

**‘Small Places like St Helena have Big Questions to Ask’:
The Inaugural Lecture of a Professor of Island Geography**

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Abstract: This publication takes the form of a written version of my inaugural lecture, which was presented at Queen’s University Belfast on 10 March 2010. It is more personal and considerably more self-indulgent than would normally be acceptable in an article, with more of my own experiences and also my own references than would usually be considered proper. However, the bestowal of such a title as Professor of Island Geography is something of a marker of the maturity not just of me but maybe also for island studies. After a section describing my path into island geography, the lecture deals with the negativities of islands and the seeming futility of studying them, only then to identify a new or at least enhanced regard for islands as places with which to interact and to examine. Reference is made to islands throughout the world, but with some focus on the small islands off Ireland. The development of island studies as a discipline is then briefly described before the lecture concludes with reference to its title quotation on St Helena by considering that place’s islandness and how this affected/affects it in both the 17th and 21st centuries.

Keywords: island geography, island studies, Irish islands, St Helena

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‘The Road to the Isles’: The Self-Indulgent Introduction

My inaugural lecture starts with two photographs of myself wearing a uniform. The pictures were taken 44 years apart; the earlier depicts me amongst fellow members of the 1964 George Dixon Grammar School for Boys Under-14 Cricket XI ([Figure 1](#), sitting, extreme left). The later has me more gloriously attired in the green and gold academic robes worn by a Member of the Royal Irish Academy during induction into that august body ([Figure 2](#)). The path from a school playing field in suburban Birmingham in England to Academy House in central Dublin in Ireland and on to this lectern as a professor has involved 95 countries and territories and 668 islands. It has been a geographer’s journey, some of which will be re-trodden this afternoon.

Figure 1: George Dixon Grammar School for Boys Under-14 Cricket XI (1964) (*photo*: George Dixon Grammar School for Boys)



Figure 2: Induction as Member of the Royal Irish Academy (2008) (*photo*: Ian Royle)



There are roots behind my routes, of course, and I must acknowledge the contribution my family have made to the journey: my wife, Lisa, accompanied today, as ever, by the loyal Wallis, the blackest of guide-dogs; our children, Katy, Alex and Ian, who are all present together with Jamie, who, at four months, is the youngest of our trio of grandchildren: Jake, Erin and Jamie. He will, I imagine, shortly be escorted from the lecture theatre by his mother, Fiona, so the rest of the audience can hear me. Another self-indulgence is for me to flash up a slide of football scenes labelled *Keep Right on to the End of the Road*, the Sir Henry Lauder song, an apposite reference for this geographer's journey and which just so happens to be the terrace anthem of my beloved Birmingham City Football Club and which I could sing to you if there were a crowd of 20,000 fellow fans to join in. Supporting the Blues, that perennially under-achieving sleeping giant of English football, has taught me lifelong lessons: humility; never to be optimistic and to be grateful for small mercies—all good preparation for a career in a university.

The Long and Winding Road (to continue the song title theme, this by Paul McCartney), for me, had an urban beginning. After reading geography at St John's College, Cambridge, I took a PhD at Leicester University under Gareth Lewis, studying four small English towns in the 19th century based on an analysis of their Census Enumerators' Books. In 1975, with my PhD still unfinished, I was appointed as a Lecturer in Geography at Queen's University Belfast, a level of experience that would not see a person achieve a similar position today. I was the second-string urban geographer to Professor Fred Boal, who I am delighted to see here this afternoon and with whom it has been an honour and privilege to work, principally upon our two edited volumes, *North America* (Boal and Royle, 1999) and *Enduring City: Belfast in the 20th Century* (Boal and Royle, 2006). Although I still work on urban projects, especially for Belfast, with a small grant secured to help prepare

another book on the city just this week, my journey took a direction that led me away from the city along the *Road to the Isles* (Scottish, trad.).

Lisa and I first came to Ireland in 1974, on holiday, free and fancy in those days before the children arrived, and before we knew that our lives were to be spent on this island. We drove to the southwest, the coast of County Cork, went to the end of the Beara Peninsula and there came across a cable car spanning a wild stretch of sea to an offshore island, Dursey. I have written of this before (Royle, 1999a), of how we waited for the operator to return from lunch and then took the cable car to a mysterious, tiny world, my first experience of what I now might call the microscopicality of islands (Edmond and Smith, 2003). I was fascinated by its shabby decline: why were there so many empty houses? I climbed through a glassless window into one of the abandoned properties, finding a surprisingly dry but littered room with an old bed frame, one shoe—there is always just one shoe—and amongst the detritus on the floor, a newspaper, whose headline was on the destruction of the R101 airship which had just crashed on its maiden overseas voyage, killing 48 people. That was in 1930, so why had the reader of that newspaper abandoned this house 40 years and more ago? Why had almost all the population left? Was Dursey dying? I vividly recall telling Lisa that I would like to follow up such questions.

The following year, I obtained my lectureship at Queen's, commencing work in January 1976 and we moved to Northern Ireland, a society then riven by civil strife, the 'Troubles'. However, the occasional scare apart, we enjoyed life in Belfast and, obviously, we have stayed. I published a little from my PhD on small towns, both early on in local history journals and much later, when asked to contribute to a somewhat more prestigious outlet, the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (Royle, 2000). I extended my urban interests to Ireland, largely through work on Belfast, especially that associated with the Royal Irish Academy (Gillespie & Royle, 2003; Royle, 1995a; 2004a; 2007a). I looked, too, to continue my research with 19th century Census Enumerators' Books. Naively I had assumed they would be available for Ireland in the same way as for England. Not so. Here the manuscripts from the censuses of 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 were never preserved; whilst those from earlier censuses, the aborted exercise of 1813, also 1821, 1831, 1841 and 1851, were held in the Public Record Office in Four Courts Dublin in 1922 when that building was destroyed during the Civil War and almost all the documents were lost. Almost all; for some few fragments survived (Royle, 1978), including the records for the three Aran Islands in County Galway from the census of 1821. This material had never been analysed and, thus, serendipity permitted me to take my nascent interest on islands from that visit to Dursey (thus far expressed only in a piece on industrial archaeology on a French island (Royle, 1982)) and apply it to this excellent island data set that had survived the destruction of the Irish public records. This paper (Royle, 1983), together with a companion piece on a regional famine affecting the Aran Islands in 1822 (Royle, 1984) set me on the road to the isles. Further work at this period on development of the Falkland Islands, a hot topic in the 1980s given the Falklands Conflict (Royle, 1985), and more on the Irish islands, including forays into their contemporary circumstances (Royle, 1986; 1989a) gave me the experience and confidence to seek to explore commonalities in the insular situation, in print initially in my paper, 'A Human Geography of Islands' (Royle, 1989b), although a little earlier, I had attempted, without success, to interest a publisher in

a book on this topic. I was helped also in my interests by attending this university's annual geography field courses, which so happened to be held on islands for the pragmatic reason that taking students on holiday packages to the Mediterranean was the most effective way of delivering them to a field area. I have accompanied students to Cyprus and Malta and will at the end of next month be on my 21st field trip to Mallorca, a long enough period for me to have recently been able to prepare a piece on tourism change there based, to a certain extent, upon personal observation over the decades (Royle, 2009).

Insular: 'A Narrow, Provincial Viewpoint'

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* informs us that the adjective 'insular' can be traced to the Latin word *insularis*; that its primary meaning is 'relating to, or constituting, an island' with a secondary meaning of 'being, having or reflecting a narrow, provincial viewpoint'. This initial negativity associated with islands does not suggest that their study is promising or even worthwhile. Islands are places of little account. For example, Arthur Seymour, Governor of British Columbia, during negotiations for a union with the neighbouring British colony of Vancouver Island in 1865 would not countenance 'the mainland' becoming 'the dependency of an outlying island', despite that island having more non-indigenous people, being more developed and possessing a much better infrastructure. Vancouver Island was to be dismissed; it was of no account, just because it was an island. In the event the mainland annexed the outlying island, the *British Columbia Act, 1866* uniting the two colonies under the name of British Columbia, the writ of the previous mainland colony of that name being deemed to 'extend to and over Vancouver Island'. What insular powerlessness is revealed by that word 'over', but islands are powerless places; all have been controlled by outsiders, many still are. Further, islands lose battles; that Malta did not in 1565 in the Great Siege nor again in 1942 during the German blockade is the exception, not the norm—even for Malta which was taken by outsiders often enough at other times, including by Napoleon in 1798. Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1943; also in the Second World War, Pacific islands were fought over, whilst the British had to abandon the Channel Islands to the Germans, given the sad reality that they would have been unable to defend them successfully. Later, Cyprus was invaded in 1974 and the Falkland Islands (twice) in 1982. In another display of insular powerlessness, last week, on 4 March, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, advised the Greek Government to sell some of its islands to raise money to cope with the country's debt crisis. It is no surprise that, with the exception of Gibraltar and French Guiana, all the world's places remaining in an official colonial relationship are islands; although some of them are now conscious of benefits to be gained from such an arrangement and do not seek to change (Baldacchino, 2010; Royle, 2010).

Another insular negativity relates to resources. My paper on the Aran Islands in 1821 (Royle, 1983) is a good enough example of the frequent problem of resource availability in a small island setting. The Aran islanders had to engage in occupational plurality. The 1821 census showed them fishing, sealing, farming, kelpmaking (burning seaweed, part of an initial processing that led to the production of iodine and which was important for generating cash to pay the rent), plus some activities that certainly took place but were not recorded on census forms such as smuggling, gathering wrack (material washed onto the

beaches), and illegally distilling the famous Irish spirit, *poteen*: in sum, ‘anything a shilling can be made from’ as the local phrase put it. The islanders were also forced to produce the very medium for the growth of their crops, what was known as ‘landmaking’, developing artificial soils, likened to plaggen soils, on their islands’ bare limestone pavement. This was done at immense effort by filling up the cracks with stones and, placing sand and seaweed layers topped with soil brought over from the mainland on the rock surface. Loose limestone rocks were used to build the islands’ characteristic drystone walls, partly to consume them, taking them away from the soil; partly, too, to protect the laboriously produced artificial soils from wind erosion on the treeless islands ([Figure 3](#)).

[Figure 3](#): Walls on Inisheer, Aran Islands (*photo*: Stephen A. Royle)



An alternative island economic strategy is to scale up production to maximize economies of scale, one example being the production of flax to make string on St Helena from 1907-1965, but when that industry collapsed, through a lack of demand for string in face of cheaper and more convenient products such as plastic twine and elastic bands, so did the island’s economy. All the eggs were in the one basket: the basket fell. A more recent case comes from the St Helena dependency of Tristan da Cunha, mightily troubled economically in the early 21st century when the processing of its one export, crayfish, was affected when the fish factory burnt down. Disease in situations of monoculture is another risk, whilst, additionally, many islands are in environmentally vulnerable areas, facing threats from volcano, hurricane, typhoon and tsunami, to say nothing of sea level rise associated with climate change, which is already impacting some atolls.

Island producers with usually only small outputs are price takers not price makers: better then to try to secure a niche market to at least ensure that the tiny production maximizes returns. St Helena produces no string any more but it does sell off the island some coffee, possibly the third most expensive brew in the world. More famous island niche products are the expensive Scotch malt whiskies from Islay and its neighbour, Jura. Laphroaig from Islay is my own favourite.

Small islands limit the opportunities available to their population. Often there is a high degree of government employment, whilst the private sector can be dominated by a relatively large multi-sectoral company, such as the Falkland Islands Company, whose headquarters building dominates the town of Stanley today, just as it did a century earlier. On Majuro, capital of the Marshall Islands, the Gibson's company dominates; on St Helena, it is Solomons. I did some research with school children on St Helena and asked about their ambitions. Those whose answers were not lost in fantasy expected to work for the government or Solomons; no one expected to set up one's own business. One young woman, learning from me about her island's coffee production, was 'gobsmacked that we can produce anything for ourselves' (Royle, 1992).

Small islands are expensive to run regarding public services such as medicine, justice and education. For services provided on-island, equipment and staff, from x-ray machines in the hospital to prison guards, may not be employed at full capacity because of limited demand. Services brought in peripatetically are expensive because of the need to pay for the travel and accommodation of the visiting specialists. The third option of sending islanders away to avail of services has a cost penalty, which may operate to limit opportunity and life chances. We have had students from the Falkland Islands here at Queen's; it was quite an expensive journey home during the vacations.

Given this extensive range of problems it is no wonder that residents of the difficult and derided places that are small islands leave. Think of the migration streams from the Caribbean to the UK after the Second World War. More recently, St Helena has lost about a quarter of its population within a few years of the repeal of the hated *British Nationality Act* of 1981 which had restricted the islanders' right of abode in their colonial homeland of the UK. In archipelagic states, such as the Marshall Islands and Kiribati in the Pacific, people leave the outer islands causing decline, and crowd into the capital islands of Majuro and South Tarawa respectively, causing population pressure there, a lose-lose situation. A cycle of decline can set in. As people leave, an island becomes ever less attractive for those still there until, in the limiting case, all leave and the island is abandoned. About 75% of the offshore islands around Ireland have been abandoned since 1841, many of them because of the potato famine later in the 1840s, but others much later as their residents perceived greater opportunities elsewhere. In what I think has been one of my better publications (Royle, 1999b), I analysed emigration from the Irish islands using the islanders' voice as expressed in the surprising range and quality of autobiographies from the Irish island realm, principally the three masterpieces from Great Blasket Island (O'Crohan, 1929; O'Sullivan, 1933; Sayers 1936). The culture these writers described is cherished: there is a heritage centre for the island, Ionad an Bhlascaoid Mhóir, in Dunquin, County Kerry; and the island is featured on the Central Bank of Ireland's £20 note in the

days before Ireland took to the Euro. However, the culture itself is dead, destroyed by emigration, leading to the final indignity of the last boat, sent out to collect the few remaining island hold-outs in 1953, including Peig Sayers, who died on the mainland in 1958. ‘Twould be a bad place that wouldn’t be better for you than this dreadful rock’ she had written despairingly (1936). The population of the Republic of Ireland (or the 26 of 32 Irish counties that became the Republic in 1921) fell from the 1840s until 1961; that for the islands of the Republic of Ireland fell until 2002 with, as stated, most of the islands losing their population, although those with a fixed link and, thus, better accessibility, lost fewer of their people (Royle, 2007b). However, in the last couple of censuses there has been something of a transformation. Some islands, such as Gola and Great Blasket itself, have recorded a population on census night. It cannot be claimed that this is a return of traditional island communities, more likely this represented people taking an early holiday in restored cottages, but at least the decline in Irish offshore island population that had lasted 160 years has been halted, for the number of those living on the offshore islands rose between 2002 and 2006.

‘From Marginality to Resurgence’

This heading was the title of a conference on islands held at Macquarie University, Sydney in 2008 at which I was invited to speak. My talk (Royle, 2008) focused on the Irish islands as an example of a more widespread recent trend that sees islands and the values and opportunities they represent cherished more in the present than they were in the past. This can be exemplified by two recent examples from Ireland. Spike Island in County Cork was a British military base, which was retained by the British until 1938 as one of the treaty ports whose sovereignty was not transferred in 1921. From 1847 the British had also used the island as a prison and this function was retained by the Irish state until 2004 when the Victorian fort in which the prison was housed was deemed to be unfit for use. The state’s prison service to which the island then belonged planned to build a modern prison on the site. However, local conservation and tourism interests proposed instead to turn the island into a heritage centre to commemorate the island’s architecture and its place in Irish political history, some noted nationalist figures having been imprisoned there by the British. I was part of a pressure group which held a conference in the local town of Cobh. We made a pilgrimage out to Spike Island, attempting to land but knowing full well that we would not be permitted to do so by the state’s security personnel who were guarding the empty island. Our purpose was served when we made page 9 of the *Cork Examiner*: ‘Noted academics forbidden to land on Spike Island’ was the headline. Page 9 was not an impressive location, but I did cherish being ‘noted’. I was convinced that our campaign would fail, islands have always been suitable locations for prisons and there were no locals to be disturbed by the building or operation of a new correctional facility. To my surprise, we won. Search for Spike Island on a browser now and up comes the East Cork Tourism webpage (www.eastcorktourism.com) with a notice that regarding Spike Island ‘Moves are afoot to ensure that this unique heritage site is preserved for future generations to enjoy’.

A second case is that of Mutton Island, a flat, treeless island of 75 ha in County Clare that had been abandoned in 1948 (Figure 4). It is now for sale at €1m, which comes to €13,333

per ha, not far short of the value of good agricultural land in the county and in excess of the cost of grazing land. Mutton Island is hardly a convenient place on which to establish an agricultural enterprise so there is more to it than that in its price, its island location now attracts a premium, the island as a geographical setting has its own value. Islands, then, far from being derided may, after all, be special places.

Figure 4: Mutton Island (*photo:* Stephen A. Royle)



Islands always had potential utility. Some are strategic, for example, perhaps forming a stable platform for military or communications activities: Bermuda was the British base for the attack on the White House in 1812; Tinian Island in the Northern Marianas the US base from which to drop atom bombs on Japan in 1945. Ascension Island in the South Atlantic has been occupied solely because of its strategic utility. It was first annexed by the British in 1815 to deny its use to the French when Napoleon was imprisoned on the next island south, St Helena. It remained a naval base until after World War I and in World War II returned to a military role when the Americans built an airfield there: the only landing place for a considerable distance; ‘if I don’t make Ascension, my wife gets a pension’, was a phrase apparently heard amongst fliers at the time. Ascension was also a landing place and junction for submarine cables crossing the Atlantic, from as early as 1899. Indeed, the Eastern Telegraph Company remained on Ascension after the British military withdrawal to manage the communications system. The local company manager was made a magistrate and acted as colonial representative (Royle, 2004b). The company was replaced as ruler by the British military to facilitate the American base in World War II; the island, which remains British as a dependency of St Helena, retains an American presence with an airfield and many communications devices studded on its volcanic landscape. Civilian communication companies, such as the BBC and Cable and Wireless, remain. There is also

a tracking station for the European Space Agency site in Kourou, French Guiana: for a vital period shortly after take-off, the launches are monitored from this strategic spot in the south Atlantic.

Island utility might also play on isolation: there were island lazarettos on Spinalonga off Crete and Mezzu Mare off Corsica used to house lepers. The employment of islands as prisons is exemplified by better known examples than Spike Island. Islands can be good locations for dangerous activities or experiments: Gruinard in the Scottish Hebrides was used to field test an experimental environmental release of anthrax in 1942; it was declared safe only in 1990. The use of Pacific atolls as sites for nuclear weapons testing is well known. The Germans produced their V2 rockets on the isolated Usedom towards the end of the Second World War. After that war, the British retained the German island of Helgoland to use as a bombing range, handing back the shattered rock only in the 1950s, when its settlement was rebuilt and the island repopulated.

Islands may have a cultural significance as reservoirs of traditional languages or practices: the Irish and Scottish varieties of Gaelic are stronger in some of their island fastnesses than in their respective mainlands; Cormorant Island, better known by its town's name, Alert Bay, in British Columbia, is the home of the 'Namgis First Nation; on my visit there in 2008, I was privileged to see a cedar totem pole being carved. Perhaps islands, then, are special places: thousands go to Robben Island to try and capture the indomitable spirit of Nelson Mandela, who was held there for so long. Off Scotland, there are islands such as Eigg and Gigha whose residents worked for years to build up sufficient momentum, and cash, to prise their islands from the clutches of foreign landlords. Furthermore, islands have long been places of social experimentation either in theory—back to the early 16th century with Sir Thomas More's original *Utopia*, which was set on an island—or reality. The first civilian occupation of Tristan da Cunha by William Glass and some others from 1817 was as an economy known as the 'Firm', a communal sealing business in which all had equal shares (Royle, 1999c).

The small scale and boundedness of islands are characteristics which donate, in the modern world, that valuable asset of privacy: a private island is, after all, the ultimate gated community. Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin business empire, and the reclusive Barclay brothers, owners of Britain's *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, are only two of the most famous examples of rich people having private islands; Branson's Necker Island is in the British Virgin Islands; the Barclay brothers live on Brecqhou in the Channel Islands. A company called Vladi Private Islands (www.vladi-private-islands.de) deals in insular real estate; there is a magazine and website (www.privateislandsmag.com) entitled *Private Islands* which cater to the lifestyle of the 'independent, adventurous personality' who occupies such places. Tastefully, the word 'wealthy' is not used.

Few can buy their own island but many can buy property on suitable islands. The sea now is not a barrier; rather, it has become a paddling pool and access to it may help islands to grow, or be repopulated. 'Come live on the island' is a slogan of a property developer erecting houses on Inchydoney, another island in County Cork. Inchidoney has a fixed link, and high speed broadband access: the traditional island negativity of poor

communications need no longer apply. These houses will be bought by those who do not have to earn a living from traditional island resources. Indeed, traditional resources may no longer be particularly significant. Tory Island, County Donegal in the northwest of Ireland used to support its people through agriculture and fishing. A visit now will reveal the local fishing enterprise to be little more than hobby fishing, with some focus on lobsters. Indeed the BBC's correspondent who called in 2005 reported with disappointment that the fish for sale in the island's restaurant tended to have come over on the ferry rather than have been plucked from the island's waters. A stroll around Tory will reveal evidence of only a few sheep; the island's peat resources, once used as a fuel, have long since been consumed. Yet there has been much investment in recent years; the stroll will be past the new health centre, the hotel, the new shop; it will pass by new private and public housing; the harbour has been extended. Some of this investment has been from the local authority, the state or, in the case of the harbour, from the European Union. Particularly symbolic are the council houses, publicly-subsidised housing, for in the 1980s when the abandonment of Tory seemed likely, such housing for islanders was being erected on the mainland. However, in that decade, led by secretaries of some of the island co-operatives who had realised that as offshore specks belonging to large county councils they had little power, an islands' pressure group was formed (Royle, 1986). Now called Comhdháil Oileáin na h'Éireann (the Irish Islands Federation in English) (www.oileain.ie), one of its most significant achievements has been to persuade the Irish Government to task a ministry with general oversight of the islands as a group. That role is now carried out by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; a recasting of the earlier and more pleasingly named Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

By contrast, some of the investment on Tory is private, including the hotel, which provides accommodation, the restaurant and a venue for gatherings. This is important, for much of the island's economy is now focused upon tourism. Some come for the tranquility and the antiquities, including a Celtic round tower. Others are attracted by the culture: the Irish language, the traditional music and dance, the *craic*, that untranslatable Irish word which connotes warm fellowship and good times. Islanders build on this and arrange festivals, too. When I was last on Tory, there was a rock 'n roll festival, earlier there had been an islands film festival. Others come for another form of culture, the painting, namely the Tory School of Primitive Art. This was established by an English artist, Derek Hill, who used to visit Tory each year to paint. An islander, James Dixon, observing Hill at work, thought it didn't look hard to do and was promptly furnished with equipment and invited to have a go himself. From that encounter, the School of Primitive Art was established and some of today's practitioners are famous, such as Anton Meenan and Patsy Dan Rogers—who holds the honorific title of *Rí an Oileain*, King of Tory. The advertising of the Tory Island Ferry Company makes as much of the school of painting as it does of the island's traditional Gaelic culture (www.toryislandferry.com).

In sum, there has been a change in attitude, from both islanders and authorities and this includes scholarship. The last can be exemplified by the re-launch of the Clare Island Survey. The original survey was run by the Royal Irish Academy from 1909-1911 and studied, in exhaustive detail, the bounded place's zoology, botany, archaeology and geology in an antiquarian way. It was re-launched by the Academy in 1990

(www.ria.ie/Our-Work/Research/NSCI.aspx), ‘to use skills and scientific methods to link the rich cultural heritage of Clare Island with its people’ (www.clareisland.info/Heritage/surveys.htm), a telling change of approach. However, not all the islands’ people necessarily buy into this new interest in them. I was, quite properly, yelled at on Clare Island by a sheep farmer, whose photograph I had taken without permission; it was my camera and what it stood for that represented the lifeblood of the island now, rather than his sheep. Perhaps that was why he shouted.

Scientific interest in certain aspects of islands has a long heritage. One need only mention Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace for the biological sciences, the latter even calling one of his major publications, *Island Life* (1881). Wallace, perhaps more than Darwin, is regarded as a pioneer in biogeography, a line that can be traced forwards to the significant work of Robert MacArthur and Edward Wilson (1967) in their equilibrium theory of island biogeography. This predicts the number of species that will exist over time on a newly created island, ideas applied now to island-like situations. Islands remain important for their flora and fauna. Everybody knows the story of Mauritius and the dodo, and there are many other examples. Tiny, isolated St Helena has or had more than 60 endemic plants including the she cabbage (*Lachanodes arborea*) thought to be extinct until rediscovered by George Benjamin and now growing in his arboretum. It was a joy for me to be taken round St Helena by Benjamin to see his arboretum and some of the endemics in the wild.

Other disciplines grew up with islands, such as social anthropology with Mead’s books on Samoa and New Guinea (1928; 1930) and Malinowski’s studies in Melanesia (1929). And where would literature be without the ability to use small islands as settings in which to limit and isolate the cast and/or to permit island exoticism to contribute to the story. Significant island authors down the centuries include Daniel Defoe with *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), forerunner of so many derivative works that they are categorised as ‘robinsonades’; Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883) (which just does not work as well under its projected title, *The Sea Cook*); and William Golding’s dystopian *Lord of the Flies* (1954).

Island Studies

This growing appreciation for the contribution islands can make to both culture and science and a changing attitude towards island heritages began to be formalised from the 1980s with the growth and development of what is now the multidisciplinary field of island studies. I taught an early course with that title at a summer school at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada in 1991, as that university’s Institute of Island Studies began its journey towards the international centre it is today. Ideas developed there and in my article, ‘A Human Geography of Islands’ (Royle, 1989b) were expressed at book length in my *A Geography of Islands: Small Island Insularity* in 2001. There have been many special issues of journals devoted to islands, especially in geography (Baldacchino, 2004a, 2005; Baldacchino & Royle, 2010; Clark & Tsai, 2003; Dodds & Royle, 2003; Gough *et al.*, 2010). There are now two dedicated academic journals: *Island Studies Journal*, which started publication in 2006 under the editorial guidance of Godfrey

Baldacchino, Canada Research Chair (Island Studies) at the University of Prince Edward Island and *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, edited by Philip Hayward of Southern Cross University in Australia. UNESCO sponsors the popular *Insula: International Journal of Island Affairs*. There are two international associations. ISISA, the International Small Islands Studies Association, formalised at a meeting in Okinawa in 1994, can be traced back to the first Islands of the World Conference on Vancouver Island in 1986. I was present on both occasions and look forward to attending Islands of the World XI on Bornholm in Denmark in August 2010. SICRI, the Small Islands Cultures Research Initiative, began in 2004; it holds annual meetings, last year on Sado Island, Japan; this year on Guernsey. Geographers play a key role in island studies work, recognised by the International Geographical Union's Commission on Islands, the inaugural meeting of which took place on Taiwan in 2007, with field trips to the Penghu Islands. We next meet on Ven Island in Sweden, straight after the ISISA meeting on Bornholm. There is even that mark of a subject's maturity: an island studies reader, *A World of Islands* (Baldacchino, 2007). Godfrey Baldacchino (2004b), in an echo of Margaret Mead's Samoa title, has declared the 'coming of age of island studies'.

'Small Places like St Helena have Big Questions to ask'

I want to come back to my own title in the concluding section of this lecture: 'Small Places like St Helena have big questions to ask'. This is a quote from an email I received recently from Basil George, formerly the Chief Education Officer of St Helena. I have a great fondness for St Helena. I am often asked, including once on the BBC World Service: 'what is your favourite island?' I answered the BBC as I always do, with 'St Helena'. It is one of the places where the impact of insularity looms largest and when I first became interested in island studies I determined to go there. I managed this in 1990, succoured by a then worthwhile grant of £100 from the Commonwealth Geographical Bureau. I wrote a good deal about the island in the 1990s (Royle, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1995b, 1995c, 1997a, 1997b, 1998; Royle & Cross, 1996) sufficient to earn me immortality in that the *Bradt Guide to St Helena* (Steiner, 2002) says: 'A geographer, Stephen Royle, has also published extensively on St Helena in the last 15 years'. That is it, there is no reference to any of the works, nor is there any use made of them, there is just this statement, quite uselessly standing alone. More recently, St Helena was the focus my book *The Company's Island: St Helena, Company Colonies and the Colonial Endeavour* (Royle, 2007c) and I am now going to use material from the 17th century collected for that book to illustrate the concepts of islandness, as it would be my contention that the general constraints work in any place and at any period.¹

St Helena was discovered by the Portuguese but not settled, and the English East India Company (EIC) annexed the island in 1659 under Governor John Dutton, who took down a settlement party and acquired African slaves en route. The island was fortified and garrisoned to deny its use to any others and the EIC used it as a rendezvous for company ships returning from Asia, which would gather at the island before venturing north in convoy for mutual protection, given the almost constant warfare in Europe during that

¹ References to the original documents from which the quotes are taken can be found in *The Company's Island*; I have not listed them individually here.

century. St Helena was also of use for refreshment and supplied company ships with fresh food and, even more importantly, water. St Helena was supported, if reluctantly, by the EIC but required to produce food for its own population and to revictual the company ships. To this end, the EIC needed to establish a civilian, self-replicating, agricultural population of freeholders or ‘planters’ and a program of migration was established. The East India Company in London was keen to see a near-utopian community established on their new possession, in response to the dreadful experiences of life in mid-17th century England, devastated by civil war and plague. There was much theoretical examination of utopias at this period and settling the island was a chance for practical expression; islands have often been used in this way, as we saw. Early St Helena was planned on democratic lines: it was to be a land owning, tax paying society in a colony that brought profit to the company. The second governor, Robert Stringer, John Dutton’s second-in-command, was already on St Helena when commissioned in 1660. He was instructed that six persons were to be members of the council, two appointed by him, but the majority, four, appointed by the freeholders. If Stringer was dead when these instructions arrived—not that unlikely given 17th century death rates and the length of time it took to communicate with the South Atlantic at this period—freeholders were to elect ‘some able, honest person amongst themselves to bee their governour’. There were to be occasional mass meetings, General Courts, held in the Market House; church wardens and highway overseers were elected by a franchise where each farm (called a plantation) had one vote, regardless of its size. Black Africans brought over from the continent or the Cape Verde Islands were to be ‘lusty’ and ‘young’ and also volunteers: ‘such as will voluntarily and without compulsion sail in ye ship’. They were at first not even called slaves. Indeed, significant social goods were to be made available for them for ‘Our Negroes’ were to be taught Christianity, and, if suitable, might even be baptised. Their children, like European children, were to be educated by the company. In short, all were to ‘live together in love and amity’ for ‘the best waie for people to live comfortably and go more chearfully about their business’ would be for five or six to ‘joyne ... together that each may be helpful and an assistant to the other’.

In the book, I describe these plans as forming a ‘paper utopia’, one that did not really escape from the page and which, like paper itself, could be easily crumpled and torn. For the utopian ideals set forward by the learned men in the East India Company boardroom in London bumped against island realities, islandness. One problem was of getting decent staff to live in such a tiny, remote place:

- The third governor, Richard Coney (1669-72), was dismissed:
 - ‘Wee gave you instructions to manage ... with the advice and consent of ye Councill’. He had not.
 - He was to arrange ‘an equal distribution of what we have appointed to ye inhabitants for their encouragement’. He did not.
 - There was a suspicion that he would betray St Helena to the Dutch.

- The fourth governor, Anthony Beal (1672-73), did lose St Helena to the Dutch invasion of 1673 amidst accusations that he did not fight. He did not.
- The fifth governor, Gregory Field (1674-78), was sacked for ‘ill-living’.
- The sixth governor, John Blackmore (1678-90), turned guns on civilians in an insurrection in 1684, which brought much adverse publicity for the EIC.
- The seventh governor, Joshua Johnson (1690-93), was assassinated by members of his own garrison, who stole the island’s treasure, hijacked a ship and sailed away.
- The ninth governor, Stephen Poirier (1697-1707), was a Huguenot refugee sent originally to grow vines and only became governor after the assassination of Johnson and the early death of the eighth governor, Richard Keeling. Poirier was completely inept, and ignored all instructions, especially on military matters. He was universally hated as he was French.

The chaplains were worse: with one exception, being drunks or rebels, several were mentally unstable. They never gave leadership or guidance; few bothered to attend church.

A second problem was that of the restricted resources and economic opportunities of the small island. The EIC was desperate that St Helena should produce a cash crop or other product to defray ‘the great charge in its keeping’ and constantly gave advice as to how this might be achieved. In addition to food crops, suggestions made during the 17th century were: aloes, betel nuts, brandy, cinnamon, cloves, Cyprus trees (for masts), goats’ wool, gum, indigo, iron, nitre, nutmeg, pepper, physic nuts, roses, rum, salt, saltpetre, sugarcane, tobacco and vines.

All failed and the EIC blamed the ‘vain, fantastical, licentious’ planters rather than acknowledge the reality of the insular problems of scale and isolation. The only cash crop ever produced in quantity for export from St Helena was in the 20th century when flax was grown to make string.

A third insular reality in the 17th century was St Helena’s powerlessness and vulnerability. The EIC was keen that its island not be taken by commercial or national rivals and made massive investments in fortifications from 1659 at a cost to other developments ([Figure 5](#)).

Figure 5: Plaque from East India Company's 1659 fort at St Helena (photo: Stephen A. Royle)



However, the island was lost to the Dutch in 1673, who landed, assisted by an islander, at a place without fortifications. The garrison fled, seemingly unwilling to risk death for the sake of the East India Company. An English naval squadron—‘wee having nothing better to doe’—regained the island a few months later, also landing at an unfortified place. The EIC, humiliated by having to ask the King for their island back, then had to repopulate it at considerable expense. Their attitude to St Helena now changed; utopianism was abandoned—‘too much pity spoils a Citty’ became the watchword.

St Helena continued as a company colony until 1834 when it was taken by the crown and it remains a United Kingdom Overseas Territory, one of those which are never likely to escape colonial oversight as it lacks the scale, never mind the resources, to progress to independence. St Helena remains massively handicapped by isolation. For those without their own vessel, it is presently accessible only by one heavily subsidised, government ship and must be one of the few remaining places in the world where travel times are measured in days: St Helena is two days away from the nearest land of Ascension Island and five days’ journey from Cape Town. As seen, some coffee is exported but only in tiny volumes; and its other product is fish, especially tuna, but these do not support the island and it remains heavily aid-dependent, its employment weighted towards government service and the one relatively large trading company, Solomons. With the recent regard for island life and heritage, St Helena could profit from tourism and the website of the company operating the government ship makes much of its attractions, including making a virtue of its drawback of isolation. Come to St Helena, it is: ‘tropical, welcoming, remote, spectacular and full of history’ (www.rms-st-helena.com). But the problem is that the ship cannot deliver enough visitors to make much difference to the island’s bleak economic situation. There is a long-standing plan to build an airport but the huge issues over capital and running costs have never been satisfactorily resolved and it may have been with something of relief that the British government seized upon the financial difficulties of the current recession to place the airport project on indefinite hold. Without an airport the

economy of St Helena will remain moribund; its society subject to massive emigration loss and the future of the island itself must be in some doubt. Basil George's big question is: how do we manage?

Islophilia

My inaugural lecture has wandered far from the Birmingham school playing field where it started almost as far from the sea as it is possible to be in England, into the world of islands. One colleague in the field wrote recently that 'I know island aficionados (males, of course) whose islophilia involves visiting as many islands as possible, ticking them off the list, and collecting the T-shirt to prove they have been there (King, 2009). Now, whilst it is true that I do keep a list of islands visited—668 at present—and have a cupboard full of T-shirts bearing island names, I think there must be more substance to my islophilia or I would have not be enabled to stand proudly before you this afternoon as Professor of Island Geography.

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