Episode Book

EPISODE #5708

The Islands Between Two Oceans

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SYNOPSIS

What does it actually mean to govern a territory with zero citizens? This episode tours fifteen sub-Antarctic islands — from South Georgia to Bouvet — and finds real ministers, courts, budgets, and fishing-licence revenue behind the paperwork. We look at who staffs these specks of rock and ice, from a fifty-person French base with a pub and a chapel to a six-person shipping container on the world's most remote island. And we trace the strangest stories: a never-used top-level domain, a king penguin who is the de jure Baron of Bouvet, permanent daylight saving time abolished by a Tasmanian council 1,500 kilometres away, and a US tariff applied to an island with no permanent station since 1955.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel had a childhood friend back in Ireland, growing up on a housing estate, and before either of them were old enough to drink, their hobby was zooming into Google Maps to find territories that shouldn't exist.



Herman

The way he describes it is lovely, actually. You're looking at a scale where it's just a huge patch of blue ocean, and then you zoom in and there's a name.



Corn

Then during the first COVID lockdown, when social isolation was the order of the day, he and that same friend ended up back in those chats. And the rabbit hole he went down was the islands between the southern tip of South America and Antarctica. Tiny specks poking out of a huge cold sea. And he wants to know a whole list of things. Which of them have research stations, and which actually have semi-permanent scientific staff living on them. Which are administered by governments you would never guess, and what on earth administering an uninhabited territory even involves.



Herman

That's the question that pulled me in.



Corn

Whether any of them can be reached as a tourist, and whether there's anywhere you can actually spend the night, with, quote, "special accommodation and some very good fleeces." Which have seen the most human exploration. And which have the most interesting stories. He sent a list of fifteen, from the Auckland Islands down to South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.



Herman

Fifteen names, half of which most people have never heard spoken aloud.



Corn

So this is a lockdown Google Maps rabbit hole that turns out to be a genuine survey of the most obscure landmasses on the planet.



Herman

Let's give the geography first, because it explains everything else. The sub-Antarctic islands sit roughly between forty-five and sixty degrees south. That's north of the Antarctic Convergence, so they're not technically Antarctic, but biologically they're tied to it. Same birds, same seals, same cold.



Corn

And they're obscure because of where the wind is.



Herman

They sit inside the Roaring Forties and the Furious Fifties. There's no landmass down there to break up the circumpolar current, so the wind just runs around the globe unchecked, and those islands are the first thing it hits. Thousands of kilometres from any continent. No native population, no airports, seas that are rough year-round.



Corn

Most of them you can only reach by ship, and plenty of them don't even have a harbour.



Herman

Some of them have no safe anchorage at all. You're landing a Zodiac on a beach in a swell or you're not landing.



Corn

So why is there land there in the first place? Because it's in the middle of a lot of very deep water.



Herman

They're the exposed peaks of mostly-submerged plateaus and ridges. The Kerguelen Plateau, the Macquarie Ridge, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the Zealandia fragment. Kerguelen is a fragment of a continent-scale volcanic province that's been sitting there since the Cretaceous. Take away the sea and it's a mountain range.



Corn

And we've got four threads to run through this. Who administers these places and what that actually looks like. Who lives on them. Who can visit them. And the deepest human histories and the strangest stories.



Herman

Start with administration, because that's where the comedy lives.



Corn

And where the actual answer to Daniel's question lives, which is that sovereignty over a place with no citizens is not symbolic at all. Take it island by island.



Herman

Start with the ones everybody's heard of, because South Georgia is the counterexample to the whole "uninhabited" premise. Britain runs it as a separate overseas territory, and has since the third of October, nineteen eighty-five. The Commissioner is also the Governor of the Falklands, sitting in Stanley. Argentina still claims it.



Corn

And that territory has an actual government.



Herman

A Chief Executive. Three Directors. A Financial Secretary. An Attorney General. A Post Office run by a summer Deputy Postmaster. And it raises about six point three million pounds a year, eighty percent of it from fishing licences.



Corn

So the licence to catch toothfish in those waters is what pays for the government of South Georgia.



Herman

That's the whole mechanism. That's what administering nowhere looks like when it's taken seriously.



Corn

France next, because their arrangement is the strangest on paper.



Herman

TAAF, the French Southern and Antarctic Lands. Kerguelen, Crozet, Amsterdam, Saint Paul. It's run by a préfet who sits in Réunion, four thousand kilometres away. Each district has a chief who holds mayor-like powers.



Corn

A mayor. Of a place with no voters.



Herman

He signs the register, he performs the civil functions, he's the state's representative on an island where the population is a rotating roster of scientists.



Corn

What about the Australians?



Herman

Heard and McDonald Islands are an external territory, and here's the detail I love. They're governed by ACT non-criminal law plus Jervis Bay Territory criminal law. Two different bodies of Australian law, applied to two islands nobody lives on.



Corn

And Macquarie?



Herman

Macquarie is administered by the Huon Valley Council. That's a local council in Tasmania, about fifteen hundred kilometres away. A suburban council, essentially, doing the paperwork for a World Heritage island in the Southern Ocean.



Corn

New Zealand.



Herman

Auckland, Campbell, Antipodes, Bounty, Snares. UNESCO World Heritage, managed by the Department of Conservation. The Balleny Islands and Scott Island are also New Zealand claims, held in abeyance under the Antarctic Treaty.



Corn

And then South Africa does something that I find funny.



Herman

The Prince Edward Islands fall under the Cape Town Magistrate's Court. They are ward one hundred and fifteen of the City of Cape Town.



Corn

They're a voting ward. With no voters.



Herman

With no voters and no councillor, and it's still ward one hundred and fifteen.



Corn

Norway, and this is the one that keeps giving.



Herman

Bouvet Island is a Norwegian dependency, administered by the Ministry of Justice in Oslo. Peter I Island is also Norwegian, held in abeyance under the Antarctic Treaty.



Corn

Now the absurdities, because Daniel asked which ones have interesting stories, and administration turns out to be a source of them.



Herman

Bouvet has its own internet top-level domain. dot bv. It has never been used. Not once. It also has an ISO country code, BV, which it does use.



Corn

And it has a Baron.



Herman

It has a Baron. The de jure Baron of Bouvet is Nils Olav the Third, who is a king penguin at Edinburgh Zoo, and who is the mascot of the Norwegian King's Guard. The penguin was knighted. There's a penguin on the Norwegian honours system.



Corn

I want to know who signs that paperwork.



Herman

Same ministry that administers the island. Which is to say, the same building that files the paperwork for the glacier and the penguin.



Corn

Macquarie had something that only died two years ago.



Herman

Until April twenty twenty-four, Macquarie Island was the only place on Earth observing permanent daylight saving time. Permanently. They never went back. And the Huon Valley Council abolished it that year.



Corn

The council fifteen hundred kilometres away turned off permanent summer time on an island of penguins.



Herman

Someone in Tasmania looked at the clocks and said, no, we're normalising this.



Corn

And then Heard Island, which is the one that makes me laugh hardest.



Herman

In April twenty twenty-five, Heard Island was hit with a ten percent United States tariff. Under the Trump administration. Based on data suggesting the US imported one point four million dollars' worth of goods from Heard Island.



Corn

From an island with no permanent station since nineteen fifty-five.



Herman

And no known human visit in about a decade. The tariff was based on erroneous data. But the tariff existed.



Corn

You can't import anything from a rock. That's the joke. Except the rock has a trade relationship now.



Herman

The larger point, though, and this is why I wanted to do the administration section first, is that none of this is arbitrary. These administrations exist because the territories carry real value. Fishing licences. Strategic position. Scientific access. Territorial claims held in abeyance. The paperwork sounds silly until you ask who's paying for it.



Corn

And the answer is toothfish, krill, and the fact that a claim nobody defends is a claim you lose.



Herman

That's the answer to Daniel's question. Administering an uninhabited territory involves exactly what administering an inhabited one involves. Ministers. Courts. Budgets. It's just that the population is zero, and the revenue is fish.



Corn

So who actually staffs these places?



Herman

This is the best part of the episode, because the answer is more people than you'd think. South Georgia has King Edward Point. British Antarctic Survey base. Twenty-two people in summer, nineteen in winter. There's also a station on Bird Island.



Corn

Those are real postings. You're there for the season.



Herman

Kerguelen has Port-aux-Français. Fifty to a hundred personnel. Dorms, a hospital, a library, a gymnasium, a pub, and the chapel of Notre-Dame des Vents. France's largest glacier, the Cook Ice Cap, is on that island.



Corn

A pub and a chapel.



Herman

Both. And a hospital, because the nearest alternative is thousands of kilometres of ocean. Crozet has Alfred Faure on Île de la Possession, twenty to thirty people. Amsterdam Island has Martin-de-Viviès, a meteorological station, twenty-five to forty-five people.



Corn

Which is a real town, at that point.



Herman

It's a town with a purpose. Marion Island, in the Prince Edward group, has the South African base, about eighteen people year-round. The new base was built between two thousand one and twenty eleven. And it hosts cosmology experiments. PRIZM and ALBATROS.



Corn

Cosmology, on Marion Island.



Herman

Measuring the cosmic microwave background from a sub-Antarctic island with five million breeding seabirds sitting next to the antenna.



Corn

And Bouvet, which we established is the most remote island on Earth.



Herman

Norvegia Station. It is a shipping container. At Nyrøysa. It accommodates six people for stints of two to four months, it's wind-powered, and there's an automated weather station running year-round when nobody's there.



Corn

Six people in a container on the world's most remote island.



Herman

And the reason the container works is that you can't build anything permanent there. Ninety-three percent of the island is glaciated. It's forty-nine square kilometres of ice and rock with a coastline that's mostly cliff.



Corn

Heard Island.



Herman

No permanent station since ANARE closed in nineteen fifty-five. But the RSV Nuyina visited in October twenty twenty-five and again in January twenty twenty-six. The first environmental management visits in over twenty years. They removed more than a tonne of waste and asbestos. And they confirmed that H5 bird flu had reached the island.



Corn

That's the thing that changes the whole picture.



Herman

It is. And it explains the other thing I want to flag, which is the most time-sensitive item in this entire episode. Macquarie Island station normally has twenty to forty people. In August twenty twenty-six, Australia announced it would withdraw all twenty-four personnel.



Corn

Withdraw them. Not rotate them.



Herman

Withdraw them. The reason given was the forecast arrival of H5N1 bird flu, and the psychological risk to the staff of living through a mass mortality event among the two thousand five hundred elephant seals on the island.



Corn

They pulled the people out because of what the people would have to watch.



Herman

That's exactly what it was. And the three hundred and seventy-one million dollar station rebuild is delayed as a result.



Corn

So that's the honest answer to "which ones have semi-permanent scientific staff." Several of them do. And at least one of them just found out that having staff is conditional.



Herman

It's a good reminder that these stations aren't permanent in the way a town is permanent. They exist because a country decides to pay for them to exist. When the decision changes, the station empties.



Corn

So can you go there as a tourist? Because Daniel asked specifically, and he asked about fleeces.



Herman

He did. And the answer is basically no, with one big exception. South Georgia is the most accessible. Several thousand visitors each summer, all by expedition cruise. No scheduled flights. No ferries.



Corn

But you can land.



Herman

You can land at Grytviken. You can visit Shackleton's grave, the museum, the church. But there is no hotel. You sleep on the ship.



Corn

So the fleece question is answered.



Herman

Not yet. Macquarie gets expedition cruise vessels, but visitor numbers are capped at two thousand a year, and there's no tourist accommodation either. The New Zealand subantarctic islands get occasional expedition cruises, and they're part of the World Heritage listing, so some landings are permitted.



Corn

Kerguelen?



Herman

The supply ship Marion Dufresne makes regular calls. But there's no tourism infrastructure at all. Access is essentially restricted to official and scientific purposes.



Corn

So the ship is the town.



Herman

The ship is the town. Heard Island has prohibited unauthorised entry since May twenty fourteen. Visitors have to complete a training program and a quarantine protocol. Only about nineteen short research expeditions landed there between nineteen fifty-six and two thousand four. Tourist and private visits since nineteen sixty-three are described as infrequent.



Corn

Infrequent. That's the word they chose.



Herman

Bouvet is effectively unreachable for tourism. Landing is extremely difficult. High seas, steep coast, pack ice in winter. The people who go are amateur radio operators running DX-peditions. Callsign prefix three-Y-zero. The 3Y0J expedition in twenty twenty-three was cut short by weather. 3Y0K started in March twenty twenty-six.



Corn

So the answer to "can I spend a night" is that you can, if you're a radio operator with a lot of patience.



Herman

And the Prince Edward Islands are a Special Nature Reserve. Activities are restricted to research and conservation. No tourism at all.



Corn

Which brings the fleece thread to a close. There is essentially nowhere on that list where a regular tourist can book a bed.



Herman

The closest thing is a bunk on an expedition ship anchored offshore. And the fleeces are necessary, because these are among the windiest, cloudiest places on Earth.



Corn

Which of them has seen the most human exploration?



Herman

South Georgia by a mile. First sighted in sixteen seventy-five by Anthony de la Roché. Cook landed in seventeen seventy-five. From nineteen hundred and four it was a major whaling hub, with Grytviken and seven stations. Then Shackleton's crossing in nineteen sixteen, from King Haakon Bay to Stromness. He died on the island in nineteen twenty-two and is buried at Grytviken. Frank Wild's ashes were interred beside him in twenty eleven.



Corn

And it's a war site.



Herman

It's a war site. Nineteen eighty-two. Argentine occupation, recaptured under Operation Paraquet. That's the flashpoint.



Corn

After South Georgia?



Herman

Kerguelen. Discovered in seventeen seventy-two by Yves de Kerguelen-Trémarec. Cook visited in seventeen seventy-six and coined the name Desolation Islands. The sealing era ran from seventeen eighty-one to nineteen twenty-two, with two hundred and eighty-four recorded visits. There were transit-of-Venus expeditions in eighteen seventy-four. The German raider Atlantis called in nineteen forty. Continuously occupied since nineteen fifty.



Corn

Macquarie.



Herman

Discovered in eighteen ten. Sealing and penguin-oil industry under Joseph Hatch from nineteen oh two to nineteen twenty. Base for Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition, nineteen eleven to fourteen. ANARE headquarters from nineteen forty-eight. And it's the site of the world's largest successful island pest eradication. Declared pest-free in twenty fourteen.



Corn

Heard Island.



Herman

First confirmed sighting in eighteen fifty-three. Intense sealing from eighteen fifty-five into the eighteen eighties, over sixteen million litres of oil rendered. ANARE station from nineteen forty-seven to nineteen fifty-five. And only three parties have ever summited Big Ben. Nineteen sixty-five, nineteen eighty-three, and nineteen ninety-nine to two thousand.



Corn

Three summits of the highest mountain on an Australian territory nobody lives on.



Herman

And there are only two recorded landings ever on the McDonald Islands. Ever. Nineteen seventy-one and nineteen eighty.



Corn

Which is what Daniel was circling with the question about exploration.



Herman

It is. And the Prince Edward Islands were first landed on in seventeen ninety-nine. Sealing era from then to nineteen thirteen, one hundred and three vessel visits. The Challenger survey in eighteen seventy-three. Annexed by South Africa in nineteen forty-seven and forty-eight.



Corn

Now the stories.



Herman

Start with the darkest one. The Vela Incident. Twenty-second of September, nineteen seventy-nine. A US Vela satellite detected an unexplained double flash in the ocean between Bouvet Island and the Prince Edward Islands.



Corn

A double flash is the signature.



Herman

It's the signature of a nuclear detonation. And most independent assessments conclude it was an undeclared joint nuclear test by South Africa and Israel. Some of the information remains classified to this day.



Corn

Between Bouvet and the Prince Edwards. In the emptiest water on the planet.



Herman

Which is exactly why someone would do it there. Nobody's watching, and the only witness is a satellite passing overhead.



Corn

And Bouvet has an unsolved mystery of its own.



Herman

Nineteen sixty-four. HMS Protector's survey team found an abandoned lifeboat in a lagoon, with no other signs of human activity on the island. No footprints, no camp, no bodies. The identity remained a mystery for years. It's believed to belong to a Soviet scientific vessel.



Corn

A lifeboat, and nothing else.



Herman

And there's a phantom island nearby. Thompson Island, reported near Bouvet in eighteen twenty-five and again in eighteen ninety-three. It appeared on maps as late as nineteen forty-three. The ocean there is over two thousand four hundred metres deep. If it existed, it was a volcanic island that vanished.



Corn

It got removed from the map by being incorrect.



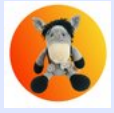
Herman

Which is the best way to be removed from a map.



Corn

Marion Island's mice.



Herman

This one is grim. Cats were eradicated from Marion as an invasive species. With the cats gone, the mice reached plague-like levels, and they were found eating albatross chicks alive on their nests. Discovered in two thousand three. An eradication programme is being planned.



Corn

The cats were the only thing keeping the mice in check, and the cats were themselves the problem.



Herman

That's the whole logic of invasive species management in one sentence. You solve one problem and inherit the next, and the next one is worse.



Corn

And then there's the KFC advert.



Herman

In twenty twenty-four, Marion Island's research station featured in a KFC South Africa advertisement called "Beyond the Sea." It's about two South Africans trying to get home for fried chicken. They filmed it at the base.



Corn

A remote research station, in a chicken advert.



Herman

And the chicken is the point.



Corn

Macquarie's geology is the one I want to end on, because it's strange.



Herman

Macquarie is an ophiolite. Exposed oceanic crust and upper mantle. The description people use is that the island seems to have been squeezed toward the surface like toothpaste from a tube. And it's the only mid-ocean ridge on Earth where mantle rocks are actively exposed above sea level.



Corn

You can walk on the mantle.



Herman

On an island in the Southern Ocean that also has the entire world population of royal penguins nesting on it.



Corn

And the South Sandwich Islands have a lava lake.



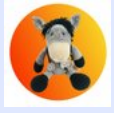
Herman

Mount Michael on Saunders Island. A persistent lava lake. One of only eight known in the world. And Southern Thule, in the same group, is the southernmost land on Earth outside the Antarctic Treaty area.



Corn

Kerguelen cabbage.



Herman

An edible native plant, rich in vitamin C. It saved mariners from scurvy, which is why the islands had historic value to navies long before they had scientific value.



Corn

And Bouvet, one more time, for Daniel's benefit.



Herman

The most remote island on Earth. Nearest land is Antarctica's Queen Maud Land, about seventeen hundred kilometres away. Nearest inhabited place is Tristan da Cunha, about two thousand two hundred and sixty kilometres away.



Corn

What did you do at Grytviken in the winter?



Hilbert

The Post Office doesn't open. There's a shed with a flag on it and a sign, and from April to October the sign faces the wall.



Corn

Hm.



Hilbert

You learn to write letters in September. You write them, you put stamps on them, and you leave them in the drawer for the ship. Sometimes the ship is three weeks late and the drawer has forty letters in it and you know all forty people.



Herman

That's the bit that never makes it into the accounts. The revenue line is fishing licences, but the institution that actually holds the place together is a drawer full of mail.



Hilbert

The Deputy Postmaster that summer was a young woman from Leeds. She was very strict about the postmark. You couldn't do it yourself. She had to do it. She'd do it standing in the doorway with the wind coming off the bay, and if the postmark was crooked she'd start over.



Corn

A crooked postmark, and she'd redo it.



Hilbert

She redid it four times one day. I said, nobody's going to notice. She said, I'll notice. She was right.



Herman

I keep thinking about what that says about the Macquarie decision. You don't withdraw twenty-four people from a station because the science stops being worth it. You withdraw them because you've decided the people on the ground shouldn't have to see what's coming.



Hilbert

A station is a promise that someone will be there next season. When the promise breaks, the station doesn't close. It just doesn't open.



Corn

Macquarie's staff are out, and nobody knows if they go back.



Herman

It depends on the birds, basically. If H5N1 sweeps through the elephant seals the way it swept through seabird colonies in the North Atlantic, the next decision writes itself. And if it doesn't, the rebuild is still delayed, and the promise is still thinner than it was.



Corn

That's the thing that connects all of it. Every one of these places is administered, staffed, and visited because somebody decided it was worth it that year. South Georgia's government runs on toothfish. Kerguelen runs on a préfet in Réunion and a supply ship. Bouvet runs on a container and a weather station. None of it is permanent. It's a decision, renewed.



Herman

Which is the part I'll be thinking about. Daniel asked which of these places are inhabited and which are administrated, and the honest answer is that inhabitation and administration are the same question. You don't staff a place you don't care about. And the moment you stop caring, the station is still there, and it's just empty.



Corn

The most obscure places on Earth aren't empty. They're administered, staffed, visited, and storied, and the fleeces are very good, and you can't book one.



Herman

Not in a hotel, anyway.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces this, and whose letters I now think about.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We read all of it.



Herman

We'll be back soon.