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The last outpost of Empire: Rockall and the Cold War

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Abstract

This paper is about what can be seen at sea. It considers the historical geography of a site at the geopolitical axis of the British Empire and the Cold War. It focuses on a hitherto unacknowledged historical reference point: the last territorial expansion of the UK, which laid claim to the tiny islet of Rockall, lying some 300 miles west of the Scottish mainland. Rockall was annexed in September 1955 because it was situated within radio-electrical range of a test site for Britain's first nuclear missile, the American-made 'Corporal'. As a 'tactical' nuclear missile designed for potential deployment in Eastern Europe, the Corporal was a central part of NATO defence policy in the 1950s. Crucial to its development was a testing station in the Outer Hebrides, from which the guided missile could be fired and its ballistic trajectory tracked over the North Atlantic. Occupying an area only 83 feet across and 100 feet wide, Rockall represented a strategic vantage point for the rival gaze of Soviet intelligence. Following Paul Virilio's argument that the logic of war is less about scoring territorial or material victories than about securing 'the "immateriality" of perceptual fields', this paper details the ceremonial annexation of Rockall and the subsequent transformation of the Hebridean seascape into a vast topography for military surveillance. This final expansive moment of British imperialism was legitimated by symbolic and rhetorical strategies tying Rockall to both earlier geographical exploration and the science of natural history.

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Keywords: Atlantic; Rockall; Seascape; Cold War; Geopolitics; Empire

Introduction

Shannon. Rockall. Cyclonic three or four becoming westerly or north westerly, five to seven. Thundery showers. Moderate or good. Malin. Hebrides. Easterly or north easterly becoming cyclonic, five to seven, decreasing three or four later. Rain. Moderate or good.

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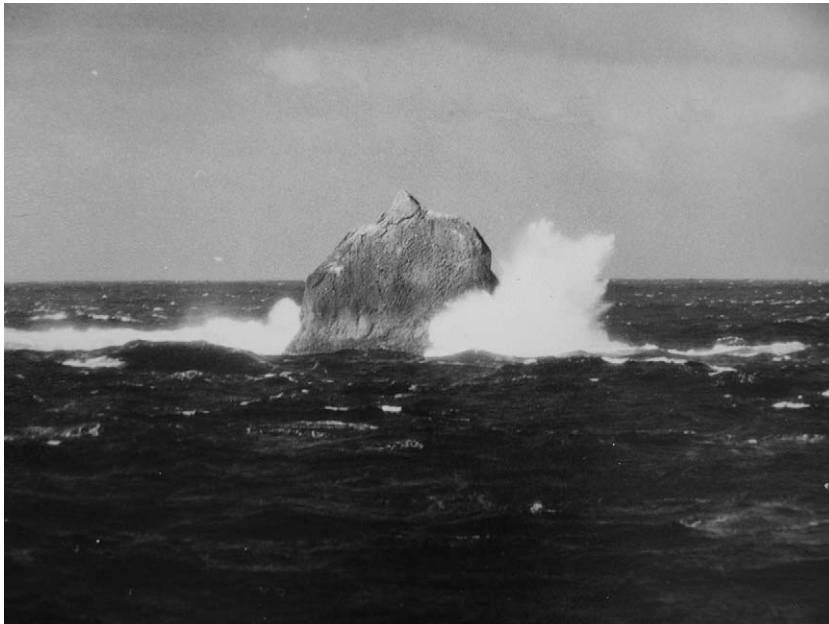


Fig. 1. Rockall as unclaimed territory. Photographed from *HMS Vidal*, 17th September 1955, the day before its formal annexation. Crown Copyright.

Broadcast at the end of BBC Radio 4's daily schedule, the cadences and rhythms of the UK shipping forecast have a soporific effect. This is true, at least, for those on land who have the liberty of receiving it as poetry rather than as information. For such a disengaged listener, the shipping forecast constitutes a nightly tour of the extent of the British Isles and its surrounds: a familiar and comforting register of sea areas and coastal stations that have come to define the symbolic boundary of a nation. Perhaps there is something quintessentially British about taking an interest in the weather of an unknown place, far away, out at sea, during the night. In this rather particular sense, the name and imaginary of Rockall – an isolated Atlantic rock 200 miles west of the nearest Scottish island of St Kilda – has become something of a national treasure (Fig. 1). The place of Rockall in British cultures of travel and science has been established through such everyday citations since the early nineteenth century. The legal claim, however, is much more recent. Rockall was formally annexed 50 years ago on the 18th September 1955 at 10.16 am precisely. But the discovery in the 1970s of subsea oil and gas resources in the surrounding sea area raised the stakes in the question of Rockall's sovereignty. The Britishness of Rockall has since been contested by various other neighbouring states. This paper reveals how Britain's declaration of ownership was, perhaps surprisingly, less a matter of economic opportunism than of geopolitical strategy.

The paper seeks to chart the geopolitical background to Rockall's formal annexation as part of the British Isles. It details the strategic importance of the site at the height of the Cold War, when Britain decided to test what was to be its first nuclear missile, the American-made 'Corporal', in the Outer Hebrides off Scotland's northwest coast. Test-firing the missile over the Atlantic was thought to give Rockall a unique vantage point: as unclaimed territory it could give rival states

a platform from which to observe operations on Britain's highly sensitive 'rocket range'. The concerns of the British Ministry of Defence were therefore explicitly territorial. The potential for the USSR to place surveillance instruments on the rock itself was regarded as the principal threat. As this paper will consider, the more fluid possibilities of Soviet surveillance from the sea were either not recognised by the British military or were considered too variable to warrant specific action. The annexation of Rockall, I will argue, was a significant manoeuvre in the Atlanticist Cold War. It also has, somewhat paradoxically, another unacknowledged historical resonance: Rockall represents the last territorial expansion of the British Empire.

The construction of the rocket range in the late 1950s meant that much of the Hebridean archipelago was turned into a massive topography of observation. The enduring theme of this story can therefore be formulated as a question: what can be seen at sea? It is an enquiry that takes us to the heart of the geographical tradition in three significant respects. Firstly, it provides an opportunity to recall some earlier precedents for what has previously constituted an historical geography of the sea, particularly with reference to the Atlantic. This paper is therefore situated within, and seeks to develop, a wider tradition of geographical writing on the sea. Secondly, it invites a consideration of the history of Rockall which is, in no small part, a history of geographical and zoological observation. I present a brief account of the scientific exploration of Rockall while acknowledging its aesthetic role on the margins of the Victorian imagination. I go on to discuss how geography and natural history were used to validate the geopolitical ambitions of the British state, specifically through the involvement of the British naturalist James Fisher. Thirdly, the central question about the geopolitics of vision at sea – the contest of surveillance and counter-surveillance – takes us to a familiar geographical trope, namely the visual apprehension of space not as landscape, but as seascape. I am here concerned with the character and politics of visual intelligence in the North Atlantic at the height of the Cold War. Lastly, I describe the process of annexation itself: its invocation of earlier maritime performances; its public proclamation; and its ultimate failure to secure an exclusive British perspective over the perceptual field of the North Atlantic.

Geography at sea

If geography has been largely a terrestrial affair, it has also, less conspicuously, been at home on the sea. Throughout its development, the discipline has found the ocean to be a ready field of scientific enquiry, producing important information relating to the geopolitical, environmental and economic interests of the state. Accordingly, much emphasis has been placed on the significance of such geographical practices as military survey and surveillance. The central theme in the narrative of this paper – the visual character of military intelligence – is one which has a long-standing prominence in the history of maritime geography. The warship, it could be argued, was geography's great apparatus. In Richard Sorrenson's account of the ship as a scientific instrument in the eighteenth century, he observes that the language of one science – geography – pervaded the language of all other sciences.¹ He shows that the ship, far from being the mere vehicle for scientific knowledge, was among the most specialised and expensive instruments necessary for the advancement of cartography, hydrography, surveying and navigation. In Bruno Latour's evocative language, the ship became 'the inked needle of an instrument of enormous proportions

that scribbled the shape of [coastlines]'.² In examining the visual culture of navigation in the early nineteenth century, Felix Driver and Luciana Martins have shown how safe travel at sea required a set of geographical skills most associated with 'the field', most notably sketching and mapping.³ As is evident in the strict disciplines of log-keeping, the question of what could be seen at sea was a matter of military intelligence. Philip Steinberg has further emphasised that the ocean has often been constructed as a space for military endeavours, either as a surface over which troops can be rapidly moved or as a battlefield.⁴ Drawing on Edward Said, Steinberg notes the ways in which military power is also 'projected' across the seas, a metaphor that has an obvious correspondence with the following account of explosive projectiles.⁵

The later nineteenth century saw exploration descend to subsea depths through the development of oceanography, a science that was particularly prominent in Scotland. This new research frontier provided what were among the most important contributions to geographical knowledge since the navigational science of the early Imperial era.⁶ The Edinburgh-based *Challenger* expedition of 1872–1876, for instance, was a landmark in the geographical study of the sea, setting out to determine the extent of the great ocean basins.⁷ Geography's oceanic ocularcentrism, however, was by no means confined to the formal practice of survey. The visual pleasures of landscape also had their parallel at sea. Vaughan Cornish, for example, was fascinated by the relation between the physiology of optics and the appearance of scenery, including seascapes. Writing in the 1930s, he tells of being caught in an Atlantic storm amid what he calls 'a welter of topping seas', when suddenly it struck him that the 'topography' of waves at a particular moment bore a startling resemblance to the landscape of the Berkshire downs, specifically the view from the Ridgeway near Sparsholt Copse.⁸ It is a reference that indicates how completely the figure of the geographical observer in the field could be translated into the marine environment.

If the sea was a theatre in this specular sense, it was also, crucially, a theatre of military operations and warfare: the ocean as geopolitical stage. Halford MacKinder's first major book, *Britain and the British Seas*, was concerned with how a strategic command of the sea could provide naval powers with an advantage over their territorial adversaries.⁹ Similar ideas were taken up by Ellen Churchill Semple who argued, in 1908, that 'history has always staged its most dramatic acts upon the margins of seas and oceans' and that the sea provided 'an outlet for the exercise of redundant national powers'.¹⁰ In recent years, a renewed and diverse interest in the sea has been fostered within cultural history and geography. In contrast to the earlier approach of MacKinder, the emphasis of this work is on the hidden histories and geographies of the sea rather than on the grand strategic game or 'decisive' events. A great deal of attention is now focused on the sea as a medium for different cultural formations and ethnic identities; as an arena of economic exchange; as an important site for labour and class consciousness; as a sphere of scientific endeavour and exploration; as well as being a geopolitical stage. The sea is being rediscovered in geography not as an undifferentiated empty space between the land (where the real action supposedly takes place), but as a culturally configured site of knowledge and power where philosophical, scientific and aesthetic discourses intersect with socio-economic, technological and political forces. An important model for some of this work is Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* in which the ocean is conceived as a matrix for transnational black identities and as an active rather than a passive geographic construct.¹¹ That subsequent geographers have further developed this line of enquiry was evident in a recently convened session at the Association of American Geographers conference on the 'cultural and political spaces of the Atlantic'.¹² Following Richard Sorrenson, other recent

scholarship has taken up the role of the ship, not just as a vehicle, but as a space of knowledge in itself.¹³ Miles Ogborn, for instance, has paid particular attention to the ship as a material space, a political space and an accounting space, and the means by which written authority – and the authority of writing – were conveyed across the seas.¹⁴

While all of these studies are important in setting the context for the story that follows, it is also worth drawing attention to another Atlantic project in which our maritime theme converges with the specific geopolitical frame of this paper. In his seminal work *Bunker Archaeology*, Paul Virilio uses the abandoned Nazi fortifications of the Atlantic Wall (a forlorn attempt to fortify Europe against Allied invasion), as a way of opening up a discussion about the changing relationship between military technology, speed and space. He takes as his starting point the statement that ‘seeing the oceanic horizon is ... an event in consciousness of underestimated consequences’.¹⁵ I shall in due course consider how the horizon of the sea was itself transformed. In the meantime, I want to consider the history of that small, singular interruption in the open visual field of the North Atlantic.

Rockall, science and the sublime

The early history of Rockall is of a mark on paper. Captain Basil Hall, the first person to make an authenticated landing, observed that ‘the smallest point of a pencil could scarcely give it a place on any map which should not exaggerate its proportions’.¹⁶ The exaggeration, if such it was, originates in the early seventeenth century with Blaeu and other European cartographers.¹⁷ Late in the twentieth century, however, Hall’s observation would be superseded by G. S. Holland and Brigadier R. A. Gardiner of the Royal Geographical Society who produced the first detailed map above the waterline, at a scale of 1:100.¹⁸ The first written mention of ‘Rockol’, at the end of the seventeenth century, is found in Martin Martin’s account of a voyage to St Kilda, where he marks the site as a place where a company of French and Spanish sailors lost their ship and who later escaped to St Kilda, whose inhabitants called it ‘Rokabarra’.¹⁹ If, as Sorrenson argues, the eighteenth century was when geography truly launched forth upon the deep, it was also, paradoxically, a time when little or no scientific interest was taken in Rockall. It was not until the nineteenth century that humans joined the other species that perched on its only ledge (eventually named Hall’s Ledge after its first recorded human). Basil Hall describes how the British frigate HMS *Endymion* had chased what was thought to be a brig with full white sails aloft, but which on closer inspection turned out to be Rockall. With no urgent Admiralty business and a becalmed sea, the *Endymion* discharged its crew on the 8th September 1811 for ‘a grand scientific field day’ equipped with sketchbooks, geologists’ hammers, chronometers and other equipment.²⁰ After the *Endymion* expedition the Navy made frequent survey visits to the Rockall area. In 1831, for instance, the Navy surveyor Captain A.T.E. Vidal not only ascertained the true position of Rockall but also mapped out the size and shape of the Rockall Bank, information that led geomorphologists like Sir John Richardson and Professor Edward Forbes to the idea that the bank marked the northern limit of the Atlantic at the period when it was separated from the Arctic Basin.²¹ The discovery that the bank was a fertile fishing ground also brought a few trawlers to the area in the nineteenth century, some of whose crew have left written accounts of Rockall.²²

Arguably, the most important visit of this time was initiated by the geographer Miller Christy. His correspondence with the Scottish naturalist John A. Harvie-Brown and the Irish ornithologist R. M. Barrington led, in the summer of 1896, to ‘the only expedition ever despatched for the sole purpose of examining Rockall from the scientific point of view’.²³ As one of the pioneers of the emerging geographical science of animal distributions, Harvie-Brown had taken a close interest in outlying islands and was sufficiently keen to make the trip to Rockall that, along with Barrington, he contributed one quarter of its total cost.²⁴ His primary interest in the birds of Rockall foundered somewhat on the discovery that, contrary to prior expectations, it was doubtful if the rock held any breeding bird populations at all. It was, it turned out, merely a perch for a few species of seabirds and occasional passerines. For Harvie-Brown, Rockall was saved from ‘ornithological oblivion’ only by virtue of it being ‘a centre of attraction for that mysterious oceanic wanderer, the Great Shearwater’, a specimen of which he duly shot.²⁵ As a solitary traveller over unbounded space, the Shearwater functioned as an emblem of the oceanic sublime, invoking the limitlessness of that fluid continent.²⁶ A certain charisma also adhered to the fact that hitherto no-one had ever found its nesting place on land, making it one of the inscrutable scientific secrets of the seas. But if the ornithology ultimately proved a little disappointing, Rockall’s potential contribution to the science of geology and, particularly, meteorology, was more significant. Notwithstanding the practical problems with the idea of building, maintaining and staffing a meteorological observation station on Rockall, Miller Christy thought that such an ‘early warning’ post could be valuable in forecasting the British weather.²⁷ Arguably, the most significant outcome of the expedition was the first successful photograph of Rockall by Rev W. Spotswood Green of the Fisheries Board of Dublin, and his son Mr C. Green, which gave a more modest perspective of Rockall’s stature than earlier sketches.

If only a handful of people had ever visited Rockall, its status was nevertheless familiar to those accustomed to the travel and adventure of the sublime tour. The archipelago of St Kilda, being the nearest land to Rockall, had long represented an *ultima Thule* for Victorian travellers well-tutored in the eighteenth-century aesthetic theory of Edmund Burke and James MacPherson.²⁸ The surrounding sea area was sublime territory *par excellence*. With its vertiginous heights amid the open and unpredictable Atlantic, the unworldly appearance of St Kilda and its inhabitants excited the sensibilities of the adventurer. And yet Rockall lay beyond the horizon of even this ambitious destination. It remained at the outer edge of Victorian fancy so much so that it was the subject of several fraudulent claims of conquest, in one case by a writer who, after supplying erroneous detail of its abundant wildlife, was unmasked by Harvie-Brown who detected, as he put it, ‘the cloven hoof’.²⁹ To have visited Rockall was the epitome of heroism and reflected well on the bravery and moral character of the traveller. When Miller Christy observed that ‘its nature, its position and its surroundings are of a quite romantic kind’, this must be seen as constitutive of, rather than in addition to, its scientific interest.³⁰ That scientific and aesthetic knowledge were indivisible is also evident in a renewed awe for the extraordinary depth that was discovered to separate Rockall from Britain. There is a sense too that the sublimity of the ocean was emphasised by being interrupted by ‘this last speck of a lost continent’³¹; that it was the very smallness of Rockall that created the necessary perspective to see the ocean as a vast and unending theatre.

In the first half of the twentieth century, only a few determined researchers and navigators made the trip to Rockall. Of these, by far the most important was the naturalist and broadcaster James Fisher, who links its earlier history as the field of scientific enquiry with its later role as

a geopolitical stage. Fisher was one of Britain's most prominent naturalists, giving voice to Britain's wildlife on radio and notable as an editor and author of Collins 'New Naturalist' book series.³² The means of Fisher's first contact with Rockall, like many precedents before and after, was courtesy of the British military. As Secretary of the British Trust for Ornithology, he asked Air Chief Marshall Sir Frederick Bowhill if aircraft under his command could find time to make some aerial photographs of Rockall.³³ Despite the fact that this request came at the height of German attacks on British Atlantic convoys, for which Rockall was used as cover for the U-boats, the Royal Air Force Coastal Command were 'anxious to help'.³⁴ As Fisher had anticipated, these photographs from the large format RAF cameras presented Rockall and other Hebridean outliers in sufficient clarity and detail that individual species could be identified and existing species maps could be revised.³⁵ Two of the notable pioneers of wildlife photography – Seton Gordon and Eric Hosking – were also aboard other RAF flights Fisher had organised, covering much of the remote west coast of Scotland. He describes 'calling at all the wonderful bird islands on the way [and having to] suppress [...] our excitement in the tasks of accurate photography and quick precise observation'.³⁶ Here too there is a familiar tension at work in the figure of the fieldworker, between 'the distanced, disembodied objectivity of science' and the sensitive, artistic, desirous appreciation of scenery.³⁷ What is important for our main narrative is Fisher's determination to reach Rockall – further evident in another unsuccessful yacht trip on the *Petula* in 1949 – and the seeming complementarity of his scientific interest with the military objectives of the British state. In due course these can be found working in concert. First, however, we must consider the geopolitical significance of the North Atlantic in the Cold War.

The geopolitical seascapes of the Cold War

War consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields.³⁸

In courting the military, James Fisher understood that the changing geopolitical environment of the Second World War was turning the British strategic interest towards the North Atlantic, heightening the significance of the Rockall area. When the geographies of international security were once again being reconfigured at the beginning of the Cold War, the west of Scotland emerged as a major *place d'armes* within the northern hemisphere.³⁹ The Outer Hebrides in particular had a commanding position overlooking the North Atlantic. They were on the shortest routes by air and sea between Europe and North America and had significant areas of sparsely populated land. The region, in other words, was ideal for military appropriation.⁴⁰ This strategic location was nevertheless subordinate to another advantageous geographical fact: that it was a long way from the centres of population in the south and east. With space for weapons testing on a small island like Britain at a premium, the North Atlantic periphery was the favoured theatre for a range of military experiments. Elizabeth Willis has recently uncovered the history of Britain's secret biological weapons programme, enacted under the Prime Ministerial authority of Winston Churchill, in the coastal waters off the island of Lewis.⁴¹ Entire boats of monkeys and guinea pigs (not to mention unwitting fishermen) were exposed to deadly bacteriological suspensions in sea trials designed to prove that biological weapons were 'feasible, relatively cheap and many times more toxic than chemical weapons'.⁴² By the early 1950s, however, 'conventional'

warfare had been largely superseded, and the primary defence requirement was to develop a tactical and strategic nuclear missile capability. Outlined in President Eisenhower's 'New Look' national security policy and Prime Minister Winston Churchill's 1952 Report of Defence Policy and Global Strategy, this new doctrine placed nuclear weapons as 'the foundation of strategy rather than baroque ornamentation'.⁴³ The advent of such weapons of mass destruction made second-guessing the enemy even more important. A compromise had to be found, for instance, between a policy of 'massive nuclear retaliation' and that of a 'flexible response', which might include the large-scale deployment of conventional forces as well as smaller-scale 'tactical' nuclear weapons. The changing security environment in Eastern Europe meant that the American policy, and that of NATO more broadly, was geared to the possibility of fighting a 'limited' nuclear war such that tactical weapons could be deployed as part of an 'appropriate' response to aggression – presumably from the Warsaw Pact – while leaving the aggressor uncertain as to the severity of the next move.⁴⁴ These armaments were controversial inasmuch as they demonstrated some willingness on the part of Allied governments to consider any nuclear action, even if it seemed relatively modest in comparison with an all-out volley of Inter-continental Ballistic Missiles. Without having the capacity to operationalise such a tactical weapon at short notice, Britain purchased from the US its first nuclear missile, the Corporal Type II: the first American guided missile 'destined for service in a foreign country to be used by a foreign power' (Fig. 2).⁴⁵ The most obvious problem for NATO was that Europe in general and Britain in particular lacked suitable areas for the proof trials and operational training that such a new weapon required. Britain's earlier arrangement with Australia to use the Woomera test site was no longer expedient, let alone practical. Other existing ranges in the UK at Aberporth and Larkhill were already overcommitted, too small for guided weapon work and too close to centres of population.⁴⁶

The principal criterion for the new 'rocket range' was the existence of a topography of observation, essential requirements being: a level stretch of 3 miles long and 1 mile deep for the rangehead; a sea danger area of 250 miles by 100 miles, free from intensive shipping and containing an uninhabited island in the line of fire for radar tracking; high land on both flanks of the rangehead and in its rear for the siting of radar stations; and two airfields of 6000 feet, or extendible to that size, within reasonable distance.⁴⁷ Although another eight sites were purportedly examined and rejected, the Hebridean seascape was the obvious option from the outset, having previously been considered for various military projects in the preceding two decades. The southern islands in the archipelago – the Uists – provided an ideal base from which missiles or targets could be launched, while the depopulated island group of St Kilda was perfectly positioned for a radar tracking station to monitor the trajectory of the guided missile. One of the 'local difficulties' that the Minister of Defence noted with regard to the Uists as a location for the range (alongside the wholesale destruction of crofting townships, the use of the range sea area by trawlers and various 'religious sensitivities') was that Rockall, being 'unclaimed territory', was 'sufficiently near to the range to be an embarrassment if it were acquired by some foreign power'.⁴⁸ St Kilda did not therefore enjoy a monopoly on perspective. If the Corporal had a range of over 80 miles, it was thought that the size, speed and improved manoeuvrability of later weapons could require even more space. In April 1955, a memo to the Secretary of the Admiralty explained that 'as the firing limits of this range increase, the Island of Rockall, situated some 200 miles due West of the Hebrides, might well be used by an unfriendly state as a vantage point for the observation of activities upon the range'.⁴⁹ The early proclamation of British sovereignty was therefore considered a necessity if the range was to proceed away from the prying eyes of a rival state.

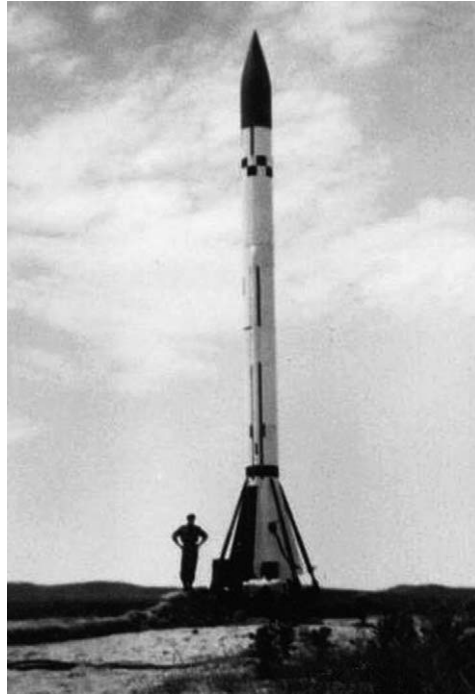


Fig. 2. Firing Panel Operator, Chris Fagan prior to a test launch of the Corporal missile on the coastal machair of South Uist, Outer Hebrides, 1961 (courtesy of Chris Fagan).

This rationale for the annexation of Rockall was not therefore about securing ‘territory’ – at least not in its conventional material sense. In affirmation of Paul Virilio’s remark that modern warfare is less about scoring material victories than about securing the “‘immateriality’” of perceptual fields’, Rockall was the only point on which the British state could ground its claim to the North Atlantic seascape.⁵⁰ As the only fixed point in this visual field, the perspective offered by Rockall was comparatively easy to monopolise. And yet the British military failed to acknowledge that it was the fluidity of the sea – the myriad possibilities for paths of surveillance over its surface, beneath the trajectory of the Corporal – rather than the stability of the land that constituted the Soviet threat. The question, *what can be seen at sea?* was, in this instance, of vital significance to NATO security, the sea area of Rockall having become among the most strategically valuable perceptual fields in the world. The nature of this visual intelligence was not, as in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific endeavours, a matter of what the eye, assisted by sextant or telescope, could discern of or from the distant horizon. The meaning of the horizon had itself changed. In the era when geographical knowledge first set out across the seas, the horizon, like the land, was the stable referent from which measurement could be made and one’s position established.⁵¹ It was, for sailors and navigators, the baseline between the ‘luminous verticality’ of the sky and ‘liquid horizontality’ of the sea.⁵² But the military epoch of the Cold War saw a move from what Virilio has called the ‘passive optics’ of glass, water or air – by which he means direct or modestly instrumented vision – to ‘active optics’ or ‘opto-electronics’, whereby ‘the look of direct vision is ced[ed] to a real-time, radio-electrical *industrialization of vision*’.⁵³ In these circumstances, the

meaning of the optical horizon was transformed by a technical clairvoyance which combined radio-electrical tracking with a new speed of data processing and communications. Virilio laments this ‘progressive derealization of the terrestrial horizon’ and is deeply nostalgic about the impact that this move has had on old-style geographic grandeur.⁵⁴ Under his analysis, information about a missile trajectory could be transmitted with such rapidity that concepts of near and far, horizon, distance and space no longer have the same purchase.

The annexation of Rockall, which was seemingly a question what could be seen at sea, was less about direct vision than about securing the ‘visibility’ of the Corporal’s radio-electrical trace. In this new competitive field of vision, earlier strategies of deception (like camouflage) gave way to a new rivalry in the detection and interception of electro-magnetic emissions.⁵⁵ As Virilio noted ‘it has become more useful to deceive about duration, to make the image of the trajectory secret’, thereby inventing the new ballistic science of tracking and radio-electrical stealth.⁵⁶ In this, as in other aspects of the Corporal’s technical effectiveness, the missile was found severely wanting. While the Soviet Union may not have been interested in the missile itself, which the British popular media acknowledged was ‘already obsolete by Moscow standards’, the frequencies for electronic warfare were still very much of value.⁵⁷ Unwarranted electronic surveillance in peacetime could lead to the missile being ‘jammed’ by the aggressive electronic counter measures of the enemy, rendering the Allies ‘blind’ and incapable on the field of war. As the comparatively primitive communication system of the Corporal was particularly vulnerable to such attack,⁵⁸ there was no question that Rockall would have to be secured before plans for the range were made public.

The rituals of territory

The realisation that Rockall presented a problem of international security did not immediately clarify how, exactly, this problem might be solved. It was one thing for the military to recognise the threat posed by unclaimed territory, but quite another to effect change on its legal status; this was a matter of some administrative complexity. Advice was sought from the then Colonial Office on procedural matters of expanding the Empire. The protocol, having been out of use for some time, needed dusting down. Examples from an earlier Imperial age were recalled and the names of far-flung pink dots were invoked by way of legal precedent: Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Tristan da Cunha, Christmas Island, Nightingale and Inaccessible Islands. The legal advice from the Colonial Office specified:

In the case of uninhabited and virtually uninhabitable territories all that seems to be required in municipal law is formal annexation, though, of course, international law probably requires some actual exercise of sovereignty to make the title good. It seems ... that the formal annexation could be achieved either by an issue of an Order in Council or other appropriate instrument under the Royal prerogative or ... by the reading of a proclamation on it by some duly authorised officer.⁵⁹

Behind this new annexation lay the ultimate standard of Cook’s *Endeavour*, charged by the British Crown in 1768 with taking possession of ‘such islands as you may discover in the course of your voyage that have not hitherto been discovered by Europeans’, and with ‘setting up ... proper marks and inscriptions, as first discoverers and possessors’.⁶⁰ Mindful of history, one

opinion at the Foreign Office suggested that as well as a commemorative plaque on Rockall, ‘we ought not only hoist a flag, but if possible insert a permanent cement base for a flagstaff, thus providing evidence of our intention to do this on future occasions ... ring bolts should be inserted and steps perhaps dug out to further this evidence of occupation’.⁶¹ If, as Patricia Seed documents, the British tradition of territorial claim resided in evidence of cultivation and settlement, then Rockall was plainly not very amenable to these sorts of inscriptions.⁶² In place of fences, walls, gardens and agriculture, were more tenuous signs of occupation: ring bolts.

For the Admiralty, the problem of Rockall was urgent. In the summer of 1955, it was felt that not only was there a pressing need to get on with the planning and construction of the range, but if Rockall was to be annexed in any formal sense, access to the rock was strictly limited by bad weather for much of the year. If a party could not land that summer, a forced delay of almost another year might not only postpone Corporal testing, but also, more worryingly, a failed attempt could alert the enemy. Such haste, however, was not the manner of the Foreign Office. One civil servant expressed annoyance at the deadline:

I cannot see that it matters if we wait several months or even until next year. Indeed, the whole operation seems to me slightly farfetched. Does anyone seriously suppose that Russia will try to annex Rockall in peacetime, or would be physically able to maintain any sort of a useful observation post there? ... If an unfriendly power wanted to get hold of Rockall during or in preparation for a war against us, they would be hardly be deterred by the fact that the Royal Navy had previously affixed a plaque to the rock declaring it British!⁶³

Another handwritten comment in the minute reads simply:

I agree. This must go to the Cabinet. In these days, many irregularities occur. But we really can't go annexing territory and leave the P.M. and the Cabinet to hear about it from the BBC and the newspapers.⁶⁴

At a meeting of the Cabinet, the newly promoted Minister of Defence, Harold MacMillan, and Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden decided to ‘send a naval party to proclaim British sovereignty over the island in accordance with Queen’s Instructions’ a procedure which would ‘give the act of taking possession of the island as formal and impressive a character as possible’.⁶⁵ ‘Queen’s Instructions’ were drafted – ‘a necessary formality’ to give ‘a flavour of an earlier Elizabethan age’⁶⁶ – and HMS *Vidal*, the Navy’s new survey vessel (coincidentally named after the first surveyor of Rockall), was sent to perform what was to be a final Imperial task.⁶⁷ As Christy Collis has detailed in relation to the Australian annexation of Proclamation Island in Antarctica, these ‘Queen’s Instructions’ were not merely an evocative and archaic custom.⁶⁸ Rather, they were necessary to invest the body of the explorer with the acquisitive agency of the Crown.⁶⁹

Mr Fisher, the best alternative

Just as Cook’s *Endeavour* was authorised to claim territory for the British Crown as part of a wider pursuit of geographical and scientific knowledge, the planned annexation of Rockall sought legitimacy from the practice of science and the history of exploration. The Admiralty felt that it ‘would be severely criticised if it did not make use of the attempt to gather all possible scientific information ... such as might be of use to various scientific bodies in this country’.⁷⁰ The

obvious choice of a civilian scientist to participate in the operation was James Fisher who, 'it was generally agreed ... with his Royal Marine background, would be the most suitable person to be embarked in *Vidal* to act as liaison officer for scientific matters'.⁷¹ Had it not been for the secrecy that attached to such a venture, the Admiralty 'might have asked the Royal Society and other learned bodies to nominate watchers, sailing, of course at their own risk and expense'. As this was not possible it was agreed that 'Mr Fisher is about the best alternative'.⁷² The Admiralty may not have known that Fisher had a track record of using the science of natural history to distract attention away from the disorder of military endeavours. As a prospective editor of the 'New Naturalist' series, Fisher reputedly told the publisher William Collins in 1942 that 'what this country really needs is a good series of books on natural history to take its mind off the carnage'.⁷³ But the Admiralty was certainly well aware of Fisher's previous attempts to reach Rockall and of the reciprocal benefits of their approach:

It is, I gather, known that he [Fisher] will jump at this opportunity of taking part on whatever conditions are laid down. His reward (if the expedition is a success) will lie in the kudos which he will gain as an authoritative writer on Rockall: he may even be able to turn it to financial advantage.⁷⁴

As expected, Fisher was elated at being asked to join the expedition. Although a prominent conservationist and naturalist, he did not voice any concerns about the ecological impact of the Hebridean rocket range. Rather, on hearing that Rockall was to be annexed in the name of the Queen, his 'first reactions were singularly warm. At last, I thought ... and by the Navy too; its all going to be done proper ... like being married in church'.⁷⁵ Fisher's status on the trip was as 'scientific observer', a role which, notwithstanding his enthusiasm at the respectability of the arrangement, he attempted to keep strictly separate from the military endeavour. If the future of Rockall, or indeed of the Hebrides, was made uncertain by this development, it was, he felt, 'certainly not [his] ... business to inquire'.⁷⁶ Nor did he probe very far to establish why, having largely ignored its existence since 1811, the British state should now be interested in Rockall. Although Fisher was clearly aware of the planned testing range, he rather innocently suggested that British ownership needed to be established in order to 'protect the fishing on the Rockall Bank and control the safety of that area'.⁷⁷

The operation in September 1955 was not dependent on the relatively calm seas enjoyed by Captain Basil Hall and the crew of *Endymion*; HMS *Vidal* was the first navy vessel to be equipped with a helicopter deck and a Westland Sikorsky *Dragonfly* helicopter, which would winch the pioneers down on to the face of the rock.⁷⁸ On arrival at the island on the 17th September, with the waves breaking over its summit, an immediate landing was clearly impossible (Fig. 1). But by the next day, in a lull between two depressions, the captain of the *Vidal*, Commander Connell, calculated that enough time of sufficiently calm weather might be available for a landing party of four men to be winched down on to the rock from the *Dragonfly*. Under the leadership of First Lieutenant Commander Desmond P. D. Scott, with Sergeant Brian Peel, Corporal A. A. Fraser and James Fisher, the group was successfully lowered on to Hall's Ledge together with bags of tools, a flagstaff in sections, a bronze tripod, a commemorative plaque and several buckets of cement (Fig. 3). On landing at last on Rockall, Fisher felt moved to kiss the bare stone but, given the high state solemnity of the occasion, thought it appropriate to first ask permission from his Admiralty companions.⁷⁹ In this context, the familiar feminist critique of the geographer in the



Fig. 3. The rituals of annexation. Clockwise from top left: lowering the tools of inscription; Corporal A. A. Fraser watches First Lieutenant Commander Desmond P. D. Scott hoist the Union Flag on 18th September 1955; Scott radios the ship with the news, while Fraser attends to the plaque and James Fisher takes some photographs; the plaque. Crown Copyright.

field – which emphasises the feminisation of landscape and the desirous ocular attentions of the scientist – seems strangely tentative. A critical model that presents the eye as the only metonymic organ for the expression of (masculine) desire over a (feminised) landscape, cannot adequately account for the decorous kissing and touching that took place on Rockall.

Henceforth it is an outpost of Empire

With only a small window in the weather, the landing party quickly got to work on the business of annexation. The tripod and flagstaff were erected and the plaque, with its suitably formal wording, was cemented on to the floor of Hall's Ledge (Fig. 3). With these material symbols in place, the ceremonial duties of state were conducted at 10.16 am precisely. After radioing the *Vidal*, the group stood to attention on the narrow ledge as Commander Scott, duly authorised with Queen's Instructions, raised the flag and pronounced: 'In the name of her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, I hereby take possession of this island of Rockall'. This performative speech act – an utterance by which a change in the status of the object and the interlocutors was effected⁸⁰ – represents a more important historical marker than has previously been acknowledged. It was a final Imperial gesture: the last act of territorial annexation in the history of the British Empire.⁸¹ Conservative Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden, who had witnessed the erosion of Britain's Imperial power to emergent liberation movements, could be afforded this small countervailing footnote. Britain's 'international retrenchment' after the end of the Second World War had seen the 'loss' of India and Pakistan; the surrender of the Palestine mandate to the United Nations; and the passing of responsibility for protecting Greece and Turkey to the US.⁸² The acquisition of the Corporal and the short-lived pursuit of an independent nuclear deterrent were thus intended to shore up Britain's international standing. Somewhat paradoxically, Britain's assertion of geopolitical power in a world deterritorialised by nuclear and missile technology required this final territorial expression of its ailing Empire.

The key to the success of the venture was not merely to effect landing on Rockall and raise the Union Flag. The real aim was for the British Government to be seen to carry out this exercise, the authority for the territorial claim residing, at this stage, in the landing being widely publicised. As Christy Collis observes in the parallel case of Proclamation Island, it was not enough for the agents of the state to perform the rituals of annexation, they also needed photography to 'textualise' this moment producing culturally recognisable forms of 'evidence'.⁸³ Management of the news story in the media was the act of annexation as much as landing four people to cement a bronze plaque to the top of the rock. Nobody would be present on the rock to read Britain's territorial claim engraved on the plaque (it was in any case washed away by the time of the next landing). By contrast, a high profile news story given weight by the glamour and constitutional authority of the young Queen Elizabeth would be widely noticed both at home and abroad. Coverage of the story with photos of the Union Flag flying above 'Sweet Rockall' – as David Frost referred to it on the BBC's satirical *That Was the Week that Was* – was duly printed in *The Times*, while the Prime Minister and his cabinet informed other NATO powers and Commonwealth Governments.⁸⁴ 'Please tell all Australians' and 'please tell all Canadians' read the official telegrams to the British High Commissions, as if these former colonies would be relieved to know that this remote lump of rock, itself smaller than the average embassy, was now securely British.⁸⁵ 'Henceforth it is an outpost of Empire' announced *The Daily Telegraph* in its leader, before

adding, more provocatively: ‘as a Communist would say, it has been peacefully liberated’.⁸⁶ While the *Telegraph’s* news report claimed that ‘Rockall belonged to no-one before’, it nevertheless asserted an underlying Britishness on account of ‘its name identif[ying] a meteorological area in BBC weather forecasts’.⁸⁷ Such a stance reinforces Nigel Thrift’s argument that ‘national identity is not accomplished in grand displays which incite the citizen to wave the flag in a fit of patriotic fervour’. Quoting work by Shotter and Billig he argues instead that it ‘goes on in more mundane citations’: ‘it is done unobtrusively on the margins of awareness ... each day we hear phrases such as ... “the nation” or “the weather”’. The definite article assumes deictically the national borders’.⁸⁸

In the official report of the operation, the captain of the *Vidal* quietly understated that ‘Mr Fisher was delighted to have his longstanding ambition to stand on Rockall’.⁸⁹ The early assessment that Fisher might gain ‘kudos’ as ‘an authoritative writer on Rockall’ which he might ‘be able to turn ... to financial advantage’ turned out to be entirely accurate. Fisher filed a report to *The Guardian* and then published his classic volume on the history of Rockall expeditions in which the author and the Navy were the last successful conquerors of this, the ultimate outlier. ‘I found the birds, interesting though they were, a minor element in the excitement of the Rockall landing’ wrote Fisher. ‘The hero of the day was the *Vidal* and all its company ... the Navy knows many such days and we do not hear of all of them; and it has been a great privilege and honour to this landsman to share one and write of it’.⁹⁰ The celebration of the ship, further evident in Fisher’s dedication of his book to ‘HMS *Vidal* and all who sailed in her on 18 September 1955’, is surely part of a long tradition of imperial exploration. And yet one of the primary ways in which the Navy’s new survey vessel *Vidal* triumphed was that it transcended the usual limitations and difficulties of being at sea in the first place. The elemental character of the sea had, at last, been overcome. As the first such vessel to have a helicopter as part of its research equipment, *Vidal* had taken the idea of the voyage into new dimensions.

The general synopsis

The shipping forecast opens with a general synopsis; I shall conclude with mine. The term synopsis – meaning, literally, ‘seeing together’ – is itself useful in this circumstance, given the necessity of inspecting Rockall’s multiple histories of vision between Empire and the Cold War.

When returning to HMS *Endymion*, Basil Hall’s landing party – the first agents of the British Imperial state to conquer Rockall – got lost in a thick fog. Hours passed before the mist lifted and both Rockall and their obscured ship came back into view. Trapped in their small open boat with the evening light fading, the men feared the worst; in 1811 their security at sea was almost entirely dependent on the visibility of the horizon. The formal annexation of Rockall in 1955 represents a different experience of the sea, and with it a different notion of security and a transformation in the meaning of the horizon. This truly modern seascape was, for the first time, no longer the view from the ship that had hitherto offered the dominant perspective. This new outlook was not even the view from the air, though Fisher’s pioneering aerial photography added greatly to the previous knowledge of Rockall. The view we are talking about was scarcely a view at all, but a means of discerning a radio-electrical trace under the new military science of tracking. The field of vision that this technology opened up was a prospect that was both deeply contested and strategically valuable. The annexation of Rockall, moreover, was insufficient to guarantee the security of

this perceptual field. In May 1960, under the headline ‘St Kilda Spy Shock’, the *Scottish Daily Express* broke the story that Soviet ships ‘posing as fishers’ had been ‘snooping’ in the waters off St Kilda in the second year of Corporal test firings.⁹¹ Given the size of the sea area, there was little that could be done to prevent such spying. The fixity of Rockall as territory or place had little strategic value over the ‘placeless’ mobility of the ship.

Rockall may have been the only fixed point from which surveillance of the North Atlantic could be secured but, as it turned out, the land itself offered no monopoly on perspective. One might argue that the act of annexation is a testimony to a military faith that land is where the action happens, that even this, the smallest point of territory would be the obvious site from which the enemy might be watchful. If such a belief was ever given credence, it was quickly dispelled. More plausibly, Rockall was the only point at which a claim over a wider ocean space could be legitimated. The sea is an unsupportive medium for marking boundaries or declaring ownership. As Steinberg has observed, many geopolitical discourses construct the ocean as ‘unclaimed and unclaimable “international” space’, the site of ‘anarchic competition par excellence, where ontologically pre-existent and essentially equivalent nation-states do battle in unbridled competition for global spoils’.⁹² For the needs of the British state, Rockall was important because it was one tiny space of representation in an expanse of (seemingly) unsignifying nothingness. State power could be projected to and from Rockall, over the sea.

The development of the Hebridean missile testing range also marks another late modern transition: from the era of the ship as vehicle and instrument to the rocket age, in which vehicle, instrument and projectile were combined. In *Bunker Archaeology* Virilio argues that with the advent of missile technology we reached a point when ‘the distinction between the vehicle and the projectile has ceased’. Richard Sorrenson also draws the connection between the military ships of the eighteenth century and the new military ‘ship’ of the mid-twentieth century, the V-2 rocket: ‘it too could be considered an instrument that, like a ship on a voyage of scientific discovery, leaves behind a trace of its interaction with the medium it passes through’.⁹³ This point is all the more striking when one considers that, as David DeVorkin has detailed, the V-2 was the crucial antecedent of the Corporal.⁹⁴ The American capture of V-2 missile ordinance and expertise from postwar Germany in 1945 led to the development of an Allied V-2 programme, ostensibly for upper atmospheric research, but with obvious consequences for national security.⁹⁵ Not only was the Corporal based on expertise acquired by the V-2 engineers, but the two models were ‘mated’ to form a two stage rocket – the BUMPER WAC Corporal – which became the first ever missile to penetrate outer space.⁹⁶ Both rockets were presented with dual ‘war-head’ and ‘peace-head’ functions: tools of science that would prepare the nation for the next war.⁹⁷

By the mid 1960s the rapidly obsolete Corporal gave way to another generation of testing in the Hebrides, in form of ‘Sergeant’ and ‘Lance’ tactical nuclear missiles, and ‘Skua’ and ‘Petrel’ high altitude research rockets. These latter stratospheric sounding rockets, despite being operated by the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, were once again presented in terms of their contribution to science.⁹⁸ The naming of these new vehicle–instrument–projectiles is significant: the Atlantic-bound trajectories of the missile invoke the mysterious avian wanderers of the Rockall sea area, the (Great or Arctic) Skua and the (Storm) Petrel. While nuclear language often works through a discourse of competitive male sexuality, there are also other powerful rhetorical strategies for ‘domesticating’ weapons of mass destruction and ‘placing’ them in their local context.⁹⁹ Natural history offers one such lexicon for taming and naturalising missile technology. It is

notable that the various countdown phases prior to the detonation of Britain's first atomic test on the Australian mainland were also named after native fauna.¹⁰⁰ The mushroom cloud signalled the end of 'Wombat'.

It is clear then that long after the annexation of Rockall, the legacy of natural history was used to rhetorically support state defence. But the practice of science at sea may yet undermine Britain's claim to sovereignty. While the British annexation in 1955 was primarily about the immateriality of a perceptual field, the discovery of oil and gas by the British Geological Survey in the 1970s meant that the value of Rockall has taken a distinctly material turn. With higher economic stakes, Britain's claim has since been contested by Ireland, Iceland and Denmark, all of whom have been involved in protracted disputes about the legal jurisdictions of subsea topography.¹⁰¹ These debates have been based, at least in part, on geological questions about Rockall's apparent discontinuity with the UK continental shelf. Britain had previously argued that as an island – defined under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as 'a naturally formed area of land, surrounded by water, which is above water at high tide' – Rockall can 'generate' a continental shelf of its own and with it an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). However, when Britain became a signatory of UNCLOS in 1997 it had to acknowledge that the provision of having a continental shelf and an EEZ is denied to 'rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own'. Rockall, being clearly above water at high tide, might appear to qualify as an island under the UNCLOS criteria; but despite a six-week residency in 1985 by former SAS member Tom Maclean in affirmation of Britain's claim, it all too clearly cannot sustain human habitation. At this point in the argument, lawyers have blamed geographers and geologists for the wealth of ambiguity that resides in the hitherto uncomplicated term 'rocks'.¹⁰²

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