

Floating Islands: A Global Bibliography

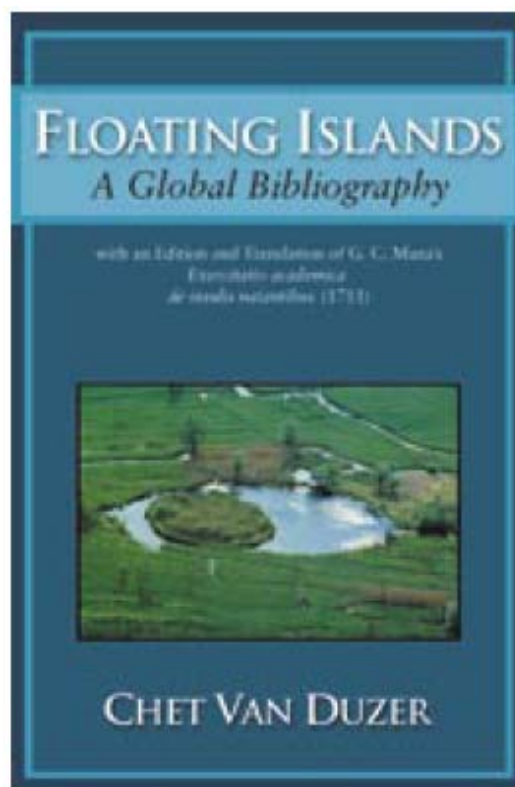
with an edition and translation of G.C. Munz's *Exercitatio academica de insulis natantibus* (1711)

Chet Van Duzer (2004)
Cantor Press, Los Altos Hills, California

404 pages plus 24 Plates
Hardcover

Price: \$44.95

ISBN 0-9755424-0-0



This book arrived with eight paragraphs of advance praise from North and South America, Europe and Japan. These mentioned exhaustiveness, erudition, 'exhilarating scholarship', the book's interest to 'agronomists and island scholars' and described it as 'a window to one of the enigmas of natural history'. High praise indeed, but there was scant mention of mires or peat - except from Hans Joosten who said that 'all possible items from floating bogs to pumice islands and from bird nest rafts to floating airports' were covered. Of course I was fascinated, but also slightly perplexed about its potential relevance for the readership of *Mires and Peat*.

The author apparently anticipated my question and answered it on the first page of the Introduction. His principal focus is on natural floating islands which consist either of peaty soil made buoyant by gases released by decomposition, or of buoyant aquatic vegetation that may or may not have organic sediments amongst its roots. In other words, floating islands could be mires; especially if we regard peat as autochthonous so long as it is still *in situ* beneath the vegetation that formed it, even if that vegetation is not still in the same location as it was when it formed the peat. But it is perhaps more generally true that floating islands originate as or in mires, for example by separating from floating mats of mire vegetation attached to the shores of lakes, or by rising from the floors of mire pools.

The other thing about the Introduction is that it is

beautifully written, grasping the imagination instantly and leading one into the subject. I was immediately 'hooked'.

Natural floating islands, once formed, acquire new qualities, as "mobile biomes" with functions in distributing plants and animals to some, and as "metaphors for our own lives ... pushed here and there by the winds" to others. They share characteristics with non-mire floating islands, from floating pumice and nests to the evocative image of Delos with its high mountains and vast plains which, long wandering in the Aegean, was alone amongst islands in never having felt the shock of an earthquake. Sheep board them when they come to the edges of lakes and take advantage of the good grazing as they are blown hither and thither by the wind, until the chance to disembark presents itself – an 1811 photograph to be found as close to (my) home as the University of St Andrews shows such an example in Scotland's own Bonnie Loch Lomond. Another photograph, included amongst the 24 Plates at the back of the book, shows two men at a small lake in what is obviously a fen in Turkey, using a pole to pull an island, complete with two trees and a shrub layer, into the shore so that they can step onto it.

Van Duzer is obviously fascinated. His enthusiasm must owe at least a little to Georg Christoph Munz (1691–1768), a clergyman from Nürnberg who wrote on a range religious and

geographical topics. The *Bibliography* is built around Munz's rare 1711 dissertation *Exercitatio academica de insulis natantibus*, written in Latin and reproduced in full by Van Duzer, with English translation on facing pages. It contains two chapters, the first describing the properties of floating islands and the second dealing with their 'causes'. Munz's account of oily material rising from the bottom of a lake to form a 'tender skin' on the water's surface which becomes gradually augmented by new additions of leaves and dust is reminiscent of the early stages of floating mat formation that I was shown in central Russia only last year. And the lake near Stockholm which seems to be gradually filling with earth but beneath which lies 'the lake, its waters full of fish' is clearly terrestrialising.

The author has attempted to locate all existing copies of Munz's *Exercitatio*, and knows the whereabouts of eleven - in two versions - worldwide. He also provides extensive notes on Munz's narrative and source literature, and has taken great pains to identify the locations of the islands described - even those that have changed their names and/or are no longer there. And these are just a couple of many examples of his meticulously scholarly approach to the subject.

The bibliography itself contains, apparently, more than 1,500 references to articles in newspapers, unpublished consultancy reports and books as well as mainstream scientific literature, in tens of languages. It distils out the content and focus of each item into a series of concise synopses that make surprisingly riveting reading. Amongst the many gems of new information included are accounts of floating-up of flooded peat in reservoirs in Sweden and the Ukraine, of muskegs on Lake Superior, and on the use of floating islands to fertilise sandy soils in the Danube delta; as well as information on more familiar topics such as floating *Carex limosa* mats in the Swiss Alps, Barbara and Klaus Dierssen's account of floating islands on the Wildseemoor, Edgar Karofeld's work on floating peat in Estonian bog pools and John Tallis's account of terrestrialisation of pond basins in North Cheshire (UK).

And that is not the end. There follow 37 thematic and geographical indices to the bibliography; so the searching for works on, for example, the vegetation, birds, wildlife habitat or human use of floating islands - or on where floating islands are to be found in Kazakhstan - has already been done. And in appendices there is a continent-by-continent list of floating islands not described in print and a further bibliography of early accounts of new volcanic islands. I have tended to pick out and remark on information that feels 'local' to me, but as the

treatment is similar for the whole of the book's worldwide coverage, I have a feeling that it will work this way for a reader anywhere on the globe.

The three pages of Acknowledgments addressed to individuals from all over the world speak volumes for the thoroughness with which Van Duzer has pursued the topic. Throughout his work there is repeated evidence of impressive linguistic ability combined with meticulous editing. I found a single mistake - the omission of an 'of' from line 8 of page vii.

All in all, this is an unusual and stimulating work which is, yes, refreshingly scholarly in its approach and realisation. It is of value not only for the wealth of information that it contains, but also for the standard that it sets for the rest of us to emulate. My copy is already well-used, but I am still mildly surprised by an involuntary tinge of reverence each time I lift it down from the bookshelf.

Even after the book was published, Van Duzer could not stop collecting information. Within two years (in mid-2006), there was sufficient new material to produce a set of *Addenda* containing almost 200 further references along with 16 old and new photographs. One of the old photos shows a possibly 1950s Girl Guide (i.e. member of a uniformed organisation that offers activities for girls in Britain) standing with a Union Jack (British flag) on an intermittently floating island in Derwentwater in the English Lake District. And a new one shows Van Duzer himself in a similar pose in the very same place; not with the 'stars and stripes', but with a canoe paddle. The final addendum gives a fascinating account of landing and walking on the island when he found it 'up' during a one-day visit in July 2005.

Three of the 'praise' passages that I began with are included in the *Addenda*, along with a new one from the *African Journal of Aquatic Science*:

"Once I opened the book to see what I had to review, I could not put it down ... resulted in utter chaos in our household. This bibliography is an amazing, in-depth, thorough piece of research. Every environmental-related institute should acquire a copy, not only as an invaluable reference book but also as an example to all up-and-coming scientists."

I know just what that reviewer means.

The *Addenda* can be found at <http://cantorpress.com/floatingislandsaddenda/>

Olivia Bragg
March 2008