

FIRST PERSON

STUART GLOVER

ISLANDING IN MORETON BAY

The idea of an island is simple enough: a piece of land completely surrounded by water. Unlike the continent whose extremities are sometimes arbitrary, or the nation whose boundaries are as much political as geographic, the island is a binary idea. There is water, and there is land. The island is land, and the clarity of it gives rise to an island's very identity and story. But at the southern end of Moreton Bay, 30 kilometres south east of Brisbane, where more than a dozen small low-lying, mosquito-blighted locks of land guard the mouth of the Logan River, there are four larger islands whose stories are not at all clear. Instead, their status as "land" at all has often been under a mark. Their history reminds us that the word "island" is a verb as well as a noun. Islands come and go, and are forever being made and unmade.

The islands of Russell, Macleay, Lamb and Karragarra are home to 5000 or so people—and many hundreds of often empty weekender-houses besides. They nestle together, further east than Coochiemudlo, but in the lee of the more glamorous North Stradbroke Island. And while "Straddie", with its surf beaches, its Aboriginal and convict lore, and its shark attacks, is a fixture in the Brisbane imagination, the four Southern Moreton Bay islands are only sometimes remembered. They, like all islands, have been made and remade in local minds many times.

SCANDAL

I have two waterfront beach houses on Macleay Island. Two beach houses is excessive, but the early 2000s real estate boom encouraged me, like many on the island, to excess. This boom was an echo of Macleay's history. Until the mid-1970s the islands had never been included under any local government area. Developers were free to do what they wished. A real estate frenzy was whipped up in the press in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and hundreds of blocks on the neighbouring Russell Island were sold off the plan to foreign and interstate investors. But unforgivably, many blocks were underwater at high

tide, or good blocks were swapped for bad after buyers had signed up. The scandal gave rise to the longest trial in Australian legal history—but one that eventually fell apart in 1983 after two years when a juror fell ill. No one was punished.

The names of the islands, particularly Russell's, were sullied. The very geography of the islands, their mix of marsh and terra firma, was at issue. Were these even islands at all? What is land? What is sea? What will a house sink on? How many bedrooms and bathrooms can a piece of stripped littoral rainforest on an island's foreshore support? Some of the small beaches on Macleay Island feature houses nestled too low in the dunes and are subject to flooding. On a still day, the waters around Coochiemudlo have a plume of bacteria. Over time, the Redland Council, which took over the islands after the scandal, reluctantly coughed up the cash to buy many of the low-lying blocks back.

IPSWICH BY THE SEA

Yet when the real estate frenzy came again at the very end of the 1990s, the buyers and the speculators—both the canny and the deluded—came once more. The *Sunday Mail* promoted that the islands had the cheapest land in South East Queensland: bush blocks for \$10,000; waterfront blocks for \$60,000. On the day I first visited a small house sold for \$49,000. Some days, they still sell for \$200,000. Mortgages and rents are low—only the car ferry, fuel and the groceries shopped from the mainland are expensive.

While Noosa to the north and Gold Coast to the south attracted rich sea-changers, the islands attracted the poor. While there is a ring of expensive houses around the 15km or so of foreshore on Macleay, the island's centre is filled with kit homes, ham-fisted two-bedders by owner-builders, and glorified sheds. It often seems like the last ungentrified waterfront development—a haven for pensioned retirees, the working poor, and single mothers. The twenty-minute ferry, to and from the mainland, is often filled with women in elasticised pants and men in fluorescent road-crew work wear. Since the GFC, house prices have begun to fall. Those surviving on welfare leave when the pressure from Centrelink to find work gets too much. The small primary school tanked on the Federal Government's *My School* website. Too many kids from vulnerable backgrounds come and go too often. It may be an island, but the escape to the mainland is always close.

THE BRIDGE FANTASY

If the mainland is always close, it is never close enough. If one thing unites island folk it is the dream of a bridge. For now, people travel back and forth

on a slow and expensive car barge, or a fast passenger ferry. The passenger ferry means the need for two cars and parking costs on the mainland. If the community is made up in a large part of people escaping from the pressures on mainland life, transport and its costs is the one issue to draw them together into political action. Local flyers and presses are filled with schemes for a new ferry, pontoons, but always a bridge: it is only a kilometre or so from Rocky Point on the mainland to southern tip of Russell.

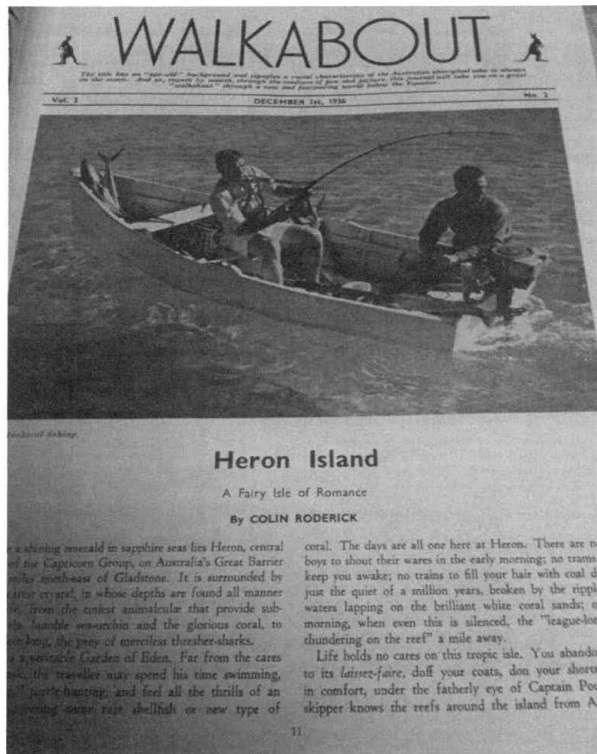
If only this expanse of water could be bridged the inconveniences of island life—the *islandness* of it—could be bridged also. The waterfront residents would be instant millionaires. But the cost—the estimate is often around the \$300 million mark—and, for some, the insistence on being an island stand in the way. Developers to the south have turned Sovereign Island into a luxury enclave with the help of a series of short bridges, but Russell and Macleay remain adrift.

HOPE AMONG THE MANGROVES

If much of Macleay's history has been shaped by the idea of being unknown, unchartered, unreachable, and unloved, there is hope. While the developers have been marginalised, the islands have been declared part of the Moreton Bay Marine Park. A large conservation area has been fashioned on Russell. Wetlands reserves have been protected on Macleay. When the convict Tim O'Shea became the first white settler on the island when escaped to there from Stradbroke in 1837, he hid in these wetlands. He was isolated enough to never learn that he had been pardoned. Now both the story and the beauty of these places have been preserved.

In what is perhaps the last reminder of the process of islanding, the islands continue to grow. In the late 1800s the mangroves on Macleay were often cleared on make life easier for the oystermen who were in search of stocks of lime. Now, the protected mangroves trap the sands, and the island swells but an extra inch or two every year. They creep ever closer to the shore. They resist the rising tides of global warming. They insist upon themselves. They declare themselves as islands once more.

STUART GLOVER teaches writing at the University of Queensland. He lives, sometimes, on Macleay Island in Southern Moreton Bay.



Colin Roderick was foundation Professor of English Literature at James Cook University in Townsville. He created the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies (FALS) whose prestigious annual lecture series and literary prize bear his name. FALS is one of LINQ's key sponsors. Roderick loved the tropics and particularly the reef. His first person piece on Heron Island appeared on the front page of Walkabout, Australia's premier travel magazine, in December 1936. It was entitled A Fairy Isle of Romance.