

ALBATROSS FOREVER

永遠的信天翁

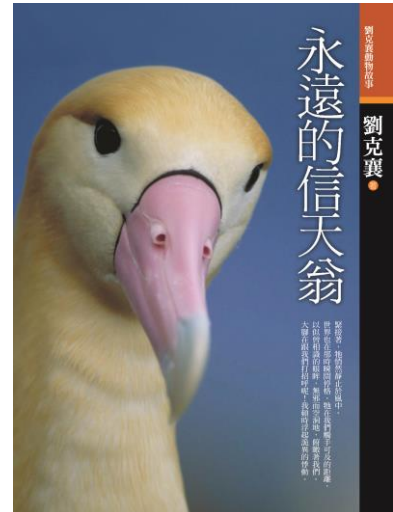
Winner of the 2009 Taipei Book Fair Award

The albatross is the largest seabird in the North Pacific. A hundred years ago, the ocean skies would be overcast with clouds of their snow-white wings as they flew overhead. By the 1940s, however, they were on the verge of extinction. Why did these birds that once visited Taiwan every year disappear from view? And how did they establish new colonies on remote islands far away? What has this to do with Taiwan?

The author has written an ingenious animal story infused with local flavours of Taiwan. Through the characters of a young ornithologist and a short-tailed albatross with an extraordinary ability to fly, the Liu Ka-Shiang retraces a period of history gripped by human greed and ignorance, vividly recreating the story of the albatross, while simultaneously exploring the meaning of flying.

Liu Ka-Shiang 劉克襄

From an early age, Liu Ka-Shiang has channeled the spirit of the nineteenth century natural historian in his explorations of the world around him, earning him the nickname Birdman among his friends. He brings a poet's eye and a historian's attention to detail to bear on Taiwan's diverse flora, fauna and its people. He has published over forty books to date, including poetry, essays and novels, as well as travel writing, bringing him a slew of the country's top literary awards.



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ALBATROSS FOREVER

By Liu Ka-Shiang. Translated by Wen Hsu.

Leaving Torishima

The bad news came.

Less than a week after the adults had left, a typhoon was moving fast towards Torishima.

As the young birds stood on Great Slope, they could see in the distance the unusual reddish brown hue of the sky above the south-western horizon. A large clump of cloud, thick with layers, spreading and rolling, slowly floated northward. They understood somehow that a terror they had never before experienced was coming their way.

One wonders if they heard from the adults what it meant for an albatross to fly in such weather. On stormy days other seabirds may escape to a safe haven, but albatrosses, being natural-born flyers, will welcome the wind and the rain, exploring in the elements the deepest meaning of flight. If they were adults, or if they had flown over the ocean for some time and had become skilful navigators, the challenge could have been a pleasant one and they might have looked forward to the chance to soar at the edge of the storm.

For an albatross, the day it encounters its first storm is the day it comes of age. For the young still attempting their first flight, this was the worst news possible. Threads of rain cut through the sky and they scrambled back to their nests to hunker down in silence and prepare for the imminent rain. Before the morning was over, the threads had become arrows and the wind blew even stronger. Sand and stones started to whirl and broken branches thrashed around. Strong gales howled, seemingly intent on scalping the Great Slope. The young could only bury their heads deep in their wing feathers and hug the ground, relinquishing control of their fate to the will of Nature.

The typhoon arrived ahead of schedule and knocked Tanaka, the rest of the crew and I off our course. But there was nothing we could do. The blind was directly below the cliff and not a place to hang around while the typhoon was raging. On the eve before the storm landed, we evacuated amid drizzle and light wind, albeit with reluctance. After returning to the dormitory, we paced the room, praying silently that all the newly fledged albatrosses be spared.

The violence of the storm was horrendous. Beginning in the afternoon and all the way through the following morning, it howled with all its might. Our dormitory's roof was partly lifted and suffered a gaping hole. Water seeped into our rooms. Nobody slept. We busied ourselves salvaging documents and materials and protecting computers and other equipment. Only in the afternoon did the force of the wind and rain gradually lessen.

Despite our exhaustion, we were in no mood to rest. We stepped outside tentatively to inspect the surroundings. Several trees in the low gullies of the island had fallen and others stood stripped of their leaves. The storage shacks nearby had lost their metal roofs. The path to the meadow was buried under mud and rocks leaving barely any sign of it once having existed. It would probably be a while until it could be reopened.

The miserable chaos only made us even more acutely aware of the young albatrosses. After straightening things up a little in the area around the dorm, we tried to make our way to the meadow. The rain was light and we repaired the trail as we pushed forward. The grassy slope before us was like a sheet that had been crumpled up and then unfolded. What had once been a lovely winding path was now in broken sections, with many parts washed away. We climbed with caution, but an assistant lost his step and fell, twisting his arm. So the plan to reach Great Slope was called off.

The following morning we set off again. What should we do now that the meadow trail was impassable? Tanaka thought of another route. Known as the path used by the geologists when they were exploring the volcano, it was a little longer but luckily had escaped relatively unscathed. Still, it took us more than an hour to reach the blind.

What about the young birds? Once there, we counted using the scope. Most of the young crouched motionless in the shallow cavities. Every one of them seemed exhausted and too weak to stand up or flap their wings. The first count left us feeling unsure, so we repeated it. This time we were able to confirm that nine had disappeared during the storm. We suspected that they had been blown away and into the ocean. Tanaka suggested a more optimistic scenario: perhaps they had left before the typhoon unleashed its full force? But we knew, in our hearts, that this was unlikely.

The fact of the matter was that we didn't have much time to dwell on our sorrow. That was because a more serious concern had presented itself. How would the birds sustain themselves after the typhoon had left? Its sudden arrival had obviously slashed two to three days off their flight practice time and many of them had consumed a lot of energy in fending off the winds and rain. Their parents had probably not accounted for it in their feeding schedule. How much strength did the young have left to learn to fly, we worried?

The young seemed to understand very well the gravity of the situation. Every exhausted body in the colony seemed to pulsate with an unsuppressed anxiety. Just like us, they couldn't wait to see the sky turn blue again.

The wind and rain finally stopped. Young birds stood up shakily, stretching their necks and flapping their wings. The most immediate priority was to dry themselves. The young would not want soaking-wet feathers to drain their energy further. Some kept combing themselves, intent on making every feather shine.

Without fine feathers, there is no flight. Feathers become worn, lost and need to be replaced. Most birds, therefore, are born with the instinct to care for them. They know how to use their beaks to transfer oil secretions from under their tails to their flight feathers. For albatrosses, this is an even more important requirement. Look at their wings and you will notice that the area that must be cared for is much greater than other birds and the time spent on it is far longer.

From inside the blind, it was as if we were watching a large airfield where pilots inspected every instrument to prepare for takeoff. The young birds looked nervous. Time seemed to tighten, leaving no room to rest or chat. Not one of them emerged to take a stroll the whole afternoon. Seeing that they were about to take flight, we got up even earlier the next day. We were on our way before dawn, taking the detour again. It was not yet seven am by the time we entered the blind. We waited in excitement.

The weather had cleared up even more by then. There was no drizzle. Most of the young birds were not in the shallow cavities but had left the nesting colony. They stood extending their necks, waiting for the sea breeze and shaping themselves into suitably streamlined poses. They were cautious in attempting any move that would take

them off the ground. They also seemed to sense that they shouldn't waste their energy after the typhoon. At first they only looked at one another, nobody made a move. For a while, it looked like none of them would step forward; they had become a collection of domestic ducks aimlessly hanging around.

Finally, one of them took the jump.

Expanded its wings, ran a few steps and leaped into the air.

It dropped back to the ground and staggered, barely regaining balance, and then crashed into several young, causing some commotion. Such an embarrassing takeoff was as disgraceful as the landing the adult birds had managed earlier.

We found out later that this was Large Feet. With her test run leading the way, the other young fell in line. But in the beginning, they were tentative in unfolding their wings, as if afraid of hurting themselves if they opened them too wide. When they ran, few risked leaping because they almost didn't dare to let their feet leave the ground. It is hard to imagine that these clumsy practice sessions could lead to soaring flight across the vast oceans. What a disappointment it is to see them so awkward on landing when we are fully aware that they are the most capable flyers!

I watched Large Feet running again with her wings open. She leaped into the air and glided for six or seven meters. But again she faltered and landed, this time falling hard. Her head and feet touched the ground at the same time and she rolled over, almost bending her wings. When she righted herself, her dark brown chest was covered with wet, sticky volcanic ash. Luckily, other birds were alert enough to get out of her way before she landed, as if they had known that this would happen. Other young were a little scared after what they had observed and almost nobody else tried to fly again. From the failure of Large Feet, they seemed to detect that it was not the right time. The wind over the ocean was not stable enough for them to steer. It was not time to leave yet. They had not learned all the necessary skills for takeoff.

Tanaka wetted his finger with saliva and tested the force of the wind. He seemed to agree with the young. 'Wind speed isn't strong enough. It's not right for flying,' he said.

When Tanaka forgets himself, it's as if he becomes one of the birds. We called it 'Albatross Talk' behind his back. As the flight time approached, such comments and assessments tended to become even more frequent.

Despite the fact that they didn't take off, the young seemed to have a better grasp after the typhoon of what it meant to fly. They unfolded their wings softly, closed their eyes even, as if they were flying across the ocean, riding the wind, delighting in the glide. Osamu was just in such a state of enchantment, resembling a seeker of truth who had achieved enlightenment.

Large Feet, alone, continued flapping in excitement, creating a dust storm around her. She was like a wild duck fanning her wings haphazardly, fearing that she would not be able to lift herself up again. After some time, however, she saw the others had hunkered down and she joined them. She walked about as if wanting to make friends, meddling here and snooping there. It looked as if she were totally confident of this thing called flying, and she was ready to take off any time.

When would the young take flight? Their energy must have been draining fast. We had a gut feeling they would leave in the next day or so. They must have been terribly anxious, but it would be better not to delay too long considering the unpredictability of the weather. We all agreed with Tanaka that the birds were staying low, barely

opening their wings because they must be waiting for the proper wind to surge from the sea.

In the afternoon, several young birds again practiced their take offs. Occasionally, they ran a couple of steps and with the help of their spread wings, they tried to leap into the air. Some were learning how to land by levelling and hanging down their big webbed feet, shaping their body into a five-point star. Some attempted to leave the ground for a short time before crashing back down. Yet their landings, despite all the falls that came with them, were more stable than Large Feet's had been that morning. No one else suffered another embarrassing rollover.

What about Large Feet? She slept curled up in the shallow hollow while the others practised. Maybe she was tired.

It was late and most likely they wouldn't depart today. But many of them could extend and raise their wings with familiarity. We all believed that tomorrow would be the day.

We decided not to return to the dorm that night and instead slept in the blind. None of us wanted to miss the spectacle. At daybreak, we were by the windows. Almost all the birds were still deep in slumber, it seemed. Once the sky showed some faint reflection of daylight, they started to awake. They didn't roam around like the day before. Any birdwatcher would intuit that something was imminent.

So it was. Just past seven am, Tanaka called out in alarm, 'It is about to start, Teruo.'

I was writing my notes, but I dropped everything and hurried to the window. Yet the young birds were just where they were. I was bewildered. Suddenly a strong wind came from the south. I felt the warmth of the sea on my face. It was hard to describe—sunny, full and intense.

Tanaka wetted his finger again to test the wind direction. 'Perfect!'

There was a deep relish in his voice, as if he was enjoying a sumptuous meal. The rest of the crew shook their heads and grinned. I, however, could sympathize with him. One spring I tasted the same wonderful wind at the mouth of Tamsui River where I was watching the migration of the water birds. We were now on an isolated tiny island in the Pacific; the seasonal wind was naturally more palpable.

The wind had a tangible bulk, a fecundity to it that is hard to describe, and it passed in waves. Mother Nature, it seemed, brought enormous kindness and goodness with it, and spoke to all beings and all the young birds, 'My children, take flight. I will be by your side.'

The young indeed responded to its loving warmth. They knew, with their limited time, there would be no better window than now to leave their homeland. So we watched as they craned their necks where crinum lilies swayed, as if welcoming the unknown. They looked up and waited, with gravity and reverence. Finally, one albatross spread its wings and began running. I had expected it to be Large Feet, but it was Osamu.

He raised his wings—just like a man learning to fly a hang glider for the first time by grasping the airfoil—and started running downwards. The speed helped his two wings to lift. After just a few steps, he gave a casual kick and the wind lifted him with ease. He floated up slowly but surely, like a kite, into the air. And he drifted out to the sea, carried by the wind.

Soon after, all the other young birds extended their wings and like light airplanes taking off on an aircraft carrier, wobbled and took off. One after the other, they left in a hurry. Shinzi, Toukatsu... All our friends bid their farewell to the land.

I would have been excited and nervous had I been one of them. Maybe I would have found it hard to believe, I

was flying! I too would have wobbled as I made my way out over the sea. Once in the air, I would enter the vast and endless ocean, accepting whatever challenges it threw my way. It would not be just a short glide followed by a long rest. Once on my way, it would be two or three years before I returned to Torishima. There are very few animals that take such Odyssean journeys as a natural part of growing up. All anticipated, right there at the first takeoff.

What an extraordinary inaugural flight! Such thrill!

Almost all of had soared with ease and were now far away. Most of the young birds, with few exceptions, glided off across the sea. Their wings were flat and extended, they were just gray shapes against the sky. There were a few, maybe because of nervousness or other factors—perhaps they were in too much of a hurry—who were unable to coordinate the running with their extended wings and so were dragged down, fell ungainly and had to start all over again. Large Feet was one of these stragglers.

The timing of Large Feet's jump was fine and the positioning of her wings was also appropriate, but her downhill running seemed to lack speed. Maybe she had inadvertently run into loose sand, thus losing her balance. Once in the air, the force of the wind suddenly dropped and she had to land right away. But she would not give up and she pushed hard on the foot that had touched the ground. Such a manoeuvre may be seen occasionally in other birds—but it is certainly not in the albatross' flying manual.

Of course, one leg was unable to support her seven to eight kilograms of weight and she came down hard on both her head and feet again. She ended up on her back, looking ridiculous. Luckily a clump of grass stalled her and gave some buffer to the impact. Her wings were fine, but she suffered a long scratch across her chest. It was an ugly tumble. It took her some effort to right herself again.

By this time, most of the young had gathered in the air and were gliding in front of the sea cliff, practicing circling while enjoying the gentle blow of the sea wind. Three or four made their way towards Great Slope, as if intending to take another look at their home for fear that they wouldn't recognise it when they came back. But they couldn't stay for more than a few seconds before the wind carried them away and across Torishima. I suspected that they had not mastered how to ride the wind and could not help drifting off.

Yet, after they were blown far off Torishima, it seemed that soon they found a way to break away from the wind's entanglements, making a big circle back to the front of the cliff where they joined the rest of the group.

'Are they going to circle for days?' I asked Tanaka, bewildered. I had read a little about how the young, when first leaving home, usually circle their island, practicing their flying and acquainting themselves with the surroundings of their home.

'Well, in the past they used to, when the weather was good. It was as if they were reluctant to leave. A romance between the birds and the island,' said Tanaka, as if enchanted. 'But this time with the typhoon, they don't have the physical strength and they will be eager to find food. They probably won't stay for long.'

Large Feet was a straggler and we were especially concerned about her. We watched her finally get back on her feet after a bit of struggle. There was no more room for her to dash down the slope, but instead of walking back up, she moved to a nearby slope on high ground. She held her breath, spread her wings and tried again.

Was that a takeoff? we wondered. She ran only one small step and leaped. My God! Did she really think the wind was strong enough? She was putting her life on the line. She began losing altitude, but at the moment she was going to touch down on a bush, the sea wind seemed to prop her up. Just like an airplane losing one engine, she

wobbled in the bumpy air current, before being buoyed up again.

Large Feet seemed to know that she was late, so she now rushed to follow the wind like a kite with a broken string and rose quickly. She flitted past the deep turquoise sea south of Torishima, more like a circling raptor showing off.

Tanaka could not help applauding. He called out in excitement, using expressions of encouragement typical to the Japanese, 'Large Feet, yes! How brave to take off again in Immovable Mountain style!'

Hearing his praise, I felt at a loss as to how to judge Large Feet's flying ability. I wondered, 'How can there be such a rash albatross?'

No sooner as Large Feet in the air, than she caught up with the group ahead of her and joined the party. There were no young birds left on Great Slope any more. Everybody had made it out. We came out of the blind, rushed down and continued scanning the sky with binoculars.

There were still over twenty birds patrolling the sea in front of the cliff. Most other young, however, were by now out of sight.