Abstract

This chapter explores the creation of a narrative of ‘isolation’ between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on the presentation of rural communities in Scotland, Wales and Ireland as passive and isolated from the cut and thrust of the metropolis. This narrative trope can be found in examples of travel writing and ethnography dating from the period 1750–1950, but is also apparent in more recent archaeological texts. Narratives of isolation can be fluid and can be manipulated. The ‘stories’ told in travel literature change over time, depending on the identities and motives of the groups involved; indeed, the value of travel accounts lies not so much in the ethnographic documentation of their subjects as in what they tell us about the motives of the people writing them.

Introduction: Highlands and Islands

The origins of models of isolated, primitive communities may be found in part in the literature that accompanied the European expansion of the eighteenth century, with the study of ethnographic and historical subjects soon extended to contemporary communities in the British Isles. For example, the natural historian Gilbert White, writing in 1789, advocated an exploration of Ireland similar to that undertaken by James Banks and James Cook in the Pacific between 1768 and 1780. White's study was to involve the documentation of flora, fauna and ‘the manners of these wild natives, their superstitions, their prejudices, [and] their sordid way of life’ (White 1900, 178). The communities of the Scottish Highlands and Islands were the objects of much discussion in eighteenth-century popular periodicals, travel literature and scientific journals. Kathleen Wilson (2003, 84) suggests that such studies also classified and ultimately provided a scientific basis for the English as a superior and distinctive people. The ‘Celts’ of the British Isles were seen as the static and unchanging survivors of an earlier age, and only the advent of modernity could destroy them (James 1999, 54). The prehistorian Cecil Curwen, in his 1938 Antiquity
article ‘The Hebrides, a cultural backwater’, said that ‘it is not generally realised that we in Britain itself have a populous region which, owing to its remoteness, did not emerge from the Iron Age until the end of the last century’ and that ‘the culture of the Hebrides as late as the middle of the nineteenth century was more like that of the Pre-Roman Iron Age in southern Britain than any succeeding phase’ (Curwen 1938, 261).

Discussion of ‘primitive’ communities living in geographically isolated parts of the British Isles was not abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century, however. Indeed, traces of the same attitudes have persisted in research even by contemporary archaeologists and historians. The island of St Kilda (Fig. 6.1), around 40 miles to the west of the Scottish islands of Lewis and South Uist, has been the subject of a comprehensive series of excavations and landscape surveys, initiated by the National Trust for Scotland and carried out in the 1980s and 1990s by the Department of Archaeology at Durham University (Emery 1996; 2000). Publications resulting from this project have focused on the ‘impact of the products of industrialised Britain on a materially “primitive” society’ (Emery 1996, 191). With the development of agrarian capitalism in the Hebrides in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, St Kilda became increasingly exposed to the markets and industrial centres of the Scottish Lowlands and of England. An expanding range of mass-produced consumer

![Fig. 6.1—The Western Isles of Scotland.](image-url)
goods became available to even the most isolated families in the Islands and Highlands, a process accelerated by the arrival of the railways to the west coast in the late nineteenth century. The excavation reports suggest that the islanders were passive recipients of foreign material culture that had been transplanted from the industrial centres of the Scottish mainland. Materials from the mainland were used to rebuild the houses that had been damaged in a storm in 1860; sash windows were installed and tarred felt, a product of coking ovens on the mainland, was used as a roof covering. The excavations carried out during the 1980s uncovered Staffordshire transfer-printed and Scottish sponge-painted earthenware, tin cans and sauce bottles (Emery 1996; 2000).

Emery intimates that the islanders were unable to fully appropriate the imported goods and to make informed choices as to which parts of this foreign material culture to adopt. Even the procurement of consumer items was something that the islanders were unable to control. ‘Some of (the) goods were brought over by the factor, or sent by friends and relations on the mainland, while others came from the government and public in Britain during times of shortage on the island . . . many essential supplies came from passing trawlers and whalers’ (Emery 1996, 189–90). Therefore, according to Emery, the islanders’ increasing reliance on goods that were available only intermittently led to the decline of the population on the island and subsequent migration to North America and the Scottish mainland in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Jane Webster (1999) has taken an alternative approach to the consideration of ‘foreign’ material culture. Webster has considered the artefacts encountered on the Hebridean island of South Uist, mainly sponge-printed wares and other inexpensive ceramics, which, as they are unmarked and generally difficult or impossible to provenance, have largely been neglected by scholars (Kelly 1993, 34). She has asked whether new patterns of consumption might have reinforced rather than weakened local identity: ‘Consumers actively employ the goods they receive in the construction of both personal identity and social ideals: they appropriate what they consume’ (Webster 1999, 57).

Webster suggests that the material culture itself was manipulated, rather than the means of obtaining it. Nineteenth-century ceramic assemblages from St Kilda and South Uist seem to show that there was a preference for bowl forms over plates, both before and after the introduction of mass-produced ceramics from the Scottish Lowlands and Staffordshire. Webster proposes that this preference can be traced back to the earlier craggan forms, which were round-based globular ceramics for the preparation and consumption of stews and milk products (ibid., 70). She suggests that Hebrideans, when faced with new pottery forms produced in the industrial centres of the mainland, did not indiscriminately absorb all of it, but rather made informed choices based on their own needs as to which forms to adopt. Sponge- and transfer-
printed bowls facilitated the continuation of existing dining habits, and these new patterns of consumption reinforced rather than weakened local identity, showing that the islanders’ way of life was not necessarily dominated by external influences.

**Case-study: the Inishkeas**

The Inishkea Islands off the west coast of County Mayo (Fig. 6.2) were considered by ethnographers and travel writers of the nineteenth century in a similar manner to St Kilda. The islands were settled during the late eighteenth century by migrants from the Irish mainland; Brian Dornan (2000) suggests that this settlement could have been a response to a need to escape negative influences such as interference from a landlord or the church. The inhabitants constructed their own social order that enabled them to cope with the isolation they faced when the islands were cut off from the mainland by inclement weather. They improved the land, and dug pits outside each house in which to collect offal, manure and urine to spread on the fields. They also elected their
own ‘king’ to oversee the organisation of island life, and there is little evidence that they engaged with the institutional Catholic Church until a priest was sent to the islands in the late nineteenth century; before this time religious observances were centred on the home (Dornan 2000, 234).

Contemporary travel writing and ethnographic surveys carried out in the late nineteenth century painted an alternative picture to one of carefully maintained autonomy, however.

‘Inishkea, where the people form an independent state of their own, and must be pretty near heathens. They acknowledge no landlord, they pay no rates, they elect a monarch of their own and though a priest does come at intervals to confess, to marry or to christen them, they have an idol they regularly worship and propitiate before their boats put out to sea’ (Shand 1884).

Ethnographer Charles Browne (1895) conducted a ‘scientific’ survey of the west coast islands of Ireland (Fig. 6.3), examining the occupations and family lives of the islanders, as well as their physical appearance, looking for familial and regional traits (Dornan 2000, 14). Such surveys were undertaken in order to search for an ideal notion of an Ireland that had survived the upheavals and technological advances of the nineteenth century. Surveys such as those of Browne went into great detail about the physiology and anthropomorphology of the islanders but paid little attention to the physical world of the people concerned, which was itself undergoing upheaval.

The self-regulation and adaptation that had characterised eighteenth- and nineteenth-century island life was actually in the process of being stripped away at the time of Browne’s visit. In 1853 a school was established on the South Island, while an increasingly centralised Catholic Church began to send a priest to the island at regular intervals, as recorded by Alexander Innes Shand (1884), and in the 1890s the Royal Irish Constabulary established barracks on the Inishkeas in an attempt to eliminate illicit distilling activities (Dornan 2000, 149). As was the case on St Kilda and South Uist, access to the Inishkeas was facilitated by the construction of a railway, in this case connecting nearby Achill Island with the Irish mainland. Soon, increased quantities of mass-produced goods were made available to the islands. In 1908 a Norwegian whaling company established a station in the Inishkeas, constructing piers and slipways to supply a processing factory, where dead whales were winched ashore from the whaling ships and the blubber and meat separated and fed by steam-powered elevators into large boilers for oil extraction (ibid., 138–9); locals were employed alongside Norwegian whalers. Relatives who had migrated to North America and Australia sent money back to the islands. When nine fishermen drowned in 1927, the Inishkeas seemed unable to recover. A national fund was set up for the bereaved families, which raised the immense sum of £40,000, enabling nurses to be sent to the
Fig. 6.3—A group of Inishkea men (Browne 1895) (by permission of the Royal Irish Academy © RIA).
islands. A grant was also made to each family on the Inishkeas (ibid., 271–3). Perhaps the moneys raised indicate that the greater population of the newly independent Republic of Ireland felt that it was unreasonable to expect people to remain living in such a place.

**Inherent contradictions**

The contradictions within travel literature and ethnography seem difficult to reconcile. The early twentieth-century archaeologist Cecil Curwen, in a search for ethnographic parallels for the pre-Roman Iron Age to the late Anglo-Saxon period, advocated the search for ‘Iron Age’ communities in the British Isles. Curwen was not disappointed in his search for a pristine society in the ‘Black Houses’ of the Hebrides, where ‘little was imported, and in the villages everything that was needed had to be produced on the spot, just as was the case in pre-Roman England’, and ‘in Barvas [Lewis] a young mother rocked her baby in an ancient wooden cradle of a kind only found in folk museums elsewhere’ (Curwen 1938, 261, 264). Not only was the furniture foreign to anyone from the twentieth-century mainland but the residents of Lewis themselves were ‘camera-shy’, ‘proud, reserved Gaels’ who would only admit ‘foreign’ visitors into their homes through ‘much diplomacy and the greatest tact’ (ibid., 264). Yet Curwen wrote that the primitive nature of life in the Hebrides had preserved a higher state of being in the minds of the inhabitants. From the black houses of Lewis had emerged ‘as fine a race of men as ever came from any kind of house in England—men who have distinguished themselves in public life in Scotland and throughout the Empire’ (ibid., 265).

H. J. Fleure, a geographer at the University of Aberystwyth in the 1930s and ’40s, suggested that the people from the remote parts of upland Wales also occupied a higher moral plane, unpolluted by the rapid cultural changes of imperial Europe:

‘There one may frequently find a man in the humblest occupations who will be eager to discuss the deeps of thought with a friend . . . a humble farm kitchen may have some of the masterpieces of religious literature on a bookshelf. And these simple folk will lead the Sunday school, in Wales or Cornwall, and tell the Bible stories with a dramatic form that might shock the English folk if they understood’ (Fleure 1940, 884).

Fleure’s perspective seems to contradict the representations of Welsh communities in Parliamentary Commissioners’ reports. In 1847 the *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales* were drawn up, and, with few exceptions, teachers in Welsh schools were represented as ill-equipped for their jobs in terms of
training, educational attainment, interest and temperament. School buildings were found to be inadequate, impractical, damp and dirty. The Welsh ‘labouring classes’ were represented as sunk in ignorance, dirt, dishonesty and immorality and open to potentially disruptive influences. The remedy recommended was the efficient teaching of English, presented as an instrument of civilisation in contrast to Welsh. In the Commissioners’ eyes, Wales was clearly out of step with Victorian England; of the 405 books in Welsh then in print in North Wales, 309 related to religion and poetry and 50 were concerned with scientific matters (Tyson Roberts 1996, 188–9). The report helped to crystallise attitudes that already existed concerning the ‘superiority’ of the English language (and, by extension, of those who spoke it) and the corresponding ‘inferiority’ of Welsh speakers. The effect was the continuing isolation of the Welsh. Descriptions of the position of nineteenth-century Wales in relation to England vary from Wales as a part of the British Empire located in Europe to Wales as a junior partner within Imperial Britain or as constituting an internal colony (ibid., 171).

The historian Sir John Seeley, writing in 1883, had hoped that metropolitan rule would be sufficiently benign and colonists so accommodating that throughout the British Empire there might emerge a ‘consensual unity founded upon a shared recognition of English ethnicity’. In his words, ‘if Greater Britain in the full sense of the phrase really existed, Canada and Australia would be to us a Kent and Cornwall’ (Seeley 1883, 63). The metropolitan centre seems to have held the same relationship with its so-called ‘white’ colonies such as South Africa as it did with the peripheral parts of the British Isles. These regions and colonies were nominally populated by people who came from the same cultural background and continent, even the same country, as the imperial ‘masters’. Nevertheless, the legal inferiority of such populations was mirrored in the descriptions in contemporary travel literature.

Geographer Kenneth Parker has examined the representation of Boers in nineteenth-century British travel writing about the Cape of Good Hope. Here, British colonialism was complicated by encounters with white Dutch settlers, who themselves were the invaders of lands occupied by an indigenous population. Parker suggests that travel accounts emphasised the differences between the peoples who inhabited these foreign spaces in order to create a contrast with the relative harmony of home (Parker 1996, 199–200). Travellers with interests in the government of South Africa endeavoured to order the indigenous groups and the earlier white settlers in such a way as to dispossess them of their territory and annex that terrain to British interests. The Boer population were particularly offensive because, as good white settlers, they had failed to successfully subdue the land. John Barrow, a member of the Royal Geographical Society, wrote in 1804 that the Boer male was ‘... ill made, loosely put together, awkward and inactive ... many a peasant whose stock consists of several thousand sheep and as many heads of cattle’, and who lives in hovels with ‘low mud walls, with a couple of spare holes to admit the light, a door of wicker-work, and a few
crooked poles to support a thatch of rushes, slovenly spread over them’ (Barrow 1804, 81, 135–6). This image of the Boer should be compared with Barrow’s description of the local Khoikhoi community, who ‘neither cultivate the ground nor breed cattle, but subsist, in part, on the natural produce of their country, and make up the rest by depredations on the colonists on one side, and the neighbouring tribes that are more civilised than themselves, on the other’ (ibid., 234).

Narratives of isolation were not just one-sided, in that one active group viewed and formed opinions on a second passive group; they were far more fluid. British travel writing about indigenous peoples in Argentina provides a case in point. Travel accounts were first published in the eighteenth century, and many verged on fantastical hearsay, but once Spanish restrictions on trade with Argentina were lifted in 1810, increasing numbers of books were published in order to provide information about the topography and local customs. As the desire for published accounts of Argentina changed, so did their content; accounts originally sought to objectively describe the country for the benefit of those who were visiting or for armchair tourists in Europe, but in reality the representation of indigenous peoples depended on the relationships they had with Europeans. Travel accounts detailing the often explosive relationships between the indigenous population and the European settlers revealed little about indigenous concepts of their social worlds. The travel account quickly assumed a standard form; specific observations of indigenous societies in Argentina gradually tended to place them in a more general category, that of the ‘native’, a species distinct and separate from the sphere of social relations being described. Descriptions of Argentinean ‘natives’ took on a similarity with descriptions of ‘natives’ in other parts of the world, and became less specific to Argentina (Jones 1986, 197–8).

This concept of an ahistorical category with no specific geographical locale is apparent to an extent in Welsh travel writing of the early twentieth century. Pyrs Gruffudd, David Herbert and Angela Piccini (2000, 596) highlight the frequent use of images of the ‘foreign’ and the ‘alien’ made by the travel writer H. V. Morton in his 1932 volume *In search of Wales*. Some travel writers in effect tried to construct Wales as an ethnically based nation by transforming the Welsh into a Celtic *ethnic* [what is this word? what language?] with their own sense of identity based on shared culture. Morton (1932, 8) portrayed Wales as the last stronghold of the retreating Britons: ‘The first thing to realise about the Welsh is that they are not really Welsh at all. They are the real Britons.’ He emphasised the ‘ethnic’ differences between the English and Welsh through visualising the latter as tribal, and it was the geography of Wales that gave it this character of difference. Mountains were barriers against change which harboured ‘old memories, old beliefs, old habits, and unaltered ways’ (ibid., 168).

The idea of an ethnic Wales that was rooted in the past was central to making Wales an attractive commodity for the traveller, and the emotions brought to it by writers can be seen in terms of a desire for the exotic. Gruffudd *et al.* (2000, 598)
suggest that we might be able to understand these writing practices as embodying a form of escape from the masculine, intellectual life of the (English) metropolis, apparent in the writings of H. V. Morton. ‘Wales is a beautiful and romantic land . . . Its people, like all Celts, are a queer, extreme mixture of idealism and materialism, of recklessness and caution, of vanity and humility. They are quick and sensitive, and passionate with a passion that is almost Latin’ (Morton 1932, 268). Time and space were telescoped, as Morton described the cockle-collecting women of Penclawd on the Gower peninsula in terms of a Bedouin tribe, ‘like Arabs on the hind quarters of their patient steeds’ (ibid., 20), and published a photograph of them depicted in just such a manner (Fig. 6.4), wearing shrouds to shelter them from the wind ‘just as the Arab protects himself from the sand of the desert’ and riding donkeys across the beach. Morton had to ensure that the reader did not ‘identify’ with the women lest the mystery attached to travel should disappear, so the women are located within a familiar discourse of the exotic—hence the Arab motifs attached to them. By presenting the Welsh as something ‘other’, the specific realities of their everyday lifestyle were denied. Writers such as Morton erased the differences between past and present, between the experienced and the written about, and between the very cultural specificities that they sought to highlight.

A theme that has become apparent is that indigenous populations represented in literature, be it travel writing or more scholarly accounts in ethnography and archaeological journals, are frequently removed from their geographical and historical locale, whether by an overt comparison with populations separated by time and space, as was the case in Cecil Curwen’s 1938 article ‘The Hebrides: a cultural backwater’, or by a more subtle use of language and imagery to compare a rural community in Wales with Bedouin tribes (Gruffudd et al. 2000). Kristine Jones’s examination of
Argentinean travel literature produced by British writers in the nineteenth century has concluded that specific observations of indigenous societies in Argentina tended to place them in general categories, for example ‘the natives’, marking them as distinct and separate from the specific sphere of geographical, historical, social and economic relations being described by the writer. This non-specific categorisation as ‘other’ made accounts of the Indian societies of Argentina sound like descriptions of ‘natives’ in other parts of the world. (Jones 1986, 202).

As was the case with literature relating to other isolated communities, travellers’ accounts of Argentina documented a society that was peripheral but also directly tied to the expanding export economy of the British empire; travellers and speculators not only reported on this ‘marginal’ society but comprised an integral part of it (Jones 1986, 185). The very presence of archaeologists, ethnographers or travel writers in Argentina, the Inishkeas, St Kilda or the Gower peninsula indicated a connection with the wider world rather than a separation from it.

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