, in *How Nations Learn: Technological Learning, Industrial Policy, and Catch-up*, ed. by Arkebe Oqubay and Kenichi Ohno (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 85–106; Johann P. Arnaso, ‘Review: An Ecological View of History: Japanese Civilization in the World Context by Tadao Umehao, Harumi Befu and Beth Cary’, *Journal of Japanese Studies* 30 (2004) 436–440; Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-inventing Japan: Nation, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 140–160.

<sup>68</sup> References to Japan as the eastern reflection to Britain’s western isle continue to appear in contemporary British publications. See for example: Waldemar Januszczak, ‘It’s Just Child’s Play for Them’, *Sunday Times*, 8 November 2015.

have undergone since the nineteenth century, legacies of this *trans*-island identity continue to shape the ways in which people, especially in Britain, think about and imagine Japan. Islands continue to be imbued with meaning beyond their geographical boundaries and form an integral part of how the people of today, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, attempt to understand the world around them.

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**Annabel Storr:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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