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VIEWPOINT

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# The Poetics of Island Place: articulating particularity

PETE HAY

At the ISLANDS V conference in Mauritius in 1998, delegates signed off on a 'Mauritius Declaration', a manifesto for the flourishing of small islands at a time of economic, ecological and cultural stress. One point of the manifesto runs thus:

that islanders speak, and others hear,  
of the unique and positive cultural  
experiences of island living through  
literature and other forms of creative  
expression.

It has often been put to me that the so-called distinctiveness of islands is overrated; that the qualities and conditions manifest within islands are not much different from those in evidence in similarly 'contained' regions on continental mainlands. It is a position I strongly contest. People who make such a claim typically think within narrowly economic categories, where such a case can be made—although even then up to a point, because the special nature of transport imperatives as they apply to islands makes for an inevitable degree of uniqueness about island economies, as well.

And once we move from the economic to the environmental and the social, the case that there is nothing essentially distinctive about islands entirely collapses. Just ask any biogeographer about the especial ecological stresses of the world's islands, stresses that stem from highly specialised and non-adaptable evolutionary vectors and from the impossibility of species-invigorating migration from outside. It is a similar story with the social psychology of islandness. The very boundedness of islands

makes them different. Physical boundedness conduces to psychological distinctiveness because it promotes clearer, 'bounded' identities. It also conduces to low dynamism and to a comparative lack of social resilience in the face of pressures from outside. This links back into island economics and island biogeographies. Ecological and economic stress are more acute on islands, because boundedness—psychological as well as real—reduces options. In a stressed world, islands are under particular stress.

All this makes for a central if confusing role for island literary practitioners. It renders the act of writing islands especially political, although this political function is often unperceived even by the writers themselves. It takes the form of an identity-claiming literature of place. The impact of colonial power relationships has been, and still is, distilled, concentrated on islands. Most of the world's islands, even those that did not experience major population changes as a consequence of European expansionism, have been shaped, although in distinctive and often unique ways, by European politics. Much island literature has to do with the politics of identity, with 'reclaiming the territory'.

Island literature, moreover, must be wrought in the face of the indifference and even the contempt of artistic fashion-makers and consumers of cultural products in the world's 'mainlands'. Islanders are typically seen as slightly eccentric; unworldly, out of touch, slow—and inbred. And island arts are minor, ultimately trivial, eddies in the greater swirl of

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world culture. Only an occasional genius, such as little St Lucia's Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, ruffles the arrogance of the centre.

Of course, 'mainland' writers do often exhibit a fascination with islands, because the 'island' is a favourite metaphor for the contained and sovereign self, usually an alienated and sensitive self, beset with trials and terrors in a cruel and uncaring world. And the island *motif* is often deployed as a convenient back-drop for artistically treating a boiled-down 'larger' history. And it can serve, as Tasmania does in Australia, and Newfoundland does in Canada, as a projection of the dreams and, more usually, the fears of the mainland—as a psychological sink into which elements of a collective national disquiet can be displaced.

In all these instances, the 'realness' of an actual island is an irrelevance, even an inconvenience. This is literary production in which the island is abstract, faceless. And nothing can be done about this—the island as metaphor is powerful, pervasive and venerable. But one of the political functions of island literature is to insist that islands are more than metaphor. It is to insist that they are real, that they are particular and that they are significant—the site of vital happenings.

The poets presented here are of this nature. They are self-consciously island poets, poets who seek explication of the essence of their particular local island environments, who work with vernacular English, with vernacular rhythms. John Joy, for example, lovingly sounds out the many words for one particular ice formation, 'barricados'—and 'pingos' extends the list, a formation of ice described to me by Robin McGrath as "like giant chocolates with cherry centres, but made of a coating of earth with an icy heart". Dry-stone waller Kerron Clague, driving "timber stobs in lines across the Marches", works essentially within this tradition and so does Scots-Gaelic poet, Kevin MacNeill.

And if island literature embodies a psychological distinctiveness, if it embodies a politics which configures identity as perpetually under threat of obliteration by robust and intrusive adjacent cultures and if it is constructed in reaction to the particular stresses of a hard-edged, bounded existence, it follows that it

should be confrontational and abrasive, often concerned with the negative aspects of existence, often taking loss, dislocation, isolation and marginalisation for its themes. Some, but not all of the poets presented here, write thus. Joe Sherman's Cape Breton Island is an elemental place, potent in its pull upon human sensibilities. It is also doing it hard, its economic staples in extreme depression. Employing an almost brutally terse phrasing, his anger under tight control, Sherman writes of the careless regard for life characteristic of Cape Breton's dangerous and declining coal mining industry. Kerron Clague unsentimentally laments the death of ancient patterns in the land under the pressure of new movements of capital—and, defiant of spirit, his own role in it.

But islands also excite other passions. They are celebrated; probably more frequently celebrated than any other geographical entity (although mountains might well challenge). The mode of writing that seeks out the quiet charm of islands is represented here by Robin McGrath's beautiful set of linked *haiku* on Baffin Island. And in a dazzling flash of language, Kevin MacNeill hymns the social and environmental satisfactions of life on the Hebridean island of Lewis ('To port') in juxtaposition with the numbing corrosion of Glasgow ('To starboard'). Other moods fall between contentment and anger. Sadness is one common signifier within island writings, perhaps taking its cue from the turbulence of the recent pasts of many of the world's smaller islands. My own poem laments the death at sea of infantrymen from the all-Tasmanian 2/40th Battalion in World War II. Captured on Timor and sent to the Burma Railway, more of them were killed by American torpedoes whilst being shipped to Japan towards the end of the war than died in action or on the Railway. Hugh MacDonald, too, this fine poet of quiet and not-so-quiet pastoral rhythms in his native Prince Edward Island, uses smaller islands off a small island as a device for wistful reflection upon the also-small regrets of growing older.

There is much scope in island art for ideological construction, for passionate engagement, for drawing links from the particular to the universal. There is little scope for the notion of the writer as radical individual, as timeless

hero, supremely unaffected by the context within which he (such a doctrine usually posits a 'he') works. Island literatures engage with the land and the sea (of course!) and the community. They address the large, cosmic questions of existence, but they do so within a context of shore-bound particularity. They are, in fact, not 'minor' literatures at all and island writers are, in reality, not workers at the margins. So should it be recognised.

### **Small Islands**

When he was small  
the island where he lived  
stretched to infinity  
far beyond the clovered  
meadows where he played.  
Along the river's edge  
beside his house  
his dreams loomed large.  
Off shore a tiny isle,  
red stack of sandy shale  
wigged in squat spruce,  
graveyard for early pioneers  
to which he liked to wade  
at lowest tide  
and stroll among the shades,  
brush past fragrant needled skirts  
loving how the shoreline  
boxed him in so he felt safe.  
But as he grew, his islands  
seemed to shrink  
so he could see  
how small he'd got  
and still they boxed him in.

Hugh MacDonald

### **Closing It Down on Cape Breton Island**

I never went near the Phalen mine,  
didn't know a Phalenite to talk to.  
That's a world I was shielded from  
when all I owned was what I'd been  
given.

Inglorious coal, then it was money  
and a death, and another death. Again  
now,  
and they can rage all they choose,  
these young men chiseled into age,

but the roof will not budge, except  
to meet the ground, and all I know  
is what I've been told,  
and I take what I am given.

Joseph Sherman

### **Barricados**

Pingos in the foreshore  
Rock cored ice  
Barnacles of belliclumpers  
Ballicatters ballacarda balacadas  
Belly-carders belly-catters  
ballycadders  
Ballicabbers ballicanters balliclamper  
Ballicutters billicatters cattibatters  
Mini volcanoes relieving pressure  
Littoral explosions  
Frozen halfway between detonation  
and recoil  
Maginot line  
Between smooth frozen land  
And smooth frozen sea  
Patterned with shallow drifts of snow  
Packed hard  
With the cold and the wind

John Joy

### **Baffin Island**

Flash under water  
Sun slips into the ocean  
Three fish in my net  
  
In the summer night  
The tide and sun are as one  
The mud dreams of clams

Above the far hill  
The ragged cloud speaks of wind  
Summer is ageing

Robin McGrath

### **TX ...**

The island seas give up the dead.  
gentling, susurrant, discreet,  
nudged by the tide,  
the dead are dawn-gifted  
to the gathering sands.

\* \* \*

But this is how it was for me:  
I am wrapped in a warm fold of  
ocean as,  
hit astern, amidships, she rips apart,  
dives for the bottom  
with eighty island men.

I had dreamed of this.  
in the scarecrow hell of the Railway,  
laid low, given to dark envisioning,  
I heard hullplates crackling,  
saw the drowner's mad, reaching  
hand.

Now I am here with eighty island  
men  
at the end of a Yankee torpedo.  
I am playing out my malarial dream.  
in our rustbucket coffin in an Asian  
sea  
we bob and nod our grotesque  
courtesy.

\* \* \*

Slow pull of the island tides.  
soft draw of southern currents.  
eighty island boys at war,  
we bob and nod our country  
courtesies,  
twist slowly to the south ...

Pete Hay

### **Cartography in Wire**

I draw fresh lines on old maps  
rebuilding the bounds of a new order  
I secure the fruit of smart investment  
stretching wire around new empires, I  
fence  
across wild acres of poor men's  
dreams.

I have no cattle, I have no land.  
This is my country.

Bright new boundaries are entered  
in the registry of land  
Clerks and lawyers dip their pens  
Keen tips watch for sleight of hand.

I drive timber stobs in lines along the  
Marches  
Wire is tensioned and it cuts the wind  
Rain and wind cut my skin  
Wire cuts my skin.

I build fences around coddled fields  
I slice through long established  
family farms  
I speed the roughshod trampling of  
the wilderness,  
dividing up the spoil.  
I build fences so that no one goes  
where they are not supposed to go.

Bright new boundaries stare back at  
the landless  
An alien herd, still bunching tight,  
grazes  
into fresh pasture.  
The would-be farmer and tenant  
farmer's son  
look upon the changed agenda and  
rubbing  
a temple with a thumb say  
'That's the way it goes'.  
Everyone says that.  
It's just the way things are.  
They cannot be changed.

But this is my country too!

The east wind is loaded with sleet  
freezing my face.  
I've been working here for almost a  
week  
high on this cold hill  
pushing out the boundaries with  
neither  
gate nor stile  
I underline the conquest mile by  
weary mile.

Kerron Clague

### **Port and Starboard**

To port: greybrownblack moorland,  
hot strong decaf and a banana  
muffin, Donnchadh Ban split open in  
front of you collecting crumbs, a  
pensive roaddigger muscled and lean  
chinging spades in your head,  
drunken guts-open conversations at

the young-once bar, crofters with no restlessness, no itchy questions, a granddaddy star winking between two ragged clouds, you filling shelf after shelf with packets and tins of youth and bliss, a brandnew sun pouring love into the room, the pearl necklace like a year of strung moons glowing round her neck, the token gesture of midnight bed and that semi-coma of sleepless image-mongering, the previous night's shenanigans coming slowly together like flotsam to the shore, the final Christmas tree glowing contentedly in the corner, its glinting baubles and mint and lavender and vanilla lights hanging like a constellation of childish perfume bottles.

To starboard: cabs streaming like fish in the drizzling night, schools swarming with gimmeorelses and fists, streets made of drink, mildly poisonous and finally depressing, stanley knives glittering with history, football scarves turning grown men cold, a dozen sisters with different fathers, rottweilers dragging their arseholes through the streets, notes flying from cobwebbed purses on state-sponsored horses at fourteen million to one, babies glinting with ear-rings and snot, café striplights like cheap neon lighters thrumming your eyes, dry familiar rape, young bikes greenly entangled in traffic, all of a sudden glimpsing The One as the lift doors close.

And vice versa.

Kevin MacNeill

#### About the Contributors

*Kerron Clague*

Kerron Clague is a self-employed fencer and

dry-stone waller who lives in Peel, Isle of Man. His poetry draws on the history and geography of his immediate environment and his exploration of the history, myths and wild places of the Isle of Man can also be seen in his drawings and stone carvings.

*Pete Hay*

Pete Hay is Reader in Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Tasmania, Australia. His most recent publications are *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* (2001) and *A Companion to Environmental Thought* (2002). He also writes poetry, essays and short fiction, and is a parochial (in the sense deployed by the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh) Tasmanian. He is the author/editor of two collections of poems and a third, *Silently on the Tide*, is in press.

*John Joy*

John Joy is a barrister and solicitor in St John's, Newfoundland, Canada, and he also holds a Masters degree in Marine Law and Policy. He works in areas of marine, admiralty and fisheries law, oil and gas, intellectual property and aboriginal justice, and he represents aboriginal people in civil and criminal matters. He is the Honorary Consul for Iceland in Newfoundland. In addition to articles on fisheries law for the North Atlantic fisheries magazine *The Navigator*, he also writes on aboriginal economic development as well as other non-fiction, and poetry and plays.

*Hugh MacDonald*

Hugh MacDonald was born in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada, attended university there and now lives in a cottage on the Montague River. A teacher of History and English, he has published four volumes of poetry and edited or co-edited as many collections, the latest being *Landmarks: An Anthology of New Canadian Poetry of the Land* (2001). His many awards include the Atlantic Poetry Prize in 1994, for his collection *Looking for Mother*.

*Robin McGrath*

Robin McGrath holds a PhD in Inuit literature and has 22 years of field experience in the Canadian Arctic and sub-Arctic. She has taught at the University of Alberta and in 1996/97 held the Halbert Chair for Canadian Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Robin now works as a professional writer and her writing credits include a volume of poetry, *Escaped Domestics*, for which she won Canada's national Jewish Book Award in 1999, a volume of short fiction, *Trouble and Desire*, and a young adults' novel, *Hoist Your Sails and Run*.

*Kevin MacNeill/Caoimhin MacNèill*

Kevin MacNeill/Caoimhin MacNèill was born on the Outer Hebridean island of Lewis (Scotland) and is now resident in the Isle of Skye,

where he is the inaugural Iain Crichton Smith Writing Fellow. A widely published writer of poetry, prose and drama (in English and Gaelic), his work has been translated into 10 languages and he is the first person from Scotland to win the prestigious Tivoli Europa Giovani International Poetry Prize. He is currently completing a novel.

*Joseph Sherman*

Joseph Sherman's fifth collection, *American Standard & Other Poems*, was published in 2002. He is a former college English instructor and arts magazine editor, and he currently writes a cultural life column for *The Buzz*, a Prince Edward Island monthly. A native of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island, he and his family have lived on Prince Edward Island since 1979.