UNMAKING ISLAND STUDIES HISTORY:

Memory, folklore, fairies, and microcosm

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a meta-nonfiction, autoethnographic account of the beginnings of a career in Island Studies, with particular reference to Shetland, fairies, snow globes, and tea and biscuits. (Metaphors are varied but never mixed.) It explores the role of randomness and accident in the development of people's lives as well as how history is used to assemble fragments of memory into a coherent, linear narrative. Contemplating the tension between folklore and history, the article embodies the process by which experiences become legend and, through circuitous courses, become comprehensible. Stories may be true but sound like lies or may be false but sound like truth. Ultimately, we must embrace the diversity of experience over the temptation of singular knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Island Studies, Shetlands, folklore, fairies, memory, disciplinary history

Microcosms

Some island researchers accumulate islands the same way my mother and I accumulated plastic snow globes in my 1980s and 1990s Florida childhood. Anywhere we holidayed, we would buy a cheap snow globe from the tourist shop, and we would put it on the shelf with all the others when we got home. Perhaps you do not know what a snow globe is. Perhaps you are too young, or too old, or too far away from Florida to know this. So, I will tell you. Or rather, I will get Gemini Pro, a large language model (LLM) trained on vast quantities of human memory, to tell you: "A **snow globe** is a transparent glass or plastic sphere filled with water and small white particles that enclose a miniature scene or figure. When shaken, the particles circulate through the liquid, creating a visual effect that mimics falling snow" (Figure 1). Let me be very clear: Although Gemini Pro would have you believe that snow globes can be made from glass, and although it steadfastly resisted my prompting to avoid depicting a snow globe made from glass, as far my mother and I were concerned, snow globes needed to be plastic. The more elaborate glass snow globes somehow seemed *wrong*: too solid, too serious, too permanent, oblivious to their fundamental absurdity. We were attracted to the bizarre and vivid ones. It helped if a snow globe had a figure of an alligator inside, though only if the place we visited had alligators. This was the crucial bit: the snow globe had to be directly connected to the place we bought it—no easy thing in a Florida in which the same snow globe might appear in multiple towns and at multiple attractions, differing only in the placename sticker on the bottom rim. We wanted something to remember a place by.



Figure 1 - Illustration of a Weeki Wachi Springs snow globe featuring an alligator and mermaids (assembled by Gemini Pro LLM, 21st June 2026).[1]

Over time, as I grew up, we stopped buying snow globes, and the snow globes themselves, through some mysterious evaporative process, lost their water. (What better microcosmic metaphor for Anthropocene catastrophe (Chandler & Pugh, 2021; Pugh & Chandler, 2021), surely, than a shelf full of dried-out snow globes?) Desiccated alligators (Tallahassee), mermaids (Naples), alligators *and* mermaids (Weeki Wachi Springs)—all wallowing forlornly in microplastic snow. Humanity is drawn to the fantasy of the island microcosm, even (or especially) when the microcosm's contents repel us and when its evasive multiplicity of meanings serves to deconstruct the lie of easy truth (Jiang et al., 2023; Stratford et al., 2011; Zhu & Grydehøj, 2023).

At least, this is how I remember snow globes, how I remember both the before and the after. For in truth, my mind's eye no longer holds these snow globes, either fresh from the gift shop or neglected on the shelf. I have just the memory of a memory, now put to use in an introspective contribution to the Series I finale of the journal *Shima* on the theme of a particular island or islands that have been inspirational for my intellectual and professional trajectory (Hayward & Evans, 2026).

Repeating islander

My first experiences spending any significant amount of time on islands were in Orkney and Svalbard in 2001-2002, studying the philosophy of isolation as part of my BA. Those experiences were strange, fascinating, and crucial for how my life developed. But my experiences there were also totally absurd and uncharacteristic of the ways in which I would later think about islands, *and* I have written about them recently in an article (Grydehøj,

[1] Gemini Pro has access to an incomprehensibly large quantity of human knowledge but has no understanding of any of it. My prompt was "Create a photorealistic image of a plastic snow globe of Weeki Wachi Springs with an alligator and two mermaids inside."

2025). For all these reasons, they are inappropriate for the task at hand of writing for *Shima* about how I got started in Island Studies.

Hold on a moment and permit me a brief digression before I get back to my task. Though I have not previously reflected upon the fact, it is curious that, as a 19-year-old from Miami, I selected a pair of archipelagos in the North Atlantic and the Arctic as the sites for my philosophy study of isolation. As I would later learn from reading so many academic articles, islands are about connection, not insularity (Gaini, 2024; Garcia Ch., 2024; Jerez-Darias & Domínguez-Mujica, 2024; Reyes & Gomez, 2024)? What was a young lifetime of cultural learning telling me about the nature of islandness to convince me of the opposite, that I should go to islands to be alone? What generic understandings and framings of islandness led me to this place (Benítez-Rojo, 1996)? The question is perhaps more one of the sources of cultural learning that surrounded me as a child, and of the ways in which I selected from among them.

In Miami, I had lived among Caribbean island diasporas (Cuban, Haitian, Puerto Rican, Jamaican), which like diasporas everywhere inhabit a tension between connection and disconnection—spatial, temporal, cultural, religious (Del Giudice, 2025; Dos Santos et al., 2025; Grau-Perejoan, 2024; Lam, 2021; Nadarajah, 2021; Nimführ & Tejeda Martínez, 2025; Podgorelec et al., 2024). Perhaps the Caribbean context of my childhood proved too familiar for me to intellectualise. It took the imagined cold emptiness of the exotic North for me to be able to imagine isolation. Or perhaps it is because these Caribbean cultures were never *my* heritage or *my* self-understanding, no matter how much *frijoles negros* I ate and how much reggaeton I overheard as I went about my daily life. My own South Florida Jewish cultural upbringing was also rooted in diaspora, in the notion that we, as a people, could find belonging only in a sacred homeland to which most of us had only the vaguest, achingly distant ancestral connection. (This sense of millennial roots in a destined homeland has come to look increasingly, catastrophically, and genocidally millenarian over the intervening decades. What better microcosmic metaphor, surely, than a tiny territory in which political and societal leaders seem intent on destroying everything in order to make everything easier to possess?)

After my BA fieldwork in Orkney and Svalbard, I moved to the sailor's town of Marstal on the Danish island of Ærø, where I would live for the next five years, initially just as an ordinary islander (working at the youth club, growing vegetables in the garden, getting drunk in the Irish bar) and then as an ordinary islander who was still doing all those ordinary islander things but was *also* researching my fellow islanders and thereby needing to reflexively negotiate my status as both insider and outsider (Nadarajah, 2007).

Digressions aside, at no stage during my stays in Orkney, Svalbard, and Ærø did I think very much about their islandness. This was the case despite, in retrospect, many other people caring quite a lot about islandness. At the time, ferry-dependent Ærø marketed itself for cultural heritage and nature tourism as 'a *real* island', in implicit contrast to the nearby (larger and poorer) bridged island of Langeland. Today's Ærø tourism marketing invests further in this theme, using the slogan 'Everything's just water next to [compared with] Ærø' [*Alt er vand ved siden af Ærø*]. For me, it was simply the place I lived. Thus, frustratingly, Ærø is hardly worth dwelling on in an article concerning my entry into island studies.

Fairies

But I *did* enter into Island Studies. Maybe I did so in 2006 when I chose another island field site for my PhD in folklore studies?

I decided to do a PhD at the University of Aberdeen's Elphinstone Institute in part because it would allow me to study the folklore of Shetland, an archipelago far to the north of mainland Scotland. The initial topic of my PhD (from which I would ultimately deviate in the most ridiculous of fashions, for reasons described below) seems strangely relevant to contemplations of emplaced memory (Anthony, 2025; Nay, 2025; Sutton, 2024): I set out to study how Shetlanders' perceptions of historical Shetland folk belief were and were not related to their own experiences of the supernatural. That is, how does thinking about the past influence our understandings of the present? I had never been to Shetland before. My choice of Shetland as a research site was rooted in the (correct) impression I had acquired that Shetland was a place in which many people cared deeply about and had significant knowledge of the past, including a strong interest in past folk belief. Shetland differed in this respect from Ærø, where few islanders claimed to know much about legends of ghosts, fairies and spirits.



Figure 2 – 'Fairies' at the Lerwick Mid-Summer Carnival, 2007 (including the author).

Those Island Studies scholars who know me solely from my political and economic geography research may be surprised to learn that I started out studying fairies and would—at the pinnacle of my participant observation—at last dress up as a Shetland fairy at the Lerwick Mid-Summer Carnival in 2007 (Figure 2). My process of becoming a fairy began with

me interviewing loads of people about fairies; then being asked to give advice on how the fairies on a carnival float should look and act; and, finally, being asked to personally don the leather waistcoat, false nose, and extravagant eyebrows by which a fairy can be known. (The requisite hairy legs were entirely my own; no prosthetics necessary.) Having entered the field hoping to learn about people's perceptions of the past, I came to be regarded as an expert on the past, and I then performed as an embodiment of the past. None of this, it must be emphasised, was *my* past. It was just a past into which I stepped, and out of which I stepped again once my fieldwork was complete.

Fairies are a hard thing to study. Most people in today's Shetland do not believe fairies exist or have ever existed. How can one study something unreal? This is a familiar problem for Island Studies scholars, ever struggling to simultaneously delimit and expand the scope of the island (Foley et al., 2023; Grydehøj, Su, et al., 2025; Hayward, 2012, 2016; Matheson et al., 2024) and to convince sceptics that islands really are worth researching (Baldacchino, 2004; Grydehøj & Su, 2025b; Ou et al., 2024). But at least, we can go visit islands ourselves, feel the swell beneath the boat (or watch the water speed past beneath the bridge), and then feel the turf and rock (or snow or sand or pavement) beneath our feet. Fairies belong—if they belong anywhere at all—conclusively to the past. What is more, fairies do not even belong to history but belong instead to that realm of the past that is labelled 'folklore' or 'legend'.

History is coherent. It is a telling of the past that makes sense, that proceeds from one important event to another. Folklore is not like that. By the time we label something 'folklore', we have decided it does not really make sense, or at least not in the way history does. Folklore is a digression from history. It may waylay us from what we ought to be doing (constructing a coherent truth), but the power of history will ultimately set us right. Or so convention goes.

Tales that are not untrue

The folklorist Henry Glassie Glassie (1987) reflects upon the division between history and folklore. I repeat him here, at length, by way of digression, and a commitment to keeping myself from the truth:

> *Folk history is an oxymoron: a false truth. Legend, the genre through which folk history claims life, was once defined as a falsehood believed to be true. When a child, I was told how Colonel John S. Mosby, cornered by the Yankees in northern Virginia, loaded a cannon with a beehive that fell amid the bluecoats and scattered them, delivering the rebel hero. From such legends in which the impossible is presented as so, the idea of false truth expands subtly to contaminate tales that are not untrue. The story raised upon memory is a legend too: the time Ernie met a ghost in his kitchen, the time Alice saw a ghost that turned out to be a rambling calf, the time the priest gave Peter a new pair of shoes, the time Mehmet bought his first tractor. The little legend of common life is guilty by association. It is not a lie, but it is like a lie, for it does not fit; it cannot be accommodated within historical knowledge.*
>
> *Maybe false, maybe only irrelevant, folk history is absurd because it holds no meaningful relation to the historian's chronicle of fact. The absurdity of folk history, its nature as lie or lie-like, is maintained by the careful preservation of*

> *legends in fragmentary condition. All fragments are in themselves absurd. They become meaningful as contexts are developed around them. The junk the archaeologist lifts so carefully out of the earth would remain junk if the archaeologist failed to embed it anew in the context of history* (pp. 188-189).

Island Studies is full of folk history. All fields and disciplines are. Fragmented tales of the time that person gate-crashed a conference, of when planes/ferries were cancelled for three days by a storm and everyone get stuck, of how an acronym used to stand for one thing before it started standing for something else, of scholarly feuds that produced influential theory, of who sang the Kenny Rogers' part and who sang the Dolly Parton part while duetting 'Islands in the Stream' at a KTV place in Taipei in 2013. Some of these legends are humorous; some are serious; all are important in their own small way, otherwise they would not be recollected in the slightest. Both folklore and history are selective; they include only those memories that matter.

I will not tell you juicy anecdotes about famous Island Studies personalities now. I am certainly a gossip, but I am not a gossip in the pages of open access journals. Yet there is one, giant piece of folk history we can longer ignore: that we basically all became Island Studies researchers by accident. I have not yet read the articles by my fellow contributors to this journal special issue. Maybe when I do, I will change my mind and come to see Island Studies as a historic inevitability. But I do not think so.

I know Island Studies history. I have written a history of Island Studies (Grydehøj, 2017), and I have written an elegy to Island Studies (Grydehøj, 2023). Once, a journal editor asked me to put the word 'critical' in title of a very mundane article to make it more exciting (Grydehøj, 2020), and since then I have been so immensely critical that I sometimes feel like Island Studies' worst enemy (Grydehøj et al., 2023; Grydehøj, Su, et al., 2025; Nadarajah et al., 2022; Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024). Until I come to my senses and remember, with relief, that Island Studies' worst enemy is probably Philip Hayward (Bebawi et al., 2022; Hayward, 2016, 2022). Or is it Gang Hong (2017, 2020, 2022, 2023)? Or is it Epeli Hau'ofa (1994)? Or is it someone of whom I have never heard, doing brilliant work to unsettle Island Studies in a language I cannot read? Whoever it is, the call is coming from inside the house. What I mean is: Island Studies may not be a lie, but neither is it the truth. Maybe it is just 'not untrue'. Island Studies is a thing that each of us—first separately, later collectively—has stitched together out of experience, then memory, then story, then folklore.

Does history come at the end of it all, when we look back upon Island Studies and understand it in retrospect? It does not. For we are always compelled to write our histories of the field in the present, never in the future, even as the field keeps marching on—or rather, keeps running in different directions—without us, while we are distracted by the act of transmitting words from our minds to our computer screens. Before we know it, we no longer *know* it.

Tea and biscuits

Doing my PhD research in Shetland in 2007 was among the most intellectually stimulating and physically challenging periods of my life. Intellectually because I met and befriended so many amazing and fascinating people; physically because every one of them served me tea and biscuits as soon as I showed up for an interview. (What better microcosmic metaphor,

surely, than an island in which fellowship is always accompanied by a heartwarming serving of tea and biscuits?) By the end of my stay, existentially altered by hospitality, I was more tea and biscuits than I was human. If the 'atomic theory' bicycle paradox of Flann O'Brien's (1993) *The third policeman* holds, there must somewhere be a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits introducing itself as Adam Grydehøj and interviewing people about fairies. I am joking. But only half joking. Culture makes islands generic and repeatable (Benítez-Rojo, 1996; Grydehøj, 2008a; Grydehøj, Xu, et al., 2025; Na'puti, 2019), but the material or intangible island that is repeated and that serves as the point of comparison for all other islands will differ for each and every person. If you live on Ærø, it is likely that you compare every other island with Ærø and judge them lacking. Some people see the islands of the world in light of Prince Edward Island, others of Hawaii, others of Malta, others of Hainan, others of Manhattan, others of Iceland, others still of Bali. For me, for a long time, this generic island was Shetland, and this generic island smelled of salt, peat fire, and—I am being quite serious—tea and biscuits.

I have only diffuse memories of my childhood snow globes, but I retain sensory knowledge of Shetland: I feel that sharp wind on my cheek as I walk along the Sletts, I enjoy the perfectly claggy mouthfeel of a bannock from Walls Bakery, I see the impossible depths of a February fog and the miraculous green of Fetlar in spring, I taste the smoke in the reestit mutton, I touch the roughness of a neolithic home half-buried in ancient earth, I hear the coming together of musical souls at a Lounge Bar session, I am awed by the majesty of Eshaness (Figure 3); I sense the shuddering power of the ride-on floor scrubber as I scoot around Somerfield supermarket during my early morning cleaning shift. Shetland became one of those places where my heart came to settle.



Figure 3 - Eshaness, Northmavine. © Adam Grydehøj, 2007.

Since then, there have been other island places: Amager in Copenhagen, Nuuk in Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, Guangzhou in China. But Shetland was the first place that I deeply understood as an island. And here, the poetic coherence of my narrative must once again fall apart, for the reason I deeply understood Shetland as an island is because, while doing reading one day in the library in Lerwick, I came across Godfrey Baldacchino and David A. Milne's (2000) edited collection *Lessons from the political economy of small islands: The resourcefulness of jurisdiction*.

As a folklorist, I ought to have glanced at this book's cover and placed it back on the shelf. (It does not have a particularly appealing cover.) I was studying fairies, and this volume was an interdisciplinary exploration of island politics and economics. It had 'political economy' in the title. What even *was* 'political economy'? (I still have not figured this out). There would be no harm in trying to read the introduction, just a little taste, to see what this whole 'small island' business might mean. And that was it. I was hooked. I started seeking out more work by Baldacchino, I wrote him an e-mail, I read some articles in the then-new *Island Studies Journal* and even-newer *Shima*. Within the year, I was having distinctly social sciencey articles published in both *Island Studies Journal* and *Shima* (Grydehøj, 2008a, 2008b). Had these journals not been so new, they probably would have been more selective, and their then-editors (Baldacchino and Hayward respectively) may well have declined to publish my very basic, first-ever academic articles. This would perhaps have directed my attention back toward folklore studies, a discipline in which no one cares much whether you publish articles so long as you enthusiastically sing ballads at conference social activities. But that is not how it was. By virtue of accident and random encounter, my research attention shifted. Although I kept interviewing people about fairies, I added questions about cultural tourism, and I tried to learn about Shetland's industrial policy and informal governance structures. I ended up writing a hideous folklore studies-human geography hybrid of a PhD thesis entitled *Historiography of Picts, Vikings, Scots, and fairies and its influence on Shetland's Twenty-First Century economic development*, in which I tried to trace the connections between Shetlanders' ideas concerning past folk belief and their notions of what kind of society they wish to be in the future and how best to pay for it—all from a comparative Island Studies perspective. (My PhD supervisor, the wonderful carolling scholar Ian Russell, was displeased but powerless to halt the momentum of chance circumstance.) I would not publish my first folklore articles until six years after my ethnographic fieldwork in Shetland (Grydehøj, 2013a, 2013b), and it would be a further decade after that before I truly returned to the discipline of folklore studies, researching Chinese legends and local religion (Grydehøj, 2024; Grydehøj, Lin, et al., 2025; Li & Grydehøj, 2025).

The ridiculous deviation from my intended research topic was an accident. I had been drawn to, living on, and researching a succession of islands without having really been aware of it, and I probably never would have become aware of it had I not stumbled upon that one book in the library.

Repeating islander

Many different islands have been influential in my intellectual and professional development. It was not Shetland—not its rugged beauty, fairies, delicious food, wonderful people, endless tea and biscuits—that prompted my entry into Island Studies. It was a book I spotted on the shelf.

Legends are true or untrue stories and memories that sound like lies. Scholarly historiography—the intellectual work we do to make disciplines and fields linear, coherent, self-realised—is the creation of true or untrue stories and memories that sound like the truth. There is a danger in attempting to write *the* truth. We have all lived far too many fragmentary truths to comprehend, and certainly to communicate to others. We must embrace this complexity, all our entanglements, even as we sometimes find it convenient to perform the pretence of knowing our history. We can be the heroes of legend, and we can be part of history. Yet history will always be provisional, waiting to be rewritten by the next 'critical' researcher who has had their own emplaced accident that brought them into a collective scholarly story.

Time leaks away from us, our present becomes trivial fragments in a shared past, at last the snow globe of memory is empty, and it will be tidied away to make space for a history that makes sense. The day may come when I wish to once again make history. For now, I am content with folklore.

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