

“THIS MERE SPECK IN THE SURFACE OF THE WATERS”: ROCKALL aka WAVELAND

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Abstract

Rockall is a tiny granite knoll isolated in the stormy waters of the North Atlantic. It is not habitable and has of itself no economic value. However, given its location it has been a prize insofar as at one time it was thought its possession could bring control of an exclusive economic zone. Iceland, Ireland and Denmark laid claim in addition to the UK, which had annexed Rockall in 1955, the last territory to be taken into the British Empire. In 1972 Rockall was declared to be part of Scotland. However the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (1982) now precludes rocks incapable of supporting life to be awarded economic zones. Interest in Rockall then reverted to symbolism especially in its occupation by Greenpeace in 1997 when the global state of Waveland was declared from Rockall’s summit, with Rockall itself as the capital. Greenpeace stayed on Rockall longer than anybody else and a claim has been established to it thereby, but Waveland itself collapsed with the failure of the company that serviced its online presence.

Key words

Rockall, Waveland, Greenpeace, UNCLOS

Introduction

Rockall is a knoll of 784.3 sq m (8,442 sq ft) reaching a height of 21.4 m (70 feet) above sea level, the only part of a continental fragment in the North Atlantic to remain above water, although it can be washed over by extreme swells. It is composed of a distinctive form of granite called aegirine-granite (Roberts, 1975). Rockall is rated as amongst the most isolated areas of land in the world, discounting the nearby Hasselwood Rock and Helen’s Reef, which are not always above water (Figure 1). Its closest neighbour is Soay, 301.3 km (162.7 miles) away in the depopulated St Kilda archipelago, the otherwise most remote part of Scotland’s Western Isles. The closest inhabited land is 366.8 km (198.1 miles) away at North Uist. Tory Island, off County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland is 423.2 km (228.5 miles) distant. Rockall’s shape resembles a half cone, with its sheer face to the east, with just one ledge, Hall’s Ledge, about 4m (13ft) below the summit on the gentler southern face (Figure 2). The point of the cone was removed in 1971 to make a small flat platform on which a navigation beacon was mounted the following year, Rockall having been implicated in a number of shipwrecks. The worst occurred in 1904 when SS *Norge* had the dreadful misfortune to collide with Rockall or the nearby reef with the loss of 635 lives, mainly of emigrants bound for the USA.

Royle: Rockall / Waveland

Early History

The Irish monk and seafarer, St Brendan, may have seen Rockall in the 6th Century, whilst an indisputable record of its existence came in the late seventeenth century in Martin Martin's (1698: 15) account of St Kilda in which he told of the islanders giving succour to French and Spanish sailors:

who lost their ship at Rokol in the year 1686, and came in, in a pinnace to St. Kilda ... Upon their landing they pointed to the west, naming Rokol to the inhabitants, and after that, they pointed downward with their finger, signifying the sinking and perishing of their vessel; they shewed them Rokol in the sea map, far west off St. Kilda.



Figure 1 – Rockall and the British Isles



Figure 2 – Rockall during the 1997 Greenpeace occupation (Davis Sims/Greenpeace)

From Martin's account it would seem that 'Rokol' was named and its approximate position known from an earlier time. Indeed, the Royal Geographical Society reported that Rockall had appeared equivocally on a chart of about 1550 as 'Rochol' and that it could, with certainty, be seen in one of 1606 as 'Rocol' (Holland and Gardiner, 1975). Later, in 1811, Rockall was described as being well known to Baltic traders although often mistaken for a ship under sail given its covering of guano atop a darker base. That comment came from an account of earliest recorded landing by Lieutenant Basil Hall. Cruising north of Ireland, his frigate, HMS *Endymion*, spotted what was thought to be a sail but this turned out to be:

not a ship of oak and iron but a solid block of granite growing as it were out of the sea, at a greater distance from the mainland I believe than any other island or islet or rock ... is to be found in the world. This mere speck on the surface of the water ... seems to float on the sea (Hall, 1831: 179).

In an insouciant manner "given that we had nothing better on our hands", it was decided to send two boats from *Endymion* to "make an exploring expedition", a "grand scientific field day" (Hall, 1831: 180 and 181). Getting ashore presented terrible difficulties but Hall and the rest of the landing party did manage to scramble onto Rockall and all busied

themselves in taking a survey and securing geological specimens. Re-embarking was even more difficult than getting ashore as it necessitated leaping into a boat and then came the problem of getting back to the frigate as it had become foggy. Basil Hall is credited with being the first person to land on Rockall and he heads the honour roll of the Rockall Club (n.d). This maintains a record of all those known to have landed although only two people are recorded for 1811 and it is clear from Hall's account that several members of the ship's company went ashore. Hall's Ledge, Rockall's only named feature, commemorates this 1811 visit. Twenty years later the Royal Navy made a scientific survey led by Captain A.T.E. Vidal, which charted the island and the surrounding Rockall Bank leading to the area becoming more exploited by fishers. There were other scientific expeditions, such as one to investigate the bird life in the 1890s, which found that Rockall was probably not a site of breeding, merely a perch (Christy, 1898).

Located and explored, Rockall was a scientific curiosity but was not of sufficient value to have been claimed by any nation. This was to change in the 1950s.

Rockall and the Cold War

In September 1955 a plaque inscribed with the following message was affixed to Rockall:

By authority of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other realms and territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, and in accordance with Her Majesty's instructions dated the 14th day of September, 1955, a landing was effected this day upon this island of Rockall from HMS Vidal. The Union flag was hoisted and possession of the island was taken in the name of Her Majesty. [Signed] R H Connell, Captain, HMS Vidal, 18 September 1955.

Access to the 'island' had been secured by use of the helicopter of HMS *Vidal*, which rather fittingly was named for Captain Vidal who had surveyed the area in 1831 (Annexation of the Island of Rockall). That the actual plaque has been washed away does not negate the British claim; it had been affixed, the Union Jack had flown and there were photographs to prove it. The only civilian in the landing party of four was the naturalist James Fisher, who had a long-standing interest and had carried out pioneering aerial reconnaissance of this and other islands and went on to write a history of Rockall (1956).

This formal annexation gave Rockall the distinction of being the last territory to be incorporated into the British Empire, an event parodied by the satirical duo (Michael) Flanders and (Donald) Swann in their song *Rockall* (1956). This passed the censors still operative at the time for as Swann put it "the lyric looked innocent enough written down but when you sung it, it was considered daringly near the bone" (Swann, n.d.), Rockall being a homonym for 'fuck all'.

*The fleet set sail for Rockall
Rockall
Rockall
To free the isle of Rockall
From fear of foreign foe.*

*We sped across the planet
To find this lump of granite
One rather startled gannet
In fact, we found Rockall.*

*So praise the bold bell-bottoms
Bottoms
Bottoms
Who saw Britannia's peril
And answered to her call.
Though we're thrown out of Malta,
Though Spain should take Gibraltar,
Why should we flinch or falter
When England's got Rockall.²*

The song is reproduced here not just because of its humour, but because, as is clear in the second stanza, there was a consciousness of a changing role for an imperial Britain in the post-war world, a retrenchment starting with the loss of India. The Suez Crisis took place in 1956; Harold Macmillan's 'Wind of change' speech would shortly to be made. This diminution of the nation's powers was challenged to some extent by the UK being a nuclear-armed state, and herein lay the reason for this miniscule expansion of the British Empire in 1955.

Britain had purchased its first nuclear missiles from the United States, the Corporal Type II, and needed to test and proof the missile and train those whose task would be to launch it. After extensive research the Outer Hebrides area was selected as the most suitable for this purpose. South Uist would be the launch site; St Kilda, uninhabited since 1930, would be the tracking station. One difficulty was that Rockall, being unclaimed territory might be taken by a foreign power – i.e. Russia, this was during the Cold War – as a base upon which observation equipment could be mounted, particularly to study the rocket's communication systems (hence the need to have Rockall taken into British hands by the ceremony of formal annexation.) As Fraser MacDonald (2006: 640) put it in his study of Rockall's role in the Cold War: "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 British military authorities must have been aware that observing the test firings of missiles could also be carried out from ships and proclaiming Rockall to be British actually brought little practical benefit. However, Rockall being a British 'island' conveyed other benefits: "State power could be projected to and from Rockall, over the sea" (MacDonald, 2006: 642). This was to become important in the next phase of Rockall's story.

Rockall and potential marine resources

By the 1970s technology for extracting oil and gas from undersea reserves had developed, North Sea oil was an expression thereof. There was a necessity to strengthen Britain's claim to Rockall for the potential its possession had for access to resources was now perhaps of great economic significance, and maybe for more than

just fishing, although the UK did take in a 200 mile fishery zone around Rockall under the 1976 Fishery Limits Act. Ireland had Rockall as Irish through a 'natural prolongation' of its territory. In the 1980s Iceland and Denmark (on behalf on the Faroe Islands) designated claims to large sea areas, dependent on undersea topography – the Faroe-Rockall Plateau for Denmark – to which the British and Irish governments objected (Symmons, 1986). A Steve Bell cartoon poked fun at competing claims to Rockall, although its Norwegian puffin should perhaps have been Icelandic or Danish since Norway was not laying claim to the crag.



Figure 3 – Steve Bell's cartoon of the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, on holiday on Rockall (1985) (with permission of Steve Bell, Belltoons)

Ireland's claim was reinforced in the public sphere by 'Rock on, Rockall', a song written in 1973 by the Wolfe Tones, a band with a nationalist agenda, named for the leader of the 1798 rising against British rule in Ireland. Two stanzas give its message:

*Oh the Empire, it is finished,
No foreign lands to seize.
So the greedy eye of England
Is turning t'wards the seas.
Two hundred miles from Donegal
There's a place that's called Rockall
And the groping hands of Whitehall
Are grabbing at its walls.*

*Oh the seas will not be silent
While Britannia grabs the waves.
And remember that the Irish
Will no longer be your slaves
And remember that Britannia, well
She rules the waves no more,
So keep your hands off Rockall
It's Irish to the core.*

To secure Rockall's position, the British government changed its 1955 status and brought it into the United Kingdom, a tactic hitherto used for Ireland itself in the Act of Union of 1801. The Island of Rockall Act 1972 incorporated Rockall into the District of Harris (in the Western Isles) in the County of Inverness, then the following year into the

Royle: Rockall / Waveland

Western Isles council when local government was reorganised in Scotland under the Local Government (Scotland) Act. In a practical demonstration of sovereignty, in 1974 HMS *Tartar* landed four servicemen on Rockall with, bizarrely, a sentry box and photographs of two Royal Marines in dress uniform standing by the box guarding Rockall were taken.



Figure 4 – British Royal Marines guard Rockall in 1974 (internet image, no copyright holder available)

However, there was a need for more than publicity photographs or statements of sovereignty, although a parliamentary answer in 1982 confirmed that the British did not countenance other claims (Oral Answers, 1982). The issue crystallised after 1982, when the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Article 121 Regime of Islands, stated “rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf” (UNCLOS, 1983: 63). Rockall not only had to be an island rather than a rock – and so it was described in the 1955 annexation and the Island of Rockall Act 1972 – but also it had to be habitable. It may well have been an attempt to demonstrate habitability that led to a former British Special Forces soldier called Tom McClean ‘living’ on Rockall for 40 days in 1984. However, staying in an accommodation pod strapped to a rock and eating food brought to that rock cannot really demonstrate habitability. Thus in 1997 when the UK itself signed the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea it had to acknowledge that Rockall could not sustain habitation; it was only a rock and although the British retained a 12 mile (19.3 km) territorial sea limit given it regards Rockall as British territory, the claim to an exclusive economic zone around it had to be abandoned. However, Rockall’s role in politics had not ended.

Rockall as Waveland



Figure 5 – Greenpeace on Rockall/Waveland, 1997 (Greenpeace)

On 10 June 1997 Al Baker, Meike Huelsman and Peter Morris, members of the environmental pressure group, Greenpeace occupied Rockall. Morris (2007) later stated in a blog that

Greenpeace challenged the deep-sea oil developments round Rockall by living on the rock that summer to establish a stronger 'territorial claim' than the UK government's; to stop the [oil] exploration and raise awareness of [the] terrible 'Carbon Logic'.

Rather surprisingly it seems Greenpeace had first asked permission from the British government. The UK saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate sovereignty and rather than expend resources trying to prevent a landing, granted permission. Greenpeace's motivation was to use Rockall's occupation as a publicity vehicle to protest against the exploitation of marine resources, particularly the expansion of oil exploration into the Atlantic frontier. One of the occupation party recorded on the Waveland (n.d.) website only as Al (but Al Baker is listed for 1997 on the Rockall Roll of Honour) stated:

The seas around Rockall, potentially rich in oil, are fought over by four nations - Britain, Denmark, Iceland and Ireland. By seizing Rockall, Greenpeace claims these seas for the planet and all its peoples. No-one has the right to unleash this oil onto our threatened climate

On 16 June Greenpeace announced that they had rejected British sovereignty of Rockall, indeed that they had borrowed the rock, which would be held until the threat of oil development had been lifted. This would seem to be a literal case of Steinberg and Chapman's "self-positioning on the margins of sovereignty" (2009: 284). Further,

despite Samuel Pyeatt Menefee's then recent pronouncement that "Gone are the days when an explorer could negotiate the reefs of a coral atoll, beach his boat on golden sands, and proclaim a new state" (1994-95: 82), that is, with adjustment for a different geography, just what Greenpeace had done. Rockall was declared to be now the capital of the global state of Waveland and a flag raising ceremony was held on this new micronation.

People were invited to apply online for Certificates of Citizenship of Waveland for it was to be a virtual micronation. This was somewhat reminiscent of the experiment on Sealand, otherwise known as Rough's Fort a World War II military platform outside British territorial waters, which has been another micronation (Grimmelman, 2012). The only test for citizenship of Waveland was the requirement to accept the following pledge: "Without violence and by bearing witness, to defend nature, to protect the global commons, to reform industrialism, and to secure peace, believing in action, rather than words" (Waveland, n.d.). Once accepted into citizenship, Wavelanders could participate in their state's online presence and campaigns, the flavour of which was given by Peter Morris who declared that, "Waveland is a new kind of country designed to protect the global commons rather than to exploit it" (Waveland, n.d.). This was in the 1990s when the internet had not reached the ubiquity it displays today and there was a novelty in there being a medium for discussion and debate which might be used as a campaign platform. The was novelty, too, in Waveland citizens owing allegiance not to a physical space – Rockall was only a platform for its launch – but to the pledge to active environmentalism to which they had all signed up – protecting the global commons. Eventually about 15,000 citizens registered and the trappings of state government for this virtual nation were established; virtual stamps and passports were 'issued' branded Waveland, Earth, Planet, Universe. The official British response to its territory being seized was to ignore it, although the oil companies were rather more exercised.

The occupation of Rockall itself ended after 42 days, significantly a longer period than the 40 days of Tom McClean, giving Greenpeace/Waveland a claim to Rockall based on right of occupation. Greenpeace subsequently took a back seat in the affairs of the now territory-less state of Waveland and would not offer financial support and in February 1999 Knowhaus, the company that were sponsoring Waveland's online presence went into liquidation and the records and archives of Waveland were removed from the internet. There was some hope that Waveland could be reinvigorated but an internet search today produces nothing recent about the 'global state', rather a number of companies with the Waveland name and details of places in Indiana, Mississippi and Kentucky called Waveland. There is the Lomwiki 'List of Micronations' site (2011), which has a brief history of Rockall's Waveland (Global State of Waveland, 2010), but another promising header "Waveland, facts about our micronations" is about the American towns. Peter Morris's 2007 blog can still take one to the application page for citizenship of Waveland but completing the form and pressing 'register' just brings up an error message.

The micronation of Waveland may have died, ironically laid low by a capitalist collapse, but pictures of Greenpeace's occupation of Waveland can still be found on the web. Some show Rockall draped with a large banner reading "United Nations no new oil", so the message is still there and, although it may not be down to the Greenpeace campaign, no oil has yet been pumped from the waters close to Rockall.

Rockall post-Waveland

In July 2011, 200 years after Hall's landing, a research collaboration between Marine Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage made the first high resolution map of the Rockall area's sea bed which should better enable its fisheries and other resources to be managed. The launch of the map was used by the Scottish government to re-affirm Rockall's position within Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2013). Meanwhile the international claims to Rockall are subject to the slow procedures of the United Nations and no outcome has been reached.

Rockall continues to create interest given its remarkable geography. In 2011 Belgian radio enthusiasts managed to land so they could broadcast from there and there is a website and DVD of the expedition (The Rockall Expedition 2011). The popular British writer and broadcaster, Ben Fogle visited to claim ownership by affixing a post-it note. His book, *Offshore* (2006), has a cover photograph of Fogle looking somewhat seasick with Rockall behind his left shoulder. The Galway Bay Sailing Club runs a Round Rockall Race. Rockall features in a spoof Wikipedia article on the Uncyclopaedia site (nd). Further it, in a massively expanded form, is the setting for Anthony Swithin's *Perilous Quest for Lyonesse* series of fantasy novels (1990-1993), which have been compared to the *Lord of the Rings* series. Swithin was actually William Sarjeant, a Professor of Geology and searching online for 'Rockall geology' brings up a geology map of his fictional Rockall upon which he had obviously spent much time and effort (Rockall Online, nd).

In 2013 Nick Hancock (2013) generated a good deal of publicity in his proposal to beat the Greenpeace record of 42 days on Rockall by staying for 60 days. This would have laid low Peter Morris's (2007) assertion that Greenpeace's claim to Rockall is actually stronger than that of the UK. Hancock was also to raise money for the British services charity, Help the Heroes, but weather conditions thwarted his attempt to get on to the island and his adventure had to be postponed.

To conclude, Rockall has no utility in and of itself, only as the key to lead to the ability to garner marine resources, although even that was rendered valueless by the UNCLOS declaration. So now the islet, crag, rock, knoll, any descriptor that falls short of 'island' has value only as a trophy, a site for endurance records or yacht races or unusual broadcasts and, for a while in the 1990s as capital of the short-lived micronation of Waveland.

Endnotes

¹ This type of rock is so unusual that it was at one time referred to as 'rockallite'.

² 'Rockall' from 'Fresh Airs' by Flanders & Swann (1955) by permission of the Estates of Michael Flanders & Donald Swann. (Administrator Leon Berger: leonberger@donaldswann.co.uk)

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