Unsettled Mount Desert Island

By John R. Gillis

Introduction

Since the 1960s when I began summering on one of Mount Desert Island's little neighbors, Great Gott Island, I became aware of looming, the tendency of islands to appear to levitate, or suddenly rise above the horizon. This illusion is easily attributable to atmospheric distortion, but less easily explained is the way islands appear and disappear on maps, assuming various shapes in different eras. This, I came to see, was the result of the human tendency to project on them our desires and fears. No other places have so fascinated us as islands, looming in art, literature, and science fiction.

In this era of unstable boundaries and permeable borders, we project on islands our desire for secure places where time appears to stand still. But this does a disservice to their actual history, which has been one of almost constant change. For thousands of years, they have served as transit points rather than permanent destinations. When long-distance travel and trade were almost entirely waterborne, isles first were stepping stones along the shore, and later, across oceans. Even today, islanders tend to be more mobile than mainlanders. Island populations are often seasonal, and islands are often vacation spots imagined as the one place we can get away from it all.

I present to you a view of Mount Desert Island that, frankly, may not sit well with those who imagine it as either unchanging or threatened by change. I will argue that Mount Desert Island has always been a transit point—for the Native Americans who moved there seasonally as hunter gatherers and for the European fisherman and trappers who camped during the summers in pursuit of their prey. Later, Mount Desert Island was subject to booms and busts like the rest of industrializing America. Now, tourism accounts for its population fluctuations, its dynamism.

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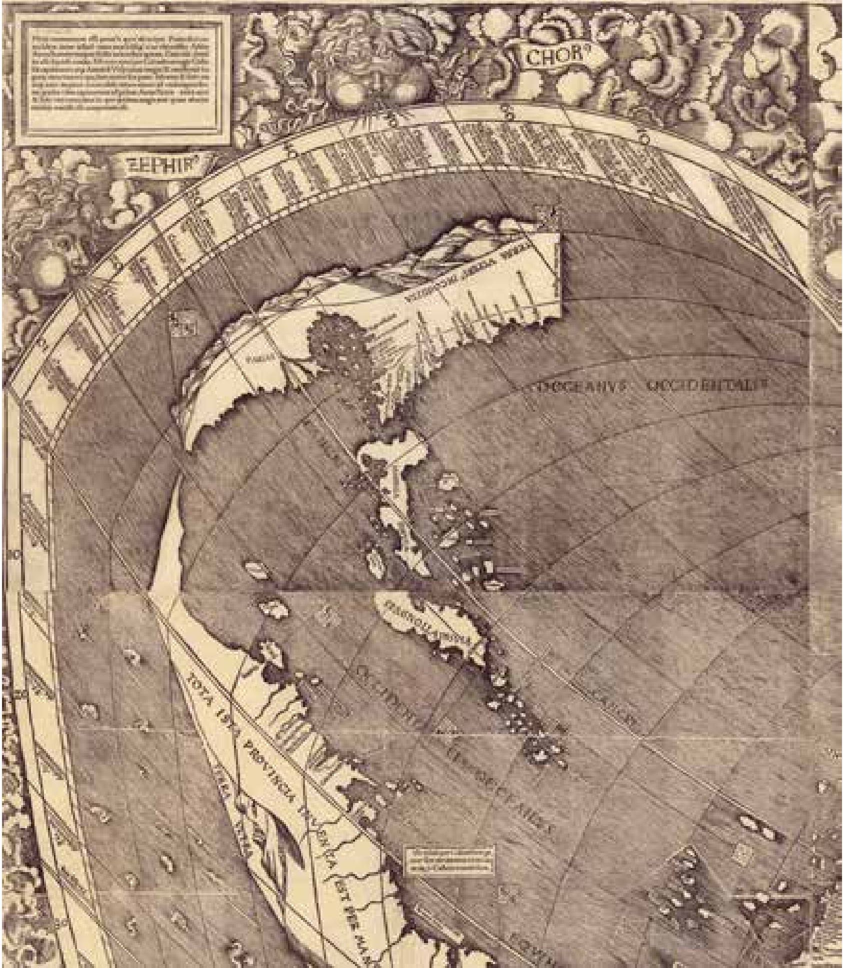

Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 "Universalis Cosmographia," the first map to use the toponym "America," envisioned a chain of islands that would lead adventurers to the New World. Map detail. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

From the Beginning

From the beginning, Mount Desert Island has been a part of a world more aqueous than terrestrial. In fact, Americans had trouble imagining themselves as a continental people. Alexis Tocqueville predicted for them a maritime rather than agrarian future.[1] Before that, they, like the rest of humanity in the Old World and New, thought of themselves as islanders. The ancients conceived of Africa, Europe, and Asia as one islanded *orbis terrarum*. Natives of Virginia informed Captain John Smith that the world was "flat and round like a trencher, and themselves at the midst," a cosmology they shared with Maine's Wabanaki, the People of the Dawn, living, as they thought, on the eastern side of a large island.[2] The colonists' conception of themselves as continental developed only in the process of the struggle to separate themselves from their insular mother country.[3] Thomas Paine's declaration that "there is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island …" announced a revolution that was as much geographical as it was political.[4]

Until then, the world inhabited by both Native Americans and Europeans was archipelagic. It was water, not land, that connected peoples, promoted commerce, and guaranteed power.[5] Archipelagic civilizations proliferated in the ancient Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, and later, the Atlantic. Britain's seaborne empire stretched from England, through the Scottish and Irish isles, and encompassed coasts and islands from the Canadian Maritimes all the way down to the West Indies. Until thirteen self-described "continental" colonies hived off, the British were far fonder of comparing themselves to the great sea states of the Phoenicians and Greeks than the landlocked Roman Empire.[6]

In the beginning, what we now know as Mount Desert Island was part of a vast transatlantic archipelago. Columbus imagined a string of isles stretching from the western edge of Europe to the eastern approaches to Asia. When he encountered a landmass blocking passage to India, he made every effort to find a way through it. This effort continued until the nineteenth century and has been renewed again in our era of global warming. The long-sought-after passage to India beckons once again, this time through Arctic waters. For northern Europeans, America was valued far more for its coasts and

waterways than for its interiors. Initially, the sea defined the land. The term "mainland" meant the part of the land neighboring the sea, not, as we define it today, as a separate landmass. Coasts were understood to be the side of the sea rather than of land.[7]

While the discovery of a coast was assumed to bring with it a claim to its hinterland, early explorers were less interested in possession of this landmass than in passages through it.[8] Early explorers of North America hoped it was all like Panama, an easily passable isthmus. On a 1651 map, Virginia is shown to be insular, with Sir Drake's New Albion (California) just beyond its western edge, giving easy access to the "The Sea of China and the Indies."[9] In one of the first sermons preached in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Robert Cushman gloried in the fact that it, too, appeared to be an island with access to the Far East on its western shore.[10] At first, that which lay inland held little interest. As Wilcomb Washburn pointed out, "Europeans often looked over, or overlooked, the real land to which they came, in anticipation of the Pacific land that remained an ideal in their minds." One of the first things that Francis Billington did when he disembarked from the Mayflower was to climb a tall tree with a westward view, reporting "a great sea, as he thought." It turned out to be only a pond, which even today is called the Billington Sea.[11] Not until the end of the eighteenth century did the archipelagic imagination begin to yield to continental aspirations, and then only very reluctantly. It was only then that the fabled island of California was absorbed into the bosom of the continent.

Initially, America belonged more to the sea than to the land. For the first three centuries, Europeans turned their backs on the continent. Water—and the fish it provided—was their greatest resource. It also connected them not only to their homelands but to one another. The coast and its islands were America's first frontier. It was a zone rather than a line, an ecotone constituted of both land and water with its own distinctive economy and culture.[12] In early sea charts, the coast is not depicted as fixed but fluid, not as a solid line but as a series of points of destination and departure.[13] Initially explored and charted from the sea, coasts were, as Rachel Carson later described them, "an elusive and indefinable boundary."[14] They were water lands inhabited by water peoples, both Native and European, inclusive of their watersheds, and if connected by

great rivers, extending deep into the interior. In an era when water provided the quickest and most efficient travel, and the most easily marketable resource, namely fish, coastal and riverine frontiers were the most coveted and contested geographies.

Contrary to the standard histories organized around settlement and westward movement, the first North American Europeans came with no territorial imperative, no desire to conquer. They were by origins insular and riverine peoples, the least feudal Europeans. Like the fish and animals they came in search of, the first Europeans never stayed in one place very long. The English, wrote Thoreau, were like sailors "who land for but a day;" and the French and Dutch were also always on the move.[15] Mariners' movements were cyclical rather than linear, as likely to be "down east" as "out west."

The English were naturally prone to see everything in terms of islands. The French, a riverine people, tended to focus on rivers, which they imagined to be extensions of seas. Great rivers were commonly referred to in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as "indrawing seas," perceived as moving from east to west and ultimately connecting Europe to Asia through America. The French voyaged deep into the interiors, seeking trade rather than settlements, looking for the legendary "Western Sea" that would bring them to Asia.[16] Cadillac was encouraged in his explorations by Native Americans who told him of waters just to the west "beyond which they say, there is no more land."[17] It is no wonder both the French and the English coveted Mount Desert Island, not so much as place of settlement but as a landmark, a jumping off point for other expeditions.

Indeed, it was on islands—Roanoke, Sable, Jamestown, Manhattan—or lands believed to be islands that the English, French, and Dutch all felt most comfortable. Islands had always triggered the wildest European fantasies of recovered paradise, and when the supply of imagined islands in the Atlantic gave out, these dreams were transferred to the American mainlands. The fabled Antilla ended up in the Southwest as the Seven Cities of Cibolla; the mythical isle of California also migrated westward.[18] New England had its own Acadian islanded place called "Norumbega," which found its way onto French maps in the 1550s and continued to be the object of quests for a very long time. Located somewhere upriver

Giovanni Battista Ramusio's 1565 map of "La Nuova Francia" imagined the northeastern part of the New World to be an archipelago. *Courtesy of the Osher Map Library, University of Southern Maine*

near present day Bangor, this mythical place had the strongest hold on the English. Its islandness provided a "kind of homology between 'Norumbega' and England," one that was exploited by promoters like John Dee to make the case for the colonization of what was to become New England.[19]

North America was not only discovered by sea but also mapped by sea. During the early modern period, the only reliable maps were sea charts called portolans, and "the world of the portolan chart was one of routes and destinations, a world very different from that of the contiguous, bounded territories."[20] In the portolans, islands stand out as the most vivid, oversized features. By contrast, continents were barely limned. Their edges appear soft and irregular. Only the ports, the sailors' prime focus of interest, are clearly indicated, while the coasts between them are uncharted. For a very long time, the American interior beyond the coasts remained unexplored, known only by analogy.[21]

Interiors were seen as "a waste and howling wilderness, where none inhabited but hellish fiends, and brutish men that devils worshiped."[22] Northern Europeans turned their backs on the land.[23] They initially settled on offshore islands because they were more accessible from the sea and could be more easily defended against the continent's indigenous population.[24] In the case of the British, even landed colonies were like islands insofar as they were connected almost exclusively by water. The Crown discouraged inland settlement, Lord Egremont telling settlers to remain close to the sea "where they could be useful to their Mother Country rather than planting themselves in the Heart of America out of reach of Government."[25] The French plunged into the interior, but remained close to rivers, their access to the sea.

The archipelagic coast was not the edge of the land, but its own unique space, a frontier, constantly moving landward and seaward, resistant to both definition and control. The English word "frontier" derives from the Latin word "front," more place of movement than settlement.[26] Shores remained placeless places, unnamed, where even today, dwellings are called "camps," suggesting their temporary status. Like the native coastal dwellers with whom they initially coexisted and whom they later displaced, Europeans initially used the shores lightly.[27] Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries, inhabitants of the great archipelago were not settlers, but *un*settlers, people whose existence depended on movement, on displacement, like all the other creatures with whom they shared this water world.

Thinking Diastolically

Coastal and island peoples deserved to have their history recognized as different and even separate from that of their neighbors. The species Homo sapiens was born in the coastal waves of southern Africa and evolved during its long migration along the coasts of Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The people of Mount Desert Island were forged in an aqueous rather than terrestrial environment. As Christopher Camuto has put it, for Mount Desert Islanders "the mainland is an afterthought, something to put an edge on."[28] They had no concept of Manifest Destiny or even destiny as such. George Putz tells us that "the Maine maritime sensibility is more prone to believe in fate than destiny." This is what separates "the mariner from the lubber and the waterfront community from inland communities, even though the latter may be but a hundred yards back from the shore."[29] Those who are terrestrial believe in straight lines and linear progress, but those who live by the sea learn to think diastolically, living lives that ebb and flow. People who live on continents think in terms of narratives that have clear beginnings and destinations, accepted starting and stopping places. But as Jonathan Raban points out,

> For people who live on islands, especially on small islands, the sea is always the beginning. … Islanders also know how the sea goes on and on, in a continuous loop of shoreline and life, without a terminus. Knocking about from port to port, you keep on going past the port you originally started from.[30]

Their worldview, like their environment, is fluid, unsettled, and contingent.

Prior to the nineteenth century, the vitality of the archipelagic world depended on keeping things open, unsettled. Everything about it was unbounded—its geography, its politics, its history. Island

By the time Samuel Champlain's map of Nouvelle France was published in 1607, the essential outline of the "l'Isle des Monts-Déserts" was becoming clear to European explorers. Map detail. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

peoples were invariably outer-directed, more closely connected with other shores than with their own hinterlands. Like the fish that were their primary quarry, they were forever on the move, more sojourners than colonists. Indeed, the so-called Colonial Period needs to be renamed in order to capture its unsettled nature.

Mount Desert Island's energies were centrifugal, encouraging rapid turnover of populations. But at the same time, the island was open and assimilative, in no way insular. Early Mount Desert Islanders were heterogeneous, multiethnic, even interracial, their cultures cosmopolitan and multilingual. These folk changed their occupations as easily as they did their identities. There was no sharp division between farmers and fishers. When the Massachusetts Puritans discovered they could not sustain a purely pastoral existence, they put aside their religious scruples and imported Anglican fishermen, who provided the basis for their economic survival.[31] As Samuel Eliot Morison famously said, "God performed no miracle on New England soil. He gave the sea."[32]

In this archipelagic world, people, goods, and information flowed freely across and around the Atlantic rim. It was borderless, not unlike today's internet world, with sea routes connecting nodal points. The distance by water was slight compared to the distance by land. The coast and its islands constituted an integrated zone with culture, law, and politics all its own. In a frontier yet to be incorporated within the firm boundaries of church and state, archipelagic people had a deserved reputation for lawlessness and irreligiosity.[33] As they still say in Maine, the law ended at the seawall.

Eighteenth-century sea charts did not delineate a continuous coastline as we now know it. They marked only landings and harbors, not what lay between them. For these, not the shore itself, were the chief interest of navigators. The word "coastline" was not used until the late eighteenth century when there was finally a continent that required an edge to define it.[34] By the middle of the nineteenth century, the broad, indefinite zone between land and sea was narrowed to a thin line.[35]

Becoming an Island

Until the early seventeenth century, Europeans were not certain that Mount Desert was even an island. It took Champlain's

circumnavigation to establish its separateness.[36] But that did not settle the question of to whom it belonged. There were multiple claims to the island's sovereignty, including Wabanaki, French, and English. In the eighteenth century, both Nova Scotia and Massachusetts eyed it for annexation, and during the American Revolution, most of Eastern Maine was controlled by British forces.[37]

And there was always the question of what kind of island it would be. Would it be as seasonal fishing camp like Newfoundland, or a farming community like Nova Scotia? Well into the nineteenth century, the economy remained unsettled. Wood cutting, boatbuilding, fishing, small farming, dairy, quarrying, hotel keeping, ice making, shipping, and trading all rose and fell, blurring its occupational profile. With so many men (and some women) "sailing foreign," identities were fluid. Mount Desert Islanders were at home not only in the waters of the Grand Banks, but in the West Indies and the Mediterranean. As Captain Littlepage, a character in Sarah Orme Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, put it, Maine men "saw the world for themselves, and like's not their wives and children saw it with them."[38]

For most of the nineteenth century, islands everywhere were a great deal more cosmopolitan than the mainlands. There was nothing insular about Mount Desert Island, nothing backward about its economy, which was technologically advanced by any standard. The massive reforestation that has happened in the twentieth century has left the false impression that Mount Desert Island was never touched by agricultural or industrial development. In fact, Samuel Eliot Morison (1887-1976) believed that by 1960, the land in cultivation on Mount Desert Island had declined by 90 percent since his childhood. David Hackett Fischer notes that since 1960, cleared land has diminished significantly more since Morison's writing.[39] It was only as the twentieth century dawned that Mount Desert Island came to be seen as remote in both space and time. In the wake of the decline of island industries like quarrying and timbering, and the loss of trading connections, Jewett's old salt would remark that "a community narrows down and grows dreadful ignorant when it is shut up in its own affairs and gets no knowledge of the outside world."[40]

Joseph DesBarres' nautical atlas, "The Atlantic Neptune," commissioned by the British Parliament in 1776, portrayed the sea around Mount Desert Island with precision, while the surrounding mountainous landforms were merely approximated. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

Connecting to the Mainland

But in the course of the nineteenth century, the shape of American history and geography was finally settled by the professionals whose task it was to give the United States its pride of place among the nations of the world. The promise of America's maritime destiny was discounted and forgotten. Coasts and islands were absorbed into continental history, which had become thoroughly landlocked. With the advent of the railway, it was land, not water, that connected; for the first time, islands were approached by land. History now began and ended at the shore.[41] The frontier had moved inland, and the sea's side became the terrestrial "seaside."[42]

By the end of the nineteenth century, coasts became the destination for a new kind of traveler, the genteel rusticator, forerunner of the auto tourist. The nature of coastal populations began to change significantly. The old archipelagic economies of fishing and shipping had been under pressure from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. With the capitalization and industrialization of the fisheries, small coastal communities lost ground to large ports with interior connections. The 1920s and 1930s saw the depopulation of the coasts and inshore islands. In Maine, rusticators and real estate developers bought up shorefront properties, altering working waterfronts beyond recognition. In the twentieth century, what had once been locales of production became sites of conspicuous consumption.[43]

At this moment, archipelagoes around the world broken up as islands became ever more dependent on mainlands. In effect, islands became more rather than less insular over time. They are now treated as autonomous units, studied by anthropologists and biologists as if entirely singular. The image of coastal and island people underwent a radical makeover. Once regarded as unruly, even wild, Maine's coastal people were reimagined as America's most rooted and conventional people, what Bernard DeVoto called a "people of granite."[44] Populations that had been at the forefront of commercial and industrial progress were repositioned as isolated and backward. In time, Maine would take as its motto, "the way life should be," projecting a nostalgic image of itself as it never had been, inert and timeless.[45]

During the late twentieth century, coastal development

everywhere followed the same formula. Water became the ultimate amenity when waterfronts lost their productive functions and became centers of leisure rather than work. The old *homo littoralis*, the seamen and the fishers, were displaced by tourists and summer people. A mere shadow of their former selves, fishing villages reimagined themselves as "heritage," which in the absence of actual fishing, was commoditized and exhibited for the benefit of the tourist industry.[46] In the twentieth century, there appeared what John Cheever called "a second coast," consisting no longer of working waterfronts smelling of fish, but lined with "gift and antique shops, restaurants, tearooms, and bars where people drank their gin by candlelight."[47]

This time, colonization of the shores came from the interior rather than from overseas. First came the artists, then the clergy and professors, followed by the wealthy, and finally by the middle classes. As in the past, they came not to settle but to sojourn for the summer. In a surprising turn of events, Native Americans were drawn back to the coast by the new economic possibilities offered by the thriving basket and canoe trade. They resumed their old peripatetic ways, setting up camps in Bar Harbor and Southwest Harbor, returning, just like their rusticating neighbors, to their inland homes during the winter.[48] The sojourners of European descent came first by steamboats, later by automobiles across the newly built Trenton bridge. As have so many bridged and tunneled isles, Mount Desert Island feared for its islandness. As it turned out, it need not have worried, for the mainland visitors were even more attached to insularity than were the Mount Desert Island natives.[49] What appealed to this latest generation of unsettlers was the idea of the island, a place remote in time and space from the world, untouched by the ills of the modern world.

Conclusion

Today, it is the singularity of Mount Desert Island that is emphasized, its archipelagic connections largely forgotten. Water no longer connects, but separates. Islands which previously offered access to the world now became refuges from it. Even as it became firmly linked to the mainland, Mount Desert Island came to be seen as more separate both spatially and temporally. The Trenton bridge is but a few hundred yards long, but the distance it traverses

seems immense. And the distance in time it spans is even greater. A journey to Mount Desert Island always seems to be a return to an older, simpler, more natural way of life. There, time's arrow seems to point backward rather than forward. In the twentieth century, islands all over the world became symbols of loss.[50] Like a Maine fog, nostalgia now envelops Mount Desert Island, obscuring its promise, its presentness.[51]

The fog rose up in the late nineteenth century when wealthy rusticators began calling their mansions "cottages," resisting progress wherever it raised its ugly head. The Rockefellers, whose fortune was built on oil, joined in the failed effort to ban cars. Naming the national park "Acadia" erased all memory of the island's well-documented industrial past. Charles W. Eliot's 1904 development plan even went so far as declaring that "the greater part of the island had never been inhabited or cultivated."[52]

In our day, just calling something an island makes it fit more easily into the mind's eye, more comprehensible. Time was said to move more slowly on islands. Going to Mount Desert Island came to involve travel in time as well as space, a return to an earlier era, a simpler, more natural way of life. When Admiral Morison wrote in 1960 that "Mount Desert is not merely an island; it is a way of life," he was expressing a new way of perceiving islands as a part of what some now call "emotional geography."[53] Morison's focus was on the symbolic rather than material dimension of Mount Desert Island, on mindscape as much as landscape. By that time, Mount Desert Island had become a space for dreams and memories, an island of the mind, not to be found on any map, but no less real to those who had made them part of their emotional geography. Ever since humanity began to exercise its unique capacity for imagination, islands have been its object. Now, in the age of the tourist industry, they loom ever larger in the minds of mainlanders, if not always in the consciousness of their own year-round residents.[54]

But it is precisely the metaphorical power of islands that so obscures their histories and geographies. Just calling a place an island attributes to it certain features—smallness, isolation, boundedness, settledness, timelessness, closure, homogeneity—none of which has ever characterized Mount Desert Island. On the contrary, what have actually made islands so attractive and viable for most of human

history are their connectedness, openness, and dynamism, in other words, their unsettledness. Today, the island is going through another of its periodic unsettlements as it becomes part of a new archipelago, a digital one, which spans not only the Atlantic but the entire globe. The talk is now all about networks and webs, of flows rather than closures. Mount Desert Island is opening up once again, returning to that condition of connectedness that has always made it such a fascinating, dynamic place. This may be unsettling to some, but it is worth remembering that it is only being true to itself as an unsettled island.

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[47] John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 188–9.

[48] Bunny McBride and Harold E.L. Prins, *Indians in Eden: Wabanakis and Rusticators on Maine's Mount Desert Island, 1840s–1920s* (Rockport: Down East Books, 2009).

[49] Godfrey Baldacchino, ed., *Bridging Islands: The Impact of Fixed Links* (Charlottetown, PE: Acorn, 2007).

[50] Gillis, *Islands*, 121–4.

[51] Gillis, "Nostalgia by the Sea," *Meditations on the Shore* (blog), accessed December 24, 2015, http://johnrgillis.com/works/nostalgia.pdf.

[52] Gillis, *Islands*, 130.

[53] Morison, 85–6; on the notion of emotional geography, see *Extreme Heritage Management: The Practices and Policies of Densely Populated Islands*, ed. Godfrey Baldacchino (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

[54] Rob Shields, *Places at the Margins: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 277; Francoise Peron, "The Contemporary Lure of the Island," *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 95, no. 3 (2004): 358.