

## THE DISCOVERY OF ISLANDS

*The Discovery of Islands* consists of a series of linked essays in British history, written by one of the world's leading historians of ideas and published at intervals over the past generation. The purpose of the essays is to present British history as the history of several nations interacting with – and sometimes seceding from – association with an imperial state. The American colonies seceded in the eighteenth century; most of Ireland seceded in the twentieth century; in the later part of that century Britain itself secedes from the association of nations it has built up across the globe.

John Pocock presents this history as that of an archipelago, situated in oceans and expanding across them to the Antipodes. Both New Zealand history and ways of seeing history formed in New Zealand enter into the overall vision, and the aim is to present British history as oceanic and global, complementing (and occasionally criticizing) the presentation of that history as European. Professor Pocock's interpretation of British history has been hugely influential in recent years, making *The Discovery of Islands* a resource of immense value for historians of Britain, of the British Empire, and indeed of the world. The title itself is derived from the poetry of Allen Curnow (1911–2001).

J. G. A. POCKOCK is Harry C. Black Professor Emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University.

# THE DISCOVERY OF ISLANDS

*Essays in British History*

J. G. A. POCOCK



Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-0-521-85095-7 — The Discovery of Islands  
J. G. A. Pocock  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.  
It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of  
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521850957](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521850957)

© in this collection J. G. A. Pocock 2005

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2005

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-85095-7 Hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-61645-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or  
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in  
this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,  
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

How shall I compare the discovery of islands?  
History had many instinctive processes,  
Past reason's range, green innocence of nerves,  
Now all destroyed by self-analysis . . .

Compare, compare, now horrible untruth  
Rings true in our obliterating season:  
Our islands lost again, all earth one island,  
And all our travel circumnavigation.

From *Discovery* (c. 1941) by Allen Curnow (1911–2001).

## *Contents*

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Note on bibliographies</i>	xiii
PART I: THE FIELD PROPOSED	
1 The antipodean perception (2003)	3
2 British history: a plea for a new subject (1973/1974)	24
PART II: THE THREE KINGDOMS AND THE ENGLISH PROBLEM	
3 The field enlarged: an introduction (2004)	47
4 Two kingdoms and three histories? Political thought in British contexts (1994)	58
5 The Atlantic archipelago and the War of the Three Kingdoms (1996)	77
6 The Third Kingdom in its history (2000)	94
PART III: EMPIRE AND REBELLION IN THE FIRST AGE OF UNION	
7 Archipelago, Europe and Atlantic after 1688 (2003)	107
8 The significance of 1688: some reflections on Whig history (1991)	114
9 Empire, state and confederation: the War of American Independence as a crisis in multiple monarchy (1995)	134
10 The Union in British history (2000)	164

## PART IV: NEW ZEALAND IN THE STRANGE MULTIPLICITY

- |    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 11 | The neo-Britains and the three empires (2003)   | 181 |
| 12 | <i>Tangata whenua</i> and Enlightenment anthropology (1992)   | 199 |
| 13 | Law, sovereignty and history in a divided culture: the case of New Zealand and the Treaty of Waitangi (1992/1998) | 226 |

## PART V: BRITAIN, EUROPE AND POST-MODERN HISTORY

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 14 | Sovereignty and history in the late twentieth century (2003) | 259 |
| 15 | Deconstructing Europe (1991)                                 | 269 |
| 16 | The politics of the new British history (2001)               | 289 |
| 17 | Conclusion: history, sovereignty, identity (2003)            | 301 |

	<i>Bibliographies</i>	311
--	-----------------------	-----

	<i>Index</i>	329
--	--------------	-----

## *Preface and acknowledgements*

This volume presents a selection from the essays on its subject which I have published since 1974, when the first of them – Chapter 2 in this series – appeared in New Zealand. That essay has been credited with a role in initiating a project known as ‘the new British history’, but since the project is now quite widely practised and understood, I have not used the word ‘new’ in the title of this book. My intention is to present a reading of British history, and an understanding of what those words may mean, which can stand alongside other readings. There is no history which is not many-sided, and no reading to which there are not alternatives.

The essays selected are later in date than the proposal of 1974, belonging to the 1990s and the opening years of this millennium. Among the reasons for this selection, one is that this has been the decade in which the ‘British history’, then known as new, began to be written by a number of hands and to be examined, sometimes critically, in a number of collections and monographs. I have selected my own writings in order to present them as part of this literature and its problems. They deal for the most part with the period c. 1500–1800, regarding which I practise historiography; the medieval and modern periods appear marginally, but are by no means unnoticed. The essays are divided into sections suggesting a periodization, each preceded by an introductory chapter written for this volume.

There are two respects, however, in which these essays reflect concerns of my own, and include among other intentions that of furthering them. The first in order of time was delivered as a lecture in New Zealand in 1973, and was occasioned in part by the British decision to seek entry into what is now the European Union. I was, and remain, concerned with the impact of this decision on New Zealand and on the history to which we – the reader is desired to note this currently unfashionable pronoun – knew ourselves as belonging. In presenting ‘British history’ as archipelagic rather than English, I was seeking to present it as a product of many makers – and

some unmakers – in which ‘we’ had voice and which could not be simply unmade by anyone. As well as reminding the British peoples that they inhabited a history more complex than they could readily terminate, this involved continuing that history past the point where New Zealand history had first appeared as one of its components. At that point it became a history perceived from New Zealand and in part made by that perception. I have included essays on ways in which New Zealand continues the ‘British history’ I have been recommending, and have added others explaining this history as the product of an antipodean perception that can be presented to readers generally. The title of this volume, and the verse accompanying it, drawn from New Zealand poetry,<sup>1</sup> conveys this perception. There are points at which I have also conveyed it by resorting to autobiography, and I trust the reader to accept that I am presenting myself as a piece of historical evidence.

The second aspect of this volume I should mention is that it contains essays and other passages critical of the idea of ‘Europe’. British history of course belongs to the history of that globally expansive civilization, originally formed in the western provinces of the European, or Eurasian, sub-continent, to which its own complex of islands may rightly be seen as belonging. I am critical only – but for many reasons – of the proposition that British, in particular English, interactions with the cultures of the adjacent sub-continent in some way diminish, or even eliminate, the history of interactions and processes within the archipelago, moving outward into the Atlantic and the global oceans, the Americas and the Antipodes. I hold that English and British history can and should be written in both a sub-continental and an oceanic perspective, and I am critical of the proposition that either subverts the other. I am sceptical of the idea of ‘Europe’ when it appears to advance this proposition; when I suspect it of a design to eliminate distinctive histories and sovereignties; and when I find it incapable of distinguishing between scepticism and hostility. All of these conditions arise too often for comfort.

The ‘British history’ here presented continues to face the problem of how far it can escape the Anglocentricity it was intended to replace; the problem being that it is inescapably, though partially, the history of an English dominance, which the English saw and conducted as a product of their internal politics, while other peoples responded to it, sought to share it, or in some cases resolved to secede from it altogether. All these reactions – the American and Irish secessions not excluded – form part of ‘British

<sup>1</sup> Curnow, 1943; 1997, p. 217.



*Preface and acknowledgements*

xi

history' as I would like it to be understood; for even a secession is part of the history from which it secedes. I understand an Irish desire to see their history in a context outside the obsessive relation with England and Britain to which it has been so much confined; and such a history might well be written on any terms which do not pretend that this relation and obsession have not existed. While there is a 'British history' to be written around a central Anglo-Scottish polarity, one written around a British-Irish polarity would perhaps penetrate more deeply into the histories of two profoundly different cultures which have been historically inseparable. Methodologically, I am interested in the relation between 'national' and 'extra-national' historiographies; ideologically, I am making the claim that both probably will, and should, continue to exist.

A volume such as this is necessarily indebted to many helpers. The footnote references and Bibliography B extend the record of this indebtedness. I must begin by naming Richard Fisher of Cambridge University Press, who proposed the collection and has endured its successive mutations with good humour and sound advice; and the anonymous readers for that Press who have counselled me on successive drafts. On English history I have learned in special ways from John Morrill and Jonathan Clark; on Scottish from Arthur Williamson, Roger Mason and Colin Kidd; on Irish from Jane Ohlmeyer, Ian McBride and Brendan Bradshaw; on American and the history of empire from Jack P. Greene, Eliga H. Gould and David Armitage; and on the history of political thought, as ever, from my colleagues and friends at the Folger Shakespeare Library. In the New Zealand field, I record a special debt to Andrew Sharp and Paul McHugh; one of another kind to James Belich, Judith Binney and (though this may surprise him) Te Maire Tau; while my contemporary Peter Munz will understand, though he may not approve. This is also the point at which to thank Caleb McDaniel for preparing the original typescript and Katherine Hajar for its revision. Felicity Pocock read it aloud at the proofreading stage. My grateful thanks also go to the editors and publishers of the volumes and periodicals in which most of these essays have already appeared. They are listed in the Bibliography and I take this opportunity of thanking them all. Lastly, my debt to the poems and friendship of the late Allen Curnow runs from beginning to end of this volume and holds it together.

In preparing these essays for republication, I have revised them lightly and sparingly in order to improve clarity, lessen repetition and eliminate

material now obsolete. I have not attempted to preserve the footnotes in their original form, but have reduced all to author and date with reference to the two bibliographies, indicating in some cases where reference is made to works appearing since the original essay's publication. A very few *obiter dicta* are contained in the footnotes within square brackets.

*Baltimore, Maryland, 2004*

## *Note on bibliographies*

I have ventured on a complete listing of my publications in the field in which this volume enters; it appears as Bibliography A. Others I have had occasion to mention are listed in Bibliography B, and are accordingly marked (B) in the footnotes.