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Postcolonialism and Islands: Introduction

Godfrey Baldacchino[1] and Stephen A. Royle[2]

No other type of territory has been so affected by the colonial endeavor as islands. Islands, especially the smaller entities, were the first territories to be colonized in the European Age of Discovery, suffered the colonial burden most intimately and thoroughly, and have been the last to seek and obtain independence. Controversially, such a triple heritage may have endowed these locales with the recipe for a particularly benign form of postcolonialism: higher contemporary incomes and better living standards.[1] Perhaps just as dramatically, island societies have been at the forefront in actually struggling to postpone or prevent independence, with considerable success to date.[2] And so, islands also offer the intriguing complication of postcolonialism in a non-post-colonial environment; the hyphen in "post-colonial" inserted to make it mean "after colonialism has ended." Apart from Gibraltar (an enclave in any case) and Western Sahara, all 16 of the world's remaining "non-self-governing territories" on the UN's list—often referred to as "overseas territories"—are islands.[3]

Few may realize it, but no island has always enjoyed political independence. Many are, even today, just possessions of neighboring continental countries. Moreover, while they might have some administrative authority even unto being an autonomous region (as with the Balearic Islands of Spain), they remain offshore parts and peripheries of a mainland state. There are island nations, of course: almost a quarter (44 of the current 192 members) of the United Nations is totally enisled. Yet, although the level, nature, timing, and duration of external control has varied—just think of Barbados, Great Britain, Indonesia, Japan, and Tonga—each and every one of these sovereign polities has passed through some period of foreign administration during their history.

There is a tradition of using islands as small-scale, natural scientific laboratories, most famously expressed in the biogeography pioneered by Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace.[4] A hint of this tradition may be seen in Beth Wightman's article in this collection, wherein she states that, in terms of numbers, islands made up 70% of the political units of the British Empire and so have had much influence on postcolonial literary (and, by implication, other) narratives. Islands, these bounded spaces, are thus sometimes seen as scaled down versions of larger worlds. Yet this need not always be the case as islands can also have special qualities predicated upon their differences to mainland areas. It is thus that Godfrey Baldacchino concludes his article, illustrating how most of the remaining colonial islands, although jealous of self-determination, do not wish to follow former mainland colonies to full sovereignty. He challengingly suggests that postcolonial research has found it easier to deconstruct French interaction with Algeria rather than to seek to understand the more nuanced and in many ways more complicated interaction

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between France and Mayotte; the discipline has preferred to study India, not Bermuda; and Indonesia rather than Aruba. One might build up a robust case for islands having a significant role in postcolonial studies, both through their representativeness and through their differences from other, larger, and more typical foci of research in this field.

Postcolonial studies are also multidisciplinary. That the essays here offer applications to a particular type of area—islands (and the island continent of Australia in the case of Elizabeth McMahon's article)—does not detract from the necessary range of approaches needed for a worthwhile postcolonial collection. Broadly, the articles here deal with literature, history, and political and social sciences, with geography often serving as a unifying transversal thematic. The significance of the last discipline to postcolonial studies is acknowledged by Beth Wightman, herself from a department of English, who writes, "The discipline of postcolonial studies has at its core questions of geography: who had control of particular spaces and places, and who has that control now? What happened as a result of such control?" Other articles also acknowledge links between subjects; thus, McMahon writes of "the alignment between geography and imagination that is literature." The impact of tourism on islands is another focus here: a disturbing image that leaps off Anthony Carrigan's article on St. Lucia is that of tourists as pink shrimps.

The Caribbean features prominently in this collection, and its writers are discussed as well, especially Nobel-laureate Derek Walcott from St. Lucia whose epic poem *Omeros* features both in Anthony Carrigan's article and in Maeve Tynan's study of the significance of the sea to Caribbean peoples' identity and culture.[5] Baldacchino takes a global reach for his study of "upside down decolonization": the way in which so many island territories still in a colonial relationship now baulk against assuming full independence. Stephen Royle follows this up in greater detail for the United Kingdom Overseas Territories, especially Bermuda and the Falkland Islands (British symbolism which features on the cover of this journal issue).

Other places used as case studies here are found in McMahon's study of Australia's "ongoing negotiation with its identity as an island continent" and Wightman's piece on Ireland. The latter is focused upon Eilís ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House*, a novel on a post-apocalypse Ireland that Wightman intriguingly interweaves with *Robinson Crusoe*;[6] while, of course, the article also speaks to the postcolonial position of the divided island of Ireland: "the integrity of the geographical field—the Irish island—here is overruled by the integrity of the British nation state," a theme also touched on by Royle. These articles give an appropriate Hibernian flavor to the collection, for the articles in this issue were among those presented at Queen's University Belfast's Postcolonial Research Forum conference "Postcolonial Islands, Geographic, Theoretical and Human" held at the university in September 2007 under the direction of Anthony Soares of the School of Languages, Literatures and Performing Arts.

Even with regard to McMahon's article on Australia, it is the characteristics of islands—often referred to in the emerging field of "island studies" as "islandness"—that comes through strongly here, focused through the filter of postcolonialism. Baldacchino shows how most of the remaining "colonies" are islands that have been in a colonial relationship for a long time and have become more thoroughly Westernized than other places, partly because the bounded nature of the island negates the possibility of escape to an area—a cultural and psychological hinterland, as much as an economic one—free from the colonizer's ubiquitous influence. Many of these colonial islands had no indigenous peoples; while of those which did, many were soon exterminated or swamped; and given that many islands were (and are being reproposed) of utility to the metropolitan power at least partly as strategic bases, revictualling ports, or fortresses, querulous nativism had always been discouraged.

Carrigan considers island specificity set against the homogenization of mass tourism. Tourists seek difference from their home place but do not consider that the islands they favor might have differences between themselves. There is a lingering trope of the "paradisiacal island," a "touristic

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fetishization" that leads to the development of a generic island blueprint with unfortunate consequences for the separate places caught up in this vortex of globalization, given often environmentally insensitive development and cultural commoditization.

Finally, Tynan discusses how significant is the sea to islanders, especially those of the Caribbean given its link with slavery, that most cruel of colonial practices. To most of the people of the Caribbean, she asserts the sea is a "wound of history." But she also has the crossing of the Atlantic by the slaves, the Middle Passage, as a metaphorical birth from which renewal has come. Tynan quotes from *Epilogue* by the poet Grace Nichols from Guyana in this regard:[7]

> I have crossed an ocean
> I have lost my tongue
> From the root of the old one
> A new one has sprung.

A discussion of island tongues and the voices to which they give rise, as well as other aspects of postcolonialism in the island context, follows.

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Notes

1. Consult Feyrer and Sacerdote (2006). For a critique, see Bertram (2007).
2. See, for example, Connell (2008).
3. See United Nations Committee on Decolonization (2008). Note that the list in the document does not include most French overseas possessions, including mainland French Guiana, which are deemed to have met the UN's criteria for "a full measure of self-government."
4. See Darwin (1979) and Wallace (1975).
5. See Walcott (1990).
6. See Dhuibhne (1990).
7. See Nichols (1984).

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