

Editor's Note: Readers who enjoy this article will be interested in Junya Nagakuni and Junji Kitadai's *Drifting Toward the Southeast* (Spinner Publications, 2003).

The Saga of Manjirō

By Junji Kitadai

The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham; while all between float milky-ways of coral isles, and low-flying, endless, unknown archipelagoes, and impenetrable Japans. —Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Herman Melville in 1851 wrote, “If that double-bolted land, Japan, is ever to become hospitable, it is the whaleship alone to whom the credit will be due; for already she is on the threshold.”¹ Melville’s description of mid-nineteenth-century Japan was historically accurate. The Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled Japan since the seventeenth century, kept out most Asian states except mainly China and Korea and all European countries except for the Netherlands. All Japanese nationals were forbidden to travel abroad. Those who went to a foreign country and returned home were executed if apprehended. Nagasaki was designated the only port for foreign trade, and only Chinese and Dutch ships were allowed to enter by the nineteenth century.

What Melville didn’t know was the story of the Japanese fisherman Manjirō, who inadvertently threw himself out of this “double-bolted land” and eventually found himself aboard none other than an American whaleship in the Pacific. He became the first Japanese to live in the United States and later risked his life to go back to Japan in an attempt to make his homeland more “hospitable.”



Illustration of Torishima Island with the ship *John Howland* superimposed into the scene. Illustration by Willa Davis. Torishima Island photo source: <http://tinyurl.com/mb6f3gy>.

Shipwreck and Rescue

The saga of Manjirō began when he was fourteen years old in a small fishing village in the feudal domain of Tosa (now Kōchi Prefecture) on the Pacific coast of the southern island of Shikoku, one of the four main islands of Japan. He lost his father when he was nine and had to work hard to help his mother and siblings.

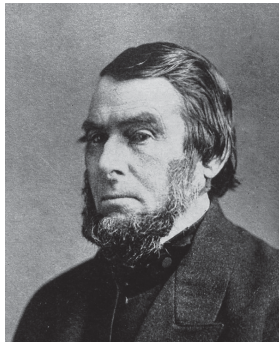
On a cold winter day in January 1841, Manjirō joined a fishing crew of five men headed by Fudenojo, a thirty-seven-year-old veteran fisherman. Fudenojo’s younger brothers—Jusuke, twenty-four; Goemon, fifteen; and their neighbor Toraemon, twenty-five—constituted the rest of the crew of a small fishing boat about twenty-four feet long. Manjirō, the youngest and least experienced, served as a cook and helper.

On the third day, when they were fishing for horse mackerels with trawl lines about twenty miles off the coast, a strong northwesterly wind began to blow and soon grew into a fierce storm. Fudenojo quickly ordered the crew to haul in the fishing gear and set sail for land. Working together, they raced frantically against the wind. But as the sun set, high waves splashed and sprayed all around them, making it impossible to see ahead. The situation became desperate as the oarlock for the sculling oar broke off. As they tried

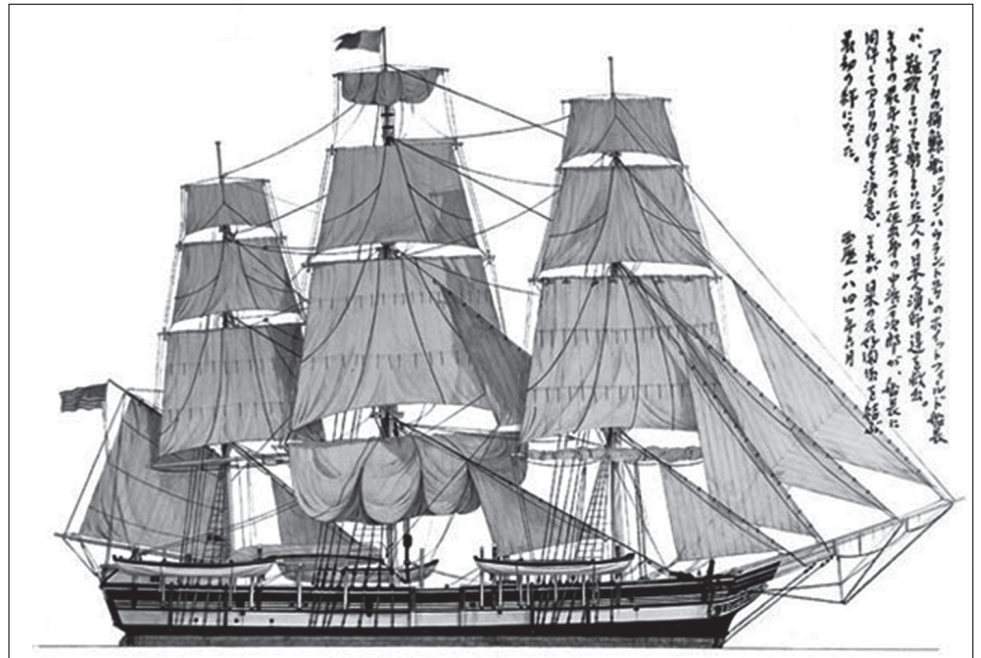
to fix it, the handle of the scull broke in half and the blade was swept away. The boat darted swiftly like an arrow to the southeast direction.

When the next day dawned, the crew caught the last glimpse of their homeland’s coast in the far distance. At the mercy of wind and waves, the boat was swept away far into the ocean. As they exhausted their provisions, huddling and shivering together from hunger and fatigue, the five fishermen could do nothing except pray to Buddha for protection. On the miserable sixth day, their weary eyes caught a dim view of an island far away on the horizon and realized the boat was drifting toward it. To their great relief and joy, it was indeed a small, uninhabited island surrounded by high cliffs and craggy beaches. The island, now known as Torishima (Bird Island), is located about 360 miles due south of Tokyo.

The following morning, as no beach could be found to land the boat, they deserted the craft and swam to the rocky shore. When Fudenojo and Jusuke were about to leave the boat, a sudden high wave overturned it, injuring Jusuke’s leg. When Manjirō and his shipwrecked mates reached shore, the island was inhabited by a large flock of albatross. The castaways survived on albatross meat until spring, when the birds migrated with their young.



Portrait of Captain William H. Whitfield. Source: North Texas Grassroots Summit at <http://tinyurl.com/larrfpd>.



Print of the *John Howland* from the Arthur Moniz Gallery in New Bedford's Whaling National Park. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/kpz52lf>.

With his unhealed leg injury, Jusuke was forced to stay in a cave the castaways shared as shelter. Fudenojo spent most of his time taking care of his weakened younger brother. Toraemon, Goemon, and Manjirō engaged in the most important task of collecting food. There were almost no edible plants on the barren volcanic island. Gathering shellfish and seaweeds at the craggy shore was their routine. The plentiful bird meat supply dwindled quickly as albatrosses started to leave the island for migration. No spring water could be found on the island, and it seldom rained. As time passed, starving and thirsty, the castaways' health and spirits deteriorated.

One morning in June, Manjirō was out for a daily food gathering. Suddenly, he saw a huge three-masted sail ship in the sea. Two boats, each with six-man crews, were lowered and started to come toward the island. Manjirō called for Toraemon and Goemon, and the three of them quickly prepared a long stick with clothes tied to it and waved it frantically, shouting, "*Tasukete-kure!* (Save us!)" The two boats came closer, and some crewmembers who saw the distress signals waved their hands. The ship was the *John Howland*, an American whale ship from New Bedford, Massachusetts, commanded by Captain William H. Whitfield. In his logbook, the captain made the following entry:

Sunday, June 27, 1841

This day light winds from S.E. Isle in sight 1 p.m.

Sent in two boats to see if there was any turtle, found five poor distressed people on the isle, took them off, could not understand anything from them more than they was [sic] hungry. Made the latitude of the isle 30 deg. 31 m. N.²

The five Japanese castaways collectively sighed relief aboard the *John Howland*, although everything was totally new and strange to them. They had never seen such a different kind of people before—all with long unkempt hair, much larger in physique than Japanese, and varied skin color. The captain had the dignified look of a high-ranking samurai and kept his crew in good order.

Well-treated, the Japanese gradually recovered their health and tried to communicate with the Americans, first by sign language and then through some gradually learned English words. Unlike his somewhat xenophobic elders, Manjirō, naturally inquisitive and aggressive, was much faster in adjusting to a new environment. The *John Howland* continued whaling in the north Pacific; this was the high point of Yankee whaling, and hundreds of American whale ships were in the Pacific. As their health improved, the Japanese castaways were assigned chores. As fishermen who were naturally interested in whaling, the Japanese had ample opportunities to observe American methods. In contrast to the Japanese, who wasted no part of a caught whale, the castaways were surprised to see that Americans took only oil and some baleens (filters in the whales' mouths) and threw all the meat away.

Manjirō quickly learned English. Probably one of the first English expressions he learned was "There she blows!" Since Manjirō had keen eyesight, he was ordered to climb up the mainmast to a crow's nest for watch duty and successfully spotted a whale from some distance away. Whitfield rewarded him with a seaman's cap. Less than five months after the rescue of the castaways, the *John Howland* had caught fifteen whales.

Widening Horizon

On November 20, 1841, the *John Howland* entered the port of Honolulu of Oahu Island in the Sandwich Islands, then part of the Kamehameha dynasty. After landing, Whitfield, unsure of the nationality of the men he saved, took the castaways to his friend Dr. Gerrit P. Judd, a medical missionary from New York and influential adviser to King Kamehameha III. Judd showed Japanese coins and a smoking pipe he owned to the castaways and, by observing their reactions, determined they were Japanese. Although Captain Whitfield made arrangements with government officials for the men to reside in Honolulu, he hoped someday the castaways could return to Japan via China. He also gave each man a silver half-dollar and some clothes.

Whitfield, from close observation of Manjirō when they were at sea, was impressed with the young boy's ability and wanted to take him to the United States for further education. Fishing crew boss Fudenojo was astounded and perplexed when he learned about the captain's idea. As crew leader, he felt responsibility to bring Manjirō safely home, but it was difficult to say no to a man who had saved the crews' lives. After agonizing over the dilemma, Fudenojo let Manjirō make his own decision. Without much hesitation, Manjirō said yes to the captain's invitation, promising someday to see his castaway companions again; his desire to learn more was far stronger than his fear of the unknown. On December 1, 1841, the *John Howland* left Honolulu with the fourteen-year-old, green-hand crew member Manjirō.

The whale ship crew welcomed him, and Whitfield named the young boy "John" after the name of the ship and shortened Manjirō to "Mung." Chasing whales in the Japan grounds, the area midway between Japan and Hawai'i, the *John Howland* reached Guam again in March 1842, where the captain put the ship on a homebound course through the South Pacific.³

Discovering America in New England

After three and a half years sailing around Cape Horn and north in the Atlantic, the *John Howland* finally entered its homeport of New Bedford on May 6, 1843. For Captain Whitfield, it was an end of another successful whaling voyage. For Manjirō, now sixteen, it was the beginning of a new

life in a foreign land. When Manjirō set foot on the New Bedford harbor the following morning, he became the first Japanese to ever live in the United States. New Bedford was then known as “the whaling capital of the world” and had a population of about 13,000. Thanks to the whaling industry, the bustling town had the highest per capita income in the US.

Fairhaven, with a population of about 4,000 when Manjirō arrived, was a smaller whaling town across the Acushnet River to the north of New Bedford and whose history dated back to the pilgrims. Whitfield's house stood near the Acushnet River in Fairhaven, and from the window of an upstairs room where Manjirō spent the first night, a forest of whaleship masts could be seen in the distance.

A widower, Whitfield remarried a few weeks after his return to Albertina Keith and bought a fourteen-acre farm in an area near Fairhaven called Sconticut Neck. Before moving to the farm, the captain put Manjirō in a one-classroom elementary school in the neighborhood of his old house. Education was an exciting new experience for Manjirō, whose family in Japan was too poor to afford school. Manjirō already had rudimentary knowledge of English and quickly learned basic grammar, penmanship and to sing the ABC song with his much younger fellow students.

Manjirō moved to Sconticut Neck as a member of Whitfield's new family. Mrs. Whitfield was warm-hearted, and hard-working, and she and her husband treated Manjirō like their son. Living on a farm was something that exceeded Manjirō's dreams when he was younger. Feudal Japan had a rigid class structure, and farmers were second only to samurai in class hierarchy and enjoyed much higher status than fishermen. Manjirō particularly enjoyed riding horses, a privilege only reserved for higher-ranking samurai in Japan.

As Manjirō's English improved, Whitfield enrolled him in Fairhaven's Bartlett Academy, the town's most prestigious educational institution. Manjirō studied hard and particularly excelled in mathematics. Successfully completing his academy course, Manjirō also apprenticed as a cooper, thus learning an indispensable trade for the whaling industry.

Under the affectionate protection of Whitfield and his wife, Manjirō enjoyed a rich and rewarding life between his sixteenth and nineteenth years. He also acquired the traditional New England beliefs in freedom, independence, and rugged individualism. Yet he experienced at least one instance of racial prejudice when officials at Whitfield's Congregational church would not allow him to share the family pew. Whitfield was indignant and joined a Unitarian church, which accepted Manjirō. Manjirō also learned that in his new town, Japan did not enjoy a high reputation because of its rigid closed-door policy regarding foreigners.

In October 1844, placing Manjirō in charge of the farm, Whitfield left Sconticut Neck for another whaling voyage commanding the *William & Eliza*. But an unexpected whaling opportunity developed for Manjirō; Ira Davis, formerly the *John Howland* harpooner and now captain of the bark *Franklin*, asked the young Japanese to join his crew. Manjirō saw this as a chance to develop his new knowledge of navigation and explore the chance to return to Japan with his shipwrecked Honolulu mates. Mrs. Whitfield urged Manjirō to go.

Determined to Open the “Double-bolted Land”

On May 16, 1846, the *Franklin* left New Bedford. The crew list included Manjirō as “John Mung,” with a job title of steward. Because of the Mexican war that started the same year, the *Franklin* avoided the Cape Horn route. The bark crossed the Atlantic Ocean toward the Azores, rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the southern end of Africa, crossed the Indian Ocean, and finally reached the north Pacific whaling area.

After chasing whales for some months, the *Franklin* came to Guam, a port Manjirō remembered. It was a convenient rendezvous and infor-



Map of Nakahama Manjirō's travels, 1850s, Tokyo National Museum. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/lxscv2>.

mation exchange port for whalers in the Japan grounds. While the *Franklin* was under repair and crewmen rested, Manjirō accompanied Captain Davis to visit other ships. Many captains had harsh words for Manjirō about his government's xenophobic policies. In March 1847, Manjirō wrote Whitfield from Guam indicating the *Franklin* would travel north and then west to the Ryūkyū Islands (the present Okinawa Prefecture) and that he hoped to help open a whaling port there. The *Franklin* arrived at the Ryūkyū Islands in May, and Captain Davis and five men, including Manjirō, landed on one of the islands in a small boat. Manjirō tried to interpret for the Americans and local officials, but he could not understand the islanders' dialect. Although the visitors and officials traded gifts, Manjirō was disappointed that the Americans and locals failed to establish a further relationship.

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The statue of Nakahama Manjirō at Cape Ashizuri. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/o85hr9>.

By the end of 1847, the *Franklin* crew's pursuit of whales in the north Pacific was halted; Davis experienced a mental illness that became insanity, forcing the crew to take the ship to Manila and turn over the captain to the US Consulate. First Mate Issachar Akin became captain, and by popular consent, Manjirō received a promotion to harpooner. The *Franklin* then continued whaling near Japan and finally sailed to Honolulu in October 1848, where Manjirō had a happy reunion with the rest of the castaways—except Jusuke, who had died five years earlier. Toraemon was working at carpentry, and Denzo (Fudenojo had changed his name because of it was difficult for locals to pronounce) and Goemon were just back from a futile attempt to return to Japan. Manjirō told them his plan of returning to Japan through the Ryūkyū Islands and promised to

come back for them. The *Franklin* then left Honolulu, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and reached New Bedford on September 23, 1849.

Welcoming Manjirō back and praising him for his promotion to harpooner, the Whitfield family had exciting news about the California Gold Rush, which spawned gold fever throughout New England. Manjirō, determining that the discovery presented an opportunity to earn money for a return to Japan, asked and gained permission from Captain Whitfield to

go west. Moving quickly, he signed on as a sailor on the *Stieglitz* that was about to leave for San Francisco carrying a cargo of lumber. The *Stieglitz* left New Bedford on November 27, 1849, and arrived in San Francisco by May 1850 via Cape Horn. One of Manjirō's first sights was of the deserted ships by the bay, abandoned by gold seekers. Manjirō worked hard digging and panning gold in the mining areas near Sacramento and fortunately earned more than \$600 US dollars in about seventy days, an enormous amount of money compared with the \$350 US dollars he earned from three and a half years of labor aboard the *Franklin*. Resisting the temptation to earn more, Manjirō hurried back to San Francisco and paid for the first time a passenger fee on a ship that left for Honolulu on September 17.

In Honolulu, Manjirō obtained some needed help from the Reverend Samuel C. Damon, a friend of Whitfield's who directed the Seaman's Chapel and published *The Friend*, the only local source of information. Impressed by Manjirō's determination to go back and open the closed doors of Japan, Damon wrote a story about the planned expedition and successfully solicited donations from readers. On December 17, 1850, the merchant ship *Sarah Boyd* left Honolulu bound for Shanghai with Manjirō, Denzo, Goemon and the small whale boat *Adventurer* that Manjirō had bought with donations, stowed aboard. Toraemon, successful as a carpenter and married to a local woman, chose to remain in Honolulu. As the *Sarah Boyd* approached one of the Ryūkyū Islands, it stopped, and *Adventurer* with the three Japanese men was lowered into the water. The *Sarah Boyd* resumed her Shanghai course. Near evening time on February 2, 1851, almost exactly ten years after the shipwrecked fishermen began their adventure, the three Japanese rowed to shore.

Prejudice Against a Castaway Samurai

The three men had landed on the southern end of Okinawa, the main island in the Ryūkyū Islands chain. Nominally ruled by the Ryūkyū Kingdom, Okinawa was actually controlled by the powerful Kyūshū Satsuma daimyō (feudal lord only second to shōgun in power).

Satsuma officials confiscated the *Adventurer* and all the goods Manjirō stored on it, including important books like *New American Practical Navigator* and a biography of George Washington. Although the outsiders were not treated harshly, Satsuma authorities carefully questioned the new arrivals and put them under house arrest for the next six months.

In the summer, they were moved to Kyūshū, first to Kagoshima and then to Nagasaki, where Tokugawa officials questioned all returned castaways. The men were questioned about all aspects of their experiences since leaving Japan, a process that lasted about ten months, until the three men were finally set free in June 1852.

Upon returning to their home province of Tosa (presently Kochi), the daimyō ordered Kawada Shoryo, a young scholar-painter, to chronicle the castaways' experiences abroad. The result was *Hyosōn Kiryaku* (*A Brief Account of Drifting Toward the Southeast*), a four-volume handwritten manuscript with rich illustrations.⁴ Because of a rising Japanese interest in the outside world, a large number of copies were produced and widely read. In October, Manjirō, Denzo, and Goemon finally went home to joyful reunions with families and friends.

Manjirō's happy homecoming and reunion with his mother was very brief. After three days, he was called back to Kochi and ordered to teach overseas affairs to young samurai leaders and awarded the lowest samurai rank. In class-conscious feudal Japan, it was extraordinary for a lowly fisherman to become a samurai.

The events of Edo Bay in 1853 destabilized the Tokugawa shogunate and rocked all of Japan as four black-hulled American warships, commanded by Commodore Matthew C. Perry, suddenly intruded into the bay. Perry carried a letter from President Millard Fillmore to the emperor, demanding that Japan open its doors to the outside world.

After the "Black Ships" left for Okinawa for the winter, the shōgun's government hurriedly ordered the Tosa daimyō to bring Manjirō to Edo

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as soon as possible. The US was an unknown entity, shogunate leaders needed more information quickly, and key officials considered Manjirō a highly useful source of information about the US. Manjirō soon found himself sitting in front of Lord Abe Masahiro and other high-ranking shogunate officials, and he spoke frankly about his American-related experiences. Manjirō emphasized how much American whalers wished, for sheer humanitarian reasons, that Japanese isolation end and that Japan's ports be opened. Top Tokugawa leaders, impressed with both Manjirō's demeanor and the extent of his knowledge, appointed him in December 1853 as samurai directly in service to the Edo shogunate. The allowance of the surname of Nakahama (the name of his native village) accompanied this elevation in rank, and Manjirō was now called "Nakahama Manjirō."

Some high officials recommended that Manjirō serve as an interpreter for the imminent negotiations with Perry, but Tokugawa Nariaki, daimyō of Mito and an influential relative of the shōgun, strongly opposed this suggestion. Nariaki argued that since Americans saved and educated Manjirō, he would not do anything to disadvantage his rescuers and thus was unfit as an interpreter. Nariaki even hinted of a possible American plot to use Manjirō as a spy and advised that he be kept away from the Americans and remain ignorant of negotiation developments. When Perry returned and negotiations with Japanese officials resumed, Chinese and Dutch languages were used since no Japanese could match Manjirō's working knowledge of English.

After tedious negotiations, a treaty was signed on March 31, 1854, providing for the opening of two ports: Shimoda and Hakodate. Japan agreed to treat shipwrecked men humanely and allow foreign ships to buy provisions. Although Manjirō played no official part in negotiation, the recommendation he made to the shogunate was reflected in the treaty that ended Japan's nearly 250-year-old isolation policy.

Manjirō's Legacy

Manjirō continued his work as shōgun's samurai in many different capacities until the 1868 Meiji Restoration that ended Tokugawa rule. Eleven years earlier, in 1857, he completed his translation of Nathaniel Bowditch's *The New American Practical Navigator*, the American seafarers' bible, which he brought back from the US. Manjirō's translation constituted the introduction of modern scientific navigation methods to Japan. In the same year, Manjirō was appointed professor of navigation at the shogunate's Naval Training School and made a great contribution to the success of the first Japanese trans-Pacific voyage to San Francisco by the *Kanrin-Maru* in 1860. He was also a popular teacher of English and American culture, authoring in 1859 the first English conversation textbook in Japan. Manjirō included the ABC song he first learned in the little Fairhaven school. A number of Manjirō's students would go on to play seminal roles in the Meiji-era modernization of Japan.

Perhaps because of the fond memory of the first English words he learned—"There she blows!"—Manjirō remained passionate about introducing American whaling methods, but his initial shogunate financial support for this endeavor was short-lived because of ongoing political turmoil.

Manjirō returned from his adventures with many conscious and unconscious messages for the Japanese people; one unconscious message was hidden in *Hyosōn Kiryaku*. A painted illustration of the whaling ship *John Howland* is included in the book, followed on the next page by an enlarged illustration of the ship's stern. A careful examination of the second illustration reveals an eagle with a ribbon in its beak containing some letters. In order to include the meaning of the entire ribbon inscription, Shoryo wrote a note at the corner of the page, "*E pluribus unum*," and, in Japanese, "This is said to be a motto used for the United States."⁵

It is not clear how much Manjirō understood the meaning of the Latin phrase, but Shoryo's inclusion indicates that Manjirō knew the importance of these words. Manjirō probably thought it was related to the spirit of

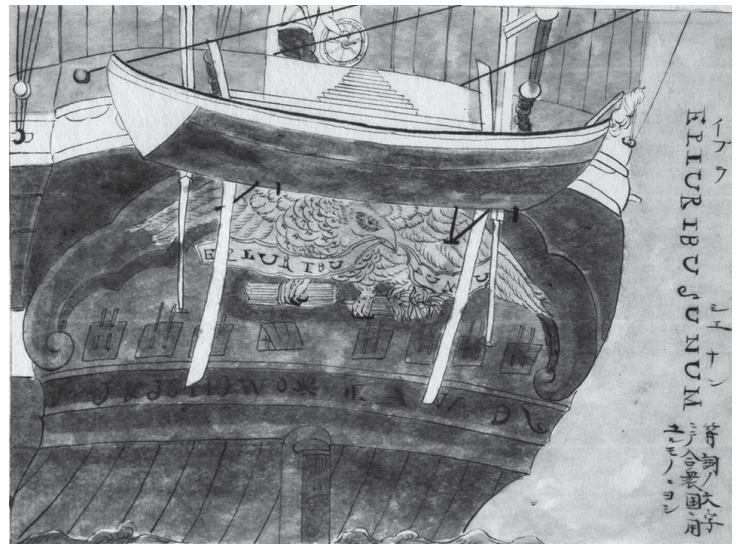


Illustration of the *John Howland* with *E Pluribus Unum* from *Drifting Toward The Southeast*.

Source: *Drifting Toward the Southeast*, AMs 1296/14 I.31L, The Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

democracy he imbibed personally when he was living in Fairhaven and his experiences as a sailor on whaling ships.

In 2011, President Barack Obama invoked "E pluribus unum" in a commemoration speech for the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Part of Obama's speech follows: "These past ten years underscore the bonds between all Americans . . . You still see people of every conceivable race, religion, and ethnicity . . . all of them reaching for the same American dream—E pluribus unum, out of many, we are one."⁶ In this age of globalization, E pluribus unum can be construed not only as the "American dream" but the dream of all mankind. In this sense, the message Manjirō brought home more than 160 years ago is still fresh and valid, especially for the Japanese of today. ■

NOTES

1. *Moby-Dick* quotes in this article are from Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967, 1976).
2. The logbook of the *John Howland* is now in the possession of Mr. Robert O. Whitfield, the fifth-generation descendant of Captain Whitfield. Manjirō's letters to Whitfield in later years are also in his possession.
3. There are fascinating parallels between the lives of Manjirō and Herman Melville. Melville left Fairhaven, Massachusetts, as a green-hand aboard the *Acushnet* in the same January of 1841 when Manjirō and his fishing mates were shipwrecked. The Japanese were saved by Fairhaven-based Captain Whitfield. In 1842, Manjirō and Melville were in the South Pacific about the same time. When the *Acushnet* anchored off the island Nuku Hiva in what is now French Polynesia, Melville jumped ship on July 9, 1842. *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, the same year Manjirō returned to Japan after his ten-year adventures in the Pacific and America. Parallels between Manjirō and Herman Melville are detailed in the first chapter, "The Floating World," of Christopher Benfey, *The Great Wave* (New York: Random House, 2003).
4. Kawada Shoryo, *Hyosōn Kiryaku* and *Drifting Toward the Southeast*, trans. Nagakuni and Kitadai, (1852; Spinner Publications, Inc., 2003). See the illustration on page 38.
5. Ibid.
6. "Obama's Speech on the Anniversary of 9/11," *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified September 11, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/qy2an6u>.

JUNJI KITADAI is a Japanese journalist and historian. He grew up in Kochi, Japan and as a boy was steeped in the lore of Manjirō. After graduating from Columbia University's Journalism School in 1963, he worked as a broadcast journalist for thirty-five years for TBS: a Japanese TV and radio network. After retiring from TBS, he concentrated in the study of the Manjirō saga. He co-translated and published the English version of the Manjirō manuscript, *Drifting Toward the Southeast*, in 2003. He is currently preparing a new non-fiction story based on Manjirō.