

Britain: An Island Nation?

As the debate over Britain's EU membership reaches boiling point, interpretations of the nation's past, and definitions of what it means to be British, are repeatedly summoned to justify either 'In' or 'Out'. One of the most popular images of Britain's history – and one used by both sides – is that it has always been an 'island nation', most memorably expressed in the words that Shakespeare gave to the dying John of Gaunt, in the play *Richard II*:

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands –
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

Stirring stuff. Ready-made, you might think, for the Leave campaign, evoking a history of glorious and geographically ordained separation. The truth of Britain's maritime past, however, is a very different story, and reflects a fact that historians have begun to investigate more seriously in recent decades. This fact is quite simple: oceans connect.

Consider a few other islands. For centuries, Malta was a hub for Mediterranean shipping, while the Canaries, Madeira, and the Azores were pivotal points in vast Atlantic trading networks. Many of the countless islands of the Pacific, despite being thousands of miles apart, have been inhabited by seagoing people and connected by sailing routes since prehistoric times.

Such a perspective prompts us to question the insularity (in both senses) celebrated by the bard's elegant phrases. In contrast to his theatrical counterpart, the real John of Gaunt is unlikely to have had much confidence that the sea acted as a 'moat defensive', because the beginning of Richard II's reign witnessed a number of attacks by French raiders. In any case, Gaunt was probably more concerned with his own efforts to become king of Castile. Shakespeare himself, writing in the 1590s, probably evoked recent memories of the Spanish Armada, but a hundred years later a much larger Dutch fleet landed an army whose commander, Prince William of Orange, went on to take the throne. Far from doing 'the office of a wall', the sea makes Britain accessible.

If this accessibility brings vulnerability, it has also been vital to life in these islands. The arrivals of the Romans, Saxons, and Vikings each left their mark in language, culture, and demography, and immigration has continued to hold an important role in British society long after the end of these mass

invasions. Immigrants have brought new skills, new technologies, new ideas, many of which seeped into the 'native' population, just as many of the immigrants themselves integrated into local communities, although often preserving their own heritage and identities. Because of their maritime geography, the British Isles have always been something of a crossroads and a melting pot.

Maritime trade has had a similarly continuous and profound economic and social impact upon the country. Cornish tin was shipped to the Mediterranean in prehistoric times; wool from flocks across the country was England's major export to Europe throughout the medieval period; cotton imported from Indian and American plantations played a major part in the Industrial Revolution. Since the sixteenth century, Britain's relationship with the world has largely been defined by its seafaring network of commerce and colonies, sometimes with brutal results: during the eighteenth century, for example, British ships carried more enslaved African people across the Atlantic than those of any other nation. The legacies of empire and of trade continue to affect our world in all manner of ways, creative and destructive, and Britain is still deeply involved in – indeed, entirely dependent on – trade both to Europe and to other regions.

What does it mean to be an 'island nation', for both the past and the future? Britain is an archipelago, so perhaps we should rephrase the question. What does it mean to be a nation of islands? It means connection, exchange, encounters and movement. It means the world's influence upon Britain, and Britain's influence upon the world. It means that if – like Shakespeare – you want splendid isolation, Britain's maritime history is bound to disappoint you.

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