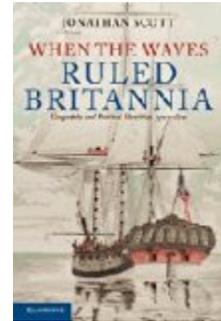


Jonathan Scott. *When the Waves Ruled Britannia: Geography and Political Identities, 1500-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 240 pp. \$32.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-15241-9; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19591-1.

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Imagining the Island Nation: The Historical Geography of British Insularity

The idea that Great Britain's island geography has defined its history and the character of its inhabitants is an enduring theme in the development of modern British identities and of Britain's relationship to the wider world. The conception of Britain as an insular nation is also a myth, albeit one of the central myths of British history. Historically, the English Channel has been less a barrier than a bridge linking Britain to continental Europe through trade, conquests, and migration. Recent work has accordingly sought to emphasize the European and imperial contexts that substantially shaped British history. Yet, even as scholars have become increasingly skeptical of Britain's supposed insularity, the history of how the English and then the British came to see themselves as an insular people has remained largely unexplored. Studies of British culture have thus tended to take early modern Britain's maritime geography for granted, without exploring how the English or British came to see themselves as an island race.

Jonathan Scott's *When the Waves Ruled Britannia* is an elegant, incisive, but sometimes elusive book that explains how a nation inhabiting an island came to see itself as an island nation. This work has two distinct but inter-related goals. First, Scott aims to uncover the place of geographical language in early modern British political thought. To this end, he combines the history of ideas with the study of historical geography to examine how the evolution of conceptions of English and British insularity factored into thinking about British politics and so-

ciety. Secondly, he seeks to demonstrate how early modern understandings of Britain's maritime geography contributed to the making of a maritime and commercial society out of one that had been overwhelmingly agrarian and rural. In particular, Scott argues that an important strain of early modern British political thought lay in the need for British society to respond to the challenges of maritime and naval competition. From the end of the sixteenth century onward, the threat of naval invasion and Dutch commercial rivalry impelled a variety of writers to articulate new understandings of Britain's oceanic geography and of the relationship between that geography and British society.

Scott begins his study by establishing the continental context within which the early modern English initially understood their relationship to Europe. Sixteenth-century English geographical thought reflected England's participation in a European geography of confessional and dynastic competition and underscored the ideological and intellectual hurdles that faced Elizabethan propagandists of naval power and overseas empire. Geographers like William Camden and Peter Heylyn followed Ptolemy in seeing the islands of Britain and Ireland as an integral part of a shared European geography of peninsulas, gulfs, and islands. However, naval warfare with Spain and the prospects of long-distance trade led John Dee, Richard Hakluyt, Walter Raleigh, and others to encourage the English to imagine themselves as an insular and maritime people. Scott then proceeds to sur-

vey how English writers, administrators, and politicians grappled through the seventeenth century with the challenge of maritime competition. According to Scott, England's emergence as a naval and commercial power depended on this process through which the English mastered the "discipline of the sea." In particular, he contrasts contemporary recognition of the ability of the mid-seventeenth-century English Commonwealth to harness commercial wealth and naval power with critiques of the subsequent English failures to maintain supremacy over the Dutch following the Restoration. The concluding chapters describe the eighteenth-century triumph of conceptions of Britain as a commercial and island nation, and then examine in greater depth how writers, including Daniel Defoe, William Falconer, Adam Ferguson, and William Robertson, understood how Britain's insular and maritime geography shaped its society and its relationship to the wider world.

Scott thus traces the early modern connections between political thought and historical geography to illustrate how geographical knowledge, state building, and identity formation interacted in complex ways to shape how Britons understood their nation's island location. In the process, he effectively demonstrates that British insularity was less a matter of geography than of the social and cultural transformation of Britain into a maritime and trading nation. However, he also shows how Britain's changing relationship to the sea fostered the conviction that geography could indeed be destiny. When Elizabethan writers urged that the English transform their insular position into a maritime and naval destiny, they introduced into English political thought a discourse that Scott labels "maritime orientalism." Whereas Edward Said described an imaginary geography rooted in ancient Greece that defined European society by contrasting it with that of an Asiatic "other," Scott emphasizes an alternative imaginary geography, also rooted in Greek history, but instead based on states' and cultures' relationship to the sea. This discourse, which arose in England in the context of Anglo-Spanish competition, flourished in the eighteenth century as the growth of Britain's naval and colonial empire seemed to affirm the relationship between geography and culture. This imaginary geography was, however, highly unstable. No one conception of insularity dominated early modern Britain. Instead, while their predecessors had tended to view Britain within a European context, eighteenth-century thinkers variously analyzed Britain's maritime geography to divide it from Europe, to link it to a continental Europe that was further differentiated from the wider

world, or to highlight the corrupting influence of continental empire on Britain itself. Scott effectively captures these competing visions of Britain's place in the world by illustrating how ideas of insularity factored into British political language in diverse and potentially contradictory ways.

When the Waves Ruled Britannia provides an excellent survey of the ways in which concepts of insularity and of the sea factored into early modern British political thought. The work's weaknesses lie in its efforts to demonstrate how this political language actually shaped Britain's imperial and naval development. Scott's portrayal of England's development as a maritime power reflects a somewhat uncritical engagement with seventeenth-century English naval history. In particular, Scott argues that England's seventeenth-century naval defeats stemmed from the failure of the Stuart monarchs to respond to the "discipline of the sea." During their reigns, aristocratic governance and royal "apathy" weakened England's naval power as gentlemen officers replaced experienced mariners in positions of authority. This interpretation relies, however, on the views of contemporary critics of Stuart royal naval policy and pays little heed to the admonitions of J. D. Davies and N. A. M. Rodger that seventeenth-century debates over the state of the Restoration navy rested on politically and ideologically motivated critiques of Stuart government rather than objective descriptions of conditions within the English navy.[1] Scott thus offers a historical analysis of the myth of English insularity only to reinforce equally long-standing myths about the development of English sea power. Scott's observation that England and then Britain could only act like an island once it had developed the naval power to preserve its insularity is an important point. Further work is needed to demonstrate how early modern thinking about English insularity actually intersected with the complicated dynamics of state and social formation and of policymaking.

This slim volume covers an immense amount of ground and offers a highly suggestive analysis of the relationship between geography and political thought in early modern Britain. It also provides a strong foundation for further investigation of the relationship between thinkers and the relationship between these thinkers and Britain's development as a maritime and commercial power. *When the Waves Ruled Britannia* is thus a major addition to the study of historical geography and to the history of political ideas, and it also represents a significant step forward in historicizing questions of English and British identity in the early modern period. Scott

deserves further praise for emphasizing largely forgotten seventeenth-century administrators and writers, like Samuel Pepy's secretary, Richard Gibson, and the engineer, Henry Sheres, whose positions within England's naval and imperial administration gave them an important perspective on Restoration naval thinking. Scott also illustrates the importance of the Dutch Republic as both a rival for early modern England and as a model for emulation. The Dutch invasion of 1688 illustrated that British insularity depended on naval dominance and the subsequent revolution in British government allowed Britain to realize its island geography in the eighteenth century. By describing the intellectual history of English and British insularity, Scott successfully illustrates the centrality of the European context for early modern British

history.

Note

[1]. J. D. Davies, *Gentlemen and Tarpaulins: The Officers and Men of the Restoration Navy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); and N. A. M. Rodger, "Queen Elizabeth and the Myth of Sea-Power in English History," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 14 (2004): 153-174. See also Rodger's own review of Scott's interpretation of seventeenth-century English naval history in N. A. M. Rodger, "English Seas," review of *When the Waves Ruled Britannia: Geography and Political Identities, 1500-1800*, by Jonathan Scott, *The Times Literary Supplement*, July 22, 2011, 7.

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