

Mark Easton (2022) *Islands: Searching for truth on the shoreline*. Biteback Publishing. Hbk: 384pp. ISBN: 978-1-785-90776-0 £20stg. <https://www.bitebackpublishing.com/books/islands>

The reference to the shoreline in the title is a giveaway. With decades of travel-related journalism under his belt, BBC Editor Easton delves into a series of thoughtful episodes where he comments about the liminality of islands, tossed about by and between land and sea. Islands are not quite here and not quite there, and Easton throws up for critical inquiry the many dualisms that islands (and islanders) stand for, and the contradictions by which they are defined: here and away, rooted and connected, open and closed, global and local, vulnerable and resilient, traditional and entrepreneurial, obedient and rebellious. As he does so, he sprinkles snippets of island history from around the world that foreground the significant impacts that distinct individuals have had on their societies and futures, on their own islands and beyond.

As a long-time island scholar, I found it quite gratifying to come across various concepts developed and entertained in the island studies literature and which seem to have travelled into the mainstream. One of these is that of ‘amplification by compression’ (ABC): a phrase that tries to capture the intense and ‘thick’ social, economic and political universe of (small) island societies, leading to agile decision making (when there is appetite for it) and casting into doubt claims that suggest that small islands are handy microcosms of larger continental spaces.

Easton travels the world but I sense that he is ultimately engrossed in trying to understand his Britain better. The sense of ‘islandness’ – another ‘academic term’ that has made it into mainstream language – permeates the soul and psyche of the British character, and breaks surface at specific moments, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum and which, by the way, explains the mess of the ‘Irish’ problem that the UK finds itself handling after its exit from the EU. Britain, after all, is not a country, neatly surrounded by water; it is the United Kingdom which is a country, and it involves one whole island (so far, counting England, Scotland and Wales) and a bit of another: Northern Ireland.

Easton’s grandfather was an avid philatelist, we are told; and that love for stamps permeates the pages of this book, in so much as stamps capture historic moments and sentiments, reproducing imperial tropes, prejudices and privileges, and serve as “potent propaganda” (p. 270). Today, we can afford to distance ourselves from the excesses of predatory exploitation of natural resources, colonialism, imperialism, slavery and the often violent acts that supposedly civilized and religious Europeans meted out to the ‘island savages’ and ‘primitives’ that they came across. All in the name of God, profit and progress.

As someone born and bred in Malta, I was especially intrigued by the central role that the Maltese archipelago plays in Easton’s narrative, and a particular prehistoric figurine in particular. I can thus personally relate to the many references to things Maltese: I remember visiting the Tarxien hypogeum when I was still a young boy, mesmerised by the red ochre that covered its walls (alas no more, obliterated by the humidity of a million breaths and so many camera flashlights); I fondly recollect picnicking with my parents within the precincts of the megalithic temples (no longer possible); I still enjoy the sporadic visit and trek to the islet of Comino and its aquamarine ‘Blue Lagoon’ (overflowing with visitors in summer). I must thank Mark for reminding us that this bay is in the middle of the middle island of the archipelago that lies in the middle of the sea at the centre of the world (*medi-terra-nean*).

Malta is small: the tenth smallest country in the world by land area; and its landscape is heavily marked by its consequential status as an island world. The ‘siege mentality’ is palpable, and etched in stone (pun intended): the fortresses and bastions that dot the country are accompanied by the equally imposing homes of the Maltese that are often fenced and walled, making it clear that they are private spaces and vestiges of a rare discretion away from an eager and ubiquitous public eye.

Islands does an excellent job at explaining the wary side of island life, the one that is suspicious of the outsider (except if they are tourists, and will thus not stay long), and the one that celebrates a visceral nativism, Indigeneity, tradition and a nationalism bordering on ethnic identity. But islands are also intensely cosmopolitan and irrevocably open spaces; their capital cities double up as ports through which new ideas travel along with people and cargo. This, also, is ‘islandness’; and this aspect of island reality exposes the fallacy that islands (and islanders) are all about being insular and prone to prefer ‘local control’. #

For scholars and aficionados of small states and territories, we need to remember that – apart from the six ancient continental European microstates of Andorra, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, San Marino and the Vatican – almost all other states with populations of less than one million are islands and archipelagos; as are many territories that boast some degree of autonomy. Islands are also prime targets for acts of conquest: consider the so-called British Indian Ocean Territory, carved expediently out of Mauritius as this was heading towards independence. Islands are also instigators of acts of secession: consider the short-lived United Suvadive Republic, which attempted to secede from the Maldives. Both cases feature in this book.

I would have liked to have seen some images in this book, even if in grey tone (to keep the costs down). Ptolemy’s map of the known world, the early 20th-century postcard with “graceful women in full-length crinolines and straw hats strolling along the beach of Hog Island” (New Providence, Bahamas) (p. 309), the 1909 map of the world showing the sprawl of the British empire, the 1972 photo of the Earth from Apollo 17, the location and size of the ‘Spice Islands’, the map that intrepid navigator Tupaia drew for Captain James Cook, and the various stamps referred to, strike me as obvious candidates. It would be much easier to appreciate and enjoy the related stories with such powerful visual references. As things stand, we must content ourselves with just one image, that of a small Neolithic statuette of a reclining female figure, one of many copies of the enigmatic original that had been found in the Hypogeum, the underground burial chamber in Tarxien, Malta.

Here then is a feast of contradictions and complexities for the senses, but rendered in a smooth and very readable style. Honed in the skills of an apt journalist and news editor, Easton takes us on our island forays with ease and charm. The book’s very accessible price should make it welcome reading, to students and all of us searching for truth on the shoreline. And the search for this truth continues: that is “humanity’s burden and its blessing” (p. 357).

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