

**Royal Holloway Travel Awards Report:**

**Rathlin Island Research Trip**

For the first three years of my PhD, when asked what my project was, I responded the same: “It’s a horror novel that isn’t scary, historical fiction that isn’t true, and nature writing about a place I’ve never been.” Two of these decisions were deliberate; the project strives for strangeness and alienation far more than ghouls and gore; attempts at authentic recreation are approached with an eye to the fiction, to warping that reality. But confinement to a dingy Croydon flat which did more for my mental illnesses than I thought possible enforced this final constraint. Covid locked us all down, and I came to rely on secondary research and the flights of my imagination.

Thankfully, travel restrictions have since lifted and the Royal Holloway Doctoral School Research Awards 2021–2022 were granted. This funding enabled me to visit Rathlin Island, the site of my research, and weigh the fact against the fiction. Located off the coast of Ballycastle in Northern Ireland, much of Rathlin Island has been designated as Special Areas of Conservation, Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Special Protection Areas. Furthermore, it comprises part of the Antrim Coast & Glens Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is protected by the RSPB. With a population of just over one-hundred, it is, in every sense of the term, an ecological utopia.

And, thus, the perfect setting for an ecohorror novel about climate crisis, when so many of these havens are at risk. As an ecological piece, the sense of place—the specifics of its flora and fauna, its weather and its landscapes—was vital to transporting the reader. Scientific data has the unfortunate consequence of being cold and clinical, changing climate crisis into a hyperobject which we fail to emotionally identify with. By situating the reader on Rathlin Island, site of sheer beauty, under the weight of climate catastrophe, my work hopes to create this resonance.

Michael Wheatley

During my stay, I immersed myself in the ecology of Rathlin Island. Hasty notes, such as “every black speck is a bird” and “yellow and purple jellyfish”, were later weaved into the novel:

The remains of jellyfish, translucent and gelatinous, withered along the shore. Limpets had bound themselves to the rock. With the departure of the sun, the seaweed was thriving; the shore was as the Sargasso Sea.

I, too, explored the museum, walked from Rue Point to Bull Point, interviewed the residents of Rathlin Island, including Stewart and Una, my hosts, and even went on a guided seaweed forage. I saw kittiwakes and guillemots and puffins before they migrated for the winter; all, previously, fabrications in my imagination. Each of these details provided my project a sense of authenticity, the truth of a captured scene:

The landscape of Rathlin ebbed and flowed in turn, the ground warped into waves. To walk across the island was to scale hills and hillocks, to descend into valleys of heath. Cliffs not only bordered the island but rose against the trails. Towering ledges of speckled rock arching high over well-trodden paths.

Though, an eye had to remain on the fiction. The Watchtower—my invented inn built on top of a scaffold on the side of the White Cliffs—was nowhere to be seen. Yet, the novel did slowly start to come true. On Day 8 of the stay, sea fog descended all across the island. Mirroring the events of the novel, I started screaming and ran outside, capturing the scene.

I am especially grateful to the Royal Holloway Doctoral School Research Awards for funding a creative project as they have become increasingly devalued over the past decade. It is culture, not capital, which helps us to perceive our world, and develop our understanding of the issues it faces. In the final year of my PhD, now, the end is in sight. Since my return from Rathlin Island, I have edited *The Horned God: Weird Tales of the Great God Pan* for The British Library. The travel awards were essential, truly invaluable. I attach, finally, some photographs.

Michael Wheatley



