A Geography of Islands

Islands have always fascinated people. They often seem remote and mysterious, set between the continents on which most people live. Indeed, many people choose islands for their perfect holiday idyll. In practice, however, the everyday social and economic reality is often very different.

A Geography of Islands firstly examines the differing ways islands are formed. Despite the uniqueness of such islands in terms of shape, size, flora and fauna, and also their economic and developmental profiles, they all share certain characteristics and constraints imposed by their insularity. These present islands everywhere with a range of common problems. A Geography of Islands considers how their small scale, isolation, peripherality and often a lack of resources, has affected islands, in the present day and their past. It considers and discusses population issues, communications and services, island politics and new ways of making a living, especially tourism, found within contemporary island geography.

A Geography of Islands gives a comprehensive survey of ‘islandness’ and its defining features. Stephen A. Royle has visited and studied 320 islands in 50 countries in all the world’s oceans. It is full of up-to-date global case studies, from Okinawa to Inishbofin, and Hawaii to Crete. In the final chapter, all the themes are brought together in a case study of the Atlantic island of St Helena. It is well illustrated with the author’s own photographs and maps. This book will appeal to those studying islands as well as those with an interest in the topic, particularly those engaged in dealing with small island economies.

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   Small island insularity
   *Stephen A. Royle*

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   *James D. Sidaway*
A Geography of Islands
Small island insularity

Stephen A. Royle
To Katy, Alex and Ian,
for all those times I was away ‘islanding’
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1 Islands
Dreams and realities

Introduction
There are hundreds of thousands of islands. They are found in every sea and ocean and display considerable ranges of scale, resource availability, economic opportunities and levels of development (Figures 1.1–1.6). Yet it is this book’s intention to show that, despite such wide distribution and variations, islands everywhere are subject to the impact of a common range of constraints imposed because of their very insularity. Such constraints—remoteness, smallness (absolute and/or relative), isolation, peripherality, etc.—can also affect, singly or together, certain mainland areas, but they are more notable in their effect on the bounded landmasses that are islands. The impact of insularity is, of course, usually more significant on small islands. Thus this book does not deal with islands of the scale of Great Britain, Honshu or Java. Instead, it focuses on smaller places, hence its subtitle: ‘small island insularity’.

The effects of insularity are universal and, thus, this book has a global scope. However, it makes no attempt to be a catalogue of the world’s islands. Instead it adopts a thematic approach. This opening chapter serves as a general introduction to the study of islands, dealing first with the pragmatic issues of where they may be found and how many there are, and what counts as an island anyway. It then considers the concept of islands and how this has entrained popular and artistic imagination, leading into a discussion of the ‘island of dreams’ conception. The chapter then returns to the real world by considering the use of islands and the concept of islandness in science, before concluding with a section on islands and reality—small island life is often at some remove from any expression of the island of dreams.

Most of the book is concerned with issues that fall within the scope of human geography, but it is vital that some consideration is given to the physical basis on which this human geography operates. Therefore Chapter 2 deals with the physical geography of islands. Their ranges of location and scale suggest that islands result from a great variety of processes of formation. Islands display a considerable range of habitats, too, although there are some commonalities brought about by insularity, such as a restricted variety of species.
It is the author’s contention that islands often share certain characteristics in social, economic and political spheres which are brought about simply by their being islands, and this conception is detailed in Chapter 3, which brings the introductory section of the book to an end.

Chapter 4 is a consideration of how islands were affected by their shared characteristics in historical periods when small islands were dependent on
domestic resources to an extent not always seen today. Chapter 5 considers the way in which islands’ peoples and population have been affected by their insularity. This may be in terms of out-migration, which has seen islands in the limiting case being completely abandoned. Elsewhere there is in-migration, which has bequeathed islands such as Mauritius, Trinidad and Fiji an ethnically diverse and divided population. This can, sometimes, cause problems of
A geography of islands otherness, with an impact on occasion upon social stability. One of the common problems facing islands is the small scale of their societies and economies, and these topics are explored in Chapter 6. Small places such as islands are usually powerless in political terms and the results of the unequal contestation between islands and outside forces are discussed in Chapter 7, along with a consideration of the politics of small islands.

Chapter 8 has an economic theme and details how a living is to be made on small islands in the contemporary world. Chapter 9 reports on a near universal development strategy, the adoption of tourism, part of which is predicated upon the innate romance and mystery of islands, the ‘island of dreams’ idea, reflecting back to this opening chapter.

Throughout the book, reference will be made to processes which will be shown to occur on islands throughout the world; the emphasis will be on the process and its application and not on the place. To conclude, it seemed logical to focus on one place instead, which exemplifies in depth all the processes.

Figure 1.4 Islands of the Indian Ocean
operating. Therefore the final chapter, Chapter 10, is not simply a repetition in summary form of what has gone before. Instead it concludes this book’s consideration of ‘small island insularity’ by detailing its impact upon one such small island, St Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean.
Islands: where and how many?

Before the journey through the geography of the world’s islands can begin, we should first consider the basic facts—where the islands are and how many there are of them. The book concentrates on offshore islands, but the issues of insularity discussed will also apply to continental islands situated in lakes and rivers (see, for example, Gutsche and Bisaillon, 1999).
It seems sure that the presence of all of the world’s islands has now been noted. In earlier eras, voyages of discovery would sometimes end with intrepid mariners bringing back details of new islands. Many such ‘discoveries’ were that only in European terms, of course. This author attended the opening of a conference on islands held in Jamaica in 1992 when the (European) chair made a reference to it being 500 years since Columbus had ‘discovered’ the West Indies. The chair was promptly interrupted by a high-ranking official from the University of the West Indies who pointed out with vigour that there were many people fully aware of the existence of these islands long before Columbus. However, the European voyages of exploration included true discoveries of islands, which were uninhabited, some not known to humankind before. Some of these islands were of considerable significance, such as Mauritius and Réunion in the Indian Ocean.

Some discoveries were wrongly charted, some claims, through ignorance or mendacity, were not actually true and there were a number of completely apocryphal islands that appeared on maps and charts. These included the three Aurora Islands, supposedly between the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, first reported by the Spanish ship *Aurora* in 1762, found again by the same ship in 1774, by which time another Spanish captain, of the *San Miguel*, had charted their location as 52°37’S 47°49’W. In 1794 the Spanish corvette, *Atrevida*, even described the islands in detail, though the captain did not attempt a landing. Perhaps this was sensible, for it seems that trying to step ashore on the Auroras may have caused him to get wet, for they do not actually exist. James Weddell searched for them in 1820 as part of his Antarctic explorations. American sealer Benjamin Morrell also failed to find them in 1822, as indeed did everybody else who looked, including the armchair geographers, for these were the islands searched for by the eponymous character in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). There was just one disbelieved sighting of five islands in the approximate area in 1856. The islands were no longer charted after about 1870. Ramsey postulates that they may have been icebergs improbably appearing as land in similar locations at a succession of sightings; that they may have been mismeasured sightings of the Shag Rocks, actually 53°S 43°W and much smaller, or perhaps they had existed but sank. He dismisses this last explanation as for the ‘romantically minded’ and has to conclude that the non-existence of the Aurora Islands is one of the ‘unsolved mysteries of the sea’ (1972, p. 80). However, volcanic islands have certainly disappeared within recent times, including Graham Island or Ferdinandea, south of Sicily, which having been seen in 10 BC, made a brief reappearance for a few months in 1831.

Ramsey goes on to detail the cases of a number of other either misplaced or entirely mythical islands, some given early cartographic recognition thanks to wishful thinking or superstition, many mythical islands being associated with enchantment or with the devil. Sometimes discoveries of islands were kept secret for strategic reasons, thus the Portuguese kept the existence of uninhabited St Helena in the Atlantic to themselves after finding it in 1502 in
order to have sole use of its benefits for restocking provisions. This island was subsequently ‘discovered’ again, independently, by other European voyagers. Not every island is necessarily precisely charted yet. For example, the island of Annobon (or Pagalu), a distant, offshore part of Equatorial Guinea is shown on British Admiralty chart 1595 published as recently as March 1995, with notes recording that the coastline and topography are derived from a map of 1913. Its position, though, is ‘based on a ship’s report of 1991’, a quaint throwback to the earlier voyages of exploration. Chart 1595 also bears the rather chilling warning that ‘mariners should exercise extreme caution when navigating in the vicinity’.

All existing islands might be known about now, but nature occasionally adds new islands to the list, usually through volcanic activity. Examples include Surtsey off Iceland in 1963; New Island in the inner bay of Deception Island in the South Shetlands which appeared in 1970 (Reynolds, 1995), an island off Iwo Jima in 1986 and a new volcanic island which emerged of the Solomon Islands in May 2000, captured on film by visiting geologists. Ferdinandea’s peak is only eight metres below the Mediterranean and it could well emerge again if volcanic activity were to resume.

Although the existence of every island is known, it is not clear how many islands there are in the world. This seems odd, since surely anybody with access to a very comprehensive map repository, sufficient time and endless patience could simply count them. The problem is not one of location, however, but of definition, for it depends on what is counted as an island. At the large end of the scale, there is no problem. Australia at 7,686,843 km² is generally accepted as being a continent, which makes Greenland at 2,175,600 km² the world’s largest island. The problem of definition comes at the other end of the scale. The basic dictionary definition of an island being a ‘piece of land surrounded by water’ (Pocket Oxford Dictionary) has the merit of being both simple to apply and comprehensive, but has limited utility in circumstances when some concept of scale or function is needed. A rock in the sea is a piece of land surrounded by water, but ‘rock’ has a separate definition in the dictionary as ‘a mass of this [i.e. a solid part of the earth’s crust] standing up into the air or water’, so is a rock an island? And does an island have to be surrounded by sea at all times? Are periodic islands such as Lindisfarne off northeastern England or Mont St Michel off northwest France to be counted? The UK Hydrographic Office would say not, for to them only if the land is completely surrounded by water at high tide does it become an island.

Can an island graduate to become at least functionally an indistinguishable part of the mainland? Is Manhattan Island in New York in any real sense other than as an historical curiosity or through geographical pedantry still an island, given its myriad connections and complete integration with the surrounding mainland? Perhaps not, but nearby its less well-connected fellow City of New York Borough, Staten Island presumably is. Should Canada’s province of Prince Edward Island have renamed itself Prince Edward Peninsular in 1997 when the Confederation Bridge opened to join it to New Brunswick?
The island of Mandø off the Jutland Peninsular of Denmark, which markets itself to tourists as being where ‘der er meget mer’ (where the land meets the sea), is accessible by specially adapted road vehicles with large wheels that make it across the shallow coastal waters. Is Mandø thus an island? To the Vikings in the Dark Ages it presumably would not have been, for to them an island was only accepted as such if the passage between it and the mainland was navigable by a ship with its rudder in place. The Scottish census of 1861 defined an island as such only if it was inhabited and had sufficient pasturage to support at least one sheep (King, 1993). Thus an island had a value and a status; smaller places were of no account and were not regarded as islands. Often islands have had to be inhabited or at least landed upon to be regarded as having passed a functional or legal threshold to be granted some proper title. In sum, there is no sufficient definition of an island except in the ‘land surrounded by water’ sense and note that the dictionary also allows for ‘isle’ and ‘islet’ to be ‘small islands’, which further complicates matters. So our endlessly patient researcher in the map repository would end with a list of hundreds of thousands of pieces of land, all islands in the strict dictionary sense but many better regarded as isles, islets or rocks.

Discussion of what is an island and where islands are is not necessarily as arcane as it might seem; the Scottish idea of a functional definition makes that clear. Further, the International Convention on the Law of the Sea does not permit exclusive economic zones being awarded to rocks that cannot sustain habitation. Rockall is an outcrop of just 74 m² in the Atlantic, 461 km west of mainland western Scotland and 430 km north of northwest Ireland. To our Scots, it would not be an island, this bare crag having in itself no functional use. However, it was landed upon in 1955 by British marines lowered by helicopter to claim title for the UK, rather than remaining a rock unable to sustain habitation in international waters. Rockall was formally added to Scotland by An Act to make provision for the incorporation of that part of Her Majesty’s Dominions known as the island of Rockall into that part of the United Kingdom known as Scotland, or the Rockall Act of 1972. In 1975 a former Special Forces soldier stayed on the rock for 40 days, further to establish British sovereignty. The contestation over Rockall relates not to the merits of the outcrop itself: if Rockall was a few hundred metres rather than a few hundred kilometres off the Scottish or Irish coast its presence would barely be remarked upon and nobody would need to land or stay on it. But if, 461 km from mainland Scotland, it is accepted internationally as a Scottish island, an integral, if very distant part of the UK, that country can claim rights to territorial waters and sea bed resources, and face down rival claims of ownership from Denmark, Iceland and Ireland. In 1974 the UK made just such a designation over 134,680 km² of continental shelf around Rockall. This area might well contain hydrocarbons—30 oil companies are interested in the possibilities. The environmental group, Greenpeace, do not wish to see oil exploration extended to this sector of the Atlantic—and, to protest against any potential exploitation, themselves occupied Rockall in June 1997 with three men living
in a high-tech, solar-powered, survival capsule. By 2 July 1997 Greenpeace had lived on Rockall longer than anybody else, and claimed sovereignty of what they declared to be ‘Waveland’. Greenpeace stated that they did not want to own Rockall, but Deputy Executive Director, Chris Rose said:

Four nations want the oil around Rockall. We do not recognise their right to develop it. We have told Tony Blair [the British Prime Minister] that we don’t want Rockall itself but that the oil should be set aside for the common good. We are borrowing it until it is freed from the threat of development.

(Greenpeace press release, 16 June 1997)

The Rockall case points up the difficulties of deciding what constitutes an island, as well as serving as one case of many in the world where islands/rocks are in disputed ownership, a theme that will be explored in Chapter 7. For current purposes it is sufficient to say that, whilst islands start at the large end with Greenland, there is no meaningful threshold at the small end. Take the example of French Polynesia. The local tourist board states that there are 115 islands in the territory’s five archipelagoes, but that is counting each high island and atoll as a single island. However, atolls are broken up into different areas of land and if each separate ‘area of land surrounded by water’ were to be counted then French Polynesia has many thousands of islands. For example, tiny Tetiaroa atoll, one of the 115 islands, has, according to the same tourist board, 13 islets, although its accompanying map records 18 separate pieces of land. The 1:100,000 map of the Society Islands published by the Institute Geographique National has only 14 pieces of land for Tetiaroa. So does Tetiaroa count as one, 13, 14 or 18 islands? Also in the Society archipelago is mighty Tahiti, which at 1042 km² and reaching 2235 m is a ‘high island’ (i.e. with a mountain and fringing reef, as opposed to an atoll which has no mountain, just a reef (see Chapter 2)). There are also 13 motus, or dry areas on its fringing reef identified on the IGN map. Two of these, Motu Uta and Motu Tahiri have been incorporated by reclamation into the main island as part of the port at Papeete and part of the airport at Faaa respectively, so a case could be made for Tahiti to be one island or 14 islands or 12 islands. In functional terms it is Tahiti, one island; in geomorphological terms it may not be one island but is one system, the high island and its reef. To the west of Tahiti there is a single reef system enclosing two high islands, Tahaa and Taiatea: one system, two islands, or counting motus and detached parts of the two high islands, 47 islands. Logic says Tahiti is one island not 14; that Tahaa and Taiatea are two islands, not 47. However, were these places atolls—and in geological time this will happen to these high islands as it has done to others—then their motus, discounted now, would have to be regarded as islands in their own right. Those around former Tahaa and Taiatea would form just one atoll, one island or 40 plus islands. All that can be stated authoritatively is that we cannot state authoritatively how many islands there are.

Neither do we know how many islanders there are. Even if there were an
agreed standard list of islands, it would still not be known how many inhabitants they had. This is because census statistics are by no means always presented in a way that identifies precisely those living on islands, especially small islands that often get collated into mainland administrative areas. Also small islands, especially, are often subject to periodic and seasonal swings in their population totals and thus their census population would reveal only one of a number of realities about their population size. Thus, it can only be estimated how many islanders there are in the world. The author once suggested that perhaps 9–10 per cent of the world’s population live on islands, many in the four large insular nations of the UK, Japan, the Philippines and Indonesia (Royle, 1989). What cannot be challenged is that islands constitute an important part of the world’s society and ecumene, as this book will demonstrate.

The concept of islands

In addition to their actual role in the world’s economy and ecumene, islands have also played a part in human culture. The thought or concept of islands has informed literary, artistic, scientific and popular culture, as this chapter will now endeavour to show. This is the romantic notion of the ‘island of dreams’, the ‘never-spelled-out popular mystique of islands’ that Ramsey dates back to Classical times, before even what he identifies as the Mediaeval ‘convention…that the site of anything marvellous was always an island’ (1972, pp. 91–2). This romance will then be matched against realities throughout the book.

Two factors that make islands special are isolation and boundedness. Isolation is obvious—an island sits alone, any person wishing to visit must make a dedicated and unusual journey over water; they must leave the mainland, the familiar, and venture to the remote insular world. The attraction of this type of journey is what Baum (1997) calls the ‘fact of difference’. He sees it in operation in visits across a political boundary as well and notes that as, say, within Europe, travel between different nations becomes easier and more familiar, the appeal of the fact of difference wanes. He then goes on to apply this idea to the island situation and opines that islands which build a fixed link (the term encompasses bridges, causeways and tunnels) lose the very ‘islandness’ which was part of the fact of difference, and, thus, their appeal. A journey on a road over a bridge is banal and has little sense of adventure. Baum cites a quotation about the debate on whether to build a bridge to Canada’s Prince Edward Island:

The idea of a fixed link joining Prince Edward Island to the mainland is a prospect that is disturbing to many islanders. The source of this disquiet is often so primal that it is not easily expressed, and it is sometimes articulated in terms of a threat to the ‘Island way of life’.

(Weak, 1991, p. 81)

Similar sentiments were expressed in Scotland during the same period when the Isle of Skye was joined to the mainland by a bridge. Much of the controversy...
about the Scottish development related, and still relates, to the high cost of the
toll to use the bridge, but there was also a lobby against it being built simply
because it took from Skye its islandness. This was particularly felt here, perhaps,
because of the fame of this island with regard to the 1745 rebellion after the
Scottish Jacobites’ defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746 against the English.
Their leader, the romantic hero figure (in legend anyway), Charles Edward
Stuart—Bonnie Prince Charlie—escaped ‘over the sea to Skye’ in the immortal
words of the Skye Boat Song. Going ‘over the sea’ on an unimaginatively designed,
over-priced toll bridge does not quite convey the same image. Baum considers
that ‘an artificial land link removes the perfection of the island’ (1997, p. 24).
Prince Edward Island is then not perfect, for its Confederation Bridge to
mainland Canada opened in 1997 (Figure 1.7). Peckham (2001) discusses the
unpopularity of the plans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to
‘unisland’ England and that project was not carried out until many decades had
passed. Off Ireland the largest island of Achill has had a causeway since 1886.
This has, doubtless, been to the island’s convenience, but Achill has lost its
islandness; the mystery which in the nineteenth century saw the Protestant
churches send missionaries there, as to ‘darkest Africa’, has gone and Achill is
now just functionally a peninsular, like the Belmullet peninsular to its north.
Meanwhile to its south, Clare Island, with its dramatic Knockmore mountain,
stands an isolated sentinel across Clew Bay and ferry services now compete with
one another to take tourists out to it.

Regarding the concept of boundedness, Weale has a quote from Lord
Tweedsmuir, Governor General of Canada, in 1939, which usefully
encapsulates the idea:

> What is it that gives an island its special charm…? I think the main reason
> is that an island has clear physical limits, and the mind is able to grasp it
> and make a picture of it as a whole.


Boundedness, one reason behind Baum’s ‘perfection of an island’, combines
with his ‘fact of difference’ to make islands special, to the appeal of writers
and artists as well as inquisitive visitors. The physical consequences of insularity
upon ecosystem development, as well as the curiosities of island formation,
have made islands the subject of study of many scientists, including Darwin
and Wallace, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Islands in the artistic imagination**

In *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (1893) Irish author, W.B.Yeats fantasises about
escaping civilisation to live alone on a small island. The ancient school primer
in which the author has this poem, states that ‘whether Innisfree is a real
island or an imaginary refuge for the soul is of no consequence at all, so far as
the spiritual significance of the poem is concerned’ (The English Association,
1915). Maybe not, but to the Sligo Tourist Board it does and trips to Innisfree Island in Lough Gill are available daily in the season from Sligo town. The island as a ‘refuge for the soul’ is a good encapsulation of the appeal of islands for those seeking succour of this nature. They can be poets, ordinary people, or hermits—other Irish islands, such as Skellig Michael and Caher, have served as the location for monastic communities. The lasting appeal of the island concept is demonstrated by the fact that the longest running programme on British radio is *Desert Island Discs*. Guests are asked how they would cope with life as a castaway on a desert island with only their choice of eight records, one book and a single luxury to sustain them.

The appeal of islands is both fed by and feeds upon the use of the concept of island in reality or metaphor by artists and writers. Many people will have heard of, if not actually read, such books as *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883), *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 1719) or its later adaption *Swiss family Robinson* (Wyss, 1812–13). Further, as this more humble author gazes out of his office window, he sees the same view of the edge of the 300 m Antrim Plateau on Belfast’s northwestern boundary that Jonathan Swift saw in the early eighteenth century. To Swift, the undulations in the surface of the rounded mountains brought to mind a huge man lying on his side and thus the idea of Gulliver and his tiny tormenters in Lilliput was born. And where did Swift base his hero’s adventures with both the tiny Lilliputians and the giant Brobdingnagians and the other less well remembered populations of his fantasy, *Gulliver’s travels* (1726)? In mysterious, isolated islands where the standard biological processes...
that produced people of human size need not have applied. His island of Leputa was permitted even to traverse the laws of physics as well as biology, for it was a flying island.

Writers have found islands convenient places to allow characters to become free from normal social constraints and permit their more ‘primitive’, because less socially-constrained, sides to emerge. One of the best known examples of this is William Golding’s *Lord of the flies* (1954). Here, a group of schoolboys are stranded on an uninhabited island. Initially, they struggle to reproduce their British society but in their isolated setting soon turn to barbarism, replete with bloody rituals and taboos. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* was remote, inaccessible, a good place to hide treasure away from prying eyes. Further, how better to study Crusoe’s response to loneliness (no eight records for him) and isolation and his relationship with Man Friday when the latter appears, than for Defoe to trap him on the bounded ecumene of an island where the social mores of his past need no longer apply? Thus, most recent discussions of the novel depict Crusoe and Friday as ‘relating homoerotically to each other before…[Crusoe returns] to white heterosexual civilisation’ (Woods, 1996, p. 36). The author of *The Swiss family Robinson*, by contrast, uses the island adventure to make religious points, a feature of the book often omitted in modern abridgements. The fact that Robinson Crusoe was modelled on a real person adds romance and verisimilitude to the story. His alter ego was sailor Alexander Selkirk, who was marooned in 1804 for over four years on Másatierra, now sometimes called Robinson Crusoe Island, in Chile’s Juan Fernandez Islands, after a dispute with his captain.

Some writers’ accounts of islands have verisimilitude because of their own island upbringing. One example would be Liam O’Flaherty of Inishmore, one of the Aran Islands of Ireland’s County Galway. O’Flaherty was the ninth child of an island farmer who supported his family from about six hectares of stony land. One obituary stated that O’Flaherty’s novel, *Famine* (1937), was the best of his works (*Independent*, 10 September 1984), but Skerrett (1932), set on ‘Nara’ (anagram of Aran) from the 1880s has some telling remarks on island life which will feature in Chapter 4.

Other authors have used islands simply to create a manageable scenario for their plot and a natural limit to their cast of characters. Detective writer Agatha Christie used country houses to incarcerate her characters (*Ten little Indians* (originally *Ten little niggers* (sic) (1939)) or trains (*Murder on the Orient Express* (1934)); just as convenient were small islands, for example *Evil under the sun* (1941) set on ‘Smugglers’ Island’. Modern filmmakers have also used islands for similar purposes, thus in the year 2000 the BBC showed *Castaway*, produced by Lion Television. This is a ‘docusoap’ featuring 35 volunteers taken to live for a year on an abandoned island, Taransay in the Outer Hebrides.

Of greater note, perhaps, are more challenging works that used an island setting to create an ideal community according to the political theories of their authors. Thus, Sir Thomas More’s model for the original *Utopia* (1516), was set on the isolated otherworldliness of an island. Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest* (1611) is famously set on an island. Its location
provided the setting for a bewildering variety of speculation about the Edenic qualities of the island and the potential it offered for erecting an alternative Utopian society on the one hand and for starkly encountering the difficulties of sheer animal survival on the other.

(Grove, 1995, p. 34)

Other authors who have used islands to create alternative societies are H.G. Wells (The island of Dr Moreau (1896)); and J.M.Barrie (The admirable Crichton (1909)).

An island is not the only literary setting that can allow an author to escape from social, biological or even evolutionary norms, of course. Some writers have used alternative devices to remove their characters from mainstream society to make their political points, such as the future (e.g. Aldous Huxley’s Brave new world (1932)) or fantasy. Of the innumerable fantasy novels, perhaps the most notable is George Orwell’s Animal farm (1945), where the animals take on human characteristics in a way that satirises the development of Stalinism. Orwell (real name E.A.Blair), like Huxley, also used the future for another of his political novels, Nineteen eighty-four (1949). Perhaps significantly, though not set on an island, this was written on the otherworldliness of a remote island, Jura, in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland, an example of a writer seeking ‘refuge for the soul’. Contemporary novelist William Sutcliffe, suffering from writer’s block, sought refuge in the Greek Cyclades: ‘my main aim was to find a peaceful island where I could relax and think things through’. This turned out to be Amorgos and his block was cured, very directly; Amorgos becoming a location used in the final chapter of the novel he was writing, The love hexagon (2000) (Independent, 8 January 2000). Robert Louis Stevenson, of Treasure Island fame, also went off to visit and live on islands: the Marquesas, the Paumotus, the (then) Gilberts and, most notably, from 1890 until his death in 1894, Samoa. Stevenson (e.g. 1896) wrote extensively about the Pacific. Painters, too, made similar journeys for artistic and inspirational reasons, often to get back, as they saw it, to a more primitive state. Paul Gauguin is the best example. He travelled to various islands in Polynesia, especially the Marquesas. Belgian writer Jacques Brel also spent the last years of his life on the Marquesas and he and Gauguin are both buried in the Calvaire cemetery on Hiva Oa. There is a museum of Gauguin’s life and works on Tahiti.

Finally in this section, one might consider travellers’ tales, such as, say, Captain Cook’s voyages in the South Seas. The modern versions of such travellers’ tales are television programmes or films. Few will not have seen a screen version of the 1789 mutiny of men from HMS Bounty led by Fletcher Christian against Captain Bligh. Christian set Bligh and the loyal crew members adrift in an open boat. The mutineers took the Bounty to enjoy the wonders of Tahiti (for which the neighbouring island of Moorea stood in some filmed versions of the story) before some of them incredibly went on to find their own private South Sea hideaway in Pitcairn Island. The book of the story
Islands of dreams

The island as paradise concept is burnt into the psyche of the denizens of the western world at least, whilst they enjoy their pampered lives, mostly in the safety and security of the continental heartlands. ‘Bounty’ is the name of a British chocolate-coated coconut bar, the name and its advertising redolent of the romance of the South Sea islands, its 2000 campaign featuring a picture book entitled ‘Atoll’ which comes to life. Actually on Pitcairn (which is not an atoll) the nine mutineers of the *Bounty* crew, six Polynesian men, their 12 Tahitian women and then one baby found life so stressful on their tiny island from 1790 that they slaughtered each other. (Thus, they went just beyond the behaviour of the modern castaways on Taransay.) When Pitcairn was rediscovered in 1808 there were 20 or more children, but only nine women and one man, mutineer John Adams, were left alive. Two women had died in cliff falls, one from natural causes. Of the 14 male deaths, one was from natural causes, one from suicide, the other 12 were murders (Lummis, 1997). This reality is an unwelcome distortion of the romantic image. Instead the modern island castaway is confirmed as the master of all that he [sic] surveys. And if this is a fantasy, it is one that can be bought. Take a look at the travel brochures and try to find one that is not trying to sell you the desert island of your dreams.

(Woods, 1996, p. 37)

To further illustrate this point, the author looked not at brochures but clippings from newspapers’ travel sections about islands. The same vision of the island of dreams was found. The Pacific island scene generally is ‘paradise’ (*Independent*, 21 April 1986) including, presumably, the separate paradises of New Caledonia (*New York Times*, 17 November 1985) and Honolulu (*The Times*, 18 January 1986). By contrast, others have firmly located ‘paradise’ in the Caribbean on Guadeloupe (*The Times*, 3 December 1983). The wealthy, of course, have their own reserved piece of this Guadeloupe paradise on St Barthélémy (St Barts). This island is a ‘tiny paradise for the chic’ (*Independent*, 6 May 1995) and is sited at some physical as well as social distance from the island of Guadeloupe itself, where paradise was available at lower prices for the non-chic. As Guadeloupe has possession of paradise, you cannot actually reach it on St Lucia, though you ‘won’t get closer than this’ to it there (*Independent*, 19 June 1993). You can also go ‘lotus eating in the Grenadines’ (islands shared between St Vincent and Grenada) (*Independent*, 17 March 1990). Even further from Guadeloupe is Grenada itself, not paradise at all in the author’s collection of clippings, but still very pleasant, in fact with a wonderful inversion of hydrological reality, this island is ‘an oasis in the sun’
Islands: dreams and realities

(Belfast Telegraph, 1 November 1997). So paradise is not in the Indian Ocean, but Nosy Bé off Madagascar is ‘stranger than paradise’ (Independent, 5 December 1992). The Seychelles possess not the real thing either for, with a nice mixture of island references, these islands are only ‘a bounty bar paradise’, (Independent, 30 December 1997). Rather, the Indian Ocean is the location of ‘Eden’, this being on Praslin in the Seychelles (Independent, 1 October 1989). On either side of that ocean are Phuket Island (Thailand) and Lamu Island (Kenya) both of which are ‘idyllic’ (Independent, 17 September 1994 and 21 November 1987, respectively). South of Phuket, Langkawi, just across the Malaysian sea border, is just ‘mystical’ (Independent, 24 August 1997).

The quotations identify the habit of journalists to slip readily into the use of tired clichés, and one would not claim these descriptions are profound analyses of the environment and lifestyles of the islands listed. To be fair to the New York Times, it should be mentioned that New Caledonia’s ‘paradise’ was ‘divided’ and ‘deadly’, the article being written at a time of great tension and some violence between different ethnic groups on this French possession. However, it cannot be gainsaid that there is constant use of glowing terms to describe islands, and this, however remote from actual reality, is significant as it informs the public’s perception about such places: islands are paradises; islands are romantic. And in a world where the biggest industry is tourism and where, as Chapter 9 will demonstrate, tourism has become many islands’ staple economy, such perceptions are priceless.

This author owns a T-shirt proclaiming him to be a ‘friend of Rathlin’, an island off Northern Ireland. Even friends of Rathlin must admit that this island is a workaday place, truly no paradise. However, such is the romance and mystique of islands that the local newspaper was able to record in some detail the wedding of a couple from the Irish Republic who were attracted to hold their ceremony on Rathlin on the ‘island of dreams’ principle (Belfast Telegraph, 27 October 1997). In a similar vein, couples can take advantage of the services of ‘The Love Company’ (ring 800–442–LOVE), which will arrange for their ceremonies (vows on request or create your own) to be held on the ‘island of romance’, also known, more prosaically, as Santa Catalina Island, California. In the South Pacific, the French Polynesian island of Bora Bora is also heavily marketed as a honeymoon destination and has the advantage of being considerably more attractive than either Santa Catalina or Rathlin.

Even more chic than to rent a piece of paradise on St Barts is to own your own. Many islands throughout the world are of a scale that they can be bought and sold in the same way as farms or estates. For example, the sixth Earl of Granville owns a 24,000 ha estate on Unst in the Shetland Islands. Because of the traditions of estate ownership in Scotland, many of the islands there can be bought and sold over the heads of resident tenants. In recent years sales have taken place of Dun Moraig, Easdale, Eigg, Eilean Aigas (formerly owned by popular historian Lady Antonia Fraser), Eilean Righ (formerly owned by Sir Reginald Johnston, sometime tutor to Pu Yi, the last emperor of China), Eilean Shona, Eriskay, Gigha, Grunay (whose 23.5 ha include a nine-hole golf course), Holm of Huip, Holy Island, Killegray, Langay, Little Bernera
A geography of islands

(possession of Count Merrilees), Mingay and Clett (both of which once belonged to 1960s pop star, Donovan), Rum, Staffa, Tanera Mhor and Vacsay.

New owners are not always traditional Scottish lairds. A Punjabi prince bought Vacsay to use for meditation. An American businessman bought Staffa, site of Fingal’s Cave, inspiration for Mendelssohn’s *Overture to the Hebrides* of 1829, for his wife’s 60th birthday. To be fair it must be recorded that he handed it over to the National Trust for Scotland afterwards with the proviso that his wife be named steward for her lifetime.

Some new owners bring changes to their islands. George Bullough, an industrialist from northwest England, owned Rum at the end of the nineteenth century and built the grand and dramatic Kinloch Castle that still dominates the island. Not content with changing the landscape, environment, economy and society, he even changed the island’s name to Rhum; Rum, without an ‘h’, being insufficiently genteel for his *nouveau riche* sensibilities.

Not far away from Rum is Eigg, whose traditional owners sold it at the end of the nineteenth century to pay gambling debts. Eigg had stability from 1925 to 1966 when Sir Walter Runciman owned it, although the island was in slow decline and was described in 1972 as being silent, ‘the silence of an introspective and depressed people, of a falling population, of lack of possibility’ (Crossley-Holland, 1972, pp. 201–2). Owners after Runciman have included a Liechtenstein-descended English businessman and a German mystic artist. The businessman Keith Schellenberg, a former bob-sled champion, bought the island in 1975 and used it as a ‘playground…pootling round in his 1927 Rolls-Royce Phantom with screaming yahs waving champagne bottles out the window’ (Johnson, 1992, p. 69). Schellenberg tried to make the island self-sufficient, but disputes with residents over security of tenure, the sale of some property and the provision of amenities made him unpopular and, one night in 1994, the Rolls-Royce was burnt out. Schellenberg started court actions against two newspapers, which had criticised his stewardship of Eigg but abandoned his suit in 1999, losing about £750,000 (*Independent*, 20 May 1999). Schellenberg sold Eigg for £1.5 m to the artist, Marlin Maruma. Maruma visited the island only twice before putting it on the market again (through Vladi Private Islands, see below) 15 months afterwards in July 1996, having sold off most of the island’s cattle and having apparently reneged on promises to invest £15 m in the island. The asking price was then £2 m and the tenants, operating as a trust, stopped being silent and managed to find the money after a massive public appeal.

Also departing from traditional ownership, but far from being a playground, Scotland’s, Holy Island was bought by Tibetan Buddhists in 1992 to become a centre for pilgrimage, ‘continuing in the spiritual tradition’ (Samye Ling Tibetan Centre, n.d.) of the life of island hermit, St Molaise.

Life on a tiny island can now be made convenient with solar energy, seawater desalination and prefabricated housing. The only problem is providing the money for the infrastructure—and for the real estate, for the demand for private islands is high and the prices, therefore, steep. The Buddhists of Holy Island
had to raise £280,000 for their uninhabited place of pilgrimage. Eilean Shona in Argyllshire, which is 3.6 km long and has pine groves, an oyster farm and a nine-bedroom house, was on offer at £1.5 m in 1993. Tiny Holm of Huip off Orkney at only 25 ha and without buildings was priced at £100,000 in 1993.

Private islands may become paradises for the super-rich. Thus the man who developed the Virgin commercial empire, Sir Richard Branson, owns Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands (though the simply very rich can arrange to rent it). Former tennis player Bjorn Borg owns Kattilo near Stockholm; actor Marlon Brando, Tetiaroa in French Polynesia (first noticed by him whilst filming his version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*) though day-trippers from Tahiti can access it. The reclusive Scottish businessmen, brothers David and Frederick Barclay, own Brecqhou in the Channel Islands, which they bought in 1993 for £2.3 m and on which they built a £27 m castle. Actor John Wayne used to own Taborcillo off Panama, up for sale in 1998 for £195,000. Baron Rothschild, whose family name is a synonym for wealth, owns Bell Island in the Bahamas. Lambay Island near Dublin in Ireland, having been acquired by his parents in 1904 who had Sir Edwin Lutyens remodel the house, was the (very) private home of the fourth Baron Revelstoke from 1934 until his death in 1994 and he is buried there.

Vladi Private Islands, based in Canada and Germany, sell about 40 islands a year and normally has around 300 islands on their books. The most expensive sold by 1998 was for £12 m in the British Virgin Islands. The owner, Farhad Vladi, has four islands himself, and puts their popularity down to the fact that owners ‘control what [they] see’ (Mulholland, 1998, p. 60). Privacy is very important to some island owners; it was to Baron Revelstoke, for example, and is, also, to the Barclay brothers who in 1996 took a journalist to court for making an unauthorised visit to Brecqhou. Vladi’s business strategy seems facile: ‘islands look set to become the last unspoilt places on earth. Their popularity can only increase, which means prices will sky-rocket’ (Hanssen, 1996, p. 44). The firm does not deal with islands that are likely to be subject to environmental, economic or political turmoil or where private ownership will offend locals, which rules out many in Asia and the tropics. Thus on the Seychelles there were in 1998 still claims outstanding by foreigners (including former Beatle George Harrison and arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi) whose land was appropriated in 1981 by the government (*The Times*, 1 January 1998). In cases where an island does meet the right criteria, is attractive to rich buyers seeking to get away from it all and wanting to become owners of all they survey in a controlled, private, secure environment, ‘you are talking about a crown jewel’ (Hannsen, 1996, p. 45). Coconut Island, off Oahu in Hawaii, was sold through Vladi Private Islands for £5.7 m—the price of paradise is high, indeed.

**Islands and science**

In addition to having a special place in the literary and cultural world, islands have also a distinct role in science, though one presumably free from romantic
associations. In his important book on the early history of environmentalism, Richard Grove adds the significance of the island as a concept in the development of science, reinforcing the place he acknowledges it already had in the development of culture. His first chapter is entitled ‘Edens, islands and early empires’ (1995; see also Schulenburg (2001) who also uses the association of Eden, islands and culture). This, again, comes about largely through the operation of those insular qualities of isolation and boundedness. King puts it thus:

For geographers, anthropologists, ecologists and biologists, islands hold a particular attraction, functioning as small-scale spatial laboratories where theories can be tested and processes observed in the setting of a semi-closed system.

(1993, p.13)

The small-scale idea was seen in the early major work on island science by Alfred Russell Wallace: ‘in order to limit the field of our enquiry...we propose to consider only such phenomena as are presented by the islands of the globe’ (Wallace, 1892, p. 241). The application of the island as laboratory can be seen most significantly in the work of Charles Darwin. Darwin’s voyage on H.M.S. Beagle from 1831 to 1836 took him to a number of island groups, including the Falklands in 1833 and, more importantly, the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador in 1835. Here variation in environment was seen to be reflected in distinctions between related species. In particular, Darwin became fascinated by the varieties in beak form of a number of types of finch found on the different islands. The giant tortoises were also different on each island, with those on less favoured islands having an ability to reach higher, to be able to graze from trees rather than just ground vegetation. Observations on the Galapagos Islands helped Darwin to develop ideas on biological adaption and were significant also in his work on evolution, his theory of natural selection, published much later (Darwin, 1859). In addition to informing his thinking on evolution, islands also stimulated Darwin’s work on geology and he produced two books containing material about the nature and formation of oceanic islands (1842; 1844). Wallace had meanwhile come independently to conclusions on evolution similar to Darwin’s (Wallace, 1855; see also Grant, 1998) and the two men presented their findings together at a lecture at the Linnaean Society in London in March 1858. That the idea of the island as laboratory had also played a part in Wallace’s thinking can be appreciated from his later book, Island life, in which he stated:

Islands possess many advantages for the study of the laws and phenomena of distribution. As compared with continents they have a restricted area and definite boundaries, and in most cases their biological and geographical boundaries coincide. The number of species and of genera they contain is always much smaller than in the case of continents, and their peculiar species and groups are usually well defined and strictly limited in range.
Again their relations with other lands are often direct and simple and even when more complex are far easier to comprehend than those of continents; and they exhibit besides certain influences on the forms of life and certain peculiarities in their distribution which continents do not present, and whose study offers many points of interest.

(Wallace, 1892, pp. 241–2)

In the contemporary era, islands continue to be significant in one modern area of biology, namely genetics. Some island populations have been relatively isolated for a long time. This has given them collectively a restricted genetic range and this can be of considerable significance in medical research (see Chapter 4). Thus, the population of Iceland is being investigated to try to track down any genetic predisposition towards diseases. A long way south in the Atlantic, the people of Tristan da Cunha have a genetic predisposition towards asthma. An American company is trying to understand why in the hope of developing a better understanding of the nature of this increasingly significant disease.

Island realities

Generally speaking, are islands paradises or is this just hype, a mixture of people’s desire for romance and mystery, boosted by popular culture and advertising? For one answer we can return to island literature, this time not to authors using islands as a convenient location for their plot development or on which to base their social theories, but to writers from islands discussing their own experiences. This can be appreciated most readily from the trilogy of autobiographies of residents of Great Blasket Island off western Ireland published between 1929 and 1936 (O’Crohan, 1929; O’Sullivan, 1933; Sayers, 1936) which are examined in detail in Chapter 5. From their books it is clear that there was a lot to commend life on their island, particularly the richness of its society and oral culture as well as the companionship of its isolated population. However, economically and materially life was hard. All three books are much taken up with the constant emigration of islanders seeking a better life elsewhere and, indeed, the island was finally evacuated in 1953.

Finally, to be fair to the journalists whose laboured and cliché-ridden words of praise for islands were mocked above, one must report that, of course, newspapers carry, if less frequently, more realistic pictures of island life. Noted journalist and commentator Philip Howard wrote that:

Life on an island may seem romantic to susceptible townies; in reality it is narrow, cabin’ed, cribb’d, confin’d, bound in. Your shepherd who does it for a living takes a far more robust view of the supposed pleasure of trudging up the mountain again than your wet romantic. Tenants of Ailsa Craig used to pay their rent in gannet feathers. Have you ever tried to part a gannet from its feathers? I should care to have to do so for the rent.

(The Times, 1 August 1984)
Further, at the end of an article about a young couple who moved from London to open a guesthouse on St Agnes, the most isolated of the Stilly Isles off southwest England, appeared this paragraph:

As the boat pulls away from the quay, leaving Rachel and Piers waving frantically in their oilskins, my thoughts are already turning to London. I am not sure if I have left them in paradise or in prison.

(The Times, 1 January 1998)

The answer could be somewhere in between, or it may be both. An island that might be a paradise to, say, a person on vacation, may at the same time be a prison to an islander seeking opportunities or services not available there. The other point to be taken from the paragraph is the fact that the journalist’s thoughts were returning to London. Islands are quintessentially peripheral and thus their people are irredeemably provincial. This view is not confined to London journalists, or to the modern era. Thus in a seventh-century dispute over religious observances, to Cummian, an authority based in Rome, the Columban community on Iona in Scotland’s Inner Hebrides were described thus:

An insignificant group of Britons and Irish who are almost at the end of the earth, and if I may say so, [are] but pimples on the face of the earth.

(Cummian, c. 632, cited in Walsh and Ó Cróinín, 1988, p. 75)

Iona has remained a religious place, the monastery dating back to St Columba has been restored, and there is a religious community living there to this day.

Islands may not necessarily always be paradises but what is not in dispute is ‘the geographical fascination of islands’, to make use of the title of Russell King’s essay on the subject and the last words of this chapter can be left to him:

An island is a most enticing form of land. Symbol of the eternal contest between land and water, islands are detached, self-contained entities whose boundaries are obvious; all other land divisions are more or less arbitrary. For those of artistic or poetic inclination, islands suggest mystery and adventure; they inspire and exalt. On an island, material values lose their despotic influence; one comes more directly into touch with the elemental—water, land, fire, vegetation, and wildlife. Although each island naturally has its own personality, the unity of islands undoubtedly wields an influence over the character of the people who live upon them; life there promotes self-reliance, contentment, a sense of human scale.

(1993, p.13)
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Key readings
For the significance of islands in scientific development, see Darwin and Wallace, also Grove and Grant for more recent discussion and commentary. Regarding island literature, the most significant is Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. For a realistic view of life by an islander, any of the three Great Blasket autobiographies should be consulted, the author’s favourite is that of O’Sullivan. See Loxley for a commentary on island literature. For a range of views on island development, consult Lockhart, Drakakis-Smith and Schembri.


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1 Islands

Key readings

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3 Insularity

Key readings

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edited book presents a range of accounts of migration in the island world. Bradford’s
history of Malta in the Great Siege is a fascinating tale of that rare event, an island
beating off a determined aggressor. Finally, Marcus Clarke’s novel can be recommended
for the power of its depiction of the bleakness of the concept and, presumably, the
actuality of the island as prison.

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Launceston).


Ferguson, R.J. (1986) Rottnest Island: history and architecture, University of Western Australia Press: Nedlands.


4 Islands in the past

Key readings

Bellwood’s book is an important study of humankind and the Pacific. The book by

Peter Munch on Tristan da Cunha emanated from a lifetime’s fascination for that island.

The work on the Aran Islands by Royle is a detailed survey of an historical island

community. Tom Steel’s book on St Kilda is a classic study of an island community

which did not survive far into the modern period.


Cox, G.S. (1999) St Peter Port 1680-1830, the history of an international entrepôt, Boydell and Brewer: Woodbridge.


O’Dell, A.C. (1939) The historical geography of the Shetland Islands, Manson: Lerwick.


Stanley, H.M. (1872) How I found Livingstone: travels, adventures and discoveries in Central Africa; including four months’ residence with Dr Livingstone, Sampson Low, Marston, Low and Searle: London.


5 Islands

Key readings

The edited volume by King and Connell presents a variety of studies on small island migration from around the world. The book by Aalen and Brody studies one island through its last days. The pressures of migration on small island society in the twentieth century is illustrated by the three Great Blasket autobiographers; it is especially prominent in Sayers’s books. The contrasting problems of excessive immigration are well revealed by the UNICEF-published study on the Marshall Islands.


Crisp, P. and Behone, B. (2000) ‘The storm before the storm? The coup may be over but little dust has settled’, Asiaweek, 28 July, p. 28.


6 Islands

Key readings

Cliff and Haggett write briefly on the epidemiological significance of islands, whilst

Sacks’s book details some of the impact of isolation on health status. Evans’s book is a
detailed study on educational provision in a series of different small island settings.

Hamley writes of the impact a major new transportation investment can make on a
small island; Kokovkin writes on the impact of telecommunications.


Donne, J. (1624) Devotions vpon emergent occasions, and seuerall steps in my sicknes, Thomas Iones: London.


Round Table on Resource Land Use and Stewardship (1997) Cultivating island solutions, Round Table on Resource Land Use and Stewardship: Charlotte town.


7 Politics and small islands

Key readings

The two books by Aldrich and Connell detail the political, social and economic circumstances of overseas territories, most of which are islands. The British government’s White Paper considers reform to the governance of some of these places. Dzurek details one of the most significant contemporary contestations over islands. Cruikshank’s book is a study of an island group taken in war.


Figure 7.6 Cartoon marking 30 years of Jamaican independence, 1992

Source: Jamaica Daily Gleaner, 20 August 1992


8 Making a living

Key readings

On offshore finance Mark Hampton’s book is a detailed study and the same author’s paper with John Christensen on Jersey is a useful case example. Glen Norcliffe has written a hard-hitting condemnation of resource exploitation in Newfoundland. Huw Jones’ work on Mauritius considers modernisation of that society as its economy changed. Stanwix and Connell present an unusually detailed consideration of remittances within a MIRAB system.


territories: increasing the world effectiveness of anti-money laundering measures, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development:


geographical perspectives, University of the West Indies Press: Kingston, Jamaica, pp. 126-47.


9 Islands of dreams

Key readings

A number of recent edited volumes on tourism and islands cover a wide range of theoretical and practical issues as well as presenting a good number of case studies.

These are the two books edited by teams led by Lino Briguglio, and others by Douglas Lockhart and David Drakakis-Smith, and by Michael Conlin with Tom Baum.


10 Conclusion

Key readings

The major historian of St Helena is Gosse, whose book takes the story up to 1938.

More recent popular accounts can be seen in Bain, Ritchie and Winchester. Royle has made a number of studies of St Helena.


Chief Secretary (1998) Investor’s guide to the Island of St Helena, Office of the Chief Secretary, Government of St Helena: Jamestown.


analysis: the phormium industry on St Helena’, Journal of Tropical Geography, 29, pp. 48-57.


