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The last outpost of Empire: Rockall and the Cold War

Fraser MacDonald

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Abstract

This paper is about what can be seen at sea. It considers the historical geography of a site at the geopolitical axis of the British Empire and the Cold War. It focuses on a hitherto unacknowledged historical reference point: the last territorial expansion of the UK, which laid claim to the tiny islet of Rockall, lying some 300 miles west of the Scottish mainland. Rockall was annexed in September 1955 because it was situated within radio-electrical range of a test site for Britain's first nuclear missile, the American-made 'Corporal'™. As a 'tactical'™ nuclear missile designed for potential deployment in Eastern Europe, the Corporal was a central part of NATO defence policy in the 1950s. Crucial to its development was a testing station in the Outer Hebrides, from which the guided missile could be fired and its ballistic trajectory tracked over the North Atlantic. Occupying an area only 83 feet across and 100 feet wide, Rockall represented a strategic vantage point for the rival gaze of Soviet intelligence. Following Paul Virilio's argument that the logic of war is less about scoring territorial or material victories than about securing 'the 'immaturity' of perceptual fields'™, this paper details the

securing the territoriality of perceptual fields, this paper details the ceremonial annexation of Rockall and the subsequent transformation of the Hebridean seascape into a vast topography for military surveillance. This final expansive moment of British imperialism was legitimated by symbolic and rhetorical strategies tying Rockall to both earlier geographical exploration and the science of natural history.



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Keywords

Atlantic; Rockall; Seascape; Cold War; Geopolitics; Empire

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