

Elizabeth McMahon. *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*. Anthem Studies in Australian Literature and Culture. London: Anthem Press, 2016, 312pp.

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Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination examines insularity primarily in Australian literature but also in literary theory, in Caribbean literature, and to a lesser extent in British, Indian, and American writing. By *literature* here is meant a broad range of genres: poetry, plays, novels, and short stories as well as nonfiction pamphlets, histories, and more. Some of the literature and history is formal and canonical, and some is popular and ephemeral. Elizabeth McMahon displays an encyclopedic knowledge of the many references to islands, shipwrecks, and utopias in the works she studies and in the secondary literature on them. The thesis is that Australia is insular yet also continental, a ‘contradiction and inversion’ and so ‘a space that contain an otherness within itself... endlessly baffling and, hence, philosophical and creative’ (3). As an ‘island continent,’ it has been seen as permeable yet bounded, isolated from the world yet connected to it, non-modern yet futuristic, one entity yet an array of islands, ‘a perfect object of control’ but escaping encapsulation, manmade and natural, and a place of ‘escape and luxury’ while also a prison and a trap (4–5). *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination* scrutinizes these conjunctions in the many varied texts it addresses.

McMahon begins her voyage with John Donne’s famous expression of 1623–1624 that ‘No man is an *Iland*, intire of itselfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*,’ observing in chapter 1 that an island is a place ‘where ego and geography appear to be perfectly aligned’ (19). Part of her investigation in the book discovers insightfully that men ‘align’ well with islands whereas women do not easily fit into them. Gender is significant throughout. Chapters 2 and 3 are paired. Chapter 2 investigates the first encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and Australia, explores historical connections between the two geographical areas, and analyzes modernist reexaminations of insularity. If one is unfamiliar with the amount of contact between the West Indies and Australia, McMahon mines them in the chapter and lays them out further in an appendix that lists naval, military, mercantile, and other men who served, traded, and so on in both places. The chapter comes to focus on what is arguably Australia’s first novel, Henry Savery’s *Quintus Servinton* of 1830. Chapter 3 continues the discussion with an exploration of mid-twentieth century West Indian and Australian writers, particularly Shirley Hazzard, for their ideas about what it meant to be insular, continental, and/or global at that point in history.

Chapters 4 and 5 are grouped under the title of ‘Dreams and Nightmares.’ Chapter 4 explores narratives and lyrical moments involving shipwrecks and castaways in which people try to replicate their homelands in their new insular habitations, become colonists, or else to try escape the confines of an insular existence. In the diverse literary works McMahon addresses, narratives are stopped by long descriptions of wrecks, by the death of people in shipwrecks, and by the end of the voyaging projects because of destruction. A central topic is God’s providence in these seafaring tales, and McMahon’s attention comes to focus on William Cowper’s ‘The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk’ and ‘The Castaway,’ as well as on the stories, plays, and other works that arose due to the wreck of the Dutch ship *Batavia* in the Indian Ocean off the West Coast of Australia in 1629. It ends with the eccentric story of deeply troubled claims to Middle Percy Island near the central coast of Queensland. Chapter 5 delves into the contradictory nature of utopias, which

almost always reveal themselves to have dystopic elements. It uses theory to uncover how islands are ‘a paradise and a prison’ and ‘a supplement to the continental dominant’ (16). McMahon follows others in noting that smaller islands utopias appear to have been left behind in the march of history, but now global climate change and rising sea levels challenge the very existence of many islands both large and small. Her analysis of various novels and plays culminates with attention on Torres Straits fiction.

Medievalists and classicists would quibble with the repeated assertions in the book about the ‘modernity’ of certain ideas about islands and identity. It is not true that the word *island* only coalesces in its geographical meaning in the sixteenth century as any glance at the *Oxford English Dictionary* will reveal. Just in the British tradition, one can look at the Anglo-Saxon *Wife’s Lament* or *Wulf and Eadwacer*, or at Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘Man of Law’s Tale,’ for examples of complex thinking about the relations between selfhood, country, the sea, gender, and insularity before what is usually considered the early modern era. Carefully reasoned and well-researched arguments that undo distinctions between medieval and modern periodization are widely available. One might now start with Patricia Ingham’s *The Medieval New* or any other number of older works that question the investments in such divisions, perhaps to arrive at Bruno Latour’s idea that ‘we have never been modern.’ Or one could dip into Shayne Legassie’s *The Medieval Invention of Travel*, which similarly questions the reiteration of historical trajectories that lead through Christopher Columbus to a recognizable modernity.

Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination is a theoretically sophisticated and multi-layered approach to the topic of Australian literature and insularity. McMahon’s style is often to produce layers of literary theory, geographical ideas about islands, and secondary sources before and then during a discussion of literature. For example, chapter 3 opens with Peter Sloterdijk’s ideas about globalism and postmodernism, continues on with Derrida, Heidegger, George Steiner, Gilles Deleuze, Walter Benjamin, George Lukács, and more. Sometimes the reader feels at sea as wave after wave comes crashing in, but generally the ideas layer on top of each other in ways that enlighten and offer new insights into the subsequent literature. It is apt that McMahon returns often to Derrida’s question ‘What is an island?’ She takes on the question and offers a profusion of ideas and examples as answers. She also fully takes on the tonal range of Derrida’s related offering that ‘There is no world any more, only islands’ in her careful attention to the plaintive but also hopeful particularity of insular lives and literature.

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