poised to reclaim his inheritance on the far shore of the Red Sea.
This time religion was the pretext. The Aksumite kings had converted to Christianity during the fourth century. Around the same
time, in one of history’s more unexpected con-
versions, the Himyarites of south-west Arabia
adopted Judaism as their official state religion.
In 523, the Jewish King of Himyar, a certain
Yusuf, launched a series of pogroms against
the Christian communities of south Arabia.
These persecutions sent shockwaves across
Christendom: the Byzantine Emperor, Justin I,
begged Kaleb “to go forth, by land or sea,
against the abominable and criminal Jew”.
As Bowersock shows, the two Adulis
inscriptions, with their stirring narratives of
long-distant African conquests across the sea,
gave Kaleb all the precedents that he needed
for his crusade against the Himyarites. It is
ever possible that Kaleb made a still more po-
tent claim to the kingship of south-west Ara-
bia. The Aksumite Christians saw themselves
as the distant descendants of Solomon and the
Queen of Sheba. The biblical kingdom of She-
ba was located in southern Arabia, and so Ka-
leb may well have seen his war against Himyar
as a reconquest of the traditional Ethiopian
homeland.

The Aksumite invasion of Himyar was a tri-
umph. In the summer of 525, 120,000 men as-
sembled at Adulis for a huge seaborne invasion
of Arabia. Yusuf was killed, and a Christian
Aksumite client king installed in his place.
No less important, Kaleb’s crusade led to a short-
lived alliance between the two Christian em-
pires of the East, Orthodox Byzantium and
Monophysite Aksum. Yusuf had enjoyed the
protection of the other great imperial power of
the late antique Near East, the Sasanian Per-
sians of western Iran. The new Byzantine em-
peror, Justinian I (527–565), hence had good
reason to be thrilled at the prospect of a friendly
Aksumite client state in south Arabia. For a
fleetling moment, a united crescent of Christian
allies stretched from Armenia in the north to
Yemen and Ethiopia in the south.
The story is a gripping one, and Bowersock
has brilliantly illuminated the clash of two
monotheisms in south Arabia in the early sixth
century. Yet despite his heroic efforts, the last
piece in this jigsaw remains missing. The Ethi-
opians were finally expelled from the Arabian
peninsula by the Sasanian Persians in around
570. At this point, all our sources fail us, and
for a crucial half century the deserts of western
Arabia are engulfed in darkness. Uncharacter-
istically, Bowersock resorts to metaphor to bridge
the gap:
The dissolution of the nexus that bound Ethiopia
to Arabia created a volatile situation, for which
a reckoning of some kind was bound to follow...Without strong kings in Ethiopia and Himyar
the international arena was left to the struggle
between Byzantium and Persia. Yet in the very
midst of this arena the embryo of the old con-
flation between Jews and Christians, which had
been ignited by the Jews in Arabia and fanned
by the Ethiopians who attacked them, were still
burning. Out of these embers a new religion was
born.
The very vagueness of the language (“em-
ers of the old conflation”) reminds us
quite how little we still know about those years
when, amid a great stillness, the forty-year-old
Muhammad knelt in a cave on the Mountain
of Light, and heard a voice as clear as the ringing
of a bell.

Eyes burned out

The Pacific has long been the hole at the
heart of world history. For two centu-
ries, global historians from the First
World have hardly known what to make of
the “fifth part of the world”. There’s just “so much
ocean, too many islands”, the late Australian
historian Greg Dening lamented ironically:
over 25,000 islands in an ocean covering more
than a third of the Earth’s surface and spanning
from the Arctic to the Antarctic and from
Southeast Asia to Central America. In the ages
of paddle and sail, steam and propeller, every
traveller could feel the connections between
land and sea, the continents and the islands.
The jet age seemingly rendered the Pacific Ba-
sin a kind of intellectual flyover territory – “the
earth’s empty quarter” – for outsiders to Ocea-
nia and Australasia. The upshot, as the k’iri-
bati scholar Teresa Teaiwa noted in 2002, was
that “the dialogue between studies of humani-
ty and studies of the Pacific” broke down. Only
lately has the conversation resumed among
historians. It now includes fish, mammals and
birds. It takes place amid metaphorical moun-
tains of fur, blubber and faeces. And it has les-
s, even warnings, for the rest of the world.
The Pacific is at once a latecomer and a for-
gotten ancestor amid a host of newly emergent
oceanic histories. Ever since Fernand Braudel
conceived of the Mediterranean and its shores
as a “world” in La Méditerranée et le monde
méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II
(1949), his successors have sought new worlds
in other maritime arenas, large and small.
There are now histories of the Baltic world
and the Caribbean world, the “Red Sea world”
and the “Black Sea world”, inspired by studies
of the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and espe-
cially of the Atlantic. Atlantic history has been
the most entrepreneurial of these fields. Its
spectacular rise in the past generation exposed
certain resistance by historians of the Pacific
to the geographical holism and somewhat
whiggish narratives – from “discovery” via
exploitation and enslavement to emancipation
and independence – that characterized histo-
ries of the world’s second largest ocean. Only

DAVID ARMITAGE

David Igler
THE GREAT OCEAN
Pacific worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush
255pp. Oxford University Press. £18.99
(US $29.95).
978 1 08 991495 1
Gregory T. Cushman
GUANO AND THE OPENING OF THE PACIFIC WORLD
A global ecological history
978 1 107 00413 9

recently have pan-Pacific histories, covering the
entire basin and all its peoples, begun to appear.

Historians in the Pacific have been writing
their own accounts of the peoples of Polynesia,
Melanesia and Micronesia for over fifty years.
Much of that work anticipated other oceanic
histories in focusing on links between sea and
land, in treating indigenous and settler peoples
within the same frame, and in upsetting con-
ventional notions of temporality and territori-
ality. The work of Islander historians rarely
interacted with that of students of the Asia-
Pacific (a field driven by economic history in
the wake of the Japanese miracle of the 1980s)
or those who studied the American West as the
Pacific-facing aspect of US history. All three
groups called themselves Pacific historians,
but they imagined different populations within
distinct boundaries. Intellectual divisions of
labour worked against Pacific histories written
in an albatross’s (let alone a whale’s) eye-
view. The Pacific remained mostly invisible to
outsiders, just as it was incomprehensible
from maps centred along the Greenwich Me-
ridian rather than the International Date Line.

David Igler’s The Great Ocean and Gregory
T. Cushman’s Guano and the Opening of the
Pacific World are some of the first waves of a
gathering tsunami of scholarship on the Pacifi-
c world. “Whole libraries have been written
about the Atlantic World,” Cushman notes,
“but readers will be hard pressed to find a sin-
gle historical monograph with ‘Pacific World’
in its title.” Igler argues similarly that “the
ocean world concept appears ripe for the Pa-
cific, particularly because of its increasing in-
terconnectedness with the Atlantic and Indian
Oceans”. They each describe processes devel-
oping along the eastern continental edge of
the Pacific, stretching outwards into Oceania
and unfolding over the longue durée. The Great
Ocean runs from Alaska and Hawaii to Peru
and concludes at a highpoint of integration in
the mid-nineteenth century, when Ishmael
in Moby-Dick (1851) hymned “the mysterious,
divine Pacific” as “the tide-beating heart of
earth”. Guano and the Opening of the Pacific
World carries the story forward from this
Melvillean moment to the near-present, and
southward to Peru and Chile. Neither book
compenses the entire Pacific basin, but both
prove the centrality of the Pacific not just
to the world, but also to world history.

In The Birth of the Modern World,
1780–1914 (2004), C. A. Bayly described
the long nineteenth century as an age of increasing
uniformity between nations and deepening di-
versity within them. Even Bayly’s globe-
spanning tour de force spared little space for
the Pacific, but Igler and Cushman confirm the
strength of his thesis. Igler shows how greater
commercial integration in the eastern Pacific
shattered indigenous communities. Likewise,
Cushman argues that the exploitation of guano
bound the Pacific more tightly into transoce-
anic, and ultimately global, circuits of labour,
resource extraction and capitalist enterprise.
These links brought political instability and
and natural disaster to Peru, the Gilbert Islands,
Nauru and other points around the Pacific. The
damage to their local economies and ecologies
will last long into the future. Seen from the Pa-
cific, then, the birth of the modern world ap-
ppears particularly violent and disruptive,
the very inverse of the myths of island innocence
preyed by Europeans in the mid eighteenth

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century before “modernity” had been ushered in. The Great Ocean calculates the high price of proto-globalization in the Pacific. Each chapter begins with a well-turned vignette from a Pacific voyage and then treats a major theme: commerce, disease and sex, captivity, the hunting of animals, the exploits of naturalists, and the quest for the geological unity of the Pacific. Igler’s topical approach can make the chronology of Pacific history hard to follow, but the pivotal periods are tolerably clear: the 1780s, the years after 1812, and the 1840s. The first two sprang from events in the Atlantic world. American independence freed former British colonists from the East India Company’s monopoly and opened Canton, the gateway to China, to American merchants for the first time. Three decades later, Napoleon’s invasion of Spain triggered an Atlantic crisis in the Spanish Empire that opened new ports to all comers on the coast of South America. Spanish galleons had carried Mexican silver from Acapulco to Manila to feed the Chinese market since the 1750s, and they limped on until after independence. The explosion of free trade further fueled the great Chinese engine of commercial innovation: sandalwood and the “soft gold” of sea-otter skins. Russian traders joined Britons and Americans in scouting for furs from Okhotsk to Baja California; the Northwest coast of North America rapidly became “a resource-rich suburb of Boston,” for the “Isle of Bosteas” (and Salem); and Hawaii developed into a “Great Exchange” for trans-oceanic commerce. The stage was set for the migratory exchange of animals, the exploits of naturalists and other invasive pathogens. These human horrors occurred against the backdrop of the increasingly frantic “Great Hunt” for marine mammals, including sea otters, fur seals and great whales, all slaughtered in droves to satisfy Chinese merchants, Massachusetts mill-owners and other consumers around the globe. “It seems to me that our path through the Pacific is to be marked in blood,” wrote a shaken midshipman on the US Exploring Expedition of 1838–42, and blood stains much of The Great Ocean. When Melville’s masterpiece appeared, Igler writes, “the ocean’s people, markets, and natural resources were thoroughly entwined with the surrounding world” – for good but also, in the experience of many Pacific populations, for ill.

The Great Ocean pictures the mid-nineteenth-century Pacific as both a graveyard and a seedbed. Peak oil – the exhaustion of sperm whales – had almost been reached, much as alarmed naturalists had observed the decline and destruction of fur-bearing mammal populations – peak fur? – in preceding decades. These same naturalists and their successors “evolved an anthroposophical passion” for the scientific sciences in the Pacific. More than a dozen scientific expeditions between 1816 and 1830 laid tracks in the ocean that The Beagle and the US Exploring Expedition followed. But the “scientifics” aboard the American expedition was James Dwight Dana, who first pieced together Pacific geology and demonstrated its “closeness to the history of the geophysical matrix of the world” (1840). Dana anticipated the much later hot-spot theory for the formation of the Hawaiian chain but, as Igler also shows, in this regard Western cosmology was only catching up with the origin stories native Hawaiians had told for generations. For Dana, the advance was short-lived: his all-embracing vision of the volcanic Ring of Fire, circling the Pacific basin and driving its seismic activity, quickly collided with the imperatives of Mani fest Destiny. By the time he had written up his extensive investigations in the 1840s, America sovereignty covered the continent from sea to shining sea and a “vast stretch of the eastern Pacific coastline” was gradually de globalizing to become “the American Far West.”

At around the same time that a large chunk of the eastern Pacific was turning into the western United States, the unbridled railroads of the great period of world exploration (1840–1848) had finished their first trip around the globe (1840). This is the flashpoint for Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World, which aims to prove that “marine bird excrement is at the heart of Pacific history.” It was a key step in the incorporation of the Pacific Ocean into global history”. By turns illuminating and obscure, Igler’s book traces every thread in the modern history of guano and pho phates from their origins in Peru, Chile and the Pacific islands outwards to Australasia, Britain and beyond. His work is more sprawling and less elegant than Igler’s, but it covers considerations considerably more ground, even at some cost to coherence. Igler follows his leads wher ever they take him. His book stands alongside other curious classics about a world-historical process called the Anthropocene.

Guano was the largest producer of fish in the 1960s, domestication of an unmanaged resource. Instead, it was a technocratic tragedy created by credentialed experts attempting to yoke conservation to profit in their “ecological laboratory”. In 1944, one of those technocrats, Fairfield Osborn, had edited the first, and for decades the only, book entitled The Pacific World. This was a handbook for US servicemen in the Pacific theatre, covering the history, flora, fauna and human inhabitants of Oceania and the lands of the Pacific Rim, compiled because “few Americans need to know more of the Pacific”. This “Pacific world” was shot through with racism, romanticism and neo-imperial optimism (“all of our epic movements have been westward”). The destructiveness of the whaling ship was played up in the mid-Osborne letters, as was the destruction of the guano mining companies. Perhaps more relevant to the us was the use, which used the 1856 Guano Islands Act to extend American property, against which the local labour to exploit them and the market for their fertilizer, notably the farms of Australia and New Zealand. The European im migrants to the New Zealand farmlands and the gold rushes in New South Wales slightly later gold rushes in New South Wales. The first two sprang from events in the Atlantic world. American independence freed former British colonists from the East India Company’s guano diggings. Cushman pulls no punches about their fate: “ten of thousands starved, their lives away” – so that whites could stay white and their fields become fertile.

When is free land to turn up? Where is the dressing to improve that which is already in cultivation? The question was asked of Peru and Bolivia on one side, and Chile on the other. This was the century’s second most destructive war capera, after the Taip ing Rebellion and ahead of the American Civil War. Spain had asked the Americans to solve the conflicting over natural resources to come in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The fortunes of Peruuvian guano fluctuated wildly for the next century, often in sync with the rhythms of EI Niño events that periodically wiped out stocks of anchoveta, the main source of fish for guano birds on Peru’s coast al islands. (Cushman follows Mike Davis, Richard Grove and other historians in making excellent use of EI Niño–Southern Oscillation records to reveal climatological coincidences with modern famines, revolutions and other upheavals.) To manage the vulnerable bird population, the Compañía Administradora del Guano (CAG), “the greatest of all industries based upon the conservation of wild animals the world knows”, was established. Cushman traces the roots of contemporary conservation to this event, implicitly rejecting recent claims for other sites around the world – Mauritius, the Scottish Highlands or Thirlmere in the Lake District – as the heart of modern conservation. That the CAG’s management was a disaster is part of his point. By 2000, after 2.500 years of h arvesting, “the Dutch were the world’s largest producer of fish in the 1960s, domestication of an unmanaged resource. Instead, it was a technocratic tragedy created by credentialed experts attempting to yoke conservation to profit in their “ecological laboratory”.

Those same naturalists and their successors in marine science, oceanography and environmentalism – the ecologist Aldo Leopold, the ornithologist William Vogt and the biologist-bureaucrat Fairfield Osborn – appear here as well-intentioned but maladroit manipulators of markets and ecosystems in Latin America. They promoted an “ecocentric path to development” through fisheries and aquaculture, but as Peru became the world’s largest producer of fish in the 1960s, domestication of an unmanaged resource.

The later rise of the neo-Malthusian works for which he is best known, Our Plundered Planet (1948) and The Crowded Earth (1953). The later rise of the neo-Malthusian works for which he is best known, Our Plundered Planet (1948) and The Crowded Earth (1953).