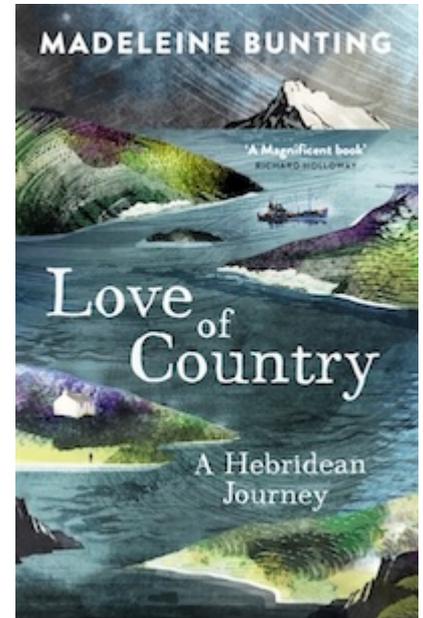


# Island Mythologies

## By Madeleine Bunting

Forty-odd miles as the crow flies from Holy Isle lies Jura. It drifts off mainland Argyll in a sea littered with small islands and skerries. Its smooth-edged bulk is impressive on the map, almost severed in the middle where a big indentation on the Atlantic west coast pinches the island to a narrow waist of land. It contrasts with neighbouring Argyll whose coastline is in tatters, a succession of long skinny peninsulas. From the sea, Jura is even more imposing, as the cliffs rear up like a fortress from rocky shores. Above rise the three distinctive hills of the Paps, those softly rounded breasts of pale scree which are so compelling on the eye from every vantage point.



As the ferry ploughed along the east coast of Jura, there were few houses or trees on this wind-cleaned island. I glimpsed the single track twisting its way twenty-five miles along the island past the tiny hamlet of Craighouse to its dead end at Ardlussa. From the ferry, Jura appeared to be near empty; it is one of the least populated islands on the west coast. 'There is nothing', is how people describe the place; either as an expression of appreciation or horror. The writer Kathleen Jamie called it 'fabulous nothing'. Only slightly smaller than the Isle of Wight with its population of 133,000, Jura has 188 inhabitants.

Jura is a fabulous illustration for the islophile dreams of three nations — Scotland, England and Britain — and how they have been exported. Over the course of the last century an Australian hedge fund manager, a second-generation American immigrant millionaire and a penniless English writer have all been seduced by the bleak grandeur of Jura. These disparate characters offer a glimpse into the multifaceted history of how islands have been used both as places of prestige and status, as well as of insight and creative solitude.

Britain's understanding of itself — its identity and its place in the world — is

deeply rooted in being an island. From this has flowed political principles, cultural preoccupations, and economic and imperial strategies. But it is not true. Great Britain is made up of at least 5,000 islands around 130 of which are inhabited. It includes several groups of islands such as Scilly, Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland, and is part of the archipelago known as the British Isles. The plurality of this geographical reality have often been ignored, because *island* brought with it the attractive characteristics of inviolability, steadfastness and detachment. As one clergyman put it in a sermon praising the Act of Union with Scotland of 1707: 'we are fenced in with a wall which knows no master but God only.'

Even more erroneously, England is sometimes described as an island. Martin Amis wrote a television essay on England in 2014, and the voiceover began to images of waves pounding chalk cliffs, and the quintessential English mistake, 'England is an island nation'. *Our Island Story: a history of England for Boys and Girls* (published in 1905) was a popular children's history for several generations; the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron (himself a visitor to Jura), raised in the seventies, cited it as his favourite childhood book.

In the eighteenth century, after the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland, the island theme became a unionist project for reform and progress. The unionist, Daniel Defoe, entitled his book of journeys in 1724-27, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, a title which made clear its political commitment to the island now made whole. In Defoe's descriptions, the island was a place of energetic activity, reordered for building, farming and hunting; it was to be 'improved', a term which became deeply political in Scotland.

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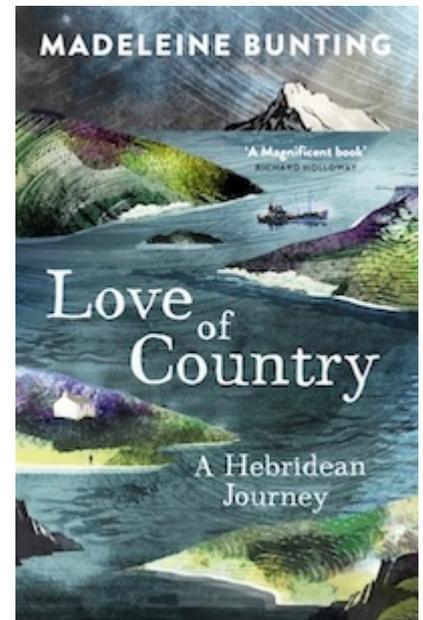
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