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Islandness

Special Issue

Guest Editors

- Christina Bosbach, University of Aberdeen
- Cormac Cleary, Dublin City University
- Leah Eades, University of Edinburgh

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BOOK REVIEW

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

HAZEL ANDREWS

Hazel is Professor of Culture, Tourism and Society at Liverpool John Moores University. As a social anthropologist, Hazel is interested in issues of identity, self and the body, principally in relation to tourism and travel. She is the author of *The British on Holiday: Charter Tourism, Identity and Consumption* (2011). More recently, her edited collection *Tourism and Brexit: Travel, Borders and Identity* was published by Channel View in 2021.

CHRISTINA BOSBACH

Christina is a postdoctoral researcher in Anthropology at the University of Durham. Her PhD, awarded by the University of Aberdeen, investigates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on island life in Scotland. She is particularly interested in mobilities and sustainability in rural coastal areas, which her current work focuses on, and in creative ethnography.

SIÚN CARDEN

Siún is a lecturer in the Centre for Island Creativity, Shetland UHI (University of the Highlands and Islands). She teaches on UHI's MA Art and Social Practice and supervises research students in Creative Practice. Her PhD (QUB 2010) and related writing focused on Belfast's Gaeltacht Quarter and the reimagining of the 'post-conflict' city. More recent research focuses on creative practice and creative economy in rural and island places, including examination of contemporary 'maker cultures' around the knitting of Shetland and Ireland and arts-based research with the #ShetlandCrew of care experienced young people. She is a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Awardee for poetry (2024).

CORMAC CLEARY

Cormac is a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Communications at Dublin City University. His PhD, awarded by the University of Edinburgh in Social Anthropology, examined the tensions and confluences between Scottish Gaelic language revitalisation and nature conservation in the Western Isles. He has previously carried out research on conservation conflict in Irish fishing communities, and is now working on public perceptions of environmental problems and media consumption in Ireland.

LEAH EADES

Leah is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include reproductive governance, pharmaceuticalisation, and medico-legal borderlands. She is currently completing a thesis that examines abortion politics and provision in Ireland under the Health (Regulation of Termination of

Pregnancy) Act 2018. She holds a BA in English from the University of Bristol and an MSc in Medical Anthropology from University College London.

CLAIRE HANNIBAL

Claire is Professor of Operations Management and Associate Dean for Research and Knowledge Exchange at Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University in Scotland. Claire's overarching research focus is on process improvement in organisations and supply chains. Claire has held Faculty positions at Liverpool John Moores University, Manchester Metropolitan University and the Universities of Wolverhampton, Liverpool, Bradford and Manchester. Prior to joining academia, Claire spent time in Ethiopia with Voluntary Service Overseas and also worked in the Scottish textile industry.

BART HOLTERMAN

Bart is a historian specialised in economic history of the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, maritime history and historical geography. He is currently a member of the LIFTE project based at the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven, where he researches the connections of German merchants with Shetland in the 16th and 17th centuries.

GRANIA POWER

Grania is a PhD student at the University of East Anglia, examining 'brightspots' in Amazonian wildfires supported by the SeNSS-ARIES joint studentship for interdisciplinary research in the social and environmental sciences. She holds an MA in Anthropology from University College Cork and a BA in Environmental Science and Natural History from Mount Holyoke College.

LES ROBERTS

Les is Reader in Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Liverpool and Co-Director of the Centre for Culture and Everyday Life. The core focus of his work is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of spatial anthropology and spatial humanities. He is the author of *Spatial Anthropology: Excursions in Liminal Space* (2018) and *Posthuman Buddhism and the Digital Self: The Production of Dwellspace* (2023).

PAULA SCHIEFER

Paula is a social anthropologist with a focus on the marine environment, fisheries, resource management, and technologies. Her research explores the lived realities of people who depend upon the sea and the ways in which the environment and their social lives are interconnected. She holds a position as a fisheries anthropologist at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) in Lowestoft, England.

DAVID WHYTE

David is a Postdoctoral Researcher with MaREI SFI Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine, University College Cork. David researches and supports participatory frameworks to include European coastal communities in the management, protection, and restoration of their ocean resources and ecosystems. More broadly, David is an anthropologist of coastal communities and rural development in Ireland and the EU. He has also worked in Irish/European rural development and the non-profit field.

EDITORIAL NOTE

ATLANTIC ARCHIPELAGO

Co-Editors: Christina Bosbach, Cormac Cleary, Leah Eades

Islandness is a prominent trope in the British Isles. Imagining Britain as 'an island' matters in discourses on national identity in England and Scotland (Abell et al. 2006), framing Britain as an island nation (Wodak 2018). Similarly, in the case of Ireland, Hayward (2009) finds that redefining the 'island of Ireland' is part of political discourse around European integration and Irish nationalism. The histories of Scotland, Ireland and Wales are often told in relation to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain. Islandness matters in another sense in this context, when smaller islands – such as Aran, Orkney or Shetland – are relegated to the peripheries. They become, as Ardener (2012 [1987]: 524) puts it for Western Scotland, areas 'in which canonical levels of remoteness are to be found'.

The ubiquity of islandness and the ease with which it is invoked 'contrasts with the apparent difficulty of remembering the complexity of our interrelationship' as an archipelago (Carden, this issue). Emphasising the latter, scholars have suggested the term 'Atlantic Archipelago' (Stratford et al. 2011: 117) to refer to 'England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales and more than six thousand smaller islands' (Miguel and Stephens 2020: 22). It is this Atlantic archipelago that our Special Issue engages with. Taking us from Ireland to Shetland and to Europe, from Shetland and Orkney to all over the world, to and from the islands that make up Shetland, and around the archipelago of small islands at the English-Welsh border, the contributions to this Special Issue emphasise connections, mobilities, encounters and multiplicity. They find new ways of thinking our archipelago without taking metropolitan Great Britain as the centre point. In doing so, they follow recent turns towards islandness in these geographical regions (Burnett et al. 2021). At the core of their articles are concepts of islandness and notions of archipelagic thinking. Before introducing the contributions, we therefore want to briefly sketch out these central terms.

Islands, Islandness and the Archipelago

Islands have been central figures in Western discourse (Hay 2006), and they have played a prominent role in the history of anthropology (Ma 2020). From the Torres Strait expedition, to Margaret Mead's work in Samoa, to Malinowski's stay on the Trobriand Islands, islands are at the core of classical texts by Western anthropologists. Ma suggests that they drew anthropologists' interest because they were seen as 'relatively isolated from their mainland, which helps to preserve a variety of "exotic customs"' (Ma 2020: 3). Islands aligned well with a more static and bounded view of place and cultures. In this sense, these histories of thought revolved not just around thinking *about* islands but thinking *with* islands. This remains the case in island studies, though islands have now shifted to embodying

interrelation rather than boundedness. In a recent volume, Pugh and Chandler (2021) marvel at the prominence of islands in policy making, activism, art and scholarship. They argue that islands are both important places to think from, and to think with, in the context of the Anthropocene:

> *[The island] is a powerful symbol of such forces as global warming, rising sea levels, the fallouts of nuclear proliferation, ocean acidification, the waste of consumerism, ongoing colonialisms, changing ecologies and evolutionary pathways, disruptive weather patterns, including intensified hurricanes and cyclones, and much more besides.* (ibid. ix)

The word 'island' immediately brings an image to mind – perhaps that of a child's drawing of a half-circle protruding from the ocean, crowned with a palm tree. However, as these introductory words have perhaps already suggested, defining what makes an island is far from straightforward. As Edmonds and Smith point out, 'islands are the most graspable and the most slippery of subjects' (2003: 5). Consider, for instance, the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 (asp. 12), which defines an island as 'a naturally formed area of land that is surrounded on all sides by the sea (ignoring artificial structures such as bridges), and is above water at high tide'. At first, this definition seems obvious – land surrounded by water – but the mention of (artificial) connections and the tides unsettle it.

In making the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions for island communities, for instance, 'artificial structures' mattered to the Scottish Government. While they eased restrictions for the islands in general in winter 2020, they specified that '[i]slands with road links to the mainland, however, will not be included in this relaxation' (Scottish Government 2020). Is an island with a road link less of an island? And what about Hilbre island – the archipelago at the English-Welsh border that Roberts and Andrews (this issue) take us to? It sits above water at high tide but is connected to the mainland by sandbanks at low tide. Does that make it an island only some of the time? Finally, the Scottish Islands Regions report (Scottish Government 2023) raises yet another issue when it mentions 'Mainland Scotland' in the section about Scottish islands that are excluded from discussion. If land surrounded by water is enough to qualify an island, what is *not* an island?

It is no surprise, then, that the field of Island Studies has struggled to define its object (Hay 2006). However, the ambiguity, relativity and shifting meanings of the term 'island' hold potentials, too. Though they may invoke images of isolation, thinking about 'islands' immediately points to relations between places, be that in discourse, imagination, stories or mobilities. Thus, one of the main concerns in Island Studies has been to challenge notions of islandness as bounded and static (Foley et al. 2023; Ronström 2021: 271) and to 'instead emphasise mobile, multiple and interconnected relational forms' (Pugh 2018: 94). It is in this way that islands have become prominent in Anthropocene thinking, as mentioned above.

Analysing the interrelations that make islandness can take various forms. For instance, Vannini and

Taggart examine connectivities by focusing on mobilities and 'kinesthetic performances' (2013: 228), highlighting that islands are done and not given. When islands are conceptualised as bounded entities, the sea is what separates them from each other and from the mainland. As we turn our focus to mobilities – for instance, ferries (Vannini 2012) – the sea instead affords possibilities for connection and movement. Foley et al. (2023) suggest that the importance of such connections in making islandness necessitates reflection on the experiential side of im/mobility. Travelling by boat, by plane or driving, afford different experiences of place. Therefore, they argue that 'the physicality and sociality of islandness [...] are commonly defined subjectively' (ibid. 10). These experiences of islandness entail not just practices but also ideas, imaginations, and representations.

The contributors in this Special Issue follow these lines of thinking. They examine the making of islandness on (to and from, and around) our Atlantic archipelago as processes grounded in shifting historical, cultural and social contexts. It is the emphasis on movement that often leads them from thinking about islandness to thinking archipelagically. Pugh (2013) points out that in a world of movement, the form of the archipelago is gaining importance. The notion of archipelagic thinking stems from literary studies. Grounded in experiences of postcolonial politics and creolisation, the Caribbean scholar Glissant uses the archipelago to emphasise relationality, multiplicity and unpredictability. Openness is central here: Glissant and Joris (1999: 120) argue that 'cultural regions, beyond the barriers of nationhood, are islands – but open islands, this being their main condition for survival'.

Archipelagic thinking unsettles ideas of boundedness, singularity, and relations between peripheries and centres. Stratford et al. (2011: 118) point out that island studies traditionally focused on relations between islands and mainlands, sea and land. However, archipelagic thinking emphasises island-to-island relations, unsettling the Anglocentric geographies of periphery and centrality in these islands (Kerrigan 2008; see also Hannibal, this issue; Carden, this issue). This flat ontology locates sites of agency as distributed along a polycentric network rather than gathered in a clustered central power. Thinking archipelagically foregrounds 'how island movements are generative and inter-connective spaces of metamorphosis, of material practices, culture and politics' (Pugh 2013: 10). The archipelago becomes a model of a 'world in process' (Deleuze 1997: 86). It draws attention above all to movement – shifting oceans and islands, changing configurations, and mobilities (Edmond and Smith 2003).

Our contributors trace these movements – the spatial stories that trace lines in the sand around Hilbre Island (Roberts and Andrews); the migration and labour networks that link Ireland and Shetland (Carden); the social life of natural resources in Ireland's island, coastal and mainland communities (Power); the handknitting that connects Shetland islanders to each other and to places further afield historically and contemporary (Hannibal); the trading networks in the 17th and 18th century that place Shetland and Orkney at the centre of a web spanning around the North Sea and extending to colonial trade (Schiefer and Halterman); the ferry mobilities under pandemic restrictions that shifted experiences

of insulation and isolation on a Hebridean island (Bosbach); and the circulation of transnational activist imaginaries, strategies and vocabularies in post-Repeal Irish abortion politics (Eades).

Overview of Contributions

The first contribution takes us on journeys between Ireland and Shetland. Siún Carden analyses the two as 'archipelagic neighbours'. Engaging with the herring fishing industry and North Sea oil, she draws out the connections between Ireland and Shetland through archival and ethnographic material. In her article, islandness takes on various forms. At one point symbolically tied to national identities, it also counters the isomorphism of nation, culture, and place. Islandness reveals both processes of distancing and of forging connections. In case of Shetland, 'islandness' entailed placing the Shetland Isles at a distance from the Gaelic-speaking highlands and islands in Scotland as well as from Ireland. However, Carden points out that over centuries, people have moved between these islands. It is these mobilities and networks of labour that become part of making Ireland and Shetland's archipelagic connection. Thus, '[i]slandness is brought into consciousness through quotidian mobilities, whether of post-Brexit goods crossing the Irish Sea or of workers following well-worn routes between "home" islands' (Carden, this issue).

Grania Power's contribution returns the focus on Ireland, although the emphasis on mobilities and labour networks remains at the forefront. Drawing on fieldwork carried out on Lettermore, one of several islands in Galway Bay, Power examines how the exchange of natural resources such as peat turf shape island identities and relationships. By thinking archipelagically, Power highlights the ways in which these islands' material resources are pooled and transmuted into a highly flexible gift economy – one that she describes as a 'pool of help'. In this way, Power's interlocutors are able to combat the conditions of material scarcity and vulnerability that have long characterised local conceptions of 'islandness', thereby achieving a level of both socio-economic and cultural resilience.

Paula Schiefer and Bart Holterman take us back to the Northern Isles and back in time. They draw out webs of historical trade connections with Shetland and Orkney at their centre. Their article focuses on the *Looking in from the Edge (LIFTE)* project and museum exhibition at the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven. Schiefer and Holterman note that nowadays, considered from the Scottish and Norwegian mainland, Orkney and Shetland seem to be islands at the edge of the map, the latter often placed in a box that highlights its remoteness. Looking at trade and seaways in the 16th and 17th century, though, these archipelagos are at the centre of a web that connects Iceland, the Faroes, Scandinavia, the British Isles and Germany and Netherlands, as well as linking to colonial trade routes. Islandness, in their study, draws attention not to remoteness or isolation, but 'emphasises connection, exchange, and cross-cultural influences on individuals and communities across the North Sea' (Schiefer and Holterman, this issue). Such a view unsettles established distinctions between peripheries and centres.

Staying up North, Claire Hannibal's article considers island-to-island ways of being and knowing on the over 100 islands that make up the Shetland Isles. Focusing on hand knitting, she draws out historical and contemporary connections of mutuality and exchange. Under the cashless truck system, knitters in the 18th and 19th century developed exchange relationships that stitched the archipelago together. These relationships linked the women who knitted and dressed garments among each other, often involving extended travelling, and connected them to male – sometimes German and Dutch – merchants. These archipelagic practices of connection and exchange rendered considerations of remoteness from the metropolitan centres of Great Britain largely irrelevant from the late 1900s until about 1950. Thus, Hannibal highlights that the remoteness we might think of as a given is 'both a relative and [...] a relatively recent condition' (Saxer 2019: 189). Moreover, she shows that these archipelagic relations of hand-knitting continue to matter more recently in the Shetland Wool Week that draws both tourism and forges local connections.

Leaving Shetland behind, Les Roberts and Hazel Andrews take us to the Hilbre Islands, an archipelago of three islands off the west coast of the Wirral peninsula at the English-Welsh border. Their article is an exploration of practices and stories that make up Hilbre's specific form of islandness. It highlights that islands and practices of islandness are inextricably linked to imagination, mythologies, stories and histories. These shape the island not as a bounded spatial form. Rather, 'paying attention to the documented taskscapes that constitute the elemental doingness of islandness throws into sharper relief the spatial production of island imaginaries and the mythopoeic tapestry that stretches out beyond the island' (Roberts and Andrews, this issue). In a landscape of shifting sands and tidal marshes, crossing to the islands is possible on foot. Introducing us to the spatial stories (De Certeau 1984) of the writer Ann Cleeves, the legend of Constable Sands, and the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the authors trace lines in the sand around the archipelago. They show that islandness is made not just by what happens on but around these islands.

Back in Scotland, Christina Bosbach moves us through a year of fieldwork spent on the Hebridean Isle of Coll during the COVID-19 pandemic in four poems. Attending to shifting practices and experiences of Coll's islandness, the poems draw out the particular connotations that islands took on during the pandemic. Images of isolation (Foley et al. 2023: 5) and insulating narratives of retreat and refuge (Burnett 2023) both clashed and resonated with the ongoing mobilities that connected islanders to each other and to the mainland.

Connections and tensions are also at the heart of Leah Eades's photo collection, which examines how notions of islandness and (trans)nationalism are articulated in contemporary Irish abortion politics. By illuminating the cross-border solidarities that shape post-Repeal protest logics, Eades's images invite us to think abortion politics archipelagically. Together, they reveal ideas of enmeshment and interconnectedness within the transnational circulation and vernacularisation of activist strategies and

imaginaries.

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ISLANDNESS, NATIONS AND '*PEERIE* PLACES': SHETLAND AND IRELAND AS ARCHIPELAGIC NEIGHBOURS

BY SIÚN CARDEN

***Correspondence**: siun.carden@uhi.ac.uk*

Abstract: This article considers Shetland and Ireland with their different relationships to nationhood, in terms of 'islandness' and as archipelagic neighbours. The islands relate through shared labour networks and migratory routes: in the 20th century, coastal workers post-'herring boom' and Irish labourers during Shetland's 'oil boom' intersected. In 1981, amid Ireland's divided status and Shetland's rapid change, an IRA bombing attempt targeted the Sullom Voe oil terminal, symbolising a collision of historical events. 'Islandness' as discussed in this article, challenges the idea of nationality as natural or simple, and offers a new perspective on mobility and interrelationship between Britain and Ireland.

Keywords: Shetland; Ireland; islandness; mobility; oil industry; archipelagic.

Introduction

Highlighting the 'islandness' of places as different in scale and statehood as Shetland and Ireland, demonstrates the 'organically fluid, socio-culturally and economically meaningful relationships that individuals and communities have with, in and through places as they are imagined in all their diversity and multi-scalar imbrications' (Williams 2013: 26). While 'islandness' is a salient factor in how both Shetland and Ireland are understood and experienced, these are places of different scales and relationships to nationhood. Shetland is a local authority area including about 100 small islands in the far north-east of Scotland, UK, about 200 miles north of Aberdeen. Of these islands 16 are permanently inhabited, with a total population of around 23,000; the bulk of the population live on the biggest island, which, in an example of the fractal nature of island/mainland dynamics, is called 'Mainland' (Promote Shetland n.d.). The 'island of Ireland' includes roughly 2 million people above and 5 million below the border separating the Republic of Ireland from the six counties which became Northern Ireland and remained a contested part of the UK after the island was partitioned by the Government of Ireland Act (1920) (Hayward 2018: 242).

As Royle (2013: 119) outlines: 'Ireland is not a small island; at 84,421 km^2, it is the world's 20th largest island by area, 19th by population size. However, it is small compared with Great Britain as close as 21 km to its east'. The criteria for a 'small island' have been much debated, but Péron (2004: 328) argues these are islands 'small enough to render to their inhabitants the permanent consciousness of being on an island'. Royle (2015: 5) suggests Belfast functions as an 'island city', as its: 'activities are carried out with a quotidian consciousness that they are performed within an insular setting'. The concept of islandness as a question of 'consciousness', whether 'quotidian' or 'permanent', is a way of understanding its different forms in Shetland and Ireland.

Shetland fulfils Peron's 'small island' criterion of frequently reminding inhabitants of its islandness. With long *voes* (inlets) and mostly treeless islands, you are never far from the sight, sound or smell of the sea. From grocery shopping (when weather might stop the freight boat) to internet access (vulnerable to undersea cable mishaps) or payslips (many of which include Distant Island Allowance), routines of daily life put the inhabitant in mind of their 'islander' position, besides travelling anywhere. Shetland's distance from mainland Scotland, roughly halfway between it and Norway, is commonly underestimated. Shetland is sometimes represented as closer to shore to fit conveniently on maps, which underlines 'for quite a few people in the islands […] just how far away they are from everywhere else – and how far removed they are from the rest of the UK in particular' (Malm 2013: 70).[1]

Shetland is electorally distinctive within Scotland, having elected Liberal Democrat Ministers to the Scottish Parliament since that institution was established in 1999, notably resisting the Scottish National Party (see Cohen 1999: 154). Greater autonomy for Shetland has been proposed by a variety of groups with different aims, including the Shetland Movement of the 1980-90s (Goodlad 1988), Wir Shetland in the 2010s and others (Grydehøj 2014). In 2022, Shetland Islands Council voted to explore options 'for achieving political and financial self-determination' (John 2020). The Faroe Islands, which have a high degree of self-government while maintaining their relationship to Denmark, offer a nearby model of island autonomy some view as aspirational. Arguments for Shetland autonomy echo those for Scottish independence, with Scotland's urban Central Belt cast as the problematically remote seat of power rather than

[1] This practice has been reduced since 2018, when public bodies were required to accurately represent Shetland's location by an amendment to the Islands Bill proposed by Liberal Democrat MSP for the Northern Isles Tavish Scott, following a campaign to get Shetland out of 'the box' (BBC News 2018; see Malm 2013: 67-72).

Westminster (Cohen 1999: 148; Cartrite 2012).

For Ireland, by contrast, islandness wavers in and out of view, called into public consciousness at particular moments and within certain layers of discourse. Hayward (2009) examines the 'redefinition of the island of Ireland' through the Irish state's official discourse, in relation to 'Irish nationalism and European integration'. In this context, Hayward (ibid: 153) argues: 'the persistent identification of the Irish nation as "the island" has helped to facilitate policy (and constitutional) change regarding Northern Ireland and even to lend credence to the international role of the state'. While Ireland includes its own small islands, using the common phrase 'the island of Ireland' to refer to the Irish mainland has paradoxical implications in terms of Ireland/UK relations, simultaneously framing the north and south of Ireland as a single, 'natural' entity and implicitly reinforcing the idea of Great Britain as a mainland and Ireland as a periphery. This makes 'the island of Ireland' a useful phrase both in Irish nationalist discourse, as Hayward (2009) shows, and within the 'creative ambiguity' (Dixon 2018: 155) of the peace process which ended the thirty years of political conflict often called the 'Troubles'.

To give one example of the 'islandness' of Ireland springing into the forefront of consciousness across these islands, the UK's Brexit vote took place when I was mid-way through moving house from Belfast to Shetland, pausing on the Scottish mainland, watching the idea of a 'sea border' erupt, at last, from Northern Irish political discourse into the UK media. Islandness as a trope is resorted to with ease – whether the idea of Britain, as David Cameron called it, an 'island nation' (see Wodak 2018); the small island as synecdoche for Ireland in Martin McDonagh's (2022) film *The Banshees of Inisherin*; or escapist fantasies of island holidays and property offered by colour supplements both sides of the Irish Sea. This contrasts with the apparent difficulty of remembering the complexity of our interrelationship as an 'Atlantic Archipelago' of 'England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales and more than six thousand smaller islands' (Miguel and Stephens 2020: 22).

As an Irish person in Shetland, I hear stories about connections between the two places. While there are well-known links between Ireland and other parts of Scotland, like the shared linguistic heritage of Ireland's *Gaeltacht* and the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd,* Ireland and Shetland are not so obviously bound together and these little stories do not much feature in grander narratives of the Atlantic archipelago (such as the Ireland/UK constitutional question, Shetland's Norse/Scottish history, or Scottish nationalism). Material connections between

Shetland and Ireland include labour networks and migratory routes. Although the sea is crucial to inter-island relations, as seen in Shetland and Ireland's historically intertwined herring processing industry, these islands also have earthier connections. Workers from north and south of the Irish border played an important role in Shetland's late 20th century oil boom and the waves of construction which followed it. The journeys of these transient labourers make the different 'islandnesses' of Shetland and Ireland stand out in comparison to each other. While North Sea oil was bringing rapid social change to the small islands of Shetland, the status of Ireland as a geopolitically divided island was the focus of violent ethno-national conflict. In 1981 these two things came together, with an IRA bombing attempt during Queen Elizabeth II's visit to a new oil terminal in Shetland.

To highlight these interrelations, this article combines archival material (primarily from the Shetland Museum and Archives), observations from my experience as an anthropologist from County Down who has lived in Shetland since 2016 and conducted research there on and through creative activity, and an interview with a Shetlander who experienced at close hand the 1970s arrival of Irish construction workers. Simultaneously holding in mind that one place characterised as a 'divided island', and another one that falls into the 'small island' category, draws attention to the ways islandness itself is conceived. Before discussing the relationship between Shetland and Ireland, therefore, I will outline some ideas about 'divided islands', 'small islands' and archipelagos.

Islands: Divided, Small and 'Connected Below'

Baldacchino (2013:2) notes: 'There are today only ten inhabited islands whose territory is divided amongst two or more countries', mainland Ireland being one of them. While divided islands have not always been so rare, he suggests: 'The elimination of divided islands in recent centuries has […] proceeded hand in hand with the march of the richly imagined nation state as the default jurisdiction of choice' (Baldacchino 2013:3). The tangibility of island edges lends itself to the nation-state's ideal unity of polity and territory, or the conflation of what Pries (2005: 171) calls 'societal' and 'geographic' spaces. Island geography presents a compelling 'spatial container' (Williams 2013: 26) for the 'territorial theory of identity' which Beck (2006: 6) calls 'a bloody error'. As well as the potential for island shores, where they coincide with state borders, to lend those borders an appearance of 'naturalness' (Haller and Donnan 2000: 9; Eriksen 2020: 143), the boundedness of small islands within larger nations sometimes sees them treated as an inner sanctum of national identity. Scotland's small islands, including Shetland,

are enlisted into imagery and narratives of Scottishness, while Ireland's small islands have been viewed as windows into a pre-urban, essentialised Irishness and as synecdoches of Irish nationhood (Beatty 2019).

Taylor (1996: 216) argues 'as Ireland is to England, so are the islands of its western shore to Ireland', representing for early anthropologists an exoticized window into an imagined ancestral authenticity (Ketonen-Keating 2021: 21). Anthropological inquiry into Ireland took the form of 'a late Victorian search for primitive survivals on the western edge of the island' (Taylor 1996: 216), such as Haddon and Browne's 1891-2 expedition to Inis Mór to 'take the measure of the islanders […] to chart the islanders' place in an evolutionary chain of civilizations' (Egan and Murphy 2015: 135; see also Jones 1998: 195; Ashley 2001: 8). By this point, Jones (1998: 202) suggests, the Aran Islands 'had already become a place where anthropological theories were tested, the most important anthropological laboratory – as it were – available in Ireland and possibly Europe'.

Like Ireland's small islands, Shetland has been 'subject to copious folkloric, archaeological, historical, and ethnographic scrutiny' (Giraldo Herrera 2022: 1143), including work by Shetlander James Teit, who assisted Franz Boas in Canada (Teit 1918; Wickwire 2019). From the late 19th century, while Ireland's small islands were being framed as remnants of earlier varieties of Irishness and such constructs were feeding the literary 'Celtic Revival' (Fitzpatrick 2011; Brannigan 2017; Hewitt 2021), Shetland's small island identity was being defined in opposition to the Gaelic world. As Burnett et al. (2021: 14) suggest:

> *From the 1880s and through the early part of the twentieth century, as the promotion of a Celtic and Gaelic profile of national identity emerged in Scottish politics and culture (Gifford and Riach 2004), a 'Norse – Celtic' debate developed with some unattractive racial undertones (D'Arcy 1996) […] it polarised the Gaelic Hebrides against the Nordic Northern Isles.*

Orkney and Shetland were part of Norway until they were 'formally passed over to Scotland in 1468 and 1469, respectively, yet it was only with the coming to power of the Stewart earls in 1581 that the islands truly fell under Scottish administration' (Grydehøj 2013a: 41). Linguistically, 'Shaetlan is the autonym for the indigenous language which pre-dates English in Shetland […] with Norn and Scots as its main input languages' (Velupillai, in press). Norn is

an ‘extinct Scandinavian’ language, ‘once spoken by the Viking settlers’ (Velupillai and Mullay 2022: 12). Scholars with a late 19th-early 20th century interest in cultural survivals tended to ‘to overlay the landscape and people of Shetland with a heroic Old Norse/Viking past’ (Grydehøj 2013b: 107; see Cohen 1989: 91).

Later studies of small island communities in both Ireland and Shetland explore change rather than continuity, though this takes different forms. Mid-late 20th century studies of small Irish islands often characterise social change as incremental decline, with islands as exemplars of what Peace (1989: 89) calls anthropologists’ ‘caricature [of] Ireland as a dying society, a culture in demise’. Decline takes the form of diminishing populations (e.g. Fox 1978: 18-19 on Tory Island), weakening of the Irish language (e.g. Messenger 1983[1969]: 6 on ‘Inis Beag’/Inisheer; see Ketonen-Keating 2021: 24, Wilson and Donnan 2006: 170), and challenges for residual inhabitants in maintaining local cultural practices and economic viability (e.g. Aalen and Brody 1969 on Gola; Kearns 1976 on the Aran Islands). By contrast, change in Shetland is connected to abrupt growth and transformation in its economy from the 1970s, following the discovery of North Sea oil. Shetland’s oil boom brought many accounts of this new industry’s effect on Shetland’s ‘way of life’ (e.g. Nicolson 1975; Byron and MacFarlane 1980; Cohen 1980; Byron 1983; Seyfrit 1988; Seyfrit and Hamilton 1992).

The degree to which ‘islandness’ is considered in studies of island life varies widely. Goffman’s (1959: 9 & 232) ‘dramaturgical approach’ in his study of ‘The Shetland Hotel’, in ‘a crofting (subsistence farming) community’ aims to create ‘a framework that can be applied to any concrete social establishment, be it domestic, industrial, or commercial’, with the island nature of this example accorded little relevance (Goffman 1959: 9). Cohen (1999: 5) argues that Goffman’s approach ‘understates culture’. Cohen’s long-term work on the Shetland island of Whalsay more frequently relates aspects of ‘community’ to the conditions of living on a small island, while resisting an essential difference between how the boundaries of community are constructed in island and other places: ‘The sea may divide one island from another, just as the parish border may mark the beginning and end of a settlement. But these boundaries are symbolic receptacles filled with the meanings the members impute to and perceive in them’ (Cohen 2013[1985]: 19; see also Cohen 1989; Cohen 2002; Cohen 2017).

With growth in Island Studies driven in part by efforts to present islands ‘on their own terms’ (Baldacchino 2008: 37), small islands have been viewed as part of global island networks, not

just in relation to their neighbouring mainland metropolises, and as places to speak *from* as well as about. Outside academia, initiatives like the Island Innovation Network share island perspectives on challenges including climate change (Island Innovation 2022). Political groupings like the Alliance of Small Island States, as Hughes (2013: 578) describes, 'sound the alarm' about rising seas. Pugh (2018: 105) suggests the 'vulnerable' and/or 'resilient' island as 'one of the most emblematic figures of the Anthropocene'. Countering this symbolic role, small islands like Trinidad and Shetland also benefit from fossil fuel production (Hughes 2013: 574-8; Sindico 2022: 120-3).

Another focus of Island Studies is to problematise 'islandness' (Foley et al. 2023); in this field it is commonplace to challenge the boundedness of islands. As Pugh (2018: 94) points out, many scholars aim to 'decentre notions of the static island and instead emphasize mobile, multiple and interconnected relational forms' (Eriksen 1993; Skinner 2002). Glissant's concept of 'archipelagic thought', rooted in Caribbean experiences of creolisation and postcolonial cultural politics but proposed as a way of viewing relationality more globally, suggests that '[l]inguistic regions, cultural regions, beyond the barriers of nationhood, are islands – but open islands, this being their main condition for survival' (Glissant and Joris 1999: 120). This 'archipelagic lens' (Miguel and Stephens 2020: 20) is applied to the study of islands as a counterweight, simultaneously, to 'methodological nationalism' (Beck 2016) and to mainland views of islands as remote and peripheral. Archipelagic approaches highlight webs of connection between islands rather than centre/periphery relationships. Miguel and Stephens (2020: 14) borrow a metaphor from the TV show *Sens8*, writing that '[a]rchipelagos, like many islands, are rhizomatically "[i]solated above, but connected below"'.

Distance and Points of Contact: Shetland and Ireland

Relations between islands are, however, shaped by their respective island/mainland dynamics as well as by direct connections between themselves. Markers of Shetland identity are somewhat at odds with Scottish national symbolism. Norse connections are much celebrated, from the Viking-flavoured Up Helly Aa fire festivals in winter, to the nordic-influenced Shetland flag (Jennings 2021: 6). References to 'Norseness' are ubiquitous in iconography and branding, from the helmeted Viking painted on the side of the Aberdeen ferry to the name of a Lerwick restaurant, 'The Dowry', recalling how Shetland was forfeited by Norway as payment for an unpaid marriage debt. Jennings (2021: 3) observes that: 'Shetlanders use the Norse part of their heritage to bolster, support and provide a boundary around their local, unique

identity'. Reeploeg (2012: 214) calls Shetland's Nordic heritage 'a continuous chorographic activity that resists, or subverts, being a British or Scottish "national outpost"'.

A side-effect of this Norse identity-construction is renunciation of associations with Gaelic language and culture. Jennings (2021: 6) notes that 'a number of communities in Shetland have requested bilingual road signs with their name, not in Gaelic as happens on the Mainland, and which would cause consternation in a non-Gaelic speaking territory, but in Old Norse'. In my experience, 'consternation' aroused by Gaelic in public space in Shetland is a reaction to mistaken outside assumptions that Shetland is part of Scotland's Gàidhealtachd (its Gaelic-speaking area, similar to Ireland's Gaeltacht), like many of the islands off Scotland's west coast. Much like Shetland being misplaced on the map[2], being mixed up with distant and different islands underlines how little is known about Shetland in the urban centres of UK and Scottish power from which it is governed. Articulating an internal Shetland sense of 'islandness' therefore involves emphasising Shetland's cultural distance from Scotland's Gaelic-speaking highlands and islands, and by extension Ireland.

Although Ireland and Shetland do not relate to each other as part of a transnational Gaelic or Celtic 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006), as might be said of Ireland and Scotland's Western Isles/*Na h-Eileanan Siar*, they remain archipelagic neighbours. From debated archaeological and linguistic evidence of 'Irish monks or anchorites, the Papar, who inhabited the Northern and Western isles of Scotland together with the Picts at the beginning of the Viking Age' (Gammeltoft 2004: 38; Ahronson 2015: 63; Caseldine 2017) to contemporary travel within the 'fuzzy' Common Travel Area spanning Ireland and the UK (Hayward 2018: 241-2), people move between these islands. During the 20th century, two industrial 'booms' brought Irish workers to Shetland: first, the coastal mobility of herring gutting in the 1930s-40s, after the high point of the 'herring boom' before World War I; and second, the more earth-bound construction work which attracted Irish workers to Shetland during its 'oil boom' in the 1970s.

Following the Fishing: *Aa Da Different Peerie Places*

In the early 20th century, herring 'thronged the North Atlantic' and 'stitched together a patchwork of places that seemed – at first sight – quite different and distinct, giving these localities similarities in their ways of life' (Murray 2022: 19). Within this industry connecting 'places as far apart as Iceland, the Netherlands, Ireland, the United States and Southern Greenland'

[2] Or referred to as 'The Shetlands', a frequent irritant.

(Murray 2022: 19), Ireland and Shetland formed part of an annual circuit for workers who followed the fishing. As several Shetland friends have informed me, Ireland has Shetland's role in this to thank for singer Daniel O'Donnell. His mother Julia (born on a small island off the coast of Donegal, called Owey) was one of the 'herring girls' who gutted and packed fish in Lerwick, Shetland in the 1940s. Julia O'Donnell met her husband, who was also from Donegal, while he was doing similar work in Lerwick (O'Donnell 2007: 131-3). Banffshire fisherman George Murray, quoted in Taylor (2021: 432), reports 'The Irish [men] followed boats gutting. They did same as girls.' Former herring girl Christina Jackman, quoted in Telford (1998: 25), confirms this was unusual and suggests economic hardship as a factor:

> *[In Great Yarmouth] Dey wir never ony Scotch men gutters or packers. Da Irish men wis gutters and packers…I suppose dey couldna get ony work in Ireland so dey cam owre wi a curer. But da Irishmen were handy ta lift da barrels wi da coopers an help da coopers. Dey never mixed wi onybody. Dey wir on der ane. I suppose dey wir Catholics. Whan da claes wir rationed efter da War, dey never spent ders. Dey sowld dem ta fock.*[3]

The mobility of this work brought many configurations of island and coastal communities together. Jackman (Telford 1998: 25) recalls that in Great Yarmouth '[d]ey wir ever such a lock of fishergirls. About a thousand I suppose…Dey cam fae da islands, fae Barra or Uist, da west islands, an aa Scotland, an aa da different peerie places'[4]. Accounts of this way of life suggest both solidarity (as in strikes for better pay) and a degree of incomprehension among these migrant workers from the '*peerie'* (little) places of the northern coasts of Britain and Ireland. Herring gutting brought together Irish Gaelic (*Gaeilge*) speakers from different parts of Ireland, Scottish Gaelic (*Gàidhlig*) speakers from different parts of Scotland, and Shetland, Scots and English speakers from all along the east coast of Britain. Interviewed on BBC Radio Shetland in 1989, Julia O'Donnell spoke as if even Ireland's Tory Island was a world away from her home island of Owey in Donegal:

[3] 'There never were any Scottish men gutters or packers. The Irish men were gutters and packers. There were two crews: six men. I suppose they couldn't get any work in Ireland so they came over with a curer. But the Irishmen were handy to lift the barrels with the coopers and help the coopers. They never mixed with anybody. They were on their own. I suppose they were Catholics. When the clothes were rationed after the War, they never spent theirs. They sold them to folk.'

[4] 'There was such a lot of fishergirls. About a thousand I suppose. All the fishergirls knew one another really, because they just lived amongst themselves. They came from the islands, from Barra or Uist, the Western Isles, and all over Scotland, and all the different little places.'

> *There was so many people from home [in Lerwick…] you're meeting people that you never met before and they're still from home. You know, as we call home 'home', all over Ireland. You know, there was Donegal and there was Downings and there was […] even Tory Island, there was people out here from Tory Island. And that was away, God knows how many miles from where I lived, way out in an island. And they came here and they were talking Gaelic and we didn't know what they were talking about.*

By Julia O'Donnell's time in Lerwick, the herring industry was in decline. By the 1960s there was little left of its mobile workforce. Photographer Craig Easton's project 'Fisherwomen' captures their contemporary counterparts on Britain's east coast, 'found behind closed doors, working unseen' (Easton 2020: 1). In 2023 Easton's photographs were exhibited in Shetland Museum, which filled with people eager to listen to local ex-'herring girls' talk about their experiences. One, Rita McNab, gutted and packed a box of fish with great show-womanship, a sharp knife and hands that shook but moved with the speed of ingrained muscle memory.
Fishing-related practices and networks spanning Shetland and Ireland's coastal areas continue to create everyday connections. During a research trip to Donegal as part of a study of 'aran' and 'fair isle' knitting (Carden 2022a; 2022b), a resident of the fishing village of Killybegs realised where I'd travelled from and surprised me by rhyming off the names of several pubs in Lerwick. These small and distant places have a prosaic familiarity because of the sea between them and the working lives it supports. I notice an occasional stray plastic fish box marked 'Kilkeel' (County Down) in Shetland; a neighbour from my hometown commuted for weeks at a time to work on Shetland's fish farms. While being linked by the sea is a staple of archipelagic or 'aquapelagic' relations (Nash 2016; Hayfield and Nielsen 2022), Shetland and Ireland's islandnesses were also brought into contact on land in the early years of North Sea Oil.

'Us Muckshifters': Irish Workers and Shetland's Oil Boom

The oil industry brought rapid social change to Shetland (Byron and MacFarlane 1980). The epicentre of this seismic change was a peat-covered peninsula on the shores of a deep inlet called Sullom Voe, towards the north of Shetland's Mainland, which became Europe's largest oil terminal. Irish labourers played an important role in this physical and social transformation. Speaking to me in her current home about ten miles from Sullom Voe, 'M', who when she was twenty became the first woman employed at the site, remembers 'how it all began. […] We

knew about this impending oil boom. We heard […] it was these wild Irish men that were coming'. In November 1974, from M's home in the hamlet of Graven, 'the first we were aware of any movement was muckshifting machines[…]All these yellow dots coming in over the hill towards where we lived. They had to drive them over the hill from Toft. There were no roads'. The plant machinery had been shipped to Toft 'from Belfast'. The first labourers on site were from a civil engineering company called JMJ[5], based in Carryduff (later Banbridge).

JMJ men, the so-called 'muckshifters' (Sullom Voe Scene 1979: 7), came from both sides of the Irish border though M remembers 'most were from the North'. There were 'lots of Newry men' and the 'poor boys from Donegal' who took 'as long to get home and get back again as they had time off', as well as workers from Waterford and elsewhere in the south. Like elsewhere in Britain, workers from either side of the Irish border and of any ethnosectarian identity were usually known as 'Irish' in Shetland. People from both Irish nationalist and unionist community backgrounds were present, but M confirms 'they were largely Catholic men'. A Shetland-based priest, Father Rory Geogeghan, told the site newsletter *Sullom Voe Scene*[6] (1980: 6) that '[w]e had about a thousand at the four weekend masses when the JMJ boys were here - they follow the Irish Catholic tradition of the civils trade'.

The prospect of large numbers of Irish men arriving in Shetland's small communities caused some anxiety. M remembers '[w]hat we'd heard at that time was "lock your doors, lock your cars, lock up your daughters". I thought, I'm not going to apply to work with those rough men!' However, her uncle advised her to apply for an administrative job because 'he'd already started meeting the Irish men and they were OK'. M found them to be 'sociable guys' who 'mixed well…they'd meet chambermaids, cleaners, local people…we'd have them come down and visit the house. They'd come to country dances. They learned the Shetland dances.' She laughs at how reality jarred with initial fears: 'after us hearing about all this "wild Irish", coming to quiet little rural Shetland!' Another woman of the same generation once told me that the Irish workers' willingness to dance with Shetland women contrasted with reluctance to dance among local men at the time, and that this enthusiasm caused occasional resentment. However, tensions seem to have been minimal. When a Catholic Bishop visited Shetland in 1977 and held a special Mass, '[c]ouncillor Edward Thomason spoke of the fears of fights and disaster

[5] The Irishness of the JMJ men led to jokes the abbreviation stood for 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph'. JMJ later merged with two other companies to become LJK, the biggest contractor at Sullom Voe.

[6] As well as *Sullom Voe Scene*, the official works newsletter which was published 1977-1994, a more DIY and scurrilous publication called *Staney Hill Free Press*, by Bill Jardine, was in circulation 1978-1989 and offers a window into the national stereotypes of the time.

in Shetland before work started at Sullom Voe and of how the arrival of the first workers – J.M.J. men from Ireland – had soon shown such worries to be groundless' (Sullom Voe Scene 1977: 8).

The impact of transient workers on the general population was limited because the workers lived apart, in 'camps' which themselves had to be built. The first of these temporary accommodation clusters was called the 'Pioneer Camp', a construction industry term which casts Shetland as an empty frontier. Irish workers lived at a more comfortable camp at Firth from 1976. These longer-term accommodation sites included what M calls 'the best facilities, entertainment, food', so although 'some did go to Lerwick at the weekends', men working long days at Sullom Voe mostly stayed in the area. Camp amenities (e.g. bars, shops, a cinema, sports spaces and cabaret shows) were important because of the distance from any other facilities.

As much of the workers' day-to-day lives were spent in this isolated area, some local people got to know them well. Friendships developed, particularly with M's uncle, who owned the Mossbank Post Office, with its public telephone box. In the early days, an Irish worker called Gerry Monaghan commented (Sullom Voe Scene 1979: 7-9), '[t]hey had the only telephone and we all met down there. They did more for the Irish blokes than anybody else'. M's uncle would invite the men to use the telephone in his own house, which led to frequent social visits. A keen photographer, he took hundreds of slides of the construction and the workers. Some show men in his home; in a typical shot, a man who worked for Belfast building firm Knockbreda sits in an easy chair wearing a Shetland-style fair isle yoke pullover, with an 'Irish blessing' wall hanging and a framed postcard from the 'Antrim coast' behind him (unpublished photograph by Gilbert Murray, 1977).

The role of these workers in the brand-new North Sea oil industry was notable enough on the 'island of Ireland' for Ulster Television to film an episode of current affairs programme *Counterpoint* at Sullom Voe. On the programme, an unnamed interviewee says that 'in terms of money, what [Sullom Voe] meant to Northern Ireland was as much as about £35 million in 1976 and we're expecting this to be more in 1977' (UTV 1978). The 1970s saw rising unemployment in Northern Ireland (Osborne and Cormack 1986: 216) and the opportunities afforded by Shetland's oil boom were keenly felt. The site was visited by the UK Minister of State for Northern Ireland, to greet 'the muckshifters' (Sullom Voe Scene 1978: 2).

As we drive between the old 'camps', few of whose buildings remain, M points out well-kept houses that Knockbreda built 'for incomers' during the oil boom. In 1976 Knockbreda's founder, Martin McCambridge, told the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* that 'work in the islands […] has earned his company a name in Northern Ireland', attracting more contracts at home and fuelling his aspirations 'to 'break into the building and civil engineering market' in the Middle East (Mutch 1976: 10). With 100 employees in Shetland of whom '90% (were) Irish', McCambridge claimed to have 'a waiting list of more than 300 in Northern Ireland wanting jobs with the company – and all want to work in Shetland' (Mutch 1976: 10). There were both pull and push factors encouraging people to make the journey in the 1970s: 'Part of the attraction of working in Shetland is obviously the money – they can earn £200 a week. But McCambridge said another reason was "the peace and quiet" – something which he admitted was a sad comment on the situation in Northern Ireland' (Mutch 1976: 10).

M remembers two of the JMJ men, 'one from Kilkeel, one from Omagh, one Protestant and one Catholic'. Holding two fingers close together, she says 'they were like that when they were here'. When they went home, however, 'they could phone each other but they couldn't meet up with their wives for drinks or anything like that' because of sectarian division. M experienced the commonly so-called 'situation in Northern Ireland' herself in the summer of 1975, when 'a fitter said why not go and stay' with his relatives on the Derry/Donegal border. At one point in the holiday they 'got a phonecall – don't come out of the house, they're hijacking cars'. Another day, '[they] came back into Derry through the Bogside. People were hijacking cars, burning them […] because it was such-and-such a date.'[7] She remembers the town centre's security checkpoints: 'We went through one, me last. They hadn't told me [soldiers would] search our handbags - all of a sudden there was a big gun held in front of me.' M nonetheless enjoyed her trip, thought that 'seeing it helped that connection' with the JMJ men, and has been back to 'Ireland about five times, different places, since'.

A Small Explosion

In 1974, when the first accommodation camp for workers building Sullom Voe was under construction, the 'situation in Northern Ireland' was spilling across the Irish Sea, as the Provisional IRA's bombing campaign in so-called 'mainland Britain' was underway. Although Hickman and Ryan (2020: 104) remark that 'the IRA campaign in England…was not pursued

[7] Possibly 9th August, the anniversary of the introduction of internment in 1971.

in Scotland or Wales', it was pursued in Shetland. Sullom Voe became the scene of the most northerly bombing attempt in that IRA campaign in 1981. 1974 was the year of the Birmingham pub bombings and the UK's Prevention of Terrorism Act, with Irish populations in Britain a focus of suspicion (Hickman and Ryan 2020: 110). The official historian of MI5 states '[i]t was later discovered that the large construction team at Sullum [sic] Voe, many of them Irish, had included a number of known or suspected Republicans' (Andrew 2009: 694).

On 9 May 1981[8], Shetland's oil terminal was officially opened by the UK's Queen Elizabeth II. She was accompanied by both Prince Philip and, in a nod to Shetland's historically layered national allegiances, the King of Norway. M recalls hearing that 'if the hierarchy knew that any of the guys had an IRA connection, they were sent home that weekend.' However, a small explosion took place, 'all but drowned out by the band as it played first the Norwegian, then the British national anthems' (Taylor 2016: 32). The fact that there had been a bomb was not immediately publicised, although 'the air was thick with rumours after Irish Republican sources issued two bomb warnings…after the explosion had happened' (Shetland Times 1981: 27).

While the IRA quickly and repeatedly claimed responsibility for breaching 'the English Queen's security' with the bomb, which had failed to detonate completely, it was not immediately clear what had happened. 'Newspaper enquiries to BP and the police drew a blank until eight o'clock [next] evening', when police confirmed there had been an explosion (The Shetland Times 1981: 27). BP (the oil company in charge of the site) suggested at first that the explosion had been due to faulty equipment. The bomb was briefly acknowledged by Scottish Secretary George Younger in the House of Commons a few days later, in response to a question by an Aberdeen MP (HC Deb 1981). Interviewed in 1999, a Shetland CID officer remembered a 'very interesting enquiry' which was not completely resolved (BBC Radio Shetland 1999).

With the eventual emergence of classified information it appeared that the bomber, a worker at Sullom Voe, had received the device in the post, and fled before a second device arrived in Shetland; this second parcel was intercepted on its way to the bomber's address in Northern Ireland (Andrew 2009: 694). Failing to blow up an oil terminal has an absurd quality, bringing to mind the colloquialism 'couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery'. However, the downplaying of the incident by authorities at the time, alongside the IRA's eagerness to claim responsibility, demonstrates the significance of the act. Sullom Voe represented both the height of British

[8] This was a time of heightened tension, just four days after the death of republican hunger striker Bobby Sands in Belfast.

industrial progress and the farthest-flung reaches of the United Kingdom. An attempt on the life of the British monarch in these small islands, however unsuccessful, showed that no part of the 'Atlantic Archipelago' was insulated from conflict over the 'island of Ireland'.

Conclusion

Considering Shetland and Ireland as two island places – two collections of islands in fact – highlights the overlapping 'imbrications', endlessly fragmenting 'fractals' and 'fuzzy borders' that characterise islandness (Williams 2013: 26; Riquet 2019: 177) and the 'Atlantic Archipelago' in particular. While the small islands of Scotland and Ireland play a role in their respective national imaginaries as conveniently bounded containers for cultural heritage, places where the symbolic repertoire of national identity can be visited and left behind, islands can also act as nationality's ragged edge, as seen in Shetland's Norse 'chorographic activity' (Reeploeg 2012:214). In the convulsions of Brexit and the movement for Scottish independence, 'islandness', whether that of the island of Ireland or of Shetland, is a disruption to as well as an 'ideal embodiment of the state's relationship to the nation' (Baldacchino 2013: 3).

Islandness is brought into consciousness through quotidian mobilities, whether of post-Brexit goods crossing the Irish Sea or of workers following well-worn routes between 'home' islands. The intermittent presence of visiting Irish construction workers in Shetland long outlasted the building of Sullom Voe. When the Total Gas Plant was built in the 2010s, for example, groundwork was done by an Irish company called RoadBridge. Today, while a large and locally controversial windfarm is being built in Shetland by a firm with the resonant name 'Viking Energy' (Cope 2023) and a new undersea cable is being laid to connect Shetland to the UK's National Grid, contractors from across the 'Atlantic Archipelago' are on the move again. The transience of some kinds of labour makes its impact easy to overlook, but by bringing different 'islandnesses' into juxtaposition (whether the divided island of Ireland and the rapidly industrialising small islands of 1970s Shetland, or the plethora of 'peerie places' represented by the travelling herring gutters) such networks construct the islandness of Britain and Ireland figuratively as well as literally.

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PEAT TURF, SEAWEED, AND THE 'POOL OF HELP' ECONOMY: TRACING THE SOCIAL LIVES OF NATURAL RESOURCES ON LETTERMORE ISLAND, GALWAY

BY GRANIA POWER

Correspondence: *power.graniae@gmail.com*

Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on the island of Lettermore, this paper catalogues a historical network of resource exchange between island, coastal, and mainland communities on the southwestern coast of Galway, and discusses the social construction of group identities and communitas in this region. Under conditions of material scarcity, people on Lettermore perform a 'transmutation' of the material into the social. The example of peat turf shows how, through customary processes of labour, exchange, and use, natural resources are subsumed into a pool-like economy of social support for members of the island community and outsiders on the island to draw upon as need arises.

Keywords: Islandness; Lettermore; rural Ireland; informal economies; island exchange networks; peat turf; nonlinearity; ethnographic methods.

Introduction

The definitional and analytical contours of 'the island' have been debated within the social sciences. In their paper 'Understanding Islandness', Foley et al. (2023) attempt to untangle tangled narratives and operationalise terminology, laying out distinct conceptual framings in social science literature of the island, island communities, and cultural 'islandness' (Conkling 2007). They identify three key framings of islandness: the island as 'other', islandness as 'smallness', and islandness as 'sociocultural phenomenon' (Foley et al. 2023, 1801). Often informed by ethnographic methods, the sociocultural phenomenon framing examines 'cultures of kinship and resourcefulness' (ibid, 1805) and distinctive forms of social life arising in communities that experience physical isolation – though those communities may or may not be water-bound. This paper contributes to this discourse of sociocultural islandness as phenomenon. I explore an unusual form of social-economic organisation on Lettermore, a generalised 'pool of help' which arises under conditions of relative isolation and resource scarcity on the island, and potentially in other island communities, coastal communities, and landlocked communities in rural County Galway. I aim to 'think archipelagically', situating Lettermore's social-economic life within an archipelago or 'constellation' of other physically isolated and rural communities across the larger island of Ireland (Pugh 2013, 10-12).

Figure 1. A road along the coast of Lettermore. Photo by author.

Archipelagic networks of inter-island resource exchange and social networks can help distinct island communities to cultivate a shared preparedness for the unpredictable and navigate shared vulnerabilities (Campbell 2008). From narrative accounts of islanders on Lettermore, I document a historical network of resource exchange in Lettermore's environs, made up of village–village, island–island, and island–mainland movements (Pugh 2013) across a diffuse network of communities north of Galway Bay. I also discuss the co-construction of relational group identities within this trade network. Tracking the social lives (Appadurai 2009) of land and sea resources in this network reveals not only relational identity making, but also a mutual recognition of shared material circumstances among island and nearby mainland communities in Lettermore's environs.

I then explore the idea that on Lettermore island itself – and likely also in the nearby island and mainland communities that mutually identify with Lettermore's material conditions – sparse land and sea resources are 'recycled' or 'transmuted' into social life through customary processes of labour, exchange, and use. Resources lose their material forms and enter into social life as they generate a larger social resource, which I call a 'pool of help.' The pool becomes available for members of the island community and visitors to the island to draw upon as need arises. During the process of labour, exchange, and use of resources in Lettermore's gift economy, the distinct lines of giver to receiver,

and the distinct timelines of giving and receiving, become entangled, so that it becomes impossible for members of the community to determine where the gift begins and ends. In response to this obfuscation, and through the extension of good will by community members, the gift economy transcends its form as a jumble of intertangled vectors of social obligation, and takes on a more convenient, amorphous form as a diffuse norm of generalised reciprocity that transcends linear time and specific relationalities or materialities and permeates community life: this is the 'pool of help'. I will track the social life of peat turf as a case study to demonstrate how the Lettermore community transmutes material resources into this larger social resource.

This analysis also speaks to social life beyond Lettermore's environs, elsewhere in County Galway and perhaps more broadly in rural Ireland, where natural resources can hold a similar level of material and social importance for small land-bound communities, and similarly diffuse and non-systematic economies of exchange and mutual care have been identified in social life (i.e., Salazar 1996). I engage with Salazar's ethnographic work on economic life in rural Ireland to explore the conception of a wider 'archipelago' of rural communities across Ireland who live under similar conditions of isolation and material scarcity to those on Lettermore, engaging innovative economies of resource exchange and transmuting resources into social safety nets of mutual support that parallel Lettermore's pool of help.

Ethnographic Context

Lettermore (or, in Irish, *Leitir Móir*, meaning 'large rough hillside') is a starkly beautiful sea-bound island of approximately three and half miles in length off the coast of County Galway in the West of Ireland. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2021 over the course of 10 weeks on the island of Lettermore and in two other rural Galway communities, with smallholding farmers and families who heat their homes using peat turf extracted from local bogs. Stays with hosts were organised through WWOOF Ireland, the Irish division of the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) programme. Emerging pressures are being placed on rural communities in Ireland to eliminate peat turf as a fuel source under new international and domestic environmental initiatives (O'Riordan et al. 2016), and the response of rural communities to these pressures was the original focus of the research. The research was conducted using ethnographic participant-observation of community life and work on the land and the bog, and through informal and formal interviews. Most of these were working interviews, conducted as I worked side by side with my host farmers, their relatives, and their extended communities.

My key interlocutors on Lettermore were Tom and Fiona (pseudonyms used for all interlocutors), a young couple who rented a small, whitewashed house beside the sea in the island's loosely clustered Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) village, which also goes by the name of *Leitir Móir*. Now in his thirties, Tom had grown up on the island, moved away to study agriculture, and returned. He had extensive

knowledge of the island – its natural resources and local history – and continuously supplied answers to my stream of questions and connected me with others to interview as we worked in the bogs or on his farm land, drank tea, or shared meals at the kitchen table.

Figure 2. A sign beside the main road reading 'Fáilte go Leitir Móir' (Welcome to Lettermore). Photo by Michaela Wentz.

Despite now being connected to the mainland and other nearby islands by drivable bridges and connected to new sources of income and resources such as remote working, commuting, a golf course, tourism, and holiday homes, Lettermore has historically been isolated from mainland Galway and has experienced high levels of poverty (Gailey 2010). In this environment of relative material scarcity, islanders' innovative uses of endogenous resources from the land and sea have shaped distinctive arrangements of social relationality and identities. To explore these, I will first discuss the construction of island–island and island–mainland relational identities (Pugh 2013) through resource exchange networks in Lettermore's environs, and then turn to the pool of help.

Island–Island and Island–Mainland Resource Exchange: Relational Group Identity-Making

Figure 3. Lettermore Island, part of a group of islands northwest of Galway Bay, and its surroundings. Sourced from Google Maps.

Lettermore is part of a small, closely clustered archipelago in the West of Ireland, off the coast of Galway and formally part of that county. It is about a day's journey south in a fishing boat to the Aran Islands and a few hours east to mainland Galway. In an interview, Tom described how people on Lettermore historically saw themselves as part of a resource exchange network with other small islands, island village communities, and with the mainland:[9]

> *A lot of villages around here, they have, like, nicknames in Irish. I think here in Lettermore, they're called '/'flē hōōn/,' which are 'winkles.'*[10] *Because we are – we have good flagstones for picking winkles, and you know, we're kinda winkle producers. In Lettermore village, there used to be Travelers, which were called 'tinkers,' and at the time they used to come there every summer, and they used to fix all your pots and pans, so if you needed a pan fixed, you went to Lettermore village during the summer to get your pan fixed. Or, another name for Lettermore village is 'jumpers,' which is, you know, a cardigan or a pullover, so they must have made a lot of jumpers in Lettermore village. Then where my mother's from, they were called 'donkeys,' '/'o*

[9] In this excerpt, I have recorded Irish words using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), being unable to find a spelling for most of the words and wishing to preserve the pronunciation.
[10] Winkles are small edible sea snails.

> *set/,' because they had a lot of bogland, flat blog land, and they used to have a lot of donkeys to do all the work. And then, you know, for example, a village might be called 'pigs,' you know, moca ('/'mōku/') because they maybe had a lot of pigs in that village because the land suited pigs, not cows or sheep. And then same for Rossamote, they were called '/'pōō ku dē/,' which are goats, uphill goats, so they obviously produced a lot of goats. So if you wanted a goat or goat meat, you might go there. So even though we're small, that's just within this bay, and a few villages, you know, within a small area, each area had their own kinda niche to work with.*

Tom's account is constructed archipelagically (Pugh 2013), recounting a network of island–island, village–village, and possible island–mainland resource exchanges. The communities described are discrete entities with unique labels, their nicknames, but the nicknames reference the contribution of resources that communities make to other groups in the network, demonstrating relational identity-making in the material entanglements between the communities. Notably, some communities are given distinct nicknames despite their close spatial proximity. Several of the places Tom mentions are villages on the same island, and Tom does not differentiate between village, island, and possibly mainland, referring to the communities involved in the trade network diffusely, as: 'within this bay, and a few villages, you know, within a small area'. Rather than physical geography, it is the key material resource provided to others in the network that bands a group together under one label.

Historical island-mainland resource shipments from Lettermore to mainland Galway were confirmed in an interview with Conor, a local seaweed fertiliser producer whose family had made their living fishing in the area for generations:

> *You can see the land around here is very poor quality. It [the legal turbary right of families to collect seaweed from particular plots of coastline] was to bring the seaweed up to the land to help them grow their own food—somewhat like what Tom's doing here now, but without the greenhouses. Yeah, to help them, you know, just grow enough food for themselves. But I think 'twas always an industry…We have a picture of our sailboat—we have a Galway hooker—going to Galway in the early 1920s, loaded with seaweed, and they were sending it to East Galway to help them put seaweed up on the land, like. Oh, it's always been—well see these boats then would've drawn [peat] turf in summer months. And then in wintertime, obviously, they couldn't be drawing the turf to sell. So they'd turn over to seaweed then. And then they'd be bringing the seaweed to Galway, to help put on the land on the East—on the far side of Galway, where obviously, they're probably short some minerals.*

Conor's account expands the bounds of the regional network of resource exchange to definitively include mainland communities.

As we observe relationality among the communities in Lettermore's environs, we should note that Lettermore's archipelago itself does not have a name. The islands to the south are organised under the common name 'Aran Islands', and are formally named in relation to one another: *Inishmore* (big island), *Inishmann* (middle island), and *Inisheer* (east island). In contrast, Lettermore and its environs have no formal overarching group identity, and their relational place names are not formal ones. Instead, their relational identities have been constructed informally, flexibly, even playfully. The lack of a common name for Lettermore and the surrounding area points toward a sense of place that is constructed in situ through mutual identification to form an affinitive, flexible, and adaptable network of communities and materialities – without being organised from 'above'. Prejudice and playful or serious rivalries undoubtedly exist between some community groups. However, even as the nicknames highlight differences in the communities' ways of life and experiences of the land and seascape, they also express a sense of mutual recognition. The communities recognise one another as peers at least in their shared experience of lack or want for materials in the region – and in their shared capacity for community-wide social-economic innovation in resource use in response to their particular biogeographical conditions.

Lastly, we can notice in Tom's account of the trade network that, just as the labels assigned to communities do not distinguish between villages, islands, and mainland communities, they also resist categorising the resources. The nicknames do not differentiate, for example, between raw resources from the land, resources produced by craftsmen, the skills of the craftsmen themselves, and the animals a community rears: 'winkles', 'tinkers', 'jumpers', and 'donkeys' are all labels given to groups of people. The nature of the resource is not definitive here; rather, the defining factor is that a resource is provided to the wider network. In the process of relational identity making, then, as a resource becomes a shorthand for a group of people, that group's particular biogeography, knowledges, skills, and labour, exchange and use practices are subsumed indiscriminately within the nickname. This points toward a mutual recognition among the communities that resources are not only definitive in inter-community life; they are also definitive in intra-community life – the self-construction of a community as a community.

We have seen a mutual recognition among the communities in Lettermore's environs of their shared circumstances of a degree of material lack, and their shared capacity for social-economic innovation and the construction of community through the use of resources. We can now look at how these capacities are expressed in the Lettermore community.

The Transcendental Pool of Help on Lettermore

If we move away from the regional scale and return to the scale of Lettermore island, we can see that local natural resources from the land and sea, as well as the customary labour, exchange, and use practices that people attach to them, have indeed been instrumental in producing communitas and

community social-economic life. Under historical conditions of material scarcity, people on Lettermore have transmuted the material resources available to them into a larger social resource, a ‘pool of help’ that may be drawn on by anyone on the island as need arises.

This pool of help is produced through customary practices of labour, exchange, and use that surround material island resources. We can understand this labour to refer to the extraction or collection of the resources, their transportation, and the craftsmanship or manipulation required to make them usable; exchange to the trading or gifting of the resources; and use to the consumption of the resources and the end of their material life cycle. Through the particularities of the labour processes required to prepare the resources for use and the system of resource exchange, the specific relationalities and temporalities of giving and receiving become inextricably entangled. This leads to a general non-differentiation between actors, and a disregard for linear timelines in giving and receiving on the island, giving rise to a diffuse norm of ‘generalised reciprocity’ (Sahlins 1972, 193) in the ‘system of total services’ that comprises community life (Mauss 1990 [1925], 7). For this reason, Lettermore’s system of total services is better characterised as a pool than a system.

We can find all of these processes when we track the social life of peat turf (called ‘turf’) on the island. For its particular symbolic richness, turf is a synecdochic case study among the resources on the island that are involved in the creation of the pool of help. Centring turf as ‘the thing itself’ (Appadurai 2006), we can extrapolate the social-material processes that surround it. The material importance of turf is physically evident on Lettermore, as bricks of dried turf cut from the gelatinous bodies of bogs are stacked near houses and along the dry stone walls. The bricks have been mechanically extracted and piled by hand to dry in the elements. They will be burned in homes like logs of wood when the weather turns cold. Tarps weighed down with fishing nets and stones protect the turf, while dry stone walls keep it dry and ready for burning.

Figure 4. Turf stacked in the traditional way against a dry stone wall on Lettermore. Photo by author.

The piles of turf dot the stark landscape rather like an archipelago of small islands themselves, shaped to weather the conditions of the wind and rain on the island. Tom explains:

> *Footing and stacking turf is an art form. And wherever you go in Connemara, they're done differently. [On the bogs themselves, with 'footed' turf,*[11] *intended to dry in the wind] you'll see pyramids with a piece of turf on top to hold it together, or sometimes you'll see shapes more like boxes, or just sort of a pile to keep it up off the ground. So here, where we're near the sea, we usually stack it up against a stone wall, because the stone walls here have lots of gaps in them, so the wind blows through and helps it to dry. And often, the stone walls are built against patterns of wind and rain, so the rain comes down on one side of the stone wall and protects the turf on the other side from the rain while still letting the wind blow through. If you go out to, say, Spiddal, they build it sort of broader at the base and up to a point, and then cover it at the top with sod to keep it dry.*

Looking at the landscape, we can see peat turf as a key resource for community subsistence and an

[11] 'Footed' turf refers to bricks of peat that have been stacked to dry in the wind on top of a bog. Footing is done after the bricks have been left lying flat on the bog for several weeks, and then turned so that both sides have a chance to dry out and harden in the wind.

embodiment of a symbolic expression of place. The turf is a nexus of the island's unique land and weather conditions, community values and place-based subsistence innovations. Its literal transmutation, through a series of stages of labour, exchange, and use (through burning), from earth into air, parallels the symbolic transmutation through labour, exchange, and use of the material into the social.

On Lettermore, as in other communities in rural Ireland, turf is laboured over, exchanged, and used in a series of stages. The labour process entails cutting turf out of the bog (done manually in the past using a tool called a *sleán*, now commonly done by machine via hired contractors); returning to the bog at least twice, and sometimes several times over the course of weeks or months to turn and foot the turf for drying in the elements; and collecting it, transporting it home, and stacking it again in a shed or against a wall. The labour process varies by location and weather conditions, but it is repeated annually in a seasonal cycle.

Throughout the multi-staged annual process of preparing turf for burning, and especially during the stages of labour on the bog itself, families and individuals voluntarily help one another in an exchange of labour-time. However, within the community's gift economy, the exact networks of labour exchange – and thereby the exact networks of exchange of the peat turf resources that the labour process produces – are obscured. Due to ambiguities in the land tenure of the bogs and to the common practice of sharing dried turf between households in extended families, it is very difficult to trace a line between the giver of labour on the bog and the receiver of its benefits. As is the case elsewhere in rural Ireland, historically and today on Lettermore some families hold ancestral turbary rights, the exclusive right to collect peat turf from specific patches of bog land. Those who still collect turf but do not hold these rights rent plots of bog land on or off the island. Therefore, the beneficiary of the day's labour could be one of several people in a family who hold the turbary rights to a given plot of land, or who have organised together to rent a plot. But it could equally be someone in one of their households who will ultimately benefit from the same turf-fire, or someone in one of their extended family networks who might later receive the dried turf as a gift if need arises. Thus, labour over the turf can be viewed as an act of service to a known individual or household, or to an entire family, clan, or set of clans. In a sense, then, the benefits of an individual's labour on the bog can be said to extend outward into the entire community – through the obfuscation of labour-giver and benefactor – along the community's interconnected networks of social obligation.

The precise timelines of labour exchanges for peat turf are blurred by the timeframe and stages required to prepare the turf to burn. Turf is cut and footed to dry on the bog years in advance of its anticipated use. Once it has partially dried in the elements and been transported to households, it is left in storage to continue to dry, usually for two to three years. It is therefore generally the turf of at least two years ago – and subsumed within it, the multi-staged labour of those who cut, turned, and

footed it two years ago – that keeps a family warm in the winter. But who would bother to distinguish between the labour of those who had cut the turf two years ago in anticipation of this moment, and those who had cut it last year in anticipation of next year, or this year in anticipation of two years hence? Better, perhaps, to conceptually throw all of that labour in together; the help of everyone who may have contributed somehow, at some stage, in some year past or even future, to the turf fire in one's home, and to feel warmly in their debt.

Thus, in the vagaries that the cyclical stages of peat turf collection, processing, and storage create, specific vectors of relationality are lost, and so are specific temporalities. The material, social-economic, and temporal become so hopelessly entangled that they undergo a sea-change, transmuting from their separate social forms into something that is pooled together within the gift economy. In the moment of use, when the weather gets cold and a household burns bricks of turf to respond to an emergent need, this process of transmutation is completed. Through the obfuscation of the role of specific vectors within the system of exchange, help comes to a household *from the community as a whole through time*, and in accepting that help by burning the turf, that household becomes indebted to the community as a whole, through time. To conceptualise the transmutation of material resources into the social pool of help, then, we can imagine a brick of dried turf burning in a household stove. As the material burns away, providing warmth to a household, all of the mutual effort and mutual care that went into it washes over the community diffusely, as though made one with the form of the smoke. Individual and collective efforts, shared labour time, and acts of generosity are transmuted, but not lost – in fact, they are now everywhere.

In this way, the labour, exchange, and use of peat turf contributes to a generalised reciprocity within the community, and the obfuscation of specific relationalities and timelines of exchange gives rise to a phenomenon of total exchange in social life, a Maussian 'system of total services' (1990 [1925], 7) that is more pool, or even 'smoke' than system in its form. This process is shaped by the physical nature of peat turf as a material (inherently wet, heavy, and laborious to work with, requiring repeated turning, stacking, and years of storage to fully dry-out). It is also shaped by the place-specific responses that communities have employed through time to work with these physical qualities of peat turf, such as traditional *meitheal* group labour and long-term storage of the turf at home for drying. However, the transmutation of specific material, social, and temporal vectors of meaning into a larger community-wide resource of good will and help cannot happen passively through obfuscation alone. Transmutation also requires generosity and the assumption of good will on either end of the entangled vectors of social meaning. The person cutting, footing, or stacking the turf must be willing to accept that the fruits of the labour could conceivably fall to almost anyone in the community, no matter who the expected recipient is, and the person burning the turf must be willing to extend gratitude to almost anyone in the community in return. A generalised good will, and a trust in the generous intentions of many or most of one's fellow community members must be – at least most of

the time – prioritised over personal grievances or personal greed. Personal agency, taking the form of generosity and reticence – the surrender or repression of one's own priorities in the interest of protecting communitas, which has frequently been identified in ethnographic studies of rural Irish community life (Keohane, Kuhling, and O'Brien 2023; Brody 1973) – is also needed for the creation of the pool of help.

On Lettermore, reciprocity for labour on behalf of others was expected, but the timeline, giver, and form of this reciprocity was highly flexible. Repayment for one's help on the bog might come immediately after the shared labour in the form of shared drinks, or the next year on the bog when it came time to prepare for winter again. It might also come in a form that had nothing to do with peat turf, for example when help was needed to build a new shed or tend to animals while someone was away from the island. It might come directly from the recipient of one's labour on the bog, or from one of their relatives. However, if some clear form of reciprocity did not come for one's help offered, this was no cause for concern, because it would surely come at some point in the future, in some form, from someone – or it might even have already happened at some point in the island's long past. Reciprocity was both retroactive and pre-emptive, and help materialised spontaneously, when some form of need arose, from emergent givers and in forms that could not be predicted. Through the obfuscation of giver and recipient, forms of giving, and the timeline of giving and receiving, then, the pool transcends specific materials, relationalities and even linear time. Through individuals' generalised care and reticence for, and faith in the wider community, it persists.

Accounts of community bog days on Lettermore, days of shared labour and enjoyment on the bog for the extraction and processing of peat turf, are reminiscent of Mauss's (1990 [1925]) characterisation of the potlatch. A Maussian potlatch is a festival that is an expression of a culture of 'total services' an institution of feasting and gift exchange that creates and reinforces community (ibid, 11). Mary Douglas characterises Mauss's potlatch as: 'totalized competitive giving that incorporates in its cycles all things and services and all persons' (Douglas 1990, xii). In Tom's account of the community bog days in his youth and his father's youth, we can recognise some of the key characteristics of the potlatch: a festival shared by distinct social groups, exchange between the groups, and shared consumption – though the element of competition between the groups is absent, and not all materials that are important in community life are explicitly represented. Instead, food, tea, and peat turf stand in for other materials in Tom's account:

> *When you're working, when you have work to do around the house and the land, you'd all go together. And when I was young, the whole family would've gone. It was a lovely day out. It was a long day, but it was nice. You'd have your early tea – like your lunch – in the morning, and then you'd have your lunchtime lunch, and then you'd finish – you'd kinda try to finish by four, and then it takes about an hour to get there and back, so then you drive home, and on the*

> *way home you might stop and get a pint, and you get some sandwiches and crisps and then you'd be home for dinner. So yeah, it was nice, it was fun. And when my father was young, it used to be that everyone in the area would go out together, and make a day of it. You know, people would be working together outdoors, doing other things, and the word would sort of get around, and everyone would go out together on the bog when the weather was right. So they'd all be working in the same general area, but every family on their own plot, like, and then when it came time for tea they'd make a fire with old turf left on the bog or brought from home, and they'd all sit down together and boil water for tea and eat together.*

Tom's older sister, Bridget, emphasised the pleasure of the experience in her own account of community bog days in her childhood, saying:

> *Food never tasted so good as it did on the bog. When I was a kid, we used to bring butter and milk, and put the containers in the soft bog to keep them cold, 'cause it was summer. It worked really well for that. While it was just bread, ham, tomatoes, cheese, and onions, when it was made on the bog it just tasted different; so delicious. Probably a combination of turf fire, fresh air and just being on the bog. I loved it. Dad used to make a small fire and get a kettle of water from the lochs on the bog and boil it to make tea.*

During these community bog days, the community is defined and strengthened through commensality, shared labour, and shared consumption. Although there are no explicit exchanges taking place – no trades or gifts – during the festive event itself by these accounts, the event takes place at the focal place of the larger system of peat turf and labour exchange. The community is strengthened at this nexus point, sharing in the same labour that forms the basis of exchange and subsistence. When Bridget swore that 'food never tasted so good as it did on the bog', she may have been describing, in part, the pleasure of a community nourishing and strengthening itself as a unified collective.

In these community events, as in this paper, peat turf may stand in as a synecdoche for other resources on the island. Not all materials that are important in community life are explicitly represented in this potlatch-like event on the bog – only peat turf. But as we have seen, due to the symbolic charisma of peat turf to represent community life, the bog can serve as a community focal place, and the labour over peat turf as a focal practice, around which the community frames and organises the priorities of social life (Borgmann 1984; Cuffe 2022). As is the case elsewhere in small Irish island and coastal communities, other land and sea resources, such as seaweeds, sea foods, livestock, wood and driftwood, tools and fabrics, also generate their own vectors of relationality and temporality in social life (O'Carroll 2021). We should imagine that the vectors of social reciprocity attached to the collective labour, exchange, and use of many distinct resources will become

inextricably entangled with one another, along with those of peat turf, in a small community where households have historically managed overlapping seasonal cycles and rhythms of labour for distinct naturally-derived resources. Through this obfuscation and the extension of good will by community members, then, all resources have the potential to undergo transmutation and become amassed in the pool of help.

Today, Lettermore's shallow blanket bogs are largely depleted from a long history of community turf extraction. People usually travel off-island to access workable bog plots. We might imagine that the pool of help may ebb through time as turf and other natural resources decline, or as modernisation transforms material availability and land-based livelihoods. Perhaps it was stronger in the past than it is today.

However, this is not necessarily the case. I would argue that it is likely not: a strong spirit of spontaneous helpfulness and generalised reciprocity persists on the island today. Community members still engage to a lesser degree in shared labour on the land or bog and natural resource exchange, while also incorporating new or more 'modern' features of island life into their generosity. To give a few brief examples, people often offered to go to the island's relatively new shop on one another's behalf, and Tom's extended relatives offered me car rides as needed and the loan of a bicycle when I arrived on the island. Tom stayed late each week at the farmers market to accommodate the school-run schedule of one of his customers who was a single parent. When our car broke down on the bog, a neighbour towed us home, and we all stopped on the way to buy bags of crisps and fizzy drinks and enjoy a group celebration of the bog day – a bog potlatch in a different form.

In a particularly transcendental passage of *The Gift*, Mauss writes:

> *In short, this [potlatch, and a community system of exchange more broadly] represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are.* (1990 [1925], 25-26)

At risk of being called sentimental – a risk that should be taken, because sentimentality is a beautiful and instructive feature of rural Irish social life – Lettermore's depleted bogs and other natural resources, and the generations of people who offered up their labour for their neighbours and the greater good of their community, and extended their goodwill to see the best in others, are not gone from the island, but subsumed – permanently – into social life. Time in the pool of help is not linear; it does not matter who and what is on the island now and who and what is not. Each 'emerges from their own sphere and mixes together,' becoming one.

Commodity and Community in Rural Ireland

In *A Sentimental Economy: Commodity and Community in Rural Ireland*, Carles Salazar (1996) describes a similar situation in rural farming communities in County Galway, in which informal economies based on the reciprocal and community-wide exchange of both labour and resources help to form something akin to a pool of help in rural, landlocked social-economic life. Salazar applies an economic systems-based conceptual framework to explore the informal economies of the rural West. However, he expresses that these frameworks fall short of satisfactorily explaining some elements of the socio-economic life that he observed and experienced during ethnographic research in Galway. He writes:

> *Farmers exchange all sorts of things on a regular basis without taking any account of what is given in return. No customary regulation seems to govern this unsystematic flow of exchanges except a diffuse norm of generalised reciprocity. In the absence of explicit contractual agreements, there is a certain feeling of moral obligation that induces one to reciprocate the help that one has obtained. This feeling of moral obligation never seems to harden into a precise normative conduct, though.* (Salazar 1996, 126)

The phenomenon identified by Salazar as a 'diffuse norm of generalised reciprocity' in rural Irish communities in 1996 bears distinct similarities to the pool of help independently identified here on Lettermore. For Salazar too, in rural Ireland generalised reciprocity governs exchanges of help – both in the form of labour and of material things – which are not easily tracked along relational, material, or temporal lines, and which seem to bubble up spontaneously and unpredictably. Salazar's three anonymised field sites of ethnographic research in Galway were not island communities, suggesting that pool-like systems of total services are not unique to Lettermore or to small island communities along Ireland's coast. Most likely, pool of help economies very similar in form to Lettermore's (blurring the temporal, relational, and material vectors of giving and receiving) exist in other communities in rural Galway or in other rural Irish communities more broadly.

As on Lettermore with its golf course and holiday homes, traditional processes of land-based labour and resource exchange sit alongside the modern commodity market at Salazar's field sites. He observes that:

> *Farming communities in the west of Ireland are deeply integrated into the world market economy, and they undoubtedly participate in the individualistic and profit-maximising ethos that characterises all capitalist societies, but they still have a substantial sphere of non-commodity transactions. It is in this domain of economic relations that neither the moral economy nor the political economy approach provides, in my view, an entirely satisfactory*

perspective. (Salazar 1996, 126)

He expresses here a dual capacity of the communities to flexibly adapt social-economic life to forces of modernisation, while at the same time comfortably maintaining their own distinctive forms of exchange. This dual capacity is observable on Lettermore as well, where work-from-home salaried positions and tourism income coexist with the continued tradition of informal exchange of labour on the land.

I believe that the capacity of many rural Irish communities to adapt readily to the shifting rhythms of labour, transportation, time, and lifestyle that modernisation brings (Keohane and Kuhling 1990) may arise from the presence of pool of help economies. The shifting temporality of a nine-to-five workday, with set hours outside of the community, for example, need not interfere directly with the social responsibility to repay a friend for help on the bog or the land, if the precise timeline and form of repayment for that help is not specified in the community's social contract. Likewise, the addition of new material resources and commodities to the social landscape cannot disrupt an 'unsystematic flow of exchanges' (Salazar 1996, 126). The strength of Lettermore's pool of help lies in its vagueness: It makes Lettermore resilient to cultural change, easily incorporates outsiders, and can even integrate exchange with distant economic networks, as Salazar describes. If the repayment obligation is not temporally, materially, or inter-personally specific, then social obligation is adaptable to different rhythms of life, timelines, regulations, working schedules, networks of roads, points of contact, languages, and technologies. Change does not threaten the spirit of generalised reciprocity, generosity and goodwill in social life.

Conclusion

Informal economies of labour exchange, and flexible systems of *meitheal* – shared group labour on the land – are recognised to be important features of social-economic life in rural communities across the island of Ireland historically and today (Carroll, Edgeley, and Nugent 2021; Boyle et al. 2022). In spite of predictions by anthropologists in the 1970s of the imminent anomic collapse of these practices and the rural, traditional communities they support (e.g., Scheper Hughes 1979; Brody 1973; Messenger 1969; McCarty 1968), rural Irish communities have displayed an unforeseen level of social-economic resilience under pressures from modernising forces. Decades after Scheper-Hughes's 1979 pronouncement of Ireland's death and the 1969 claim in the ethnographic film *The Village* that 'in ten years nothing will be left' (McCarty 1969), many marginal rural communities are still populated, still Irish-speaking, still in possession of many traditions that serve to support or enrich life, and still largely considered by residents and visitors alike to be pleasant places to live and raise families. Some of the observable persistence of rural Irish *Gemeinschaft* (small community life) in contrast to its predicted demise can be attributed to the well-organised and successful political agitation of rural communities for autonomy and self-governance, including land and fishing rights,

and other forms of political resistance to decline (Coleman 2021; Okley 2005). The unforeseen persistence of Irish *Gemeinschaft* has also been connected to ethnocentric projections in the anthropology of Ireland itself during the anomic turn that led to the false predictions of cultural death (Peace 1989; Egan and Murphy 2015; Coleman 2010.) However, I believe that the persistence of rural Irish *Gemeinschaft* can also be attributed to highly flexible systems of gift and exchange within rural Irish communities, which, in their pool-like non-differentiation of actors and temporalities of giving, can absorb unpredictable and changeable conditions in social-economic circumstances.

The main contribution of this paper, then, is to posit the existence of these highly flexible pool of help gift economies in rural Irish communities. I also highlight their role in buffering those communities against pressures of change and decline. This flexibility in gift-based social-economic life is an expression of social-cultural islandness (Foley et al. 2023), a social innovation that can likely be found in many rural and, historically, relatively isolated, coastal and mainland communities in Galway or all across the larger island of Ireland. By linking observations of social-economic life today on Lettermore with strikingly similar observations made of mainland communities by Salazar in the 1990s, this paper thinks archipelgically (Pugh 2013), highlighting a likely archipelago of rural communities with pool of help economies across Ireland. This paper has also documented a historical exchange network of island–island and island–mainland movements in Lettermore's environs. The construction of relational group identities within this network of resource exchange points toward a mutual recognition of shared social-economic circumstances, further indicating a shared capacity for social-economic innovations such as pool of help economies in rural island and mainland communities. Lastly, this paper has posited that the transmutation of material resources into the pool of help takes place through the social processes of labour, exchange, and use enacted upon resources by rural Irish communities. Through the case study of peat turf as a resource, we have seen how time, and individual identities in the community retreat into the background, so that something greater – a mutual care without end or beginning – can wash over the community in a form like smoke.

Figure 5. Lettermore as seen from the polytunnel on Tom's farm. Photo by author.

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LOOKING IN FROM THE EDGE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY MODERN TRADE BETWEEN SHETLAND, ORKNEY, AND GERMAN HANSEATIC MERCHANTS

BY PAULA SCHIEFER AND BART HOLTERMAN

Correspondence: *Paula.schiefer@posteo.co.uk, Holterman@dsm.museum*

Abstract: This article delves into the transformative impact of reframing narratives on historical trade relationships across the North Atlantic, focusing on the islands of Orkney and Shetland. Drawing from the Looking in from the Edge (LIFTE) research project and its associated museum exhibition, hosted at the German Maritime Museum, Bremerhaven, the study challenges traditional perceptions. It highlights the Hanse, initially a network of German merchants connecting major European cities, expanding into North Atlantic trade in the 15th century. The research explores long-term relations between Hanseatic merchants and Shetland communities, re-evaluating the islands' roles in early modern European trading networks and capitalist markets.

Keywords: fisheries, trade relations, Northern Isles, Germany, Hanse.

Introduction

In 2018, the Scottish parliament issued a ban on putting Shetland in a floating box on maps used in official documents. The measure was part of the Islands Bill, a set of regulations to strengthen the position of Scotland's island communities, which aims to correct the 'geographical mistake' that conveys a false impression of the distance at which Shetland is located from the Scottish mainland and its connected political and economic challenges (BBC News 2018). The issue points not only to the geographical distance from Scotland, but by extension to the distinct cultural identity of the Shetland islands. Located almost midway between Scotland and the Norwegian coast, the islands were historically much more closely connected to Scandinavia as part of the Norwegian jarldom of Orkney, both economically and culturally. Even after they became Scottish in 1469, the Scandinavian influence remained strong: the Norse language Norn was spoken until the 18th century (Fenton 1978: 616) and traditional boats were built in the Scandinavian clinker shipbuilding tradition (Fenton 1978: 552-570). Today the Norse heritage is still celebrated each year during the festival 'Up Helly Aa',

which culminates in the burning of a Viking ship. Even in neighbouring Orkney, where the Scottish influence was much stronger much earlier (Crawford 1983), the Norse history remains visible, for example in geographical names.

Not only the Norwegians left traces on the islands, but also German merchants from Hanseatic towns and Dutch herring fishermen who frequented Shetland in the 16th and 17th centuries left lasting impressions. Yet from a Scottish, Norwegian, and continental European perspective, the Northern Isles are usually regarded as located at the fringes, which is mainly a land-based view. However, seen from the perspective of maritime trade and seaways, the Scottish Northern Isles can be considered located at a crossroads that connected various European regions: Scandinavia, the British Isles, Germany and the Netherlands, and North Atlantic islands Iceland and the Faroes. Being located on trade routes from Dutch and German ports to the Far East and the Americas, they even connected with the expanding colonial trade networks in the early modern period. The smoking of tobacco is a prime example of the impact of the colonial trade on insular communities, where it appeared in the 17th century.

This paper explores how the display of historical and archaeological research through exhibitions can reframe narratives of British islands in relation to larger urban centres throughout history by focusing on the Scottish Northern Isles Orkney and Shetland. We move away from mainland UK and continental Europe and recentre our gaze towards the North Sea and the North Atlantic, understanding the sea as a place of encounters and connection rather than a dividing barrier. We use the exhibition *Looking in from the Edge – The Hanse in the North Atlantic* (German title*: Immer weiter – Die Hanse im Nordatlantik*) in the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven to demonstrate how the Northern Isles were tied into international trading networks, both economically and culturally. The exhibition was opened at the German Maritime Museum on 23 March 2023 and shows the role of Orkney and Shetland within the international trading networks, with a special focus on the German Hanseatic merchants between the 15th and 18th century,

Looking In From the Edge: Research Context and Methods

By focusing on the entanglement of the Orkney and Shetland islands in early modern international trade networks, the exhibition is well-suited to challenge assumptions often related with islands, such as concepts of centre and periphery, connectedness, and isolation, big and small. In recent years it has been acknowledged that the study of island societies must

deal with these assumptions and calls have been made for an interdisciplinary and comparative approach in island studies (Dierksmeier 2021). Islands are often seen as small, remote, and isolated places, although this is in most cases a most problematic idea and depends very much on the eye of the beholder. The concept of Islandness problematises these assumptions and challenges us to look at islands in terms of connection, rather than isolation (Foley et al. 2023). From this point of view, we want to emphasise connection, exchange, and reciprocity and frame the Northern Isles as sites with their own agency that interact with, but are not merely dependent, from the UK mainland and continental Europe. We are doing so by focusing on historical trading relationships, centring Orkney and Shetland into a trade network that foreshadows international capitalism, and the social and cultural networks that were established between foreign merchants and local island communities.

The exhibition was curated as part of the output of recent research projects at the German Maritime Museum that studied German trade in the North Atlantic in the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. The latest of these projects, *Looking in from the Edge. The impact of international commercialization on north-west Europe's peripheral communities 1468–1712: production, commerce and consumption in Orkney and Shetland (LIFTE)* (2020-2024), focuses exclusively on Orkney and Shetland as trading centres and explicitly moves the focus away from large European trading centres towards the islands themselves. The project is a cooperation with researchers from the University of the Highlands and Islands, Orkney College, the University of Lincoln, and the University of Tübingen. An interdisciplinary team of anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, and others worked together to understand the importance of the Northern Isles in processes of commercialisation and international trade in the Early Modern period.

The methodologies used during fieldwork from all disciplines became part of the exhibition as such, and enrich the study of exhibition storytelling, displaying archaeological excavations, archival work, and the use of ethnography (Sitzia 2023). Archaeological artefacts uncovered at excavations in Orkney and Shetland tell the story of how international exchange influenced consumption and production patterns on the islands. Written sources are not just used to analyse the general trading patterns, but also serve as objects that allow a glimpse on the persons who produced them. This is part of the strategy of challenging ideas of margin and periphery by moving the focus to stories of single actors within the trade networks. Historians of the LIFTE project explored archival sources to learn more about individuals who were

involved in international trade relations. The exhibition provides examples of both German and Orkney merchants and the relationships and ties they formed within local communities. It does so with a display of archival sources in which relations between merchants and the island communities are narrated, and with objects that materialise the presence of the merchants within insular communities throughout the generations until this day: gravestones. Ethnographic contributions in this project tie finding of other disciplines together and reflect on them: how can we tell stories of science, Islandness, and relations along the sea in an engaging way and connect them to current experiences? Participant observation, interviews, and engagement with museum collections played a central role in supporting research and curating the final exhibition.

Next to the exhibition at the German Maritime Museum, exhibitions are planned on the Northern Isles (Shetland Museum and Archives in Lerwick and Stromness Museum in Orkney), each of which have their own emphases to accommodate local communities and other visitors of the museums. These exhibitions give opportunity to re-think the history of the islands without taking metropolitan Great Britain as the centre point. This article is based on the exhibition shown at the German Maritime Museum, as those other exhibitions are still in planning at the time of writing.

Crossroads Northern Isles

The main objective of the exhibition project, to move perspective on Orkney and Shetland from places at the fringes to the centre of commercial exchange, is visualised by a large wall map which is the centre point of the exhibition (Fig. 1). It shows a 17th-century map of the North Sea area, upon which Orkney and Shetland are highlighted with a magnifying glass. Labels for place names in different colours show locations where the LIFTE team conducts research in form of their home institutions (Bremerhaven, Tübingen, Kirkwall, and Lincoln), archives and excavations. Moreover, arrows and icons drawn in red display the most important traded commodities and sea routes that connected the islands to the rest of Europe, and in doing so, highlight the Northern Isles as an important crossroads between Scandinavia and the British Isles, Germany and the North Atlantic.

Figure 1: 'Crossroads North Atlantic' with wall map of the North Sea in the background and the sailing manual 'Het licht der zee-vaert' in a showcase in the foreground. Photo: Annica Müllenberg/DSM.

Stories trace the merchants from the Hanseatic towns Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck, who crossed the North Sea to trade in Shetland from the late 15th century onwards (Holterman 2020; Friedland 1983; Smith 2019; Holterman & Grassel 2020). Predominantly interested in acquiring salted and dried fish caught by Shetland fishermen for the European market, they traded in more than 20 known harbours across the islands, which many of them visited each summer. As the settlement pattern of the islands was based on single farms, and urban centres were absent until the late 17th century, a clear central marketplace was absent in Shetland. The same goes for the fixed port infrastructure known from European commercial centres, such as quays, piers, and cranes. Instead, trading ships moored in the sheltered bays, while lighter boats brought commodities to the shore, where small booths were erected that served as storage spaces and shops (Holterman 2020: 215-225). The islands were not only of interest for Hanseatic merchants as a trading destination, but also as a waypoint on their way to Iceland and the Faroe Islands. For example, one of the first testimonies of the presence of German traders on the islands was a shipwreck in Shetland of a Bremen ship on its way to Iceland in

1469 (Hänselmann 1888).

Shetland was not only frequented by German merchants. Scottish and English merchants frequented the islands in increasing numbers from the late 16th century onwards (Smith 1984: 20-25; Shaw 1980: 174-175; Donaldson 1958: 68-69). These foreign traders were so present that their names became attached to certain bays on contemporary sea charts. An example is the Dutch sailing manual *Het Licht der Zee-vaert* by Willem Janszoon Blaeu (Blaeu 1620), which displays an anchorage in southern Shetland as 'Hamburger haven ofte Bremerhaven'. Next to it the name 'Schotsche ree' indicates that the bay was also frequently used by Scots (Fig. 1). A final foreign influence in Shetland were herring fishing vessels from Holland, the so-called busses, which anchored in large numbers in Shetland bays, first and foremost in Bressay Sound (Smith 1984: 25-28; Poulsen 2008). Under the influence of their presence, the current capital Lerwick developed on its shore in the late 17th century (Shaw 1980: 176).

In Orkney the economic situation was quite different. Where Shetland had developed export-oriented fisheries around 1500, Orkney instead specialised in growing barley, which was mainly exported to the urban centres in Scotland. Three storehouses built in the 1640s for collecting barley for export are visible testimonies of this activity. Trading in Orkney mainly centred in the town of Kirkwall (a royal burgh since 1486) and was in the hands of local merchants, so-called merchant lairds, instead of foreigners (Shaw 1980: 168-170; Marwick 1936). Orkney's grain was also exported to Shetland, which grew only little grain itself. According to a description of John Brand in 1701, Shetlanders paid for the Orkney grain with money they received from German merchants (Brand 1701); otherwise, the islands' economy was mostly based on barter exchange and credit extension (Holterman 2022). This influence is illustrated in the exhibition with a display of foreign (German, Dutch and Scottish) coins from the 15th to the 18th century found in Shetland. For both, Shetland and Orkney, the centuries-old connections with Norway remained vital even after the island groups had been pledged to Scotland in 1468/69. Norway was mainly important as a source of timber and as a market for coarse woollen fabric *wadmal* that was produced on the islands since Norse times (Shaw 1980: 178-179; Smith 1984: 32-35).

Orkney and Shetland were also a node in a larger network of sea routes, connecting northern Europe to the Americas, the Mediterranean and even the Far East. Large merchant ships from the Netherlands and Hanseatic towns in Germany passed the islands on their way to or returning from these regions, taking a detour around the British Isles to avoid going through

the English Channel. There, enemy warships posed a real threat, due to the many naval conflicts such as the English-Dutch naval wars. This is amongst others reflected in many ship losses of German, Dutch, and Spanish ships known from written and archaeological records. The most famous of these was the Spanish warship *El Gran Grífon*, originally a Hanseatic trading vessel, that was confiscated as part of the Spanish Armada and wrecked on Fair Isle in 1588 (Grassel 2015). A letter shown in the exhibition (sent by merchant James Omand to his employer, Shetland laird Laurence Sinclair of Brugh from 1640) narrates of peaceful trading with Germans as well as the violent attack of Spanish-sponsored privateers from Dunkirk on a fleet of Dutch warships that was waiting in Bressay Sound to escort merchantmen returning from the East Indies (Hibbert-Ware, 1640). Recently it has even been suggested that Shetland functioned as a provisioning station for ships sailing to Newfoundland and New England (Bouchard 2020), although the direct historical evidence for such a practice is rather thin.

Traces of Connection and Exchange

In line with the interdisciplinary character of the LIFTE project, the exhibition uses written records and archaeological evidence of historical exchange to trace social and cultural impact and effects which long-term and close trade relations had on the communities on Orkney and Shetland. Examples of material culture highlight social and cultural changes which communities in Orkney and Shetland experienced through the trading relationships with foreign markets. Illustrating the more agricultural economy of Orkney and the fishing communities of Shetland, production and trade of goods for the international market are analysed and international trade patterns are contextualised in day-to-day lived experience of locals. Central to the exhibition, below the wall map, is a large-scale aerial photograph of the farmstead Skaill in Rousay, Orkney. This farmstead was continuously settled from the Norse period until the 19th century, and archaeologists of the University of the Highlands and Islands have been excavating here since 2015. Museum visitors are invited to enter the excavation area and to explore examples of finds of imported and produced goods from a timespan of roughly a thousand years, which are made visible through openings in the floor.

As mentioned before, while inhabitants of Orkney predominantly grew barley for export, Shetland depended on its fisheries. Under the influence of foreign demand for dried fish on the continent and the British mainland, inhabitants of Shetland developed large-scale longline fisheries for cod and ling, as well as a distinct method for curing fish. They were beheaded and gutted, salted, and laid out flat on the rocks and stony beaches (*ayres*) to dry. The method was

in use until the early 20th century (Fenton 1978: 579-584). The importance of Shetland fisheries is among others illustrated by a model of cured fish and a collection of early modern cod bones found in Bremen, Germany (Fig. 2). Their large size and the fact that cranial bones are almost completely absent from the assembly (as the heads were cut off before the fish was dried) attests that these were imported dried fish from the North Atlantic, quite probably from Shetland (Küchelmann 2019).

Next to barley and fish, the islanders paid their taxes with produce such as butter and wadmal, a coarse woollen cloth. These items were subsequently exported by local authorities to Scotland, Germany, and Norway. All kinds of other products that could not be produced on the islands had to be imported: flour, beer and wine, guns, clothing, kitchenware, tools, tobacco, fishing tackle and salt for salting fish. Timber was mostly imported from Norway. Imports are mainly visible in archaeological excavations through ceramic fragments. Analyses show that these came among others from Scotland or Germany. This influx of foreign products and the presence of foreign traders also led to cultural influences: contemporary accounts describe Shetlanders for example as dressed in German fashion (Irvine 2006: 57-58).

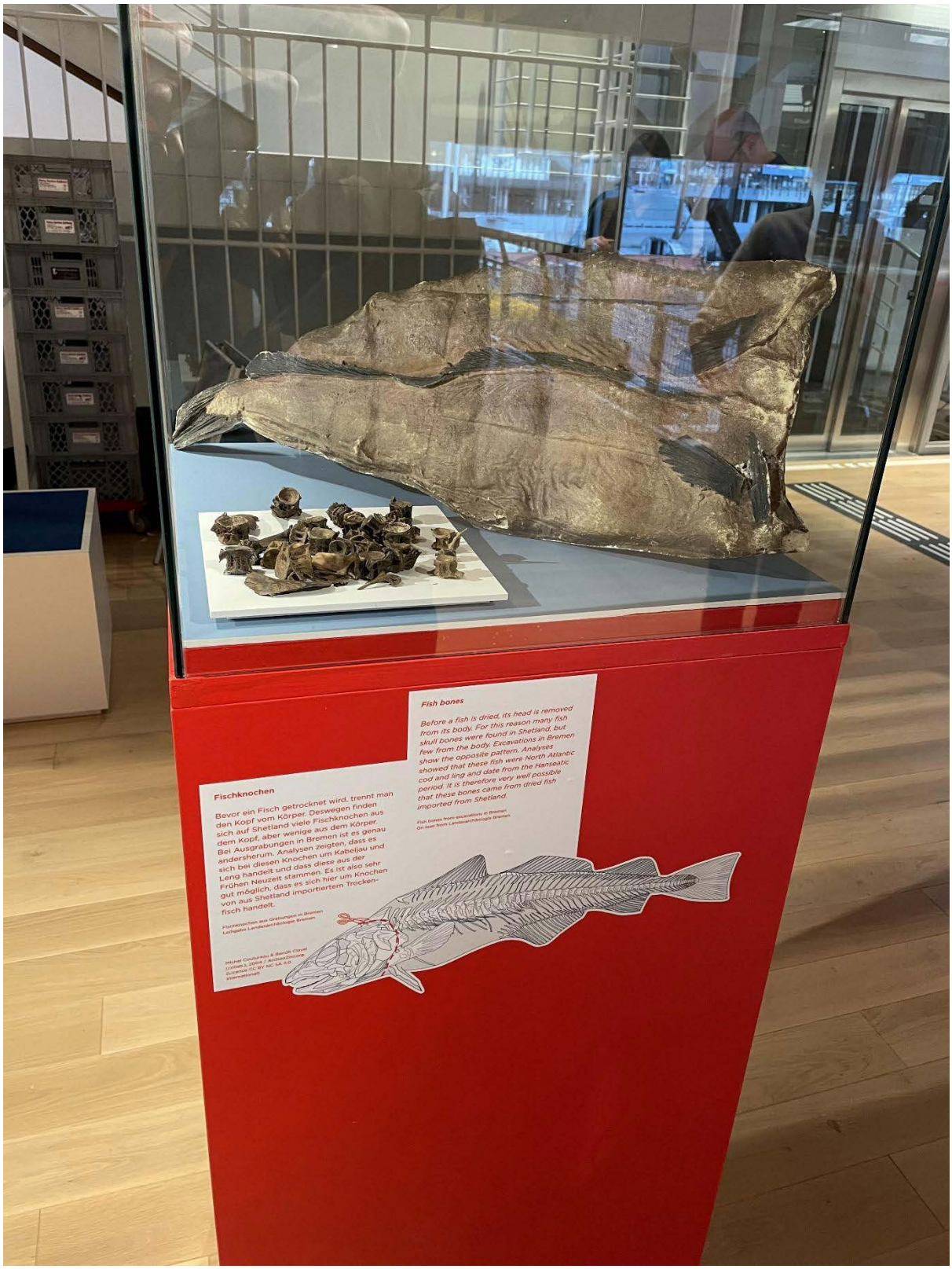

Figure 2: Display of fish bones from excavations in Bremen, Germany, and a model of fish salted and dried in Shetland. Photo: Hans Christian Küchelmann.

A distinct group of imported products are colonial products. They appear on the island markets in the late 16th and 17th centuries. Trading accounts of Hamburg merchant Otto Make from

1653 (Neven of Windhouse Papers 1635) and of Orkney captain Peter Winchester (Traill-Dennison Papers 1664) show that commodities such as sugar, ginger, pepper, and other spices were imported in large quantities. However, one of the primary examples of the consumer revolution that was set in course by the colonial trade of European countries was tobacco. Due to the inclusion of the Northern Isles and the North Atlantic, the exhibition offered the opportunity to include a more detailed understanding of the influence of early modern capitalist trade on island societies, a topic which can be traced very well by the advent of smoking. Tobacco began its triumphal march through Europe in the 16th and 17th century. Make's and Winchester's accounts show that by the 17th century, smoking had also reached the Northern Isles. Tobacco was grown on plantations in America (Virginia), but also in Europe, and reached Orkney and Shetland via ports like Hamburg or Bristol in England. In the archaeological record, the rapid spread of smoking is primarily attested by large amounts of clay pipe fragments. A selection of these fragments found in Shetland is included in the exhibition. Thus, this crop is a good example of a global, colonial commodity, like spices and coffee. These goods gradually found their way into people's everyday consumption and changed their lifestyle habits, made possible by the colonialism of European countries.

Making Research Visible and Challenging Perceptions of the Hanse

The above developed storyline does not only reflect on archaeological findings that help us trace relations between German merchants and the communities of the Northern Isles, but also intends to show how research challenges existing views of history by constantly asking new questions. In the exhibition this is done by incorporating four tables of the existing permanent exhibition into the temporary exhibition. Additions and commentaries are written in red handwritten letters next to exhibition texts, showing the audience how new research questions arise and how historical narratives are questioned within that process (Fig. 3). An example of these questions is the role of Orkney within the trading networks, which was neglected in former research. It was especially unclear why German merchants were so prominently present in Shetland but seemed to have had no interest in trading in Orkney. By comparing the economic situation on both island groups and their commercial links, it is possible to get a beginning of an answer to this question, which has to do with the focus on grain instead of fish as most important export product, the closer connections of Orkney with Scotland and the earlier emergence of a merchant class in Orkney.

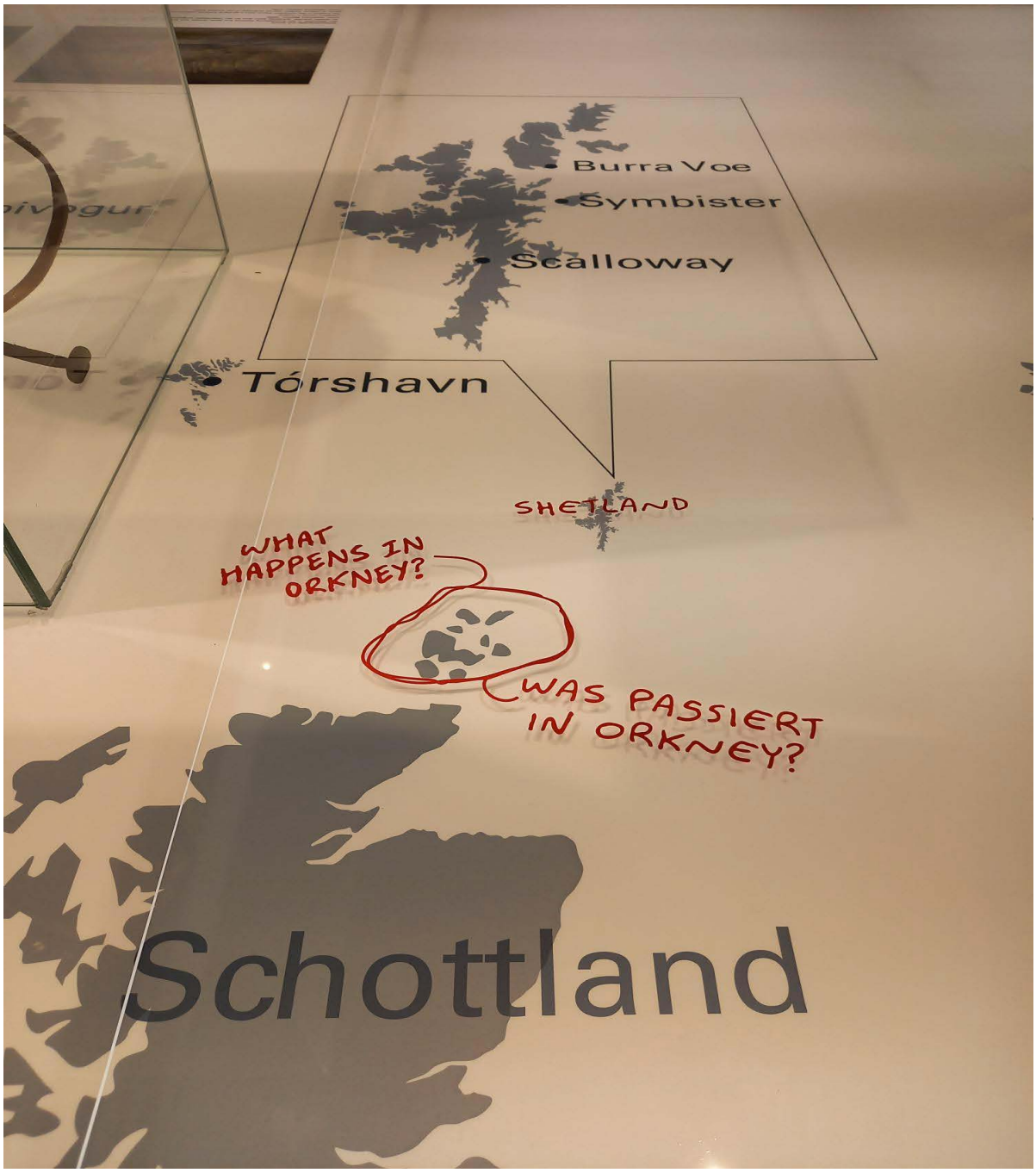

Figure 3: Interventions with the permanent exhibition are asking new questions. Photo: Paula Schiefer.

Another question that figures prominently in the exhibition is which role the German Hanse played in trade around the islands. This is particularly important, as narratives around medieval and early modern maritime heritage in Germany are linked almost exclusively to the Hanse, an organisation of Low German merchants and cities who were active in trade across the North and Baltic Seas from the late 12th to the 17th century. Intensive trade between Hanseatic cities bordering the North Sea and Baltic Sea contributed to the development of a regional (Blockmans 1996), but also locally distinct identity (Asmussen 2022) until this day. Those urban

centres in the continental European North as well as the four most important outposts of the Hanse (*Kontore*) Novgorod, London, Bruges, and Bergen are the focus of Hanseatic studies until today (Dollinger 2012: 124-35). The renewed interest in the Hanse in the 19th century maintained a process that could be categorised as 'cultural remaritimisation' (Tommarchi 2021) and shapes storylines of exhibitions, cities, and representation of the Hanse until today. This is particularly evident in the permanent exhibition in the German Maritime Museum, which focusses on the well-preserved medieval shipwreck (c. 1380) known as the Bremen cog. In German historical research since the 19th century, cogs were seen as the main type of long-distance trading vessel during the heyday of the German Hanse in the 14th century and a symbol of German commercial power (Tanner & Belasus 2021: 315; Dolinger 2012: 182). The permanent exhibition therefore necessarily devotes much attention to topics relating to the Hanse, which forms the background against which the LIFTE exhibition is placed.

Recent historiographical debates have challenged traditional views about the character and role of the Hanse. Traditionally seen as a unified commercial power block (cf. the usual English translation 'Hanseatic League', recent research has emphasised diverging and often conflicting interests between various members of the Hanse, leading to models of the Hanse as community of interests, network organisation, or an institution for conflict resolution (Huang 2020; Ewert & Selzer 2016; Wubs-Mrozewicz 2017). This paradigm shift goes hand in hand with a shifted focus of scholarly research from centres to the margins, such as for example the role of small inland Hanseatic towns (e.g. Ashauer, Holterman & Siegemund 2021) and the late Hanseatic period of the 16th and 17th century, which is traditionally seen as a period in which the Hanse was disintegrating (Dolinger 2012: 433-87).

The attention on North Atlantic trade is an important part of these debates. Originally it was forbidden for Hanseatic merchants to trade directly with North Atlantic islands under privileges granted by the Norwegian king to the Hanse in its important *Kontor* in Bergen, which controlled trade in dried fish from Scandinavia. Merchants from Bremen and Hamburg, who had a marginal position in Bergen until the 16th century, started to ignore these trading bans in the late 15th century and traded with the islands directly (Holterman 2020: 84-85; Hammel-Kiesow 2019). The Hanseatic trade with North Atlantic islands, including Shetland, is therefore an example of both trade outside the large Hanseatic centres and of the transformation of the Hanse in the early modern period. North Atlantic trade was already outlined in the newly curated permanent exhibition in the German Maritime Museum in 2017, and this topic is now further explored by the LIFTE exhibition (Fig. 4). The topic of trade in Orkney and Shetland

therefore not only forces us to reconsider the role of islands in early modern trading networks, but also questions established views of these networks in general. By tracing how local and foreign actors responded to the economic circumstances on the islands, it prompts the question whether we should rather understand this period as a transformation of activities and priorities within the upcoming international capitalist market than as a period of Hanseatic decline.

Figure 4: Opening of the exhibition, 23 March 2023. Photo: Annica Müllenberg/DSM.

Personal Stories of the Actors in the Trade

In Shetland, German and other foreign merchants traded directly with inhabitants on location. Traders returned each year and developed enduring financial and social relations with the islanders, which often lasted for many generations. Visible testimonies of these relations are two 16th-century gravestones of merchants from Bremen, Segebad Detken and Hinrick Segelken, in the church of St Olaf on the island Unst, the northernmost of the Shetland islands (Fig. 5). Detken's gravestone reads: 'Here lies the worthy Segebad Detken, citizen and merchant of Bremen. He carried on his business in this country for 52 years, and passed away blessed in our Lord in the year 1573 on the 20th of August. God rest his soul' (MacDonald 1934: 29-30). Detken's burial place was even remembered almost a century later, as is attested in a letter from 1661, in which the elders of the church supported the merchants Herman and Gerdt Detken, descendants of Segebad, in a conflict with the Shetland tacksmen about import duties. The letter explicitly refers to the text on Segebad Detken's stone (Staatsarchiv Bremen, 2-W.9.b.10.).

Contrary to Shetland, in Orkney the organisation of international trade was in the hands of a few local merchant families, known as the merchant lairds (Marwick 1936; Shaw 1980: 169-70). They were well-respected in their communities, and traces of their status can be found throughout the old town in Kirkwall. In the St Magnus Cathedral, memorial plaques of the family of Captain Peter Winchester from 1674 as well as the Traill family can still be found today. Placing individual biographies into the network of relationships exemplifies how social and cultural influences between all sides could have been created through trading. Without knowing many more details about Segebad Detken, visitors can imagine that regular visits over 52 years of trading with Shetlands' communities will have left a long-lasting impact on him, his family, and his trading partners in Shetland.

Figure 5: Bart Holterman cleaning the grave of Segebad Detken, a merchant from Bremen who traded for 52 years with the Shetland communities and died there in 1573. The available documents show Detken's long-term involvement in the trade with Shetland and include a lawsuit about the use of the harbour of Baltasound by other German merchants. His gravestone on Shetland highlights how traces of trade are still visible above ground today. Photo: Paula Schiefer.

Figure 6: Bart Holterman and filmmaker Cameron Carroll at the grave of Hinrick Segelken, church of St Olaf, Unst. Photo: Paula Schiefer.

Conclusion

Trade goods, merchants, other people, ships, and stories travelled along the North Sea and North Atlantic, connecting local, international, and global markets. This paper demonstrates ways in which the dissemination of interdisciplinary research through museum exhibitions can make these relationships and networks visible. The case of Hanseatic and other foreign merchants and the Northern Isles shows the connective networks of trade, social, and cultural exchange that developed across oceans in the late Middle Ages and the early modern Period. The main aim of the exhibition and the LIFTE research project is to recentre so-called peripheries and show how marginal societies of Europe, in this case Orkney and Shetland, were integrated into international trade networks and parts of processes of commercialisation just like the major centres of Europe. We understand this paper as an addition to retell the histories of the Northern Isles, not only in relation to Scotland and major centres of Great Britain but also to continental Europe.

Regarding the concept of Islandness, the exhibition challenges our perceptions of islands as

small, remote, and isolated places in two ways. Firstly, the focus on trade changes our gaze to a maritime perspective that emphasises connection, exchange, and cross-cultural influences on individuals and communities across the North Sea. It shifts the concept of peripheries and centres, not only within the German Hanseatic trade in Europe, but also in context of early modern capitalism. Not only are the Northern Isles embedded in larger European trading networks, but they also experience the consumer revolution that was set in course by the colonial trade. In doing so, the Northern Isles can be seen as a node in these networks rather than some distant place at the edge. Secondly, it changes the perception by including personal stories of actors in the trade, both from the islands and from Germany. This reminds us of the fact that trade is not an abstract phenomenon, but something that is conducted by humans travelling between places, with personal ties and relationships. A German merchant trading in Shetland was therefore not a passive vector in trade relations, but a person with lived experiences who was embedded in both, societies at home and on the islands. Likewise, it shows that inhabitants of Orkney and Shetland were playing an active role in establishing and managing commercial exchange with the islands, and, in doing so, changed their social status within the local communities.

Interventions in the existing permanent exhibition at the German Maritime Museum show how narratives about history are always changing, depending on the context and the questions asked by researchers. This applies not only to history, but also to our understanding of the nature of islands. After all, Orkney and Shetland are not single islands, but island groups with their own centres and peripheries, depending on the view of the observer and changing through time. For example, the remote northern islands of Shetland Unst and Fetlar were well-integrated into the fish trading network of the Hanseatic merchants in the early modern period. It remains unknown however, which roles small islands played in these networks - such as Foula, Fair Isle and North Ronaldsay, far away from the Orkney and Shetland mainlands.

The exhibition reframes Shetland and Orkney not in a box on the map as some place far away, but as a maritime crossroads in Northern Europe in the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, as a dynamic and complex contact point between cultural and economic spheres on the border between the North Sea and the North Atlantic.

More information about the research, the exhibition, as well as visual content can be found at: https://www.dsm.museum/en/press-area/looking-in-from-the-edge.

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CLOSE-KNIT: EXPLORING HOW KNITTING HAS SHAPED THE HISTORICAL AND ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS OF THE SHETLAND ARCHIPELAGO

BY CLAIRE HANNIBAL

Correspondence: *c.hannibal@rgu.ac.uk*

Abstract: By considering the archipelago as a dynamic form, this study examines historical and contemporary examples of island-to-island ways of being, knowing and doing. Shetland hand knitting offers a contextual backdrop to explore the shaping of historical and enduring relationships between the Shetland Islands. In positioning the Shetland Islands as mutually constituted and interrelated, the study offers an examination of the Shetland archipelago in its own right, rather than as told in relation to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain. Such a perspective affords a more nuanced understanding of some of the smaller islands that constitute the British Isles.

Keywords: Knitting, Shetland, Archipelago, Island, Barter, Wool Week.

Introduction

Made up of over 100 islands, 16 of which are inhabited, and a total population of just under 23,000, the Shetland archipelago is part of Scotland and lies almost equidistant between the UK and Norway, 294 km north of Aberdeen and 308 km west of Bergen. These islands are at the centre of the trading routes between Germany, the UK and Scandinavia (Marttila 2016). The largest island is known as The Mainland (as opposed to The Scottish Mainland), which is where Shetland's capital, Lerwick, is located. To the north of The Mainland are the North Isles of Yell (population of around 1,000), Fetlar (population of around 60) and Unst (population of around 650 and the UK's most northerly island). To the south is the island of Fair Isle (population of around 60), with the islands of Whalsay (population around 1,000), Foula and Out Skerries (both with a population of around 30) situated respectively to the west and east of The Mainland.

The Shetland archipelago is often characterised as remote, particularly when described in relation to the UK mainland (see e.g. Macaulay 2016; Gazey et al. 2006). Such a perspective reinforces a notion of isolation and marginalisation that overlooks the histories and narratives

between the islands that form the archipelago (Suarez 2018). Archipelagos are rhizomatic in that they have no unique centre and are an interrelated network of islands (Wiedorn 2021). Island-to-island ways of being, knowing and doing have received relatively limited research attention when compared with studies of land and sea, and island and mainland (Stratford et al. 2011; Baldacchino 2006). The study of islands has thus placed heavy emphasis on the borders comprised by land and sea (Pugh 2013), which is in contrast to the notion of the sea as a form of connection rather than isolation in the context of the spatial configuration of an archipelago (Smith 2013). In consequence, researching archipelagos as interrelated, mutually constituted, and co-constructed requires further exploration (Stratford et al. 2011).

Pugh (2013: 10) frames the archipelago as a dynamic form and makes a compelling argument for thinking *with* the archipelago by arguing how such islands 'adapt, transfigure and transform their inheritances into original form'. One example of how an archipelago adapts, transfigures and transforms is hand knitting in the Shetland Islands. Historically a predominantly female activity, early complete examples of Shetland hand knitting have been dated from the 17th century. Traditionally knitting was used as a third source of income alongside the primarily male economic activities of crofting and fishing (Fryer 1992). Income from fishing was used to pay rent, crofting provided food, and items were knitted to clothe the family and traded for money and goods (Fryer 1995). Proceeds from knitting offered survival in a bad fishing season or a poor harvest, and were thus vital (Arnold 2010). Examining how the Shetland archipelago was, and continues to be, shaped by knitting provides an island-to-island context to examine themes of archipelagic connection, exchange and mutuality; important topics that are currently under-researched (Stratford et al. 2011; Stratford 2013). In examining Shetland's relationship with knitting, this study positions the archipelago as more than a collection of islands, and instead as mutually constituted and inter-related. Three fieldwork visits were made to the archipelago in 2019, 2022 and 2023 to consider the question of *how has knitting shaped the historical and enduring relationships of the Shetland Islands?*

The paper begins by setting out the origins of Shetland hand knitting prior to discussing Shetland knitting as a form of economic activity. Next, the backdrop of the historical bartering system used on the archipelago is introduced and consideration is given to how bartering fostered connection, exchange, and mutuality within the system of hand knitting. The paper then examines the relationships that have endured through knitting by examining Shetland Wool Week; a week-long event, established in 2010, celebrating Shetland's textile industry and

attracting visitors from across the world. Finally, the paper reflects on the research question posed to discuss how knitting has shaped relationships in the Shetland archipelago.

Origins of Shetland Hand Knitting

Records documenting the early history of Shetland hand knitting are in short supply. From the beginning of the 18th century there is evidence of women knitters trading blankets, hosiery, caps and gloves with Dutch and German merchants for money and goods (Fryer 1992; Victoria and Albert Museum n.d.) but it is not until the middle of the 18th century that records are available to document the practice of knitting as an economic activity (BBC Radio Scotland 1993) Nevertheless, the historical context of an economy based predominantly on the fishing industry provides an important backdrop to the progression of hand knitting in the Shetland archipelago. Fishing, a chiefly male economic pursuit, impacted on family life as men were absent from the islands for long periods of time, with some never returning (Pearce 2017). In consequence, women frequently adopted a myriad of roles including surrogate fathers, bread-winners and crofters, in addition to their usual roles of mother, cook, housekeeper and supplementary wage earner during the long periods of male absence (Fryer 1995). Abrams (2005) argues that such circumstances created a society that gave women economic and cultural power; a societal dynamic that would have contrasted with the experiences of women living in mainland UK during the same period.

With many more sheep than people, Shetland knitters have access to abundant supplies of wool. Shetland sheep can survive the climatic conditions of Shetland to produce soft, lightweight fibre that can be used undyed. Traditionally women and girls plucked wool by hand from the sheep and combed it into rolls of wool that were ready for spinning into yarn for knitting. Over time women took advantage of environmental and economic opportunities to develop their skills from knitting coarse hosiery and blankets to crafting high quality items, including fine lace hose and shawls using intricate openwork patterns, from which the reputation of Shetland knitting emerged (Fryer 1995). Anecdotal evidence suggests that historically Shetland knitters had learned to knit 'before they could remember' (Wild 2019: 38). Knitters did not document their patterns, and so knitting patterns and techniques were derived from unwritten generational knowledge (Steed 2016). Patterns were inspired by nature (Mann 2018). Garments were knitted from memory (Cohen 2019), and hence the knowledge exists in the practice (Adamson 2013). In addition, from 1790 to 1872 the Shetland hand knitting industry expanded considerably, with knitters diversifying their output to meet fashion

demands. It would appear that different regions of the archipelago focused on knitting different items, and through this organisation of output the overall production of knitting substantially increased (Fryer 1995). For example, on The Mainland soft undergarments were knitted in Northmaven, stockings in Nesting, haps (small shawls) and socks in Walls and shawls and veils in Lerwick. Knitters on the island of Unst became known for their intricately patterned fine lace garments, Whalsay for using colour and pattern to develop allover styles and Fair Isle for stranded knitting characterised by detailed and colourful patterns using only two colours per knitting round or row (BBC Radio Scotland 1984).

Knitting as an Economic Activity

Due to the demands of the croft and the family, employment outside of the home was not historically feasible for women and so they fitted hand knitting around their daily activities (Fryer 1995). Shetland hand knitting, described as ‘da makkin’ or ‘da sock’ was taken everywhere, particularly when women went to collect the peat on their backs, thus leaving their hands free to knit (BBC Radio Scotland 1984). Girls learned from an early age that their hands should never be idle (BBC Radio Scotland 1984). Abrams (2012) notes how historians have paid limited attention to hand knitting, considering it as a handicraft superseded by mechanised textile production. ‘Representing hand knitting as a domestic hobby undertaken by wives waiting anxiously for their menfolk to return from the sea was a common fallacy circulated by those who wished to imbue Shetland hosiery with mystery and a tinge of tragedy’ (Abrams 2012: 605). In actuality, it was work that was undertaken independently of men thus offering women a degree autonomy (Abrams 2006; Arnold 2010).

Until the late 1800s, Shetland fishing operated under a system of fishing tenure, whereby Shetland fishermen were obligated to fish for their landlords as a proxy for rent and to offset loans taken out to buy, and keep, fishing boats and equipment (Abrams 2012). This system was known as ‘truck’ or ‘barter-truck’ (from the French *troc* meaning barter (Jevons 1875)), and is defined as ‘payment in kind and not in the current coin of the realm’ (Fryer 1995: xii). The truck system was not particular to Shetland and had been in operation across the UK since the 15th century (Hilton 1957). After a series of Parliamentary Truck Acts, by 1890 the practice of paying workers in anything other than money was largely abolished in England and Wales (Frank 2020; Hilton 1957).

In Shetland, poor harvests at sea and on land resulted in fisherman-tenants falling heavily into

their landlord's debt (Smith 1977). Shetland hand knitters, who were exclusively female, also laboured under the truck system, bartering knitting for goods with exclusively male merchants located on the archipelago (BBC Radio Scotland 1993). Today, the remains of 19th century merchant stores can be seen on the archipelago. Examples include Greenwell's Böd at Uyesound in Unst and the renovated Da Muckle Store in Hillswick on The Mainland. In Shetland, truck was so ingrained that a specific inquiry for Shetland entitled *British Parliamentary Papers, C (1st series) 555 I: Commission to Inquire into the Truck System, Second Report (Shetland Evidence), 1872* (and hereafter referred to as: Truck Inquiry 1872) was conducted by the Glasgow Sheriff William Guthrie. The Truck Inquiry (1872) was generally concerned with examining the effect of truck on the fishing and hand knitting industries. It began on 1st January 1872 and 17,070 questions were posed to inhabitants from across the archipelago. The inquiry included interviews with Shetland knitters. 'Evidence was taken respecting the hosiery or knitting trade, in which a very large proportion of the women of the country are engaged' (Truck Inquiry 1872: 1). William Guthrie recorded their responses verbatim; the record of which, documented as the Truck Inquiry, provides insight into the lives of Shetland knitters in the 19th century (Chapman 2015). The interviews from the inquiry, some of which are detailed as part of this study, provide a wealth of information and first-hand accounts of life under truck where 'it is the custom and understanding of the country from Unst to Dunrossness, that payment shall be made in goods' (Truck Inquiry 1872: 45).

Apart from a very small number of women who were deemed to knit garments of exceptionally high quality, under truck it was very difficult for Shetland knitters to get paid in money. For the majority of knitters, the payment from the merchants was in goods, which meant that the merchant made a profit in two ways; firstly, on the goods exchanged and secondly, on the profit on the woollen goods that he later sold (BBC Radio Scotland 1984) Knitters asked for money in return for their knitting and were quizzed as part of the Truck Inquiry as to why this was preferable to goods. As knitter Adrina Simpson explains:

> *Question 317: Did you want it all [the price of the knitting] in money?*
> *Answer: I would have liked it all in money.*
> *Question 318: Why? What would you have done with the money if you had had it?*
> *Answer: There is many a thing that can be done with money.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

Knitters were refused money by the merchants as demonstrated in this interview with Margaret

Williamson:

> *Question 8314: Do you always get goods for your knitting?*
> *Answer: Yes, I get goods because I can get nothing else.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

As it was generally only goods that the merchants were prepared to exchange for knitted items, it was often the case that a woman bringing in many items, or a particularly high value item such as a fine shawl, did not want to receive the whole value of the goods at that time. As the merchant did not want to give cash to make up any shortfall, he was obliged to open a line of credit for that knitter. It is documented that:

> *[Merchants] ascribe the practice [of credit] to their solicitude for the convenience of the knitters. The merchants of course have the benefit of getting their hosiery, to some extent, on credit. They have the use of the money without interest so long as it remains in their hands; and when they pay, they pay in goods on which they have a large profit.* (Truck Inquiry 1872: 46)

It is worth noting that this line of credit only extended in one direction, and knitters were not permitted to take a larger amount in goods than was owing to them for knitting.

The Truck Inquiry is replete with examples of knitters declaring their preference for payment in cash. For many, money was required to pay rent and to purchase food and other provisions. Cotton goods, tea and shoes were the main goods for which they could exchange their knitted items (Truck Inquiry 1872). Consequently, Shetland families became excessively well-dressed due to the bartered cotton that was sewn by women into fine clothes. However, though people were finely dressed, they were also starving as they could not get money to buy food (BBC Radio Scotland 1993). As part of the Truck Inquiry a medical doctor, Dr Robert Lowie from Lerwick, was interviewed as follows:

> *Question 14,698: With regard to hosiery, has it come within your own knowledge that knitters are paid in goods to an extent that is unwholesome for themselves and for the community?*
> *Answer: Yes, in drapery goods.*
> *Question 14,699: In what way has that been forced upon your attention?*

> *Answer: Sometimes in the discharge of my professional duties, I have observed that there was an utter disproportion between the clothing and the food of these knitters. I am no judge as to the value or quality of the goods, but many of them are clothed in a very gaudy, showy manner, and in a way quite inconsistent with their position in life. I have reason to know at the same time that their food is utterly insufficient. I have known knitting girls, one might almost say, starving or very near starving, when they were at same time very well dressed or dressed in a very showy manner.*
> *Question 14,704: Do you refer to the difficulty in which they have in getting money for their work?*
> *Answer: Yes; and to the fact that they get goods, chiefly drapery goods, for it.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

Despite the number of questions asked of Shetlanders as part of the Truck Inquiry, no legislation followed its presentation to Parliament. Smith (1977: 211) notes how 'it [truck] seemed as immovable in 1872 as it had been a century before'. For the fisherman, emancipation from truck came in the form of both the herring boom of the 1880s wherein the availability of fish soared and released them from their debt to their landlords, and the Crofters Act of 1886 which freed Shetlanders from their tenured obligations (Smith 1977). For the Shetland hand knitters, the truck system continued well into the 1900s. A further Truck Inquiry was carried out in Shetland in 1908 and resulted in '…a few token prosecutions with some half dozen merchants being fined derisory sums, but in reality it was business as usual, and it really did seem as if the Shetland hand knitting industry would never rid itself of truck' (Fryer 1995: 61). It was the First World War that that began to eradicate truck, with knitters receiving cash for hosiery sold to servicemen, and the disruption to the supply of cheap imported underwear from Europe leading to an increase in demand for Shetland knitted hosiery and an increase in prices (Fryer 1995). Post-war, many knitters were forced once again to operate under the truck system. Following the Second World War, and the associated increase in demand for knitted hosiery, the knitters were emboldened to set up a co-operative; the Shetland Hand Knitters Association. The Association was one of the main factors that eradicated truck for hand knitters as set prices were established, knitters were paid in money and quality criteria were established (UK Parliament 1952). The truck system in Shetland thus endured for many more years than for England, Wales, and mainland Scotland.

Influence of the Truck System on Shetland Knitters: Connection, Exchange, and

Mutuality

From an industry perspective, the organisation of Shetland hand knitting during truck has been described as 'casual to the point of disorganisation' (Fryer 1995: 23). Yet there is evidence to suggest that knitters were organised in terms of their labour. For example, under the cashless truck system knitters had to develop exchange relationships, usually with other women, which spanned the archipelago. Those who wished to knit with their own wool either used their own sheep, received wool in payment for work or obtained wool through barter from the islands of Yell and Unst; islands whereby wool was more readily available (Abrams 2006). Another option was to exchange their lines of credit in exchange for wool. This practice was more common among knitters who were particularly poor and had no other means of living apart from knitting (Truck Inquiry 1872). Rather than using their own wool, knitters had the option of being employed by the merchants on a knit-to-order basis; wool was provided in advance to knit the garments, the cost of which was deducted from the amount subsequently paid by the merchant (Abrams 2006). No formal contracts were afforded to these knitters and employment was on a piece work basis with prices being set by the merchant (Fryer 1995). Obtaining wool for knitting was, therefore, a rather complicated endeavour that required connection, exchange, and mutuality between women across the Shetland Islands. For those that were unable to knit-to-order, these mutually constituted relationships were vital to obtaining wool to produce garments that could be exchanged and were thus crucial to many for survival.

Once a garment was knitted it required finishing, also known as dressing. Women acted as dressers, which comprised washing the item, stretching it so that the stitches, particularly the lace patterns, were visible, and conducting repairs as necessary (Truck Inquiry 1872). The merchants would not purchase items that were not dressed and so the dresser played an integral part in the transaction as they not only finished the garment, but they also acted as the intermediary between the knitter and the merchant (Truck Inquiry 1872). In an interview with a dresser named Ann Arcus as part of the Truck Inquiry she explained:

> *Question 1750: In what way is it that you are sometimes asked to sell articles for the knitters?*
> *Answer: Because I cannot always have them [the garment] dressed and ready for them [knitter] to sell after the time they come in with the goods and before they go away again. These women come from the country, and I cannot have their things ready before they want to go home again; and therefore I sell them before they come back.* (Truck Inquiry

1872)

In the course of the interview, it transpires that Ann is perceived as being able to get a good price, and sometimes money, in return for the knitted items, which may be another reason that knitters ask her to act as an intermediary:

> *Question 1779: Do not the girls employ you to sell their shawls because they think you may get some money from the merchants, when they would not?*
> *Answer: It is just because they think I can get a better price; at least that is what I think is the reason. They don't bid me to get money.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

Knitters travelled great distances by boat around the archipelago to sell their garments, via dressers, to merchants in Lerwick, but only made the journey occasionally (Fryer 1995). The practice of employing a dresser was one that operated on trust from the knitter as items were left for dressing and the knitter returned to their home. The knitter had to have confidence that the dresser would subsequently exchange their knitting for a fair price. An example of this is Catherine Petrie who travelled from the island of Fetlar to Lerwick, nearly 100 km, to sell her knitting in Lerwick as there were no merchants in Fetlar:

> *Question 1432: Do you sell it [knitting] to merchants in Fetlar?*
> *Answer: No. There are no merchants in Fetlar who take it. I come down to Lerwick with it once a year…when I come down I employ a person to dress the shawls, and then that person sells them for me in the shop, and I get back a note from her, stating the amount in goods that I am to get for them.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

This co-operative relationship appeared to work well, with dressers advancing credit to knitters for their services; a debt that was settled once the item was sold.

Knitters bartered the goods received from the merchants with neighbours for potatoes or meal. Tea was a particularly popular form of currency and was used by knitters to obtain a wide range of provisions and wool to knit with. Cotton, drapery goods, paraffin, and sugar were also sold or exchanged by knitters for provisions or wool, and sometimes at a considerable loss as discussed in an interview with knitter Mary Coutts as part of the Truck Inquiry:

> *Question 11,604: Did you get the full price for your tea from the farmers?*
> *Answer: I suppose we did sometimes, but I could not say. They did not weigh out the meal and potatoes which they gave in exchange; they merely gave a little for the tea which my aunt gave them. I have known her to go as far as Papa Stour, twenty-four miles away, to make these exchanges. That was where most of her friends were.*
> *Question 11,605: Have you ever had to barter your goods for less than they were worth?*
> *Answer: Sometimes, if there had been 2½ yards of cotton lying and a peck of meal came in, we would give it for the meal. The cotton would be worth 6d. a yard, or 15d; and the meal would be worth 1s. I remember doing that about three years ago; but we frequently sold the goods for less than they had cost us in Lerwick.* (Truck Inquiry 1872)

The network of knitters operated across the archipelago, bartering with merchants under the truck system for cotton, drapery goods, tea, and sugar, and with neighbours and islanders for foodstuffs and wool. With knitters working as and when they could to complete items and orders, it was customary for groups of knitters to work together to help a knitter that had a deadline to meet. The favour would be returned (BBC Radio Scotland 1984).

Reciprocity between knitters in Shetland appeared essential to survival under a pernicious economic system that, due to its exploitative practices, was made illegal in the UK in 1831 (Frank 2020) yet endured in Shetland until well into the 20th century. The practice of knitting in Shetland as a form of economic activity under the truck system demonstrates connection, exchange, and mutuality between knitters in all regions of the archipelago. Whilst it has been stated that the history of hand knitting in Shetland is a history dominated by men because it was the male merchants that were responsible for marketing the knitted items (BBC Radio Scotland 1993), arguably it is also a history of women developing connections and mutually beneficial relationships that enabled them to use knitting to provide vital income. For example, different regions of the archipelago developing their own knitting styles to increase sales demonstrates how the knitters were thinking archipelagically, using the sea as a means of transportation and connection, across a polycentric network. Similar examples of knitters exchanging goods for wool in order to knit for income show exchange and mutuality as essential cultural characteristics.

Shetland Wool Week: Archipelagic Connections

Today knitting, regarded as a cultural asset, continues as an important economic activity in the

archipelago (Carden 2019; McHattie et al. 2018) and remains as one of the ways in which Shetland presents itself to the outside world (Abrams 2006). Shetland's knitwear industry is worth approximately £3 million to the local economy (Napier 2022) and focuses on high quality handmade luxury items that are sold across the world (Shetland Museum 2023). Craft tourism, which draws on the heritage of Shetland knitting, has also emerged as an important economic activity in recent decades. Knitting enthusiasts visit the archipelago independently or as part of arranged knitting tours (for example 'Shetland Wool Adventures (Shetland Wool Adventures 2024) and Spirit of Shetland Knitting Holidays (Stitchtopia 2024)'). Such tours normally include visits to local knitwear designers, textile museums, points of geographical interest and masterclasses with expert local knitters focused on, for example, Fair Isle knitting or Unst lace knitting.

One important example of craft tourism is Shetland Wool Week (SWW). Launched in 2009 in response to the then Prince of Wales's Campaign for Wool, SWW draws on the knitting heritage of the archipelago (Abrams and Gardner 2021). Taking place in September each year, a series of studio tours, talks, factory visits, workshops and exhibitions have evolved and include almost all from the archipelago that are involved in commercial knitting (Carden 2022). The organising committee of SWW stresses the importance of the events having a link with local Shetland traditions and with wool. The most recent SWW ran from Saturday 23rd September until Sunday 1st October 2023 and its theme was Mak + Do + Mend (Make and Do and Mend) (Shetland Wool Week 2023).

SWW encompasses the archipelago; some of the events are free of charge and some command a fee. Attendees are responsible for organising their transportation to the events and are advised to book their accommodation prior to arranging further travel arrangements due to limited availability. Examples of events held as part of SWW 2023 included 'A Yarn With Unst Knitters' held at the Unst Heritage Centre at a cost of £4; 'Knitting Socks on a 1920s Circular Sock Machine' costing £90 and held in Walls and 'Loops and Lunches' local knitwear display in Bigton Community Hall at no cost. In addition, there were open studios, film nights, talks, plays, music, tours (e.g. Garths Croft in Bressay and Uradale Yarns in East Voe) and masterclasses including knitting, spinning, shawl pin whittling, and jewellery making. There are 423 events listed in 2023 SWW programme (Shetland Wool Week 2023). SWW now attracts thousands of visitors from across the globe including North America, Canada, Australia, Poland, Sweden and Japan (Felting and Fibre Studio 2023); a significant increase from the

first SWW that attracted 30 attendees to the opening ceremony (The Shetland Times 2019). Shetland Amenity Trust estimates SWW to contribute £2 million to the economy of the archipelago as, in addition to the week of events, it increases year-round craft tourism (Shetland Amenity Trust 2020). The timing of SWW is important; prior to its inception the month of September was described as being very quiet in the archipelago and is now seen as the busiest time of year (McHattie et al. 2018).

Carden (2019: 365) notes how 'while the 'place' of place-based textile practices is often imagined as a static, romanticised repository of 'tradition', where change amounts to loss, textile-making in places like Shetland is part of the everyday, inventive, and always changing practice through which 'place' is constituted.' SWW is an example of how change appears to offer gains, rather than losses, to the archipelago in the form of a new income stream, increasing awareness of Shetland wool and woollen products, promoting the area as a tourist attraction, and celebrating traditions to ensure their longevity. Initially, SWW was considered an event for tourists and there was limited engagement from locals (Mingei 2022). This perception has changed and is attributed to relationships that have developed across the archipelago around SWW. For example, the organising committee has developed strong relationships with experienced knitters who now teach the masterclasses, and younger knitters are being trained to follow in their teaching footsteps. The committee also works with farmers and crofters to arrange tours that offer the opportunity to showcase Shetland farming and its relationship with wool production (Mingei 2022). Each year, in advance of SWW, the patron releases a free hat knitting pattern (examples include the 'Buggiflooer Beanie' in 2023 designed by Alison Rendall (Ravelry 2023) and the 'Bonnie Isle Hat' in 2022 designed by Linda Shearer (Ravelry 2022). Using their preferred colours, local and international attendees often knit the hat and wear it to SWW, creating a sense of identity and connectedness. In advance of SWW 2023, local newspaper articles called for volunteers to become involved in the event, particularly those who would like to become knitting masterclass tutors (The Shetland Times 2023). In its fourteenth year, SWW is firmly established as part of the archipelago's annual calendar of events and provides a contemporary example of how knitting continues to shape the relationships of the Shetland Islands.

How Knitting has Shaped the Historical and Enduring Relationships of the Shetland Islands

Considering the Shetland archipelago as remote and peripheral, particularly in terms of its proximity to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain, tends to overlook the interconnectedness of its islands. Examining the system of Shetland hand knitting provides examples of how knitting has acted as a vehicle for thinking archipelagically, with the sea forming connections, rather than barriers, between the Shetland Islands.

The practice of knitting as an economic activity under the truck system required the fostering of archipelagic mutual exchange relationships; these relationships were between the knitters, between the knitters and the merchants, and between the knitters and fellow islanders with whom they could barter. Demonstrating connection, exchange, and mutuality, such relationships had most relevance across the archipelago; forging such relationships with centres in Great Britain would have been of limited value as inhabitants of these areas were not labouring under the truck system and therefore had limited understanding and connection with the day-to-day experiences of Shetlanders. Thus, in this instance, considering the Shetland archipelago as remote from the metropolitan centres of Great Britain appears to be less associated with geography and more related to a remoteness from the economic systems in place across the Shetlands Islands. From the late 1800s until the mid-20th century, this lack of alignment between trading practices in Shetland with the centres of Great Britain renders considerations of remoteness largely irrelevant, and thus not a helpful comparator. Instead, a focus on the Shetland archipelago as inter-related, mutually constituted, and co-constructed (Stratford et al. 2011) permits a focus on understanding relationships across the archipelago, rather than on comparing relationships between the archipelago and other areas of Great Britain. Such a focus highlights networks of knowledge and reciprocity that were essential to survival.

Today, Shetland Wool Week not only provides a contemporary example of archipelagic thinking, it also shows how the islands have been able to ‘adapt, transfigure and transform their inheritances into original form’ (Pugh 2013: 10). Rather than framing change in terms of a loss of connection to tradition and heritage (Carden 2019), SWW has adapted, transfigured, and transformed its knitting heritage into a new form of craft tourism. Not only does SWW showcase Shetland traditions through the lens of wool, it has also engendered an archipelagic culture supporting the longevity of knitting through the training of knitting teachers, the transference of knitting knowledge, and a celebration of connectedness through knitting. That the SWW hat pattern is downloaded tens of thousands of times each year is testament to the

connectedness with the archipelago that is sought out by knitters, whether they attend SWW or not. That these new forms are rooted in place positions the archipelago as more than a collection of islands. It is the archipelagic connections that have enabled the Shetland Islands to adapt their inheritances into this original form.

The historical and contemporary examples presented in this study enhance our understanding of island-to-island ways of being, knowing, and doing (Stratford et al. 2011; Baldacchino 2006). They show how knitting, with its archipelagic focus, has shaped the historical and enduring relationships of the Shetland Islands. In these examples, the spatial configuration of the archipelago does not appear to hinder the forming of island-to-island mutual exchange relationships; the sea integrates rather than isolates. Thus, the context of hand knitting has afforded a re-thinking of an archipelago in its own right, rather than as peripheral to a larger land mass. The study therefore offers a different perspective on the Shetland Islands as told in relation to the metropolitan centres of Great Britain, and it is this plurality of perspectives that affords a more nuanced understanding of some of the smaller islands that constitute the British Isles.

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TRACING LINES IN THE HILBRE SANDS: A SPATIAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF ISLANDNESS AND OTHER FICTIONS

BY LES ROBERTS AND HAZEL ANDREWS

Correspondence: *les.roberts@liverpool.ac.uk, h.j.andrews@ljmu.ac.uk*

Abstract: The Hilbre Islands are an archipelago of three small islands in the Dee Estuary at the border between Wales and England. Hilbre has long played host to myths, legends and spatial stories that speak to questions of identity, mobility and the betwixt-and-betweenness of place and cultural belonging. Travel to and from the islands today is still undertaken on foot, with navigation across the sands possible at low tide. Approached and conceived as a negative space, it is the social, cultural and spatial practices that are constitutive of Hilbre's very particular form of islandness that this paper sets out to explore.

Keywords: Hilbre Islands, islandness, spatial anthropology.

Introduction: The Fiction of Islandness

In September 2001, a schoolboy from Wallasey on the Wirral peninsula, north-west England, chanced upon a curious discovery when surveying his local area on Google Maps. Planning a family walk to nearby Hilbre Island, Rory Chapman noticed that a place marker located on Middle Eye, one of the three islands which make up the Hilbre archipelago, was named 'Hole to the Centre of the Earth' (Daily Mirror 2021). It is not known how the icon carrying this curious toponym came to be there, or why. Moreover, soon after the story appeared in local, national, and international newspapers, the icon vanished as quickly and as mysteriously as it came. It should be self-evident to anyone who knows about such things that the place marker obviously does not relate to an actual topographic feature that matches the name it had been given (Fig. 1). Hilbre Island (as the archipelago is collectively known) is, to the best of our knowledge, a place not otherwise associated with Jules Verne-type subterranean fiction. So, what exactly it was that motivated someone to pin such an icon onto the island we will never know. But for our introductory purposes this does not much matter. What the example provides us with is a means by which to consider the way islands – or *this* island at least – may be thought of not as destinations or places of dwelling in their own right but as points of transition. In this

reckoning, the island functions as a gateway, portal (Hay 2006: 23), or staging post on journeys bound for Elsewhere, whether these be 'real world' geographies mobilised by the island's constitutive islandness or other spaces procured by an 'island imagination' (Baldacchino 2004: 274) pitched towards horizons that lie beyond. Either way, it can be argued, islandness presupposes a consonant fictiveness.

Figure 1. Images used in newspaper articles reporting on the discovery of the 'Hole to the Centre of the Earth' icon on Google Maps. The image on the right, showing an actual hole in the ground (location not known), was used to illustrate an article about the story in Chinese news media (China Times 2021).

Our opening contention, then, is that a spatial anthropology of islandness necessarily begins from a point in space and time from whence the ineluctable fiction of islandness is first set in motion (Augé 1999; Roberts 2018: 83). This is not to say *fictitious* in the sense of fabrication. What it refers to is the spatial unfolding of a narrative practice – 'spatial stories' to use Michel de Certeau's term (1984) – that proceeds on the understanding that fiction can 'be the opportunity for the individual's imagination and memory to experience the existence of other imaginations and other imaginary worlds' (Augé 1999: 99). Much of what we are proposing in this paper – whether this relates to the imagined geography of the unknown author of the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or to the everyday islandness experienced by the crime writer Ann Cleeves in the late 1970s – is informed by this underlying contention. Whatever it is that colours and gives shape to our fiction of islandness amounts to what it is we feel we can say, or wish to say, about the spatial anthropology of Hilbre Island.

So when Rory from the Wirral tells the *Liverpool Echo* newspaper that 'I have looked at Hilbre

Island on the map with my mum when we did geography in lockdown' (Liverpool Echo 2021), it is not difficult to imagine someone similarly housebound by the pandemic, whose time had also been spent trawling through the virtual worlds of Google Maps, and whose imagination, like Rory's, had alighted upon a small archipelago at the mouth of the Dee Estuary. Equally, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario where, in the midst of a global pandemic, islands take on very particular connotations, the trope of isolation resonating with more intensity and urgency than before (Foley et al. 2023: 5, 9). We could also imagine embarking on a further journey inward and downward: a subterranean vector of isolation that, having no other space left to go, plumbs the vertiginous depths of the underland (Macfarlane 2019). So yes, we could imagine all of that. But it would be a fiction: the spinning of a spatial yarn.

Like Rory and our cartographic trickster, our own journey towards the fiction of islandness begins within domestic interiors. And perhaps like they were, we are stationed at office desks strewn with papers, books, notes, maps, photographs, and other items of miscellanea which, along with our laptops and smartphones, provide us with a means by which to 'travel' to Hilbre Island. Once we are there, we find ourselves able to access other spaces of the imagination that we have been seeking all along. In other words, we journey to the island to then secure passage to somewhere else. This is probably no less true when applied to the actual journeys we have made to Hilbre Island, when the imagination finds itself tethered to landscapes that are not framed by a screen or buried in deep layers of text.

With these preliminary thoughts in mind, we set out a spatial anthropology of islandness in which Hilbre Island provides a space both to think with (Pugh 2013) and, as a spatial imaginary, to probe more deeply. As we will argue, islandness does not necessarily presuppose a theoretical or methodological disposition towards island-*centric*-ness. It can just as productively be explored by paying closer attention to what goes on around the island; to what it is that performatively constitutes its islandness, or which negates it; to the archipelagic connections the island has with mainland spaces that straddle national borders; to its mythopoeic fabric: its spatial stories and practices. In this respect, as with the symbolic inversion of the island that the Hole to the Centre of the Earth throws into relief, it is understanding Hilbre Island as a negative space rather than a fixed point on a correspondingly fixed map that we are keen to explore. As we shall see, this entails a process of tracing and delineating lines in the sands. Thinking about islandness in terms of a negation or inversion, where attention is cast not to the island itself but all that the island is not, is to populate Hilbre as a negative space made up of

lines and spatial stories. To frame what is otherwise an anthropological space (Certeau 1984, Merleau-Ponty 2014) as a negation is not to posit a rejection or repudiation of space in the terms Ingold (2009) sets out in his polemical essay 'Against Space'. It is to reverse engineer those processes whereby an island is perceived and understood as an island in the first place. In this respect, we are very much in step with Foley et al.'s take on islandness, which holds that:

> *Although some of the oft-cited definitions of islandness highlight characteristics like sea-boundedness and comparative remoteness, the sea can also be envisioned as a road to the rest of the world, and there are traditions of seeing the land and the sea together, not the sea as a barrier, which are all helpful for imagining islandness more inclusively.* (2023: 10)

On Islands, Islandness and Archipelagos

As Hilbre Island is not strictly speaking *an* island, but an archipelago, the terminology applied is by no means incidental. More so when we consider that for a large proportion of the day Hilbre is not an island at all, given that one can get there by foot and that it is only its elevation compared to the surrounding sand flats that confers on it the 'proper' island status when the tide rolls in. It does depend on what is meant by 'island', however. Islandness – understood here as a broadly anthropological orientation towards a discrete set of practices and imaginaries that coalesce around the *idea* of an island or islands – does not presuppose entanglement with an empirically verifiable topographic form that meets the defining characteristics of an 'island', however construed. Put simply, what an island is or what constitutes an island is not at all straightforward. Islands, as Edmond and Smith note, 'are the most graspable and the most slippery of subjects' (2003: 5). Much of the academic debate about the definition of islands proceeds from, or is in some way related to, the etymology of the word and an understanding of the related concept of islandness.

Writing as we are about a place that is located in the waters of a country in north-western Europe, Owe Ronström's (2009) discussion of the origins and meanings of words for islands is certainly instructive. Ronström points to the many different words applied to 'island' that exist in different languages. He lists 26 words in his native Swedish, 16 in Finnish, and ten in English, including *atoll*, *ait*, *reef*, *key*, and *isle*. Approaching islands from a linguistic and etymological perspective points to the many different forms an island can take – for example, names linked

to size of the landform, or to its composition or position – but also to how the meanings of island have changed through time and through the localised prism of socio-cultural milieux. Similarly, then, what is meant by 'islandness' in any given instance is no less contingent on the cultural, geographic, and linguistic specificities attached to islands from the vantage point of those whose islandness is being performatively put to work as a socio-spatial practice. A related point is made by Foley et al. who observe that 'the physicality and sociality of islandness… are commonly defined subjectively' and thus reflect the 'biases and preconceived ideas' of the definer (2023: 10). As such, Conkling's assertion that 'if the characteristics of islanders [and islandness] resonate through time and across space, then certain island qualities must transcend local culture' (2007: 192) is sharply at odds with our own and others' understanding of, and approach to, islandness.

Ronström notes (2021: 271), '[a] longstanding concern in island studies is what constitutes "the island"', and that the object of study is informed 'by the constant and wayward sliding between the physical places we call islands, and all the figures of thought that we attach to such places' (ibid.). This may be useful in terms of the general understanding of islands that Ronström is drawing attention to, but it does not allow much room for closer consideration of what gives form to a particular island. For Vannini and Taggart, 'islands are relational spatialities grounded in unique kinesthetic performances' (2012: 228). In other words, islands and islandness come about through spatial practices. Islands, though, are so much more. How a particular islandness is practised will be influenced by ideas about islands in general. In their discussion of Malta, Nimführ and Otto (2020) refer to 'islandscapes' (a term derived from the work of Cyprian Broodbank) as a useful analytical tool to consider the so-called 'relational turn' in island studies that seeks to move the association of islands away from ideas of insularity, backwardness, and disconnection. Thinking in terms of islandscapes allows islands to be thought of assemblages, 'embedded and entangled in broader discourses, infrastructures and ideas' (ibid: 187). An island and the practice of islandness cannot be disentangled from the histories, mythologies and on-going stories that are woven in and around it.

Drawing on Deleuze's study of Melville's short story 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', Stratford et al. (2011) argue that the relationships between islands that the archipelago speaks of points to a 'world in process': an archipelagic *becoming*. From this we understand the archipelago to be brought into being by the exchanges, connections, and movements between its different elements, emphasising the fluidity and assemblages that emerge in inter-island movements

(Pugh 2013). For Smith, the usefulness of the archipelagic is in the opportunity to explore networks of relationships and 'that it need not be islands alone that fit this description' (2013: 14). Both Rankin (2016) and Baldacchino and Tsai (2014) note that islands cannot be understand objectively as things. For the latter, the 'facts' of islands and archipelagos need to be discussed with the myths and metaphors associated with them (ibid: 15).

Discussing islands archipelagically thus emphasises connectivities and challenges potential assumptions that islands are isolated or insular (Foley et al. 2023: 9). Indeed, an island remains an island even though it may have fixed connections, but the connections may change the practice of the island concerned (Grydehoj and Casagrande 2020). Links between islands and other landmasses can serve to both contribute to the development and decline of an island. In a similar vein, Stratford (2013) and Stratford et al. (2011) argue that the archipelago allows us to think about the relations between islands, the connections and assemblages; that what the islandness of a particular island is will be linked to island-island relations rather than just island-mainland connections.

Situating Hilbre's Islandness

Hilbre Island, or Islands as the group of three rocky outcrops are sometimes referred to, is located at the mouth of the River Dee between Flintshire in Wales and the Wirral peninsula in England. The largest of the islands is Hilbre, followed by the Middle Eye and the Little Eye. At low water it is possible to see the bedrock that connects all three of the Hilbre islands. This suggests an earlier formation of one landmass as depicted in the Mercator map of 1564 (one of the sources of a map published by John Speed in the early 1600s), in which the landmass was labelled *Il Bre* (Chesterwiki n.d.). Similarly, a map by Robert Morden published in Edmund Gibson's edition of William Camden's *Britannia* (1695) depicts the three islands as one (Fig. 2). The accuracy of these early maps can be called into question (Anderson 1982: 4-5), not least by comparing them with other maps published around the same time, such as Grenville Collins' 1689 map of the Dee Estuary (Fig. 3). However, depending on how far back in time one goes, it is worth acknowledging that the existence of one island may be feasible given the connective tissue of bedrock still visible around the islands, and the possibility that the sandstone structure was worn away by weathering and erosion to leave three islands in place of one.

For an overview of Hilbre's history the most authoritative point of reference remains the 1982

collection *Hilbre: The Cheshire Island – its history and natural history*, edited by J.D. Craggs. Of the book's 19 chapters, 16 are focused on the archipelago's flora and fauna. The first three chapters, including a contribution from the crime writer Ann Cleeves, which we refer to below, address social and economic life on the islands. This covers questions of ownership (and disputes between England and Wales); the islands' sometime strategic role militarily, or as part of mercantile and maritime operations; as a smuggling hotspot; a monastic outpost; a hermitage; a (possible) site of pilgrimage; a telegraph station; a place frequented by fishermen; a mecca for birdwatchers; a lifeboat station; and, more recently, a destination for tourists and leisure-seekers (see Anderson 1982: 32-37).

Figure 2. Map published in the 1695 edition of William Camden's book Britannia. The map, by Robert Morden, shows Hilbre as a single island. For full map see Camden (1695: 552).

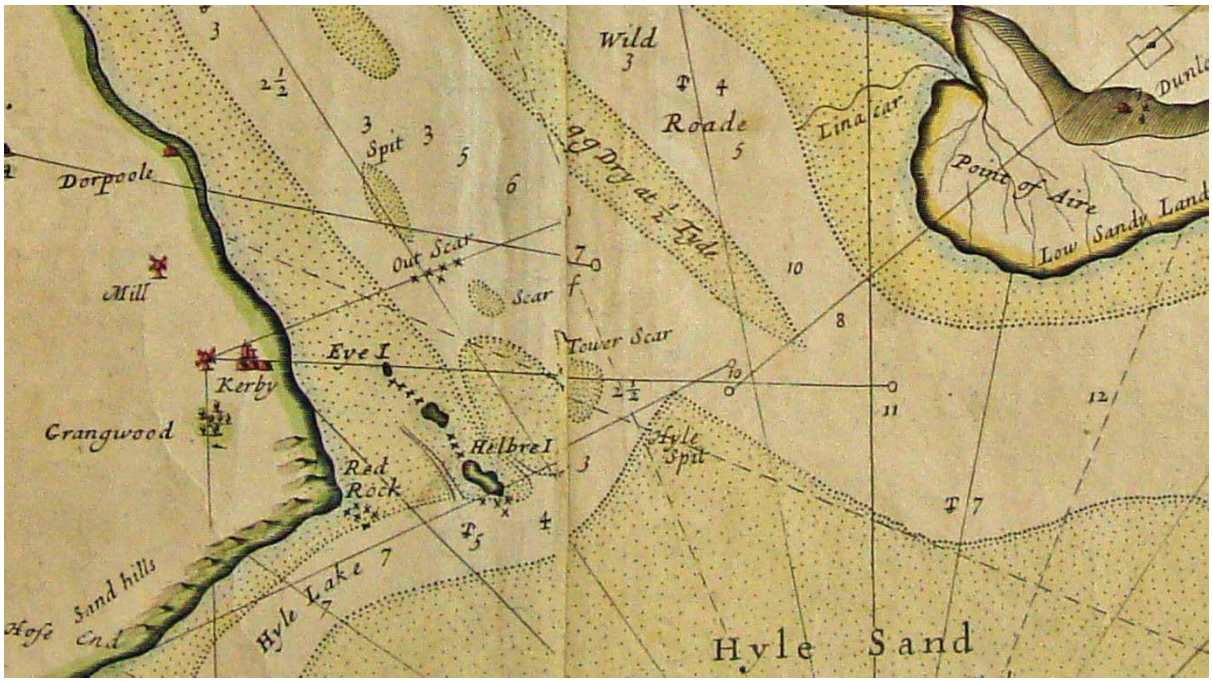

Figure 3. Detail of a 1689 map of the Dee Estuary by Grenville Collins, a hydrographer commissioned to carry out a survey of the coasts of Great Britain. Unlike Robert Morden's map, Collins' shows Hilbre as an archipelago rather than a single landmass. Note that north is pointing down in this map. Courtesy of Cheshire Archives and Local Studies.

For our purposes, however, it is Hilbre's mythological and folkloric associations that are the main focus of interest. There are several myths and legends associated with Hilbre (Craggs 2004-2005), two of which are discussed in more detail in the next section. Alongside Constable Sands (discussed below), which provides an important foundation for many of Hilbre's subsequent spatial stories, the legend of The Lady's Cave, set in the 1200s, recounts the tale of the daughter of the castellan of Shotwick who threw herself from a boat carrying her from England to Wales for an arranged marriage. Barely clinging to life, she was discovered by monks, to whom she told her story before dying near to the site of the cave (Fig. 4). There are also stories of a Hilbre Monster, which date to 1149. The monster was said to be in the form of a maelstrom that sucked people and ships to their deaths. Although the idea of a giant whirlpool has been largely discredited, reported sightings of a 'strange whirlpool' near Hilbre have since been made (Chesterwiki n.d.). In 2006, The Wirral Globe newspaper, having enlisted the services of a 'paranormal investigator', reported the case of a 13-year old girl who visited Hilbre in 1954: '[H]iding in Ladies Cave…', legend has it, the teenager 'encountered a

terrifying crab-like creature over six feet in length…with a pair of huge blood-red eyes' (Wirral Globe 2006). Other stories circulating online (from DIY local history resources such as Chesterwiki) have included sightings of a long-necked creature (sometimes with a hump, sometimes with a greyish, green body) moving at speed through the water, or tales of people being lured to their deaths, having heard what sound like calls for help but which are in fact monsters baiting their human prey.

Figure 4. Lady's Cave on the west side of Hilbre Island facing out across the estuary towards North Wales. Authors' photograph.

Having briefly sketched some of the background which informs approaches to the spatial anthropology of the Hilbre archipelago, the next section explores further the mythological underpinnings of Hilbre's spatial stories and the fiction of islandness these have engendered.

Lines in the Sand

As we have already suggested, to trace the spatial practices that connect Hilbre Island with other spaces is to draw our own provisional line in the sand. It means orienting towards a spatial anthropology of islandness that is grounded in the mythopoeic terrain of spatial stories that can be mapped around Hilbre rather than focusing on topographic particularities of the

archipelago itself. Granted, those stories may very well place us squarely within the geographical boundaries of the archipelago in ways that reinforce a fiction of islandness anchored in ideas of settled dwelling or of Crusoe-like isolation. The imaginary of islandness at play here is an island that pulls its islandness around its shoulders, as if hunkering down for a period of settled, proximate and weather-beaten residence.

An evocation of this can be found in one of the two epigraphs included in opening pages of the aforementioned *Hilbre: The Cheshire Island* (Craggs 1982). It is a quote from Irish Blasket Island writer Tomas O'Crohan's 1934 book, *The Islandman*: 'This is a crag in the midst of the great sea and again and again the blown surf drives right over it before the violence of the wind, so that you daren't put your head out any more than a rabbit'. Echoes of this island imaginary can be found in Ann Cleeves' contribution to the collection, in which the future crime novelist recounts a year spent on Hilbre with her husband Tim, who served as warden of the island from 1977 to 1981. Observing how '[t]he weather plays a prominent part in this account' (Cleeves 1982: 48), Cleeves goes on to paint a vivid picture of the demanding day-to-day taskscapes of the island (Ingold 2000). Set against a dramatic backdrop of bitter north-westerly gales which made it 'difficult to hear or to breathe and every step… an effort' (Cleeves 1982: 51), these come to define the fiction of islandness that is presented in the chapter through their (re)iteration, repetition, and ritual observance. 'A year on Hilbre', as the chapter is called, may conjure an imaginary of a year spent *on* a land formation that is, by definition, 'cut off' or separated. However, such an imaginary belies the prosaic geography of everyday spatial practices that make *that* year on Hilbre what it was from the very particular vantage point of its author. This may seem a rather obvious or superfluous point to make. But it is a salient observation nonetheless, inasmuch as Cleeves' island story marks a point of contact wherein Hilbre enters the social world. 'A year on Hilbre' becomes 'The Cleeves' year on Hilbre', or, narrated as it is from the writer's authorial point of view, 'Ann Cleeves' year on Hilbre'.

This shifting of the semantic goalposts matters. The islandness that is being presented here is a product of the unique set of circumstances attached to the social and professional roles that make the Cleeves' islandness what it is for them. And that is clearly not a year merely spent 'on' the island, but a residency which required frequent journeys back and forth to the mainland, sometimes on foot, other times by Land-Rover; and which even extended to a three-week holiday on Fair Isle in the Shetlands, north of the Scottish mainland. In Ann's case, the period spent on the island coincided with her enrolment on a two-year postgraduate course at the

University of Liverpool. Cleeves describes how she 'began to adjust to commuting across the sand every morning and back at night, and to planning my day according to the weather and tide table' (1982: 50). Some of the island taskscapes that Cleeves found herself having to negotiate on a daily basis thus extended out beyond the island itself, highlighting the importance of sand, tide, and weather to the spatial practices by which Hilbre is – and long has been – invested with meaning and symbolic capital. When Cleeves describes an experience that brought home to her the inherent dangers of the tidal crossing, we arrive at the exact point in the narrative when her spatial story becomes intertwined with a much wider island mythology:

> *One day at the end of October I had a frightening experience as I tried to walk from Hilbre to West Kirby in a thick fog. There are no landmarks at all on the shore and I realized in a panic that I was lost. In the fog, sound and light become distorted, and I lost all sense of time. It was a strange and dream-like experience. Just as I realized that the footsteps I had found and was following were my own, leading me in a circle, the fog cleared enough for me to make out the horizon and I arrived safely on the mainland. I came ashore, not at West Kirby but at Hoylake, and if the fog had not cleared I would have missed the Wirral completely*. (ibid: 51)

On the one hand, it is not hard to see how this account prefigures an imaginary of place – dream-like, mysterious, atmospheric, deadly, precarious – that would directly inform Cleeves' later work as a writer of crime fiction. But it also alludes to a mythic provenance that has its roots in stories, historical narratives, legends, and apocryphal tales which, in their different ways, all revolve around the fear, threat or actuality of drowning (Simpson 1908: 87-88; Brownbill 1928: 33-34). In a rare instance of Cleeves writing a story actually set in or around Hilbre Island, rather than just inspired by it – the short story 'Stranded' (2014) – we are confronted with the ghost of a drowned girl. Dead for thirty years, the girl tries to entice the young Anthony Murphy, her would-be suitor, out towards the mouth of the River Dee. With no idea that the object of his affections is a ghost, Anthony's reflections on what it is that keeps drawing him to Hilbre hint at the liminality of both the location and the uncertain, porous boundary between the living and the dead: 'caught between two worlds… Halfway between England and Wales and stranded like a sandstone whale between the land and the sea' (Cleeves 2014: 34). Set in 1978, the short story is itself clearly rooted in the fiction of islandness that was cultivated during the Cleeves' Hilbre residency that spanned most of that year. The

fog-bound commute she recounts in ‘A Year on Hilbre’, where she nearly misses the mainland altogether, is revisited thirty-six years later in the figure of a ghostly siren luring the living out towards the open sea, and a certain death.

We might think of the sands of the Dee Estuary as a kind of negative relief map, where the Hilbre archipelago is flattened and the ridges and undulating dunes of the sands brought more prominently to the fore. Conceived of this way, attention is drawn away from the rocky elevation of the island crags towards all that is happening around them. The task of populating such a map – figuratively in pinning a spatial story to an author’s spatial practices, or cartographically, as illustrated by the ‘Cestrian Book of the Dead’: a virtual map of deaths by drowning on the Dee Estuary (Roberts 2012; 2016; 2018) – sets in motion a project of spatial anthropology. We have already inducted Cleeves into our canon of Hilbre wayfarers. As authors, our reflexive complicity in the fiction of Hilbre’s islandness means that we too have written our way into a space of representation that bears the inexorable imprints of our own lines in the sands. But in mythological terms, the lineation of Hilbre’s islandness goes much deeper and geographically much further.

As we have already noted, the legend of Constable Sands is firmly anchored in the cultural and historical imaginary of Hilbre Island. For present purposes, let us strip this legend down to its barest elements. In the early 1100s Earl Richard of Chester embarks on a pilgrimage to St. Winefride’s Well in North Wales (situated in Holywell in modern-day Flintshire). En route he is set upon by a ‘band of Welsh marauders’ (Craggs 2004-5: 21). A message is sent to William Fitz Nigel of Halton, the Constable of Chester (Brownbill 1928: 29). Fitz Nigel and his troops make their way to Hilbre, expecting to find there a ship to transport them across the estuary. Upon arrival at the island, with no ship at his disposal, the Constable sought spiritual guidance in the form of a prayer:

> *O blessed Werburge and virgin pure,*
> *I beseke the mekely helpe me this day,*
> *That we may transcende this river safe and sure,*
> *To save and defende my lord from discomfiture.*

St Werburgh hears the prayer and obliges the Constable’s request. The waves part and a safe passage across the estuary is secured, allowing Fitz Nigel to cross the sands and rescue the

Earl:

> *For like as to Moises [Moses] devided the Redde See,*
> *And the water of Jordan obeyed to Josue [Joshua],*
> *Rhyt so the depe river if Dee made division,*
> *The sondes drye appered in sight of them echone.* (Leigh 1867: 3)

The ‘dry sands’ appeared to each one of Fitz Nigel’s men: clearly a miracle of biblical proportions. Or, alternatively, a myth that stems from more earthly origins: the well-documented fords that snaked their way across the estuary at low tide (Craggs 2004-5: 21; Fiennes 2009; Young 1926; Heyworth 1972; Roberts 2012, 2018). By their very nature, these routes and pathways across the sands were forever shifting, making them all but unmappable. As a consequence, such cartographically elusive modes of travel exist only in their narration: spatial stories that chart anthropological spaces of everyday mobility that are legible as ‘lines on the map’ only to the extent that they have been committed to record and/or memory. The aforementioned map of deaths by drowning on the Dee Estuary between 1500 and the 1820s, which was compiled from Chester Quarter Sessions Coroners’ Inquest records, provided one such means by which to trace these precariously navigable byways through the sands (Fig. 5). Another is Charles Kingsley’s 1849 poem, ‘The Sands of Dee’, by far the most cited literary reference in narratives focused on the cultural and natural history of the Dee Estuary. The poem tells the tragic tale of Mary, a cattle girl, who ventures out onto the sands and is overtaken by the tide and drowns: ‘The western tide crept up along the sand, / And o’er and o’er the sand, / And round and round the sand, / As far as eye could see. / The rolling mist came down and hid the land: And never home came she’ (in Roberts 2012: 106.). Had Ann Cleeves’ near-miss journey across the sands ended differently, this stanza could very well have served as a cultural point of reference in a footnote to her obituary.

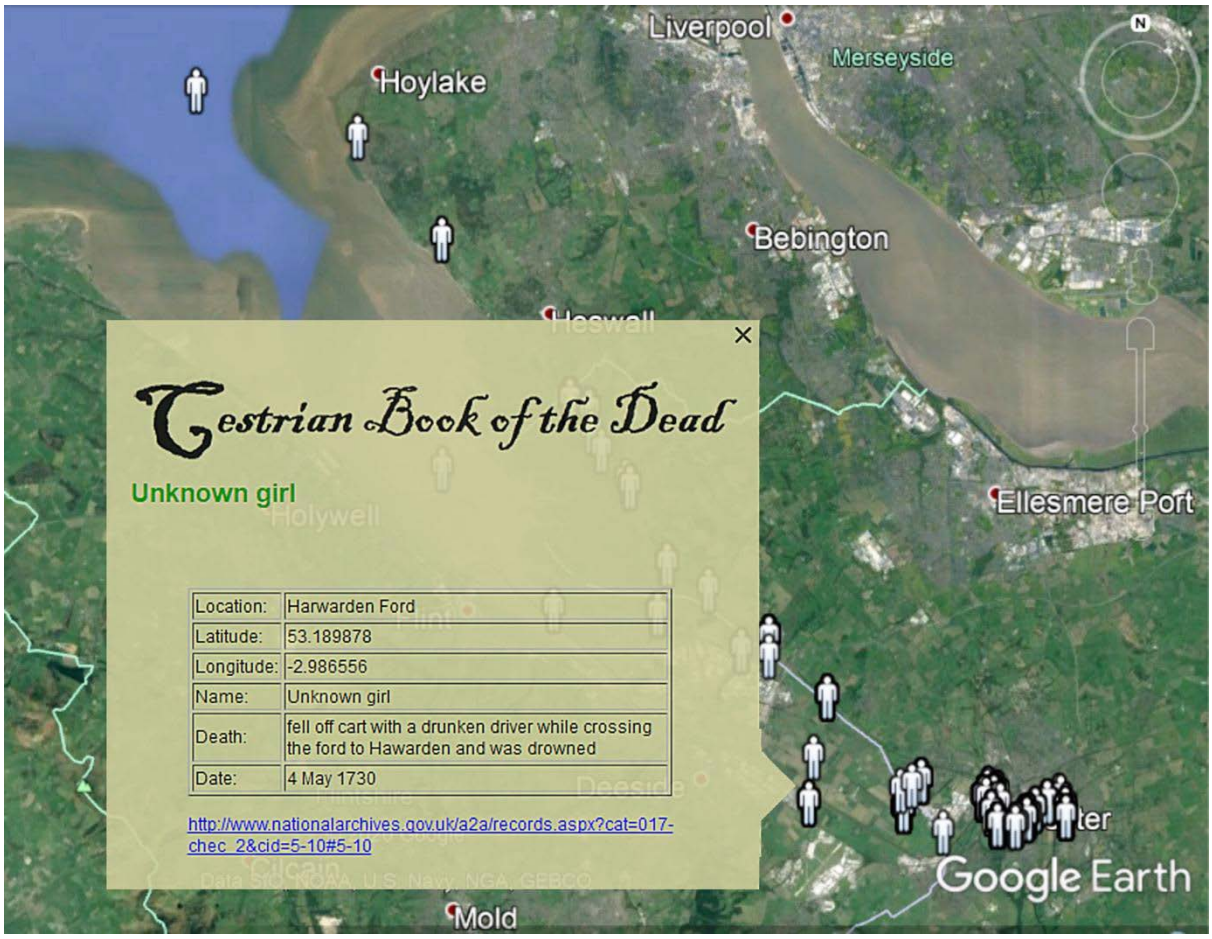

Figure 5. Screenshot from the Cestrian Book of the Dead that marks the site of drowning of an unknown girl who was crossing the ford to Hawarden in 1730. Source: 'Dee Estuary' 53°14'29.66"N and 3°03'57.62"W. Google Earth. 10 April 2013.

While there is no question as to the existence of fords connecting the English and Welsh sides of the Dee Estuary, whether there was a navigable river crossing as far north as Hilbre is far less certain. Given the constantly shifting geography of the estuary (Hewitt 1922: 52–55; Marker 1967), it is not inconceivable that, even at its widest point (five miles from coast to coast), the Dee was at one time fordable via Hilbre Island. That said, despite the extensive sand banks that are visible at low tide, looking out across the expanse of the estuary from Hilbre today, the possibility of there once being a 'Constable Sands'-style crossing from Point of Ayr on the Flintshire coastline to West Kirby on the Wirral does require a stretch of the imagination. Stretching the imagined geography of the medieval Middle English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knigh*t, to include a Hilbre stop-off – which is exactly what the historian John McNeal Dodgson does in an article on 'Sir Gawain's Arrival in Wirral' (1963) – reinforces a fiction of islandness in which Hilbre becomes part of a mythopoeic archipelago that reflects a wider cultural and historical geography than that merely localised to the three small islands

that make up the Hilbre archipelago. But however fanciful, speculative or far-reaching, such intertidal navigations are nevertheless deeply embedded in the folklore and mythology of the Deeside region (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Pub sign, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Golftyn Lane, Connah's Quay, Deeside, Flintshire (pub permanently closed at the time of writing). Authors' photograph.

The folkloric significance of the Arthurian Knight's epic journey to Deeside and the wider estuary region rests on one short part of the poem, lines 697 to 702:

> *He wanders near to the north of Wales*
> *with the Isles of Anglesey off to the left.*
> *He keeps to the coast, fording each course,*
> *crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore*
> *in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people*

> *both God and good men have given up on.* (Armitage 2007: 37)

The exact point at which Gawain crosses over the estuary into the Wirral is not known (Tolkien and Gordon 1925: 691; Heyworth 1972: 124; Rudd 2013: 53). For the purpose of clarity, it might do well to rephrase this as: the exact point at which the fictional character Gawain is imagined to have crossed the Dee by the unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not known. This distinction serves to place weight not on the detail of the textual geography of the epic poem but the imaginary of place and the 'affective regionality' (Campbell 2016: 158) that shaped sociocultural understandings of how a traveller in the early 1400s *might have* navigated the journey from North Wales to the Wirral peninsula:

> *An audience which knew Wirral would know the crossings of Dee. It might seem very suitable, in the circumstances, for the poet to lead Sir Gawain's strange journey into familiar country not by any of the usual crossings but by a legendary ford, and to enhance the legend by giving a familiar place at that ford a strange and unsuspected venerability through associating its name with that of the more famous place in Anglesey.* (Dodgson 1963: 25)

Despite the efforts of some scholars, notably Eadie (1983: 194), to maintain it is 'probable' that the author is referring to Holyhead in Anglesey, this clearly does not stack up if 'Holy Head' – 'Holy Hede' in the original – is where the crossing took place. Some interpretations of the poem have taken Holy Hede to be Holywell in Flintshire (Gollancz 1940: 107; Burrow 1965: 190-191; Rudd 2013: 59), which seems altogether more likely. But it is Dodgson's account that is the most intriguing, as it places Holy Hede somewhere between the Point of Ayr and Hilbre Point, at the northeastern tip of the Wirral at Hoylake. For Dodgson, the fact that the poem refers to fords (in the plural) supports his thesis that the estuary crossing was conducted in two stages: from Point of Ayr to Hilbre, and then from Hilbre to West Kirby (1963: 20). Although he concedes that a means of crossing the first stage 'seems improbable', Dodgson goes on to remark that '[i]mprobability, however, is no discouragement of legend' (ibid: 20, 21), citing the case of Earl Richard's rescue by the Constable of Chester.

Dodgson does by no means brush off the question of probability or improbability. Indeed, it is highly probable that Dodgson himself did not seriously entertain the suggestion that a 'stage 1' crossing by foot would have been possible. What seems clear, though, is the historian's

openness to the value of a fiction of islandness in which Hilbre's archipelagic connection with other spaces and its interpolation in other spatial stories are recognised as viable social facts. That the estuary is an historically unstable and contested border region makes these mythopoeic connections that much more resonant. In this respect, the authors of this paper share Dodgson's embrace of the constitutive fiction of islandness. His islandness becomes enfolded into and coextensive with our spatial anthropology of islandness. Holy Hede, for its part, becomes an *other space* that extends beyond the imprecision of historical geography – the question of where *exactly* it is meant to be in an empirical cartography of real-and-imagined journeys – in service of a re-imagining and performative restaging of a regional spatial story whose secure point of anchorage is the Hilbre archipelago.

From Hilbre to Holy Hede

In this paper we have approached the study of Hilbre Island by following our own prescriptive lines in the sand. That is: to foreground Hilbre's topographic and symbolic status as an archipelago; to reverse engineer the dominant imaginary of Hilbre's islandness by conceiving of the archipelago as a negative space; to refuse to draw boundary lines around a spatial object known as 'Hilbre', and to thus be aware that an island edge is 'more than just permeable; perhaps it is actually the portal to roads and sea-trails fanning out to other (is)lands, a natural bridge to the world beyond' (Hay 2006: 23); to populate not so much the archipelago itself as the surrounding landscapes and sand flats by which Hilbre is constitutively connected with other spaces; to give voice to this mythopoeic constellation of archipelagic wayfarers by stitching spatial stories to – or archaeologically prising them from – the embedded and embodied spatial practices with which they are entwined; to show the workings of a spatial anthropology of islandness which proceeds on the understanding that what might be thought of as an 'island', or, indeed its correlate 'islandness', can only ever be provisional, open-ended and reflexively embellished by the spatial practices invested in the study of islandness itself; and, above all, to recognise that a spatial anthropology of islandness necessarily begins from a point in space and time from whence the ineluctable fiction of islandness is first set in motion.

With that last prescription in mind, our starting point was schoolboy Rory Chapman's discovery of the 'Hole to the Centre of the Earth' on Middle Eye. Can a credible link be made between the Jules Verne story this very nearly namechecks and the sea monsters and 'terrifying crab-like creature over six feet in length' encountered at Lady's Cave? Yes, why not? Such a link can demonstrably be made by virtue of our just having do so. By embracing the fiction of

Hilbre's islandness we rebut the charge that we are merely 'making stuff up', as if concocting a dubious fiction to sit alongside the myriads of others that proliferate in the unbounded mythosphere of the world wide web (which is not to say that we are not.) As a scholarly constellation of spatial stories, this narrative will go on to have a life of its own much like any other. Or not. It is no less a space awaiting the careful excavation of the curious than that of the rugged terrain of Hilbre Island itself. As a portal to deep time – to prehistoric fictions of dinosaurs and giant marine reptiles – Hilbre's islandness is poised precariously on the edge of a gaping abyss that plunges as deep as any subterranean wayfarer is prepared to go in the quest for their quarry.

But at the same time, we recognise that such a fiction has its limitations. If left unchecked, the trope of excavation or of penetrating the layered stories of Hilbre's mythohistorical underland ends up propping up a fiction of islandness we have been seeking to dismantle. The spatial stories that have drawn our attention in this paper are those that require a method whereby such stories are traced along lines in the sand. Movement is lateral not vertical, binding together the quotidian geometries that chart connections of the historically living not those of a past that is interred: a repository of ghosts, of the walking dead. It is not the dead who are walking when we follow in the footsteps of Gawain. If we imagine Gawain to be the proxy of his unknown creator, then it is the living in conversation with the living by which these lines in the sand are set in motion. Hilbre's islandness is our islandness insofar as it is a mutuality of fiction and a space of hospitality in which such a fiction can be nourished and sustained. Reimagining Constable Sands as a spatial story rather than merely a legend is not to confer on it some kind of historical 'truth'. Its fiction is no less a fiction. The difference is that it has assisted in the task of populating Hilbre's islandness, by which we mean giving life to the real-and-imagined spaces that the archipelago inhabits as a work of fiction. In this sense, the spatial anthropology of islandness can be likened to a quest for a mythical Holy Hede. To embrace the spatial play of islandness is to embark on such a quest equipped with the knowledge that Holy Hede – like any other utopic space (Marin 1984) – can only ever have value to the extent that it succeeds in outpacing the cartographic impulse that seeks to fix it to a point in space and time. Hilbre, like Holy Hede, is as mobile and unbounded as the islandness that puts Hilbre into practice.

A spatial anthropology of islandness can encompass many things but what it clearly does not have any truck with are universalist claims, a la Conkling, that seek to 'transcend local culture'

or disentangle island spatial stories from the embedded particularities of everyday social, cultural, and spatial practices. As the example of Ann Cleeves' Hilbre residency has shown, paying attention to the documented taskscapes that constitute the elemental doingness of islandness (Vannini and Taggart 2013) throws into sharper relief the spatial production of island imaginaries and the mythopoeic tapestry that stretches out beyond the island conceived of as a bounded spatial form. The performative threads of Cleeves' spatial stories become woven into this tapestry alongside the myriad others that we have traced in this paper, our own included. Some of these lines and threads may fray over time, others may need restitching. But what endures is a living and organically vital space of islandness that cannot and should not be merely pinned down to staid representational form.

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WEATHERING COVID

BY CHRISTINA BOSBACH

Correspondence: *christinabarbara.bo@gmail.com*

The following four poems are a reflection on a pandemic year on the Isle of Coll, Scotland. They are based on my fieldwork on Coll between August 2020 and August 2021 and speak to both ordinary aspects of island living and the impacts of the pandemic.

View from Coll to the mainland and the Isle of Mull. Photograph by the author, March 2021.

Preparing for winter / lockdown

stock up the freezer
order coal and heating oil
stomach the price of freight now
there will be days without a ferry

fix the tiles on the roof
buy candles, torches, generators
until the next storm
stuff newspaper into the gaps
in the windows

keep the boat in mind
even if you can't go
anywhere, position yourself
vis-à-vis the 4G mast
keep an eye on the light
in your neighbour's window
insulate from contagious isolation
and keep this above all in mind
everyone here finds winter hard

winter

laughing, she digs
her heels into the ground
pulling at the brambles
while the kids start a fire

on the eve of the shortest day
we lay cardboard and seaweed
around frail trees, and we share
cake in the downpour

*

stay in your car, a sign
has gone up in the village
no more than one person
at
the
time
for the first time
a positive test confirms
31st of December 2020
we stopped being an island

*

the ten first days of the year, I hear nothing but deafening silence

the house moves
creaking and shifting, expanding
with hesitant warmth

radiators crackle
fabric rustles
with my shivering breath

wind rattling the roof tiles rumbling the barn door rushing through leaves like engine noise throwing the gate wide open

*

amid scattered chocolate boxes
we laugh tears on the sofa
wet from the walk
the neighbours' teens tell jokes
feet still muddy
it will be quiet
when they leave

summer

surrounded by heather, we live
in a wide stretch of flammables
it hasn't rained in weeks

by the ferry pier, we watch
unfamiliar faces in unfamiliar cars, looking
through the lenses of their phones

shadowed by blackened hills, we cough
in smoke flooding the village street
we beat out the fire with all that we have

*

billowing coat, walking stick, stray white hair
she stumbles back
arms raised, hands covering
her mouth, shielding
from my breath

like when he checks wind directions
before letting me sit in his garden

they wish we were still an island

*

breathless
we swim in the cold blue
catching fish off the cliff edge

painting memories on pebbles

elated
we hug again
our loved ones arriving
at an unmediated distance

delirious
we sing at night
with drunken smiles
of forgetting

*

visitors in bright outdoor jackets crowd
on the viewing deck of the boat
while we watch, stranded
at the pier
unable to find room, left
behind as the world starts moving
again

How to live on an island

learn
how much flooding
your car can take, know
there are good weather jobs
and bad weather jobs

walk
on the beach
walk
on the hills
walk
through the fields
walk
up the road
walk
with a dog
walk
with a friend
walk
on your own

walk, and

take a trip to the village, because
people will talk
but go to the village, because
people will talk
and care for what you say, because
people will talk

learn
how to weather
storms and calm seas
windproof your skin, know
that even an island
is not always an island

ABORTION POLITICS, ARCHIPELAGICALLY

BY LEAH EADES

Correspondence: *leah.eades@ed.ac.uk*

Abstract: In this photo collection, I examine how notions of islandness, interconnectedness and (trans)nationalism are articulated in post-Repeal Irish abortion politics. The images, captured during doctoral fieldwork, highlight the importance of cross-border solidarities, as well as the opportunities and tensions associated with the circulation and vernacularisation of transnational activist vocabularies, imaginaries and strategies. Together, they point to the value of conceptualising abortion politics through an archipelagic lens.

Keywords: abortion politics, reproductive mobilities, transnational social movements.

From 1983 to 2018, the 8th Amendment served as a de facto abortion ban in Ireland, permitting terminations only when the life of the pregnant woman was endangered. The 8th was a marker of Irish distinctiveness, intended to discursively separate the country from its more permissive neighbours and informed by 'fears – deeply rooted in historical experiences of colonialism and nationalism – that modernization and secularization would sully Irish womanhood and assault "traditional" Irish culture' (Delay 2019, 313; see also Oaks 1998; Conrad 2001; Fletcher 2001; Smyth 2005).

By the time I was conducting fieldwork in 2021-22, the landscape had changed significantly. In 2018, the Irish electorate had voted by a landslide to repeal the 8th Amendment, paving the way for the enactment of more liberal legislation. Domestic abortion services had been in place since 1 January 2019. Nonetheless, its provision remains subject to contestation, both by anti-abortion groups who want to restrict access to lawful abortion and abortion rights groups who want to expand it further. It is the protest logics and materials of these movements that constitute the subject of this photo collection.

In the following photos, a picture emerges of an Ireland whose orientation to the outside world looks very different to the 'fortress mentality' (MacQuarrie et al. 2018, xiii) of old. Of course, Irish abortion politics have always been archipelagic – as the generations of women who 'got the boat' to England starkly demonstrate (Rossiter 2009). More recently, medical and technological advances have collapsed the symbolic boundedness of the nation-state even further, as 'the growth of a trans-national and extra-territorial set of actors and flows' (Calkin 2018, 22) carve out new political geographies of access. By 'thinking with the archipelago' (Pugh 2013),

these cross-border relationships and exchanges fall into particularly sharp relief, revealing a circulation of transnational activist vocabularies, imaginaries and strategies that extends far and wide. In the photos depicted here, we see Irish campaigners claim kinship with counterparts in Northern Ireland, Poland, Latin America and the USA. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of the transnationalisms at play; rather, it is a mere snapshot.

If reproduction is indeed 'a medium through which competing national origin stories that focus on Irish national identity and cultural self-determination, indeed visions of "Irishness" itself, are imagined and expressed' (Oaks 1998, 133), then what visions are being expressed here? This is the question I invite readers to keep in mind as they engage with the following photos.

Figure 1. A National Party flyer distributed at an anti-abortion rally in Galway. Proponents of the 8th Amendment typically framed abortion as an external threat, both to foetuses and to Irish national identity. Here, however, the 'threat' comes from within.

Figure 2. Anti-abortion protestors call for reform in Northern Ireland, while also referencing the recent overturning of Roe v. Wade, at an anti-abortion march in Dublin.

Figure 3. MAGA-inspired 'Make Ireland Pro-Life Again' hats on sale at a Dublin rally.

Figure 4. An abortion rights rally outside the US Embassy in Dublin following the overturning of Roe v. Wade. In the words of one of the speakers: 'America only has to sneeze and the rest of the world grabs its tissues.'

Figure 5. A Galway vigil in memory of Agnieszka, a woman who died after being denied a life-saving termination in Poland in January 2022. Irish campaigners sometimes refer to women like Agnieszka as "Polish Savitas" – a reference to Savita Halappanavar, whose 2012 death has been credited with sparking Ireland's Repeal movement.

Figure 6. An activist wears a green scarf, modelled on those worn by Latin American abortion rights campaigners, at March for Choice in Dublin.

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WAVES ACROSS THE SOUTH: A NEW HISTORY OF REVOLUTION AND EMPIRE
SUJIT SIVASUNDARAM

REVIEW BY DAVID WHYTE

Correspondence: *David.whyte@ucc.ie*

How might the French Revolution, or British imperial discourse, have been shaped by the cultures and peoples of colonised islands in the global South? In *Waves Across the South* (2020), Professor of History Sujit Sivasundaram departs from traditional Euro-centric analyses of 18th and 19th century imperial history that focus on revolutionary processes as enacted by European powers. Rather, in the waters around places like New Zealand, Mauritius, and the Persian Gulf, Sivasundaram shows us how Pacific and Indian Ocean archipelagos actively shaped new institutions and ideologies, as opposed to being mere receivers of those. The book is set in the "age of revolutions": the decades of the late 18th and early 19th centuries which saw the American and French revolutions, as well as struggles for independence in the Caribbean and Latin America, usually portrayed as an 'Atlantic triangle of grand events' (p. 1). The author's timeline, however, begins with the 1722 collapse of the Safavid Empire in modern day Iran (p. xv). The attention to political events of the coastal South and their effect on European politics and history becomes the hallmark of the author's approach.

In his description of archipelagic thought, Smith argues for a literature on island places that pays attention to the physicality of coast and sea, as well as to the 'polycentrism' seen in 'the multiplication and distribution of sites of agency across a network rather than their clustering around a central power' (2013: 6). Sivasundaram's juxtaposition of indigenous agency with colonial power is in keeping with this tradition. The book's central thesis is that as colonisers came ashore across the global South, they were met with a surge of Indigenous and non-European politics that transformed the various systems and styles of European imperialism.
This argument is advanced over seven substantive chapters that take different bodies of water and their cultures as a focus. For example, in chapter 2 we learn of the effect that colonisation had on political systems in Tonga and New Zealand, among others. History and anthropology have often recorded that this tended to result in the centralisation of systems of chieftaincy and governance, as Europeans established institutions that better reflected their notions of civility and with which they found easier to engage. However, Sivasundaram argues that this neglects

the agency of local people in transforming their politics. Often, power became centralised through an act of resistance, as the image of a sole Indigenous monarch could be used to rally the people of an entire island against a common invader. Other times, local big men and women were impressed by the power of European monarchs and simply sought something like it for themselves.

The relationship between indigenous agency and the ocean as a cultural space is a common theme throughout the book. The portrayal of European powers as maritime versus relatively land-based island cultures is one that the narrative categorically rejects. We are shown how, by inhabiting the ocean and its movements, peoples of the global South created maritime societies that vied for space with Europeans in a globalising world. The author builds this thesis across varied examples including how Indian seafarers first gained advantage in Indian Ocean trade through their understanding of the monsoon winds, and how instances of mutiny against European captains led to the establishment of settlements on far flung Pacific islands.
The writing style, though factual, is also colourful – that is to say, *blue*. One of the books most immersive and enjoyable aspects is its consistent location upon the waves. The challenge to imperial expansion posed by rain, storms, swells and other physical processes are often included in the analysis. Watery metaphors continue throughout and reproduce the core themes of archipelagic thought, which also emphasise how exchanges between peoples, places, and powers of vastly different scales characterise an emergent world connected – not separated – by oceans.

Sivasundaram collected data from a wide range of primary sources across the South. He uses the letters of Burmese monks to examine changes to everyday life as they were experienced and spoken about by people across the region; Māori maps; paintings of Indian boat crew; and various artefacts of material culture that are analysed to demonstrate how the common theme of intercultural exchange between Europeans and non-Europeans manifests at different times and locations. On several occasions, the author mentions his visits to some of the locations in question. Given his own insistence on the importance of place and location on the sea, it is a shame that the narrative does not pause here to offer vivid descriptions of contemporary port cities or cosmopolitan archipelagos of the South. Although a historical piece, such descriptions would have allowed for a comparison with the historical record and the discussion of how historical indigenous politics affect today's institutions – not to mention to bring the locations to life in another way.

The publication of *Waves Across the South* is timely, both in terms of a growing academic interest in the ocean as cultural space, but also in the context of a renewed political interest as part of the UN Decade of Ocean Science (2021-2030) and the EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030. The book ought to form part of the theoretical and factual arsenal through which coastal communities are engaged in these grand plans as they attempt to integrate local understandings and deliberative governing structures into the collection and application of science to improve the health of the oceans.

In all, this is a seminal text that demonstrates the necessity of re-imaging coastlines as cultural connectors – not peripheral to urban centres and historical processes. Examining how these islands and European political centres are entangled will help readers understand the 21st-century reality of Britain and Ireland as they navigate new relationships amongst their constituent parts and with continental Europe. *Waves Across the South* will be of interest to a wide readership across anthropology, especially scholars of coastal and island communities, island studies, (post-)colonialism, and imperial history.

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