

COMMANDING PERSPECTIVES ON THE ISLES OF SCILLY

Robert Maybee's Ballad of Sir Cloudesley Shovel

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General Background

The Isles of Scilly consist of an archipelago set in 45 square sea-miles in the British Isles: there are five inhabited islands and 51 uninhabited islands (Mumford, 1970:20).^[1] While islands are distinguished between those that are inhabited and those that are uninhabited, a distinction also exists between islands and large rocks. In terms of Scilly, the definition of an island is taken to be “land surrounded by water at high tide, supporting a variety of land vegetation at all times” (Bowey, 2004/2005:7).^[2] Scilly is 49 degrees 55 minutes north latitude, 6 degrees 19 minutes west longitude. The population of Scilly is about 2000. The closest landmass is Cornwall, with Land’s End 28 miles off the nearest island, although Penzance, the sea and air departure point for Scilly, is 42 miles away. It is often said about Scilly that it possesses a kind of “*multum in parvo*” (Mumford, 1970:37), or a wide variety in a small location. While the source of the name Scilly is uncertain, Scillonians do not like their home being described as ‘the Scillies’ (plural) but prefer ‘Scilly’ (singular). The slogan repeated throughout the long-running journal *The Scillonian* is ‘There is only one Scilly’—an interesting phrase in its anxious insistence. As Baldacchino and Milne say of small islands generally, it has a “firm sense of boundary and distinctness” (2000:1).

Until the 19th Century, the fortunes of Scilly waxed and waned, like the ever important tides that lap its shores, according to the needs of the mainland and the demands of war. Whenever the English perceived a threat of war from her old enemies—Spain and France—then time, energy and resources were put into shoring up Scilly as a strategic position for defence. In times of peace, Scilly was pretty much left alone, cropping up in mainlanders’ consciousness only as an item in the weather forecast, or when it petitioned mainlanders for financial help through the national newspaper, *The Times*. Scilly’s history, culture, architecture and politics deserve much more attention than they have received. Rather like its closest neighbour, Cornwall, Scilly has a kind of iconic status, but it is a status that is underpinned by myths that serve purposes convenient to others. To ask how Scilly sees itself is also a vexed question, given the seeming contradictions between the idea that ‘there is only one Scilly’, and the real distinctions

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made between St Mary's and the other islands known as the 'off islands'. However, the question of how Scilly sees itself is a question beyond the scope of this paper.

Here, I explore one aspect of Scilly's identity as it emerges in a 19th-Century ballad that alters the perspective on a story more commonly seen from a national or international perspective. Re-addressing a famous maritime incident from a particularly Scillonian point of view, Robert Maybee's ballad *The Loss of Sir Cloudesley Shovel* is used as a case study to suggest the resilience and tenacity of small islands that seize an opportunity to tell their own version of a particular story.

Robert Maybee

Robert Maybee was born on 1 April 1810, and died sometime in December 1891, at the age of 81, apparently in the poor house. His parents were millers, based on the island of St Mary's, although it appears that Maybee himself spent time on other islands as an itinerant worker. He worked as a labourer and builder, but is also recorded as selling fruit and ballads door to door,^[3] as records indicate that he was indicted for doing so without a licence.^[4] Maybee's life spans an interesting and important period in the history of the islands, the bulk of the 19th Century, which saw vast changes in the economic life of Scilly.

The changes occurred primarily with the arrival of a new Proprietor or Governor of the islands in 1834, Augustus Smith. Until this point, Scilly had been governed in a very *ad hoc* way by individual men who were virtually absentee landlords, predominantly represented by the Godolphin family for the Duchy of Cornwall. In 1834, Augustus Smith took over the islands on a 93-year lease for a payment to the Duchy of 40 pounds per annum. Smith himself is a fascinating character, the subject of a number of books,^[5] and was very much concerned for the long-term benefit of the islands and islanders. He introduced compulsory education for children forty years before this happened on the mainland.^[6] Smith's arrival on Scilly brought structured change in employment, education, transport and government, and he is seen by most commentators to have enabled an escape from entrenched poverty for many people. Smith was no doubt strict, and attempted to force productive labour on people who had not been used to being actively governed and organised, and this is perhaps the context in which to see Maybee's own encounters with the law. Maybee missed out on the schooling opportunities that Smith's changes brought, and Maybee's financial existence seems to have been precarious as his *Lines Written on Opposition in Trade* (1881) suggest. In this poem, he laments how at the age of 70 he is forced to sell berries from door to door, and has to face competition from two younger men who threaten to undercut him to steal his customers, whom they will then fleece with higher prices when they have broken him. The final lines of the poem describe Maybee's dilemma and lack of opportunities:

*I am too old to go abroad
 Into a foreign land[.]
 I must spend my few days at home
 And do the best I can.*

Maybee's circumstances indicate how difficult life could be on Scilly, in spite of the vast improvements that Smith began in the middle of the 19th Century.

Maybee has had a particular kind of status in relation to Scilly as a documenter and describer of the islands, whose words regularly crop up in histories and guidebooks of Scilly. Knowledge of Maybee is limited, dependent largely on his memoir, *Sixty-eight Years' Experience on the Scilly Islands* (Baxter, 1973), and a series of ballads he dictated. Additional material comes from comments and recollections about him by islanders recorded in *The Scillonian*, and from invaluable work done by R M Baxter in 1973 in the only publication dedicated to him, *Robert Maybee: The Scillonian Poet*. More recently, Maybee's work has found its way into an anthology of labouring poets of the 19th Century,^[7] which provides a broader context in which to see his work.

His reputation could be described as contested. For Baxter, he is 'the' Scillonian poet, and he is described in *The Scillonian* of March 1957 (v129:58) as "the island bard". More recently, Scillonian writer Sam Llewellyn wrote that Maybee had been "rather flatteringly described as the Scillonian Poet" (2005:32). Some of the disagreement about his value undoubtedly lies in the nature of his compositions. His memoirs are direct and descriptive, his poems are simple ballads that reflect the way they were composed. They have the repetitive rhythm and vocabulary that you would expect of material composed orally, designed to be remembered easily, performed easily and drawing on a long history of ballad making. The stories are local, pit people against nature, include a strong sense of the intransigence of nature, and of the fragility of human beings at the mercy of stronger forces, particularly the sea, and divine judgement. They are descriptive, action-based, narrative-driven, uncomplicated yarns. They are fundamentally oral compositions—though they were also transcribed and sold door to door by Maybee himself.

The Loss of Sir Cloudesley Shovel

Most of Maybee's ballads are about shipwrecks, which is not particularly surprising given the location and nature of the islands, and the fact that they consist of a large number of very dangerous rocks that historically have not been very well signposted for the seafarer. In the past, much of the islands' income derived, precariously, through trade with passing ships, and through the provision of expert pilots to guide ships through the rocky passages to safe harbours. It has to be said also that some of the islands' income has derived from salvaging the remains of ships that did not make it to safe harbour. That the sea should play such a large part in Maybee's work reflects the huge impact that the natural environment has on small island cultures, and the volatility of the relationship between people and the forces that surround them—forces that cannot be directly controlled, and must be respected if they cannot be fully understood. Shipwrecks in Maybee's poetry also stand as markers of historical time. In contexts where seasons are more important than individual days, the passage of time can be understood through events that everyone can remember rather than through events of particular individual or personal significance. A shipwreck, then, becomes a collective experience, drawing together a group of people who witness an event of large-scale

significance, where lives and property are endangered. Ballads about shipwrecks are part of a culture's way of understanding itself across time, by providing a mark in collective memory. Shipwrecks provide the possibility for the demonstration of human endeavour on a grand scale, and for the celebration of island heroism by brave and knowledgeable locals who risk themselves to save those who are literally 'blown in'. Shipwrecks mark the spot where the natural physical environment and the products of mankind collide; indeed, ballads about shipwrecks invite the listener to reflect on these collisions. Shipwrecks often entail significant loss of human life, and ballads about shipwrecks invite the listener to consider the fragility and impermanence of human life in the face of forces with greater longevity, while at the same time affording listeners a moment to celebrate their own present survival in inhospitable circumstances, and, perhaps, to celebrate the survival of the tribe through individuals who it pass on.^[8]

Maybee's ballad about the loss of Sir Cloudesly Shovel is a striking case in point, and an intervention in national myth-making.^[9] True to traditional ballad style, most of Maybee's ballads, even those not about shipwrecks, are local and contingent, inspired by an event, the weather or some immediate response to the environment. The *Cloudesley Shovel* ballad is different because it returns to an event well before Maybee's birth. Sir Cloudesley Shovel was an English admiral, named Rear Admiral of England and commander-in-chief of the British fleets in 1704. At 8pm on 22 October 1707, Cloudesley's ship *Association* and the rest of his fleet struck the Gilstone Ledge in the Western rocks off Agnes, with the loss of about 1700 lives. It was a large-scale and significant disaster, and one that contributed to the pressure on Parliament to bring in the 1714 Longitude Act that established the prize for someone who could effectively introduce a way of identifying longitude, and therefore, more accurate navigation and location.^[10] A pamphlet from 1709 is entitled "The life and glorious actions of Sir Cloudesly Shovel knight Admiral of the confederate fleet", while the poem at the end of the pamphlet refers to Cloudesley as "Britain's glory".^[11] In another contemporary document, allegedly by a "Gentleman who served" with Shovel at Toulon, we have detailed coverage of "His Birth, Education and Rise; with a full Account of all the Naval Battels since the Revolution". The tone is heroic and laudatory as this section from the Dedication suggests:

And tho' there has not been wanting in every Age some Marine Heroes to support in their respective Generations the Glory of the British Nation, to whom Nature seems to have assign'd the Dominion of the Sea, I am confident it may without any Flattery be affirm'd, that if the noblest of them be compared with the fam'd Commander, whose Memory this Essay is intended to perpetuate to the latest Posterity, there will hardly be one found, in whom all the Qualities requisite to the Composition of an accomplish'd Marine Officer were so conspicuously lodged.^[12]

The pamphlet deals fleetingly with Cloudesley's death, "the singularity of which will enhance the Glory of his famous exploits", but instead returns anxiously to it, circling uneasily around one obvious question: how did such an "accomplish'd Marine Officer" manage to lose his fleet only a few miles off his own mainland?

'Tis in vain for Humane Reason to pretend to enquire into the Affairs of Providence, or to demand the Causes of Events from the Almighty, we must therefore acquiesce in the Decrees of Fate, and bear with Resignation what Lot the Will of Heaven assigns us, yet where we ought not to express our Resentment we may our Admirations, and certainly nothing can appear more surprising to our Judgements than the shipwreck of Sir Cloudesley Shovel, who was as experience'd an Officer, and commanded as skilful Sailors per chance as ever serv'd under any Admiral, he was familiar with Dangers, and acquainted with all the Terrors of the Ocean, he had serv'd the Nation for several Years in eminent Posts at Sea, had often view'd those very Rocks he split upon, he had rid out that stupendous Storm when Admiral Beaumont and several other Officers were cast away, a Tempest more horrid and unusual than had ever been known by the most aged Mariners; his Knowledge and Experience in Marine Affairs was consummate, he knew himself in Person the working of Ships, and advanc'd himself at first by his Skill in navigation, and gradually went thro' all the Posts that could give him an Opportunity of improving himself in that Art, yet after all he died, as already related, in a manner not more surprising than lamentable.^[13]

On 12 May 1873, Robert Maybee provided an answer to this question by allowing what Edward Said (1993:78-79) might call a 'contrapuntal reading' of the shipwreck, or a reading that contrasts accounts to highlight the power relationships they entail, and the interests they can be revealed to serve. By 1873, over 160 years since the shipwreck itself, Maybee's point of departure is the memorial to Shovel on Porthellick Green. His treatment of the wreck diverges markedly from other commemorations of the tragic event, and intriguingly asserts the importance of the islands and the islanders that are only a backdrop to the main events when they are represented by non-islanders. In the quote above, very little is said about Scilly itself or the cause of the accident, with only a brief reference to the "rocks of Scilly", and the sea that "cast his Body upon the Sands of the same Island where he suffer'd Shipwreck". In Maybee's story, the Admiral is warned by one of his sailors that the fleet is too close to the rocks, the sailor is hanged for his impudence, and the fleet is wrecked because of this.

*Sir Cloudesley's fleet when on the main,
Sailed round the coast of France and Spain
Long with a gallant band.
It was a dark and stormy night,
The Admiral thought his course was right—
He was far from rock and sand.*

*One valiant seaman, bold and brave,
Knew they'd soon meet a watery grave,
Aloud he then did cry:
Our course must alter, wear, or stay—
No farther can we run this way,
The Scilly rocks were nigh!*

*The Admiral had the seaman hung,
And while on yard-arm wild he swung,*

The seamews shrilly cried (Baxter, 1973:26)

Specific comparisons between the 18th-Century pamphlets and Maybee's ballad yield illuminating evidence of the effect of counterpoint. First, both prose documents marginalise the shipwreck by treating it as literally accidental to the main story of Sir Cloudesley Shovel. The 1709 pamphlet celebrates all of Shovel's maritime successes and telescopes the wreck down to a few brief pages. Furthermore, this text actively discourages consideration of how the incident happened with the phrase: "'Tis in vain for Humane Reason to pretend to enquire into the Affairs of Providence". Here we find that the wreck occurred after the destruction of eight French ships at Tolon, and the wreck is seen as an unfortunate element in an otherwise successful career.

By contrast, Maybee's poem is only about the wreck—that is, Shovel's career and character are irrelevant except as they are revealed in this incident. We do not know why he is sailing "round the coast of France and Spain", but we do know why the wreck happened—through the Admiral's arrogance. What the Admiral thinks ("the Admiral thought his course was right") is sharply contrasted with what the sailor knew (he "knew they'd soon meet a watery grave").

Similarly, the telling of the story varies significantly in tone and style. The pamphlet offers a formal, impersonal, calm and confident account designed for the public arena. It advises the reader how to see the event as a 'lamentable' moment in an otherwise illustrious career. The ballad, on the other hand, includes direct speech from the sailor ("Our course must alter"), as well as the evocative word picture of the hanged man swaying from the yard arm to the sound of the seabirds 'shrilly' crying.

Even more telling to the analysis of how Maybee's version counterpoints standard English versions is the shift in the penultimate stanza to the present tense, and the personal voice of the ballad's speaker as the ballad ends with the supernatural tone that is common to the genre:

*One hundred years have passed away,
And seventy three,—so histories say,
This tale came to my mind.
I viewed the spot on a bright spring day,
In seventy three—the twelfth of May,—
No flowers there could I find.*

*Thousands have passed along that way,
And viewed the spot on summer day—
They always found it bare;
No wild flowers there are to be found,
No pinks or daisies growing round,
No green grass ever there.* (Baxter,1973:27)

The focus for this version of events is Scilly itself. Far from being the background to a part of England's military history, Scilly here provides the perspective from which to

understand the fateful events. Rather than the admired hero and leader of his men, Shovel here is given the role of arrogant and tyrannical master who squanders his men's lives rather than take advice from a subordinate. The ballad has a strongly revengeful sense of the thousands who pass by, enjoying the sunny spring day, while the luckless Shovel has left no trace behind.^[14] It is an appropriately Scillonian punishment for his grave not to yield growth given the islands' continued association with flowers and plants luxuriating in favourable growing conditions.^[15] In Maybee's version, there is no suggestion that we see in other accounts that the islanders might have been culpable in the foundering of Shovel's fleet. Bathurst (2005:124-125), for example, retells a story in which Shovel was washed up still alive only to be murdered and mutilated for an expensive ring by a female wrecker who confessed to the crime on her own death bed. In contrast to the dispassionate authoritative voice of the pamphlet, the speaker brings the reader right up to the present moment. In Maybee's account, history is not over, final and finished, but rather resonates into the present, asserting the survival and resilience of the islands themselves.

End Thoughts

It is no part of my argument that Maybee's version of the wreck of the *Association* is more accurate or truthful than any other. Indeed, its colour and liveliness testify to its imagination and creativity. It could also be argued that it sentimentally heroises the sailor just as the prose texts heroise the Admiral. Furthermore, the reader/listener is certainly not encouraged to bring to the ballad the knowledge that these kinds of wreck have been attributed to the deliberate effects of wreckers. Nor am I arguing that the sailor is explicitly represented as a Scillonian, although his knowledge of the rocks makes this implicitly plausible. Rather, the ballad can be seen as a stage in the battle for ideological control over the cultural representation of small islands in its focus on the way that history can be used to address the here and now, as it ends celebrating the sunny spring day in May on St Mary's island. It is Maybee, not the sailor, who asserts a perspective that is explicitly Scillonian.

If we read Maybee's poetry and think about it in the context of the Isles of Scilly, it reminds us that centre and margin, core and periphery, depend upon point of view. From Derrida we have learnt that binary oppositions such as mainland and island, which suggest an acknowledgement of difference and equality, can be deconstructed to reveal vested interests that privilege mainland over island, while crucially relying on the notion of the island for its definition.^[16] Postcolonial critics such as Said, in turn, have analysed the power relationships that exist between what is seen as centre and what is seen as margin, insisting that cultural representations need to be read against each other to provide fuller meanings.

From a different perspective—one that addresses colonialism and island cultures as they are experienced rather than understood from a meta-theoretical standpoint—Barbara Christian, born on the Virgin Islands, has some very sharp words about the use of centre/periphery:

Periphery . . . is a word I heard throughout my childhood, for if anything was seen as being at the periphery, it was those small Caribbean islands which had neither land mass nor military power. Still I noted how intensely important this periphery was, for US troops were continually invading one island or another if any change in political control even seemed to be occurring. (Christian, 2001:2260)

Maybe's ballad shifts our perspective on a moment in history and alters the significance of particular individual agents. The Admiral, whose death was of such importance to the English that it resulted in new energy being put into long standing navigational problems, is relegated to a bit part. Rather than being the key tragic figure, the Admiral is symbolically equivalent to Coleridge's albatross hanging around the Ancient Mariner's neck, a *momento mori*, or a warning to others. In Maybe's ballad, the land survives the transient intruder, and lives on in the words of the poet and the continuing experiences of the readers and listeners. By reversing traditional hierarchies of admiral and sailor, by ending with the view of those on the islands, Maybe illustrates Barbara Christian's point that many people "have never conceived of [themselves] only as somebody's *other*" (Christian, 2001:2259). His ballad provides us with another view of historical events. Maybe's version of events may bear little reality to what actually happened, which, given the extent of the tragedy, might be impossible to establish. Maybe's ballad refuses to see Scilly as marginal, the mere vehicle for an English maritime disaster. In place of marginality, that sense of what is "not major, not central, not powerful", Maybe asserts a sense of Scilly as central, with an identity that is "powerful, important, and *ours*" (Said, 1993:392-393), and encourages us to "rethink our mind's sense of what makes a place strong or weak, or what makes for peripheral or central space" (Baldacchino, 2000:2). By creating its own hero in the unnamed martyred sailor, the ballad provides an alternative way of seeing, and looks from the islands outwards, commanding the perspective.

The wreck of the *Association*, then, can be seen as a site of conflict not just between rocks and ships, but over who has the right to tell or write history. Reading contrapuntally might work towards understandings of small island cultures that resist the hierarchies implicit in definitions of centre/margin, mainland/island or core/periphery. It is islands, in many cases, that provide the physical and spatial boundary markers of nations and cultures, and as such they are quite literally fought over. One area of small island culture research might examine how the representation of islands in literature and culture provides other kinds of boundary markers, constructed in history and contributing to very different kinds of cultural memories.

Endnotes

[1] Bowey (2004/2005:7) makes the point that there are six islands 'if the Gugh, on which there are two houses, is regarded as separate from St Agnes'.

[2] As Bowey (2004/2005:75) goes on to point out, this disqualifies 'Hanjague [Han'jig], which is 85 feet high, but does not have sufficient vegetation to accord it island status.

[3] *The Scillonian* (1941), v21n19.

[4] Court House Records (1857), 18 November, Isles of Scilly Museum Archives.

[5] See, for example, Inglis-Jones (1969) and, more recently, Llewellyn (2005).

[6] Intriguingly, David Buffet's presentation at the 2nd International Conference on Small Island Cultures, Norfolk Island, 2006, suggested that Norfolk Island too introduced compulsory education before the rest of Australia. Education is, of course, a double-edged sword and can easily be seen as a tool of colonialism, particularly where issues of standardising language are concerned.

[7] See Goodridge (2003).

[8] Bathurst (2005:8) provides a history of shipwrecking, and the first chapter focuses on the perils of seafaring in times of "inaccurate charts, insufficient fuel, incompetent crews, drunken captains, absent lookouts, [and] corrupt pilots".

[9] There are actually two versions of this ballad in Baxter's collection of Maybee's work. The one I cite here seems clearly to have been composed by Maybee; the provenance of the other is less clear. It seems more literary, is more intertextual and is more sophisticated in its structure and patterning than the first. The relationship between the two ballads deserves further scrutiny, and I am grateful to Peter Goodall for his insights here.

[10] The Act established a prize of between £20,000 and £10,000 depending on the degree of accuracy, and was eventually reluctantly awarded to John Harrison in 1773 (Matthews, 2000).

[11] *Eighteenth Century Catalogue*, microfilm 1651 reel 1893 n4. It should be said, though, that there were sceptical English voices such as Pope and Addison. Addison, for example, is reported to have remarked that "Shovel could not reap any honour from dying by an error of his profession" (Mortimer, 1954:4).

[12] *Eighteenth Century Catalogue*, microfilm 1651 reel 2613 n3, Dedication.

[13] *Ibid*:127.

[14] The second version of the ballad has the sailor request to hear Psalm 109 before he dies, with the added impact of invoking the curse that the punishment for those who reward good with evil should include his children being fatherless, his wife becoming a widow and that "his posterity be cut off".

[15] The story runs that the industry began when William Trelvellick sent a hat-box of flowers from Scilly to Covent Garden and received one pound. The current guide for

Scilly asserts this to have been in 1868 (Bowey, 2004/2005:39) while Mumford (1970:126) is less clear whether it was 1867, 1879 or 1881.

[16] See, for example, Derrida (1981:279) and his paradox that “it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. . . . The centre is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center”.

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