

## **Ten years of book reviews in *Island Studies Journal***

*Stephen A. Royle*

*Visiting Professor*

*Kagoshima University Research Centre for the Pacific Islands*

*Japan*

*and*

*Emeritus Professor of Island Studies*

*Queen's University Belfast*

*Northern Ireland, UK*

[s.royle@qub.ac.uk](mailto:s.royle@qub.ac.uk)

**ABSTRACT:** This brief and commissioned paper reviews ten years of book reviews that have been published in *Island Studies Journal* (2006-2015). The paper discusses numbers and types of reviews, the nationality of the reviewers, the spatial, thematic and/or disciplinary focus of the books reviewed, using these observations to make critical comments on *Island Studies Journal*.

*Keywords:* book reviews, islands, *Island Studies Journal*

© 2015 – Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

---

### **Introduction**

From its inception, it was planned that *Island Studies Journal* (*ISJ*) should have a strong book reviews section and the Deputy Editor for Book Reviews, Stephen Royle, with Chet Van Duzer, Ilan Kelman and David Kupferman, along with the support and dedication of the *ISJ* editor, Godfrey Baldacchino, have delivered this commitment. We find reviewers by the process of networking – it's who you know – thus, a lot of reviewers come from Canada, especially Prince Edward Island, the location of the editor for most of the life of *ISJ* and the location of the institutional depository of the journal. Or it may be who other people know; Godfrey Baldacchino has a list of potential reviewers and their interests. Sometimes one can think of those who have reviewed before, though as will be shown below, over three quarters of *ISJ* reviewers have written only once. Occasionally, reviewers offer themselves. Sometimes I look within a book posted to me and contact somebody whose work has been cited and send them an invitation to review. Invitations always ask for the person to provide an alternative reviewer if they cannot do it themselves; the book review editor's task becomes more difficult if that process turns out to be circular and you end up with the person you had first thought of. Some people asked to review just never respond; quite often you get a polite refusal, usually couched in terms of 'I am too busy'. That is understandable, academia is a pressured world and a book review is going to mean less for a colleague's promotion (or survival in post) than his/her own publications and/or getting a grant. Sometimes they accept, get sent a copy of the

book to be reviewed, but alas nothing appears thereafter. Pleasingly often, though, colleagues do accept and do write the review, thus making a contribution to the furtherance of our island studies corner of the academy.

The book review team and the editor himself keep an eye open for likely books; sometimes island studies people make suggestions to us; sometimes publishers contact us directly or reviewers offer to write up something they have seen or that they want, so they can get the review copy of the book to keep for themselves, which is fair enough. The process of writing the review is straightforward. *ISJ* has an instruction sheet for reviewers, which is sent to the prospective reviewers, giving details of format and other directions; the pages of the review section of the journal also serve as a handy template. Submitted reviews are then checked for style and correctness before being published.

### Approach

In preparation for this brief analysis, I looked over all the review sections in the 19 numbers of *Island Studies Journal* under consideration here; from the inaugural issue of 1(1) in May 2006 to 10(1) in May 2015. I counted 192 book reviews, a few of which were looking at thematic issues of particular journals. One film and one exhibition were also reviewed. Ten ‘review essays’ have also appeared in the journal during this same period, but these do not review publications, so they do not form part of this analysis.

**Table 1: *Island Studies Journal* reviews and reviewers.**

Books Reviewed	Number of Reviewers
1	98
2	16
3	5
4	2
6	1 (Stephen Royle)
9	1 (Ilan Kelman)
11	1 (Chet Van Duzer)
13	1 (Godfrey Baldacchino)

Table 1 shows that, by far, the majority of reviewers have written just once for *ISJ* and it is notable that the four people to have penned six or more reviews are all connected with the management team of the journal. The considerable majority of books reviewed (169) were written in English, with another 12 in French; 5 in Italian, 2 each in German and Spanish, one in Turkish (a book published with an English translation) and a new edition of an historical work in Latin. All *ISJ* reviews have been penned in the English language, bar one by Lorraine Guay of Université Laval in Québec, Canada, which was published in French, although accompanied by her own English translation. This enabled her to transmit the message as widely as possible that the book she was reviewing, *L'Île de Ré* by Céline Barthou, was ‘*un ouvrage magnifique*’, ‘a ‘truly magnificent work’ - *ISJ* 1(2). Another, by Heinz Jürgen Probst,

of an *isolario* in Italian, was originally written in German but was translated by Beate Ratter before publication in *ISJ* 2(2). [Table 2](#) identifies the countries from which the reviewers came.

**Table 2: Reviewers by country of origin.**

Country	Number of Reviewers	Island based reviewers
Australia	18	Tasmania 2
British Virgin Islands	1	1
Canada	42	Prince Edward Island 21
		Vancouver Island 1
		Iles de la Madeleine 1
Cook Islands	1	1
Denmark	2	2
Fiji	8	8
Finland	1	
France	2	Corsica 2
Germany	3	
Greece	1	Lesvos 1
Guernsey	2	2
Ireland	1	1
Italy	3	
Jamaica	1	1
Japan	1	1
Malta	3	3
Marshall Islands	2	2
New Zealand	5	5
Norway	8	
Spain	3	
Sweden	3	
Switzerland	1	
Trinidad and Tobago	1	1
UK	41	41
<i>England</i>	<i>27</i>	
<i>Northern Ireland</i>	<i>11</i>	
<i>Scotland</i>	<i>4 (Western Isles 2)</i>	
USA	34	Hawai'i 1

About two thirds of the reviewers came from islands of all sizes, for what that is worth. More telling is the breakdown between countries recognised as developed and the others; only 13 of 192 reviewers (under 7%) came from Caribbean and Pacific islands. Furthermore, there are large gaps in the spread of reviewers: none at all came from the huge island nations of Indonesia or the Philippines, and only one from Japan, for example. This gap may be something that those who commission reviews for *ISJ* in the future might want to address.

Regarding what the books reviewed were about, 35 focused on islands in general. One such was Rosemary Gillespie and David Clague, *Encyclopaedia of islands*, reviewed in *ISJ* 5(1) by R. J. Berry. Other books in this category were those dealing with commonalities affecting islands. One example here is John Connell's *Islands at risk? Environments, economies and contemporary change*, which the reviewer, Godfrey Baldacchino, assured readers would get them 'thinking hard and gingerly about the promises and pitfalls of island development' - *ISJ* 8(2). Some books had broad themes that stretched beyond islands but which affect islands; a number of the publications from the Commonwealth Secretariat fell into this category. Another important example is Dietmar Rothermund, *The Routledge companion to decolonization*, reviewed by Peter Larmour in *ISJ* 3(1). Nine books concerned empires and colonies or their aftermath; five of the books under review studied more than one island/set of islands. [Table 3](#) attempts to squeeze books that lent themselves to such an exercise into their ocean or sea.

**Table 3: Spatial focus of books reviewed in *Island Studies Journal* (N = 71).**

<i>Ocean/Sea</i>	<i>Number of books</i>
Atlantic	19
Caribbean	11
Indian Ocean	2
Mediterranean	7
Pacific	32

One book not easily assigned to this spatial categorization, and is in fact not in the table at all, is Victor Suthren, *The island of Canada: How three oceans shaped our nation*, reviewed by Godfrey Baldacchino in *ISJ* 5(1).

As I was looking through the 19 review sections, I noted down some of the topics of the books under consideration (see [Table 4](#)). This is not an attempt at an exhaustive list; just some themes which struck me as significant.

**Table 4: Themes and/or disciplines discussed in the book reviews.**

Anthropology	Language
Climate change	Literature, including poetry and novels
Ecology	Music
Economics	Myths
Emigration	Politics
Empire	Social movements
Fishing and whaling	Tax havens
History and archaeology	Voyages of discovery/exploration
History of cartography	

The scope of the studies ranges from the broad to the very detailed, down to a study in French by Giovanna Iacovazzi of competing brass bands in the village of Zabbar in Malta, reviewed by Marcello Sorce Keller in *ISJ* 8(1). Regarding novels, one example covered is Bernice Morgan's *Cloud of bone*, set in Newfoundland and reviewed by Judith Robertson in *ISJ* 3(1). Note the novels reviewed are what would be described as serious literature and are not just popular fiction set on islands; thus, Robertson compares Morgan's book to Virginia Wolff's *To the lighthouse*, which I recall from school as being very serious indeed.

What comes from perusal of the list is the wide range of topics dealt with in the reviews section of *ISJ*, and thus also in the field of island studies generally. However, one observation that might be made is the dominance of the humanities and social sciences. Obviously, climate change is a contemporarily significant physical topic for islands and island studies: a number of important books have been reviewed in this area. There are also some scientific reviews that come under an 'ecology' umbrella, such as Kevin Edwards' guest editorship of an edition of *Human Ecology* which focused on the Faroe Islands and was reviewed by Russell Fielding in *ISJ* 3(1). However, it may be that *ISJ* needs to do more to include more scientific topics related to islands and the lives of their populations.

The reviews themselves, although almost invariably containing some critical comments, are generally if not always supportive and positive. Thus one writer would have been pleased to see him/herself described as 'a scholar in the finest sense of the word'. In contrast, another would not have been satisfied to find his/her book 'lacks both depth and confidence'. On rare occasions, reviews have been challenged by the author or by another scholar. Peter Rudiak-Gould's *Surviving Paradise: One year on a disappearing island*, about the author's experience as an English teacher for a year on Ujae in the Marshall Islands, was reviewed twice. Its first review in *ISJ* 6(2) by Ilan Kelman was fairly positive. However, this view was challenged in the next issue, *ISJ* 7(1), by David Kupferman, who described himself then as 'a long-term resident of the Marshall Islands' (he has since moved to Hawai'i). Kupferman found Rudiak-Gould's book 'replete with stereotypes, racist attitudes and otherwise offensive characterizations' and wished to criticise it severely on these grounds. This points to an issue that occasionally comes up more widely in island studies and also other areas of academia where outsiders can be accused of insensitivity regarding the subjects about whom they research and write.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude on a happier note, there are some nicely light touches within the reviews. Thus, R.J. Berry, in his review of *The encyclopaedia of islands* in *ISJ* 5(1), noted that, if you looked that book up on Amazon 'you will find that those who bought it also bought *Islands* by R.J. Berry'. And to continue on that self-indulgent vein, having been involved in the book reviews for *Island Studies Journal* since the very first issue, grant me leave to quote with satisfaction from Laurie Brinklow's review of Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares, *Islanded identities*, in *ISJ* 8(2) that Professor Stephen Royle is 'one of the grandas of island studies'. I have six grandchildren who, using the Northern Irish vernacular, do indeed call me 'Granda'.

Finally, it would be pertinent to also adopt a demand side approach to a frank analysis of the book review section of *ISJ*, and examine if and how such a service is of any benefit. Certainly, the authors of the books under review, as well as their publishers, are always keen and anxious to see what like-minded scholars may think of their oeuvres. Furthermore, the

*S. A. Royle*

book review section serves the journal's readers by alerting them to new works. A list of books published would do that, of course, but a review adds value by detailing the content, approach and quality of the book, in addition to setting out its title.

Lastly, as a book review editor, I hope that the reviews also benefit those kind colleagues who undertake the task of writing them and whose efforts I would like to acknowledge formally here on behalf of *Island Studies Journal*. Reviewers receive no fee, of course, but do get a complimentary copy of the book, as a token gesture of appreciation for their work. This has a monetary value, but one hopes that this gesture also brings an intellectual benefit since, one hopes, having to review a book does ensure that the reviewer actually does read it.