

Selections from NDL collections

## A letter from Thursday Island

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\* Held at the [Modern Japanese Political History Materials Room](#)

\* [Description on the ITO Hirobumi Papers \(in Japanese\)](#)

I was in a book store recently when SHIBA Ryotaro's novella *Mokuyoto no yakai* (*Soiree at Thursday Island*)<sup>1</sup> caught my eye. It was an interesting coincidence, since only a few days previously, as I was reorganizing a catalog of library materials, I had seen a letter from Thursday Island addressed to Japan's first Prime Minister, ITO Hirobumi.

Thursday Island is a small island of only about 3 km<sup>2</sup> just off the northeastern coast of Australia.

Pearl-shell fishing flourished around Thursday Island from the late 19th to the middle of the 20th century, due to a demand for materials to be used in making high-quality

dress buttons. Pearl oysters were gathered by divers, who wore heavy diving suits with lead weights and a metal helmet to which oxygen was fed from the surface. Although lucrative work, the divers faced constant danger and difficulty as they searched for oysters in the ocean depths. In addition to workers from Europe and Southeast Asia, a significant number of Japanese immigrants were engaged in this peculiar industry.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SHIBA Ryotaro, *Mokuyoto no yakai*, Bungei Shunju, 1977, NDL call no. KH555-293

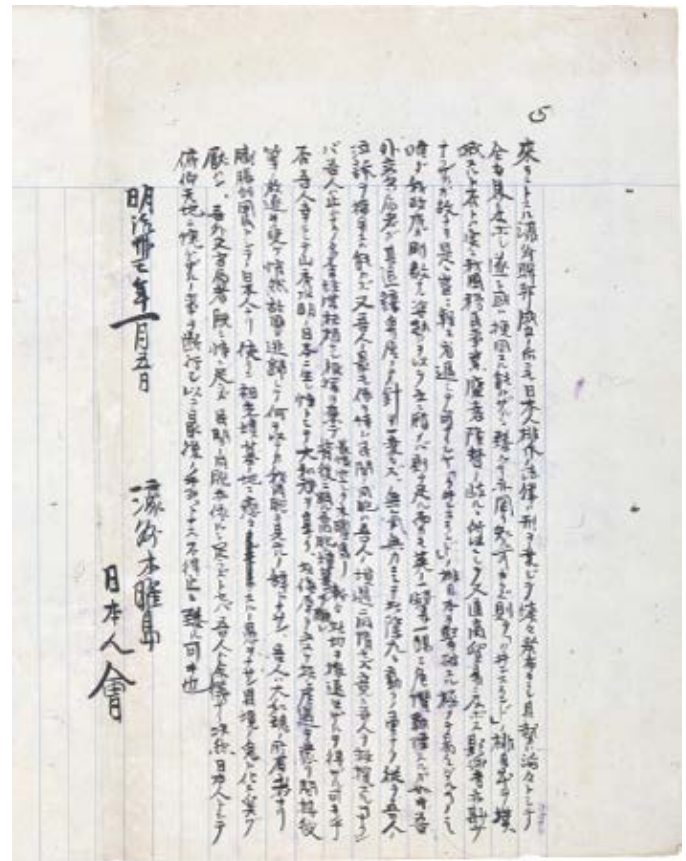
<sup>2</sup> *Kanpo* (Official Gazette) No.5295, March 1, 1901, NDL Call No. YC-1

\* Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).



The envelope in which the letter from Thursday Island was sent. The enlargement shows the stamped words: Thursday Island Japanese Association.

*Mokuyoto no yakai* is based on interviews with people involved in the pearl-shell industry and depicts the experiences of Japanese divers who lived and worked on this island. One theme which repeatedly emerges in the novel is the question of why the Japanese immigrants were satisfied to be employed as divers rather than starting their own businesses with their own ships and trading rights. During the era depicted in the story, from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, the proprietors were predominantly Englishmen and others of European descent. A variety of opinions are introduced throughout the story, including the testimony of retired divers, who speculate that the answer lies in the "nature of the Japanese people." Mention is made of the Chinese historical document *Gishiwajinden* (Records of Wei: An Account of the Wa), which tells of the Japanese catching fish by diving in the ocean. There is also mention of an experiment conducted by a British researcher, in which a retired British seaman could dive five times a day while a Japanese subject could dive 50 times a day. Shiba speculates that Japanese might be attracted to pearl fishing because of some characteristic passed down from generation to generation since ancient times.



The final page of the letter

The letter addressed to ITO, however, suggests a far more pragmatic and graphic answer to this same question while shedding light on another aspect of history. The letter, dated January 5, 1900, and sent by the Thursday Island Japanese Association, reports that "individual" Japanese proprietors who made large profits in the pearl-shell industry were gradually deprived of their rights through amendments made in local laws. According to *Wakayamaken iminshi* (The History of immigration of Wakayama Prefecture),<sup>3</sup> there were more than 20 Japanese proprietors circa 1897. Among these was a man named SATO Torajiro, also known as the "King of Thursday Island," who in his heyday had employed 1,800 workers. He served at one time as president of the Thursday Island Japanese Association<sup>4</sup> and returned to Japan in January 1901, later becoming a member of the House of Representatives. The implication of this is that, in times prior to that in which the story is set, Japanese proprietors once made great profits, but conflicted with European proprietors and were eliminated from the industry.<sup>5</sup>

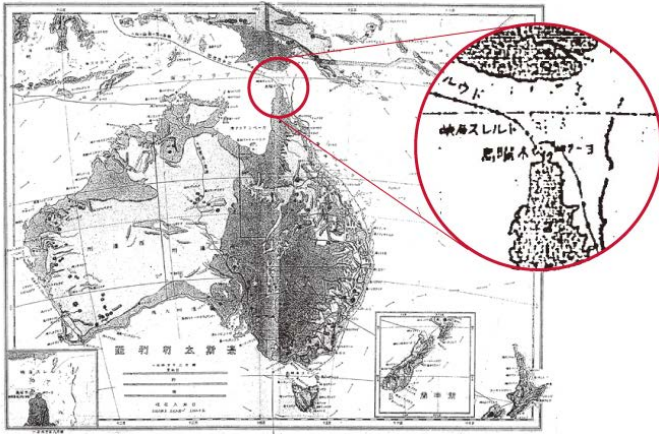
<sup>3</sup> *Wakayamaken iminshi*, Wakayama Prefecture, 1957, NDL call no. 334.4-W38w

<sup>4</sup> "(15) Mokuyoto tsushin naru shinbun kiji ni tsuki zai Townsville Iijima ryoji, kunrei no ken"

Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), Ref.B13080202600, 7-1-3-5\_002 (Holdings: Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), November 1899

\*Available on JACAR website: <http://www.jacar.archives.go.jp/das/meta/B13080202600>

<sup>5</sup> "Mokuyoto ni okeru hojin hochiku jiken" *Yomiuri shinbun*, October 7, 1899

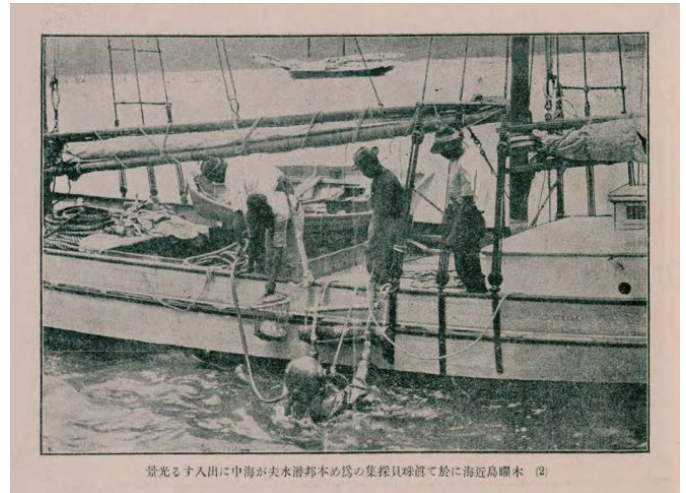


A map of Australia published in August 1900. Thursday Island is indicated in the enlarged picture on the right.

*Shin bankoku chizu*; created by SHIGA Shigetaka and YAZU Shoei. NDL Call No. 89-1

\*Available in the [NDL Digital Collections](#).

The Commonwealth of Australia, established one year after this letter was written, promulgated legal restrictions on immigration and naturalization of Asian immigrants in December 1901 in order to protect laborers of European descent.<sup>6</sup> However, it was impossible to maintain the pearl-shell industry without Japanese divers. Thus, the restrictions were soon partially eased so that Japanese laborers could immigrate again.<sup>7</sup>



Japanese divers gather pearl oysters in the sea near Thursday Island.

*Kyoiku kenkyu* 97th issue (April 1912) Shoto kyoiku kenkyu kai NDL Call No. Z7-164

The divers who appear in *Mokuyoto no yakai* played a major role in the pearl-shell industry during the period some 20 years after this letter was written. It might have been a time in which the interests of proprietors of European descent dovetailed with those of the Japanese divers, who wished to earn a fortune and return to their homeland, irrespective of whether they could own a business or not.

(Translated by Shihoko Yokota)

<sup>6</sup> *Shogaikoku no kenpo jijo*, Research and Legislative Reference Bureau of the NDL, 2003, p.119

<sup>7</sup> "Mokuyoto iki imin no seigen jogai" *Yomiuri shinbun*, April 19, 1903