

Island studies Journal *Island Studies Journal*, 13(2), 2018, 207-209

Owe Ronström (2016). *Öar och öighet: introduktion till östudier [Islands and islandness: Introduction to island studies]*. 314pp. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag. ISBN: 978-91-7331-790-0. SEK240.

Island studies are still in quite short supply in a Nordic cultural context, in the sense that the field has contributed infrequently to the self-knowledge of the Nordic countries. This is perhaps because they already conceive of themselves as island nations to such a degree, that the need for and relevance of studies of islands have not seemed clear or urgent.

In this context then, it is remarkable that a systematic introduction to island studies has been published in a Nordic language. Owe Ronström's *Öar och öighet (Islands and Islandness)* begins from a local island context, and is enriched by extensive references to Swedish as well as Nordic cultural areas. The result communicates a thorough connectedness between island perspectives and their general Nordic context, which offers a beautiful and highly detailed depiction of local island relations and global island perspectives.

Owe Ronström, Professor of Ethnology at the University of Uppsala, lives and works in Visby on the major island of Gotland, where he was born and raised. In the introduction he uses this biographical aspect to unfold some basic phenomena of island existence as an inspiration to the general reader before proceeding to his specific topic of research.

The introduction also conveys a thought-provoking feature of the Swedish way of writing. To my knowledge hardly any other alphabet shows such a direct and symbolic relation between typography and meaning. The Swedish word for island—the letter ö—represents in its simple form the hallmark of the island world. The circular ö, including its two dots—communicates all the positive and all the negative aspects of “islandness,” and the related duality and ambivalence of islands. The positive: small scale, proximity, comfort, and community, representing the utopian and the paradisiacal view of islands. But the opposite is here as well: inbreeding, backwardness, *tristesse*, like prisons, horror, terrible...

The book, instructively and richly illustrated, consists of 15 chapters, each of which explores a specific theme. Each chapter offers an examination of its ideas and content relevant to its theme and uses a mixture of expected and unexpected approaches. This book demonstrates Ronström's willingness to reflect thoroughly and deeply on every specific theme, taking nothing for granted. The reader is conducted in a simultaneously personal and highly professional manner through each chapter and, importantly, Ronström's writing style reaches far beyond the strictly academic. The benefit of this approach is the book's potential to appeal to many more “island readers” than most academic monographs.

In this manner the book deals vividly with basic questions of island research, engaging perceptively with numerous fields of study, and offering an instructive example of McCall's call for island studies to be cross-disciplinary. Ronström takes the reader from the now classic island studies question, ‘What is an island?’ through ‘An archipelago of words’, unrolling an abundant semantics of island words. Island designations in several languages are examined, depicting an exciting multitude of island meanings across a variety of cultures and their histories.

The following chapters discuss shifts in the perspectives of island research away from a traditional ‘continental’ mindset, their unstable history of culture, island designs in the humanistic sciences,

and islands in modern language. The chapter, 'In or on islands', analyzes the significance of the two propositions for the meaning of islands and islandness. Other chapters analyze basic concepts such as 'definedness', 'remoteness' and the two classical concepts, 'archaism' and 'endemism'.

In the final chapter, 'Presence and absence', Ronström examines the titular themes in the light of a late modern mindset (Giddens et al.), theories of globalization and their consequences for island societies and their understanding of themselves. Ronström explains these consequences as a confrontation with deeply rooted traditions and conceptions. Islands, he argues, are not isolated (anymore), but serious players in the dynamic relations between 'isolation' and 'connectedness'. These days many island societies choose to perceive and define themselves as uniquely local. Ronström mentions Mauritius, which has developed a powerful consciousness of local cultural character and potential isolation at the same time as taking part in strategies of globalization to avoid negative social and cultural insularity. Isolation has become increasingly relative in the 'eternal' now of global presence, and the question arises for islanders about how to maintain a form of local culture amid all the similarities.

A main point of interest in the final chapter becomes the 'natural' islandness of islands: the limits between island and the outside world are culturally being created consciously and unceasingly, and at the same time they are being blurred by traditional conceptions of certain forms of specific natural borders. The conception of islands exemplifies all the well-known binaries (center vs. periphery etc.), but the definable and the insular in itself has a special status within the Western history of ideas. The definable represents a protection against all the surrounding space, being perceived as empty and meaningless. Islands provide a lexicon for a double discourse about marginalized phenomena, offering a wealth of symbols and metaphors, a rich treasure of pictures and conceptions that have been of great importance for Western societies.

Ronström's work is important also because it focuses on the relevance of Nordic islands to various significant international contexts. For example, it contributes to debates about whether the Scandinavian/Nordic countries represent a specific area of study by pointing out the high density of islands on one most 'populated' belts on earth, on the northern hemisphere, especially between the 58th and the 66th northern latitude. While it may not be Ronström's intention, his approach could generate new reflections about the character and values of Nordic island culture. Nevertheless, this book inspired my thinking about future research on Nordic island culture as a valuable player in global island connections. For example, the area around the Åland Archipelago is so densely populated, why have the remote islands of the Pacific Ocean dominated literature (Robinsonades), more than this *world of islands*?

Ronström's introduction to island studies is careful and comprehensive. It conveys much new and substantial knowledge about Nordic islands as well as raising open, inspiring questions about islands in general. This book offers the crucial insight that islands and islandness are much more than simple facts and unambiguous phenomena. They are instead highly complex entities, and an island studies approach such as Ronström's enables a richness of reflections, which indisputably points far beyond the understanding of islands as such.

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