

Review Article: Islands Matter

Islands: From Atlantis to Zanzibar

Steven Roger Fischer

London, Reaktion Books, 2012 pp. 336, ISBN 9781780230320 (hardback)

Islands and Britishness: A Global Perspective

Jodie Matthews and Daniel Travers (Eds)

Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012 pp. vii + 270, ISBN 9781443835169 (hardback)

Throughout its pages, *The Round Table* has kept up a lively and critical conversation on small states, but I doubt whether the specific challenges of island life—most small states are islands, or groups of islands, anyway—have ever been treated directly. It is as if such an obvious and self-evident feature of geography is to be permanently relegated to the status of backdrop, and quickly dismissed or moved aside in order to permit one to focus on more interesting topics.

‘Island studies’ has, however, definitely come of age in recent decades: an effect of a more relaxed accommodation with issues of materiality; a more rigorous pursuit with a spate of ‘area studies’; a coming-to-terms with the embedded economics, politics and culture of place in an age of sweeping global trends; and a broader appeal for a more plural and more comparative island–island scholarship, not least from among small island students and academics themselves. Being the 50th anniversary of the independence of the world’s first small (and island) states in the Pacific (Samoa) and the Caribbean (Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica), 2012 also regaled us with two engaging publications that both easily represent and capture the global and pluri-disciplinary reach of island studies.

Fischer’s was not an easy book to write. The mere thought of tackling the subject of islands—comprehensively, bluntly, globally, and including both material islands and those ‘of the mind’—just boggles. I know of only one other, singly authored text that sought to do the same: Stephen Royle’s masterly *A Geography of Islands* (2001). The result with Fischer is, as one may expect, both laudably impressive and somewhat disappointing.

The scope and reach of *Islands* is awesome: its subtitle *From Atlantis to Zanzibar* is an ominous signal of this. Fischer takes a largely time-based approach, framing his core chapters between a review of the geological origins of islands in the throes of plate tectonics and the eventual demise of our planet, by then a single isle bereft of water, in the throes of a dying sun. The rest is a powerful exposé of material that speaks to the history, economic development, politics, imagination, literature and artistic rendition of/from/for islands. The jargon is semi-popular—Fischer has a penchant for quotable

quotes—with all citations and references collated at the end of the book, so as not to obstruct the flow.

The task at hand is, of course, immense. Fischer handles its organisation by having us switch focus from one island or island group to another, one paragraph at a time, as if always to remind us that our planet is such a diverse smorgasbord of islands and island lives. Especially valuable are the brief cameos and stories that have proved significant: take the exploits of Pierre Poivre that robbed the Netherlands of their monopoly over the clove and nutmeg trade (p. 140); or the poignant story of the Bikini islanders, whose homeland was transformed into a deadly nuclear wasteland (pp. 175–176). Fischer has a fine pen (as readers of his other books would confirm) and he is best when describing such events. Elsewhere, however, he is less captivating, even boring and confusing, especially when the reader is confronted with a considerable amount of data: island names, details of locations, land area, population sizes, rankings and other statistics. Strangely absent, for a book of this kind, are a series of handy maps that would have visually identified the many islands being mentioned, explained and explored. Not all of us know where Kapingamarangi is (p. 278).

The encyclopaedic scope of this publication invariably exposes it to some errors. Some of these are factual. There are *no* Arawaks in Barbados today (p. 110); there could *not* have been any ‘Italians’ settling in Fort Amsterdam in 1624: Italy only came into being in 1860 (p. 100); France has *not* absorbed the islands of Crozet, Kerguelen, St Paul and Amsterdam as a *département* (p. 183): they are rather a *territoire d’outre-mer*, an overseas territory; the Cook Islands and Niue do *not* ‘enjoy independence’ but are largely self-governing (p. 124); rather than mining dying out in Greenland (p. 129), it is only just starting, and the retreating glaciers are making much more of the Greenlandic mass accessible to mining operations; cod fishing has *not* died out from Iceland (p. 141); and ‘Western Samoa’ (p. 160) has officially been Samoa since 1997.

Other mistakes are the effect of sweeping statements where the author fails to appreciate specific details that may provide kinks in a generic argument. How could the European invasion of the Pacific Ocean be fairly described as ‘pacific’ (p. 112), and by the author’s own yardstick? Just by arguing that it was less violent and destructive than the Caribbean one does not make the Pacific version of European colonisation benign. Economic leakages from island tourism cannot just be grossly defined as ‘60%’ (p. 157), as the rate depends on many variables. And why is running many an (especially small) island state described as ‘sailing an empty ship’ (p. 162)? Is the author making a parody of small state governance, just because economic options are limited?

This last query takes me to a further serious criticism of this book: we are not presented with any information explaining how it was compiled. Some of Fischer’s arguments and often bold declarations would surely need to be read and savoured in context. Are his views the outcome of the author’s own travelling experience and multi-island sojourns? To what extent is this just a review of very selective secondary readings? Does the author have a special debt to particular, inspirational texts—such as Frank Talbot and Robert Stevenson’s *Oceans and Islands* (1991) and Louise Young’s *Islands: Portraits of Miniature Worlds* (1999)—which are the most cited? Where does he stand on the issues he has raised? We just do not know.

Finally, for a wide-ranging, fact-laden book of this size, an eight-page, two-column index is simply insufficient and most frustrating.

Like David Quammen's powerful *Song of the Dodo* (1996), Fischer has a rare ability to explain and expose in clear, jargon-free language what he has to say about islands, and what islands have to say about other topics; and one may long ponder on his pithy assertions. His two-page preface to the book is already clear testimony of this skill. I thank him for reminding us that '... in human history, economy, politics, literature, art, psychology and so many other things, islands have been a co-measure of humankind itself' (p. 6).

Turning now to Matthews and Travers, they also offer us islands from a global perspective, but theirs is a book that is engrossed with one particular dimension of contemporary island life: Britishness. An elusive concept to be sure, but a basic idea that departs from a colonial experience and is transmuted into a historical-cultural link, a nostalgic affinity with Empire and Commonwealth, an aspiration for a mythical homeland, a loyalty galvanised in war, as much as a manufactured identity for touristic consumption. The chapters of this book scour such diverse locales as the Isle of Wight, the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, Orkney and Shetland—all islands fairly contiguous to the main island of Great Britain and all members of the 'British isles' for now (an ominous referendum on Scottish independence beckons in 2014, with Shetlanders among its least enthusiastic sympathisers)—and on to the more far-flung locales of Bermuda, Cyprus, Gibraltar, Grenada, Heligoland, Hong Kong, Jamaica, Malta, St Helena as well as antipodean New Zealand and Tasmania. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the book's dust jacket photo of stately, red-painted telephone boxes surrounded by palm trees at the old Naval Dockyard in Bermuda (courtesy of Stephen Royle) says it all.

The year 2012 was a vintage year to explore this fascinating topic. With the summer Olympic extravaganza, and the differently glamorous Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations, both on display in London, Britain did not just cash in on retail sales and tourist numbers: *Islandness and Britishness* is a timely wake-up call to reflect on the British legacy, both far and near, with those who remain the Queen's (post)-colonial subjects (as in the overseas territories of Bermuda, Gibraltar and St Helena, reviewed in Chapters 1 and 12) as much as with those whose link is a tenuous and distant memory (as in Heligoland, given to Germany by Britain in a land swap deal in 1890 and heavily bombed by the Royal Air Force in 1945, and reviewed in Chapter 15).

The island problematic deftly weaves through the various chapters of this book. Britain is itself an island, as much material as fictive, and its iconic affinity with other islanders was part of the official discourse justifying the Falklands conflict with Argentina in 1982 (with Churchill as an earlier exponent of this nissological narrative, as described by Matthews in Chapter 3). What this book does superbly is to deploy a very diverse cast of authors to tease out the elusive British factor by means of an equally diverse range of epistemologies and heterotopias. Take, for instance, the outcry after journalist Madeleine Bunting recast Jersey islanders as Machiavellian collaborators during the German occupation of their island in the Second World War, and insinuated (rather wildly, in historiographic retrospect) that Britons would have acted in much the same way had Britain been occupied by Nazi forces (Chapter 3). Or consider the ritual of serving afternoon tea to British tourists in Malta, even as most Maltese would drink coffee (Chapter 5). Or mull over the quantitative study exploring the titillating gap between 'Comeovers' and natives, and the study of irony, irreverence and political satire, both from the Isle of Man (Chapters 6 and 13).

There is some content overlap among the 19 chapters, as is the case with the review of the commemoration of Liberation Day in Jersey (Chapters 3 and 18); and an even poorer index than Fischer, with less than 100 entries. There is also a rather genteel and uncritical presentation of Britishness: to what extent is this camouflaged Englishness, underscoring the tension that keeps the 'United Kingdom' together? But, all in all, another great and engrossing read.

References

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Island Studies Programme, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada
Visiting Professor, University of Malta, Malta
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