

ISLOMANIA AND GUERNSEY

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Abstract

This paper considers the ways in which literary, artistic, and cultural representations of Guernsey have been affected by this place's status as an island. Guernsey has often been viewed through the prism of Classical myth and with reference to the islands of the Mediterranean. Developments in nineteenth-century biology also led to new natural history approaches to Guernsey. Depictions of local distinctiveness result both from conditions in the islands of Guernsey themselves and from wider thoughts concerning islands in general.

Keywords

Channel Islands, Guernsey, Islomania, Victor Hugo

Islands have increasingly become the focus of scholarly interest. Indeed, in the last decades, there has been a tsunami of academic literature. The bibliography in Paul Rainbird's *The Archaeology of Islands* runs to some seventeen pages and is selective rather than comprehensive. Clearly, in a short paper such as this, it is not possible to range far and wide. It would be possible to catalogue the different types of people who have been attracted to Guernsey: medieval hermits in search of solitude, Huguenots escaping persecution, writers seeking a peaceful asylum with a low cost of living, adventurers and tax-evaders, artists in quest of the sublime. We shall encounter some of these characters in the course of this article. But rather than focus on people, I want to home in on some themes.

First I would like to consider the question of *mentalité*. When we contemplate the world around us, our vision is influenced by the ways in which we have been reared and educated. The native of the Kalahari 'reads' the desert in a fashion markedly different from that of the urban tourist on safari. We are conditioned by geography. We are also conditioned by time. In studying the past, we tend to forget that Greek and Latin classics long dominated education. From earliest childhood onwards, Classical mythology, Classical history, Classical languages, and Classical literature dominated the curriculum.

At a tender age, many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century children read the *Odyssey*, often in the original Greek and even more commonly in translation. Thus they encountered stories about Calypso's enchanted island, Odysseus' island home in Ithaca, the sweet maiden Nausicaa living in an island on the edge of the world. They learned about ships, the 'wine-dark' sea, and the navigation hazards presented by Scylla and Charybdis. The study of Greek history revolved around Aegean islands. Latin poetry brought Roman divinities and Italian islands.

My review has been brief, but I hope that I have established my argument, that Classical studies furnished rich images of exotic islands. Our ancestors' minds were conditioned to view islands through a Classical prism. And thus they approached the Channel Islands. As one anonymous nineteenth century poet wrote about the dreaded Casket rocks, off the northwest coast of the island of Alderney:

*Yet all must pass your dread defiles
 Ere they attain these Southern skies,
 And boldly toil their fearful miles
 To win the island Paradise:
 As poets feigned, in classic lore,
 Hell's portals must be crossed, before
 The blessed shade could reach Elysium's happy shore.*

The Caskets are likened to the gateway to hell. Having successfully negotiated this hazard, the traveller comes to the island Paradise – Guernsey; and Guernsey is then compared with the shore of Elysium. Our Classical poets tell us that Elysium knows perpetual spring and shady groves, that it has its own sun and is lit by its own stars.

The island of Guernsey was often viewed in Classical terms. The historian Tupper opened his *History of Guernsey* with the observation:

In point of size, Guernsey almost equals the celebrated island of Ithaca, which, lying on the western coast of Greece, is very rocky and mountainous and only forty miles in circumference. And yet Ithaca was part of the kingdom, and long residence of Ulysses, whose adventures, on his return to it from the Trojan war, form the subject of Homer's Odyssey. (Tupper, 1854: 1).

Tupper uses his comparison to justify his history. Like Ithaca, Guernsey is small, but she “is not barren in interesting historical incidents”. If tiny Ithaca can be chronicled, so can Guernsey.

Sark offered the visitor the beauty of the Venus Pool. Venus was a goddess of erotic love, the Roman equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite. Classical mythology portrayed Aphrodite/Venus as a divinity born in all her naked beauty amidst the sea foam off the coast of Cyprus. When Victorian artists discovered a rocky pool in Little Sark and realised that it was completely covered by the sea at high tide, they named it the Venus Pool. William Toplis was shown the Venus Pool in 1886 by Peregrine Feeney and he spent the next two decades perfecting his painting of it (‘About Toplis’). He represented the rock structure with minute accuracy. At the end, he positioned a female nude by the side of the pool. When viewers gaze at Toplis’ painting today, they all too frequently fail to decode the image and symbolism. Few link the nude to Aphrodite/Venus or remember Kypris/Venus emerging from the waters of Cyprus. Yet when the painting was originally displayed, the mythological imagery was well appreciated.

I have, I hope, established my first theme: our ancestors regularly viewed Guernsey and the other Channel Islands through a Classical prism. *Les îles Anglo-Normandes* were transmuted into Aegean isles peopled by Homeric heroes and divinities.

I would now like to turn to my second theme. On the voyage of the *Beagle* in 1835, Darwin discovered that the chaffinches in the Galapagos islands differed slightly from island to island. Darwin’s discoveries quickly led to a recognition among scientists of the significance of islands – and islands lent themselves to scientific research. An island can be understood as an entity. Who can hope to understand a continent such as Asia or Europe? Yet the human brain can hope to make sense of an entity as clearly defined as an island. The enterprise may be flawed – but it attracts.

Islands offer subtle variations in their natural history. They also offer subtle patterns of cultural diversity. A form of language derived from medieval Norman-French was to be found in the Channel Islands. This was not just a single patois; rather, each island had its own

distinct and nuanced variation until the mid-twentieth century. The patois of Jersey differed from that of Guernsey. And within the bailiwick of Guernsey, there were different patois variations in Alderney and Sark. In Guernsey, the patois of the high parishes was different from the patois of the low parishes.

For the French visitor, the islands were like Normandy – but different. As Victor Hugo’s son wrote during his exile in the Channel Islands, Guernsey was Norman in its origins, language, laws, and climate. But it was also different, as Hugo went on to explain:

“The Channel Islands were Normandy, but different from Normandy. No passport was required. Enter who wish. There was no penal code, no law code such as Napoleon’s. Press freedom and the other freedoms of association prevailed. In this insular Normandy freedoms existed thanks to traditional right” (F.V. Hugo, 1857: 22).

Hugo was not the first to notice this. In the eighteenth century, French scholars became interested in the Channel Islands. As the French scholar Georges Festa (1991) observed at a lecture delivered at Southampton University in 1988, the islands offered the Enlightenment philosophers an example of independence and the exotic quality of a maritime space that was later to become an asylum in the Romantic era.

The islands constituted something resembling a laboratory. As the Guernsey historian Tupper (1854) commented, the islands “were tolerated as two tiny semi-republics between two powerful monarchies”. Continental academics put the insular cultures under the microscope and were fascinated by what they found. It has commonly been asserted that the islands became interesting in the nineteenth century when British tourists, looking for the picturesque and the sublime, began to visit and discovered the beauty of the islands. Festa’s thesis demonstrates that the islands were interesting a century earlier, to the philosophers of the Enlightenment era. A good example of such a thinker is Francois Marlin, who opined:

The Islands were not the sewers of England and France, filled with libertines, bankrupts and thieves; not at all, the moral standards of the Islands were good and decent (in Festa, 1991: 94).

In the course of this paper, there have been several references to Victor Hugo. He came with his family to Guernsey in 1855, a political refugee. Originally, he intended to stay only a short while on the island and then make his way to another place of exile. However, after a few months, he bought a property in Hauteville, St Peter Port, and he lived in Guernsey until 1870. Hugo’s novel *Toilers of the Sea* (*Les Travailleurs de la mer*, V.M. Hugo, 1866) contains a deep appreciation of the island and of its maritime setting. Hugo was fascinated by the sea, and the violence, wildness, and sublimity of the ocean.

Hugo was not the only poet to celebrate Guernsey in the nineteenth century. Georges Métivier was a Guernsey-born man who wrote lovingly about his native land. Hugo expressed admiration for his poetry. In a letter to Métivier, he declared:

It is the country belfry, it is the deep, sad ancestral field, it is the sacred hearth of the family that I rediscover in your lines, so perceptive in their innocence, so polished in their ruggedness. You speak the fine old Norman language with piercing appeal (A.I.s. from V.M. Hugo to Metivier, in French, currently in the private collection of Gregory Stevens Cox).

Métivier was not the only patois poet. He was followed by Denis Corbet, a versatile schoolmaster who painted pedigree Guernsey cows, surveyed land - and composed verse in his free time. Corbet wrote both in patois and in standard French. He chose French for a

poem entitled *Ma Muse*. He explains that at the age of fifteen he was sunk in a melancholy mood on the north coast of Guernsey. He was wondering how he could follow in the steps of illustrious predecessors. Amidst his reverie, his muse appeared and addressed him in English:

*Elle me dit: "Rêveur, voilà depuis long temps
Que je te suis partout, en observant ta peine,
Voudrais tu donc pouvoir dire ce que tu sens,
Exprimer en langage et ta joie et ta peine?"*

*"Voilà," lui repondis-je, "o déesse, mes vœux!"
"Désormais, chante donc," dit elle, "en ta campagne
De ce triple parler qui convient tant à ceux
Qui rattachent la France à la Grande Bretagne. (Corbet, 1884: 230-231)*

[*"Deamer, for a long time I have been following you everywhere, watching your pain, would you like to be able to say what you feel, to express in language your joy and your pain?" I replied "There, goddess, are my wishes!" "Then sing" she said "in your country in this three-fold language which so suits those who join France to Great Britain."*]

The muse placed her mantle around Corbet's shoulders, a wreath on his forehead, and a sceptre in his hand. Corbet concluded his poem by describing the joy that overcame him. From that day onwards, he sang incessantly in *le triple parler de l'île que j'estime*: patois, with its two linguistic relations. The poem is simultaneously playful and profound. It eloquently illustrates the dilemma confronting a young islander in his search for an identity. Perhaps that is the ultimate secret of islands. They offer choice and an opportunity for individuality.

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