

## INTRODUCTION

This publication comprises a selection of peer-reviewed versions of papers presented at *Culture and the Construction of Islandness*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Small Island Cultures Conference, held at the University of Prince Edward Island's Institute of Island Studies on Prince Edward Island, Canada, June 28–July 2, 2007 for SICRI: the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative.

The conference brought together scholars from a wide range of disciplines sharing a common interest in island cultures. In their presentations, participants explored how islands—their history, geography, ecology—shape human cultures and in turn, how cultural performances—including language, the arts, institutions and relationships—shape islanders' appreciation of themselves, their natural and built environments and their place in the wider world. In this volume, authors explore the importance to culture of island insularity and connectivity, demographics and diasporas; trace the cultural imprints of colonialism and self determination; and reveal the importance of both relative dependency and political autonomy. Commodification of culture in various guises, the idea of culture as a tool for development in emerging knowledge economies, and the potential to insert culturally based ethics into environmental management are subjects of inquiry. Islands, often deemed to be manageable in scale and therefore apt microcosms for study, are shown to elude easy definition and exhibit contradictory tendencies. They may provide lessons for mainlands but in some cases, rules and models relevant to mainlands simply do not pertain and if imposed, invite disaster. Yet, an “island advantage”—often the inventiveness necessary for sustained life on small islands—can twist or reverse an apparent deficit in surprising ways.

A key theme through many of the papers is the question of cultural hybridity and autochthony. By definition, small islands form and are then colonized, usually repeatedly by various constellations of species including humans with varying cultures. When, then, can any aspect of human culture on an island be considered indigenous? When does ‘local’ music, for example—often seen to be liberally borrowed and adapted from elsewhere—arrive at folkloric status? Given the inevitability of change, how much should we worry about forces of change, whether they arrive on a canoe or a cruise ship, or across a bridge? Islanders often seek to assert and conserve their cultures, yet also yearn for modernity. Some changes that seem threatening can be shown to have positive, sometimes critically important aspects that allow cultures not only to persist but to be strengthened through adaptation—a sort of hybrid vigour that defies intuition. In this volume we see that new technologies offer different ways of defining culture and promoting cultural resilience, and key roles for governments, academics and grassroots activists are illustrated.

Enough said. I have no room here to indulge the many threads of thought that run through this volume. I have tried to arrange the papers so as to lead the reader through a series of (sometimes loosely) connected ideas that sometimes build on one another and at other times (like islands) present apparent contradictions. Enjoy the read!

Irené Novaczek (Editor) for the SICRI Steering Committee (January 2008)  
Director, Institute of Island Studies  
University of Prince Edward Island  
Canada