

**Arbeitskreis Großbritannien-Forschung / German Association for British Studies in cooperation with the German Historical Institute London
Conference, Berlin, 4-5 May 2018**

Splendid Isolation? Insularity in British History

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“Our story centres in an island, not widely sundered from the Continent, and so tilted that its mountains lie all to the west and north, while south and east is a gently undulating landscape of wooded valleys, open downs, and slow rivers. It is very accessible to the invader, whether he comes in peace or war, as pirate or merchant, conqueror or missionary. Those who dwell there are not insensitive to any shift of power, any change of faith, or even fashion, on the mainland, but they give to every practice, every doctrine that comes to it from abroad, its own peculiar turn and imprint.”

(Winston Churchill, *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*)

In these few lines, Churchill refers to one of the most notable features of British history: its “islandness” - a close connection between geographical facts and attached metaphorical (i.e. cultural and political) meanings. As Churchill reminds his readers, a specific dialectic of separateness and connectivity is characteristic of an island.

The conference “Splendid Isolation? Insularity in British History” will explore the interrelationship between isolation and connection of the British Isles in an epoch-spanning and interdisciplinary approach. Focussing on politics and cultures of “islandness”, it will discuss the place and the specific meaning of the island situation from early modern times to the looming Brexit of today. The conference seeks to investigate contexts in which “islandness” was referred to, explore shifting meanings attached to this notion, and examine the actors who made use of the “island argument”, their specific interests and practices.

We invite proposals for papers from all relevant disciplines such as history, political sciences, cultural studies, literature, sociology or geography. We are particularly interested in contributions that address the inherent tensions and contradictions of the island idea. This includes, first of all and on a general level, tensions between connectivity and isolation in the British context. Moreover, we would like to chart the powerful but often consciously misleading claim of unity attached to the island idea. Either strategically employed or unconsciously adopted, the island notion is prone to obscuring both the internal tensions of the British Isles and the actual dominance of England with regard to questions of national identity as well as external tensions regarding geopolitical expansion and colonisation in the context of the British Empire. A critical reading of the island idea in these contexts and in relation to specific projects, policies and practices might provide new insights into the processes of nation-building and Empire. Contributions that deal with discursive or ideal figurations and ask about the immediate implications of the island idea, and contributions that seek to explore its appropriation for and translation into tangible practices and policies are equally welcome.

The following topics and questions may provide a guide:

National identity and “islands within”

In the context of politics of (national) identity, the construction of the nation as a distinct island, the emergence and historical development of concepts such as the “island nation” and “island race” have been addressed from various angles. New perspectives might be gained by investigating the circumstances of the (re-)emergence and disappearance of such

discourses and the appropriation of the island idea by specific groups for specific aims – not least in current debates about Brexit and Britain’s place in the world. Ideas of the British Isles as a distinct yet united entity suggest homogeneity while remaining silent about regions or groups that were perceived as different, backward and not an integral part of the “island nation”. A closer look at these “islands within” - or in the case of Ireland the “island nearby” - the political struggles and the underlying policies might reveal important components and contradictions of constructing insularity in British (and Irish) history. Further questions might address the relationship between the island notion and perceived problems of national security, and the dynamics of islanding or unislanding certain regions within Great Britain, e.g. Scotland or Wales in relation to England.

British Isles, Island Colonies and the British Empire

Beyond the focus on Britain as an island, the imperial and global history of the British Isles reveals yet another layer of tensions. From the beginning of the process of European expansion (distant) islands were seen as natural colonies and important outposts of maritime expansion. In this constellation, the British Isles adopted the status of “mainland” in relation to the colonies. What did the double status of Britain as an island and at the same time a mainland mean? The British Empire was primarily a maritime empire. Therefore its island colonies were of strategic and symbolic relevance, for example for the development of (imperial) sciences and not least national identities. How was the understanding of Britain’s island situation shaped and influenced by maritime power, colonial expansion and, ultimately, decolonisation? How was insularity on the one hand and colonial expansion on the other mediated? What tensions arose from policies of insularity and of empire? The Navy and the merchant marine, trading companies and port cities certainly played an important role as mediators between the mainland and island colonies. Did travellers of the oceans shape ideas of insularity and of a maritime British Empire in different ways from non-travellers? Did the idea of insularity engender specific practices or policies similar to or different from other (maritime) colonial empires? How did different social and ethnic groups experience ‘their’ island situation in a global empire?

All speakers are expected to deliver their papers in English.

The conference will be held 4-5 May 2018 at the Centre for British Studies (Großbritannienzentrum) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. In the interest of fostering stronger links between scholars in Germany and the United Kingdom and Ireland, the German Historical Institute London will cover travel expenses for accepted speakers travelling in from the British Isles. Accepted speakers from Germany may qualify for bursaries to cover travel expenses, depending on funding.

Proposals in English should include a brief one-page C.V. and a 250-word abstract of the proposed paper, and are due by 3 November 2017. Submissions and general inquiries should be directed to Wencke Meteling (meteling@uni-marburg.de) or Andrea Wiegeshoff (andrea.wiegeshoff@uni-marburg.de), and questions regarding travel expenses/bursaries to Hannes Ziegler (ziegler@ghil.ac.uk).