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# ESCAPING FROM THE PAST?

## The Falkland Islands in the twenty-first century

STEPHEN A. ROYLE

### Abstract

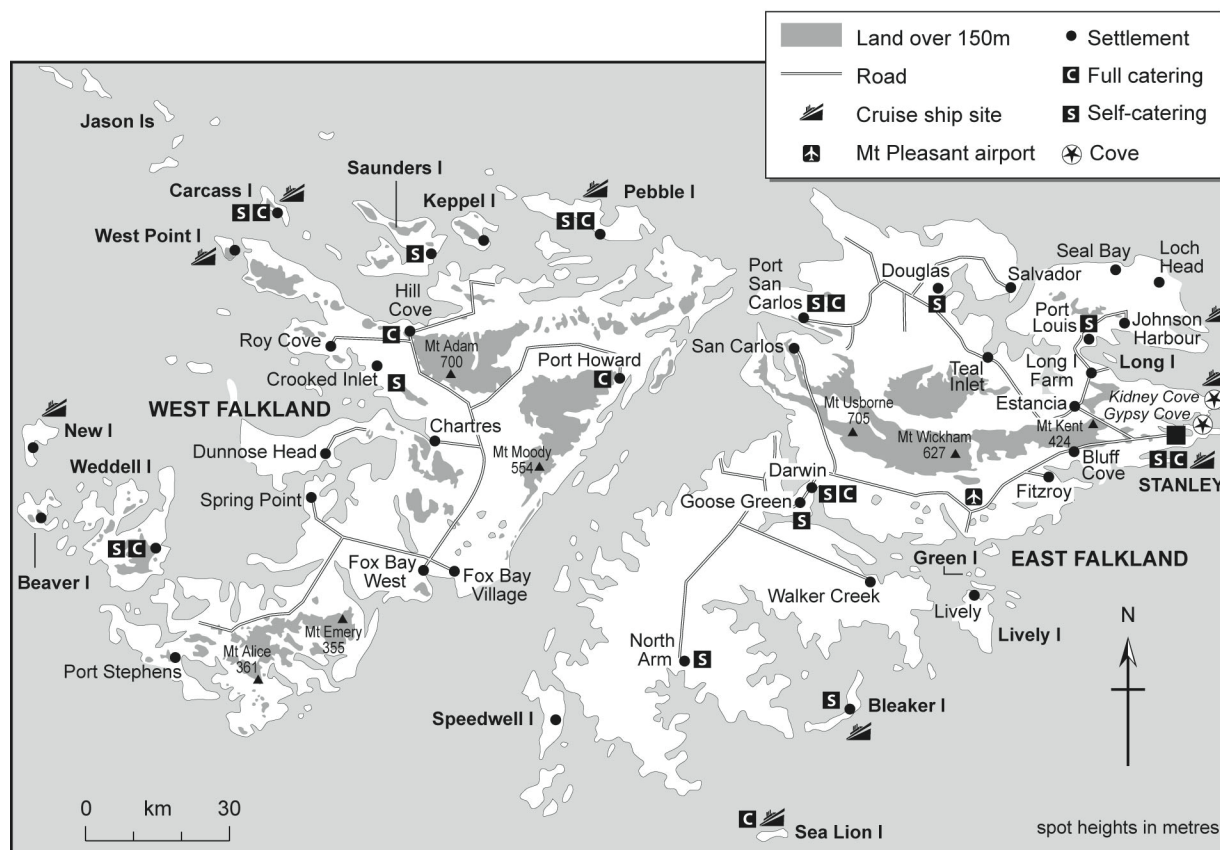
This paper considers the competing claims for the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, which led to a war in 1982 between the United Kingdom and Argentina. Given that it was over competing claims for sovereignty over a non-independent territory, this war seemed to be redolent of the nineteenth rather than the late-twentieth century. Post-war developments are outlined whilst the paper considers whether or not the Falkland Islands can ever escape from the Conflict, which occurred more than thirty years ago.

### Keywords

1982 Conflict, colonialism, Falkland Islands, sovereignty

### Introduction: The Falklands Conflict

War does not just affect the military forces involved in the action; it impacts the place over which is fought and its people, both during and long after the war, hence titling this paper with a question mark: 'Escaping from the past?'. The war in question is the 1982 Falklands Conflict. On 2 April 1982, Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands, a British dependent territory in the South Atlantic, which is also claimed by Argentina. Two days later, the British governor surrendered the islands, the small garrison stationed there unable to withstand superior Argentine numbers. The British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, reacted vigorously and under her orders a substantial naval task force departed for the South Atlantic in mid-April. Meanwhile, Royal Air Force assets were assembled on the British possession of Ascension Island. The British forces landed in the northwest of East Falkland on 21 May and made their way across the island to Stanley, the capital, which lies in the east, with engagements on the way as at Goose Green and Mount Kent. By mid-June, the hills west of Stanley were occupied by the British, who also controlled the ocean. The Argentine navy had kept to port after the controversial torpedoing of its light cruiser, the *General Belgrano*. The Argentinean commander surrendered on 14 June (Boyce, 2005). The Argentinean president, General Leopoldo Galtieri, left office three days later. By contrast, Thatcher went on to win the 1983 British general election, buoyed by the 'Falklands factor' (the military victory in the Falkland Islands).



Map 1: Falkland Islands

Originally published in Royle S (2006) "Falkland Islands," in Baldacchino, G (ed), *Extreme tourism: Lessons from the world's cold water islands*, Amsterdam & Boston: Elsevier: 180. Used by permission.

There were 258 deaths amongst 1,035 British casualties, and six British vessels were sunk or destroyed. Argentina suffered 1,717 casualties, of whom 649 died. 11,313 Argentine troops were captured and repatriated; a submarine at South Georgia and *General Belgrano* were sunk and 75 fixed wing aircraft lost. The military history website, [militaryhistory.about.com](http://militaryhistory.about.com), fails to add that three Falkland Islanders died as well, killed by a British shell that landed on a house in Stanley in which they were sheltering (Hickman, n.d.). The sacrifice of civilians seems to be of less note than that of soldiers: the Pledge Peach Union describes them as "forgotten civilian deaths" (Beck, 2007).

### Falklands history

The events of 1982 can only be explained by reference to a longer history. At that time, the Falkland Islands had been subject to a period of British occupation, unbroken since 1833. Further, the islanders, largely of British stock, dated their family's residence to the mid-nineteenth century or before, and took very seriously their right to self-determination. Neither of these facts overcame a sovereignty claim to the islands held by Argentina. This claim had been inherited from their Spanish colonial masters upon independence; Spain's

claim related to that country buying out France, the French being the original settlers on the previously uninhabited islands at Port Louis in East Falkland in 1764. The French group was from St. Malo and called the islands Îles Malouines; a variation of this is Malvinas, the Argentinean name for the islands. The British independently settled Saunders Island off West Falkland in 1765; a conflict nearly broke out when the two nations discovered each other's presence. By the early nineteenth century, both the French and British had departed, and the islands were free of governance. However, both parties left plaques to record their claims. Following this was a rather confusing period, during which one man from the United Provinces (later Argentina) raised its flag, seemingly without knowledge of his government. Another was given rights by the United Provinces to (feral) cattle and seals, but was accused of piracy when he enforced these rights against Americans who did not recognise his command. The Americans cleared most of the people off the islands in retaliation. Soon afterwards, a British resident of the islands was murdered by the people who were exploiting the cattle and on 3 January 1833, HMS *Clio* arrived under Captain Onslow to restore order. The British Royal Navy established control and its officers served as the early lieutenant governors of the islands. One of them, Lieutenant Richard Moody, established the planned town of Stanley in 1843, moving the settlement from Port Louis.

There was discussion in London as to a suitable economic role for the new colony. The Falkland Islands developed initially as a place to service ships rounding Cape Horn. Somewhat later, the rural area ('Camp') was opened for sheep production. For much of their history, the islands concentrated upon agriculture, rather in contradiction to modern imperial maritime imagery. The exportable product was wool, not meat, and the animals were raised extensively on the treeless islands' poor grassland pasturage, huge estates of tens of thousands of hectares. Many estates were owned by companies from off the islands and were run by expatriate British managers or Falkland Islanders. One prominent land holding enterprise was the Falkland Islands Company, which also ran shipping services and many businesses in the town of Stanley, the only place where those not employed on the estates could live (Royle, 1985). Other than some naval activity in both World Wars, the islands settled down to a quiet existence unknown to most people in their imperial homeland; there are tales of mail addressed to the Falkland Islands being sent to Scotland on the assumption that they must be somewhere in the Hebrides. One Falkland Islands timeline records no events between 1833 and 1971 other than the 1914 naval Battle of the Falklands (Timelines, n.d.); the islands barely seem to ruffle the pages of history.

However, the past was still present in that Argentina had not abandoned its claim to the islands. By the late 1960s, this threat was deemed not to be as significant to British interests as securing arms sales to Latin America, including—despite their dreadful human rights records—both Chile and Argentina. Arms sales occurred between Britain and the latter in spite of opposition from Falkland Islanders and their supporters. In 1979, the new Conservative government in Britain started to talk to the Falkland Islanders about sovereignty, although the minister sent there, like those of previous British administrations of the period, was left in no doubt of the strength of local views on the matter, which were strongly opposed to making any change (Dodds, 2002). The idea of turning the islands into a fortress was rejected on cost grounds. A condominium was regarded as unworkable. A sovereignty freeze would not be accepted by Argentina, leaving 'lease-back' as the favoured British proposal; with this plan, sovereignty would be transferred, but the islands leased back to Britain for approximately fifty years so adult islanders would die under British rule, whilst children and those born after the agreement would always know that transfer was to take place and could accept it or make plans to leave the islands to avoid living under Argentinean control.

There were some contacts with Argentina in New York which served as a neutral venue, but then in 1982 General Galtieri invaded the islands. The immediate domestic advantage of this was his seeking of a foreign policy success to unite the fractious Argentinean people. Had Galtieri held off, maybe the Falklands would have been transferred to Argentina in some form at some stage, even if this occurred against the wishes of the islanders. As it was, Galtieri's decision to invade proved an irresistible opportunity for Thatcher to demonstrate her resolution by fighting back, to her own political advantage. So the Falkland Islands and their past, which had been of little significance for generations outside the South Atlantic in 1982, came centre stage in the blazing light of battle.

## Post-conflict developments

After expending the lives and casualties mentioned above to win back the Falkland Islands—not to mention £1.5 billion directly, with another £1.3 billion in replacement costs for the ships and equipment used or lost (Freedman, 1988)—the British were obligated to invest, to modernise, to rescue the territory from what had been decades of official neglect. Immediately, there was a campaign to restore and revive the islands' livestock. Another early and significant measure was to declare a conservation zone off the islands, which enabled fishing to be regulated. These waters contain considerable reserves of *Loligo* squid, the small squid familiar to diners, and also the much larger *Ilex* squid, which is used in processed foods. The managed exploitation of these species—and others, such as the Patagonian toothfish—has transformed the Falkland Islands economy. There is limited local fishing; foreign boats, which pay substantial licence fees for the rights to fish, take most of the catch. Since the mid-1980s, annual revenues of £15-£30 million (for a population of only around 3,000) has helped to transform the infrastructure of the islands. The school in Stanley was rebuilt; a floating harbour was constructed in Stanley; the farm settlements now have graded, if not usually sealed, road connections. These improvements have assisted their economies and freed rural people from the difficulty of having to 'off-road' when journeying away from the farm. A programme of land reform, the breaking up of the big estates (which was actually under way prior to 1982) has been completed. Most rural settlements are now family farms; only the Falkland Islands Company holding of Lafonia is still run as a traditional estate from Goose Green. A timetabled ferry service between East and West Falkland has eased inter-island connections. Stanley itself has grown considerably, with some labour-shed from the land reform programme and immigration from Chile and St. Helena; the latter has brought in people for low-end jobs. The town has saturated the area to the east of the original site, and is now expanding westward. There are more businesses in Stanley, including a commercial bank. Despite Fortress Falklands being rejected as an option before 1982, defence has been strengthened considerably since the Conflict with the building of an air force base at Mount Pleasant on East Falkland. The base's runway doubles as a civilian airfield, and it is large enough to allow the landing of full-size commercial jets. This has simplified access to the islands. At the time of writing, there are weekly flights by LAN Chile to Santiago, that city serving in some ways as a hub for Falkland Islanders. Flights to Britain with the British Royal Air Force can be taken via Ascension Island.

Tourism has increased exponentially since 1982; each year a few hundred tourists fly in. More significantly, 70,000 or more cruise ship passengers pass through the islands; these tourists are either rounding South America in luxury ships or on smaller expedition-style Antarctic cruises which call at the Falklands on the way south, since the islands are a gateway to the Antarctic. By the mid-2000s, tourism ranked alongside agriculture as the islands' second most lucrative industry, behind fishing (Royle, 2006). A potentially significant economic activity for the medium term is oil. A small British firm, Rockhopper Exploration, declared the reserves it has found north of the islands to be commercially viable and steps are being taken

to develop the field, with the first oil production expected in 2017 (Rockhopper Exploration, 2012). Oil will be transferred to vessels offshore to be sent for refining; no oil will land on the islands. The islands will profit from royalty payments, but even the exploration phase brought economic activity to the islands, and there are also storage yards onshore, providing jobs for expatriates and some islanders. Oil rig supply vessels berth alongside fishing boats at the floating harbour, and on crew exchange days, helicopters fly from Stanley out to the oilfield. Further exploration is taking place south of the islands. The potential revenues from oil exploitation certainly make the Falkland Islands more attractive to Argentina; this has exacerbated political tensions in the South Atlantic region (Dodds and Benwell, 2010).

### Escaping the past?

The Conflict was over 30 years ago, and the islands have been transformed since. However, the Conflict has not disappeared into history. One reason is the memorialisation, manifested in the celebration of 14 June as 'Liberation Day'<sup>1</sup> and the memorial structures themselves. The main memorial at Stanley—and smaller ones elsewhere—serve as a daily reminder of 1982 for many islanders. Another aspect regards tourism, discussed above as a growing sector for the islands' economy. The visitors in some cases come by default, if they are on a cruise that just happens to call, but for those who choose to visit, the Conflict can be significant. However, it may not rank alongside the islands' splendid wildlife: for some visitors it may be worth the journey just to see a striated caracara, locally called the Johnny Rook. There are sea lions, albatrosses and other birds magnificent in size and in some cases plumage, also penguins, some species of which can be observed in large numbers. Other visitors might come for the empty, open landscape or the interesting periglacial features, the 'stone runs'. However, some come (at least partly) because of the Conflict. Veterans come, of course, now sometimes with grandchildren in tow, while others interested in 'dark' tourism also come. Firms both on and off the islands arrange battlefield tours for such visitors.<sup>2</sup> Tourism affects many islanders; some of the farm settlements are cruise ship stops, and some settlements on East Falkland also receive tourists from Stanley. When a cruise ship calls there, passengers coming ashore are met by a large fleet of four-wheel-drives driven by residents of Stanley and Camp alike who take them on tours, which certainly include some 1982 references. Visits are made to crashed aircraft sites; the taking of souvenirs is not permitted at such sites. In addition, 247 of the Argentinean dead have been interred in a cemetery at Goose Green. The cemetery has been vandalised on occasion because of its unpopularity with islanders. In addition to this frequent refreshing of 1982 by taking in the sites or memorials thereof, islanders in their 40s and older have their own memories; some were deeply traumatised by their experiences as I know from conversations with some of them. Younger people without personal experience of the war (it is not called a 'conflict' on the islands) display a respect for the sacrifices of 1982 and have learned negative attitudes toward Argentina. In 2013, there is a plan to hold a referendum on sovereignty in the islands which will certainly produce an overwhelming majority in favour of retaining the islands' links with Britain.

The past generates and sustains a Falkland Islands identity beyond the actual personal memories of 1982. It is not that the islanders see themselves as offshore, distant Britons; over the years I have been visiting the islands, I have observed the emergence of a greater sense of a national identity, exemplified by the fact that representatives speaking for the Falkland Islands at the United Nations now use the term 'country' when talking of their homeland (Special Committee on Decolonization, 2012). However, there is complete realisation of the need to guard against the islands' threatening neighbour (Argentina) through attachment to the United Kingdom, a more powerful country with a dedicated responsibility to protect the islands. The

United Kingdom maintains four Typhoon aircraft at the Mount Pleasant airbase, and the Atlantic Patrol Task South always has a frigate or a destroyer in or around the islands. There is also a military harbour to facilitate the forces' presence. In addition, many islanders serve in the Falkland Islands Defence Force (the actual number is not made public for security reasons). This local unit is trained and equipped to deter any Argentine aggression towards the islands. Should Argentina establish a presence on the islands, this force would act as a guerrilla unit.

Argentina still claims the Falkland Islands. Travel in Argentina will expose the visitor to many road signs asserting its claim: '*Argentinas por siempre*' (Argentine forever) surrounding a map of the islands is one example, while '*Las Malvinas son Argentinas*' (the Malvinas are Argentine) is another. The Argentine President, Christina Kirchner, made strong statements about the islands in the months leading up to and following her 2011 re-election and in Argentina at least sovereignty is once again a live issue (Dodds, 2012). Argentina tried to stop Falklands vessels from gaining entry to South American ports and has pressured Chile to halt the weekly flights to the islands from Punta Arenas despite its monthly stop in Argentina to pick up visitors to the cemetery at Goose Green. There have been disputes over fish conservation practices, particularly regarding the migratory Ilex squid which crosses Argentine waters before entering those of the Falkland Islands. The exploitable quantities of oil off the Falklands only makes the islands more attractive to Argentina. The current British Prime Minister, David Cameron, has responded by saying that the wishes of the Falkland Islanders are paramount and that these wishes are clearly for the islands to remain British, whilst he accused Argentina of acting in a colonialist fashion. The Falkland Islanders, perhaps conscious of being pawns in a colonial chess game played between two other nations—recall the lack of record of the civilian deaths in 1982 shown above—also strive to represent their own views. There is a vocal lobby in the United Kingdom, and members of the islands' Legislative Assembly make their views heard at the United Nations, as at the Special Committee on Decolonization in June 2012 when two members of the Legislative Assembly, Michael Summers and Roger Edwards, made the case for the islanders' self-determination (Special Committee on Decolonization, 2012).

If there were to be another conflict, the British might struggle to retake the Falklands again; certainly organizing a task force of the necessary size and strength to do so would prove challenging, especially in the light of the recent defense review impact on the navy, which now will have no aircraft carrier until 2020. Instead, the British must strive to prevent a successful invasion from taking place. Obviously, diplomatic methods first would be employed, but if it did come to military action, the strength of the on-island British forces—the Typhoon jets especially—and the ability to send warships to the South Atlantic would make Argentinian conquest much more difficult than it was in 1982. Argentina's present military capability, which has seen little upgrade since 1982, might not be able to win the battle.

British public opinion—especially parliamentary opinion—remains strongly shaped by memories of 1982, as the thirtieth anniversary commemorations demonstrated. Given the iconic symbolism of Margaret Thatcher's success in retaking the Falkland Islands, no successor would want to be the prime minister who lost them. Thirty years have seen the Falkland Islands modernize, and there has been a development of greater local control in a functioning democracy. There is certainly more prosperity now than in the 1970s, thanks to fishing and tourism, as well as the prospect of oil revenue in the not too distant future. To a great extent, 1982 was the catalyst for these positive developments; the past has shaped the islands in a number of different ways. The Falkland Islands government produced a downloadable booklet to mark the thirtieth anniversary (Cowkell, 2012). Headlined with the pointed message 'Our Islands, Our Home', much of it tells briefly the story of several people on the islands in 1982, each illustrated with a black and white photograph.

Beside each 1982 story, there is a colour photograph of a member of the same family 30 years later, with details on their lives in the islands in the twenty-first century. The past is not forgotten is the message, but things have moved on, as one Falkland Islander states in 'Our Islands, Our Home': "the events of 1982 made me determined to succeed and help build a better future for the Falklands".

## Endnotes

1 <http://www.falklands.info/factfile/parades.html>. For the report on the 2012 ceremony see the British Forces Broadcasting Service account at <http://bfbs.com/news/falkland-islands/falklands-liberation-day-remembered-58172.html>.

2 For example, see [www.falklandislands.com/contents/view/385](http://www.falklandislands.com/contents/view/385) and [www.conexo.co.uk/falklands-battlefield-tours-added-for-2012](http://www.conexo.co.uk/falklands-battlefield-tours-added-for-2012).

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