

Book Review

Islands: Searching for Truth on the Shoreline

Islands: Searching for Truth on the Shoreline. By Mark Easton. London, UK: Biteback Publishing, 2022. 370 pages. £20.00.

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For anyone interested in islands, the title and subtitle of this book will immediately attract attention. But in a modern world where “truth” is repeatedly questioned (“untruth,” “post-truth,” “truths,” “scientific truth,” etc.), the book’s subtitle, *Searching for Truth on the Shoreline*, is especially thought-provoking. How can one search for truth in such a setting? What does this mean for island studies? It is with such questions that I am reading and reviewing *Islands*.

The book’s author, Mark Easton, is a career journalist. Pointing out early on that “isolation” and the ongoing Covid pandemic have key similarities to island life, Easton notes that it is a timely “moment to assess the special place where isolation meets connectedness, to go mudlarking upon the shorelines where ‘us’ meets ‘them’” (xiii). It is with this approach that the author offers a glimpse into the making of islands and of the people who have made islands their home.

Aimed at a general readership, the book’s twenty-two chapters express much about the author’s career travels and is laced with anecdotes, personal experiences, and details on archaeological history. While avoiding in-depth critical and theoretical engagement with scholarship in the field, Easton does acknowledge that island studies has for at least twenty years been “pledged to changing the way we think about islands” (7).

There are two juxtaposed writing styles throughout, which are visually distinct in the chapters. As the author comments, his aim is “to chronicle the journey of physical islands and explore the psychological islands that form the great archipelago of humankind. To that end, there are two books forced together in one” (8). As such, and reflecting the author’s engagement with the topic, throughout the book, there are many examples of islands through a historical lens, personal childhood memories, and mentions of career experiences.

On starting to read the book, I was intrigued to find in the preliminaries a plate of “The Sleeping Lady,” a Neolithic statuette found in the Hypogeum, an underground burial chamber on the island of Malta. How does this statuette connect with islands and truth? Why focus on Malta? The link between the two, and with the study of islands, is that this statuette was produced on Malta in the Mediterranean Sea, which is the starting point for Easton’s exploration of islandness and the focal point throughout the book. Pointing out his inspiration for finding an island starting point from an early scene in the film “Doctor Dolittle” (1967), as the author notes:

I take down my atlas and open it at the page marked the Mediterranean Sea, the middle sea that is home to more than 300 named islands, an alphabet of insularity from Ada Bojana in Montenegro to Zvërnec in Albania. Then I place my ruler carefully across the whole page, with Tangier at one end and Beirut at the other. Halfway along the ruler's edge, bang in the middle of the middle sea with a name that sits precisely and pleasingly in the middle of the alphabet is a small archipelago of eight islands. My journey will begin in Malta. Right in the middle. (12–13)

The opening discussion of “islandness” (Chapter 1) offers an overview of key tropes that are at the heart of the field: sea, isolation, vulnerability, belonging, connections. As Easton comments, “islands are a product of what happens at the junction between land and sea” (6). The author's interest in ancient history takes the reader on an excursion in islanding 700,000 years ago in connection with the re-thinking of humanoid travel (Chapter 3). Many other island-related themes are laced within the book: progress, isolation, walls, visitors, identities, perspectives, isolation, barriers, bridges, land, flags, territory, belonging, unity, and nationhood.

A personal glimpse into the author's childhood (stamps, maps, films) helps in understanding why “truth” is foregrounded in the book (Chapter 4). As a journalist, the author notes that “according to the BBC's Editorial Values, I must seek the truth” (33). This is a “scientific truth,” looking at historical facts but challenged by “rumour, supposition, misinformation, conspiracy and downright lies” (34). This is extended into Chapter 5 with an example of the dialectics between truth and myth in origin stories and the importance of islands in ideas on creation. In a discussion of sovereignty, Chapter 6 is framed around the Mediterranean island of Melos, when a colony of Dorians established themselves there, wanting to create their own territory.

In an increasingly translingual scholarly ideoscape, it was pleasing to see Chinese characters included in Chapter 8 in connection with the discussion of notions of “private.” While also commenting without in-depth linguistic discussion that Japan has no concept of “private” (83; however, see Nakada and Tamura 2005), the idea of “private” in relation to islands is an important “truth” to understanding geopolitical connections between space and place.

Other topics include escape and the psychology of islands (Chapter 19), with much history underpinning the discussion. With island examples, Easton comments on the idea of “happiness,” this time from a UK perspective: “The Outer Hebrides and the Orkney Islands are the only locations in the country where people give an average happiness score of more than eight out of ten across a decade of data” (296). Such thought is also found in Chapter 13 with “utopia,” but in connection with reclaimed Canvey Island in England and on the Thames estuary just east of London in the county of Essex.¹ The author “first came to Canvey for the BBC after the 2011 census revealed that the area was the most English place in England” (190). With this island, Easton points out that “islandness” in this setting helps create a “worldview.”

Islands is an interesting read. Drawing on the author's journalistic career, the book has some thought-provoking scholarly points that help in understanding why islands are so important

in human life. While Easton's book claims to be "*Searching for Truth on the Shoreline*," it is perhaps with the author's own experiences (childhood, professional, and personal) that such "truth" is expressed in an exciting and informative way.

Henry Johnson, Professor
University of Otago

Note

¹ While a "reclaimed" island, Canvey Island is still separated from the mainland by the narrow East Haven Creek.

References

Nakada, Makoto, and Takanori Tamura. 2005. "Japanese Conceptions of Privacy: An Intercultural Perspective." *Ethics and Information Technology* 7, 27–36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-005-0453-1>.