CULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND THE TOURIST GAZE

The Falkland Islands

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Introduction

This paper engages with the effects of insularity upon cultural development and survival, demonstrating that, for example, in some of the islands of the British Isles, old languages have survived to a greater extent than in more accessible mainland areas. The paper then focuses upon the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, where over the eight generations of British occupation, there is some evidence of specific cultural development, especially in the rural areas. These areas are now under economic challenge and one of the mechanisms for coping has been the encouragement of tourism. The ‘tourist gaze’, to borrow the concept of John Urry (2002), can impact negatively upon that which it views, but to some, tourism is seen as a welcome economic diversification, which helps to support the economy and the culture of these remote islands.

Culture and Islands

Culture develops over time and in a place, partly in response to the constraints and opportunities associated with that place. This is not a claim for the re-introduction of determinism; for example, if a people inhabit a coastal ecumene where they engage in fishing, they will develop a culture that has reference to that activity. This will contrast, if only in detail, with that of people even from the same country and ethnic group who live inland and engage in subsistence agriculture. Let us consider the constraints associated with small islands, for their people face a range of issues common to their insularity, independent of location. All have to deal with the small scale of their landmass, the fact that their resources may be of limited range and quantity, the peripherality of their homeland and its absolute, and, usually, relative remoteness and powerlessness.

Taking the British Isles as an example, as a result of the constraints of insularity, the small islands off the different national mainlands have cultural similarities, if mediated
in detail by their actual location. This can be appreciated most readily with regard to language. English is the dominant tongue of the whole archipelago, but there are also a number of other languages: Scots Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, Manx, Cornish and a French patois on the various Channel Islands. Some of these languages are particular to islands: namely Manx on the Isle of Man and the patois of Jersey, Guernsey and the other smaller Channel Islands. Elsewhere, where the traditional languages were spoken on the large islands of Great Britain and Ireland, they have been pushed aside by the advance of English to survive as first languages either in remote, often mountainous, rural locations or, pertinently to this article, on islands. Scots Gaelic is strong on the Isle of Skye, other islands of the Inner Hebrides and especially the more remote Outer Hebrides or Western Isles. Irish, too, is strongest in the island realm: on Tory, Aranmore, the three Aran Islands, Cape Clear and others. Welsh has a larger foothold on the mainland than the other Celtic languages, even though it is again largely a rural and mountain district first language, but another bastion is the Isle of Anglesey, which Welsh-speaking islanders would prefer to see written as Ynis Môn.

I use language here as a shorthand for the wider aspects of culture, of course. Also, traditional cultures being pushed to the island realm donates problems of sustainability, for these societies are fragile and across the whole of the British Isles in the last couple of centuries hundreds of islands have become depopulated, their culture dispersed and lost. One of the most notable losses associated with culture was Ireland’s Great Blasket Island, location for three Irish-language autobiographies of the early 20th Century (O’Crohan, 1978/1929; O’Sullivan, 1953/1933 and Sayers, 1974/1936). The island was depopulated in 1953, the local island culture that was celebrated in these wonderful books now as dead as these three authors. There is a Blasket Heritage Centre celebrating their life and work—on the mainland. It would seem, then, that mechanisms that support island economies may be valuable also in preserving traditional culture. I will explore this point regarding tourism and its impact on the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic.

Island Culture and the Falkland Islands

There are about 700 islands in the Falkland Islands archipelago, of which two, with the prosaic names of West and East Falkland, are of substantial size, making up the bulk of the 12,173 square kilometres area. British navigators first saw the uninhabited islands (in 1592) and landed upon them (in 1690), but the French were the first to establish a settlement at Port Louis in 1784. A year later, ignorant of the French presence, the British settled at Saunders Island. The British abandoned their foothold and the French sold their settlement to Spain, and this claim was inherited by Argentina upon that country’s independence. Meanwhile, after a lawless period following the clearance of the official settlement by the Americans, the British established control in 1833 and have continuously ruled the islands since, with only the hiatus of 1982 when the Argentineans expelled the British, only for them to lose the islands to Margaret Thatcher’s task force later that eventful year.
Figure 1. Off-roading in East Falkland.

The British moved the islands’ only settlement from Port Louis to the planned town of Stanley in 1845. Stanley then developed as a place of service, repair and refreshment for sailing ships making the ferocious passage round Cape Horn. It became a very urban place, with all the functions and activities of a capital city, although in miniature. In the second half of the 19th Century, the rest of the Falkland Islands was opened up for settlement (Royle, 1985). In this treeless expanse with its rough grasses and low bushes, the most suitable economic activity was extensive ranching. In the early years of settlement, this had focussed upon cattle, but under the British it was sheep estates that came to dominate the rural economy. These huge holdings of tens of thousands of hectares tended to be owned and run by companies rather than families. The product was wool, not meat; the islands were too remote and the total scale of the rural economy too small for a market for sheep meat to be developed. The Falkland Islands, with a civilian population total that has never yet reached 3000, has thus developed over what must now be eight generations two distinct lifestyles—urban in the one town and port of Stanley, and rural elsewhere, everywhere outside Stanley known collectively as ‘Camp’.
This article will now focus on Camp. Here, the usual constraints of islandness were magnified. Communications within the Falklands were very poor. Until the last few years there were no proper roads outside Stanley. Journeys were long and tedious affairs by horseback over land or by small ships. In the 20th Century, matters were eased somewhat by the development of four-wheel drive vehicles capable of traversing the boggy terrain, and the Land Rover became a staple form of transport (fig 1). However, the isolation of the Camp settlements remained extreme, especially on West Falkland (Stanley is on East Falkland) and on the several small islands that had become estates. This fostered a tradition of self-sufficiency. The estate settlements would grow their own vegetables and cut their own peat for fuel. Although the commercial livestock operation was sheep, most would run a few cattle for milk and they would slaughter the beasts themselves for meat. Even delicacies such as jam could be home-produced, and that from diddledee berries was particularly prized (Wilkinson, 1992). The scale of the communities was always tiny (fig 2), with people living out their lives in company with just a handful of others. Camp life was set around the seasons, with shearing being the most important event. Other periodic activities were the necessary get-togethers, vital chances for social interaction. Sports days were important, the annual summer horse races after Christmas in Stanley remain popular, as do the sports days on West Falkland, which move location from farm to farm each year. There was also a characteristic Camp education experience, with its necessary distance education programmes. In these circumstances a distinctive culture emerged with a focus on these activities and experiences. Taking language as an indicator, one can point to the use of a few distinct words such as Camp itself, from the Spanish campo, field and palenque, the killing shed (‘abattoir’ does not convey the essential simplicity of a Falklands palenque), although other common words are used also in other rural Anglophone southern hemisphere regions such as smoko for a break, presumably a term brought in by Australian shearers.

Camp Culture: An Uncertain Future?
The survival of Camp culture is in some doubt as changes to the Falkland Islands take place. The national economy now is dominated not by wool from Camp, but by the sale of fishing licenses (for squid) and also services, both focused on Stanley. There have been significant alterations in Camp. From before the conflict of 1982, there was a process of land reform that has eventually seen the huge estates broken up into smaller units—there were 36 farming enterprises in 1979, now there are about 90 (Royle, 1994) with only a few company estates left. All enterprises are still thousands of hectares in extent, but given the low stocking rate possible in the Falklands, the sub-divisions are now largely just family farms. This transformation has seen much shedding of non-family labour, with consequent rural-urban migration into Stanley, which has grown by about 50 percent since 1982. Thus, a higher proportion of the Falkland population now is urban with limited knowledge of Camp or its culture. One Camp dweller told the author in surprise that visiting Stanley children did not even know what a palenque was. Some of the family farms are struggling, the sub-divisions having made some of them too small (Gurr, 2001). The tiny domestic market means that they have to export their produce, competing in the global market against larger units. The world wool price has been fickle in recent years, and there remain the inevitable high costs of collection and transportation of the product to market from farms isolated on the local scale in a territory itself very distant from consumers. There has been diversification, and the Falkland Islands Development Corporation has been active in that arena. Examples are the EU standard abattoir near Stanley, which has helped increase meat exports, and there has been the development of woollen garment production on the islands, and pasture and stock improvement schemes have increased productivity. However, the rural economy still struggles and the Camp population is ageing and falling. West Falkland has now less than 400 residents, and there are few children left now for the Camp Education Service to teach.

The Tourist Gaze on the Falkland Islands

Tourism is an industry that may ease the rural problems of the Falkland Islands (Royle, 2006). The islands get about 35,000 tourists per year, with the vast majority on cruise ships—39 ships making 85 voyages were involved in the 2004-5 season. Passenger tax alone brought in £300,000 sterling to government coffers in 2003-4. The voyages are either by large ships circumnavigating Latin America and mostly full of elderly North Americans, or they are by smaller vessels with more adventurous passengers calling in on their way to the Antarctic (Ingham and Summers, 2002)—the Falklands have the last shops and pubs they will see on their trip. The cruise ships often make two stops, one at Stanley, a second at one of a variety of places in Camp chosen for its accessibility to wildlife. The ships anchor offshore and zodiacs transport the passengers to land. Stanley offers several shops and pubs; and it has a good range of facilities for a settlement of a couple of thousand people. Some tourists, seemingly unaware that the Falkland Islands are both anglophone and safe, just cluster round the jetty. The more brave venture into town and ‘gaze’. In the recollection of a former Chief Executive of the Falkland Islands, they:
Drift as though they were inhabitants of another dimension, like giants observing a model village … [without] concept that the roads carry traffic and real people are doing real work in real offices while they shamble around. (Gurr, 2001:221)

Some get taken by road to the nearest penguin site at Gypsy Cove, which was spoilt by trampling associated with the feet of up to 1000 tourists per day at peak times. It is now carefully fenced and protected. Others do get out into Camp, as shown below.

A second tourism sector comprises the land-based visitors who fly in from Chile or with the British Royal Air Force from England via Ascension Island. There are a few hundred each year, the limited infrastructural capacity on the islands regulates the market—Stanley’s largest hotel has just sixteen beds. These tourists tend to be middle-aged people, usually with an interest in the wildlife and/or the military history; and there are many sites from the 1982 conflict to be explored. A third sector is the military market. There are about 1500 service personnel stationed on the Falklands at any one time, and given the islands’ isolation, they take their rest and recreation in the Falklands, often in Camp if only to escape from their main base at Mount Pleasant.

Figure 3. Gentoo penguin rookery, Kidney Cove, East Falkland.

One guesthouse owner in West Falkland reports that it is the choice of getting up when they want and having a long, hot bath that attracts her military clients, but most visitors to Camp come at least partly to see the wildlife (Strange, 1992; Woods and Woods, 2006). There are sea lions—one popular offshore destination is Sea Lion Island—and other marine mammals, such as dolphins, whales, fur and elephant seals. Even more spectacular is the avian wildlife. Everywhere, there are surprisingly sizeable birds: upland geese, the Falklands flightless steamer duck, grebes, shearwaters and petrels. Falcons, hawks and caracaras, both striated and crested, are birds of prey. Turkey vultures are scavengers and of a size sufficient to be able to tackle sickly sheep (the author has watched with transfixed horror a turkey vulture consume a steamer duck). More palatable and more popular sights are the penguin rookeries. The Falklands are of
global importance for breeding gentoos and rockhoppers, less so for kings and magellanics, and it is the penguin that is the iconic image for rural Falklands tourism. A number of the farms can offer tourists a close-up view of penguin rookeries. One is Kidney Cove on East Falkland (Kidney Cove, 2006). Trips here see tourists taken directly from their cruiser or from the pier in Stanley by ships’ boats or tourist company launch to a small jetty, then collected by Land Rover and driven off-road to the penguin sites. Some find the off-road ‘safari’ challenging; to others it is part of the fun. The principal site is a gentoo penguin rookery, a disturbingly malodorous attraction (fig 3). Near to the rookery are what the owner calls two ‘bucket and chuck it’ toilets, benches and a hut selling souvenirs. The income generated from such visits helps to keep the overall farm enterprise afloat and maintain the owners’ presence in Camp and so make an indirect contribution to the survival of Camp culture.

Figure 4. Shearing shed, Port Howard, West Falkland.

Other types of tourism experience impact more directly on Camp culture insofar as it is the culture that is at least one reason for taking the trip. Some of those staying in guesthouses in Camp settlements may be there for that reason. The author has stayed in one in Port Howard in West Falkland and the operators in showing him round ensured that there was the chance to see the farm and appreciate the associated way of life by, for example, getting into the shearing shed (fig 4), its distinct odour being a memorable Camp encounter. Other tourism experiences are even more focused on traditional rural culture, and many take a trip out to observe a traditional farm. Some of the relatively small Falklands farms of 4-8000 hectares may now obtain around half their income from tourism. By directly paying to see it in operation, tourists actually help to sustain this traditional culture, if at a risk of fossilising it. John Urry in his development of the concept of the ‘tourist gaze’ (2002) has shown how places can be appropriated for the tourist experience. In the extreme, traditional culture becomes just a living museum—there are examples of Irish island cultures where this has happened, such as Inishmore, where the author has observed a patch of potatoes with a sign referring visitors to their leaflet, which explains that potatoes used to be an important crop (Royle, 2003).
Without the tourists, those potatoes would not have been planted. In the Falklands, the journey to the living museum has not yet been completed, insofar as the rural enterprises are still engaged in active production, which tourists can observe, but which would be taking place anyway without their presence. However, perhaps the journey is underway. Consider this extract from a tourism provider regarding Long Island Farm (fig 5) on East Falkland, an 8000 hectares enterprise belonging to a sixth-generation Falklands couple:

Who still live and farm in completely traditional Falkland style. They farm using skilled sheep dogs and Falkland Island bred horses, milk their own cows, make their own bread, butter and cream. They also use the traditional fuel, peat, which is a tradition that has nearly died out in the Falklands. A sheep shearing demonstration will take place. There will be a horse gearing display (Sullivan Shipping, 2006).

The tourists are also brought into the traditional farmhouse to see the peat stove and have smoko with bread, butter, jam and cream, all home made. Tourists here view what is, at least for the present generation of farmers, a living Camp culture, although the fact that horses are still used for sheep work here, rather than the otherwise ubiquitous quad bikes might suggest that some of the old ways are being preserved for the visitors. Tourists also contribute directly to Long Island Farm’s traditional culture more than just financially in that some of them get the chance to cut the peat for the stove.

Figure 5. Long Island Farm, East Falkland.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the characteristics associated with insularity can foster either the survival of an older culture or the development of a distinctive island culture. Focusing on the rural areas of the Falkland Islands, it has demonstrated the development of a rural island culture, with emphases on self-sufficiency, the cycle of the wool producer’s year and the need to overcome isolation. This traditional culture is under
threat as economic and social changes, including land reform, have affected it, especially as the Falkland Islands’ rural population is now ageing and declining. Some economic support comes from tourism, and when it is focused on wildlife this supports the rural areas and culture indirectly by paying into the overall farm enterprise. The wildlife is certainly commodified, but at least the avian actors in this theatre are not aware of this, and with the now careful management of the sites the sustainability of the commodified penguin is reasonably assured. Tourism that focuses rather on the Falklands’ rural culture might be seen as an operation of MacCannell’s (1973) conceptualisation of some tourists’ desire to see and experience what is authentic, even regarding interactions with a host community. Achieving this without commodification of the Camp culture itself may well be difficult. Perhaps small-scale visits to farm guesthouses may get close, but it is probably impossible to attain within the confines an organised tour. Following MacCannell, Cohen (1988) suggested that the quest for such experiences may result in the performance of only a ‘staged authenticity’ (see also Brown, 1996, or Halewood and Hannam, 2001), reminiscent of Urry’s appropriation of the tourist gaze. The gaze has the possibility of turning the culture it observes into stone by fossilising it in its current and attractive state. There is already some element of staged authenticity regarding the farm visits in the Falkland Islands, and, as the generations move on, perhaps this trend towards a living museum will become stronger.

References


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