DURSEY: ISLAND INSPIRATION

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ABSTRACT: The author, now deep into retirement, outlines his career which increasingly focussed on the study of small islands, although he was trained and accepted into academic life as an urban historical geographer. Royle traces his transition into island studies to a chance opportunity whilst on holiday to visit Dursey, a small island off County Cork in Ireland where he was intrigued by the obvious decline in its economy and society. Later, he had the opportunity to put his nascent interest in islands into practice by historical research into the Aran Islands in County Galway and the path of his career altered, taking him to be a Professor of Island Geography. This article reminisces on the inspirational visit to Dursey.

KEYWORDS: Dursey, islands, Island Studies, St Helena

I have reached that post-retirement stage in academic life where Island Studies people, if they know my name at all, must wonder if I am still alive, perhaps muttering phrases such as "Steve Royle? Didn't he used to…?" And yes, I did. I was a founder member of ISISA (the International Small Island Studies Association) and for years served as its treasurer. I was Deputy Editor of *Island Studies Journal*, responsible for the book reviews. I was a member of the International Geographical Union Commission on Islands. I have written five books on islands: two general and three specific historical studies of St Helena, Vancouver Island and Port Hamilton (now called Geomundo), an archipelago off South Korea. I have about 150 other publications on islands. My academic career saw me become Professor of Island Geography at Queen's University Belfast in 2008. I retired in 2015, a couple of weeks before my 65th birthday, to enable me to take up a sixth-month post in Island Studies at Kagoshima University in Japan, following which one of my island books was republished in Japanese. In the days of blessed memory before both COVID and Microsoft Teams and the like curtailed the practice, I travelled the world to attend island conferences. In short, I enjoyed a busy, productive and very pleasurable career, much of it spent teaching and writing about islands. Also just visiting them – 869 islands to date. I have dozens of island T-shirts.

I did not go up to Cambridge University in 1968 to read geography with the ambition to become a professor of island geography. Rather, given the topic of my subsequent PhD at Leicester University, I became an urban historical geographer and as such I was appointed to a lectureship in geography at Queen's University Belfast in 1976, the institution where I remained for my entire career. That I transitioned partly, increasingly almost fully, into Island Studies says a lot about our much-vaunted and much-valued academic freedoms, then not threatened in the worrying way they seem to be today. How come? Well, there was an inspirational island that, with the necessary subsequent opportunities to put inspiration into practice, transformed my career.

My inspirational island was Dursey, County Cork, Ireland (not properly called Dursey Island as the -ey ending already means 'island', as with Jersey and Guernsey). When I was carrying out research for my PhD at Leicester University in 1974, my wife, Lisa, and I, still in our free and easy pre-parenthood days, drove a car around Ireland. It was our first visit to the island and as 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland[1] were then hot and heavy, we focused largely on the south and west of Ireland, keeping as far as possible from the dangerous north. (Little did we know that the following year would see the start of our now 50 years residence in Northern Ireland).

One morning whilst in County Cork we decided to drive to the end of one of the 'fingers' of the splayed hand that forms the extreme southwest of Ireland. This was the Beara Peninsula (Figure 1). Beara is hilly – Hungry Hill at 682m is described by the *Irish Times* as 'formidable' – and its narrow, winding roads proved to be a challenge for our battered, aged Ford Anglia, the quality of which motor car was indicative of our limited means. Off the tip of the peninsula, its southwest extremity, lay an island, Dursey, first sighted some way below the prominence at which we had paused. At that time, I was an urban historical geographer, with research interests in towns in Leicestershire: Coalville, Hinckley, Lutterworth, and Melton Mowbray, home to the eponymous pork pies as well as Stilton cheese. I was not interested in islands, but the sight of Dursey, shaped somewhat like a breaching whale with green, treeless slopes falling away on each side of a central spine of hills, was intriguing. And we had determined to go to the end of the Beara Peninsula, not being aware that its tip was insular. So, we decided to see if we could get onto the island. We drove on to discover that access to Dursey was by a cable car. This is Ireland's only cable car, and it had been erected as recently as 1969 to provide safe access to the island, avoiding the need to navigate across the rough and very dangerous waters of Dursey Sound. There was adequate parking by the mainland end of the cable car system, and we walked to the terminus to discover a notice stating that the operator was at lunch. We would have to wait about 30 minutes. This seemed too long, and we were in need of our own lunch, which would have to be taken in Castletownbeare back along the peninsula's southern shore overlooking Bantry Bay. We nearly left and had we have done so my career would have been different. The account that follows is taken from my memories of that day, not from any field notes or records, other than three poor photographs. I did take field notes when doing research on islands, but I was not doing research this day. I was on holiday and, anyway, I had no inkling that the visit was to change my career trajectory. How was I to know that I was a future professor of island geography?

[1] 'The Troubles' refers to a prolonged period of sectarian conflict between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland that commenced in the late 1960s and ended in 1998 – with many of the former opposed to British dominion over the north and with frequent violence enacted by rival paramilitary groups.

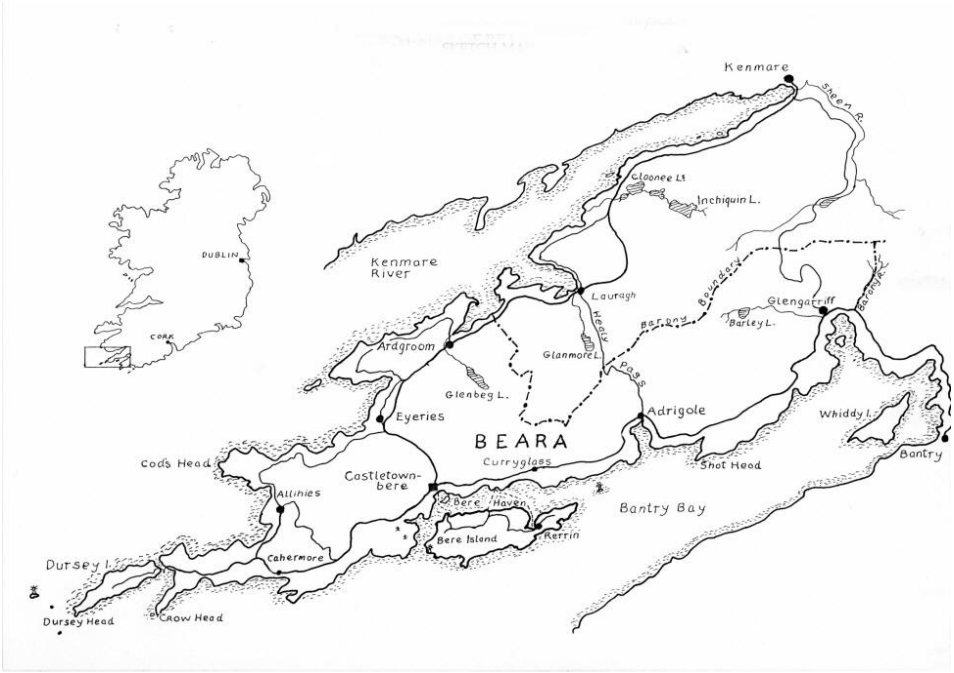


Figure 1 – Map of The Beara Peninsula, with Dursey at bottom left.



Figure 2 - The Dursey cable car in 1974 (author's photo).

In the end we did wait for the cable car operator. Slightly after the promised time a late middle-aged, overweight, Corkonian appeared. He unlocked the cabin, a rather basic, workaday box suspended from the cables above. He set the cables in motion, and we were the only passengers for the ten-minute journey, suspended up to 250m above the ragged

fringe of the eastern Atlantic Ocean. The journey was spectacular, the destination rather less so. We de-cabined (that must be the word for getting out of a cable car) onto a silent, miniature world. I had been to a couple of islands before. My family had lived in Essex in southeast England, and we had been to Canvey Island. There had also been a school trip to Mersea, an island in the Blackwater Estuary accessed by a causeway subject to tidal inundation. These fleeting experiences had not prepared me for Dursey.

My initial impression, the first inkling of what became a career's inspiration, was of the boundedness, the confined nature of this miniature world, the "wave-lined edge of home" as a Canadian island poet has it (Acorn, 1975). Take away the convenience of the cable car – waiting for the operator to take lunch was hardly an inconvenience compared to having to rely on a boat across the pounding surf – and the impact of the boundedness, the isolation, would be magnified manyfold. And the cable car had been operating for only five years at that time. This miniature world was the ecumene of the islanders who numbered then around 30. Dursey, like other islands, was not a closed system but it was restricted, shut off in a way us residents then of Leicester could barely begin to comprehend. What was life like? I had heard of cabin fever, the irritability and restlessness that can affect people thrown together even on holiday; what must it have been to spend a life within the constrictions of a small island with a white-knuckle crossing of the dangerous sound being the only way to get free even for a little while. How did the people cope? And what did they do, how did they make a living? Questions: I might have been an urban historical geographer, but I had a geographer's wider curiosity.

Curiosity peaked as we made our way into an area with houses. I suppose it was once a village but there were no signs of services of any sort and many, most, of the houses were abandoned. Dursey was obviously in serious decline. The few houses with intact doors and windows looked rundown and in need of fresh paint at the very least. The quietness was intense to us urbanites, there were few signs of any activity at all, never mind economic activity beyond a little agriculture.



Figure 3 - Agricultural implement, Dursey



Figure 4 - Abandoned cottage, Dursey
(author's photos, 1974)

I went into one of the cottages. There was no fear of disturbing inhabitants, for no one was going to be home given that I entered through a hole that had once framed a window. Inside all was chaos and obviously the last visitors into the room had been of the ovine persuasion for sheep droppings were much in evidence. There were a couple of sticks of broken furniture and a metal bed frame underneath which was one brown shoe – subsequent visits to abandoned island properties were to teach me that there is always one shoe. By the hearth,

cold for decades, there was a folded newspaper, surprisingly dry and, though yellowed, still in fair condition. The frontpage story was of the disaster of the R101, a British airship which crashed upon landing in France after its first overseas flight, killing 48 of its 54 passengers and crew. The sad event had taken place on 5 October 1930, leading me to assume that this room and its decaying house had been last inhabited almost 44 years prior to our visit. I was now just full of questions. What had caused the near total abandonment of Dursey? Dursey was an isolated island – was that part of the explanation? Were other islands like this? Dursey was a small island, were larger islands subject to the same forces that had devastated Dursey? What about accessibility, about the relativity of the remoteness, were they issues? The answers would certainly be linked to geography, answers to questions of this scale always come down to geography. I could answer these questions now; well, I could write about them anyway and at length. In fact, I have written about them and at length. But not then, not aged 23 with research experience totally restricted to small, 19th century towns in the English East Midlands. I just knew that I wanted to answer my questions; that I had been inspired on the spot to take an interest in islands. In short, I had become an 'islophile' and in my first moments as such I was already struggling towards concepts of 'islandness' (even though I did not then know such words). As I climbed back out of what when the R101 still flew was the window, I noticed an elderly woman in a brown coat come out of one of the few occupied houses. Here was a chance for an impromptu interview, to ask this islander some of my questions. But I was young and shy, lacking both the necessary confidence and experience to approach her. I think we just nodded. Discussing this with Lisa, we both recall the first expression of my fantastical new idea that I would now like to study islands. She expressed surprise about the suddenness of this seemingly unlikely aspiration. However, later, when it actually came to be, she was supportive, if sometimes bothered that Island Studies took me so often from home after the aforesaid free and easy pre-parenthood days had ended.

So, I did study islands and that chance visit to Dursey was, indeed, the key to my subsequent career. It took both time and serendipity for my ambition to be realised, although I do recall taking a spell away from my PhD research to read and be further inspired by Tom Steel's *The life and death of St Kilda*. In 1975, the year after our Irish holiday, I was interviewed successfully for a lectureship in geography at Queen's University Belfast, even though I had not finished my PhD (those were the days!). I touted my expertise in urban historical geography; islands were never mentioned. Then sometime later, after finishing the thesis and writing a few papers from it, I sought a new research topic based in Ireland. The primary data source for my PhD had been English 19th century Census Enumerators' Books, so I should look into the Irish equivalent. However, I discovered that almost all Irish 19th century census documents had been housed in the Public Records Office in Four Courts, Dublin when it was destroyed by shelling and fire in 1922 during the Irish Civil War. Only a few scraps, some of them actually charred, survived. By happy chance, the 1821 census manuscripts for the three Aran Islands in County Galway were intact, presumably they had not been in the record office at the time of its destruction. Here was the chance to investigate islands, to begin to fulfil my Dursey inspiration. I interrogated the documents and published a paper thereon in *Irish Geography*. Around the same time there was a colour supplement article about the British possession of St Helena in the South Atlantic which pictured a boy looking down at Jamestown from atop Jacob's Ladder – a staircase of 700 steps which links the town in the valley to the top of the 40 degree slope to its south. This inspired me to try to get to St Helena, one of the world's most remote islands, and this location became a key research focus throughout my career. I made three visits, with 14 years between both the first and second and second and third trips. I climbed Jacob's Ladder each time, getting progressively slower.



Figure 5 - Jamestown, St Helena from the top of Jacob's Ladder (author's photo, 2018)

I used to be President of the Geographical Society of Ireland. My presidential address was published in *Irish Geography* in 1999 under the title of 'From Dursey to Darrit-Uliga-Delap: an insular odyssey'. Darrit-Uliga-Delap is the main settlement of Majuro atoll in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific, and it was chosen from the hundreds of islands I had visited to feature in the title solely because it began with the letter D, alliterative to Dursey. There was no choice for the first island in the couplet; Dursey was my inspiration.

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