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Introduction

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### JODIE MATTHEWS AND DANIEL TRAVERS

Islands and archipelagos hold great imaginative power, and they have long been a subject of study for cartographers and geographers, for anthropologists and historians of colonisation. But what does it mean to be an islander? Can one feel both British and Manx, for example? What are British tourists looking for when they go to Malta? How do past relationships with Britain affect islands today? What happens to our identity when we travel to islands? This collection takes a variety of perspectives to provide answers to such questions, examining war, empire, tourism, immigration, language, literature, and everyday life. More generally, in this Introduction we try to answer the questions “why islands?” and “why Britishness?” By “Britishness” we refer to something like a national consciousness (whether felt collectively or by the individual towards a larger group, and felt in any location) which is not, as Frantz Fanon makes explicit, necessarily nationalism.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say, of course, that Britishness is barred from conscription to the cause of nationalism. Written by authors from different fields of academia, we arrive at different conclusions about the relationships between islands and Britishness in this collection, but our contention is that these differences are productive, lending the comparisons to be made across the chapters (and across the islands that are their subject) originality.

What, then, is the value in our comparing the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Cyprus with the windswept islands of Heligoland and Orkney, Jamaica with Man? Pan-island studies of this sort have been successful before. For instance, in Godfrey Baldacchino’s groundbreaking island studies reader, Edward Warrington and David Milne compare the markets of Singapore and Jersey despite the self-evident climatic, geographic, demographic and cultural variations.<sup>2</sup> But our aim here is not to schematize various features of islands as Warrington and Milne do, rather to interrogate whether there is a facet of identity that might usefully be

labelled “islandness,” and whether a shared cultural history with one nation in particular can be seen to affect it. Baldacchino suggests that it is precisely the uniqueness of each island that means there may be no better comparison for one than another.<sup>3</sup> We introduce this collection of contributions from scholars across the world examining islands that, for some, are both home and object of study. If not quite home, most of the authors profess an affinity with the island in question. As a collection, we take a genuinely global view of the questions surrounding islands and Britishness. We not only bring together various contemporary strands in Island Studies, but uniquely focus on the relationship—historical, cultural and economic—between particular islands and Britain, and, crucially, how this relationship frames identities both on the island and in Britain itself. In inviting contributions for a collection interested in islandness, we selected those which concentrate on the small (and lesser-researched) islands which form part of the “British archipelago,” and on the much further flung isles that demonstrate the reach of Britishness. This selection thus includes the Isle of Wight and the Channel Islands, Hong Kong (with its relatively large population of around seven million) and New Zealand, but excludes Ireland. Reams of academic studies do greater justice to the relationship between Britain and Ireland than could one chapter here, but the accuracy of positing the island of Ireland as “small” is also in doubt when one of our key questions asks about a sense of islandness.<sup>4</sup> With a combined (Éire and Northern Ireland) population of over six million and surface area of around 84,000 sq. km., it constitutes its own mainland, with islands such as Rathlin and Aran forming its satellites.<sup>5</sup> Hong Kong and New Zealand may be larger than Ireland in terms of population and surface area, but their islandness in relation to Britain is accentuated by vast distances.

The appeal of islands is almost a cliché. For one thing, their boundedness means that they are “able to be held in the mind’s eye and imagined as places of possibility and promise.”<sup>6</sup> One can also draw on the wealth of British literary, philosophical and filmic references to the island as the setting for utopia (and, indeed, its appropriateness as a dystopian milieu, as in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* or *The Wicker Man*).<sup>7</sup> It has become something of an orthodoxy in island studies to quote Margaret Atwood’s assertion that, symbolically, the island is to England (or, as this collection has it, to Britain) as the frontier is to America.<sup>8</sup> Our cultural binds to the idea of the island are even tighter than that, however, as the form has long been used to represent the individual. Most people can quote John Donne’s denial of insular man, but this very denial implies the opposite: despite being part of a continent of mankind, in many ways we are also like islands, particularly in a world view that values the concept of

the self-determining individual. Gillian Beer notes that our affinity with the island may even have associations with our pre-natal experience in the womb.<sup>9</sup> In (and on) islands we find metaphorical affinity though we might be far from home, cultural familiarity because exoticism has led many to write of and study them; in short, we find paradox. Pete Hay has commented on this strange feature of island studies: are islands “characterised by vulnerability or resilience?” Are they “victims of change, economically dependent, and at the mercy of unscrupulous neo-colonial manipulation?” Or, rather, are their inhabitants “uniquely resourceful in the face of such threats?”<sup>10</sup> Further, the island can be both paradise; a “magical and unsinkable world”<sup>11</sup> and prison, as Judith Okely evocatively describes in relation to her experiences on the Isle of Wight in Chapter Four. In her work elsewhere on Tasmania, Elizabeth McMahon alludes to the current potential for tourist appeal in the island’s penal history (and it is a literary interpretation of this history on which Maciej Sulmicki focuses in Chapter Fourteen).<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the key paradox to highlight here is that, despite the fact that the defining feature of the island is its state of being completely surrounded by water, in none of the chapters of this collection does the reader feel a sense of the island being culturally cut off—instead, they all elaborate on the island as a site of complicated and fruitful or terrible exchanges.

What is meant by “island identities?” Though this collection interrogates each island’s identity as part of a global “British Isles” (problematically or otherwise), the authors collected here assert that each island possesses its own, specific and multi-faceted identity. Regardless of their continued legal relationship with Britain, islands might be viewed as having something akin to a national identity because they are self-contained societies that define themselves, at least in part, by their natural geographic borders. Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as an “imagined political community,” with the members of each nation possessing an image of community, despite having no direct contact, can directly be applied to each island.<sup>13</sup> Within smaller islands, the concept of community may be more literal, as direct contact with other members is likely to be more frequent because of smaller populations, but its imagined nature is still important. Members of the island intelligentsia, of certain trades, and of certain specific interest groups may be well aware of one another’s existence more than on the mainland, but this is not to say that a builder in Ramsay and a fisherman in Port Erin consider themselves any less Manx for not personally knowing one another; the bond is less tangible than that. It is this sense of connectedness which is central to understanding island identities as analogous to a national identity. As

David Miller has argued, such an identity links people to a geographical place, in contrast to other identities (such as religious ones), which have no terrestrial boundaries.<sup>14</sup> An island's water boundaries lend themselves to a feeling of finitude in much the same way that a nation's borders encapsulate it. Treating island identities as a national identity not only makes sense, it also allows us to draw on the wealth of scholarship already written on the subject.

The assertion is not without its problems. If one adopts Anderson's definition there is a danger of confusing the political nuances inherent in island life. Whatever the divisions on an island, however, one can usually observe the notions of connectivity that Anderson's definition requires. Islanders often feel a certain loyalty to the island that they inhabit, which tends to take precedence over feelings of unity with the mainland—however near or far that is. Many Orcadians, for example, consider themselves Orcadian first, then Scottish or British.<sup>15</sup> This hierarchy of identity can be flipped in times of national celebration, mourning, or war—as is evidenced by Jersey's willing participation in traditionally British commemorations of Liberation Day, explored in Chapter Eighteen, or in Linda Riddell's assessment of Shetland during and after the First World War (Chapter Eleven). As Linda Colley asserts, "identities are not like hats, human beings can and do put on several at a time."<sup>16</sup> This is true within island societies, and many islanders identify with both the island of their residence (or birth) and Britain, or at least the British Isles. As Brockliss and Eastwood have argued, Britons themselves possess a "composite identity," created not by suppressing other identities but by forging a whole new "British" lived identity.<sup>17</sup> As the following chapters show, island identities are as complex as those in larger nations, with various social and cultural elements contributing to them. It is not strictly necessary to absolutely define Britishness in order to understand its effects on the culture and life of the people who are affected by it. Arthur Aughey has said that defining "Englishness" is not a "precondition for saying something intelligible about contemporary England."<sup>18</sup> Bernard Crick has argued the same about Britishness.<sup>19</sup> There are so many different factors in constructing a "British national identity" that it is almost impossible to do so. Language, place, origin, religion, and gender, to name but a few, invariably have an impact on the way in which an individual understands his or her own identity. Britishness, it seems, is dynamic; it can be transplanted or absorbed into the daily life of a society, it can be used pragmatically, and, importantly, it can be rejected.

It is, perhaps, no surprise that a major theme of the collection is the (post)colonial, as it was Britain's imperial ambition that defined and

continues to define many of these islands' relationship with Britain. However, to repeat a commonplace of imperial historiography: "if the metropole dominates the periphery, the periphery nevertheless influences the metropole."<sup>20</sup> Britishness was made in new ways, at home and abroad, because of new forms of contact between peoples. As Gillian Beer notes, "even now, remote islands—the Falkland Islands or Fiji—are claimed as peculiarly part of empire history."<sup>21</sup> The island incites even more scholarly interest as a result of particular historico-political contingencies, such as the Falklands conflict in 1982, which saw the British media and Conservative political establishment highlighting the affinities of "island races."<sup>22</sup> Britain's association with islands across the globe is much older than that, of course. As Christian Depraetere points out, by the beginning of the last century most islands were part of colonial empires, with Britain "ruling the waves' through its truly global islands network."<sup>23</sup> The residents of small islands might consider themselves unfortunate that the land mass on which they live is not only supremely useful to the seafaring imperial power; it also *looks* like property.<sup>24</sup> The inhabitants of Heligoland fit into this category, as Sebastian Seibert discusses in Chapter Fifteen, finding themselves caught up in the strategic geography of the German Bight. The vast island network that made up the British Empire no longer belongs, of course, to Britain, but that is not to say that it is no longer relevant to it. Much scholarly attention has been paid since the 1970s to the identities of colonialism and its returns, an example of which is explored by R. M. Christofides in relation to British Cypriots in Chapter Eight. One thing that becomes clear from the essays in this collection is that colonialism has far-reaching and long-lasting effects on identity that could never have been anticipated at the point of island independence.

"Britishness" in relation to islands is not just about the influence of an empire, however; power relations are not only geopolitical but cultural. To assert, as this collection does, that Britishness continues to play a role in conceptualising the identity of these islands is not to reinscribe the gestures of colonialism, tying the islands to a British metropolitan centre and denying the importance of local history, power and culture. Britishness is just one feature of these islands' identities, and chapters in this collection also consider the relationships played out on the island between Britishness and the other nationalities with which the islands share an affinity—Turkey and Greece in Cyprus, for example, Spain on Gibraltar, Scottishness in Shetland. Indeed, many of the chapters further complicate received wisdoms about national identity on the islands by considering the intersecting discourses of class and gender, such as Dalea Bean's exploration, in Chapter Ten, of gendered notions of loyalty to

Empire in Jamaica during the World Wars, and Oliver Benoit's work in Chapter Seven on the fissures of class within a nascent national identity in Grenada. Nevertheless, any stated affiliation between Britain and the islands in this collection can never be politically neutral, framing as it does an island's history in a particular way, no matter how much the frame is critiqued herein; it is not a strategy without risk and it is one to which we are alert. As Chris Bongie points out, to do away completely with relational identities is unrealistic, and our project here is to examine Britishness in relation to other national, separatist or colonial identities.<sup>25</sup> Across the chapters in this collection we see a clearly dislocated, fragmented form of Britishness, ex-isled as it no longer finds itself on the British mainland, and a reconstituted Britishness that blends with and complicates its other. Viewed through the prism of Britishness, the paradox of the island becomes clearer than ever.

Island identities, like national identities, are not created overnight; they are the result of gradual political and cultural processes. For islands, these processes often entail centuries of socio-political negotiation between themselves and their larger neighbours or colonising powers far away. The dynamic of interference and engagement with the larger nation often continues to define the modern identity of the island itself. This is the case in either a direct way (through colonialism or political rule), or by the smaller island using the other to distinguish its own cultural sovereignty. Each island's identity is not, then, merely the sum of its cultural and political influences, but is also a separate entity. Only when Manxness or Malteseness is accepted is it possible to make comparisons with Britain and Britishness. There exist distinct differences between islands and the mainland. As David Moore writes, while islands are "intimate communities . . . , a medley of rural simplicity and urban sophistication," they may also possess a far-reaching view. Many of these islands are leaders in international financial markets, or in tourism and leisure, proving that the insular can be innovative (or adept at exploiting the inequalities encouraged by capitalism, depending on one's view).<sup>26</sup>

Island societies are subject to the same sentiments regarding threats to independence as any other analogous entity, be it state or nation. As the nationalist Prussian historian Heinrich Von Treitschke asserted, "it is only in war that a people becomes in very deed a people."<sup>27</sup> Even islands whose legal sovereignty from Britain is still being negotiated may engage in territorial disputes with their other neighbours: full independence from one country is not necessarily a prerequisite for engaging in altercations with another. An example of this is the debate over the tiny *Écréhous* islands between Jersey and France, a dispute played out in peaceful protest thus

far, and one that perhaps resembles the disputes between Japan and Korea over the Liancourt Rocks.<sup>28</sup> Though most people in Britain were completely unaware of the event, the temporary invasions of the *Écréhous* in 1993 and 1994 by French fishermen were closely monitored by the people and authorities in Jersey. Such conflicts strengthen a sense of island identity, with victories and defeats defining island values. More often, however, islands are the unfortunate inheritors of conflict, forced into belligerency based on the actions of their mainland neighbours or the colonial administrator. An island's relationship with Britain and Britishness could play a pivotal role in war, and, in the past, loyalty to the Empire has been called upon, resulting in dilemmas between local and imperial identities. Amongst others, Hong Kong, Jamaica, and Singapore went to war in 1914 as part of the British Empire, and again in 1939 when their safety was less than certain. Association with Britain and Britishness in wartime is risky, especially if the island occupies a strategically important or vulnerable location.

Islands can be used as pawns in strategic posturing between rival nations, with imperial powers considering islands to be part of their territory despite their remoteness. Since the thirteenth century, the Channel Islands were symbolic of the struggle between France and England, and changed hands on a number of occasions. This rivalry between great powers can be manifested in the culture, language, and politics of each island society. Orkney and Shetland, as Silke Reeploeg shows in Chapter Sixteen, are culturally Scottish and Norse at the same time. Man tends to negotiate between its Gaelic, Norse, and English identities, while Guernsey retains its Britishness with a French flair. The Maltese are caught between British and Italian cultural influence. This can and does retain a presence in an island's quotidian identity.

Many islands, especially those in the British archipelago, define themselves based on their relationship with the British "other," and Britishness or Englishness can be used as a mirror with which to assert an island's distinctiveness. This exceptionalism allows islands to focus their energies into proud displays of uniqueness in sport, in heritage, and in cultural events. Though Britishness continues to play a major role in the island's society, the overt rejection of Britishness serves to strengthen its own identity. Placing emphasis on the island's own history as separate from that of the mainland serves to deepen and delimit the island's distinct heritage, just as island-specific cultural displays reinforce cultural sovereignty. This can be used pragmatically for the purposes of tourism, allowing visitors to the islands from the mainland an escape, and perhaps conveys a feeling of the exotic. It also gives the tourist a peek into the



daily realities of island life, as Emma-Reeta Koivunen discusses in Chapter Nine. Exceptionalism also applies to islands further removed from Britain. Remote islands occasionally define themselves by being *more* like the colonial power than their neighbours. In this way an island culture uses Britishness to take itself out of the regional context (but implicitly draws attention to Britishness as a performance and complicates notions of self and other). Marie Avellino hints that this is the case in Malta in Chapter Five. The island ostentates its Britishness to appeal to tourists, and a figurative island of Britishness in the Mediterranean is created, a place that gives a taste of the “real,” imperial Britain, paradoxically untouched (yet made possible) by twenty-first-century globalisation. This is also the case in St. Helena and Bermuda, as Stephen A. Royle explains in Chapter Two, with many visitors commenting that the islands are “strangely British.” Gibraltar is an island, at least in a symbolic way, for this reason; its Spanishness is marginalised in favour of aspects of Britishness. Gibraltar’s very survival as a British Overseas Territory in fact depends on this distinction, according to Chris Grocott in Chapter Twelve.

Commodification of Britishness allows it to be used pragmatically for the islanders’ benefit. Hong-Kong’s wealthy businessmen, for example, considered Britishness a nominal identity based on financial pragmatism. As described in Yizheng Zou’s chapter, Hong Kong’s elites saw opportunity in Britishness. Culturally, particularly likeable images, icons, events and cultural displays are sometimes imported and given an island twist, while more distasteful aspects are rejected. The monarchy is an institution which islands tend to celebrate, and a royal visit is often greeted with eager anticipation. The person of the Crown has in the past been a strong tie to keep the British Empire and, later, the Commonwealth together.<sup>29</sup> Other institutions, festivals, holidays, and commemorations are often deliberately retained. This “buffet Britishness,” picking and choosing different elements from the mainland, ensures that particular aspects of Britishness are consciously or unconsciously chosen as part of an island’s society or are appropriated as part of its own. Elements of Britishness, as Sue Lewis describes in Chapter Thirteen, enhance local satire on the Isle of Man. The war memory of the Channel Islands is influenced by British remembrance and commemoration, as Paul Sanders shows in Chapter Three. This need to favour Britishness or conversely to make Britain the “other” can create rifts in island communities. The strength of Manx identity, for example, creates a society where Manx and non-Manx might be defined by their background. As Cheek, Grainger, and Nichol describe in Chapter Six, the concept of other people’s Manx identity is often enough to create a feeling of alienation among immigrants

from Britain to the island, with the self-imposed assumption that they could never become truly “Manx.” Internalising the label of otherness, they make the hyphen of hybrid identities (such as British-Manx) an insurmountable barrier.

Finally, then, without wishing to limit the dialogue that readers might find between the essays that follow, there are some assertions that can be made about Britishness from looking at its manifestation on islands. To make such a claim is unusual amongst studies of Britishness, as the conclusion is usually that this identity is *intangible*, or historically contingent, or always a fiction. We take these things as going without saying, but want to draw something more concrete from the work of scholars here.

Intriguingly, Britishness was perceived in some former colonial locations as a successful form of national identity for export, one that could be used in island locations paradoxically in support of an emergent national consciousness designed to throw off the yoke of colonialism. Britishness finds meaning, therefore, not just on the “mainland” of England, Scotland and Wales but is, rather, a particular ideology that may be conveyed, nurtured, called on, used to interpellate and, conversely, rejected, across the globe. It is perhaps this very exportability that leads to British tourists today visiting postcolonial islands in search of a Britishness they feel has been lost at home. They hope that insularity will have preserved a Britain of the past, quite possibly one that never existed outside the imagination. The island thus becomes a site of dislocated and detemporalized identity. For islanders, meanwhile, Britishness can be treated pragmatically or ignored depending on the circumstances. It might be a commodity to sell to tourists, something that separates socio-economic classes, or an idea that reinforces loyalty to a particular administrative regime or body politic. Crucially, this loyalty is understood in terms of action (whether that means being photographed giving a British soldier a cup of tea during the Falklands campaign, or signing up for combat in Jamaica during the world wars) rather than unobserved sentiment. These activities are likely to be framed as gendered, meaning that manifestations of Britishness are also divided along gender lines.

For those who move permanently to an island away from the British “mainland,” it seems possible to assume an island identity, to be accepted as an islander and perhaps shed, share or cover up the extent to which “Britishness” is felt as one’s primary identity. For those who visit the island for a short period, the extent to which islanders are willing to share (formally or informally) local knowledge, the experience of seasonality and the reality of isolation all affect the extent to which one can

understand everyday life there. And back on the mainland, when postcolonial islanders return to a place they have been encouraged to consider a “home” (or at least a place of opportunity), continued political, economic, linguistic and cultural traversals of the sea from Britain to island influence the relationship between postcolonial identities and a diversely-perceived British national narrative. This collection is intended to encourage questions and stimulate discussion about island identity and how it relates to Britishness. The first of its kind to cover such a topic, it is hoped that the following chapters will contribute to a growing understanding of how Britishness exists in the context of a global British Isles.

## Notes

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