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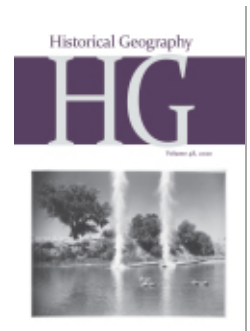
*Phantom Islands: In Search of Mythical Lands* by Dirk  
Liesemer (review)

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*Phantom Islands: In Search of Mythical Lands*. Dirk Liesemer.

Translated by Peter Lewis. London: Haus Publishing, 2019 (2016). Pp. 159, maps, bibliography. \$24.95, hardcover, ISBN 978-1-912208-32-6.

Islands have a time-tested real estate claim in the psyche of the human mind. As a form of Rorschach test, islands become representations showcasing viewpoints and goals of the societies that seek them. Some examples include islands as a “natural laboratory” for questions regarding ecological distribution or evolution, islands as resources of mineral deposits, and islands as vassal states, strategic outposts, or keen places to explode nuclear weapons. In some cases islands are seen as a perfect place for penalty, such as Australia or Alcatraz, and in other cases, they are viewed as ultimate paradises or escapes, for example, Atlantis or Breasil. When reading *Phantom Islands*, the reader is a traveler exploring these competing motives in the search for lands that ultimately are just out of reach for those that seek them. This is one of the alluring elements of this text. Regardless of the hope a reader may experience as they go along with the explorers in their search for the faraway lands, whatever motive that drove them to these far reaches will be in vain—at least, for the time being. Geographers are ready to interrogate the traces of culture that slowly build the places we mark on the maps of our world. *Phantom Islands* allows an opportunity to interrogate this process. These preliminary palimpsests seem to have starting points that are defined by their existence but take on meaning without having hosted human feet. At what point are cultural traces implemented? Does the place in question need to exist? And, if it existed once, and was mapped, but never found again, does it remain a place?

The book is divided into brief vignettes highlighting different stories about supposed islands around the world. These accounts are fascinating and eclectic. Some of them encompass the log entries of ship captains, and others are materialized from stories repeated by wayward travelers. Some of the chapters read similarly to classic Greek and Roman mythology, including descriptions of wild beasts, humanoid giants, and strange vegetation. Some of the missions to unknown places were based on simple tales told repeatedly in local ports. Reading these chapters showcases to the modern GIS user that cartographic tools and skills were once gained by simply setting course for the horizon, or as Liesemer describes it, “built from the ground up” (11). We may find these

to be outstanding follies and risky endeavors from our easy chairs in the twenty-first century, but Liesemer punctures the protective assurance of our modern conveniences by including a recent story of an unknown island sought after by a female captain, which was incorrectly charted on Google Earth.

The book itself is small and colored a beautiful blue hue, which reminded me of the outstanding blue waters of Caribbean islands, like the Great Inagua, in the Bahamas. Liesemer's writing style is humorous at times but also philosophical, for example, Liesemer's description of the earth as body and soul, with the waters that circulate as the blood that brings the body life (11). Some chapters contain small codas that reveal morsels of updated and relevant facts about the story but that might not merit their own chapter. On several occasions I found myself doing further research on these fascinating stories that weave together societies and places.

Curious readers will find an antipode text in Judith Schalansky's *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands: Fifty Islands I Have Never Visited and Never Will* (Penguin Books, 2010). Schalansky and Liesemer's texts are remarkably similar in their layout—a map of an island preceding a short tale about the island. One book describes islands that don't exist but are thought to, and the other describes islands that exist . . . as far as we know. But after reading *Phantom Islands* it is easy to see how something can seem so certainly there but yet fall just out of reach.

The quickly summarized narratives are both the strength and weakness of this book. Sometimes the reader is left wanting more details surrounding these curious cases. The ability of Liesemer's concise accounts to pique the reader's curiosity and a sense of wonder comes into view when considering a similar book, *Lost Islands* by Henry Stommel (Dover Publications, 2017). Here they would find a more detailed text with intricate maps and duly referenced context. Stommel's book includes fold-out maps and copious descriptions in the historical narratives of "lost" islands, while Liesemer supplies smaller, more digestible tales to chew.

Criticisms of the book include the maps that start most of the chapters. Some of them include references to known landmasses or cartographic features, and others do not. The reader may wonder how the cartographer decided to draw the islands without any reference. Liesemer includes a helpful note attempting to explain some of the

difficulty of drawing such phantom lands only described in historical documents, but she fails to explain how certain islands appear so well placed and others do not. Also, this note of reference might have been better placed at the beginning of the book, as an aid for the reader. Another small criticism of this overall wonderful book: the chapters are arranged by alphabetical order of the name of the island. As I read, my mind kept thinking in terms of water bodies. Perhaps the text may have been better organized in terms of region.

Overall, *Phantom Islands* will be a good read for curious, wandering minds. It may also be a nice text on a list of books for a course about island geography, cultural geography, or nautical history. The book is easily accessible to a wide variety of readers. Just as the fabled Charybdis pulled in countless ships to seal their fates, you will be drawn into these tales of exploration of faraway places. You will likely find yourself rushing to your preferred search engine to find out more about these fascinating edge points of human stories.

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*Ciudad Juárez: Saga of a Legendary Border City*. Oscar J. Martínez. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018. Pp. xi+330, photographs, tables, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. \$90.00, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8165-3721-1. \$29.95, paperback, ISBN 978-0-8165-3722-8.

Mexican border cities have long had an “unsavory reputation” in the United States and even interior Mexico (x). North of the border they are often associated with vice tourism, undocumented migration, the loss of factory jobs, drug trafficking, and violence. This is particularly true of Ciudad Juárez, the oldest and largest border city, which is the focus of historian Oscar Martínez’s book, *Ciudad Juárez: Saga of a Legendary Border City*. Martínez, who grew up in Juárez, attended school in El Paso, and taught at the University of Texas at El Paso for many years, is the consummate guide to the economic and social history of Juárez and reminds readers that, as Mexico’s sixth largest city, it also “represents a vibrant community” (4).

This work expands on the author’s first book, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848*, a classic in border studies published in 1978