
Opening Extract from...

The Un-Discovered Islands

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Published by Polygon

Illustrated by Katie Scott

The Un-Discovered Islands

An Archipelago of Myths and Mysteries, Phantoms and Fakes

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Introduction

I remember well the motto of the Anderson High School in Lerwick, displayed on the brightly coloured crest that was fixed to the gates outside. 'Dö weel and persevere', it counselled. At some point we pupils must have been told the origin of these words, for they were intimately tied to the place itself. 'Dö weel and persevere' was the formative advice given in 1808 to the young man Arthur Anderson, later to be the industrialist Arthur Anderson, co-founder of the P&O shipping company, member of parliament for Orkney and Shetland, and benefactor of the school that still bears his name.

It was not a particularly stirring piece of advice. To me it sounded half-hearted, like the words of an inattentive father patting his son absent-mindedly on the head. But the story of Anderson's rise from poverty to philanthropy was supposed to inspire young Shetlanders. It was part of the history of our school and the history of our islands. The implication was that, if heeded, these words could help shape our futures too. Hard work and perseverance: those were the lessons that would lead us forward.

Accompanying that motto on the crest were three Viking images – an axe, a longship and a flaming brand – alongside another, more ambiguous inscription. On a yellow scroll across the centre of the emblem were three words in Latin that pointed to a rather different part of our history. '*Dispecta est Thule*': Thule was seen.

Though I passed through those gates countless times in my years at school, no teacher ever explained the Latin words they bore, and I never bothered to ask. From somewhere, I had gathered a vague notion that Thule was supposed to be the edge of the world, and that somehow Shetland was it, or at least it once had been. But in my youthful head that word was connected most closely with the Thule Bar down at the harbour, a far more mysterious and tantalising place for a teenage boy.

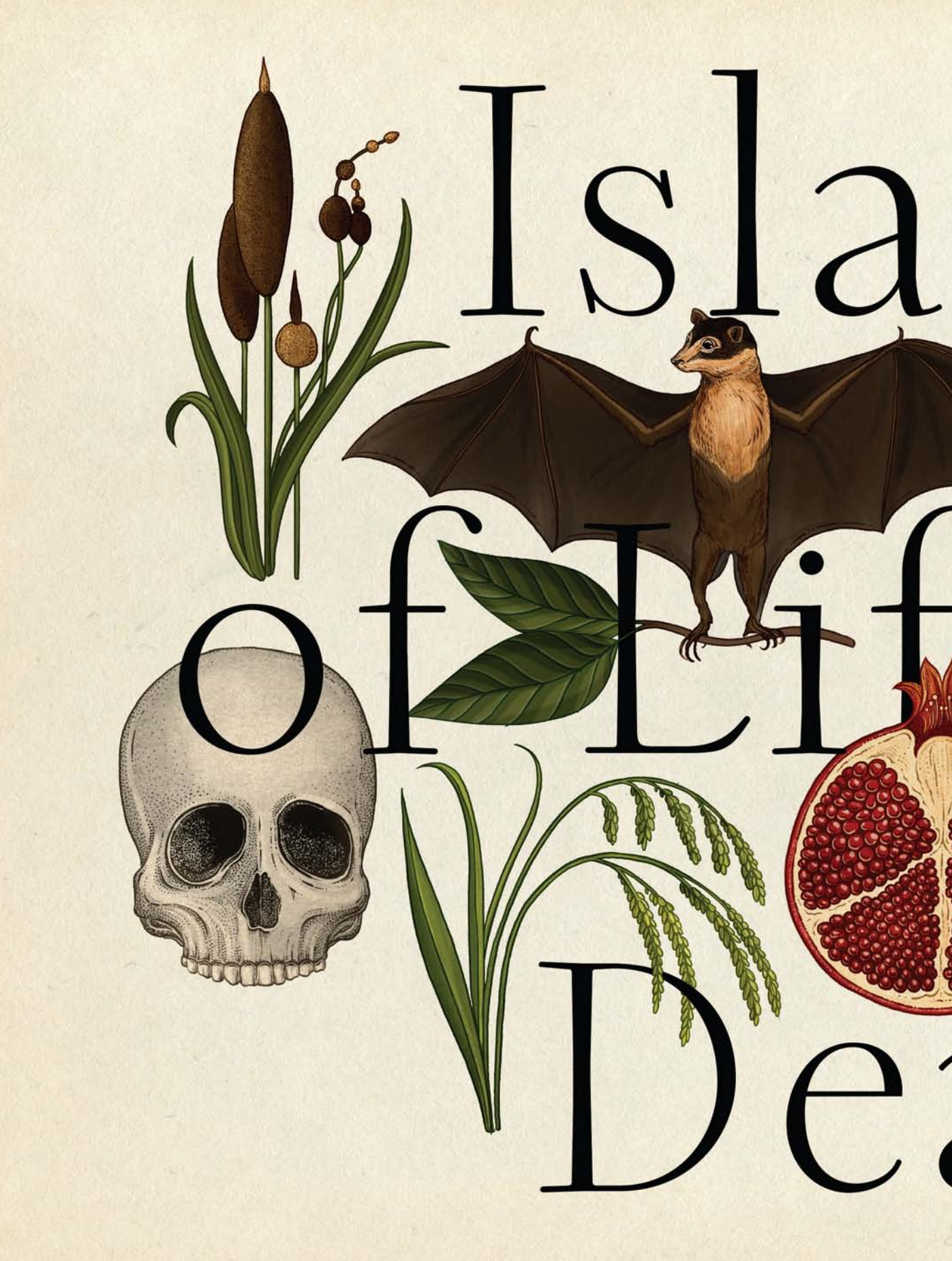
It was not until several years later, when school was long behind me, that I learned the origin of this motto. Thule was indeed the edge of the world, but it was more than that. It was an island once believed to be real but now absent from the maps. It was a place that was no longer a place. The words themselves came from the Roman historian Tacitus, whose father-in-law, Agricola, was governor of Britain in the late first century AD. Sailing north of mainland Scotland, Agricola had seen Shetland on the horizon and believed it to be Thule, the northernmost point in the classical world. He pinned the label to the islands, but it didn't stick for long. Thule was seen, and then once again it disappeared.

In hindsight it seems odd that such a phrase was considered a suitable decoration for those gates, since its message so obviously clashed with the one that accompanied it on the crest. According to the school motto, Shetland was as pivotal a place as we, its sons and daughters, wished to make it. Arthur Anderson was an important man – his ships had sailed the world's oceans – and like him we could go anywhere and do anything. But in those three words from Tacitus, Shetland lost its identity altogether and tumbled off the edge of the map. Hitched to the idea of Thule, we barely even existed at all. It was a peculiar contradiction, but something in that unreal geography appealed to me.

Later I found that the oceans are full of such places: islands discovered and then un-discovered. They have existed in every part of the world, and some appeared on maps for many centuries before finally being erased. These islands have not been lost to rising seas or to earthquakes; they are not the victims of natural disasters. These islands are human in origin, the products of imagination and error.

Gathered in this book is a whole archipelago of un-discovered islands, grouped into six sections. The first are *Islands of Life and Death*: mythical places, confined to stories. *Setting Out* introduces islands found by early travellers in the Atlantic and Pacific, when few people knew the world beyond their own shores. The third group emerged during the *Age of Exploration*, as European sailors began to crisscross the globe with increasing regularity. The fourth are *Sunken Lands*, once thought to have been submerged; while the fifth are *Fraudulent Islands*, invented by hoaxers and liars. The sixth and final group are *Recent Un-Discoveries*, made during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Each of these places has its own story. None is exactly alike. Some have helped to shape entire cultures, while others have been barely noticed. Some are strange and fabulous, while others are utterly believable. All of them reflect in some way the values of their age, and all of them have enriched the geography of the mind. This book seeks to celebrate and commemorate these un-discovered islands, and, through them, tell the story of how we have created our image of the world.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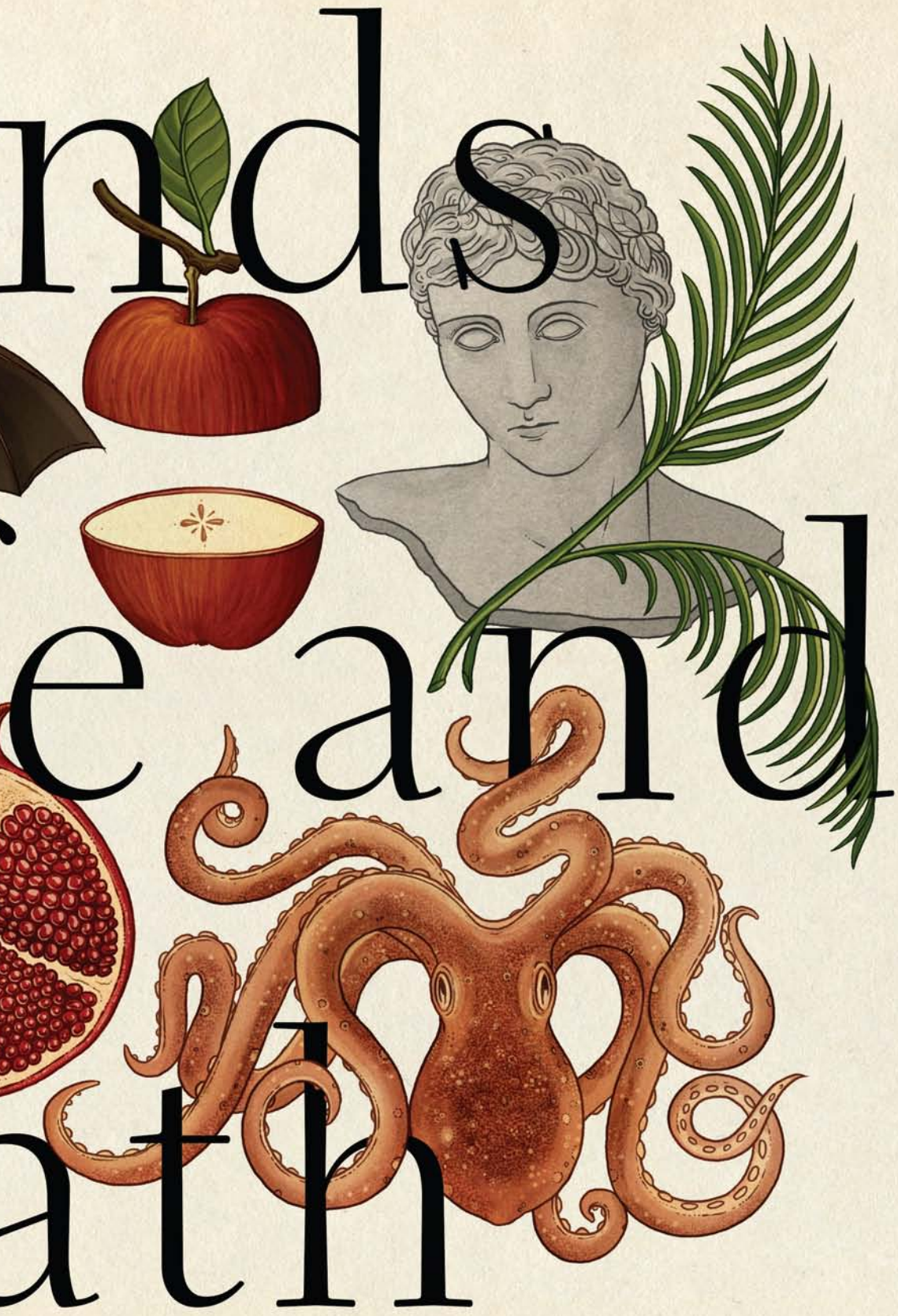
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Islands of Life and Death

Islands of Life and Death

FACED WITH THE SKY we imagine gods; faced with the ocean we imagine islands. Absence is terrifying, and so we fill the gaps in our knowledge with invented things. These bring us comfort, but they conflict, too, with our desire for certainty and understanding. And sometimes that desire gives us back the absences we sought to fill.

For as long as people have been making stories, they have been inventing islands. In literature and in legend, they are there from the very start. For societies living at the sea's edge, the dream of other shores is the most natural dream there is. Polynesians, Marsh Arabs, the ancient Greeks, the Celts: all imagined lands beyond their horizon. All of them told stories of islands.

These places were not quite like the everyday world. They were supernatural regions, where the lines between life and death were blurred. The ocean divides us from other lands, just as death divides us from the living. The crossing can be made, but only once. Islands, then, are perfect metaphors for other worlds and afterlives. They are separate and yet connected; they are distant and yet tangible. The sea of death is cluttered with imaginary islands.

Today, we try to draw strict lines between facts and fictions. But myth, superstition and religion have been part of human life for as long as we have been human. They have shaped our thinking and guided our actions. The way we comprehend our existence is indivisible from the stories we have told ourselves. So while the islands in this chapter may be mythical, they were no less real for that.

The Isles of the

THE NOTION OF A paradise on Earth has long been part of European mythical traditions, and in Homer's *Odyssey* we find one of the oldest extant versions of the story. There, Elysium, or the Elysian Plain, is the land to which those favoured by the gods are brought. According to Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, people there 'lead an easier life than anywhere else in the world, for in Elysium there falls not rain, nor hail, nor snow, but Oceanus breathes ever with a west wind that sings softly from the sea, and gives fresh life to all men'. This, then, was not a place beyond death, but an alternative to it.

The ancient Greeks did not have one single version of this story, however. It was an evolving and multifarious idea. By the time of Plato, in the fourth century BC, Elysium was most commonly imagined as an island or archipelago in the western ocean. It was known as the White Isle, or the Isles of the Blessed, and some considered it a place to which all could aspire.

In Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*, Socrates outlines his own belief, in terms that clearly anticipate the Christian religion yet to be born. After death, he says, body and soul become separated, but each retains the character it had when alive. The fat remain fat; the scarred remain scarred. At least for a time. Equally, 'when a man is stripped of the body, all the natural or acquired affections of the soul are laid open to view'. Unlike the body, however, the soul must face judgement after death, a task un-

dertaken by three sons of Zeus. Aeacus judged those from the west and Rhadamanthus those from the east, with Minos as the final arbiter. Anyone who has 'lived unjustly and impiously shall go to the house of vengeance and punishment, which is called Tartarus'; whereas, 'he who has lived all his life in justice and holiness shall go, when he is dead, to the Islands of the Blessed, and dwell there in perfect happiness out of the reach of evil'.

The fact is, Socrates told them, 'that to do injustice is more to be avoided than to suffer injustice, and . . . the reality and not the appearance of virtue is to be followed above all things, as well in public as in private life'. Only then can one guarantee a passage to paradise.

The Celts too believed in a blessed island, according to the earliest recorded stories. In fact, there were several such islands, including Tír na nÓg, the land of eternal youth.

Blessed

Socrates knew that his listeners – the rhetoricians Gorgias, Callicles and Polus – considered this story to be a myth. But he suggested they reconsider. His own life had been well lived, he claimed, and he felt ready to present his soul 'whole and undefiled before the judge'. Did they share that confidence in themselves?

It was there to which the young warrior poet Oisín eloped with Niamh, the daughter of a sea god called Manannán mac Lir. On returning to Connemara to visit his family, three years after the marriage, Oisín discovered that a year in Tír na nÓg was the same as a century in Ireland. His family were long dead.

Other such realms were often used interchangeably. There was the island of Mag Mell, akin to Homer's Elysium, where deities and favoured mortals lived without pain or sickness. There was, too, Emhain Ablach and its Welsh equivalent Ynys Afallon, the island of apples. Fruitfulness, for the Celts, was a key feature of the place.

In medieval times, that island of apples became known most famously as Avalon. It was there that King Arthur's sword Excalibur was forged, and it was there where the king himself would later reTíre after being wounded at the Battle of Camlann. Just as for the early Greeks, the heroic Arthur had earned his place on the blessed isle, and his journey to it was an alternative to death. According to legend, the king would one day return from Avalon to fight for his people: a kind of Celtic messiah.

It is from the twelfth-century cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth that much of the story of Arthur is derived. In his *Vita Merlini*, Geoffrey described Avalon in some detail – detail that has been drawn directly from the Roman tradition of the Fortunate Isles and the Greek traditions of Elysium, the garden of Hesperides and the Isles of the Blessed.

> *The Island of Apples gets its name 'The Fortunate Island' from the fact that it produces all manner of plants spontaneously. It needs no farmers to plough the fields. There is no cultivation of the land at all beyond that which is Nature's work. It produces crops in abundance and grapes without help; and apple trees spring up from the short grass in its woods. All plants, not merely grass alone, grow spontaneously; and men live a hundred years or more.*

In cartography, the Fortunate Isles became associated with the Canaries, and medieval maps often rendered that archipelago as *Insula Fortunata*. But the mythical origins of the name were not forgotten. Although Christian teaching insisted that paradise lay in a supernatural realm, the idea of a promised land on Earth never left the European imagination. The fruitful isle remained on the western horizon. In England, the blissful land of Cockaigne was the subject of countless stories and poems; in Germany it was Schlaraffenland, the land of milk and honey; and in Spain it was Jauja, a name now attached to a small city in Peru.

As European explorers began pushing further into the Atlantic in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many expected to find such an idyll somewhere out there. Later, after Columbus, that expectation seemed for a time to have been met, and the language and imagery once associated with the Isles of the Blessed were bestowed upon the newly discovered continent. The promised land had been found, it seemed, and it was called America.

AFTER DEATH, THE bodies of islanders from Mabuiag in the Torres Strait would be taken outside and laid on a platform. Clan members of the dead person's spouse would then watch over them, to ensure that the spirit, or *mari*, had properly evacuated the corpse. They would also protect it from the hungry mouths of lizards.

After five or six days, the body, which by then would be putrid, was decapitated. The head would be placed in a nest of termites, or in water, to remove the flesh. The rest of the corpse remained on the platform, covered in grass, until only the bones were left.

Once cleaned, the skull would be coloured red and placed in a basket, decorated with feathers and hair. The deceased's in-laws, who were in charge of these rituals, would then perform an elaborate ceremony in front of the dead person's family. For this they would paint themselves black and cover their heads with leaves, before presenting the skull to the closest relative. A chant would be offered to console the mourners:

When the wind comes from the north the sky is black with clouds and there is much wind and pouring rain, but it does not last long, the clouds blow over and there is fine weather once more.

Ki

Other islands of the western Torres Strait had rituals that differed slightly from this one. In some, the body would be buried in a shallow grave, or else desiccated and mummified, while on others the skull would

be adorned with beeswax and shells. On one island – Muralug – a widow was expected to carry the skull of her husband in a bag for a year after his death, while other family members might wear his bones as ornaments, or keep them safe in their houses.

One element was common to all, however: the belief in an island of ghosts, to which the dead person's spirit would travel. That island, called Kibu, was beyond the northwest horizon, and once it had escaped from the body the *mari* would be carried there on the prevailing south-easterly winds.

Upon arrival, the spirit was met by the ghost of an acquaintance – usually their most recently deceased friend – who would take them into hiding until the next new moon. At that time they would emerge and be introduced to the other spirits of the island, who would each hit them upon the head with a stone club. This seemingly unwelcoming act was, in essence, an initiation ceremony, and from that moment on the *mari* was a *markai*: a ghost proper.

Some believed the *markai* spent their time in treetops, crying, perhaps in the form of flying foxes. But most agreed that the afterlife was not so different from this one, and that the spirits remained in human form. During the day they would hunt for fish with spears, and in the early evening they might dance on the

beach. The *markai* could also catch turtles and dugong (a marine mammal related to the manatee) by creating waterspouts, up which the animals would be drawn.

But ghosts were not restricted to Kibu. They could return home temporarily if they wished, and sometimes they would even go to war with the living. Islanders often invoked the *markai*, whether individually, through divination and spirit consultation, or in ceremonies such as the 'death dance', which was usually held several months after a person had passed away.

In Mabuiag, these ceremonies were called the *tai*, or simply the *markai*, and were held on the nearby uninhabited island of Pulu. Often they would mark the deaths of several people at once, and the details of the performance would depend on who and how many were being commemorated. The essence of the ceremony, however, was the representation of the dead by the living. Those taking part would rub their bodies in charcoal and decorate themselves with leaves and feathered headdresses, until they were fully disguised. Each would take on the character of a specific person, and would become, in the minds of the audience, that person's ghost.

The performers carried bows and arrows, or brooms, and danced and jumped before the spectators. There was an odd, slapstick element to these dances, with one performer skipping and falling over, while others loudly

broke wind. The ceremony concluded with the beating of drums and with a great feast.

Throughout the *tai*, the performers were imitating and personifying the dead. It was a form of consolation for the relatives, and an insistence on the continuation of that person's spirit. It was believed that the ghost was present within the dancers, and that it would continue to be part of the world. This connection was crucial. The divide between life and afterlife was like that between islands: it was real, but not insurmountable. It could be crossed. Like Kibu itself, the ghost world was accessible and comprehensible. But that accessibility would not last forever.

The rites and beliefs of the Torres Strait islanders were recorded by members of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition at the very end of the nineteenth century. But already then things were changing rapidly. The islands' government, together with missionaries, were eager to suppress and replace native customs. More spiritually and physically hygienic forms of burial were insisted upon, and the traditional beliefs were gradually replaced by Christian ones.

Kibu too was replaced, of course, by a heaven that was entirely unlike the islanders' own world. The afterlife today lies not just over the north-west horizon but skyward, detached entirely from the islands and from the sea. Unlike Kibu, heaven is unimaginable, and the ghosts of the dead are now gone for good.

Hawaiki

WHEN MĀORI PEOPLE first began to communicate with Europeans in the eighteenth century, they insisted that New Zealand was not their original home. Instead, they explained, their ancestors had come from Hawaiki, an island somewhere over the north-east horizon. What's more, they had not arrived in the distant past, but only a few hundred years previously.

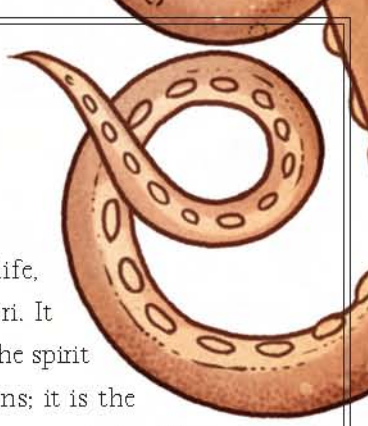
The details of this migration were not entirely clear. Different tribal groups, or *iwi*, told different versions of the story. And though their cultural memory was rich in detail, many Māori were understandably reluctant to share such important knowledge with settlers, especially since those settlers were also demanding to share their land.

In the best known version of the country's early history, a fisherman and explorer called Kupe discovered New Zealand more than a thousand years ago. He arrived there by accident, while chasing a giant octopus south across the ocean. Kupe then returned to Hawaiki and told his people about this new land in the south, which he called Aotearoa, the 'long white cloud'. Around 1350, following the instructions he had given, a 'great fleet' of seven large canoes set out to make the crossing back to Aotearoa. The passengers in those canoes were the ancestors of today's Māori.

The problem with this story is that it wasn't reliable. It was a constructed history, an amalgamation of many different tales pieced together by an ethnologist, Stephenson Percy Smith, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Smith was a thorough researcher, but his conclusions were misleading. Rather than accept the inconsistencies and mythical elements that he found within traditional stories, Smith tried instead to iron them out and present the results as fact. In doing so, he built a narrative that was neither historically accurate nor truly representative of what the Māori themselves actually believed.

As it turns out, the date Smith proposed for the 'great fleet' was not that far wrong. According to the most recent evidence, the first people to settle in the country arrived around 1280, though not in a single flotilla but more likely in several groups, perhaps over a period of decades. The Polynesians were highly skilled navigators, and there could have been contact for some time between the new and old home. In total, there may have been as few as 200 people among those first immigrants.

The Māori's geographical origin can also



now be pinpointed with a fair degree of certainty. They came from eastern Polynesia: specifically, the Cook and Society Islands. Which might provide a simple answer to the question of Hawaiki. Except that it doesn't. For Hawaiki is not simple at all. In traditional stories it is a multifaceted idea that cannot be pinned down to a single location. This island was not just the migrants' point of departure, it was part of their luggage – that rich, mythical tradition with which they arrived.

In 1793, a Māori chief called Tuki Tahua was asked to draw a map of New Zealand for the governor of New South Wales and Norfolk Island. This he did, with an impressive degree of accuracy. But in addition to the physical features of the land, Tuki also included what he called a 'spirits road', which traced the line of mountain ranges from the far south right up to the North Cape. This was the path that one would follow after death, he explained, which led ultimately to Te Reinga Wairua, 'the leaping place of the spirits'. From that final point of land, at the tip of the North Island, each spirit would dive into the ocean then swim towards the underworld, where they would find Hawaiki.

But this island unfolds still further, for these were the words with which newborn babies were traditionally welcomed into the world:

> *E taku pōtiki, kua puta mai rā koe i te toi i Hawaiki.*
> *My child, you are born from the source, which is at Hawaiki.*

Both afterlife and prelife, Hawaiki surrounds the Māori. It is the the place from which the spirit comes and to which it returns; it is the source and the destination. In some stories, it is also the place in which the very first human was created: a kind of Eden, where gods still dwell. The precise way in which the island is portrayed – the balance between physical homeland, spiritual origin and underworld – varies greatly, depending on the story being told and the local culture of the teller. But Hawaiki is a shared idea; it ties people together. And not just within New Zealand.

Eastern Polynesia is among the most recently inhabited parts of the world. Many of the islands of that region – which stretches from Hawaii in the north to Easter Island in the east and New Zealand in the south – were populated only within the past fifteen hundred years or so. The traditions of these places are closely related and interlinked, and the notion of an origin elsewhere has remained fresh in the thinking of their people. Where most cultures have myths of creation, the Polynesians have myths of migration.

For the Māori, Hawaiki is a place of goodness. It is the place from which their people, their traditions and their culture derive. It is both real and imagined, both geographical and mythical. Yet it does not divide them from their current home, for it is within as well as without. It connects, in time and in place.