

REGIONE SICILIANA
PROVINCIA REGIONALE DI TRAPANI
AZIENDA PROVINCIALE TURISMO TRAPANI
AZIENDA AUTONOMA SOGGIORNO TURISMO ERICE
A.L.T.A.
OTIS SICILIA
COMUNI DI TRAPANI - ERICE - PACECO
MARSALA - FAVIGNANA - VALDERICE
COOP. ED. ANTIGRUPPO SICILIANO
CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

A TRIP ACROSS THE WATER



1° CONVEGNO INTERNAZIONALE
**THE SICILIAN ORIGIN
OF THE ODYSSEY**

TRAPANI
ASTORIA PARK HOTEL
LIBERA UNIVERSITÀ DEL MEDITERRANEO
18-22 LUGLIO 1990

Samuel Butler and Lewis Greville Pocock: The Discovery of Islands.
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Prepared for a conference at Trapani on "Sicilian Origins of the Odyssey"
July 18-25, 1990.

How shall I compare the discovery of islands?
History had many instinctive processes,
Post reason's range, green innocence of nerves,
Now all destroyed by self-analysis.

These lines by Allen Curnow, the major poet of New Zealand, contain my title and indicate my theme. We are about to compare many discoveries of islands: Odysseus's discovery of Scheria, his rediscovery of his homeland of Ithaca; the discovery of Trapani, Favignana, Levanzo and Marettimo as the originals of Scheria and Ithaca, brought about by Samuel Butler and Lewis Greville Pocock; their own discoveries of Scheria and Ithaca at the centres of their own lives; Nat Scammacca's rediscovery of Sicily as his own Ithaca. Nat and Nina are an Odysseus and a Penelope, long committed to the rediscovery of islands as work for the imagination in both history and poetry. History is my profession; Homer was a poet and so is Scammacca; Curnow is a poet who celebrates the historic imagination which takes shape upon islands. Samuel Butler was a novelist and satirist educated in Victorian England on Greek antiquity; L.G. Pocock, my father, was a professor of classical studies; both settled in New Zealand and visited Trapani in pursuit of Ithaca and the Odyssey. Neither was a poet, nor am I; but in this address I want to consider, both as history and as poetry, how they came here, and how Sicily and New Zealand--two islands (I am quoting Curnow) not in narrow seas--came to stand for Ithaca, that island to which we are always returning but where we cannot stay too long.

The Englishman Samuel Butler lived for about four years (1859-64) as a colonist in the Canterbury settlements of New Zealand. Canterbury is a great plain on the east coast of the South Island, limited by the alpine mountain range which divides the island into east and west, as the Apennines divide Italy. He wrote of these Southern Alps that they were very beautiful, but did not yet look as if they had been painted very much. He did not remain in New Zealand, but before his return to England he began to write Erewhon--it is the English word for nowhere spelt backwards--a satirical utopia, or rather a dystopia, in which he imagines himself crossing the mountains and descending into a strange country on the farther side. This is how the imagination works upon unknown islands; you remember how Odysseus, exploring the island which is in fact Circe's, returns to his companions and says "we don't know where the sun sets or where it rises." In a tragedy by Allen Curnow, The Axe, a young warrior, scouting in enemy land on his small island, says

Why does this country speak to me, this other country

On the other side of the world in the sea? I am not on this side.

The words express the human situation as seen in the antipodes, where one has voyaged as far as one can, come to the last island and finds one can only recall where the voyage began. Butler's hero, at the summit of a New Zealand mountain pass, runs in terror from a group of great statues, not made with hands but with the wind blowing through them like Memnon in Egypt, and so descends into Erewhon on the West Coast. When I was a young man in Canterbury, two of my fellow students, McGlashan and Tait, made the first crossing of that same pass in winter; they

said they came to the place where Butler's statues should have stood, but there were none there.

I think that when Odysseus at the end of his life takes his oar on his shoulder and sets off in search of a land of farmers where they think the oar is a flail or a fan used in harvesting grain, he crosses the mountains to Enna or Piazza Armerina; and even then, you remember, he is to die of a wind off the sea. It is a kinder ending than the discovery of a utopia, because history is in some ways harsher than the individual life. In a modern Canterbury beast fable, Philip Temple's Bleak of the Moon, the protagonists, who are mountain parrots, are driven from the east coast by human settlement, but are forced back from the west by great prehistoric birds who lived there before any humans came. But in Erewhon Butler imagined a postmodern, not a prehistoric utopia, one in which crime was considered a sickness and sickness was considered a crime. He was using the "other country" of the South Island to shape the vision he began to construct there and went on developing, in which he parodied Charles Darwin to insist that machines would sooner or later become more intelligent than men and govern them. He was a parent of science fiction and (they now assure us) a prophet of our near future; but in terms of the poetic imagination of "the discovery of islands", he was foretelling Allen Curnow's world, in which "green innocence of nerves [is] all destroyed by self-analysis" and since all is information, there are no more discoveries to be made.

Compare, compare, now horrible untruth
Rings true in our obliterating season;
Our islands lost again, all earth one island,
And all our travel circumnavigation.

And therefore, in New Zealand about 130 years ago, Samuel Butler began to imagine alternative histories and to look for them not in fantasy only, but in the buried realities of history where they are sometimes to be found. It was thirty years later in his life that he began to contend that the Odyssey was written by a young woman of ancient Drepanon, who put herself into the poem as Nausicaa and the landscapes of Trapani and the Isole Egadi as the recognisable scenery of Scheria, Ithaca and other episodes recounted by Odysseus to King Alcinous. Sexual and other reversals are important here; the probably homosexual Butler liked to imagine that the sonnets of William Shakespeare were dedicated to a ship's cook named Willie Hughes; but there is more than that to his choice of this coastline as setting of the Odyssey. He found it by studying books of cartography in the British Museum, searching sailing charts and atlases until he found what he needed; but here we are, once more, on an island's western coasts, on the horizon of the civilised vision where things can prove to be other than they have seemed. The ancients had said that Trojans had lived here as well as Greeks; there had been Elymi, Sicans and Carthaginians. Things changed and blended so far west; it was possible to imagine myths and monsters. Beyond all that, there was the sense of being at the western margin of the world, with nothing beyond you except the unknown, as when the English poet Keats

heard, like ocean on a western beach,
The surge and thunder of the Odyssey.

However, Butler was not looking for a utopia in the provincia di Trapani; he was looking for a place where a poem had been made and where it might still be seen. And so he came here in 1892, 1894 and 1896, and with the Englishman Festing Jones and the Trapanese Pietro Sugameli explored the harbour of Trapani, the bay of San Cusumano and the contours of Mount Erice, tracing both how Odysseus came ashore at Scheria and met Nausicaa, and how the Phaeacian ship landed him on Ithaca and he made his way to his home. By now Butler was

persuaded of the female authorship of the Odyssey, as well as of its west Sicilian setting, and had argued for both in articles published in England. In 1897 he published The Authoress of the Odyssey: where and when she wrote, who she was, the use she made of the Iliad, and how the poem grew under her hands, and complained energetically of the lack of response his arguments were meeting from the scholarly profession. Even if his views were wrong, he said, they were deserving of an answer; and if he received no answer, he would continue to think himself right. I have heard the same complaint uttered by my father; to be received with silence is the fate of scholars whose basic assumptions differ radically from those of their colleagues. They are not refuted but ignored, because they do not share the discourse in which even refutation must be expressed; they are considered eccentrics, inhabitants of a private world.

My father Lewis Greville Pocock was of an English family long settled in South Africa. He was educated in England and served in the First World War as an artillery officer, first in Namibia, then in France--I have a letter he wrote in the first days of the Battle of the Somme, which ends "I wish somebody would invent an atomic bomb"--and finally in Italy, on the Piave and the Asiago plateau and at Vittorio Veneto. On demobilisation and as a married man of thirty, he studied for a degree in classical studies at the University of London and in 1927 was appointed professor of classics at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Through South Africa and then New Zealand, he entered that oceanic and antipodean world of which I have been speaking, in which it is hard to put down roots because the great streams of never-ending ocean are always flowing. The palm drops its nut in the sea; the nut floats away, is washed ashore a thousand miles away, becomes a tree and drops fruit in its turn to repeat the story. The Maori people of New Zealand, who insist that they are the tangata whenua, the people of the land and the birthplace, nevertheless tell how the hero Kupe came in a great canoe and returned to tell his people of the land he had found. They followed his directions many generations later, but the question is asked: e hokihoki Kupe? did Kupe ever come back? Kupe is the Maori Odysseus, and every island is Ithaca. To return is not to remain.

My father had little time for such poetic imaginings, though his love of the Odyssey knew no bounds. He was a scholar who might have been a farmer, and thought of a text as something to be dug over to see what the spade might bring to the surface. In 1950, the centenary of British settlement in Canterbury, he delivered an address on Samuel Butler as an early settler and his beliefs on the origins of the Odyssey, and decided to visit Trapani and see the ground for himself. He came here in 1952 and I came with him; I had just completed a doctorate in Cambridge and was waiting for the next stage in my career. It was his only visit, but the true beginnings of a scholarly enterprise which filled the remaining twenty-three years of his life. He published four works: The Landfalls of Odysseus (1955), The Sicilian Origin of the Odyssey (1957), Reality and Allegory in the Odyssey (1959) and Odyssean Essays (1965). Until Nina and Nat Scammacca discovered the second of these and began to translate it, they had not received much more attention than Butler's Authoress of the Odyssey and had been treated with much the same lack of response.

The Trapani my father and I saw in 1952 was part of the Sicily that existed forty years ago; I recollect that we were detained by the harbour police for waiting about in the evening without our passports, which were at the hotel, though we were treated with great courtesy once they realised what we were. We explored the port of Trapani and made ourselves familiar, so we thought, with its rocks and waterways, though an emergency resulting from the crash of a

British aircraft on its ^{way}wy to Malta prevented our doing so by water. Since we were still treading in the footsteps of Samuel Butler, we spent much time at San Cusumano, exploring a cave in the cliff-face there which was at the base of an old torre di guardia; the rough walls used to make pens for animals in many Sicilian caves recall the cavern of Polyphemos in the Odyssey, though this identification ceased to be of much importance as my father's interpretation became increasingly independent of that put forward by Butler. What the two scholars had in common was a belief in the realism of the Odyssey: a belief that it is full of descriptions of places which are real and meant to be recognised as real by the amused and excited regional audience for whom the poem was originally intended. Since I was myself less immediately involved in research based on this assumption, I recall most clearly the one excursion we made by sea: a visit to Levanzo as it was in those days before turismo, when I became convinced of the merely imaginative truth that we were treading on Odyssean beaches and that this was the landscape for which the poem had been written, the remote west of the ancient Greek sea-peoples.

That was L.G. Pocock's only visit to Trapani, though I came once more in 1957, and visited Castellamare del Golfo, to take photographs at Cala Bianca, a bay west of that town which my father thought might be the scene of Odysseus's battle with the Laestrygonians. The series of books he published were all written in New Zealand, and represent the development of his full understanding of the Odyssey, gained by placing it in a western Sicilian setting. From placing the landfalls of Odysseus on Scheria and Ithaca on the beaches of Trapani, the slopes of Erice and San Cusumano, and from identifying the Isole Egadi with Ithaca and its neighbour islands as described in the poem--where the topography cannot be that of the Ionian group of which the real Ithaca is part--he went on to other identifications. Scylla and Charybdis cannot be located in the Straits of Messina, but can convincingly be found among the active volcanoes of the Lipari group; Circe's island is Ustica; the descent into Hades and the Streams of Ocean are located at the Pillars of Hercules between Ceuta and Gibraltar, the western extremity of the world known to Mediterranean seafarers until the Phoenicians made their way to Britain and around Africa. It was this series of identifications which led my father to give up Butler's thesis that the Odyssey was written by an untravelled woman. Not only had Butler known less about female psychology than he thought he did; the poem was written by an experienced seafarer, about people who knew how to travel by sea and for the entertainment of audiences as experienced as the poet. This experience had been denied to women in ancient patriarchal society, who might make voyages as passengers or victims but not as navigators, and the idea of a woman poet has been restored only by the Scammaccas' brilliant hypothesis of a husband-and-wife collaboration, in which she appears Penelope rather than Nausicaa.

The coasts and islands my father identified could still be seen as ancient landscapes in the 1950s, and this probably made it easier for him to conduct research on them, through cartography, photography and correspondence, from an island group on the other side of the planet, where society and its imagination were still modern but not postmodern. He rejected the belief of classical scholarship in his generation that ancient epic was purely mythopoeic, the product of many singers in an essentially oral culture. To him the Odyssey was a highly individual, idiosyncratic and sophisticated poem, a heroic and epic comedy whose hero was determined to have both glory and length of days; a poem full of jokes and allusions, which could not be the work of the poet of the Iliad--"he was no more Homer", my father wrote, "than I am Martin Luther"--because the author constantly exploited the Iliad to convert its themes into

those of a picaresque narrative whose hero played tricks upon everything, yet never ceased to be a hero. it was Dante rewritten by Machiavelli, a divine comedy in which the humans were as ingenious at lying as the gods. And if the poet of the Odyssey played jokes with the text of the Iliad, he was capable of playing jokes with the landscapes of western Sicily and the seas beyond, which his audiences knew as well as they knew the Iliad. Together with the scholarly thesis that the ancient epic was the product of multiple authorship in an archaic culture, my father would have rejected if he had ever heard of it--which I don't think he did the postmodern critical principle that a text is only a text, making no reference to any reality existing outside it and revealing nothing of the personality of any author existing behind it. The authorial personality he had discovered or invented behind the Odyssey was so vivid to him that he sometimes felt as if he and the poet were speaking directly to one another. And if a real person was speaking in this complex and artful poem, he was speaking of real things.

The crucial title in the series of L.G. Pocock's Odyssean writings is the third: Reality and Allegory in the Odyssey. The reality is the topography: the claim that the poem constantly describes actual and identifiable places, which would be recognised by the original western audiences and would stir them to various emotions, including laughter, by the epic, sometimes comic, and sometimes deliberately absurd ways in which these real places were incorporated in the story. This claim situates the poem in a real world and makes it a poem interwoven with reality; it is a historical reconstruction which makes the poem into history, and if this is now out of fashion the fashion will some day pass. But at the same time the claim makes the poem a text which was intended to be read, a code which was intended to be deciphered. Since he held the poem to be individual and unique, my father also held that it had been created by the poet in the act of writing. But once written codes are discovered in a poem, other levels of codification become possible; and my father's next step was the discovery in the Odyssey of allegory. This too was the consequence of the Butler-Pocock location of the poem in western Sicily, a land of many peoples, some of whom claimed Trojan as well as Achaean descent. The Greek-speaking Elymi were a people of this kind, but the ancestors given to Phaeacian chiefs in the Odyssey gave them a genealogy which they shared with the Cyclopes, the Laestrygonians and the earthborn giants whom Maori would name tangata whenua. From this my father, following some ancient and some modern scholars, drew the conclusion that the Odyssey is a poem of the Elymi, recounting the adventures of an Elymian hero by naming him Odysseus and incorporating Iliadic themes with a recognisable regional setting. His raids and adventures among Cyclopes and Laestrygonians, with whom his Phaeacian hosts were connected by pediangata whenua or previous inhabitants with whom the Greek-speaking settlers had occasionally intermarried.

This was to raise the exciting possibility that the Odyssey--like the much more literary Aeneid half a millennium after it--was a poem of mixed cultural origin on the outer margins of the Greek expansion. But my father's pursuit of allegory did not end there. He further discovered in the poem evidence of a Phoenician or Carthaginian maritime hegemony, typified by the seagod Poseidon whose wrath pursues the hero but is frustrated by the Hellenic deities Zeus and Athena. Against this alien empire the figure represented by Odysseus is in constant partial rebellion; he is a popular hero, a pirate or bandit "man of respect" half in the service of the empire and half pursuing his own and his people's interests on the margins of its rule. He is related to the Carthaginian power structure in much the same way--though I do not recall my father taking up this analogy--that Brutus in the Roman epic is to the Etruscan, and there are resemblances between his wiliness and the pretended stupidity of Brutus. Anyone less like

Odysseus than Aeneas, of course, was never invented; this poem is not Roman but Sicilian.

Though Odysseus leads the sack of Troy in the continuations of the Iliad, in the Odyssey he neither destroys a city nor founds one. The poem is not concerned with the making and unmaking of cities, but with coming home. Odysseus is easily distracted by love and adventure, but his intention all the time is to return to Ithaca, though he knows he can never be free from restlessness there; he sacrifices to the goddesses of harvest and dies of a wind off the sea, in an ending which is less heroic than idyllic, less Homeric than Theocritean. This has never satisfied the European intellect; Dante, Tennyson and Kazantzakis all arranged for Odysseus to perish apocalyptically in the southern hemisphere, engaged in some heroic or titanic defiance of earth and heaven. But the antipodean imagination is wiser than that; it knows there is no edge to a round world, and that since all travel is circumnavigation every land is Ithaca. It understands why Odysseus in old age is at rest but not at peace; to quote Allen Curnow once more:

Whole-hearted he can't move
From where he is, nor love
Whole-hearted that place.

I was struck, on reading through my father's Odyssean writings, to find him suggesting that the Elymian hero had died quietly a little before the poem was completed--seated on the seashore, but not, like the despicable Jason, because the prow of his beached ship had rotted and fallen on him, or, like the Maori prophet and warleader Te Kooti Rikirangi, because he had gone to sleep under his farmcart and it had capsized. The epic ends with an idyll which is not even an irony, because the whole of the Odyssey has been a periplus of the western Mediterranean, and has circled back to Ithaca which is Scheria where it began. The Mediterranean was as huge to Greeks as the Pacific is to us; and outside both there is Ocean, which is world-girdling but only world-girdling. The antipodean imagination, into which I have tried to show the Odyssey flowing, is aware of the vastness of unknown Ocean, but knows at the same time that all travel is circumnavigation. My father's interpretation, which anchored the poem in the reality of described and actual places and in the allegory of the wars and commerce of historic peoples, did not seem to lessen it by making it the representation of a known history and geography, though his own realism was aggressive and could sometimes be philistine. The hero and his epic survived, within the circle of the return to Ithaca.

I have been quoting from Allen Curnow, a New Zealand poet of English descent. I should like to end with some lines by a Maori poet, Haare Williams, writing in English. A marae is a meeting-place, and "hoki mai" is a greeting at setting out and returning.

On that
marae
we
the visitors
gave
but kept
a rite:
to return
and yet
leave;
to stay

and yet
to go;
to know,
whatever
happens,
return.

Hoki mai.