

# ISLONIA

Micronationality as an expression of island livelihood issues

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## Abstract

This article describes the manner in which the owner-inhabitants of Dry Island, off the coast of the Western Scottish Highlands, claimed micronational status (as 'Islonia') in 2013, examines their reasons for claiming this status and identifies the results of the venture. Drawing on these characterisations, the article discusses the expression of local livelihood issues in micronational discourse and the manner in which local issues pertaining to Dry Island/Islonia can be understood with regard to the concepts of *shima* and *aquapelagism* advanced within Island Studies.

## Keywords

Islonia, Dry Island, micronation, absurdity, livelihood, shima, aquapelago

## Introduction

As something of an absurd 'sidebar' to coverage of the preparations for Scotland's referendum on independence from Great Britain in September 2014, Scottish newspapers carried stories about an island that had pre-empted the vote by declaring its own independence. The island was Dry Island, located in Loch Gairloch, a sheltered coastal bay in Wester Ross in the North West Highlands, close to Badachro village (and accessible by a causeway) (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Without exception, media coverage of the story was affectionate in tone, amiably reporting the secessionist impulse as a harmless act of whimsy on the part of the island's two owners, Ian McWhinney and Jess Dodd (See, for instance, Mackinon, 2014 and Roberts, 2014). Public discussion of Roberts' article on the *Daily Record* Facebook page gave a broader range of responses, ranging from the affectionate, "What a lovely story, sounds like the perfect place to live" (Linda Wither), through to more antagonistic comments, including "why give 'eccentric' numpties like this the attention they crave?" (Alan Duffy) to "Are these clowns creating their own Whiskey Galore B&B? Scotland Forever!" (Tom Quinn) (all posts July 20th, 2014). Quinn's post evokes a story with particular resonance in the West of Scotland, Compton Mackenzie's novel *Whisky Galore*, concerning communities on two remote, fictitious of Western islands (named Great Todday and Little Todday). The main narrative is set during World War Two and concerns the islanders' attempts to



Figure 1 – Loch Gairloch’s position in Western Scotland  
(Basemap source: ESRI, 2015)

hide away a shipwrecked cargo of whisky and resist the attempts of a self-important English Home Guard officer to locate and confiscate the liquor. The novel represents the islanders as retaining strong traditions of Gaelic language and having a disdain for English rule that is apparent in their dry humour and pretence of compliance. The novel was adapted for cinema by the (English) Ealing Studios company in 1949 and has remained popular with both English and Scottish audiences (being affectionately revisited in 2008 in the form of an extended duration (1.26 minute) black and white television ad for Tennets lager<sup>1</sup>). The film has also had its critics, principally those who have deemed Ealing Studios’ representation of the islanders as trivial and demeaning.

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Indeed, in his book *The Road to Independence? Scotland in the Balance*, Murray Pittock has described the film as “heavily drenched in stereotypes of the whisky obsessed, wily native from the sticks” (2013: 146). Quinn’s antipathetic invocation of the fictional island text appears to reflect a perception that the ‘spurious’ claims for Isonia’s independence served to trivialise the actual debate on Scottish autonomy taking place.



Figure 2 – Dry Island/Isonia’s position in Loch Gairloch  
(Basemap source: ESRI, 2015)

The Facebook posters’ criticisms recall Grydehøj’s academic critique of Stuart Hill (aka ‘Captain Calamity’) and his attempts to claim micronational status for the Shetland island of Forvik, in which he contended that:

*this micronation has been detrimental to the development of a genuine Shetland self-determination movement and has weakened Shetland’s culturally rooted resistance to wider Scottish nationalism... far from bolstering associated nationalist movements, some micronations may lower them into ridicule and defeat. (2014: 34)*

But, as he also acknowledges:

*An element of comedy is often present when discussing micronations. This is a mixture of circumstance and design. Many would regard the idea of a single individual or handful of individuals declaring independence as inherently humorous, and the very futility of this gesture perhaps invokes a sense of comedic inevitability. At the same time, however, many micronations are designed to be funny. (ibid)*



Figure 3 - Photograph of Dry Island/Isonia causeway connecting it to the mainland, (reproduced from the 'Visit Isonia' website which identifies the image as "courtesy of a US drone")

Grydehøj's discussions are informed by characterisations McConnell et al (2012) have made about micronations. Referring to them as "micropatrias", the authors have noted that these fanciful entities "mimic and in many ways parody established sovereign nation-states" (2012: 810) and can be regarded as:

*spaces where forms of humor and seriousness intertwine and entangle to allow for playful and critical approaches to sovereignty through national representations and diplomatic performances. These representations and performances vary along a continuum of functions, intents and styles in terms of the explicit and implicit expressions of humor, seriousness, playfulness and criticality. (ibid)*

The online Wiki 'List of Micronations' describes Isonia as "an absurdist micronation with territorial pretensions". The notion of absurdity merits consideration here (not least due to the fact every entry on the Wiki list might be regarded as being characterised by absurdity). In the course of a complex discussion revisiting the politics of absurdity with regard to trauma, Bowker offered the characterisation that absurd events are deemed absurd by those who experience them "because they somehow exceeded the categories of good and bad, leaving us without recourse to conventional methods of moral or ethical classification" (2013: 44). A similar claim might be made to the trivial – or traumatic? – assertions of micronational status by Dry Island's owner-occupiers. Assertions that appear to be so entirely external to the theatre of 'serious' political action that gestures can be perceived as the merest whimsy, neither here nor there. Yet that whimsy strikes a chord.

Micronations have been an enduring object of public attention in recent decades. In the United Kingdom, for instance, comedian Danny Wallace's six part BBC 2 television series *How to Start Your Own Country*, broadcast in 2005, embodied a 'how-to'

approach to its subject that resulted in the eventual declaration of the 'Kingdom of Lovely' based in a flat in London's East End. In the following year Lonely Planet published *Micronations*, subtitled a 'Guide to Home-made Nations'. Both the series and the book play up the absurdities of the situations. In one episode of the TV series, for example, Wallace attempted to inform baffled residents of Eel Pie Island in the Thames that he was their new ruler; while the micronations listed in the *Lonely Planet Guide* (whose cover sports an image of a regal couple in front of a suburban house) include 'The Grand Duchy of the Lagoan Isles', described in the volume as a "tiny, tiny nation located within a small, spring-fed natural pond" with no human inhabitants (Ryan, Dunford and Sellars, 2006: 86).

This whimsical tradition provides one context for Isonia. Another is a distinctly more contemporary one. Island micronations were once the projects and playthings of rich eccentrics. As various contributors to recent issues of *Shima* have identified, many 20th Century island micronations were created by affluent individuals who either own the land they claim (eg the Barclay Brothers and Brecqhou<sup>2</sup>, Russell Arundel and Outer Bald Tusket Island<sup>3</sup> and Dean Kamen and North Dumpling Island<sup>4</sup>) or else can invest in the material creation of offshore platforms intended as independent entities (such as Leicester Hemmingway's moored 'island' of New Atlantis<sup>5</sup> or Michael Oliver's sand-boosted Minerva Reefs claim<sup>6</sup>). More recently however, micronational claims have been made on islands by less financially enabled individuals, such as Stuart Hill, owner of the islet of Forvik<sup>7</sup>, or the shop-keeper and retirees who asserted micronational status for Lamb Island<sup>8</sup>. Isonia follows in this more recent pattern fueled by less financially enabled individuals.

It is also pertinent to consider the concept of island micronationality with regard to a key concept in contemporary Island Studies, that of islands as *shima*. In the inaugural essay published in the journal of the same name (v1n1, 2007), Suwa identified that the Japanese term *shima* offered significant advantages for those attempting to conceptualise islands, in that *shima* represents an island as both a "geographical feature and as small-scale social groups where cultural interactions are densely intermeshed" (2007: 6). In this context, Suwa emphasised islands as being "cultural landscapes" substantially determined by livelihood:

*Livelihood marks human presence on islands. It can be expressed as a cultural space in ecology, geography, sociology, ethnology, history, memory and so forth. Livelihood creates island landscapes as works of culture. In this sense, the 'island' is a work of imagination derived from lived experience and memory in which the island landscape is a product of natural and human environments interacting with each other. Taking this further, shima can be considered as a subjectivity in which islands are molded into cultural landscapes through interactions between people, the memories of those who are part of islands and the social systems involved. (ibid: 8)*

Similar processes may be discerned in the imagination of island/*shima* in micronational terms, in that the micronations are "works of the imagination" that place a rhetorical layer over a cultural landscape shaped by human livelihood activity. The creation of *shima* on/from islands essentially blurs with the conceptualisation of *shima* in micronational terms:

*Islands are recognised as separate places through the distinction of performative cultures; they are the living space within a landscape where the presence of residents is ever-present. Shima is a sanctuary within which performances produce a psyche that fills the space with spirits, settlements, myths, ancestors, memories, and arts. Shima is both a natural and social property where memories about the lived world are stored. Communities form the cultural landscapes of islands, feelings of and about which are embedded within everyday life and shared by members by means of the performances. (ibid: 7).*

Micronations can be considered as performed identities manifested in particular media spaces (such as, in a contemporary context, the Internet) that reflect cultural memories, perceptions, myths (and humorous reflection and interpretation) of the experience of locales and the livelihood activities that play out in them. As the term 'micro' in the designation suggests, the human agents that created micronational *shima* are often few in number (and, on occasion, singular) and the cultural experiences they thereby represent and elaborate are not ones that reflect broad populations. They are, nevertheless, richly informative about highly specific communities, their livelihoods and perceptions.

#### Isona: home-made statehood

Ian McWhinney, his partner Jess, and their two daughters are the sole inhabitants of Dry Island. McWhinney's family is related to the Mackenzie family, which played a prominent role in the history of the North-West Highlands and took possession of large areas of land around Loch Gairloch in the 1500s. Unlike many other areas of the Western Highlands, the Mackenzie family's reluctance to evict tenants during the 19th Century ensured that the local community sustained itself during a period that saw severe depopulation and migration across to North America and Australia (Mackenzie, 1988). The McWhinney family has owned the island and house located on it for several generations. In this sense, the family claim to the island is more tenable than those of the individuals described above who have acquired and/or attempted to construct micronations on islands which they have little prior connection to. While Jess McWhinney, lacks this direct connection, having relocated to the Highlands from Oxfordshire, she has also been active in promoting her family micronation. The couple first announced the micronational status of their home island in May 2010, prompted by their sense of disconnect with the political parties contesting the British parliamentary elections (with their Ross, Skye and Lochaber constituency returning Liberal Democrat candidate Charles Kennedy as MP). They chose the name of Isonia for their island by compounding their daughters' names, Iona and Isla. Along with a sense of disconnect from organised politics and the remoteness of Westminster from the North-West Highlands, another motivation was to create a talking point that might attract tourists to the locality and to their fishery and cottage rental businesses.

The harvesting of marine resources has been an essential aspect of the livelihood of the population residing around Gairloch since the earliest records of the area's population. John Dixon's detailed survey of the area in the early 1880s provides an overview of fishing activities that describes the area as teeming with fish, identifying cod, ling and saythe (pollock) as the main species fished, being processed and transferred to the marketplace by firms using depots at Badachro (1886: 143-147). One of Dixon's

principal informants about the local fishery was John Mackenzie, managing of a cod (and other) fish curing operation on Dry Island. Some sense of the importance of cod to the local economy at this time can be gained from the following characterisation:

*The Gairloch cod fishery is now carried on by two firms, who have curing-houses or stations at Badachro, one on the Dry Island and the other on Eilean (or Isle) Horisdale. The fishery seems to be more productive now than even in the days of Sir Hector Mackenzie [in the early 1800s]. It yields an average of about forty thousand cod per annum. The year 1884 was extraordinarily good. The number of cod cured and sent away fresh was about eighty thousand, besides about forty-four thousand saythe. These figures were about double the average. A few ling are also taken, but they are the same price as cod, and are counted among them. In 1884 about a third part of the fish were dried; the remainder were sent fresh to Glasgow and the English markets by steamer. The price paid to the fishermen in 1884 was 11d. for each cod and 4d. for each saythe. The number of boats employed was forty. Each boat had as a rule four men, so that there were in all one hundred and sixty fishermen employed besides about thirty workmen and ten women who worked at the stations. (ibid: 145-146)<sup>9</sup>*

As with cod stocks elsewhere in the North Atlantic region, factors such as over-fishing caused a massive decline in the cod stocks around the 1980s that led to catches dropping to negligible levels by the early 2000s. (See Hughes and Nickell [2009: 17-21] for a summary of the recent history of Scottish cod fishery.)

In terms of the discussion of the McWhinney family's current business operation, Dixon's main reference to shellfish in the 1880s is a significant one that suggests fluctuations in crustacean numbers occurred over an extended period:

*Lobsters and crabs are exported from Gairloch; but this fishery is not so successful as formerly, owing to the decline in the number of lobsters. It is prosecuted at several of the villages on the coasts of Gairloch and Loch Ewe, and the produce is sent in boxes to the English markets. (ibid: 143)*

While not specifically referred to by Dixon, these crustaceans were harvested using traditional creel (basket traps). The reasons for the decline he observed in this period are unclear but some eighty years later there were sufficient numbers in the broader Inner Hebridean waters to generate a crustacean and scallop harvest valued at around 11 million pounds sterling in around 1980 (Mason, et al, 1983). A decline in lobster production became noticeable again in the 1980s (ibid) with a variety of factors, such as over-fishing and environmental damage, identified, these being compounded by the passage of the Inshore Fishing Act (Scotland) in 1984, which removed a three mile coastal exclusion zone for mobile gear fishing, allowing practices such as scallop dredging to damage inshore reefs and to thereby decrease biota.

As a result of factors such as those described above, the McWhinney family's main livelihood is gained from the traditional local practice of creel fishing for crabs, lobsters and langoustines with the family now predominantly retailing their catch locally as fresh produce. In recent years Ian McWhinney has also taken paying customers on 'shellfish safaris'. The family's livelihood – like those of many of their forebears – is thereby intrinsically connected with the marine environment and resources of the Loch Gairloch

area in the manner that Hayward (2012a, 2012b) has described as constituting an *aquapelago*, which he defines as:

*a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging.* (2012a: 5)

While the “social unit” in question in the case of Islonia is a family of four, rather than a more extended community, Islonia suggests itself as a paradigmatic aquapelagic micronation.

The diverse threads of the family’s livelihood can be seen to have informed the creation of a micronation that has been expressed, with much humorous self-deprecation, on (and largely by) Islonia’s website and Facebook page. Indeed, the website (in particular) combines the somewhat generically humorous aspect of micronations discussed by Grydehøj above with a distinct family humour that reflects upon the couple’s notional positions as king and queen of the island and the nature of what can be understood as quasi-governmental policies developed within family situations. The ruling couple’s distinct cultural preferences are, for instance, represented on the ‘Visit Islonia’ website (under the heading of ‘Sectarianism’) via a statement that identifies that:

*Usually Sectarian differences between the largely older Scottish population and the more youthful English population are few. Relations remain very good (see population growth). There has been (sic) a few contentious issues. This has led to the 2007 accord which decrees that no Bon Jovi music is allowed to be played within King Ian's earshot after 10pm.*

By contrast, more serious statements are made under the heading of ‘Environment’, eg “Islonians are sensitive to environmental issues and [Islonia] wishes to attract Ecotourists rather than mass market tourists.”

A number of statements that mix the two modes are perhaps the most illuminating about the circumstances that led to the creation of a micronational identity for Dry Island. The short section entitled ‘History’, for instance relates that:

*This small archipelago, part of the inner, inner Hebrides has a long history. It has seen its fortunes rise and fall with the three F industries, Fishing, Farming and Fleecing (tourists).*

Two aspects are significant. The first concerns designated geographical affiliation. Referring to the aggregate of Dry Island, the substantially larger Isle Horrisdale to the north and adjacent islets (see Figure 2) as a “small archipelago”; it describes these as the “inner, inner Hebrides”. This description associates the Loch’s islands with the *Na h-Eileanan a-staigh* (“inner [Hebridean] islands”, the nearest of which are Skye and Raasay (to the south west)<sup>10</sup>, rather than identifying the island and bay as part of the North-West Highlands. The description of the rise and fall in the region’s fortunes humourously inserts “Fleecing (tourists)” along with the two traditional subsistence activities (with the reference to ‘fleecing’ playfully alluding to the introduction of intensive sheep farming that led to the de-population of the Western Highlands in the



early-mid 1800s). The page entitled 'Economy and Trade' similarly mixes humour (mostly around issues of scale) with factual observation, as in the following section entries:

**Economy and Trade**

*Isonia's economy is underpinned by its great harbour which makes the island a focus of regional trade, and its wealth of natural piscatorial resources. Over the years the national government has delivered a well managed and stable economy, however the small size of the country results in a balance of payments that leans heavily on imported goods.*

**Aid**

*Isonia receives no aid but does give small aid to other countries bordered by her, i.e. Scotland.*

**Spending**

*Isonia is carrying out a major economic adjustment program to adjust to the loss of income due to over fishing from foreign fishing vessels from Gairloch.*



Figure 4 – McWhinny family on Isonia with Isonian flag (photograph by Peter Jolly, 2014)

These statements effectively reflect the livelihood pressures on a small, family-run business located on an island remote from major population centres. The site describes the economic situation as stable, in that the generation of income from family fishing activities secures imported goods in a relatively stable manner but describes pressures arising from external relationships that see taxation flowing to Scotland (identified as a bordering country). The characterisation of this taxation as “aid” reflects local

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perceptions that their community is under-funded by Scottish (and UK) authorities. On a more local level, the term “foreign” is applied to other fishing boats operating in Gairloch whose owners do not have the direct connection to the specific locale and, indeed, family fishing heritage, that McWhinney has. These issues are playfully symbolised on the Isonian national flag, which superimposes a crab image over the bottom corner of a saltire (Saint Andrew’s cross) (Figure 4) – simultaneously invoking Scottish identity and humorously identifying local character.

One of the micronation’s more successful ventures has been the virtual citizenship application program run from the Visit Isonia website via an online form (<http://www.islonia.com/citizens.php>), which has resulted in over 6000 citizenships being awarded. Isonia passports are also available to citizens who visit the island, upon arrival at the ‘border’ (Figure 5). Ian McWhinney has also identified that since the declaration of Isonia’s micronationality his ‘shellfish safari’ business has increased significantly (personal communication, April 2015) and there is further evidence that the micronational claim for Dry Island has played some part in attracting tourists (see, for example, Varwell, 2014).



Figure 5 - Isonia’s border post (photograph by Simon Varwell, 2014)

## Conclusion

As the above discussions outline, the micronational identity that Isonia has asserted for itself might best be considered as an assemblage of the actual lived experience and livelihood activity of its residents and the manner in which the Isonia website represents those to an external public. The concept of micronationality in the context of Dry Island,

is one that reflects and is premised on the location's isolation from major population centres and the sense of insularity felt by its community, located on the North Atlantic edge of the Wester Ross region. The aquapelagic aspect that determines the family's livelihood and internal (micro-) community is also an essential characteristic. In this regard, the territorial space of the island/micronation includes an aquatic economic zone within Loch Garloch. The lack of exclusive access to the zone illustrates the limitations of simply 'claiming's micronationality at the same time as it highlights the lack of attribution of traditional fishing grounds in such contexts. Compared to the grander posturing of island micronations such as North Dumpling Island (whose autonomous status was playfully acknowledged by President George Bush Senior, who signed a non-aggression pact with the micronation – Butkus, 2014: 87); Isonia might appear as quirky, quaint and/or trivial. But rather than being a rich man's plaything, the particular *shima* and the micronation might better be seen as a local expression of 'grass-roots' livelihood issues in a (highly localised) aquapelagic context in which the generationally well-established inhabitants are marginalised from decision making over the resources that determine their livelihood. Declaration of independence through micronationality, however absurd it may seem externally, is statement of dissent and a theatrical expression of resistance to remote control.

#### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Currently available online at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbmvdWNxwQA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbmvdWNxwQA) - accessed January 26th 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See Johnson (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See MacKinnon (2014).

<sup>4</sup> See Butkus (2014).

<sup>5</sup> See Hayward (2015a: 2).

<sup>6</sup> See Hayward (2015a: 2).

<sup>7</sup> See Gryehoj (2015).

<sup>8</sup> See Hayward (2015b).

<sup>9</sup> Along with the above products Dixon also noted the operation of a small salmon processing operation at Poolewe (ibid).

<sup>10</sup> The other main islands of the group being Islay, Jura and Mull.

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