

Milica Prokić and Pavla Šimková (eds)

Entire of Itself? Towards an Environmental History of Islands

Winwick, Cambridgeshire, The White Horse Press, 2024

ISBN 978-1-912186-84-6 (HB) £70.00 978-1-912186-83-9 (PB) £32.00. 310 pp.

If everyone has their own island(s), mine are Madeira and the triangle islands of Faial-Pico-São Jorge in the Azores. I spent many long summer months in Madeira as a teenager; the Azores, I got to know later; in 2005, during a work trip, and I fell in love with these foggy lands of volcanoes, cows and whales.

There is a reason for beginning this review with a personal note, in *Entire of Itself? Towards an Environmental History of Islands*, each chapter opens with a brief biographical account of the authors' ties to a particular island or their interest in the islands study. These are page-turners beginnings that immediately grab the reader's attention.

When I was asked to review *Entire of Itself*, I accepted without much thought, and only afterward did I fear that it would be another complicated task in the midst of many that plague me these days. However, I found myself taking the book with me everywhere I went, reading it in cafes or under the trees during my short breaks. I enjoyed learning about distant places and people, and thinking about islandscapes in new ways. For me, a good book is one that makes me pick up a pencil to underline sentences, draw arrows, jot down short ideas in the margins, and wonder how I can use it later, incorporating it into my own writing and teaching. Needless to say, my copy of *Entire of Itself* is now full of handwritten notes, scribbles and marks.

As the editors, Milica Prokić and Pavla Šimková, point out, 'islands tickle the imagination'. This is because of their exceptionality in a world dominated by continental masses and otherness as miniature cosmos. In the introduction, the two environmental historians explain that there is an extensive literature on the subject, from biologists to philosophers, anthropologists and historians, as islands are hotspots of endemic biodiversity, a laboratory for studying natural and social processes, and the perfect setting for building – sometimes real, sometimes fictional – utopian and dystopian societies. However, *Entire of Itself* aims, in the words of the editors, to explore the environmental history of islands by flipping the angle. Instead of looking at them only through the usual spatial concepts of centre-periphery, connection-isolation, and boundaries-continuity, Milica Prokić and Pavla Šimková propose to bring islands to the forefront and centre of the narrative, with authors of the chapters addressing the role of island and human agencies in shaping material and imagined islandscapes. Islands are thus presented as a new category of analysis in environmental history. This is not exactly a novelty – forests, mushrooms, whales or dunes, to name a few, have been used as critical analytical tools for thinking about human and more-than-human histories – but islands do present a different view of the world, one that is distinct from what forests, mushrooms, whales and dunes have to show, adding another layer of knowledge to the images and voices of the Anthropocene.

REVIEWS

Entire of Itself is comprised of fourteen chapters, divided into three sections labelled 'islands of conservation, islands of exploitation, and islands of experimentation', to highlight the main human perspectives on such environments. But despite the arguments provided, this structure does not hold because the chapters do not fit into these boxes. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The editors are the first to admit that the 'dynamic, multispecies, multilateral, and multifaceted' interrelationships described in the book are impossible to frame, as they easily cross and overflow the proposed categories. This means that the structure employed is artificial and inefficient as a thematic guide, yet this reveals the rich and plural nature of the histories being told.

The fourteen histories feature the collective contributions of a number of scholars with diverse interests, including maritime history, heritage management, religious studies, political and social ecology, landscape archaeology, environmental conflict, gender studies, tourism, ecosystem services and politics. The chapters span a wide temporal and geographical scope, from late antiquity to the present, across the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea. The topics addressed are equally varied, offering fascinating insights into islands, history and environmental issues. They range from the living and settling on islands, subsistence and survival in places that can be hell, paradise, or both, to histories of nature and power, colonial plantation systems or other imposed economic regimes that threaten pre-existent world-lives and fragile ecosystems. Violence and tension are recurrent themes in the human histories narrated. Islands serve as refuges for buccaneers, quarantine zones and prisons from which there is no escape from oppression. Violence is inflicted on the islands' unique flora and fauna, often leading to their extinction. Violence supports the belief that some lands are expendable and can be used for nuclear testing or dumping of toxic waste, leaving behind an unbearable trail of destruction. Islands are depicted as blank places, transient landscapes, subject to natural and human forces that can create, shape or erase them in days, years or centuries. However, these islands are also powerful agents in their own right, as their particularities define the identities, livelihoods, and opportunities of those who inhabit on them. And while insularity often imposes hardship, it also fosters stories of resistance and resilience, and catalyses nature protection and conservation.

This book offers a compelling account of the multifaceted nature of islands and their capacity to serve as exemplars of the (new) hybrid environments, such as those composed of plastic, which are likely to persist and define the Anthropocene. In the conclusion, Milica Prokić and Pavla Šimková posit that, whether resisting or succumbing to it, islands are shaped by connectivity. The histories that comprise the book illustrate this point precisely. They demonstrate that no island is an isolated entity. Each island is, nevertheless, unique in its own singularity and in its relationship with the global, patchy world.

JOANA GASPAR DE FREITAS

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa