
Opening Extract from...

Island

How Islands Transform the World

Written by J. Edward Chamberlin

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J. Edward Chamberlin

Elliott & Thompson

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Contents

in memory of Jack Cowdry (1921–2008)

to Rob Finley, dory compass

and for Lorna, sea anchor and heaven-haven

The natural history of these islands is eminently curious [. . .] Seeing every height crowned with its crater, and the boundaries of most of the lava-streams still distinct, we are led to believe that within a period, geologically recent, the unbroken ocean was here spread out. Hence, both in space and time, we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact—that mystery of mysteries—the first appearance of new beings on this earth.

Charles Darwin

I should like to rise and go
Where the golden apples grow;
Where below another sky
Parrot islands anchored lie,
And, watched by cockatoos and goats,
Lonely Crusoes building boats.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Introduction

ISLANDS ARE EVERYWHERE. There are islands in the middle of a lake, some sacred—such as Manitoulin in Lake Huron, the largest freshwater island in the world, or Isla del Sol, one of the forty or so islands in Lake Titicaca—and some sentimental, such as William Butler Yeats's Lake Isle of Innisfree or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's St. Peter's Island in Switzerland's Lake Biel; others are dear to the hearts of those who live in or visit the lake regions of the world. There are islands in rivers and streams, some supporting great cities, like New York and Montreal, others shaping cultures, like Île de la Cité in Paris, and still others whose influence seems more modest, like the "smallest, barest island" in New England's Merrimack River, which Henry David Thoreau described as having an "undefined and mysterious charm." There are islands in between, such as the Canaries and the Azores, the Hebrides and the Faroes—those so-called stepping-stone islands in the Atlantic that offered relatively safe haven to early seafarers—or the chain of outcrops called Rama's Bridge (or Adam's Bridge) that links Sri Lanka to the mainland. There are islands in the deltas of the great rivers of Asia and Africa, like the Irrawaddy and the Zambezi, and islands where land and water are confused, like the muskeg islands at the edge of the boreal forest in Canada or the Sundarbans, the

mangrove swamps in the Ganges Delta (which, according to one nineteenth-century observer, "looked as though this bit of world had been left unfinished when land and sea were originally parted").

While many islands are out on the open ocean, all alone and far away from any other land—such as Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic and Easter Island in the Pacific—others are snuggled along the shore, like Haida Gwaii on Canada's west coast, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and the islands that shape Singapore and Hong Kong, Mumbai and Venice. Countless rock outcrops and coral atolls are uninhabited by humans, while large islands like Java and Japan have a population of over a hundred million each.

Altogether, about one billion people live on islands. They are often fiercely (if sometimes foolishly) independent. Nearly one quarter of the members of the United Nations are island nations, some of them as small as Nauru (once called the Pleasant Island) or Tuvalu (formerly known as the Ellice Islands) in the Pacific, each under ten square miles in total and with populations around ten thousand. Eleven of the world's fifteen smallest countries are islands, including the Seychelles and the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, Malta in the Mediterranean, and several island nations in the Caribbean: Saint Kitts and Nevis; Grenada; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Antigua and Barbuda; and Barbados. (Their only mainland rivals for size are Vatican City, Monaco, San Marino, and Liechtenstein.)

There are islands that limit us, and islands that liberate us; islands where love flourishes, and islands where hatred takes root; islands that hold us together, and islands that keep us apart. Some islands, special for spiritual reasons, are to be visited only by the elect; others are strictly reserved for prisoners. Some, with material resources, have

been occupied by a few families for centuries, while other islands, with no resources at all, are now home to thousands of residents.

People have gone to war over islands, as they did with the Falklands and the island of Run (now part of Indonesia), which was the only source of the precious spice nutmeg during the seventeenth century. And islands have been instrumental in making peace: the British ceded the very same Run to the Dutch in 1667 in exchange for Manhattan, and France traded its part of Canada (and more) to Britain in 1763 in order to secure Guadeloupe and Martinique—because of the islands' sugar cane.

Many islands stay put, like sentinels of the sea and guardians of the straight and narrow, and others move about with the wind or the current or the quirks of fate, like the Flemish sandbanks and Sable Island (off the coast of Nova Scotia) and the floating islands of roots and vegetation in the Florida Everglades and in the Tigris–Euphrates Delta. Some islands disappear and reappear—the Halligen islands in the North Sea during stormy season, Falcon Island in the Pacific once in a volcanic blue moon—while others can be reached on foot, but only at low tide. And there have been man-made islands for thousands of years, from the crannogs in ancient Ireland and Scotland to the prehistoric villages built on stilts in Alpine lakes.

There are islands we escape to—and islands we escape from. Some of them are real, and some are imagined. When mapmaking became a cultural tradition—especially in Europe and Asia—as well as a travel guide, plenty of imaginary islands appeared on these "real" maps. Commerce played a big role in this. No one ever landed on the mythical island of Buss in the North Atlantic, for example, but it was still charted on maps and even chartered to the Hudson's

Bay Company to harvest furs. Such islands are both there and not there—like stories. "It was, and it was not" is the phrase used by storytellers on the island of Majorca when they begin. Maybe stories themselves began with islands, for islands have fascinated people as long as they have been singing songs and telling tales and traveling, and have found counterparts in the islands that are our homes and gardens and towns and farms, as well as our personalities. For millennia, seafarers and settlers and storytellers have sought out islands for reasons that go deep into the human psyche and haunt its imagination, even—or sometimes especially—when ignorant of geography. It may have something to do with the way an island rises up from the sea and then sooner or later disappears again, perhaps invoking a primordial consciousness of the beginning and the end of life. Or it may be connected to the journey between the mainland and an island, and between one island and another, requiring the crossing of water. This has haunted humans since time immemorial; the word "metaphor," the signature of stories and songs, means "to carry across."

Islands have provided a special invitation to fertile imaginations, just as they did (in evolutionary theory) to unique mutations. There have been countless islands where marvelous—or malicious—things supposedly happened, and memorable islands that came into being as fiction took up history, with stories of true island adventures (survivor stories long before reality TV) sponsoring novels like *Robinson Crusoe*. Psychiatry began with an awareness of "islanded" psyches, and anthropology made islands an academic fetish (and a travel excuse), with island accounts beginning in the late nineteenth century by Arthur Haddon on the Torres Strait

Islands and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown on the Andamans, and then by Bronislaw Malinowski on the Trobriand Islands and Margaret Mead on Samoa.

Islands represent both paradise and purgatory, just as they invoke madness and invite magic. They have been places where curious things occur—or where nothing at all takes place. But even then, the howling noises of the sea or the deep silence of a lake will often conjure up a sense of strangeness around islands, and generate stories about the unusual things that go on there. Many poets, from the Scandinavian *skald* to the Swahili *sha'ir* and from Homer (in the *Odyssey*) to Shakespeare (in *The Tempest*), have located some of their most intriguing stories on islands. Later, Jonathan Swift took readers to islands of wonderment on Gulliver's travels, Alexandre Dumas to the treasure of Monte Cristo, and H. G. Wells to the menacing *Island of Dr. Moreau*. And they are certainly places where fabled creatures live: there are real islands with dragons, like Komodo in Indonesia, and imaginary islands with dragons, like those in the *Chronicles of Narnia*.

There are islands of solitude, and islands with a social life—though not always an easy one. So is the ultimate appeal of islands "home"—or "away"? Ideals of civilized life, domestic and settled, are routinely represented in island images, but so are concepts of the wild and the barbaric; and both of them may sustain the sense of community that islands often celebrate.

The history of islands is also the history of our planet, from its beginning as an island in space to its current position as part of the archipelago that is our solar system, and from the moment land first appeared above the waters that covered the earth to the

contemporary appearance and disappearance of islands in the cycles of climate change and seismic upheaval that make up and break up our world.

All of which raises—or complicates—the question: What is an island? Is it simply land surrounded by water, which the etymology of the word in various languages suggests? Do tidal islands, and isolated peninsulas, qualify? How about man-made islands, like oil rigs or waterfront real estate developments—or castles surrounded by moats? Is size a factor, with small being beautiful? But then, what is it that a reef or a rock outcrop have in common with Greenland or New Guinea? And what about continents like Australia and Antarctica? Do geology and geography set the standard for island identity, or politics and economics? Are islands defined by their natural history—or by their human history?

One thing is certain: barren or beautiful, large or small, real or imagined, islands are a central part of the world we live in. They represent much of what we dread, and much of what we desire. And since so many of our thoughts and feelings have an island counterpart, they may well define what it is to be human.

Chapter One

First Islanders

Settlers and Storytellers

"Jamaica, the most considerable as well as by far the most valuable of the British West India islands, is situated in the Atlantic Ocean, among what are called by geographers the Greater Antilles [. . .] Jamaica is nearly of an oval form; 140 English miles in length, and in its broadest part about 50. It is the third in size of the islands of the Archipelago. It is bounded on the east by the island of St. Domingo [Hispaniola], from which it is separated by the channel called by English seamen the Windward passage; by Cuba on the north; by the Bay of Honduras on the west; and by Cartagena in New Spain [now Colombia] on the south [. . .] The island is crossed longitudinally by an elevated ridge, called the Blue Mountains. What is called the Blue Mountain Peak rises 7,431 feet above the level of the sea. The

precipices are interspersed with beautiful savannahs, and are clothed with vast forests of mahogany, lignum vitae, iron wood, logwood, braziletto, etc. On the north of the island, at a small distance from the sea, the land rises in small round topped hills, which are covered with spontaneous groves of pimento. Under the shade of these is a beautiful rich turf. This side of the island is also well watered, every valley having its rivulet, many of which tumble from overhanging cliffs into the sea. The background in this prospect, consisting of a vast amphitheatre of forests, melting gradually into the distant Blue Mountains, is very striking. On the south coast the face of the country is different; it is more sublime, but not so pleasing. The mountains here approach the sea in immense ridges; but there are even here cultivated spots on the sides of the hills, and in many parts vast savannahs—covered with sugar canes, stretching from the sea to the foot of the mountain—relieve and soften the savage grandeur of the prospect."

—*Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* (1830)

"[December 4, 1844] My first sight of Jamaica was one that I never can forget. There was a conical mass, darkly blue, above the dense bed of clouds that hung around its sides, and enveloped all beneath [the] towering elevation [of Blue Mountain Peak] [. . .] Night soon fell. Many lights were seen in the scattered cottages, and here and there a fire blazed up from the beach, or a torch in the hand of some fisherman was carried from place to place. My mind was full of Columbus, and of his feelings on that eventful night, when the coast of Guanahani [San Salvador, also known as Watlings Island, in the Bahamas] lay spread out before him with its moving lights, and proud anticipations. So did I contemplate the tropical island before me, its romance

heightened by the indefiniteness and obscurity in which it lay [. . .] The well-known comparison by which Columbus is said to have given Queen Isabella an idea of Jamaica—a sheet of paper crumpled up tightly in the hand, and then partially stretched out—occurred to me, and I could not but admire its striking appropriateness."

—Philip Henry Gosse, *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica* (1851)

Like many islanders the world over, Jamaicans often refer to their island as the Rock; and in the beginning Jamaica was just that, a rock rising above the surface of the sea. Long after its geological history had begun, its natural history followed, with biological life forming in the soupy sea around while on the land plants developed over millions of years until eventually the first tree rose up into the air.

Jamaica would one day be covered by trees; but before that it was shaped by volcanic rocks, which were eroded by wind and water and by limestone produced with the slow disintegration of the shells of marine life, including coral. This limestone then dissolved into pockets and purses called karst formations, the sinkholes and springs and caves and underground reservoirs and cone-shaped hills and honeycomb sides of Jamaica's Cockpit Country, one of the most remarkable examples of such a limestone landscape in the world.

Then, in a familiar island compact, Jamaica's geography conspired with its geology to give the island a rich diversity of flora and fauna, fascinating travelers and residents alike from ancient times. Such variety remains one of the most reliable markers of island identity. Temperate or tropical, on almost every ocean island around the

world there are thousands of plant and animal species, some tiny and hidden away and others portly and prominent, some resident and others just passing through; and over time they create their own island conditions, building a world in which they uniquely belong and bringing nurture and nature together in what Jamaicans might call a rocksteady rhythm. Typical of mountainous islands with windward and leeward shores, Jamaica has two climates; in the northeast, exposed to the wind, it is wet and warm, while in the lee of the mountains to the southwest the weather is drier and cooler. This makes for an even more remarkable range of species, including an exceptional variety of ferns and fruits and berries—and of birds to feed on them.

Birds and islands have a long association, for until very, very recently in the history of the world, birds were the only creatures (other than insects and bats) that could *fly* over the water to reach islands. The Chinese word for an island combines the ancient ideogram of a bird with that of a mountain—and measured from the seabed, every ocean island is a mountain. In this imagining, an island is a place for a bird to land; and birds hide out or hover about all over Jamaica—it has the highest number of native avian species anywhere in the Caribbean. There are finches and flycatchers, herons and egrets, black-billed and yellow-billed parrots, mockingbirds and kingbirds and the magnificent frigate bird, with its scarlet throat that balloons in breeding season. There are whistling ducks and blue and yellow and black and white warblers, elaenias (called Sarah Birds) and euphonias (called Cho-Cho Quits), an owl called Patoo and an oriole called Banana Katie. The island is also home to a little green and red tody called Rasta Bird, a cuckoo called Old Woman Bird

and another called Old Man Bird, and to doves and lots of crows, including the rightly named jabbering crow. And the John Crow, which isn't really a crow at all but a turkey vulture (graceful or disgraceful, depending on one's point of view) that has found a place in Jamaican folklore. There are hummingbirds, especially the so-called Doctor Bird, found only on the island and celebrated in Ian Fleming's James Bond story *For Your Eyes Only* (1960), where the opening words speak of "the most beautiful bird in Jamaica, and some say the most beautiful bird in the world, the streamer-tail or 'doctor' hummingbird." It is now the national bird of Jamaica. And there are over a hundred species of butterflies, each of exquisite color and design, including the giant swallowtail—largest in the Americas and native to the island.

Green and brown and croaking lizards live in Jamaica, along with a few snakes and one species of crocodile (which appears on the national coat of arms). Turtles have lived on and around Jamaica for millions of years, from the time when the sea was relatively shallow; and now there are green turtles and hawksbills and loggerheads and leatherbacks, bringing the sea and the land together in their amphibious lives. In fact, certain reptiles that can manage significant water crossings are usually among the first animals on any "new" island. Perhaps as importantly, reptiles can go for long periods without eating anything at all, absorbing heat passively from the sun and the ambient air rather than having to generate body heat internally like mammals and birds—which requires a lot of food.

Among the marine mammals, the manatees, or "sea cows," are relatively scarce around Jamaica these days; but they have made their home close to shore forever, and would have been easy pickings for

the earliest human settlers. There are still plenty of dolphins and some whales, including sperm whales and humpbacks, sharing the waters with stingrays and sharks, barracudas and eels, marlin and tuna. Around the reefs there are fish with intriguing names—grunts and groupers, snappers and doctorfish, squirrelfish and goatfish and triggerfish and angelfish—and in some parts of the Caribbean Sea the unusual flying fish, breaking the surface at speeds up to forty miles per hour and gliding on pectoral and pelvic fins for distances from a hundred feet to a quarter mile. Some say it flies over the waves to escape predators; others believe it does it just for fun.

The trees that originally grew on Jamaica, from the dry lowlands to the rainy valleys and up onto the steep hillsides, were drastically reduced—in both number and variety—with the arrival of humans, who cut timber for building and cleared land for agriculture. But this opened up spaces for new plant varieties, some introduced by travelers and some brought there by chance, on the winds and waves or by bird or boat. There are tamarinds whose seeds traveled from Asia, breadfruits brought from Tahiti by William Bligh (the notorious commander of the *Bounty*), and sapodilla (better known in Jamaica as naseberry) with its delicious fruit and sap called chicle, tapped every six years to make chewing gum. Jamaica has flowering trees such as the native poui, which has a spectacular yellow-gold blossom that lasts only a short while, falling in an apron around the base of the tree; and the blue mahoe, which displays trumpet-shaped, hibiscus-like flowers at different times of the year, its wood prized for cabinet-making and the crafting of musical instruments, and its bark used in Cuba to wrap cigars.

Other trees have various uses. The lignum vitae's sapwood was once a remedy for syphilis, and its gum is still used in the treatment of arthritis. There is a tree called Duppy Machete, with floral petals deemed suitable for dealing with duppies, West Indian spirits of the dead. The beautiful frangipani has a sweet scent but a poisonous sap, while the fruit of the ackee is poisonous at the wrong time of harvesting but delicious at the right stage. It is now the foundation of Jamaica's national dish, ackee and salt (cod) fish. There are cashew trees, with a pear-shaped fruit that ends in a kernel that is the nut, and soursop and coconut and pawpaw and mango trees, along with avocado and banana and cocoa and nutmeg, none of them native but all now widely dispersed on the islands of the Caribbean. Nutmeg was an icon of the spice trade, which once centered around a group of islands in Indonesia but was eventually transplanted to Grenada and other West Indian islands. The berries of the indigenous pimenta tree seemed to early European travelers to combine the taste of nutmeg, cinnamon, and clove, and for a long time Jamaica supplied most of the world with allspice, as it was called.

Mangroves grow on many of the Caribbean island shores, as they do in many parts of the world, extending the reach of islands by walking out to sea with their prop roots and capturing sediment and plants that will eventually shape the swamp into an expanded shoreline. There are casuarinas, which have come from afar but made the Caribbean their home, and sea grapes, with their leathery leaves and sour-grape fruit. They may have been the first plant seen by Columbus when he reached what he thought were the Spice Islands of Indonesia—and the smell of these trees, along with the sight of

their leaves blown from the shore and carried by the sea, would have been noticed by sailors long before any island came into view.

Anthurium, bougainvillea, Easter lily, wild scallion, and heliconia—called wild banana—are among the flowering plants native to Jamaica, along with a mimosa called Shame-Me-Lady, so sensitive that a light touch or a slight breeze cause the leaf stalks to collapse and the leaflets to close. One indigenous plant called Ram Goat Dash Along makes a healing bush tea, while cerasee makes a bitter tea that is also used as a body wash. Pomegranate and frangipani shrubs are common, along with Duppy Cho-Cho, which may harbor bad spirits. Marigolds and fuchsia grow in the mountains. Jamaica is also home to the greatest variety of orchid species in the Caribbean. They originated in Africa, like the enslaved men, women, and children who were later transported to the island, but many of the orchids were brought to the Americas as seed dust on the Sahara winds.

All humans on the islands of the world are settlers, though when they first traveled there, and why and how and from where, is often uncertain, or else explained in the myths that make up the history of first islanders (and which usually include stories about the first plants and animals as well). We can be sure that some humans came by choice, some reached by chance, and coercion played a part for others. Often islands provided sanctuary for those fleeing hunger or war, or seeking solitude—saintly or otherwise. Islands saw the arrival both of seasonal workers and of enslaved laborers, and of settlers looking for a different life, establishing new societies, and exploiting

natural resources that they did not have back home. And some of them will have had a dream.

People seem to have first settled the islands of the Caribbean around six thousand years ago. All of them came by boat—some paddling, some perhaps sailing, others just drifting from the mainland—though over time a myth was told about flying to the islands, transported by birds or spirits. Once there, they gathered wild plants and ocean kelp and hunted food from the seashell-crunchy, seaweed-squishy shore; and according to their stories they were only the latest in a series of travelers in the Caribbean Sea stretching back into the mists of time. Alternating periods of wandering and settling down had defined the lives of these Amerindian people—indeed of all people—since the beginning, with each coming and going being different and yet the same, signaling both a passage and a pattern. Some set out from the mouth of the Orinoco River in Venezuela, and their first islands were Trinidad and Tobago. Others came from Central America along the Yucatán Peninsula and from Florida, and they settled on Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, Cuba, and Jamaica (often referred to as the Greater Antilles). Archaeologists have divided them into different indigenous groups, but such labels are misleading, for they all thought of themselves simply as The People. "We the people" is the quintessential island affirmation, for an island is not a metaphor for home. Home is a metaphor for an island.

We can only guess whether it was because of a crisis or out of curiosity that these ancient peoples began to set out to sea from the American mainland. They may have had dreams of a place where they would find material and spiritual well-being; or maybe they had actually heard about such a place from their singers and storytellers.

Some of them may have been looking for a new start; others might have just gone for a boat ride and lost their way. Perhaps they were on their way to meet their ancestors. Whatever their motivation, they *did* set out.

When these first Amerindians arrived on Trinidad and Tobago, they couldn't see anywhere else to go and so they stayed, imagining these isles for awhile as the new center of their world. Then they heard from their dreamers and derring-doers about other islands, far beyond the horizon—about one hundred miles across the sea, as it happened. So when they had had enough of life on those first islands, or enough of their fellow islanders, or were restless for adventure, they set off again, paddling and drifting until they reached the island of Grenada. From there they could see another island, and another, and another, part of an arc stretching some five hundred miles—the eastern Caribbean (also called the Lesser Antilles). Were these the blessed isles their shamans had spoken about, over the horizon, at the end of the rainbow? Were they the home of spirits of malice and mischief or of gods of grace and goodness? Nobody knew. And everybody wondered.

These ancient Amerindian peoples were used to the ways in which rivers and mountains offered plants and animals to them, and as they traveled north along the arc of islands, they continued to harvest some of the shore food they were already familiar with. But fishing in the open sea offered another livelihood, where hunting and gathering required new knowledge and skills and a surrender to different natural and supernatural forces; and these soon became part of their consciousness and their culture. Over time, they made these islands of the archipelago their new home. They

found oysters, mussels, conch, and crab along the shoreline and in the mangrove swamps, and larger species—including lobsters two feet long and weighing over thirty pounds—on the sand, among the sea grass, and on the rocky beaches. They took to the sea for fish, and they ventured inland, finding some animals and plants they knew about and others they had never seen before. They harvested birds and reptiles and the small mammals that had swum to the islands or stolen a ride on driftwood. Slowly they brought their hunting and harvesting heritages into harmony, with island birds and sea turtles now animating their myths, and island storylines telling about their new relationship with the land and the sea around it.

Still, the history of settlement in the Caribbean was far from over. It seldom is with islands, where comings and goings are facts of life. From the South American mainland, new settlers with new ways of living began arriving in the Caribbean around 500 BCE, moving throughout the islands. They cultivated crops and resided in communal dwellings and village centers rather than seasonal hunting and fishing camps. They built houses to last for generations, farmed the land, harvested the sea, and created sophisticated ceremonies. Because many of the islands are mountainous, some of these new Amerindian settlers established political strongholds in the highland interiors where the resources were plentiful and the competition scarce. They expanded the existing traditions of weaving and basketmaking and ceramics and developed forms of dance and music and cooking that caught the attention of the Europeans and Africans who came much later; and they became known as the Arawak—from *aru*, their word for cassava.