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An Island with Potential: Henry Neville's *The Isle Of Pines*

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At length one of our men mounting the Main-mast espyed fire, an evident sign of some Countrey near adjoyning, which presently after we apparently discovered, and steering our course nigher, we saw several persons promiscuously running about the shore, as it were wondering and admiring at what they saw: Being now near to the Land, we manned our long Boat with ten persons, who approaching the shore, asked them in our Dutch Tongue Wat Eylant is dit? to which they returned this Answer in English, That they knew not what we said. One of our Company named Jeremiah Hanzen who understood English very well, hearing their words discourst to them in their own Language; so that in fine we were very kindly invited on shore, great numbers of them flocking about us, admiring at our Cloaths which we did wear, as we on the other side did to find in such a strange place, so many that could speak English, and yet to go naked.¹

At first sight, the reader witnesses a typical colonial encounter: Western Europeans arriving on the shores of a remote island in the Pacific meet the native population. The nakedness of the natives epitomizes the savage, uncivilized and unprotected state of the islanders. Their wonder at and admiration of the Dutch visitors immediately establishes a hierarchy of the discoverers over the discovered, who had never seen ‘a thing called a Ship’ (6). Due to the perceived superiority of the Dutch it is not the islanders who command the intruders to declare themselves, but the sailors who ask the natives to identify their country. Again the islanders are at a disadvantage because they do not understand Dutch, while the sailors recognize that the natives speak English, and are able to converse with the islanders in their own tongue. Here the familiar colonial narrative ends. Once it has been established that the islanders are of English descent, there is a background story to be told which connects the discoverers with the discovered. Both England and the United Provinces were sea-faring states in the north west of Europe. As Jonathan Scott has pointed out, they were to a significant extent defined by

their geographical location and proximity to each other, their shared Protestant religion and economic ties. They had shared for several centuries a similar maritime culture, although the fortunes of the English and the Dutch turned out in rather different ways.² The encounter with the Dutch as a narrative frame for the story of the marooned English people, read out by the Isle's current ruler, Prince William, is thus loaded with meaning.

According to this story, William's grandfather, the English accountant George Pines, had been shipwrecked on the island during Elizabeth I's reign when he was sailing to the East Indies. He managed to save himself together with four women, including his master's daughter, two maids and a black slave. Finding themselves alone on an island with a pleasant climate, shelter and food in abundance, the five began to populate it, and George settled his descendants in four tribes on different parts of the island, which served to maintain order until after his death. This core narrative of *The Isle of Pines* had originally been published on its own with a licensing note of 27 June 1668. Its author, the Civil War republican Henry Neville, subsequently published a separate letter purporting to be by the Dutch ship's captain Cornelius van Sloetten and narrating the discovery of the Isle by the Dutch in 1667, before issuing the full version of the pamphlet with a licensing note of 27 July 1668.³ The publication of these pamphlets coincided with Neville's return to England after a period of exile in Italy, where he had sought refuge from the Restoration regime.

The Isle's core text with George Pines' narration can be read as an Arcadian work, in which humans are at one with nature, and civilization and domination of the country are implicitly rejected.⁴ The framing narrative and the description of the Dutch encounter, however, end this romantic vision of a state of nature and innocence and bring the Isle back into the context of seventeenth-century European competition for overseas trading posts and possessions, where good government of land and people was the key to success. Due to the lack of such a government, subsequent generations of islanders had failed to uphold the harmonious co-existence of the initial settlers. Their innocence was lost when George first took possession of the women and entered into sexual relations with all four of them in a recreation of The Fall. Yet the consequences of his transgression only became fully visible in the third generation when 'wantonness' among his descendants had come to replace the 'necessity' (17) which forced the first generation of sons to 'marry their sisters' (14). This degeneration of society caused by a 'neglect of hearing the Bible read' and characterized by 'whoredoms, incests, and adulteries' was temporarily contained by the exemplary punishment of 'the grandest offender' (17), the second son of the black slave, and the institution of a code of law by the new king, Henry. The Fall of Man had made government necessary. It was, as Thomas Paine was to say, 'like dress ... the badge of lost innocence'.⁵ Loosely based on the Ten Commandments, Henry's laws imposed the death penalty on blasphemers, absentees from the monthly religious assembly, rapists

and adulterers, while there were also physical punishments for assault, theft and the defamation of the governor. Like More a century and a half earlier, and Harrington in the previous decade, Neville acknowledged that law and order had to be imposed and maintained if any utopian project was to succeed. Yet, Neville's Isle never reaches a state of organization comparable to either Utopia or Oceana because any attempt by the ruler is thwarted by the unruliness of the people. George Pines is no great legislator like King Utopus or Olphaus Megaletor, and certainly no early modern Lycurgus. Bringing order to the Isle's unruly society happens by piecemeal reform. Without the right foundations, the ideal society could not be achieved.

The succession of rulers on the Isle roughly corresponds to the governments of England. The patriarchal rule of George Pines represents the early Stuarts, while Henry as the founder of a new order with its own code of scripturally inspired law which follows a period of civil unrest echoes Oliver Cromwell and the Interregnum regimes. The present ruler, William Pines, meanwhile, a thinly disguised Charles II, faces renewed unrest caused by two competing factions inside the State representing the Restoration government challenged by a radical underground that continued to disrupt the civil peace. Incidentally, Neville himself had left England for Italy after having been implicated in the Northern Rising of 1663. The Isle was a warning to Charles that all was not well in his kingdom. Factionalism on the fictional island leads to insurrection when a tribal ruler and descendant of the black slave rapes the wife of a leading representative of another tribe, thus threatening 'ruin to the whole State' (26). Only the intervention of the Dutch with their superior arms and authority saves the island from a collapse of order. It is the Dutch who reveal the shortcomings of the islanders.

Their arrival on the island is the defining moment that changes the whole dynamics of Neville's *The Isle of Pines*. The narrative pitches representatives of two European sea powers against each other, leaving the English looking increasingly embarrassed. The colonial (as well as the utopian) project is concerned with the efficient government of resources, such as land and people, for economic growth and the establishment of civilization. Yet, the first thing the Dutch notice on their arrival is the islanders' primitive living conditions. The 'Pallace of their Prince' is only the size 'of one of our ordinary village houses', covered with boughs to 'keep out the ... Rain' (4), while the majority of the people live in 'little ... Huts ... under Trees' (20). The islanders admire the Dutch sailors' dress, but Prince William's wife only wears 'rags', the 'Relicts of those Cloaths ... of them which first came hither' (4), despite the fact that the textiles production in their country of origin far exceeded demand in Restoration times. The islanders offer their visitors food, which is scorned due to a lack of 'materials' (4) to season it. The Dutch meanwhile are successfully involved in the spice trade, exchanging 'Knives, Beads' and 'Glasses' for 'Cloves and Silver' in Madagascar (2). The islanders in contrast do not have 'any

ships or Boats' and are 'strangers to ... shipping' (5), missing out on trading opportunities, even though their English forefathers had been pioneers in the East India trade. They also lack the most basic tools and gratefully receive from the Dutch 'some few Knives' and 'an Ax' to cut timber as the axe their ancestors had saved from the shipwreck was now 'quite blunt' (5). All this marked the contrast between England's former glory and the Island's regress into a barely civilized state. The republicans' utopian projects of the 1650s had been aborted with the Restoration. Instead of realizing a Harringtonian 'commonwealth for increase' England had been thrown back into the confines of a monarchy.⁶ While the English had descended into political and economic insignificance, the Dutch had risen to become the new international sea and trading power in Europe. Neville blamed the inertia of the Restoration regime.

Given that the colonial encounter between the two nations is set in the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Dutch War in the summer of 1667, it is hardly difficult to see the author's point. That fateful summer for English fortunes saw the Medway disaster, in which the United Provinces destroyed much of the English fleet at Chatham, the loss of Surinam to the Dutch in the Treaty of Breda as well as the ceding of Pola Run, which gave the Dutch significant advantages in the Spice Trade. The 1651 Navigation Act, originally intended to favour English shipping, was also modified in favour of the Dutch, now allowing them to transport German goods to England. The decline of the English as depicted by Neville, however, does not just refer to their trading power, but also to their lack of industry and their military weakness. The islanders are naked also in the sense of being unarmed. They take to their heels at the mere sound of a gun, and even their ruler wonders at 'the strange effects of Powder' (25). The military and naval insignificance of the English Pines under Prince William (and the later Stuarts) stands in contrast to the military and naval power of the England his grandfather George had left late in Elizabeth's Golden Age, one year after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and in a period known for the exploratory travels of Drake and Raleigh. Neville bemoans English military decline under the early Stuarts when financial constraints and political conflicts at home meant that foreign policy took a back seat. His narrative reveals nostalgia for the naval success and military greatness, when republicans such as Arthur Hesilrige, Henry Marten, Thomas Scott, Thomas Chaloner and Neville himself were in charge of the Rump's diplomacy (1649–53). Then, England could still match the Dutch, whom English republicans considered as their natural allies. However, the United Provinces' failure to recognize the regicide regime of the Commonwealth provoked England. The republicans broke off negotiations and went to war with Dutch in 1652. That war ended with English naval victory and the loss of numerous warships and merchantmen on the Dutch side. This first Anglo-Dutch War (1652–4) was about trading rights as well as ideological issues, such as the legitimacy of the English government. Yet, this did not prevent English republicans from continuing to see the Dutch as more

natural allies than the French. Neville emphasizes this point by referring to the Dutch sailors explicitly as ‘friends’ (5).

Not only do they build a palace for William Pines, they also help him put down an insurrection of his own people. They never contest the English possession of the Island, and they present the Pines with useful tools. With their model behaviour, the Dutch invite emulation. The contrast between status quo and ideal that characterizes utopian writing here is not between England and the Isle, but between England/the Isle and the United Provinces. In that sense the utopian project of the Isle is unfinished. Yet, the Dutch relationship to the English is not one of open hostility, but of friendly competitiveness. For English republicans, the Dutch and the English were still natural allies. It was in England’s best interest, Slingsby Bethel argued, to ally with the Dutch and ward off the threat of French ‘universal monarchy’.⁷ Neville stresses his preferred alliance in his reference to the Amsterdam merchant Abraham Keek – a contact of the English republican underground – who is the ostensible author of the ‘Two Letters’ to ‘a Credible person’ in London’s Covent Garden which preface the work, reporting on the discovery of the English Pines (f. A2v). Like More’s fictitious epistle to Peter Giles introducing *Utopia*, the letters are to give credibility to the story and authenticate the existence of the island. Yet, to an attentive reader familiar with More’s work, the fictional device could equally signal that the Isle was a utopia written to criticize the Stuart regime in ways otherwise impossible under restored censorship regulations. The same is true for the deliberately vague information on the Isle’s location, which Keek initially describes as ‘about 2 or 300 Leagues Northwest from Cape Finis Terre’, while later admitting possible mistakes ‘in the number of the Leagues’ and ‘exact point of the Compass’. The letters also suggest that the ship that ‘fell in’ with the Isle was initially thought to be French, while the actual pamphlet reveals its Dutch provenance (f. A2v). Neville thus hints that the English were mistaken in their judgement of who their real friends were. The Stuart government might think English salvation was to be found in an alliance with the French; the republicans favoured a partnership with the United Provinces.

Charles II’s performance as a monarch disappointed Neville, especially in foreign policy terms. Yet, he also made a point that the Isle, and by implication the English motherland, had unused potential: its people. As Harrington had remarked, the people were the ‘materials of a commonwealth’.⁸ In *Oceana* they would help perpetuate the political system through their participation; on the Isle they only perpetuate the English race but have no obvious sense of purpose or direction. George Pines, the accountant, is obsessed with the propagation and numbering of his people. He even has a rota to impregnate his four women in turn, and is proud to report that they brought him thirteen, seven, fifteen and twelve children respectively. The first generation of children on the island amounts to 47 people, while the island population counts 1,789

at the end of George's life. Yet, the English islanders neither make anything of their geographically convenient situation off the European trading routes nor of their growing population. Contemporary economic theory, represented by the works of Petty and Graunt, stressed the importance of a strong population for national wealth creation. Petty in particular emphasized that it was 'the number, arts, and industry of [a] people, well united and governed', not the extent of a territory, that was responsible for 'the greatness and glory of a Prince'. Both 'Labour and Industry' and a country's geographical location held the key to success, while Locke's 'labour theory' would stress that the acquisition of land was justified by its cultivation and efficient use.⁹ Neville's theory of colonization and wealth creation went beyond the mere possession of land. It was also about the efficiency of its cultivation, the use of labour and the trade with its excess produce. *The Isle* points towards colonial policies the Whigs would develop in more detail after 1689.¹⁰ Yet, Neville implies that the English are not ready to embrace the task. The Pines suffer from laziness and 'idleness', and their favourite pastime is to 'lay abroad on Mossey Bankes' (12–12 [*sic* 13]), thus fulfilling the common stereotype among republicans that warmer climates produced inferior, effeminate peoples, unable to build up significant military or colonial power.

The Dutch in contrast do everything the English settlers have failed to do on their arrival at the island or any time since: they survey the land, take measurements, and assess the geography for accessibility for shipping, for fresh water supplies and natural resources, such as 'veins of Minerals' (22) in the ground. They appreciate the island's 'fertile' (21) soil, trees and fruits, and the suitability of the animal population for food provision. Most importantly, the Dutch know how to assert authority, discharging just 'three or four Guns' (26) to restore order on the island. In the light of contemporary works on colonialism, the *Isle* becomes an illustration of missed opportunities, or as Adam Beach puts it, a case study for 'English degeneracy and Dutch supremacy'.¹¹ However, Neville's work is not as profoundly pessimistic as Beach suggests. For the *Isle of Pines* is an island with potential for economic growth. It has everything it needs 'by ... Nature'. However, with 'the benefit of Art ... it would equal, if not exceed many of our European Countries' (21). The Dutch captain reassures the reader in his 'Post-Script' that 'time will make this Island known better to the world', if its inhabitants learn to make use of 'Natures abundance' (31). As much as the first institution of government with Prince Henry's law code brings some degree of political civilization, the 'art' of agriculture and the production of goods for trade would bring civilization in economic terms. Only if the English Pines transform their island to make it properly their own will they become known around the world and respected as a great power. The *Isle* thus remains a work in progress, a utopia in the making. Neville meanwhile calls on his English readers to reconsider their constitution at home and England's role in the wider world.

In our post-colonial age, the acquisition and economic exploitation of foreign territories has rightly come to be seen in a critical light. For seventeenth-century republicans, colonization was a way of propagating wealth, spreading ideologies of civilization, and of experimenting with alternative forms of government and utopian settlements. The competition for overseas territories was also a continuation of inner-European competition on a new scale. If the English Pines made this island their own by cultivation, and wholeheartedly entered into the colonial venture, the riches of the island would provide new opportunities for the export of agricultural products, shipping and trade. Neville's verdict was simple: the English would have to become more like the Dutch, or would eventually be overtaken by them and perish, marooned on the wide, open seas. It would be another few decades before English governments embraced this controversial challenge.