Troubles of the Map-Maker

Cartography

RUPERT T. GOULD in *Oddities: A Book of Unexplained Facts* (Stokes):

Until we know considerably more about the geography of our planet than we do now, there will always be "doubtful islands," distinguished on the Admiralty charts by the skeptical affix "E. D." ("existence doubtful") or "P. D." ("position doubtful").

It may seem curious, in these days of over-civilization, that we should still be in this state of uncertainty. But, in sober fact, we still know much less about the "round world" than is generally supposed, and a small departure from the beaten track may still, in certain parts of the great oceans, and even nearer home, transform the ordinary mariner into a discoverer. An excellent example of this neglected truth is the case of the Belcher Islands in Hudson Bay. Hudson Bay has been known and traversed ever since 1610, and that famous, if somewhat retiring, corporation, the Hudson Bay Company, has maintained trading posts on its shores for centuries past; yet in quite recent times (1915) a group of unknown islands were discovered within the bay (or rather, inland sea) itself, and almost within sight of land. They are quite large islands—several are more than seventy miles long—and they have a total area of about five thousand square miles.

Strictly speaking, they were not absolutely a new discovery. Old charts showed, in their vicinity, one or two little clusters of tiny islets, proving that in times gone by some vessel or vessels had sighted them; but their actual size, extent and position had remained unknown and unguessed-at. Obviously, they are not of recent formation; they merely happen to lie off the ordinary trade route of vessels navigating the bay, and in a region which, until 1915, had never been properly examined.

In the early days of cartography—say until the beginning of the seventeenth century—it was not much more than an even chance that any particular island shown on a chart had any real existence. It was just as likely to have come there direct from the draftsman's imagination; or through a misreading or miscompilation of old and irreconcilable authorities; or as a compliment to a patron of either sex; or in consequence of some political exigency. If it did exist, the only real information which the chart afforded concerning it was that its topography and position quite certainly differed in a very marked degree from their representatio non the paper. Yet some of the non-existent islands, especially if they were charted in unfrequented parts of the ocean, held their place on the charts for what seems an amazing length of time; their vitality is as remarkable as the longevity of the invalid, now recognized by most medical men. Such, for example, was the island of Hy Brasil, the mythical island supposed to be visible in the sunset from a wide range of places on the west coast of Ireland. *Ichabod!* Its charted position (in so far as it can be said to have had any accepted position on the charts) is now occupied by a shoal with the comparatively prosaic name of "Porcupine Bank."

St. Brandan's Isle, too, was long charted as the westernmost of the Azores; while Mayda, another mythical island which was probably a distorted version of Bermuda and was long a source of puzzlement to cartographers in general, turned up smilingly in the middle of the Bay of Biscay, on a map published at Chicago so recently as 1906.

Between these entirely mythical islands and the "doubtful" islands of the Admiralty charts, brief mention may be made of another class of island, apparently created for the sole purpose of irritating the map-maker, who may justly observe, with Fuseli the painter, that "Nature is always putting me in the wrong." These are the islands which appear and disappear, generally as the result of volcanic action; or which shift their position from time to time. Actual "floating islands" the cartographer severely and justly neglects. The best-known specimens, such as those in Lake Orion and the famous island in Derwentwater, can never form a menace to shipping, and may safely be left to the care of the Ordnance Survey and similar bodies; although it is worth noting that the Derwentwater island, which usually but not always comes up for a few weeks in summer (always in the same place) and then sinks again, was surveyed in 1887 by no less distinguished a cartographer than the late Admiral W. J. L. Wharton, then and for 17 years afterwards Hydrographer of the Navy.

At sea the mariner is almost as likely to fall in with a sea-serpent as with a floating island; practically the only hunting-ground for such phenomena is the Indian Ocean, where small islets formed of decayed vegetation and sometimes bearing small trees, are occasionally blown out to sea at the echanging of the monsoon. If we class some of the enormous Antarctic icebergs as islands, of course, the case is altered; and certainly, in dimensions some of them could give points to many real islands. For example, an L-shaped berg 60 by 40 miles in length was seen in the South Atlantic in 1865 and 1866, and one unfortunate vessel which got embayed between the two arms of the L was wrecked and destroyed on its shore quite as rapidly and efficiently as if she had blundered against Ushant in a fog. Even this is not a record (or, as *The Times* would print it, a "record") for size, for a Norwegian whaler recently sighted off the South Shetland Islands, an ice-island over a hundred miles long and obviously many miles in width.

But while floating islands are outside the purview of the cartographer, those irritating volcanic islands which periodically appear and disappear are not, and there have been many such cases. Falcon Island, in the northwest Pacific, is a good example of the class (it was "doing its stuff" quite recently) and there have been one or two instances nearer home.

For example, in the year 1831 an islet emitting smoke and fire appeared, like Venus Anadyomene, some miles off the southwest coast of Sicily and rose gradually to the height of over a hundred feet above sea-level, with a diameter of about half a mile. At the end of the year, however, it found itself unable to support the honor of having been named "Graham Island," after Sir James Graham (Peel's "dirty boy"), then First Lord of the Admiralty. In consequence, it modestly effaced itself, sinking back towards the bed of the Mediterranean, and has ever since remained covered by several fathoms of water.

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