Archipelagic Scotland: The Poetics of Islands and Island Poetry

Abstract: The essay proposes an exploratory discussion of the significance of the concept of islands and archipelagos in Scottish poetry. Beginning with a look at Samuel Johnson’s A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland (1775) and James Boswell’s The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1785), the essay recalibrates the notion of remoteness, thus attempting to challenge dominant narratives of the centre and its margins. With an overview of selected poetic representations of the islands of Scotland, the paper aims to offer an insight into the diversity of voices and approaches characterizing Scottish literature, with a brief look at the twentieth-century and twenty-first century Scottish poetry including readings of selected works of such poetic figures as Kathleen Jamie, Jackie Kay and Don Paterson.

Keywords: Scotland, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson, archipelagic poetics, Scottish poetry

Seven hundred and ninety: this is the number of islands of Scotland. Even though many smaller islands are uninhabited, it still leaves quite a few. Some, like St Kilda, were inhabited for millennia; recently traces of Neolithic culture were found on the island. Some, like Iona, were lively centres of Celtic culture. Early manifestations of modernity brought turmoil to the settled island cultures, with the particularly disruptive Highland Clearances in the second half of the eighteenth century, which resulted in forced evictions on many islands. Additionally, growing tourism affected the islanders’ life in the nineteenth century. Eccentric in their location and status, the Scottish islands were for many the epitome of a savage way of life. Yet changes came earlier, as a remark from Samuel Johnson’s A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland (1775) suggests: “We came thither too late to see what we expected, a people of peculiar appearance and a system of antiquated life”¹. Although in the case of Johnson, clearly unaware of his bias, it may have been an expression of a disappointment in not encountering savages who lead

a sufficiently primitive existence. Johnson’s Scottish travel companion, James Boswell, The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides (1785), writes that as visitors they wanted to “contemplate a system of life almost totally different from what we had been accustomed to see; and, to find simplicity and wildness, and the circumstances of remote time or place, so near to our native great island.” On the verge of the British Isles, forming part of Europe’s boundary, the Hebridean islands are othered in the accounts of the two eighteenth-century travellers. As Peter Conrad writes, “[i]slands lie at the edge of a world we think we know, and the gaps between them make the perimeter porous: can they mount a defence against the bogs, demons or rival deities assembled beyond the border?” There is a sense that Johnson and Boswell set out on their journey to the Scottish islands in search of bogs and demons. The metropolis meets the periphery with a sense of superiority, feeding island fantasies, informed by the myth of the lone adventurer which privileges a sense of wilderness and remoteness that is allegedly to be found there. Yet as Kathleen Jamie points out, “[p]laces with such long human histories, I soon came to distrust any starry-eyed notions of ‘wild’ or ‘remote’. Remote from what? London? But what was London?” The question, challenging binaries and interrogating the division between the dominant centre and the weak (because dispersed as opposed to concentrated) margins recurs in academic discourse devoted to the reconceptualization of island cultures.

Recently the concept of islands and archipelagos has come to academic attention in an emerging field, Atlantic archipelagic studies that strive to challenge the dominant narrative of the centre and its margins. The term “Atlantic archipelago” was coined in the mid-1970s by J.G.A. Pocock in an attempt to replace the Anglocentric terms “British Isles”, “Great Britain”, or “United Kingdom”, which would integrate the national narratives of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales into a “new British history.” As Philip Schwyzer explains in the introduction to Archipelagic Identities: Literature and Identity in the Atlantic Archipelago 1550–1800: “The essence of what we might term the archipelagic perspective lies in a willingness to challenge traditional boundaries – boundaries, that is, between the histories of different nation-states, and also between academic disciplines.” He argues that a “central strand of archipelagic studies… must be comparative –… between the various languages, native and immigrant, of the region.” In Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1707, John Kerrigan proposes to “strip away

---

3 Peter Conrad, Islands: A Trip Through Time and Space (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2009), 62.
6 Clemit, “Storm sky bright”.
8 Schwyzer, Introduction, 4.
modern Anglocentric and Victorian imperial paradigms to recover the long, braided histories played out across the British-Irish archipelago between three kingdoms, four countries, divided regions, variable ethnicities and religiously determined allegiances. The archipelagic perspective proposes a shift in focus, with closer attention to locality and distinctive habitats and other configurations of belonging. Despite the stereotypical associations of islands with isolation and remoteness stemming from the etymological background, as Alexandra Campbell argues, dominating “narratives of sovereignty and individualism”, the emergence of Island Studies and Blue Humanities “has sought in part to counteract this belittling and insular view of island cultures… by offering alternative readings of island spaces cultural and ecological interconnectivity”. Importantly, archipelagic criticism puts “emphasis on fluid spatial relations gesturing towards and exploring reconfigurations of cultural identity”. Significant as the emergence of these theoretical approaches is, it follows artistic practice: as is often the case, poets precede theorists. And so Scottish poets practiced archipelagic thinking before the concept was invented and theorized.

Aware of the significant role of islands in Scottish culture, as soon as Jackie Kay was appointed to the post of Scots Makar, or national poet of Scotland in 2016, she announced a tour around Scotland, which began with visits to North Uist, Lewis and Shetland, to be continued throughout her five-year tenure. Kay plans to use the experiences gathered during the tour in an epic poem reflecting “multi-voiced, multi-tongued Scotland”, as she puts it. The title of the poem will be “Ferlie Leed”, a Scots expression meaning “wondrous talk”. Her intention is to write a verse about each place that will contribute to a poem reflecting the varied languages, accents, geography and cultures of Scotland. Kay wishes the final poem to include a range of different languages and accents; as she says, “In Shetland, the way that people talk is very different to Doric, or Lallands. Then there are Polish voices in Scotland, and Syrian voices”. She says that her ambition is “to get round as many of Scotland’s islands as possible so I can stitch together a tapestry of poems, with a stanza about each island”. A tapestry brings to mind Penelope, but Kay is closer to Ulysses, calling the tour “an odyssey”. She sees it as part of her “makarship”: “I want as makar to get around every single Scottish island and peninsula, just because they often get left out. I want to write a long poem where each

---

13 Brooks, “Jackie Kay”.
island has a stanza. I think stanzas and islands have a lot in common – stanzas have a lot of space around them and islands have the sea”\textsuperscript{15}. Kay continues to employ this simile in a statement that highlights the connective role of poetry, “[i]slands are like stanzas – poetry hopefully crosses land and sea”\textsuperscript{16}. Just as the sea is a “space of connection and communication”\textsuperscript{17}, the archipelagic condition makes Scottish literature plural, dispersed, scattered. This dispersal and scattering is not its weakness but an advantage, which has resulted in a rich literary tradition. A brief look at the twentieth-century and twenty-first century Scottish major poetic figures reveals many island connections.

In the twentieth century, a number of poets lived and worked on islands around the coast of Scotland. Born on Deerness, Edwin Muir spent his childhood on Orkney and later in his work explored the contrast between his recollections of this pastoral idyll and the gritty, urban life he later experienced in Glasgow. George Mackay Brown spent almost all his life in Stromness on the Orkney Island where he was born. The most important poet of the Scottish Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid lived in the island of Whalsay, Shetland, from 1933 until 1942, and his collection Stony Limits, and Other Poems (1934) evokes the Shetlandic landscape. His collection of travel essays, The Islands of Scotland (1939) is a significant work of literary reconfiguration of this geographical and cultural region. Born in Nassau in the Bahamas, Ian Hamilton Finlay briefly lived on Rousay, the Orkney Islands, during the winter of 1955-56. This location became a source of inspiration for the symbolic landscapes depicted in much of his later work when agoraphobia made him unable to leave Stonypath, Little Sparta (which became his island in the Pentland Hills south-west of Edinburgh) for thirty years\textsuperscript{18}. Another significant poetic voice, Iain Crichton Smith was born on the Isle of Lewis and received a bilingual upbringing. Unlike Muir’s Orkney, his vision of island life is not an idyll. In an essay titled “Real People in a Real Place”, Smith writes: “To grow up on an island is to grow up in a special world. Many of the books I have read on the Hebrides, however, make this world appear Edenic and unreal: others suggest that the islander is a child who appears lost in the ‘real world’, and even invent for him a language that was never spoken by anyone. It is easy to assign the islander to this misty, rather beautiful world, and leave him there”\textsuperscript{19}. Another notable contemporary Scottish poet, Derick S. Thomson (Ruaraidh MacThòmais), author of A New English-Gaelic Dictionary (1981) and editor of the literary quarterly Gairm (Call), grew up in the same village as Iain Crichton Smith.

Regular visits to Scalpay, the small Hebridean Island, had an enduring effect on Norman MacCaig’s poetry. There is separateness between Edinburgh and Scalpay in his writing.\textsuperscript{20} The poems set on the island evoke a remote, alien landscape, but also

\textsuperscript{15} Brooks, “Jackie Kay”.
\textsuperscript{16} Anonymous, “Scotland’s Makar – Jackie Kay”.
\textsuperscript{18} Little Sparta, [https://www.littlesparta.org.uk/ian-hamilton-finlay-his-work/](https://www.littlesparta.org.uk/ian-hamilton-finlay-his-work/).
\textsuperscript{19} Iain Crichton Smith, “Real People in a Real Place”, in Towards the Human (Loanhead: Macdonald Publishers, 1986), 14.
\textsuperscript{20} Alasdair Macrae, Norman MacCaig (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 2011), 58.
show a communal life. Yet another major Scottish poet, Sorley Maclean lived on the island of Raasay lying off the coast of the Isle of Skye. One of his best-known poems, “Hallaig”, written in Gaelic (and translated by Seamus Heaney), is a meditation on a Raasay village, which had been cleared of its inhabitants, now a spectral place.

In the twenty-first century, the Scottish islands continue to offer a welcoming ground for poets. There are those who come from the islands; there are also those who were born somewhere else but decided to live and write on the archipelago. Born in Edinburgh, Meg Bateman’s residence of choice is the Isle of Skye, which is coterminous with the language in which she creates. She has published three collections of Gaelic poetry with English translations, including Aotromachd/ Lightness (2001), Fair Wind (2007) and Transparencies (2013). Scottish by choice, Jen Hadfield, author of three collections: Almanacs (2005), Nigh-No Place (2008) and Byssus (2014), lives in Shetland. Another poet with the Northern Isles connection is Christine De Luca, Edinburgh’s Makar from 2014 to 2017. The pull of islands is so powerful that some poets transcend their medium and reach for other means of artistic expression, as the Perthshire-born, London-based Robin Robertson, who together with a Scottish folk musician, Alasdair Roberts, produced Hirta Songs, a song cycle inspired by the archipelago after the poet’s visit to St Kilda, released in 2013 on the label Stone Tape Recordings.

Some poets revisit islands in a literary form, foregrounding cultural links; they add new links in the chain, in the process of artistic continuity. For instance, in one of his journey projects, Còmhlan Bheanntan/A Company of Mountains (2014), Alec Finlay combines poems, essays, photographs, and what he calls “word-mntn” drawings. Inspired by Sorley Maclean’s “Ceann Loch Aeoineart”, Finlay chose fourteen locations on the Isle of Skye, exploring cultural and historical aspects of place, including the mountain range from Maclean’s epic poem An Cuillithionn (“The Cuillin”). The volume is preceded by a map of the island with numbered places, or vistas, for which Finlay uses the word “conspectuses” interchangeably. Originating from Latin and signifying “a sight”, conspectus suggests an overall view of something, which justifies the book’s subtitle: 14 Views of the Isle of Skye. In a long list of contributors, Finlay lists among the poets Meg Bateman, Thomas A. Clark, and Roderick Watson, as well as Sorley Maclean and Ian Crichton Smith.

New generations of island-born writers in their work continue to evoke life and landscape of archipelagic Scotland. For instance, Ian Stephen, who was born in Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides and still lives on Lewis, the author of Maritime (2016). Other poets associated with the Outer Hebrides are Kevin MacNeil, the author of Love and Zen in the Outer Hebrides (1998) and editor of an anthology These Islands, We Sing: An Anthology of Scottish Islands Poetry (2011) and Niall Campbell, born in South Uist, the author of Moontide (2014), First Nights: Poems (2017) and Noctuary (2019). Andrew Greig, the author of Found at Sea: The Expanded Log of the Arctic Whaler to overnight on Cava (2013), a collection compared to a modern Odyssey, which depicts the way of life of sailors, their loneliness and companionship. Each section is preceded by an epigraph, which
situates the volume in a broader, British literary context, both modern and Anglo-Saxon, through references to Ezra Pound’s Cantos and the Old English poem, The Seafarer. Yet the poems are never far from the Scottish ground, as the final poem, “Post script”, with a note “in memoriam George Mackay Brown”, demonstrates. Finally, originating from Shetland, Roseanne Watt is a poet, filmmaker and editor for The Island Review. Her first collection, Moder Dy was published in Polygon New Poets series in 2019. In “A Note to the Reader”, Roseanne Watt expounds that a number of the poems in the volume are written in Shaetlan, or the local vernacular of the Shetland Islands, “a form of Scots shaped by sea roads”. As Watts puts it, the language is “something of a fraught coalition between English, Lowland Scots and old Norn: the extinct Scandinavian language of the Northern Isles”. Place names and words describing the natural world echo the latter, being the spectral trace of the old speech no longer fully present. Because Shaetlan does not have standardised spelling, it depends on individual speech patterns, changing from one island to another, as Watt helpfully explains. This means that starting from the title, the spelling in the collection is a matter of convention subject to fluidity. The expression “moder dy” (which may be pronounced differently by different islanders) – spelt as “moder dai” in the epigraph, an excerpt from Scots Magazine – means a “mother wave”, one directed towards the land. “On a sonic level, Shaetlan reflects its landscape; hard and open, yet with constant fluctuations of light”, “wilderness inside”. Some poems are thus written in two languages, Shaetlan and English, the latter being the result of “uneasy translations”, as Watt puts it. The reader is also invited to reconstruct the meaning of the dialect poems – “[f]or a truer understanding of these poems” – with the aid of the glossary provided at the end of the book, “where each word can be read and measured with the full weight of its meaning behind it”. Watt plays with typography and the arrangement of words on the page. The English versions are frequently printed in italics and in a different layout to indicate that they are distinct from the Shaetlan originals. The singularity of island poetry is thus marked concretely on the page.

The singular nature of islands, each its own difference from every other, continues to invite many poets to create and write. In the final part of the essay I wish to turn to two poets, Kathleen Jamie and Don Paterson. The latter chooses to muse over new beginnings offered by an island location in a poem titled “Luing”. For Paterson, Luing is “our unsung/ innermost isle: Kilda’s antithesis”, the description being

---

22 During the Place and Space in Scottish Literature and Culture conference organised at the University of Gdańsk in October 2015, Roseanne Watt presented some of her video-poems, a form in which she also creates.
23 Rosanne Watt, Moder Dy (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2019), xi.
24 Ibid., xi.
25 Ibid., xi.
26 Ibid., xii.
27 Ibid., xii.
a deliberate gesture away from the mythicized St Kilda, which is “very much a place of romantic pilgrimage for people.” Paterson’s poem employs common tropes such as island as exile, island as rebirth and island as a body. There are references to bodily parts (“her arms”, “the palms”, “the breastbone”, “the brow”), and to life functions (“her breath”), all belonging to the motherland, to which Luing appertains. The word “fontanelles” in the penultimate stanza contains a powerful suggestion of the island as the place of the beginning of a new life. The phrase “fordable Atlantic” suggests the accessibility of a place where everything can start anew, after crossing a shallow strip of a body of water, depicting the island not as a remote location but one within reach. The participles “leaving”, “watching”, “aching”, which begin the three stanzas stress the process of becoming, whereby things “reopen one by one” and begin again and again, forever unfinished.

While Paterson refuses to look at St Kilda, Kathleen Jamie looks at it from different perspectives. In Sightlines (2012), dedicated to “the island-goers”, the essay “Three Ways of Looking at St Kilda” depicts the island as “cliff-ridden and bird-wreathed – and totally unlikely on the whole”, the effect undoubtedly enhanced by the island’s history. Inevitably as it seems, island travel creates certain associations. On the return of Jamie’s first trip to St Kilda, which was thwarted by wind, she only gets as far as the Monach Islands in the Outer Hebrides. Jamie writes with a hint of irony: “I’d been on the desert islands, my husband had been at home with the infants. He was the one who looked ravaged, like Robinson Crusoe”. The opening of the essay titled “On Rona” depicts a sense of desolation pervading these islands and returning in Jamie’s writing. Now home mainly to petrels, puffins, gannets, fulmars, and skuas, the island is “one last green hill rising from the waves”, which is “[f]ar over the horizon, out in the north Atlantic, where one might expect a clear run to Iceland or even Labrador, or, if anything, just a guano-streaked gull-slum”. Rona “[i]nhabited once, but now the island is returned to birds and seals; grey seals breed in thousands there, many seemingly disinclined to leave. Every day, all around the shore, were rocks softened by the shapes of seals, watching us from the waters”. In Jamie’s poem titled “Fianuis”, the name of the peninsula on Rona, the poetic subject is in the company of a nameless friend, which contrasts with solitude evoked in Paterson’s poem. At “the land’s frayed end”, they “saunter”, encountering objects suggestive of transitoriness and brittleness such as feathers, shells and “a whole bull seal, bone-dry”. A sense of provisionality is all-pervasive, the word

30 Jamie, Sightlines, 131.
31 In 1930 the remaining thirty-six St Kildans asked to be evacuated on a ship called Harebell. The life on the island several years before the evacuation was documented in the film St Kilda, Britain’s Loneliest Isle (1928).
32 Jamie, Sightlines, 135.
33 Ibid., 179.
34 Ibid., 182.
“change” reverberating in bird calls. What remains are the clouds and wind, “everything else is provisional”. Witnessing mutability, we come to gain a sense of our own transience. Made and unmade on the earth in the course of geological periods, islands offer a realisation of deep time, which governs land formation and is in stark contrast with brief, human time in all its fleeting nature.

In writing on the islands the self is immersed in the world, where the forces of the weather-world rule and dominate, offering glimpses of the sublime and the elemental being: the wind, the sea, the stone. The poems just considered – and many others ranging over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – foreground temporality, and proximity of self and world, experienced dually: instantaneity as the self is immersed in the present moment and deep time, as the subject realises the geological forces which bring change beyond human perspective. At the same time they embody the archipelagic experience, of the self at the edge, while re-centring the subject and her or his locus as a centre in its own right, and thus worthy of our sustained attention in all their archipelagic singularity. The richness and diversity of modern and contemporary Scottish poetry highlights its dispersal, where “dispersal” does not suggest a weakness but an expression of archipelagic complexity.

Bibliography


MacNeil, Kevin. These Islands, We Sing: An Anthology of Scottish Islands Poetry. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011.


