Introduction: Britain’s island idea

The fact that British influence – measured by the standards ... of ancient Greece or China – is a relatively recent ... phenomenon only adds to its interest. It is part of ... the history of western Europe’s Atlantic-side peoples ... the land we inhabit is the sump into which Eurasian history has drained ... the spread of farming and metallurgy and Indo-European languages; the colonizations of Phoenicians and Greeks ... the migrations of Jews in antiquity, and the coming of Christianity ... the arrival of oriental mathematics, science and technology; the invasions of Germanic, Slavic and steppeland peoples; Ottoman imperialism ... Many of these movements created their refuse ... who ended up on the Atlantic shore ... unable to get any further west, as if pinioned by the winds. The great problem of their history is not why they took to the sea and spread over the world, but why they took so long about it.

Filipe Fernandez-Armesto, ‘Britain, the Sea, the Empire, the World’

Human beings have always exploited water. Intensive agriculture developed on irrigated flood plains; the first complex urban cultures (Sumerian, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese) made use of coastal as well as river and caravan transport. In Song China, as later in the Netherlands and then Britain, commercial societies developed by linking rivers with canals. In the early modern period the whole globe was made one ‘water world’ by the startling accomplishments of long-range Portuguese, Spanish and other European cannon-carrying seafaring.

Yet there have been few maritime civilizations. Since the development of agriculture and until late industrialization most people have worked the land and been bound by its produce, limits and seasons. Maritime economies and cultures developed around the edges of the Assyrian,

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1 In David Cannadine (ed.), Empire, the Sea and Global History: Britain’s Maritime World, c. 1760–c.1840 (Houndmills, 2007) pp. 7–8.
2 When the Waves Ruled Britannia

Roman, Byzantine, Chinese, Ottoman and Iberian empires, in Tyre, Athens, Carthage, Venice and Amsterdam. They were, that is to say, the product of cities, rather than of states. However, sometimes cities created states. In the late sixteenth century this occurred in the northern Netherlands, where the driving forces behind the United Provinces were Amsterdam, Utrecht, Haarlem, Leiden, Delft. A century later, following a successful water-borne Dutch invasion in 1688, the United Kingdom of Great Britain (1707) was created by and through London, however stylish Edinburgh came to look at the party. It was created by the capital as a political power, and through it as a national, regional and imperial entrepot.

In the ancient world the development of maritime Greek culture exploited the geography of the eastern Mediterranean, but was not created by it. It owed something to earlier Egyptian, Cretan and Phoenician example. Like their neighbours, most Greeks by 600 BC had developed an agricultural and pastoral economy, and an aristocratic/warrior society. Change came for three reasons. One was that two of the agricultural products concerned, wine and olive oil, were highly tradable. Another was the dispersed Greek pattern of polis settlement, first in Ionia (Asia Minor) and then in colonies from the Black Sea to the western Mediterranean.

The third development was the decision of Athens to invest in maritime military as well as economic power, and to integrate both into politics. The result was a democratic system capable, militarily, of stopping Persia (though not, as it turned out, Sparta). One result was an Athenian empire distinct from the colonies which had preceded it. Although this maritime culture never replaced agriculture, it integrated with it, shaped it, and occasionally displaced it within Attica in particular.

In the analysis of ‘Pseudo-Xenophon’: ‘[In Athens] it seems just that the vulgar, the poor and the people are given the preference to the distinguished and rich people, for the simple reason that the people is the motive power in the navy and gives the state its strength … much more than the heavy-armed infantry.’ In early modern England also, military
need eventually brought about political, economic and social change. The military extremity which led, in 1645, to the creation of the New Model Army helped to unleash a religious and political revolution. No less important, though less examined, was the creation of a new and unparalleled English republican naval power with a distinct social philosophy and social structure.8

In terms of its speed and scope the only early modern transformation comparable to the ancient Athenian one occurred in the northern Netherlands (a fact later remarked upon by the Scottish Enlightenment writer James Dunbar). Here, too, the rise of a mercantile, maritime economy exploited regional geography, between the Baltic and the Mediterranean, and at the intersection of three major rivers and the sea.9 Dutch economic development not only imitated Portuguese example, but appropriated Portuguese possessions. Unlike Portugal, however, and like Athens, late sixteenth-century Holland and Zeeland imported their grain. Along Athenian lines the United Provinces became a highly cultured and prosperous urban product of large-scale migration. As in Athens the society which resulted was not only post-royal but significantly post-aristocratic. As in Athens, without the struggle for survival against a neighbouring empire (in this case the Spanish Habsburg) these developments might never have occurred.

Unlike Athens or the United Provinces, sixteenth-century England was a rural, aristocratic and monarchical grain-growing society. Yet, beset by military necessity imposed by Spain, the United Provinces and then France, it was driven during the following two centuries to acquire components of a maritime economy, government and culture. Although these developments were initially peripheral, they came to involve social and political change. To England came, eventually, mercantile republicanism, commercialized aristocracy, parliamentary monarchy and global empire. By the eighteenth century the British state had become sufficiently powerful to impose its fiat upon mighty commercial trading companies, and trade had become integrated with agriculture and manufactures to an extent which would help to make industrialization possible.10 Whereas during the Elizabethan period maritime voyaging

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8 The authority remains Bernard Capp, *Cromwell's Navy: the Fleet and the English Revolution 1648–60* (Oxford, 1989). As Capp acknowledges, however, this navy was not Cromwell’s, in origin at least, for the importance of which fact see chapter 4 below.


was sponsored by a coalition of gentlemen and merchants operating with permission of the crown, and whereas the Dutch economic miracle was achieved by the mercantile political marginalization of landed gentry, only in Britain from 1660 to 1800 did aristocratic and mercantile culture achieve a political and social coalescence capable of determining, and being determined by, government policy.

As the culmination of a long-term process of imitation and adaptation in agriculture, trade, maritime culture, political economy and government this was not a development in one country. Key to the process was war: calamitous military failure as well as success, and therefore experience of what was necessary to fight war successfully. This study emphasizes the social and political impact of this experience. As the co-operative necessities of hoplite warfare created the Greek polis and (building on classical example) the Dutch military revolution created a republic, rather than a monarchy, so in eighteenth-century Britain the relationship of economic, political and military structures was the outcome, not of a single event in 1688–9, but of more than a century of Dutch-informed trial and error. Within this long-term international relationship and process, this study identifies three striking ‘moments’ of Anglo-Dutch political proximity, in 1584–5, 1649–54 and 1688–97. Each entailed elements of rivalry and even conflict intertwined with alliance, emulation and attempted union. These were opposite sides of the same coin.

In the Netherlands water, fresh and salt, was everywhere. The United Provinces was a phoenix risen around, and within, a complex delta. In Holland and Zeeland, in particular, economic life, including the acquisition and retention of dry land, required continual hydraulic activity. In England, by contrast, though the country was well watered by rain and rivers, geography, economy and society were all different. This was so despite a component of internal geography in Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire by locals ‘very properly call’d Holland, for ’tis a flat, level, and often drowned Country, like Holland itself; here the very Ditches are navigable, and the People pass from Town to Town in Boats, as in Holland’. It was so despite natural harbours, in depth and


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in relation to the prevailing westerly winds, greatly superior to those on the other side of the channel. As one Elizabethan commentator complained:

Whereby it plainly appeareth, That as the Excessive Expence of the Low Countrie bestow’d on Havens, hath not Impoverish’d, but the clean contrary, greatly Enrich’d them by Incomparable Wealth and Treasure, with number of Rich, Fair and Populous Towns; So our Sparing Mind, or rather greedy Getting, Gaining and Enriching Land from your Majesty’s Havens and Navigable Channels, hath utterly Destroy’d and Spoiled many good Havens by nature left us, and thereby wrought very Beggary, Misery and Desolation on these your Frontier Towns.¹⁴

In the United Provinces a maritime economy (including political economy) had improved harbours and coastal towns, while English agricultural activity degraded them. For England, embracing the ocean would require mastery of a new element. It was not until 1675 that John Seller, Royal Hydrographer, produced the first English maritime atlas. “Till Seller fell into it’, commented Samuel Pepys, ‘we had very few draughts, even of our own coasts, printed in England.’¹⁵ Meanwhile, English mariners used Dutch maps, printed books and loan words, and studied Dutch shipbuilding and trade.¹⁶ Dutch engineers, investors and immigrants transformed the internal landscape, draining the Fens, introducing Dutch methods of animal husbandry and crop rotation, and establishing market gardening so that in 1699 John Evelyn could report that there were now enough English-grown ingredients to make a salad.¹⁷

Other important cultural resources included reverence for antiquity (humanism) and Protestantism. This helps to explain why, despite the importance of Portuguese and Spanish technology, knowledge and example the most important maritime models for England were ancient Athens during the Elizabethan period, the United Provinces during the seventeenth century, and Phoenicia/Carthage during the eighteenth. This was so despite the fact that Athens had been a democracy, and Carthage and the United Provinces were republics. From Homer, Plato, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Polybius English writers learned

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¹⁴ ‘A Memorial of Sir Walter Raleigh to Q. Elizabeth Touching the Port of Dover’ in Sir Walter Raleigh, A Discourse of Seaports; Principally of the Port and Haven of Dover (London, 1700) p. 2.


to re-imagine the North Sea as the eastern Mediterranean, and Catholic Spain (and then France) as Persia. From contemporary Dutch practice, English politicians, administrators and merchants learned an array of secrets of economic, fiscal and military modernity.

Within the historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it is increasingly appreciated that nations and states wrote themselves not only in speeches and on paper, but upon landscapes and waterways. This is no less true of the early modern period. In England as in Ireland, much of the ‘ideology and, indeed, central values of the culture were wrapped up in the landscape – its occupation, its use, its names, stories and legends’. When the United Kingdom of Great Britain was eventually created, a long fought for and complex cultural achievement (economic, social, political and military) was explained as a natural fact. The general claim was of a special relationship to the ocean. As an Erskine Childers character put it in 1903: ‘we’re a maritime nation – we’ve grown by the sea and live by it … We’re unique in that way, just as our huge empire, only linked by the sea, is unique.’ The specific claim was that Britain was an island nation.

To use the terminology of Daniel Defoe in the Appendix to this volume, this was an aspect of the duck language by which residents of Britain persuaded foreigners, or themselves, that their country was elementally unique. For humans, though not for ducks (according to humans), this informed a moral argument, since the languages of politics remained moral and indeed primarily confessional. To the extent that this argument was nationalist these writers were also quacking through their tailfeathers. The purpose of duck language, Defoe dramatically observed, was to ‘kidnap’ and betray foreign ducks. This is not to say that Britain developed a sense of self which was exceptionally exclusive, xenophobic, or anything other than a recognizably local version of European nationalism. It is to say that, within this historical formation, the tropes of island, island nation, oceanic destiny and empire were central.


This built upon a series of developments. These included the Anglo-Scottish dynastic union achieved in 1603, the brief political and military unification of Albion by Oliver Cromwell, and the creation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707. These events underwrote the creation of a modern English, and then British, military-fiscal state. Crucial to the process was development of an empire, European, Atlantic and global. The relationship between English and then British state and empire formation, in particular militarily, has been a powerful theme of the historiography of both the seventeenth and the eighteenth century.

‘The motif of the island’ has been asserted to be ‘the theme of British colonialism’.

Britain’s island idea came to encapsulate all of these claims: internal unity; military security; global mobility and reach. Above all it implied separation. To this day the United Kingdom stands upon the threshold of its future, distracted by an idea about its past. That idea is Britain’s separateness from the rest of Europe. In the 1930s, the origins of this believed fact were traced by G.M. Trevelyan to the Elizabethan emancipation of the ‘national and patriotic genius’ from ‘that obedience to cosmopolitan orders and corporations which had been inculcated by the Catholic church and the feudal obligation … In the heat of that struggle, English civilization was fused into its modern form, at once insular and oceanic, distinct from the continental civilization of which the Norman Conquest had once made it part.’

By the mid-eighteenth century this insular ‘Britannia’ claimed to rule the waves. This claim signified independence not only from external power, but within historical time. In relation to a series of features of modernity the suggestion became, not only that Britain was free, but that it had been first. In 1940 Winston Churchill spoke of ‘our long island
history ... and the long continuity of our institutions and our empire ... we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny ... we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds'.

This claim to island identity was defended decisively by 1945, and again in 1982, when the Thatcher government fell back upon images of 'This Sceptered Isle' and of a globe-spanning 'island race'. Viewed from another part of the world island identity might have a different meaning (for instance small, or universal). Visiting his childhood home of Trinidad (still a British colony) from England in 1956, V.S. Naipaul reported: 'Trinidad is a funny place. It has a population less than Nottingham's yet, while Churchill calls England an island, they call T'dad a country. And really it is hard to feel while you are here that Trinidad really is small. Jamaica is even worse. Jamaica is the world for Jamaicans.'

In his *History of the English-Speaking Peoples* Churchill stated the geographically embodied British claim to separateness moderately. The island was 'not widely sundered from the Continent' and very accessible to the invader, whether he comes in peace or war, as pirate or merchant, conqueror or missionary. Those who dwell there are not insensitive to any shift of power, any change of faith, or even fashion, on the mainland, but they give to every practice, every doctrine that comes to it from abroad, its peculiar turn and imprint.

It is no longer acceptable to make such claims to distinctness in cultural or racial terms. One interesting consequence is that the dependence of British historians upon geographical language has deepened. Following John Pocock's 'Atlantic Archipelago' and Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles*, a study by Norman Davies is simply called *The Isles*. Linda Colley, despite setting its history in European and imperial contexts, refers to Britain as 'these islands'. In 2005 *The Economist* celebrated republication of H.E. Marshall's *Our Island Story* (1905), arguing that its 'brave mix of truth and myth' once again looks 'cutting edge'.

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In fact it was a conspicuous English failure to fight on the beaches, or anywhere else, which helps to account for the fact that the process which created the modern British state was not English, but Anglo-Dutch. The extent to which a massive foreign invasion of England remains unrecognized by British and other European public consciousness is surely remarkable. In November 2009, The Guardian newspaper battled an anti-Low Countries backlash in the wake of the appointment of Herman Van Rompuy as the first president of the European Union. ‘Before deriding the statelets of north-western Europe’, an editorial warned, ‘English chauvinists should recall the hand the great British patriot, Lord Palmerston, played in settling the map. These countries have been overrun militarily more than any others, but so many different invaders have now left their mark that the culture is now one of metropolitan tolerance.’ The Dutch republic was uniquely tolerant before it overran England militarily in 1688. If tolerance were a by-product of invasion William III would have encountered flower power, Beatles records and gay matrimony in Torbay. Before ‘settling the map’ of others, early modern Britain had to settle the map of itself. If, thereafter, the United Kingdom became a maritime power, that was not because it was an island. Other such powers (Athens, the United Provinces, the United States) had not been islands, although all contained many; other islands (Crete, Sicily, Ireland) had not been such powers. ‘They are an island people, maritime by instinct, proud, valiant, dogged.’ It is no accident that these words were penned in England shortly after the Second World War, though in fact by a New Zealander writing about Crete.

By comparison to New Zealanders English people do not evince any remarkable interest in islands as such. Far from poring self-consciously over maps of archipelagos in the Aegean or South Pacific, they are rather simply more or less securely possessed of their sense of otherness in

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relation to the rest of Europe. That this has been packaged geographically is secondary, though it is to the history of that packaging that we are about to turn.

Nations are products, not of nature but of culture.38 As David Armitage has written:

Because Britain's maritime destiny seemed compelled by nature, it was by definition beyond historical analysis; similarly, because Britain's natural situation divided it physically from the rest of Europe, its history could be seen as unavoidably exceptional. A fact so stubborn could hardly be historical; a history so exceptional was inassimilable to other European norms. British naval mastery came to be seen as [as] inevitable as the expansion of the British empire, and each would be subject to the same complacent amnesia. If the myth indeed had a history, it would become more contingent and hence less inspiring.39

If this myth had no history, nor was it a statement about geography. It was the deployment of a geographical trope to project a new, and modern, military reality.40 England was not an island; early modern islands were not divided from the rest of Europe; and British geography was not exceptional in European terms. However, to follow Armitage in replacing politics with history, and inspiration with perspiration, we must begin not with any assertion of empirical reality, but with a reconstruction of the relationship between geographical and political perceptions as they existed and changed over time.

