

Paradise Lost? Searching for the Perfect Place

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The term 'paradise' is widely used but not always in the same way. The resultant dilemma is that if its different meanings are not universally recognised there cannot be a common understanding; a degree of precision in terminology is essential. Moreover, through its undisciplined use, the currency has become debased; like anything that is free, it too easily loses value. Yet the reality is that the concept of paradise, so widely sought, cannot be bought cheaply. In fact, it will be argued that it is by no means certain that it can be bought at all. Once lost, it is unlikely that it can be recovered; paradise is not for sale.

Encouragement to write this paper stems from an invitation to contribute to an interdisciplinary workshop held at the University of Seychelles in April 2017. As a geographer with a penchant for utopian ideas, I have for long been fascinated by the evidence of people searching for the perfect place. If I am honest, I have myself at times been lured by the prospect and it is probably no coincidence that I find myself writing this piece in a part of the world that is often associated in the popular imagination with thoughts of paradise. Seychelles, in the language of its tourist literature, is commonly portrayed in this way. Its promoters have done their job well as, around the world – whether at an airline check-in desk or amongst family and friends – this is often how it is imagined.

In fact, the idea of paradise is more complex than it might at first seem and an exploration of its meaning can reveal much about human aspirations, past as well as present, rational as well as misguided. Thus, in the rest of this paper I will point to contrasting meanings and portrayals, with the aim of showing what it is not, as well as what it is. Of particular relevance to Seychelles, I will then ask why paradise is so often associated with islands. Paradise may well be lost (if, indeed, it ever existed) but I will show that there are always people who try to make it a reality. Finally, in the spirit of the provenance of this paper, I will offer a few comments on how this kind of study can exemplify the value of interdisciplinary research.

‘This is Paradise’

A place or condition of great happiness where everything is exactly as you would like it to be...

(Cambridge Dictionary, 2017)

The concept is timeless but the word ‘paradise’ itself is believed to have been first used in Persia, where it was conceptualized as a walled garden (itself a metaphor for the geographical containment of perfection). It was then adapted by the ancient Greeks, prior to finding its way into mainstream western thinking. At the same time, it took its place in a variety of eastern traditions and, from the seventh century, in the new religion of Islam. Along this circuitous route its inherent subtleties have been corrupted into everyday language to describe places and experiences of delight: ‘this is paradise’, you hear people say. But, as we will see, the very idea of places of delight is open to different interpretations.

One popular *genre* is especially intriguing. Thus, it is ironic that paradise, at root a deeply spiritual term, has acquired commercial value. There will be few business directories around the world that do not carry the word in one form or another to project a favourable image of a myriad of products and services: Paradise Café (with Paradise Burgers invariably the signature dish); Paradise Computer Services; Hotel Paradiso; Paradise Pizzas; a suburb of the Australian city of Adelaide that carries this name; and in America, an otherwise nondescript township called Paradise. It is as if an association with the term will itself boost sales, drive up residential values and attract investment. Not surprisingly, the concept also features in popular lyrics, as Phil Collins reminds us with the words:

*Oh
Think twice
‘Cause it’s another day
For you and me
In paradise.*

Everyone, it seems, wants to share in paradise, even if few can be sure of what it really is.

Paradise is, in fact, a complex concept and one has to delve beneath the surface of contemporary usage to reveal its various origins and depth of meaning. There are different interpretations – religious and cultural – but all share an association with a distant past that is, by inference, better than the present. In a classic of its day, the twentieth-century academic, Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, warned of a seductive tendency to think of the past itself as a lost idyll. Referring to this as the ‘escalator effect’ he argued that each generation looks back to something that was better, like a child will recall times at play with the sun always shining. In a more esoteric exploration of the concept, Richard

Heinberg (1989) contends that the memory of an original Golden Age is 'pervasive and deep' and that 'the stereotypical image of paradise is a perennial focus for human yearnings'.

One thing is clear: paradise, it would seem, is never in the 'here and now'. Lost in the hidden dimensions of time, it is not even certain whether paradise is a purely spiritual construct or whether it is rooted in history. Was there once a world where perfection was everywhere in evidence, or is the idea purely a product of a fertile imagination? Are we simply imagining that the past was better than the present? Even more challenging, is paradise a place that was, or still can be, found on earth or is it reserved for life hereafter? Is it for the living or the dead? There is, in fact, no single answer to these various questions and one has to look, instead, to some of the more important exemplars.

In the western, Judeo-Christian tradition the ultimate earthly paradise is the Garden of Eden (where the main references are to be found in the Old Testament Book of *Genesis*). For here the rivers flowed with milk and honey, the trees were laden with ripe fruits, and Adam and Eve lived in a state of seemingly eternal love and innocence. Amidst such bliss, all that the first humans were instructed to do was to tend the garden and refrain from picking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Alas, as the English poet, John Milton, commiserated in the seventeenth century in his epic poem with the telling title, *Paradise Lost*, the temptation proved too great and the idyll of Eden was all too soon destroyed. Eve took a bite from the apple offered by the Satanic serpent, and the rest, as they say, is history. Humans have ever since been searching for what was lost. Milton wrote a later epic called *Paradise Regained* but redemption is no easy matter (Milton, 1667 and 1671). Once the genie is out of the bottle it will not easily return. It may be scant compensation for the living but at least the Bible would, in the final book of the New Testament, offer hope of an afterlife in Heaven: '*a great city in the sky, its streets paved with gold, where God is worshipped for eternity*'. This New Jerusalem was an enticing prospect but it was never to match the Garden of Eden in the popular imagination.

Anthropologists have questioned the widely-accepted belief that the biblical Garden of Eden was the original version of paradise, pointing instead to the Sumerian civilization in the fertile Tigris-Euphrates valley. The Sumerians settled there from as early as the fifth millennium BC, and a mythology evolved of their own paradise (located in an even earlier past). The name of this was Dilmun, a place of pure harmony:

*That place was pure, that place was clean.
In Dilmun the raven croaked not.
The kite shrieked not kite-like.
The lion mangled not.*

*The wolf ravaged not the lambs...
None caused the doves to fly away.*

(Heinberg, 1989, p42)

Also from ancient times, as early as the eighth century BC, Greek poets conceived their own, classical form of paradise, the Elysian Fields, the eternal isles of the blessed. The idea was passed down through the centuries, with Aristophanes in the fifth century BC portraying this wondrous place in the following terms:

*On, to the fields of roses,
The meadows gay with flowers;
Old custom so disposes,
Dance out the merry hours.
Beside us go the Muses blest
Uniting us in song and jest.*

(Aristophanes, online source)

At first the Elysian Fields were located somewhere far to the west of the Mediterranean, sometimes in the form of specific islands, encouraging thoughts of being accessible and thereby offering the prospect of a heaven on earth. Later versions of Elysium, however, were reserved solely for the dead. This is how it is portrayed in Roman literature, too, with Virgil, for instance, speaking of the Blessed Fields imparting health and eternal life to those who have earned blessings. (Snodgrass, 1995, pp191-2)

It is always an elusive concept, yet there can be few traditions that resist its lure. With Hinduism, the highest of heavens is said to be the place where Vishnu, the supreme god, resides. Upon arrival, the souls are granted love and fellowship with Vishnu, which lasts for eternity. For Muslims, as well, there is little in prospect while living, and paradise is definitely for a later incarnation.

If earthly behavior proves merit, the faithful will cross the bridge of al-Aaraf and know an otherworldly union with the Almighty, who promises satisfaction of all earthly appetites.

(Snodgrass, 1995, p260)

And so it goes on – a shared vision of wonderful places and wonderful people, where all live in peace and harmony. The story is one where, from one generation to another, people are not deterred by the troubling fact that paradise is elusive, sometimes only attainable after death. Indeed, in a later section of this paper we will see how there have been numerous attempts to locate it firmly on earth, and therefore to keep it constantly within reach of the living. But whether it is a place reserved for the afterlife or somewhere to seek in the present, islands, in particular, often provide the venue.

Islands of Paradise

If you know from where to set sail, with a friendly pilot offering expertise, it should not take you too long to reach Utopia.

(Miéville, 2016)

The term ‘utopia’ is another term for the perfect place, although, unlike paradise, it is not so often linked to conventional religious thought. Utopia, instead, is a work of fiction, sometimes a political tool that indirectly illustrates and advocates radical change. The world need not be as it is, claim utopians, and they proceed to illustrate how much better it could become. But that is only the first part of the argument; the more difficult question is to ask how one gets from the here and now to where one would like to be. It is a difficult, some would say impossible, journey but that is not enough to deter travellers in search of paradise from setting out. Hope is the basic motivation, the fuel that powers successive missions.

Utopias come in many shapes and sizes but a recurring theme is to locate the perfect place on an island. It is hard to disagree with the observation that:

... the island utopia has been a standard since antique times: Eusebius’s Panchaea and Iambulus’s Islands of the Sun; Henry Neville’s Isle of Pines, and Antangil, from the anonymous 1616 novel of that name; Bacon’s Bensalem; Robert Paltock’s Nosmnbdsgrutt, from The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins; Huxley’s Pala; Austin Tappan Wright’s Islandia; and countless others. And in the centre of that great archipelago of dissent and hope, one place, one name, looms largest.

(Miéville, 2016)

The name that looms largest in this context is, in fact, the eponymous *Utopia*, a fictional island envisaged by Thomas More, the principled advisor in the court of Henry VIII (More, 1965 edition). More’s depiction of utopia – tellingly, the word ‘utopia’ in ancient Greek meaning either ‘perfect place’ or ‘no place’ – was conceived as an antidote to the less-than-perfect conditions in England at the time. Many of the things that were wrong about the world he knew were put to right in his fictional work or, coining the words of a later utopian writer, the world was turned upside down. Demonstrating the continuity of utopian thought, this idea of turning the world upside down was repeated in the seventeenth century by an English radical, Gerrard Winstanley. He challenged conventional wisdom on a number of fronts, including the belief that all common land should be appropriated by the poor (Hill, 1973). Winstanley, like More before him, also lived at a time when dissenters entered dangerous territory when voicing their views.

Thomas More, a devout Catholic, was himself only too aware of the dangers of being too openly critical of his king's demands in the course of establishing his own sovereign church; the price of dissent was high. Thus, the thinly disguised use of an imaginary island to air his views was intended to deflect attention. So, too, the fact that his book was first published, in 1516, in the scholarly language of Latin, also restricted popular interest in what he had to say. But, as his own unfortunate circumstances showed, his steadfast beliefs led eventually to his downfall, when he was executed in 1535 for refusing to recognize King Henry as the head of the newly-established Church of England.

In the following century, William Shakespeare, in *The Tempest*, made his own contribution to utopian thought; the first performance of the play was in 1611. He used as his medium a principal character, Gonzalo, the trusted counsellor of the rightful Duke of Milan. After a hazardous sea journey, the main characters find themselves cast ashore on a remote island, providing Gonzalo with the perfect setting to proclaim his radical ideas for an ideal society. It helped that the island in question was bountiful, offering a plentiful supply of food, so that the burden of everyday toil was not called for.

*I' the commonwealth I would, by contraries,
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty...*

*All things in common should produce
Without sweat or endeavor; treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,
Of its own kind, all foison [plenty], all abundance,
To feed my innocent people...*

*I would with such perfection govern, sir,
To excel the golden age.*

(II.i)

Utopias are all about exciting the imagination and it is not difficult to see why the idea of placing them on an island responded to that. In part, it was simply because an island is a geographical entity, by definition separated from the rest of the imperfect world. Normally far out in the ocean, beyond the immediate horizon, islands were portrayed as places offering freedom to experiment, away from the watchful eyes of priests and politicians. Another reason why they lent themselves to this genre is that, in an age of discovery, European sailing ships crossed the oceans not knowing what they would find. This gave rise, in turn, to the belief that perhaps, on one of these hitherto undiscovered islands, there awaited a paradise on earth. Perhaps even the lost Garden of Eden?

The early explorers lent a degree of credence to what were essentially fanciful ideas, when they returned with tales of islands, sometimes uninhabited, with lush forests where trees bowed under the weight of succulent fruits and the surrounding waters teemed with fish. They brought back with them spices that soon became the source of a valuable trade, as well as hardwoods, silks and precious gemstones; for the merchants who financed these trips, international trade was the future. But for the general populace, it was the bawdier side of these distant islands that captured the imagination. Sailors in the taverns elaborated on what they had seen, with tales of treasures to be won and exaggerated descriptions of scantily-clothed maidens awaiting their return.

Even with the passing of the age of discovery, the allure of islands continued. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the French artist, Paul Gauguin, decided that there must still be places uncorrupted by modern civilization. Believing that paradise could yet be discovered, he made his way to the Pacific island of Tahiti. In fact, he arrived too late, behind rather than ahead of western influence, but that did not stop him from creating his own fantasies. As an accomplished artist, he perfected a new style of painting, using bright colours and simplistic forms, but as a person he exploited the innocence and good nature of the local women and children whom he portrayed. Only later were critics to expose his exploitative behavior, but at the time his paintings of voluptuous women in a tropical idyll only served to confirm popular notions of paradise.

Little wonder that these exotic images brought light to the everyday world of Europeans, living under overcast skies and enduring a cold climate for much of the year. Little wonder, too, that such imagery has been revived by the modern tourism industry, offering the prospect of paradise, now just a few hours away. Paradise is a powerful brand. Surely, everyone would like to visit such a place, at least so long as it can live up to certain expectations; two in particular. One is the kind of luxuriant environment that a tropical location can offer, the other is the separation from the rest of the world afforded by an island.

Against this background, the islands of Seychelles meet all the requirements and, sure enough, the venue is portrayed, without reservation, as paradise *par excellence*. In fact, most of the promotional literature for Seychelles seems to allude to paradise at one point or another: ‘Welcome to Paradise: Welcome to Seychelles’ proclaims one advertisement; ‘Seychelles a paradise for people and wildlife’ another. Each year, visitors arrive in their thousands, lured by the prospect of finding paradise on earth and most are not disappointed. There is much to enjoy in the natural environment of Seychelles and there are few other places that can still match its pristine qualities. But, compared with its original connotations, the present view of paradise is, perhaps inevitably, partial. For most people now, who travel to faraway places, the concept has become a purely physical concept. It is no small joy to discover places of exceptional natural beauty, yet for the modern tourist the term is used to describe just that and not the totality of human existence that was embodied in the Garden of Eden and its many bedfellows.

It is the idyllic nature of the natural environment of Seychelles which has been popularized by the resident artist, Michael Adams. Since 1972, when he made the main island of Mahé his home, he has developed a distinctive style of art derived from the intricate shapes and colours to be found around him. Many of his paintings explore the complexities of the luxuriant vegetation that characterizes the islands. He has lived through tempestuous times, with the formation of a promised socialist utopia soon after his arrival giving way, in time, to a mixed economy, but for Adams the richness of his natural surroundings surpasses everything else. No-one has done more, locally, to give expression to the concept of paradise, for which the islands are now renowned.

Another creative resident of Seychelles is Glynn Burridge, a writer who lived for two decades on one of the group of outer islands known as The Amirantes. His writings extend beyond descriptions of the physical splendor of this remote and unique environment, yet it is that which provides a constant backcloth:

Set like gemstones in the immense blue of the Indian Ocean, they at first appear unreal, the inspired work of a master-cartoonist who has succeeded in realizing a caricature of the perfect world... No pretty picture shall ever capture the full beauty of the isles nor shall any clever turn of phrase ensnare their soul within a net of mere words. When we have used up phrases like ‘the last Paradise’ to describe lesser places, what remains to do justice to the untouched wonders of these magnificent miniature worlds?

(Burridge, 2014, p1)

Paradise, however, is a fragile concept, balanced precariously between past and present. Retaining a pristine natural environment is a challenge in itself, and Seychelles, as a leading example, does very well with more than half of its land area enjoying protected status.

Added to this is the growing protection afforded to its surrounding sea. This is what the tourists come to see and in that respect the islands deliver what is promised. In the modern world, is it realistic to expect anything more? Surely, when Adam and Eve transgressed, that was the end of social harmony? And in other traditions it is much the same story. Human history tells of many material achievements but not of living peaceably together. Seychelles cannot claim to be an exception in this respect but it probably fares better than many other societies, as the following words from the Preamble of the Third Constitution and an ongoing process of reconciliation testify. Thus:

AWARE and PROUD that as descendants of different races we have learnt to live together as one Nation under God and can serve as an example for a harmonious multi-racial society.

It is, by and large, a friendly and tolerant society. But, as with any other nation, it cannot be judged against an abstract template of paradise. We are all part of the same world and no one part of it can live in isolation; sadly, it is a world with widespread blemishes, some more damaging than others. It would seem that paradise, in this sense, remains beyond reach. The best one can hope for, surely, is a beautiful environment, far from the madding crowd; anything more than that is dependent on humans behaving better than they have done throughout history. Peace should take the place of war, sustenance instead of famine, cooperation rather than competition. But what are the chances of this?

The chances are, of course, slim if not impossible. Yet, against all the odds, there are those who persist in the belief that such a transformation is possible. Humans are not inherently bad, they will argue, but, instead, they have been corrupted by perverse forms of society. If the natural goodness of people can be recovered, then there are no limits to what might be done. Paradise, according to this world view, is not beyond reach. Nor does one have to wait for the hereafter to get there. The prospect of paradise on earth is possible and, to make the point, there have been – and continue to be – numerous attempts to make it happen. In the next section, to illustrate the theme, we will look at just a few of these.

The Quest for Paradise

The world was all before them, where to choose... They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way.

(Milton, 1667)

The prospect of finding a better world is so alluring that, from one generation to another, people have obstinately defied rationality, ignoring the compelling fact that their predecessors have all failed in this same quest. Armed with their various plans, they have

turned their backs on mainstream society and set out on their own quest. But the path is formidable and, like a mirage, the distant glimpse of nirvana never gets any closer. Some travel further than others but, ultimately, the destination proves to be beyond reach.

Who are these people who start on impossible journeys? Far from being few in number, there is no shortage of examples from the past to the present day. In some periods they are more numerous than in others, but the remarkable thing is that there is always some evidence of such endeavours, from secluded religious communities to modern communes. There are numerous accounts of community experiments in the United States (see, for instance, Don Pitzer, ed., 1997). To illustrate their persistence, one especially fruitful period was America in the nineteenth century, at the time of the opening of the frontier. In spite of the earlier settlement of the land by North American Indians, much of the vast continent remained pristine. In some ways, the forests and plains that awaited the boatloads of settlers arriving from Europe already resembled paradise. But that was not enough for the newcomers. With so much virginal land beyond and so few regulations to hinder experiments, surely this provided an unprecedented opportunity to plant the seeds of a new society. Where Adam and Eve had failed, they believed they would now succeed; paradise could be regained. They were on a mission and religious fervor soon dominated their thinking:

... the virgin territories are epitomized as the Plains of Heaven, no less, and the long journey across the sea was likened to the sufferings endured by the Israelites in their flight from the Egyptians. At the limits of the wilderness lay the Promised Land, and all who had been chosen for the journey would be saved... of all the nations of the world, America had been chosen for the Second Coming, and the millennium of the saints (while essentially spiritual in nature) would be symbolized by a paradisiac transformation of the earth.

(Hardy, 1979, p128)

Even those with a more political agenda were not slow to adopt the sense of a religious mission. This was exemplified in the early nineteenth century by the utopian socialists, for whom paradise would have a distinctly egalitarian flavour. Foremost amongst this movement was the charismatic Robert Owen, who, having experimented with reforms in a working mill in Scotland, tried unsuccessfully to establish the more radical concept of 'villages of cooperation'. This was not to be and, frustrated by his failures in Britain, in due course he led his most fervent followers across the ocean to the Promised Land of America. To hasten the process, he purchased an existing community in Indiana, formerly created by German settlers, who had by then decided to move further west. With buildings sufficient to accommodate as many as a thousand members, Owen sought to remake the world, renaming his settlement New Harmony. He was nothing if not an optimist and, with his own funds he supplied the land and built new houses, in the hope that his followers would

do the rest. Sadly, as with other community experiments before and since, the project foundered. Owen declared that New Harmony was ahead of its time but a perennial failing was that human nature was not well attuned to the kinds of sacrifice that communal living calls for. Undeterred, he returned to England, where he set up a further community, this time known as Harmony Hall. As with his earlier experiment, it proved to be anything but harmonious. (Hardy, 1979, pp53-8)

Owen's failures, however, did not stop others from planning their own utopias; in fact, for most of the nineteenth century there were numerous such experiments across the whole of the United States. As well as utopian socialists, religious groups sought the ideal place to await the millennium while, later in the century, anarchists experimented with communities without authority. Most of these did not endure for more than a few years but some made more progress. In particular, German settlers gained an enviable reputation for their productive farming and their consequent ability to feed themselves, in contrast to others who shied away from hard labour.

Another type of community which endured for many years was that of the Shakers, originally known as the Shaking Quakers; the Quakers themselves were a pious sect but, in the presence of the Lord, they released their emotions in a frenzy of dancing. The men danced in one group and the women in another, and the rest of their activities in the communities were similarly separated. Given that many communities collapsed on account of sexual rivalries, this fact is often given as the main reason for their longevity. But there was certainly more than that; the Shaker communities were also renowned for their careful organization so that they were always economically viable. Shaker designs of buildings and furniture became a byword for their success, just as their farming and wholesome cooking attracted visitors until well after the main community impetus had waned. Paradise, perhaps, but at the price of gender separation and strict rules.

In contrast, industrialised England spawned its own community experiments in the same period. Land was at a premium and laws more tightly proscribed than in America, but this did not stop a number of colourful ventures. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, inspired by the Russian writer, Leo Tostoy, several anarchist communities were formed, seeking to find ways to manage themselves without conventional authority. One such place was the Whiteway Colony, in the west of England. (Thacker, 1997)

Whiteway was a bold experiment that endured for longer than its counterparts. Its driving belief was anarchism and, at least in the early days, all of their activities were shaped by that. Their land was worked communally on the basis of voluntary cooperation, meals were prepared and eaten together, and there was a common laundry. They burnt their deeds to demonstrate disdain for individual property rights, and then proclaimed that their estate

would always be held in common. There was no formal organization, and no leaders. Possessions in the community were freely available to all, including outsiders, on the basis that things should belong to those who need them most.

The women in the community enjoyed more freedom than they had previously experienced in Victorian society, claiming that they did exactly the same kind of work as the men and did not find it too tiring. It was a step towards equality, although it seems that the men did not undertake what were seen as women's chores. Women also took the opportunity to experiment with what was called 'rational dress', which took the form of a looser, less formal style of clothing than was customary at the time. More controversially, the members practiced 'free union' in favour of marriage and, in the process, attracted external criticism for their lax moral standards. Such criticism was met with non-resistance.

Their vegetarian diet, too, was a conscious attempt to practice a doctrine of non-aggression:

We live simply and economically. Bread and a little butter, porridge and tea or cocoa for breakfast; beans, lentils, or some other pulse, cooked with onions and potatoes, are the chief dishes at dinner time, varied occasionally with rice, rhubarb, or wholemeal pudding, or bread and cheese. We never have jam or cake unless it is given to us, and then it is much appreciated.

(Shaw, 1935, p56)

But was it paradise? Had the Whiteway colonists found a formula where others had failed? When one reads accounts of the early days of the experiment, around the turn of the nineteenth century, one might almost believe they had succeeded:

I do not remember that rain ever fell in that sweet Arcady; probably it did... If our feet were down in the potato tranches, our heads were up in the stars. We felt we were gods.

(Shaw, 1935, p5)

Alas, even if the sun was shining there were ominous clouds on the horizon. These came in the form of newcomers, drawn to Whiteway by its high ideals but, in themselves, joiners who were not prepared to play their own part. They took but did not give. This caused frictions and soon the undiluted practice of communal living gave way to some individual practices. There were still strong communal ties but not as complete as previously. In fact, rather than see this as a failure, their ability to adapt was heralded by the original members as a sign of maturity. Interestingly, they compared themselves in this respect to the unyielding Shakers, who:

... by practicing celibacy and working very industriously, achieved great wealth, but at a terrible cost; for they are hidebound and prejudiced in their mental outlook, their natural

feelings held in abeyance, living an unnatural life, their numbers only kept up by the fact of widows and widowers with families of children joining them. So with us material success might have been gained at the price of spiritual sterility.

(Shaw, 1935, p225)

In other words, paradise comes at a price, which for some is too high. The lesson of Whiteway is that staying just outside the limits of perfection might prove to be a better place than the inner sanctum.

Reflections on Research

How do you get to this wondrous place – by rainbow or railroad?

(Hardy, 1979, Preface)

As indicated earlier, this paper was written for a particular event, namely, a workshop on interdisciplinary research. It remains to consider whether the esoteric subject of paradise can offer a serious contribution to this underlying theme.

It is argued that paradise is a subject which defies the capacity of any one discipline to reveal its intricacies. Nor is there much value in applying different disciplines as separate lines of inquiry, as that will simply produce parallel answers. An understanding of the subject will draw on a variety of knowledge and methods. Religious studies is one obvious source of understanding, as will be aspects of philosophy. So, too, history provides an essential dimension, while geography looks at the idea of paradise as a place; anthropology has a part to play, as does psychology. Literature recounts numerous examples of imaginary places of perfection, so often referred to as paradise, just as sociology can cast light on the expectation of harmonious relations. There is no shortage of disciplinary starting points yet, at the same time, any one of these will be insufficient on its own.

Interdisciplinary research is more than the sum of its parts. It draws together two or more disciplines and uses their combined strength to find answers to different questions. In this way, it can solve problems that any one discipline would be unable to achieve on its own. But that is not all it does, for in the process of investigation the various disciplinary strands can be woven together to create new textures. This is unlike, say, multi-disciplinary research, where different disciplines remain discrete modes of investigation, working in parallel.

What is more, the potential of interdisciplinary research to reveal truth is relevant to both an analysis of ideas and a review of practical experiments to create paradise on earth: both the

theoretical aspects of the subject and empirical lend themselves to this approach. Neither can be fully understood without drawing on the combined wealth of different disciplines.

In the end, of course, one has to acknowledge that even if one marshals the best of academic research, paradise remains a difficult subject to conquer. The researcher treads a fine line between strongly-held opinions and beliefs, too often emerging with the most flimsy of evidence to substantiate one's findings. It is a seductive concept that lures researchers to find out whether it has ever existed and whether it can be attained in the future. But, like the siren Lorelei, enticing unsuspecting mariners onto the rocks, the call of paradise should not too readily be answered. It is no coincidence that the term, 'fool's paradise', has become so widely used. History yields lessons; voyagers take note!

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